The Paradigm Shift and the Evolution toward Postmodernism in Contemporary Spanish Poetry

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Many critical voices have discussed postmodernism as an overall response to contemporary Spanish artistic evolution. This appearance of the postmodern, both artistically and socially, however, could not have happened overnight at some point in 1975. As with any sweeping political, moral or artistic change, a process must be at work. I will suggest in this study that an applicable set of guidelines for understanding this process may come from Kuhn’s paradigm shift theory. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to delineate the evolution of Spanish poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s as interpreted under this theory of the paradigm shift. Although this theory is used mainly in the sciences, we will show a precedent for utilizing it to describe the tendency toward postmodernism in a Spanish culture which, over the last several decades, has turned more to Postmodernity as its social paradigm.

Beyond the development of postmodernism as a response to the notion of the “master narrative” exists Kuhn’s theory of the paradigm and of the paradigm shift. This theory, first pertaining to the natural sciences, and adopted later in literary criticism, brings a reformulation of the idea that postmodernism is much more than a poetic rebellion. Kuhn’s principle critical work, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, first questions the idea of an objective scientific view by stating that the vision of the scientist is guided by a greater set of rules through which the scientist perceives the world (8-9).
This over-reaching set of rules and notions, or as Kuhn puts it, “[the] accepted model or pattern” that governs the scientific view is called a “paradigm” (Kuhn 23). The development of the modern sciences, for example, has been one of replacing one vision of the universe, or paradigm, with another, rather than an evolution of previously existing thought (23). Thus, the scientist is ruled entirely by whatever paradigm exists at the time, unable therefore to see anything which falls outside of it (24). In other words, scientific knowledge is not based upon the actual facts found; rather, it is a perception of those facts based on the dominant paradigm at the moment (Dietz 31).

Of course, the notion that something as empirically-driven as the natural sciences could fall prey to such a subjective and decentralized phenomenon as that which paradigm theory offers does not sit easily with everyone. In fact, a debate rages among scientists as to whether they should follow this theory, also known as that of the “subjective paradigm (Bleich 320),” or that of the “objective paradigm,” the traditional notion of science as a process of evolution rather than revolution (321).

The notion of the paradigm shift, the “revolution” referred to both here and in Kuhn’s own work, is the process whereby one paradigm replaces another (Dietz 34). This process works in the following three phases: 1) Crisis Phase: anomalies arise which the present paradigm cannot explain; 2) Transitional Phase: the breakdown of the paradigm becomes universally accepted; 3) The Adoption of a new paradigm: new paradigms are created and compete until the community accepts one as the dominant paradigm (Dietz 39). Kuhn, in fact, uses several historical examples to illustrate this process, such as the discovery of oxygen (Kuhn 57). The paradigm existing at the time that oxygen was discovered could not accept its existence, so it fell into crisis. This crisis
forced science into a transitional phase, then an adoptive phase where a new paradigm
that could accept the existence of oxygen was found and utilized (62).

The application of paradigm shift theory in literary criticism is a logical one, as
the “subject paradigm” functions well in the context of competing, and ultimately very
subjective, hermeneutical visions (Bleich 329). In fact, critical studies based on the
paradigm and paradigm shift theories already exist, such as Easthope’s article on
Forster’s *A Passage to India*, “Paradigm Lost and Paradigm Regained.” Here, besides his
detailed comparison of an empiricist’s, then a post-structuralist’s, critical readings of
Forster’s work, Easthope delineates the crisis, transitional and possible adoptive phases
of the most recent paradigm shift, that from High Modernism into postmodernism. The
knowledge that pure empiricism does not function as proof of Western phallocentric
superiority caused a breakdown of the paradigm prevalent up to the middle of the 20th
Century (Easthope 93). From there, in the 1960’s and 70’s, works by Barthes and others
criticized the notions of the “master narrative” in both literature and literary criticism
(95). From there, a new dominant paradigm eventually emerged, one based on the notion
that context and interpretation define a text, rather than that of a meaning embedded for
the reader to find through empirical, universally accepted evidence (96-97). The purpose
of the reading, and therefore, the intentions of the reader, will now define the parameters
of the text’s interpretation. It is this, postmodern, paradigm that I argue is now a major
player in the struggle for domination in Spanish poetry.

In terms of the feasibility of an argument in favor of a complete paradigm shift
having already happened in Spanish poetic art, I do not believe that this has happened
yet. It would occur to anyone who has studied the sweeping thematic and technical
changes of Spanish poetry from the 1950s through the beginning of the 21st Century, however, that some sort of change is definitely afoot. As the techniques of testimonial, intimate, experimental and postmodern poetics emerged in Spain, there remained a consistent counter-balance. This included the revalorization of Iberian Renaissance and Baroque Period poetries (such as those of Camões or Quevedo) and the presence and influence of the Christian, Kabbalic and Sufi mystical processes in several poetic works of the period. This study, in both scope and depth, will attempt to reconcile both theoretical and critical notions of the poetries of both the time-period and place in question with Kuhn’s theories of the Paradigm Shift. It is my hope that by crossing the evolution of the postmodern with that of the new paradigm as outlined by Easthope we may better understand the forces at work in both the greater movement between esthetic preferences in poetry and the undertakings of the particular poets involved.

It is necessary, however, to discuss the parameters by which we judge a work as “postmodern” or not, particularly because of postmodernism’s weight toward the turn of the Twentieth Century in Spanish poetry. A widely accepted definition for the postmodern poetic is given in Linda Hutcheon’s well-known synthesis of postmodern criticism, A Poetics of Postmodernism. Here, she defines it as “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concept it challenges …” (3). It serves at its advent to demystify the notion of the “master narrative” as proposed by Lyotard (whether that be an historical, literary or cultural one), through the process whereby “consensus becomes the illusion of consensus” (Hutcheon 6-7). Postmodernism, at its most basic level, desires to counter modernist discourse by removing the authority vested in the text and replace it with the revelation of that text’s
true status, as a human construct, both expressed and limited by the language used to create it (7-8). Thus, any discourse, whether artistic or political, may be understood as nothing more than the manifestation of a “contradictory interaction” based on any given ideology and its “relations of power” with the reader / listener (178-179). Techniques such as intertextuality may serve to reveal the true nature of the “master narrative” as a combination of the literary and the historical. “It is a kind of seriously ironic parody that often enables this contradictory doubleness: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature” (124). This world of intertextuality supports the reworking of particular “master narratives,” such as phallocentric and political hegemonies, decentralizing them and, thus, leaving their relative, and even illusory, nature exposed (158-159).

The single most important artistic technique employed in the poetry of postmodernism is alluded to multiple times in the previous paragraph, that is, deconstruction. In his work On Deconstruction, Culler names three principal aspects of deconstruction (Culler 85-89). First, the deconstructive text must work within the terms of the same system it means to deconstruct. In this way, the text will undermine the notion, idea, philosophy or base text which it at first would seem to assert. Second, and more specifically, the deconstructive text will question the notion of causality in the deconstructed object. This means that the text will make evident the relationship between cause and effect in which the main ideas of the deconstructed object create its logical base. Finally, the deconstructive text will reverse the hierarchical oppositions of the original causal scheme. Thus, by inverting the system in which the deconstructed object works, it may subvert the effectiveness of the causality which feeds the notion of
hierarchy sustaining the object. As Hutcheon states, “postmodernism might be seen to operate as an internalized challenge to analytico-referential discourse by pointing to the way in which its model of infinite expression is, in fact…, underpinned by a drive toward totalization and finite and closed knowledge” (75).

The application of this technique in any text causes the illusion of the text as a “master narrative” to be undone. Returning to the defining characteristic of deconstruction, through the process outlined above, the “modern” text, or “master narrative,” becomes just another example of a value-laden hierarchy with no real central core to sustain it. Thus, the text is not only deconstructed, it becomes decentralized.

Decentralization, in fact, appears in some of the first, and most influential, critical texts in the study of postmodernism. Roland Barthes, in his work *Mythologies*, describes language as nothing more than a small part of a greater, yet identical, structure of signifier, signified and sign. “In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described [in a summary of Saussurean linguistic theory]: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order system” (Barthes 114). Ultimately, the semiotic of myth is identical to that of language, meaning that both are finite constructions based on the same, limited model within and through which the illusion of form exist merely as a function of its own limitations. For this reason, what Barthes calls form (117) is not the object itself, but that into which the “impoverished,” empty shell that our linguistic / mythological / sociological tri-partite conception converts it. As Culler puts it, Barthes works toward the ideal of considering all human endeavor
as just another linguistic system, “as a series of ‘languages’” that serve to uncover cultural secrets (Culler, *At the Boundaries*, 30-31).

Jacques Derrida explains the technique (or “project”) of deconstruction as a way of both undoing textual phallocentrism (Harvey 196) and of revealing “différence,” or “a system of difference and contradiction” (Derrida 44) which deconstruction exploits. As postmodernism suggests that no text may contain, nor exist as, a “master narrative,” the only centralizing force in such a text becomes that of Derrida’s “différance.” This re-definition of the notion of a universal center as nothing more than a contrast between differing textual elements, implies that no real definitions may exist, which leads then to a questioning of the nature of literature versus non-literature (i.e., history, political discourse, etc.) Derrida’s *Glas*, a simultaneous literary and philosophical discourse, effectively demonstrates this notion (Culler, *At the Boundaries*, 38).

In terms of Derrida’s push for a deconstruction of phallocentric language, other critics have taken up the struggle to deconstruct and decentralize this notion. Julia Kristeva, for example, takes up the argument in terms of the marginalization of women in the now-derided notion of the “master narrative.” In her *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva studies the grammar of poetic language and resolves that it functions to express “significance” not through normative discourse, which capitalist society has stratified and appropriated, but through a marginalized discourse. “Magic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and ‘incomprehensible’ poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to what it represses: the *process* that exceeds the subject and his communicative structures” (Kristeva 30). The term “significance,” thus, represents the true nature of the world, a “structuring and de-structuring *practice*” rather than a set
hierarchy (31). Rhythm (36) and the phonic quality of language (37), both of which reflect poetry’s underlying primitive structure, also represent both the womb and its “significance,” movement and origin. The term Kristeva designates to this phenomenon is that of the “chora,” a greek term for “womb” (35-36). It defines both the derridean “différance,” or the relationship between the real “and the symbolic,” and the element which links the body to its origin, “the mother” that gave birth to it (36-37).

The anti-phallic struggle is not the only one present in postmodernism, however. The fight against capitalist government (and against the hierarchical nature of capitalism in general) and the false freedom it offers becomes a primary concern for some postmodern critics. For example, Terry Eagleton, in his work *An Introduction to Literary Theory*, explains that, just as the notion of a literary canon is a social construction (22-23) and an exercise of power in a hegemonic relationship between the reader and the critic (240), so is political discourse, especially that borne of capitalist regimes whose “master narrative” is nothing more than an expression of their own tyranny (246). In Eagleton’s view, the notions of literature and of literary criticism are really just social constructions (242), an opinion which, with the support of deconstruction’s result of decentralization, makes sense, since no universal center, whether historical or literary, really exists. Other techniques, such as the mixing of high and low cultural elements, also play a role in Rossetti’s poetry, as we will see.

The development of postmodernism in Spanish poetry, specifically during the period of 1970-2000, marks a change in the perception of Iberian cultures as no longer belonging entirely to the past (Bou 402). Historically, the Franco dictatorship which ruled Spain for most of the Twentieth Century had, in the mid-1970s, been replaced. The
death of Francisco Franco on 21 November, 1975 (Hooper 29), marked the end of a period of economic growth known as the “años de desarrollo,” in which Spain developed from a rural and relatively impoverished country to become the world’s ninth greatest industrial power (18). This unprecedented economic growth was due to a combination of high levels of importation and a constant flow of tourist dollars during the 1960s and early 70s, along with foreign investment in the country (19). Unlike what happened in Portugal, the Spanish government welcomed all of these income-attracting economic and developmental decisions (19-20). Although corruption and social stratification abounded (21), the country saw a level of prosperity unheard of in the years prior to the Civil War. By the approval of the first post-Franco democratic constitution in 1977, however, the ‘economic miracle’ had ended and prosperity had begun to decline (25-28). It had also become evident that, despite the increase in personal wealth that all Spaniards enjoyed, the division of wealth among the social classes had not changed at all (27). So, with the death of Franco and the rise of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español in the late 1970s and early 1980s, or the Spanish Socialist Party, there appeared a chance for renewed economic growth as well as a more egalitarian distribution of wealth in Spain (52-53). However, as the 1980s moved to a close it became clear that the Socialist Party would not attempt to change the uneven distribution of wealth in the country (61), one of many reasons for which the more conservative Partido Popular, or Popular Party, began taking more and more parliamentary seats during the 1980s and 90s (62-69). In fact, social critics have commented on an important aspect of the transition period that differentiates it from that of other countries, namely, the control maintained by the ruling class over the
transition to democracy (López 36). The Spanish case is, thus, one of a transition “from above” (Kaufman 13).

Culturally, Spain has had to accept its linguistic and national plurality while simultaneously maintaining a unified, central government (Hooper 371). Religiously, the people’s adherence to the church, an essential element of Spanish culture in the past, began to wane during the post-Franco era (133). This was due in part to a secularization of the general populace, especially those born at or after the transition period (133-4). The generally conservative nature of the Spanish clergy came into sharp contrast with the more liberal political culture of the 1980s and 90s, a fact made plain through a “virtual absence of ideology from Spanish politics” (143). In this seemingly anti-clerical situation, however, there is still a strong sentiment that Catholicism serves as an element of national identity, even if the belief in God is not so solid (126). It is in this confusing moral, and somewhat disappointing political, situation that a poetics of postmodernism takes hold in Spain.

In artistic terms, during the 1950s and 1960s a new generation of poets began writing in Spain, one whose members had survived the Civil War as children and grown up during the first decades of the dictatorship (Debicki 99). Their poetry appears in the 1950s as more socially-inclined, one of the few art forms which the censors permitted (Bau 397). In the 60s, due to industrial growth, the influence of foreign film and music, and the relative relaxing of censorship laws (Debicki 98), poetry expanded to include a less social and more metaphysical style (Bau 398). Two poets from this period who exemplify the transition are José Hierro and Ángel González. The third that we will
study here, Ana Rossetti, represents best the application of postmodernism to the contemporary poetic and social scene.

José Hierro, a poet already known by 1950 for his testimonial poetry [in works such as *Tierra sin nosotros* (1947), *Alegría* (1947), and *Quinta del 42* (1952) (Soriano 22)], published *Cuánto sé de mí* in 1957 (Debicki 126). It is a work known for its combination of the older testimonial style with a newer, “subjective expression of the sense of loss” through which the poetic subject, conscious of his role as a poetic witness, views his world (126).

*Cuánto sé de mí* serves as a transitional marker from the social poetry of the 1950s to the more metaphysical poetry of the 1960s. First, the subjectivity expressed by the poetic subject has been seen as directly tied to the notion of the limits of language representing the limits of the subject (Bermúdez 247), a central topic in postmodernism. According to Bermúdez, this limitation may only be overcome through the death of the flesh, and thus of the body which requires language to describe it (247). Also, although musicality in poetry is an essential element of Lorca’s work (Boggs 209), in Hierro it is seen as a method by which the poetic subject may transcend the confines of literature, time and space (209). It is important to note that a large part of Hierro’s work is focused on the notion of transcendance, rather than on deconstruction or decentralization. Thus, even though his work is not postmodern, the subjectivity with which he testifies to the state of the world, a constant desire for transcendance and the notion of death as an escape from the limitations of expression will all greatly influence Spanish postmodernism.
In terms of the paradigm shift theory, Hierro’s work exemplifies a moment of crisis, where, although one paradigm is still in effect, it no longer serves the purpose of expressing the experience of the present moment. Social poetry, although useful in the first two decades of the post-war era in Spain, does not reflect the situation in the late 50s and early 60s, where a new reality begins to take hold in the country. Thus, the emergence of a metaphysical strain in this period finds its explanation as a symptom of the Crisis Phase.

A young contemporary of Hierro, Ángel González, also begins his work in the 1950s and 60s as a testimonial poet, often expressing the limits of life and its dependence on language as its primary mode of expression (Debicki 114-115). Unlike Hierro, however, González’s poetic work continues to evolve into the 1970s and 80s (163), taking on topics such as the poetic subject’s relationship with memory and aging, and a dialog with the concept of history within the confines of poetic language (Valero 2). His use of a plain and simpler language has been shown as revealing an intertextual relationship between his own text and that of Juan Ramón Jiménez, especially concerning the topic of death (Wilcox, “Ángel González,” 37). In one of his most recent works, Otoños y otras luces (2001), González’s poetic subject focuses entirely on the topics mentioned above while simultaneously adulating life, love and poetry’s connection with both (2-3). His view of language also evolves, becoming more seemingly postmodern through a “tendency to self-referentiality and indeterminacy” that invites the reader to participate in the linguistic games played (165). In a poetic environment that becomes ever-more decentralized, González challenges the notion of the “master narrative”
through a questioning of the notion of absolute truth with which the reader enters into the
text (Deters 239).

In terms of the paradigm shift, the poetry of Ángel González reflects a moment in
which a new paradigm, postmodernism, is appearing as one among many in Spanish
poetry. It happens through a subjective, indeterminate language that questions absolute
notions and forces the reader into an ambiguous, decentralized state in whose creation
s/he has participated. This period in the shift is recognizable, thus, as the Transitional
Phase.

This new paradigm, postmodernism, was just beginning to appear in the 1960s
and 70s in Spain. As I will show in the work of Ana Rossetti, by the 1980s
postmodernism appears as a present, and possibly dominant, paradigm in Spanish poetry.
If the latter is true, this will be the period known in paradigm shift theory as the
“adoption” of the new paradigm, at least artistically speaking.

Ana Rossetti, born in 1950, grew up during a period of relatively relaxed
censorship and came of age in an historical period marked, as explained above, by, as
Debicki states, “a lack of historical perspective, uncertainty regarding the future” (179).
Her ironic undermining of cultural “master narratives” concerning the phallocentric
through carefully utilized sexual imagery (211-212) allows for a deconstruction (through
carnavalasque inversion) of a culture of male-dominated hegemony (213). Her work
Indicios vehementes (1985) is one that many consider one of her most telling works, in
which poems such as “Chico Wrangler,” the inversion of the male-female, or dominant-
submissive, relationship function in the context of a foreign advertisement (Debicki 213;
Ferradáns 25). The application of a deeper meaning to a popular object whose purpose is
entirely superficial (that is, to gain customers and make money) indicates another, very postmodern aspect of Rossetti’s work, the marking of an absence of universal meaning (Moreiras Menor 108). Her work also demonstrates the emphasis on Spanish culture as having become one of the “spectacle,” where one searches out appearances but not meaning (108). Decentralization occurs, thus, through the deconstruction of ultimately superficial and vacuous cultural icons, such as an advertisement for pants, as indicative of a superficial and vacuous culture. Ironically, it is this emptiness that has become, according to Rossetti’s work, a mark of Spanish cultural identity in the wake of the Franco’s death (111).

In terms of the paradigm shift theory, as stated above Rossetti’s work embodies the adoption of the new, postmodern paradigm. However, it is important to note that her work expresses a criticism of the excesses of that paradigm’s cultural extension, known as Postmodernity. Also, her use of past imagery [from the work of Góngora, for example (Ferradáns 27)] and her non-attempts at defining an overly-ambiguous postmodern Spanish society set Rossetti apart from her contemporaries (Moreiras Menor 115). As with the case of Ángel González, there exists a certain timelessness brought about through her poetry. As Rossetti states, “… cuando escribes, no existe una sucesión logica del tiempo. Todo lo que tienes y todo lo que esperas está ahí” (Rossetti 14). Also, unlike either González or Hierro, the theme of death, although present in her prose (Moreira Menor 119), does not take a central role in her poetry. I believe that this is due to Rossetti’s adherence to the experiencing of a postmodern paradigm which, in its ambiguous, indefinable and nihilistic view of the decentralized universe, sees the attempt to transcend the world as a waste of time. Death, as a part of transcendence in both
Hierro’s and González’s work, as well as an important theme traditionally in Spanish poetry, may also reflect the historical aspect of life, one which, in Rossetti’s postmodernism, no longer has any meaning (119).

The issue of whether or not a paradigm shift has occurred is not a closed one, however. The ambiguity present in Hierro’s and González’s work is not necessarily new, but rather also present in the poetry of earlier Twentieth-Century poets such as Lorca and Salinas. Also, in all the above writers there is an appreciation for the presence of older forms, such as the presence of Golden Age themes and characters in Rossetti’s poetry. Finally, all essentialist poetry has not vanished, as work by poets such as Clara Janés (who is noted for both her anti-phallocentrism as well as her use of Christian, Zoroastrian and Sufi mystical symbolism) and Jesús Jiménez Reinaldo demonstrate. Thus, it is possible that peninsular poetry, and thus peninsular culture, could be in the throes of a Transitional Phase whose final paradigm choice may be as surprising as it will be necessary.

In this study I have attempted to construct a very brief outline of Postmodern Theory, Paradigm Shift Theory, and the application of the latter in the adoption of the former over the course of the second half of the Twentieth Century in the Spain. I have examined three poets whose work I believe exemplifies the shift from Modernism to postmodernism in the Iberian Peninsula: José Hierro, Ángel González and Ana Rossetti in Spain. Each poet represents a different phase in the paradigm shift, from the Crisis Phase, to the Transition Phase and finally to the “Adoption” Phase. All three poets also focus, at least to some extent, on the notion of death as both a sort of ontological guide-post as well as an almost centralizing and definitely primary force in their poetries.
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