

GARCÍA MONTERO, BAUDELAIRE, AND THE UTILITY OF POETRY

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Las flores del frío (1991), Luis García Montero's fifth book of poetry, continues his main themes: the necessity for human intimacy in the modern urban world and the role of poetic language in creating a meaningful reality. The title also reflects the Spanish poet's penchant for dialogue with prior traditions. In this case the intertextual reference is to Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*. Furthermore, in the poem "Canción ofendida," the speaker invokes the French master's name in dialogue fashion. By examining this poem in the light of the critical writings of these two poets, it will be shown that García Montero shares Baudelaire's zeal for revolutionary art, but differs from the French master in advocating an explicit relationship between poetry and utility.

Considering the writings of one poet in light of another's work reflects an intertextual relationship. Intertextuality has been defined in countless ways, but the less precise the definition, the more useful it is for interpretation. Riffaterre defines intertextuality as "one or more texts which the reader must know in order to understand a work of literature in terms of its overall significance" (56). According to Worton this definition is both broad and concise. An intertext may be a specific word or image or may recall a theme, period, or movement that creates a tension in the reader's interpretation of a poem (27). A related feature of intertextuality is the canonical structure against which a text is shaped and which it seeks to subvert (Frow 156-57). García Montero's writing over Baudelaire's title, then addressing him in a specific poem, creates the kind of tension suggested by Riffaterre. Each poet, in turn, challenges the canonical structure of the dominant society through his art.

Baudelaire's influence as a critic of nineteenth-century art is widely

recognized. He wrote extensively on painting and music as well as literature, being perhaps best known for his work on Delacroix, Wagner, and Poe. Baudelaire views the pursuit of beauty as the primary goal of artistic expression. While direct imitation of reality is to be avoided, art should nonetheless spring from observation of the world. However, Baudelaire does not perceive a direct relationship between art and morality (Hyslop 14-32 *passim*). He queries, "Is art useful? Yes, because it is art" (Hyslop 64). Baudelaire, while admiring Hugo, ultimately disagrees with the Romantic notion of the utility of art. In any event, Baudelaire's aesthetic theories left him room to pursue the ideal of beauty while at the same time critiquing, though implicitly, the Parisian society of his time.

García Montero has become a respected literary critic. Besides editing Rafael Alberri's complete works, he has written on the history and role of poetry in such books as *La otra sentimentalidad* (1983), *Poesía, cuartel de invierno* (1987), and *¿Por qué no es útil la literatura?* (1993). He is associated with a generation of young poets who began writing in the 1980s and who have attacked the prevailing *novísimo* aesthetic as excessively hermetic and divorced from life. In his most recent essay, García Montero articulates the need for a socially committed poetry and compares the present-day *culturalismo* to the nineteenth-century bourgeois mentality toward art: "El narcisismo del arte abandonado a los dominios del arte [. . .] [es] en el fondo un narcisismo muy burgués y muy siglo XIX" (22-23). He blames the poets themselves, as they have abandoned their duty to make their work matter to a particular time and place. Poetry's mission is to respond to the crisis occasioned by the dehumanizing, deindividualizing effects of capitalism. The new poetic hero will embody "un nuevo concepto de individualidad que no se defina por las distancias imaginarias entre el yo y la realidad social" (33-34). Poetry must redefine individual and collective experience to be useful.

This last point does link García Montero to Baudelaire, whose work is seen today as an acute critique of the social ills that befell Paris in the wake of the Revolution. Josephine Diamond notes that Baudelaire disrupted, through startling imagery, the "fragmented, commodified" view of Paris (172). Postmodern readings of Baudelaire have focused on this fragmentation and "the scene of language as a mobile play of

difference [. . .] the different poetic modes of *Les fleurs du mal* set up a play of contrasts between desire and its commodification” (Diamond 172-78). These studies highlight the power of poetic language to effect change and find an echo in García Montero’s work.

Upon examining briefly the aesthetic theories of these two poets, we see that common ground emerges in their desire to critique the underlying social order of their respective times. They diverge over the utility of poetry, implicit for Baudelaire, explicit for García Montero.

The poem “Canción ofendida” develops the intertext established in the book’s title:

- Parece que se queman las heridas
de un siglo envenenado,
Baudelaire.
- 5 Nadie siente tu llaga. Pasa el tiempo
y el dolor envejece,
Baudelaire.
- De sentido común se hacen los puentes,
las noches de autopista,
Baudelaire.
- 10 Y la bella en el yare se desnuda
con los pezones limpios,
Baudelaire.
- Los miserables pasan como libros
sin título en la frente,
15 Baudelaire.
- Hoy puede levantarse un rascacielos.
El mundo es otra cosa,
Baudelaire.
- Pero el yo no ha encontrado todavía
20 su lugar en la frase,
Baudelaire.
- Y también puede abrirse una ventana
encima del abismo,
Baudelaire.
- 25 Mira el muchacho blanco, aquel muchacho

de los labios honrados,

Baudelaire.

Para su despedida, en un bolsillo,

los versos del poeta

30 Baudelaire.

No son las flores del mal lo que ha vivido.

Son las flores del frío,

Baudelaire. (23-24)

The controlling feature of the poem is the repetition of "Baudelaire," which assumes the air of a refrain (note the *canción* form) or incantation. In all stanzas but one, the name is set off by a comma, as if the speaker were addressing the French poet. Adopting Riffaterre's notion of intertextuality, one would say that the name Baudelaire, and all it represents, is the "gap" which the reader must fill to understand the poem (57).

Baudelaire's world is evoked through contrast with the technological and cultural changes that have occurred since his time (skyscrapers, sexual freedom, etc.). Each stanza may be read as a commentary over the effects of time on tradition. In fact, the stanzas broadly recall poems from *Les fleurs du mal*. "La bella en el yate," while distant in space, appears open and liberated, while the female subjects of Baudelaire's poetry are frequently described as haughty and unattainable (e.g., "Hymne á la Beauté") or as hiding a profound sadness ("Le Masque"). In similar fashion, "los miserables" find their counterparts in the masses of the "Tableaux Parisiens" section of *Les fleurs du mal* (e.g., "Les Petites Vieilles"). García Montero echoes the social critique of Baudelaire's observer (the *flâneur*), for the latter, according to Walter Benjamin, draws heroic material from the "refuse" of the street (79). This transformation anticipates, in turn, García Montero's affirmation of a new hero emerging from the commonplace. But if the masses are central to Baudelaire's vision, García Montero's work turns inward toward the individual. In keeping with the intimista trend of his generation, the speaker becomes transformed through romance, memory, and various other social experiences. At the end of *Las flores del frío* ("Definición del alba") the human community gives him new life, while "Le Voyage" closes *Les fleurs*

du mal with the passage from life to death.

The suffering present in contemporary life is accentuated by the lines "parece que se queman las heridas" and "puede abrirse una ventana al abismo." Against this modern landscape of hopelessness, Baudelaire's work has become clichéd: "Nadie siente ru llaga." In fact, the "muchacho blanco" is a caricature of the earnest young poet for whom Baudelaire's verse has become "commodified," i.e., a pocket edition in the manner of a book of aphorisms or quotations. In this way *Les fleurs du mal* is actually the canonical, dominant text against which García Montero must write to "dis-order" tradition (Frow 128). Ironically, Baudelaire succeeds in his aim to create a new cliché by removing the halo from the image of the lyric poet (Benjamin 152).

Baudelaire's success in Spain, however, was a long time in coming. Spanish critics harbored hostility toward *Les fleurs du mal* (with the exception of Clarín) until at least the mid-nineteen-thirties (Aggeler 72; Hambrook 8). García Montero, surely aware of this traditional hostility, engages Baudelaire in a dialogue that dis-orders, in turns, the dominant Spanish critical discourse.

Although García Montero has rendered passé Baudelaire's *frisson nouveau*, the end of "Canción ofendida" brings the reader back to the title by making an important distinction between "mal" and "frío." The speaker negates Baudelaire's assertion that evil lies in the human heart and that the only escape is to deny life through art, narcotics, and eroticism (Carter 60-61). Throughout the canciones section of *Las flores del frío*, the speaker has defined "frío" in such terms as "ofendida," "tachada," "amarga," "ahogada," and "multada." These images portray a world where human relationships have failed. Moreover, the speaker is not a *flâneur* but rather one desperate for the "alba," a reawakening of hope. On the other hand, Baudelaire's work ends with "Le Voyage" to death, as his speaker cannot find the compassion and community he seeks. Death becomes not only a logical extension of life but also an adventure on which one embarks with a mixture of anguish and expectation (Carter 101). Thus, "No son las flores del mal lo que ha vivido, / Son las flores del frío" suggests redemption—the night ends with the dawn—where Baudelaire saw little hope for the "mal" afflicting humankind.

García Montero's allusions to *Les fleurs du mal* signal a complex

relationship with Baudelaire and his work. Admittedly, the book's techniques and structures are as different as their times; García Montero writes in a colloquial style that eschews the complex allegory and symbolism of Baudelaire. The two poets, however, share a desire to attack the sources of a spiritual void found in their surroundings. For Baudelaire, the evils that human beings do to one another come from within; for García Montero, humans find themselves in a state of perpetual "cold" when they dwell in a society that prevents meaningful relationships.

As an intertext, *Les fleurs du mal* both informs and enriches *Las flores del frío*. García Montero does not cast aside the work of the French master but instead revisits and redefines it. In the end, "frío" is but a facet of "mal" caused by human isolation. Just as Baudelaire wrote against the dehumanization of his day, so García Montero advocates a new societal structure based on compassion. Baudelaire's intertexts heighten the sense of despair and loss found in *Las flores del frío* and cause the reader to look beyond the poems themselves to the critical theories of the two authors. Upon examining those theories, we find that García Montero ultimately uses Baudelaire, who believed that utility was implicit in art, as an explicit instrument for transforming the societal and critical landscape.

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