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# Vision, Desire and the Reader of the *Polifemo*

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*Language is communication in its most perfect form. But literature, especially poetry, calls language, and consequently communication, into question. Poetry is a further transformation—a transgression—of communication. What the poet says cannot be said in conversation [...] Poetry transfigures mere communication: it is a communion.*

—Octavio Paz

Góngora's poetry has been characterized by some late-twentieth-century critics as a poetry of excess. Approaching his *Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea*, however, has daunted readers in this and previous centuries precisely because of what it does *not* contain. References to any concrete political or social context are few and do not serve to fix the poem in any place or time. Nor do they point the reader toward an allegorical interpretation of the poem based upon analogies to Góngora's Spain. An allusion to Europe's consumption of Sicily's agricultural bounty (18)<sup>1</sup>, and another to the commercial activities of Venice and Genoa (55) are the only statements in the poem which could be taken as political or historical references. Standing, as they do, in apparent isolation, such statements do not seem to indicate a central concern of the poem. Moreover, C. Colin Smith has quite rightly pointed out that the Sicily of the *Polifemo* is not any real Sicily at any specific time, nor is man depicted in the poem at any particular historical moment (220). Rather, the world of the *Polifemo* is an anachronistic mixture of Graeco-Roman minor deities, pastoral and arable agriculture, pan-European commerce, Genoese merchants, Swiss soldiers. This island, like that of the *Soledades* is "a timeless conjunction of all that Góngora wants it to be" (220).

If the *Polifemo* has no specific setting, no references to any historical, social or political reality, and no indication that it is to be interpreted allegorically, neither can it be said to contain a great deal of action. Indeed, the *Fábula* is a mostly static poem on its narrative level. Until the cyclops hurls the stone that crushes Acis at the work's conclusion there is almost no action depicted. In the poem's various

sections Polifemo, Galatea and Acis are described, but there is little movement. Instead, many of the strophes offer encapsulated, static images which present the results of action but rarely action itself. Together they comprise a poem which is less a narration of action than a series of descriptions of related but separate and still moments. While the characters of the work scarcely move, neither do they converse. Galatea's plea for help to the sea deities at Acis's death constitutes her only words. Yet even at this point the fact of her entreaty is narrated without her words themselves being presented. Acis, for his part, does not speak at all. Indeed, Polifemo, in his love song to Galatea, is the only figure in the poem who can be said to have a voice.

The reader, faced with something of a dilemma when approaching a long poem which cannot be situated in any place or time and which does not seem to be greatly concerned with action or speech, is forced to look to other levels of the poem in search of a focus. Specifically, one might analyze the poem's thematic content for insistent themes which could open the *Fábula* to interpretation. Likewise, one might look to the level of the very language of the work, for it is the difficulty and density of the poem's language that has been the source of much of the critical commentary it has received. Certainly the extremes of hyperbaton, multiple metaphor and the density of allusion in the *Polifemo* produce a constant awareness in the reader of the otherness of this creation. The language of the *Polifemo* is so convoluted, so densely wrought and allusive that it has demanded great effort of the reader—even of readers who were themselves poets and contemporaries of Góngora. The tangle of Góngora's language draws attention to itself as poetry. It is possible, then, that poetry which is so insistently self-aware and which produces and maintains that same awareness in the reader is, to some degree, about itself—poetry about poetry, about language and about the limits and possibilities of representation. Looking first at the level of the poem's thematic content and imagery, then at the level of syntax and metaphor, I hope to show that it is precisely in this area of poetic self-reflection that all these levels intersect, and that at this juncture an indication of one possible interpretation of the *Fábula* exists.

Desire is a salient theme of the *Polifemo*, and it could hardly emerge earlier in the poem. One of the first images confronting the reader is that of the nearly irrepressible desire for the hunt in the first and second of the three dedicatory strophes: the falcon yearns to begin the chase and cannot be still upon its perch; horses strain at the bit; greyhounds whine with desire as they tug at their silken leashes. The horn urges all to start pursuit, yet from the beginning the

fulfillment of desire is deferred. The horn must cede to the lyre, exercise to leisure, sound to silence, and desire for the hunt must give way, unfulfilled, to the representation of a poem which takes as its theme desire itself.

The cyclops Polifemo desires the nymph Galatea; so do the sea deities Glauco and Palemo. Acis desires Galatea; Galatea desires Acis. The lovers' first meeting, described with hunt imagery—he is *venablo* (25.193), she, *monstruo de rigor, fiera brava*, is subdued by an *arpón* (31.244-5)—recalls the yearning for the hunt with which the poem began, and intimates that their desire will likewise go ungratified. Polifemo's song, is, in ironic contrast to the excessive natural plenitude that weights the world of this poem, a song of desire.

Furthermore, desire in this world is consistently directed toward that which cannot be seen or which cannot be seen completely. "Polifemo te llama," laments the cyclops, "no te escondas" (51.405). His song is a plea, in part, for Galatea's appearance; yet Galatea is "la ausencia mil veces ofrecida," (29.229) a living paradox whose only offering to those who desire her is her absence from view and thus the perpetuation of their desire. Polifemo's lament is a song to a beloved who is present but perpetually invisible and unresponsive. Similarly the triton Glauco sings or speaks to induce the nymph to "tread the silver fields" of the sea in his crystalline cart (15.119-20), but Galatea, again, is nowhere to be seen.

More complex in terms of vision and desire is the description of the encounter between Acis and Galatea, for here desire is born of an unexpected and incomplete vision of another's beauty. Fleeing the disordered world of Polifemo, Galatea takes refuge beneath a laurel whose trunk, in similar flight, eludes the burning sun. There, beside a fountain, the "snow of her limbs" is both emphasized by its contrast with the green grass and hidden by the "curtains" (27.213) formed by the branches of the laurel:

La fugitiva ninfa, en tanto, donde  
hurta un laurel su tronco al sol ardiente  
tantos jazmines cuanta hierba esconde  
la nieve de sus miembros, da a una fuente. (23.177-80)

It is upon this white vision partially concealed and veiled in green, that Acis stumbles; and while he satisfies his thirst by drinking from the stream, the desire born of vision is not fulfilled: he feeds his eyes, to the extent that he can, on the partially obscured body of Galatea: "su boca dio, y sus ojos cuanto pudo, | al sonoro cristal, al cristal mudo" (24.191-2). This image of the partial revelation of the body,

which at once frustrates and incites the lover's gaze is reiterated in the description of "vagas cortinas de volantes vanos" (27.213) which both do and do not shelter Galatea's shadowy bed from view.

Galatea's first sight of Acis is similarly incomplete and, similarly, provokes desire. Waking from sleep at the sound of the youth's splashing, she finds his delicate gift of fruit, milk and honey, but not its giver. Her first reaction is the combination of the desire to *see* the generous yet absent source and regret that the forest hides him from her:

mira la ofrenda ya con más cuidado  
y aun siente que a su dueño sea, devoto,  
confuso alcaide más, el verde soto. (31.246-8)

Thus moved, she rises and comes upon Acis among the shadows. Delicately balanced on one foot, she hovers to see his apparently sleeping body, but her gaze is impeded by the foliage; she must make him out "a pesar [...] de las ramas" (34.269). She shifts her position for a better view, but still the dying light of late afternoon denies her the full beauty of his face:

Del casi tramontado sol aspira  
a los confusos rayos, su cabello;  
flores su bozo es, cuyas colores,  
como duerme la luz, niegan las flores. (35.277-80)

Yet it is from the youth's face, the very part of him that cannot be fully perceived, that Love's venom, desire, is released (36.285-6).

Even once Galatea has yielded to Acis and the two recline upon a natural bed, protected in the hollow of a rock, Acis finds his advances gently rebuked and limited by his lover. As the object of his desire refuses to be possessed, a flock of doves, witnesses to the scene, is robbed of its consenting applause; the reader's voyeuristic gaze goes unrewarded, and Acis, yearning for the waves of Galatea's hair and the fruit of her breasts, finds himself in the place of Tantalus, that quintessential figure of unsatisfied desire, who, consumed with hunger and thirst, is condemned to have cool water and sweet fruit always present yet ever receding just beyond the limit of his grasp. The one moment which could be construed as a kind of union or possession, that moment when Acis dares and is allowed to kiss Galatea's lips, is precisely the moment which is interrupted by the horrendous strains of Polifemo's lament.

The lovers' ensuing flight toward the sea and safety is cut short as the boulder hurled by the cyclops strikes its fleeing mark.

Sus miembros lastimosamente opresos  
del escollo fatal fueron apenas,  
que los pies de los árboles más gruesos  
calzó el líquido aljófara de sus venas.  
Corriente plata al fin sus blancos huesos,  
lamiendo flores y argentando arenas,  
a Doris llega, que, con llanto pío,  
yerno le saludó, lo aclamó río. (63)

While some critics have seen Acis' final transformation into a river as "insistently triumphant" (Jones 15) and the sea into which that river flows as "a massive assurance of continuity" (Smith 226), I believe that there is ample evidence in the final lines of the text for a less triumphant and more ambivalent tone which is more in keeping with the poem's pervasive theme of deferred desire. Comparing Góngora's version of the transformation with the last lines of the story as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, one notes immediately the difference in both tone and events. Whereas Ovid causes Acis not only to be transformed into the river which bears his name but also to be physically reincarnated in an exotic, improved and deified form—horned, blue-faced and taller than his former self (Parker 172-3)—Góngora presents no such figure of a new, physical Acis. Instead, he has the hero remain a river which is welcomed by the sea goddess Doris not with celebration but rather, as Parker (113) emphasises, with lamentation (*llanto pío*). Thus, any kind of final union of Acis with Galatea is paradoxical and incomplete, for while Acis' transformation into a river allows a symbolic union with his beloved through the intermingling of bodies of water associated with the two lovers, he remains, nevertheless, a river forever in flight, perpetually seeking the sea.

The essence of desire in the *Polifemo* lies in its very lack of fulfillment. To paraphrase Góngora's words, desire, like the asp, prefers the rustic tangle, the uncut meadow, to the heart of the clipped and tended garden (36.281-4). Desire thrives upon the *ausencia mil veces ofrecida*, upon the partial view, the impeded gaze. Desire depends, in short, upon the denial of full possession of its object. That which is desired is that which is absent, which cannot be fully perceived, comprehended or possessed.

I believe that the *Fábula's* preoccupation with desire—a focus so insistent at the work's narrative and thematic levels—may be fruitfully applied to the analysis of the language of the poem and to the reader's confrontation with that language. Such an application is indeed suggested within the poem by an intriguing series of images which occupy closely situated strophes recounting the awakening of

desire between Acis and Galatea. (1) Just after Acis, all heat, dust and perspiration, has penetrated Galatea's cool seclusion, he is characterized as a javelin of the god of love: "Era Acis venablo de Cupido" (25.193). (2) Shortly thereafter, Cupid has pierced Galatea's heart with an *arpón*: "carcaj de cristal hizo, si no aljaba, | su blanco pecho de un arpón dorado" (31.243-4). (3) Galatea has never seen Acis, yet his image has been gently sketched, as with a paintbrush, into her imagination: "ni lo ha visto, si bien pincel süave | lo ha bosquejado ya en su fantasía" (32.251-2). (4) Having left her bower in search of the unseen figure whose splashing in the stream has invaded her sleep and whose silent, courteous gift has aroused her curiosity, Galatea comes upon the partial sight of Acis and sees fleshed out before her what heretofore has been only a suggestion, a sketch in the mind:

A pesar luego de las ramas, viendo  
colorido el bosquejo que ya había  
en su imaginación Cupido hecho  
con el pincel que le clavó su pecho (34.269-72)

The image of Love's javelin in the first of the four strophes quoted above finds its echo in the piercing *arpón*, which, in turn, is presented in relation to the *suave pincel* of the strophe immediately following. Finally, *venablo*, *arpón* and *pincel* become a single image—*el pincel con que clavó su pecho*—which embodies the properties of all three of its antecedents. In the sequence *venablo* → *arpón* → *pincel*, the fusion of the instrument of desire (*venablo de Cupido*, *arpón*) and the instrument of representation (*pincel*) into a single image equates the introduction of desire with the act of representation. To represent is to produce desire.

That the poem makes such an implication is to say that desire is not only an important thematic element here, but that it is also an essential element of the writing and reading of the poem. If to represent is to produce desire, then what desire is produced by the *Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea* as a representation? Perhaps most obvious is the desire of the reader to possess the full and incontrovertible meaning of the text—a desire which, like that of the poem's protagonists, is frustrated at every turn by an incomplete possession of its object.

The reader's search for meaning in this poem is impeded by complex syntactic structures, the multiple meaning of words, layers of metaphor, by language which itself bears witness to the poet's desire to surpass the limitations of poetic tradition and of his idiom. A close look at only a few verses upon which I have already touched can

illustrate this suggestion.

La fugitiva ninfa, en tanto, donde  
hurta un laurel su tronco al sol ardiente,  
tantos jazmines cuanta hierba esconde  
la nieve de sus miembros, da a una fuente.  
(23.177-80)

Vilanova (2:34) has maintained that these verses comprise one of the most indecipherable mysteries of the whole of Góngora's writing; around them has emerged a mass of conflicting scholarly interpretations. Among the early commentators, some understood this passage to mean that Galatea's snow-white body makes the verdant grass in which she lies seem to flower with jasmine; others, that the term *jazmín* refers to the effect of her body reflected in the spring (Parker 140). Dámaso Alonso (3:139) favors the first interpretation as does Gabriel de Corral (Vilanova 2:34); Vilanova (2:34), Díaz de Ribas (Vilanova 2:34), Salcedo Coronel (Vilanova 2:34) and Blecua (144) prefer the second. González Ollé (137) straddles the fence on this issue, claiming that the nymph, having lain down by the spring, would logically then drink from its water, so that the part of her body which covers the grass corresponds to the image of *nieve* and that part which is submerged or reflected in the water, to *jazmín*. Parker (141) points out that the difficulty of the passage is at once syntactic and metaphoric, since varying the position of the comma in the fourth verse changes the implied referents of the metaphors *nieve* and *jazmín* (and I should add that, bearing in mind the orthography of the period, such a comma—if it is contained in the manuscript—is ambiguous or—if it is not present in the manuscript—is supplied by an editor, thus reflecting his interpretation). Dámaso Alonso (3:139), in favor of those who envision the nymph's jasmine as flowering amid the grass, reminds his fellow scholars that the term *fuelle* applied not only to a fountain or stream but also to its environs. Colin Smith (224) comes forward in support of the *reflejistas* to say that for him, at least, "it is clear that Góngora wanted the reader to envision Galatea as reflected in the water [...] To pull one's hair out over the grammar of the third line, as the commentators did, is to miss the splendour of the image." Parker (141) tosses in the small but important complication that the jasmine blossoms of strophe twenty-three have become lilies by the time the heroine rises in strophe twenty-eight.

In these four verses alone, there seems to be for every reader an interpretation, often in conflict with the others, sometimes confusing, but each the product of a close reading of the text by a scholar. My



point here is that the desire of even the most sophisticated reader, when confronted with a complex text, is to arrive at a definitive meaning. Yet meaning in the *Polifemo* is often not the concrete and singular association of image and referent that the interpretations above have tried to make it. The diversity and discord among those readings underscores the impossibility of such an approach. Rather, meaning in this poem is often multiple and sometimes intentionally paradoxical. Galatea may at once be nymph *and* snow *and* jasmine, contrast *and* reflection. Colin Smith is quite on the mark when he states (elsewhere in his article and not in reference to these particular verses) that "sense" or meaning in the poem is never directly provided by the author; "sense [...] emerges and orders itself steadily as the impressions build up and as the force of the images is felt" (220). Parker's final comment above is significant too, and should be well taken: the much-debated snow and jasmine do become lilies at next glance, for the problem in interpreting these verses about Galatea is that—in contrast to the relative stasis at the narrative level of this work—at the level of metaphor Galatea, like almost every other element of the poem, is constantly in the process of becoming something else.

Acis makes his entrance under similarly complex syntactic circumstances:

(polvo el cabello, húmidas centellas,  
si no ardientes aljófares, sudando)  
llegó Acis [...] (24.187-9)

By virtue of a simple metaphor, his hair is both dusty and dust itself. In the rather more complex chiasmic structure which immediately follows, the conflict between syntax and logic in the adjective-noun pairs *húmidas centellas* and *ardientes aljófares* allows an unfolding of meaning that is both multiple and paradoxical. The syntax—i.e. the concordance between *húmidas* and *centellas* and the lack thereof between *húmidas* and *aljófares*—establishes the humid sparks and burning pearls as pairs. At the same time, however, the logical association of the adjective *húmidas* with *aljófares* and of *ardientes* with *centellas* suggests adjective-noun pairs which contradict syntax, so that Acis perspires at once literal droplets of water, humid sparks, burning pearls, burning sparks, humid pearls. Each separate image carries an intentional meaning (albeit deliberately illogical as in "humid sparks," "burning pearls"), yet the figure achieves its full resonance in the *totality* of the *concepto*, the combination and opposition of all the images, a totality which is impossible to conceive all at once and which is nearly as difficult to articulate.

The reader of the *Polifemo*, like Galatea, is confronted with both the copious and delicate gift of the poem and with the absence of the giver. The desire born of such a gift, then, is to penetrate this thicket of language and to disentangle, to see completely and clearly and to appropriate its full meaning. The reader's pursuit, however, offers only partial revelations, impeded vistas, ambiguous images. The experience of the reader of the *Polifemo* is rather like Ortega y Gasset's description of reading the *Quijote*. The author of *Meditaciones del Quijote* maintains that approaching a great work of literature is like standing in the midst of a dense forest, whose greater part is always beyond what one can perceive:

El bosque está siempre un poco más allá de donde nosotros estamos. De donde nosotros estamos acaba de marcharse y queda sólo su huella aún fresca. Los antiguos, que proyectaban en formas corpóreas y vivas las siluetas de sus emociones, poblaron las selvas de ninfas fugitivas. Nada más exacto y expresivo [...]

Desde uno cualquiera de sus lugares es, en rigor, el bosque una posibilidad [...] El bosque es una suma de posibles actos nuestros, que al realizarse, perderían su valor genuino. Lo que del bosque se halla ante nosotros de una manera inmediata es sólo un pretexto para que lo demás se halle oculto y distante. (35)

The language of the *Polifemo* suggests precisely such a reading. The evasiveness, the tantalizing mutability and ambiguity that is such a central feature of the *Polifemo*'s imagery is of a piece with its narrative and thematic focus. Góngora has, after all, chosen to retell a transformation myth, a story of metamorphosis which has as its constantly reiterated theme a desire whose object is forever elusive. The *Polifemo* is spun out in a dense tangle of metaphor of such a protean nature that the very images of which Góngora's myth is built are constantly in a state of metamorphosis of their own.

I do not mean to say that the reader's dilemma is an ultimately negative one. It is, to the contrary, both positive and necessary. Were the reader capable of possession or comprehension of the *Polifemo* in its totality, in a singular and all-encompassing reading, if every metaphorical jasmine, pearl and lily could be ascribed to some incontrovertibly concrete element in the narrative, if the poem's imagery were of a stable and immutable nature, then one's reading—what Ortega calls the "suma de posibles actos nuestros"—would indeed lose its genuine

value.

La invisibilidad, el hallarse oculto, no es un carácter meramente negativo, sino una cualidad positiva que, al verterse sobre una cosa, la transforma, hace de ella una cosa nueva. (Ortega 36)

It is this power of the language of the *Polifemo* to transform its subject through partial revelation which not only awakens desire in the reader but which also can lead to what Octavio Paz has called "poetic knowledge", a way of knowing which he opposes to logic, science and philosophy:

[...] the poem is not reducible to explanations. The poem is, simultaneously, a mode of apprehending reality and a mode of expressing it. In this sense, it is thought and art at the same time. But I underline: it is neither scientific nor philosophical knowledge. Nonetheless, poetic knowledge loses neither truth nor dignity because it is not science or philosophy. It is the *other* form of knowledge, the *third* form [...] Poetry has been a creator of myths, and poets have turned shapeless myths into poems and works of art. This function of poetry has not disappeared in our time. Poetry has rejuvenated myths.

I take this "poetic knowledge" to be akin to what Colin Smith described earlier as a "sense" which is not directly supplied by the poet but which is gained by the reader through a build-up of impressions and through the force of images. Poetic knowledge is not based upon patent meaning. It is instead Ortega's "suma de posibles actos," an intuition of that part of his textual forest which is not immediately visible. The syntax and images of the *Polifemo* imply *possibilities* of interpretation, but deny a single, unequivocal reading. Indeed the "poetic" reality of this poem must include the totality of those often conflicting and illogical possibilities.

The *Fábula's* preoccupation with desire at the levels of narration, theme, imagery and syntax encompasses the desire of the characters, of the author and of the reader. Thus, the *Polifemo* can be read as a poem whose subject is, to a great degree, poetry itself, as a poem which constitutes an exploration of the nature of poetic language and of the act of reading, and which suggests and ensures its own expansive possibilities of interpretation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All references to the text of the poem are taken from the edition in volume 3 of Dámaso Alonso's *Góngora y el 'Polifemo'*. Numbers refer first to the strophe, then to lines.

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