Spanish Poetry and Anglo-American Modernism: The Legacy of Andrew P. Debicki

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Who are the great poets of our time, and what are their names? Yeats of the baleful influence, Auden of the baleful influence, Eliot of the baleful influence.

(Is Eliot a great poet? no one knows), Hardy, Stevens, Williams (is Hardy of our time?)

Hopkins (is Hopkins of our time?), Rilke (is Rilke of our time?), Lorca (is Lorca of our time?) who is still of our time?

Mallarmé, Valéry, Apollinaire, Eliard, Reverdy, French poets are still of our time.

Pasternak and Mayakovskiy. Is Joule of our time? 

(Kenneth Koch, "Fresh Air")

MY CAREER as a scholar of twentieth-century Spanish poetry owes much to Andy Debicki, who has been my friend and mentor since the mid-1980s and my colleague at the University of Kansas since I joined the university in 1996. While this paper deals with Debicki's books and articles, his selfless and indefatigable devotion to the work of other scholars is an even more crucial factor in his status as the virtual founder of the field of twentieth-century Spanish poetry in the United States. To say this field would not have existed without Debicki is, of course, hyperbole. But it is clear that it would not have taken the shape that it has without his double contribution as literary critic and relentless mentor to young scholars.

The question I consider in the pages that follow concerns the definition of poetic modernity itself. This is surely one of the central issues in the study of the literature of the past century: without an adequate idea of what modernism was, we cannot know what postmodernism is, or how we are situated today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. My first observation, hardly a novel one, is that Andrew Debicki took his initial definition from the Anglo-American New Criticism that he found when he arrived at Yale in the 1950s. In Estudios sobre poesía española contemporánea: la generación de 1924–1925 (1968), he applied concepts derived from the New Criticism (e.g., the “objective correlative”) to the poetry of Federico García Lorca, Cernuda, Rafael Alberti, Jorge Guillén, and Salinas. This might seem less than striking more than thirty years later, but it was a salutary step. For nearly the first time, an American scholar of Spanish literature was using the same critical methodology that a colleague in an English department might have used to study John Donne or John Crowe Ransom. Close reading became king, and remains so to this day. No other critical theory, even one that disdains the New Criticism itself, can claim legitimacy without attending to the text.

To clarify this definition of modernism, rooted in the New Criticism, it might be helpful to contextualize New Criticism as a kind of “poetics” of Anglo-American modernism. The origins of this critical methodology can be found in the essays of T. S. Eliot (and, to a lesser extent, those of Ezra Pound), and in the southern Agrarian school (John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren).

After World War II, New Critical close reading became the preferred method of teaching literature to students from a wide range of backgrounds. A student without extensive cultural capital could be taught to produce close explications without recourse to extensive scholarship or biographical information. Along with this methodology came a canon of modern poetry, which privileged W. B. Yeats and Eliot, and the creation of the so-called academic poetry of the 1950s. Viewed in retrospect, the New Criticism is the poetics of modern poetry as a whole but specifically of its once hegemonic Anglo-American strain.

To what extent, then, is it possible (or desirable) to assimilate modern Spanish poetry to the ideals of Anglo-American modernism? The New Critical methodology seems to be most in sync with the work of poet-professors of the Generation of 1927, like Guillén and Dámaso Alonso. In fact, Guillén becomes the paradigmatic poet
in Debicki’s early criticism. Of particular attraction to Debicki was the idea of the poem as an object amenable to analytic study. Guillén’s carefully crafted verse lent itself particularly well to this New Critical methodology. While a study of the “objective correlative” in Alberti might seem odd from our current perspective, a fair-minded rereading of Debicki’s chapter on the Andalusian poet reveals that a close attention to the text is always possible, even when the overriding theoretical concept appears to be outmoded (Estudios 265–304).

It is not that Debicki’s critical methodology was inadequate to the task at hand, then. The limitation of his vision, in my opinion at least, lay in his construction of a Spanish modernism that mimicked the Anglo-American model. The case of Lorca is a pivotal one, for Lorca was already an important presence in American poetry when Debicki wrote and published his New Critical study of the Generation of 1927 (or of 1924–25, as he preferred to call it). Beginning in the 1950s, Lorca achieved a sort of cult status among the avant-garde poets who would later be included in Donald Allen’s 1960 anthology The New American Poetry. Lorca’s essay, “Teoría y juego del duende,” was widely read and quoted at the time, and it helped to spawn a poetic school (“deep image poetry”) that was hugely influential at least up to the end of the 1970s. For contemporary American poets, Lorca represented the antithesis of Anglo-American modernism as represented by Eliot and W. H. Auden. They would probably not have recognized the Lorca they admired in Debicki’s academic studies.

This difference of perspectives is reminiscent of Jorge Borgès’s “Pierre Menard: Autor de Quijote”: an American poet in the 1950s or 1960s reproduces the text of Lorca’s poems by the same mysterious means that Menard used to write Cervantes’s canonical work. (Such a work actually exists, in Jack Spicer’s After Lorca, a mixture of translations of Lorca’s poetry, original poems by Spicer himself in a pseudo-Lorquian style, and letters from Spicer to Lorca; the preface is written by Lorca himself, from the grave.) Reading this text, we interpret it in the context of what would become known, a few years later, as postmodern American poetry. About the same time, a brilliant young professor, recently graduated from Yale (let’s call him Andy) also reproduces Lorca’s text by the same mysterious procedure. Here the effect is very different: we are forced to interpret this Lorca in the context of the development of North American academic Hispanism. It is impossible to reconcile these two readings or even to decide between them. The young professor of Spanish has a much greater knowledge of Lorca’s poetry and its immediate literary context. The poet, in contrast, has more limited Spanish and perhaps a somewhat romanticized idea of Lorca’s poetry. Yet the academic view misses precisely the aspects of Lorca’s poetry that makes him such a pivotal figure for the poet, who would be within his rights to reject the New Critical version of the Spanish poet: if Lorca is simply another modernist poet in the Yeats-Eliot vein, it is hard to see why he had the influence he did on poets who rejected both the New Criticism and its canon.

Debicki subsequently moved away from the New Critical view of the objectivity of the text, but not necessarily from the view of modernist poetry he had developed before 1970. In other words, he becomes somewhat dissatisfied with New Criticism but continues to view it as an adequate methodology for the study of modernist poetry. Instead of reinterpreting modernism using other methodologies, he chooses to read subsequent poets who, in his view, departed from modernist precepts. The result is one of his most influential books, Poetry of Discovery, devoted to the second generation of Spanish poets to emerge after the end of the civil war. While emphasis on the reader’s response replaces his earlier insistence of New Critical objectivity, this book still takes the form of a series of close readings of poetic texts. One of his main insights was that an objective New Critical reading could not explain the originality of this poetry, which lay in its ability to interact with the reader’s own presuppositions.

That his view of modernism itself remained undisturbed by his subsequent critical evolution is evident in the work that culminates his career to date: Spanish Poetry of the Twentieth Century: Modernity and Beyond. In this book he consistently argues that poets as different from each other as Antonio Machado, Lorca, and Guillén belong to a single symbolist-modernist mainstream. He recognizes an element in the poetic avant-garde that anticipates more recent poetry but sees it as a tantalizing undercurrent rather than as the main plot line. The problem with this view is that it tends to obscure the continuity of modern poetry from the more radical branches of symbolism through the avant-garde movements of the 1920s to the nóvísimos and beyond. If on the one hand we see mainstream symbolist-modernism, a kind of Yeats-Eliot tradition, as dominant in the first half of the century, then postmodernism becomes a radical departure, albeit by a few earlier exceptional writers. If on the other hand we view this so-called mainstream as merely a narrow selection of writers canonical in the American academy in the 1950s, then the discontinuity between modernity and postmodernity all but disappears.

One lesson here is that our reading takes place within a particular institutional and cultural milieu, one that defines a literary tradition in retrospective fashion. This highly profound observation goes a long way in explaining the difference between my own perspective on modernity and the one that I have found in reading Debicki’s scholarship. Debicki’s view of modernity remains situated in the New Critical canon of the 1950s. My own was formed by my reading of a generation of contemporary American poets who themselves rejected the New Criticism and whose poetics is not explicable as an extension of the Yeats-Eliot mode. This suggests that American critics of Spanish poetry are in
some sense translating between two poetic traditions, reading the Spanish text in relation to their own understanding of a tradition closer to home.

Debicki’s criticism is rooted not only in a particular view of twentieth-century poetry but also in an ideology that I am obliged to call “humanist.” Though once a New Critic, Debicki was never a formalist: his interest in poetic structures lay in their ability to “encarnar y dar creación a temas absolutos; y también para hallar valores esenciales dentro de la realidad concreta de este mundo” (Estudios 384; “incarnate and give concrete form to absolute themes; and also to find essential values within the concrete reality of this world”). The search for a link between the concrete details of the poetic text, analyzed in the critic’s books and articles, and more transcendent meanings and themes lies at the heart of Debicki’s critical project. In fact, the assertion of a profound connection between the concrete and the abstract, the mundane and the transcendent, becomes a kind of formula that has survived, virtually unchanged, over the course of many decades: poet x or poet y uses poetic techniques a, b, and c to heighten our awareness of “fundamental issues of existence” (Poetry 58). The main variable is that Debicki views modernist poetry as embodying this transcendent meaning in its linguistic structures, whereas later poetry (postmodern?) achieves transcendence by leading the reader into a quasi-deconstructive aporia. Underlying both these techniques, however, is the belief that poetry must address human life in all its complexity.

The view of Debicki’s career that I have presented here is perhaps overly simplistic, “jumping o’er times / Turning the accomplishments of many years / Into an hour-glass” (Shakespeare, Henry V, prologue 29-31). I have left out many important facets of his career, including his hardly negligible scholarship on Latin American poetry. To my mind, however, the importance of his work lies in its central themes: analytic rigor and an underlying commitment to literature as a way of exploring the central themes of human existence.

Works Cited

Modernist poetry in English is generally considered to have emerged in the early years of the 20th century with the appearance of the Imagist poets. In common with many other modernists, these poets were writing in reaction to what they saw as the excesses of Victorian poetry, with its emphasis on traditional formalism and overly flowery poetic diction. The questioning of the self and the exploration of technical innovations in modernist poetry are intimately interconnected. The dislocation of the authorial presence is achieved through the application of such techniques as collage, found poetry, visual poetry, the juxtaposition of apparently unconnected materials, and combinations of these. Twentieth-century Spanish poetry has received comparatively little attention from critics writing in English. Andrew Debicki now presents the first English-language history published in the United States to examine the sweep of modern Spanish verse. More important, he is the first to situate Spanish poetry in the context of European modernity, to trace its trajectory from the symbolists to the postmodernists. Avoiding the rigid generational schemes and catalogs of names found in traditional Hispanic literary histories, Debicki offers detailed discussions of salie