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The "Hair" Factor, Humanism, Neoplatonism, and Empire Building in the Spanish Golden Age

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The sonnet of Hernando de Acuña (1520-1580), “Soneto al Rey Nuestro Señor,” reflective of the reign of Charles I of Spain, and, more so that of his son, Phillip II, captures the triumphal character of 16th century Spain’s imperialistic mission of colonization, and religious zeal. In keeping with the new humanistic spirit of the Renaissance, Spain’s voyages of discovery to the New World, her conquests, and evangelization attempts sought to create an empire with one king, one law, one language, and one religion:

*Ya se acerca, señor, o es ya llegada/la edad gloriosa en que promete el cielo/una grey y un pastor solo en el suelo,.../y anuncia al mundo, para más consuelo, un monarca, un imperio y una espada./.../ que a quien ha dado Cristo su estandarte/ dará el segundo más dichoso día/ en que, vencido el mar, venza la tierra. (Rivers 90)*

Two underlying philosophical trends, transplanted from Italy, drove Spain’s ambitions and marked her Renaissance *Weltanschauung*-humanism and neo-Platonism (Williams 123). Besides putting greater emphasis and value on this world and what it had to offer, and on earthly existence itself, humanism placed great importance on the body and physical beauty. 1 At the same time, neo-Platonism called for the attainment of the highest form, the good, in Christian terms, an

1 See the special issue of *La corónica, A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures & Cultures*, devoted to the topic of humanism: Vol.39.1, Fall, 2010.
afterlife in heaven in the presence of a divine being or God, who represented a totality of good and perfection (Zeller 134). A beautiful woman became an angelic being, imbued with divine light, who could guide a man to this highest form or salvation. For Dante, Beatrice provided this guidance, while for Petrarch it was Laura (Allen 240-276). Also related to this humanism and neo-Platonism was the “sweet new style” of the poets of the dolce stil nuovo, the most important poetic movement of the 13th century. This poetry’s main themes were Love (Amore) and Noble mindedness (Gentilezza) and often included deep introspection. The human form also appeared as an object of adoration in this poetry, with vivid descriptions of female beauty (Contini 444).

Both of these threads of Renaissance philosophical and artistic expression, humanism and neo-Platonism, sometimes in opposition to one another, created an underlying tension, expressed through the effects of time and space on the human being, and depicted metaphorically and artistically through physical changes caused by the wind on the female form, in particular, her hair. A topos for many love sonnets of the Spanish Golden Age poets is the image of the beloved’s golden hair disarranged and scattered by the wind. The following examples, taken from Elias L. Rivers’s famous anthology, Renaissance and Baroque Poetry of Spain, illustrate this point:

**Garcilaso de la Vega: Sonnet 23**

“y en tanto que el cabello, que en la vena/ del oro se escogió, con vuelo presto,/ por el hermoso cuello blanco, enhiesto, el viento mueve, espante y desordena” (Rivers 37)

**Fernando de Herrera: Sonnet 28**

“ricos cercos dorados, do se mira/Tesoro celestial d’eterna vena; /armonía d’angélica Sirena;” (Rivers 124)

**Luis de Góngora: Sonnet 145**

“y mientras con gentil descortesía/mueve el viento la hebra voladora/que la Arabia en sus venas atesora/ y el rico Tajo en sus arenas cría” (Rivers 162)

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Luis de Góngora: Sonnet 146

“Mientras por competir con tu cabello/oro bruñido al sol relumbra en vano” (Rivers 163)

Francisco de Quevedo: Sonnet 448

“En crespa tempestad del oro undoso/nada golfo de luz ardiente y pura/ mi corazón, sediento de hermosura, sí el cabello deslaza generoso.” (Rivers 285)

The gentle wind subtly adds motion, life, and the passage of time to an otherwise static image. (Nowadays photographers employ fans to move and disarrange a model’s hair.) This portrayal of female beauty immediately brings to mind Sandro Botticelli’s painting, *The Birth of Venus,* on display in the Uffizi Galleries in Florence, Italy, and with an image online (http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/botticelli/venus/venus.jp`.g). Petrarch’s Sonnet 90 (The Canzoniere http://petrarcr. petersailon.com/canzoniere.html?poem=90) and Ovid’s story of Daphne and Apollo in his *Metamorphoses* (trans. by Mandelbaum 20).²

*The Birth of Venus* was painted by Botticelli between 1482-1485 and depicts Venus, riding on a seashell and sea foam to the island of Cythera, blown to shore by the wind Zephyrus as he carries the nymph Chloris. Flora, the goddess of Spring, waits for Venus on shore. The painting’s depiction of a nude female and the rendering of Venus’s blonde locks blown and disarranged by the wind are expressive of the humanistic interest, and more specifically, Botticelli’s, in the female body, in physical beauty, and in women’s hairstyles of the day. On another level, this portrayal of Venus’s birth is also symbolic of the birth and importance of human love. It captures the neo-Platonic tenet of spiritual beauty embodied in a beautiful blonde woman, the ideal beauty of a humanistic age, as a driving force of life, and the means by which man is led to God. Another related interpretation given to the painting

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² Richard Strauss (1864-1949) composed *Daphne, Tragic Opera in One Act,* based on the same theme, while Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) also sculpted a marble statue, Apollo and Daphne, in 1625.
by art historians has been that the figure of Venus symbolizes the new values of Humanitas being brought by the era's winds of change, to the city of Florence, symbolized by Flora (http://www.uffizi.org/artworks/the-birth-of-venus-by-sandro-botticelli/).

The *topos* of the hair, disarranged and scattered by the wind, so prominent in the painting, had appeared earlier in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the story of Daphne and Apollo. In Daphne’s case the unbound disarrayed hair symbolized her desire to be free from men and marriage: “Around her hair—in disarray—she wears a simple band. Though many suitors seek her, she spurns all; she wants to roam uncurbed; she needs no man; she pays no heed to marriage, love or husbands.” Peneus, her father, the river god, tells her that she owes him grandsons. In return “his daughter scorns/ as things quite criminal, the marriage torch/ and matrimony,” Apollo is captivated by her hair: “He looks at Daphne’s hair/as, unadorned, it hangs down her fair neck, /and says: ‘Just think, if she should comb her locks!’” Ironically this attitude made her even more attractive to Apollo. “But even then, the sight of her was striking./ The wind laid bare her limbs; against the nymph it blew; her dress was fluttering; her hair/ streamed in the breeze; in flight she was more fair.” The hair and body in motion made her more beautiful. Apollo pursues Daphne: “He’s at her shoulders now; she feels his breath/ upon the hair that streams down to her neck.” She prays to her father that she be saved from Apollo’s desire:

As soon as she is finished with her prayer/a heavy numbness grips her limbs; thin hair/ begins to gird her tender frame, her hair/ is changed to leaves, her arms to boughs; her feet—so keen to race before—are now held fast/ by sluggish roots; the girl’s head vanishes/becoming a treetop./

In the end she is transformed into a laurel tree with the leaves representing the hair. Apollo, continues to show his love for her by giving the laurel leaves their subsequent historic role as a garland of triumph worn by Roman chieftains and poets (Mandelbaum 21).

Petrarch also employed the motif of the golden hair scattered and disarranged by the wind in his Sonnet 90, a love poem that expresses regret and sorrow for a past action not taken: “She let her gold hair scatter in the breeze/ that twined it in a thousand sweet knots/ and wavering light, beyond measure, would burn/in those beautiful eyes, which are now so dim.” (The *Canzonieri*, Poem 90) The neo-Platonic description of the young woman’s beauty, clearly rooted in the *dolce stil nuovo* is described thus: “Her way of moving was no mortal thing, but of angelic form; and her speech rang higher than a mere human voice/A celestial spirit, a living sun/ was what I saw...” (Gentilezza is alluded to here in his description of perhaps an unrequited love that has left an unhealed wound in his heart.) In stanza 3, Petrarch clearly is utilizing a *topos* from the *dolce stil nuovo*.

In Castilian poetry, it was the 15th century poet, Francisco Imperial, who had spent time in Italy, who introduced the *dolce stil nuovo* into Castile with his poem 231, in the *Cancionero de Baena*:

Este decir fiso el dicho Micer Francisco Imperial por amor e lores de una fermosa mugger de Sevilla que llamo el estrella Diana, e fisolo un dia que vid e la mira a su guysa, ella yendo por la Puente de Sevilla a la yglesis de Ssant'Ana fuera de la ciudad.

In this poem Imperial speaks of his lady love as the Star Diana, and like Dante, who had caught a glimpse of his Beatrice near the Arno River, Imperial catches a glimpse of his star Diana on a bridge of the Guadalquivir in Sevilla (*Onrubia de Mendoza* 63).

For Imperial, she is an angel. He enumerates her characteristics juxtaposing the miraculous with the known natural world. He uses flowers to reflect her perfect nature (not unlike Botticelli in his painting of Venus), jasmine for her delicateness, roses for her youth, and the lily for her gentleness. The three
flowers also convert Diana into a virtuous creature: the jasmine represents faith, the lily, hope, the rose, love and charity. The estil-novista woman, by means of this poem enters into Castile. She is an angel, a miracle, a star, an embodiment of virtue, a guide for the life of man. No one can compare to her. She is the new angel/woman, guiding light.

Fernando de Herrera (1534-1597) builds on this vision in his Sonnet 38. He sees the divine light reflected in his beloved: “Serena luz, en quien presente espira/ divino amor…” She is his guide, his road to heaven:

¿cual, nueva maravilla, cual exemplo/de la immortal grandeza nos descubre/aquessa sombra del hermoso velo?/
Que yo en essa belleza que contemplo/ (aunque a mi flaca vista ofende i cubre)/ la immense busco, i voi siguiendo al cielo. (Rivers 124)

Thus, these representations of humanism and neo-Platonism, as embodied in the portrayals of beautiful young women, both artistically and poetically, speak of a moment of great optimism and belief in the human potential and its ability to create and achieve fulfillment and happiness. Yet, as we all know nothing human can be perfect.

With the destructive effects of time on beauty and earthly things, the theme of carpe diem informs many of these same poems of the Spanish Renaissance. The sonnets from which I quoted earlier reflect either the new Renaissance humanism expressed in the admiration and idealization of female beauty, or an emphasis, in the manner of the stil novisti, on the angelic, neo-Platonic aspect of womanhood. Time is the greatest threat to both and the Spanish Golden Age poets are keenly aware of the ravages of time, especially Luis de Góngora (1561-1627) and Francisco de Quevedo (1580-1645). Their later poems reflect disillusionment and a pessimism that is in direct contrast to the optimistic, idealistic, humanistic poems of their earlier output. Even Garcilaso de la Vega (1501-1536) in his Sonnet 23 already warns the young beautiful woman:

. . . ceged de vuestra alegre primavera/el dulce fruto, antes que el tiempo airado/ cubra de nieve la hermosa cumbre./ Marchitará la rosa el viento helado,/ todo lo mudará la edad ligera/por no hacer mudanza en su costumbre. (Rivers 37)

Quevedo’s and Góngora’s responses are darker, sadder, and more, Baroque.

In this respect, the later poems of Góngora and Quevedo capture the deterioration of a Spain that experienced drastic economic losses due to the never ending zealous religious military campaigns of Phillip II. The early burst of positive nation building succumbed to an exhaustion of the military might, and the Baroque spirit saw decay and death (Descola 307). Góngora’s sonnet 145 still speaks in terms of a positive carpe diem approach to life:

. . . antes que, de la edad Febo eclipsado/y el claro día vuelto en noche obscra, huya la Aurora del mortal nublado/ antes que lo que hoy es rubio tesoro/venza a la blanca nieve su blancura/ goza, goza el color, la luz, el oro. (Rivers 162)

In Sonnet 146, the pessimism and the awareness of what Lorca called the “duende” in his famous essay, “Juego y teoría del duende,” is clearly expressed:

. . . goza cuello, cabello, labio y frente/ antes que lo que fue en tu edad dorado/oro, lilio, clavel, cristal luciente/no sólo en plata o vio la troncada/ se vuelva, mas tú y ello juntamente/ en tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sombra, en nada. (Rivers 163)

Quevedo, like Góngora, speaks of the effects of Lisi’s hair on his emotions, and his desire to get lost in the frothy tempest of the wavy gold of her hair: “En crespa tempestad del oro undoso/nada golpos de luz ardiente y pura mi corazón, sediento de hermosura/si el cabello deslazas generoso” (Rivers 285). The glorious golden hair, blowing unbound and freely in the wind, and human earthly love idealized by
Quevedo like no other in his sonnet 471, “Amor constante más allá de la muerte,” (wherein he actually links humanism and Neo-platonism, like the Spanish nation, remained threatened by time, wars, wealth ill spent, and calamity upon calamity. Quevedo’s idealization of human love in this sonnet enables love to break down the barriers between this bodily existence and the afterlife: “Alma a quien todo un dios prision ha sido,/ .../ su cuerpo dejará, no su cuidado; serán ceniza, mas tendrá sentido;/ polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado” (Rivers 286). In this instance, human love can conquer decay and death. Subsequently, Quevedo reveals a deeply pessimistic evaluation of Spain’s political and economic status. The end result was a Spain described in one of Quevedo’s most famous poems, Psalm 17, “Miré los muros de la patria mía.” It is a Spain with dilapidated walls, tired of the racing of time. It is a Spanish countryside devoid of light, overcast by the shadow of mountains. Inside his hut, there is nothing that does not remind him of death: “Entré en mi casa; vi que, amancillada,/ de anciana habitación era despojado;/ y no hallé cosa en que poner los ojos/ que no fuese recuerdo de la muerte” (Rivers 264).

In the final analysis then, Hernando de Aucuña’s famous sonnet, along with sonnets celebrating the golden feminine ideal gave way to a dark, pessimistic tone and recognition of the fact that time does destroy, decay sets in, and death is the ultimate result. The golden hair blowing in the wind, freedom, humanism, Neo-Platonism, and energetic expansive empire building of the Renaissance period ended in defeat, disillusionment and decay during Spain’s Baroque period.

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