

Reconstructing Lyric and Melancholy

Dr. Felipe Valencia, an assistant professor of Spanish in the Department of Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies at USU discovered poetry when he was living in Spain at age thirteen or fourteen. Every week, Valencia would go to a newsstand and purchase a new book of poems. This exposed him to the works of different poets such as: Cavafy, Baudelaire, Shakespeare, Pablo Neruda, and Federico García Lorca. Later, during his second year of undergraduate work, Valencia was reintroduced to poetry during his sixteenth century Spanish literature class. It was during this class that he was assigned to read the poetry of St. John of the Cross. Valencia thought it was beautiful and interesting, but he didn't understand. He went to the professor and asked her if she would explain it to him. Instead of explaining, she assigned him to prepare a presentation on St. John of the Cross for class. From this experience, he learned that the poem relates a direct experience with God. In retrospect, Valencia views this assignment as instigating his curiosity in poetry analysis.

Valencia focuses the majority of his research on Spanish Literature that originated from Spain during the Renaissance. Valencia states that, "out of all the poetry that I have read, I particularly love Spanish poetry from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is very musical; it is the poetry in which the Spanish language reached a very splendid state." To understand this poetry in its historical context, Valencia is reconstructing two terms: lyric and melancholy. The aim of his research is to "[show] how practitioners and theorists of poetry in Spain during 1580-1620, found in melancholy this affect that opens up a space for an early modern concept of lyric to emerge. They have to use melancholy for lyric to exist. Lyric is the melancholy mode of poetry." Valencia's area of research is a relatively new aspect of criticism that has become more prominent within the last fifteen years. Scholars involved in this aspect of criticism analyzes the

correlations between literary terms and time periods. For example, the current understanding of the term “lyric” is different from a Renaissance view.

Valencia is writing on how the concept of lyric poetry emerges at the end of the sixteenth century. He is interested in the emergence of this concept and how it enables and enhances a series of transformations, experiments, and changes in Spanish poetry from the last part of the 16th century to the earliest parts of the 17th century. A foundational aspect of his research is the reconstruction of literary terms within their historical context. To expound upon this aspect, Valencia explains that Spanish poetry from the Renaissance is characterized by a great deal of change and upheaval. More people started writing and reading poetry within diverse contexts and interpretations. New genres and techniques emerged simultaneously. Valencia explains how this happened by proposing a new interpretation of this change in poetry. For Valencia, the key element that has been largely ignored until recently is that they began to think in earnest about what lyric poetry is.

Through his research, Valencia explains how our perception of lyric is historically inaccurate. He claims that we lack the ability to read Renaissance poems within their historical context when we retrospectively categorize these poems with our romantic concept of lyric. To Valencia, it is interesting that criticism in general has taken lyric for granted by assuming that all these shorter compositions—sonnet, ode, and song—are the same. However, very few people within that period would recognize the term “lyric”.

For Valencia, this reconstruction is important because it allows for more faithful readings of these 16th and 17th century poems. Faithful readings allow Valencia and his students to participate in a beautiful and bizarre way of thinking. For Valencia, this reconstruction is “one of the best contributions I can make, within my discipline and to society in general. With this

reconstruction, I can allow others to also participate in this perspective—exposing them to a different way of thinking.”

According to Valencia, “poetry has a very predominant role in the Spanish tradition, in the sense that it is considered one of the strong suites in Spanish literature. Poetry transcends national boundaries with its collective heritage.... Poetry contributes greatly to this feeling of shared language. Spanish is a remarkable homogeneous language.”

Valencia explains the connection between Lyric and Melancholy, “I think that this intense interest in melancholy during the 1580s -1620s and the interest in defining lyric poetry at the same time are not coincidental—they are linked and that’s what I’m trying to show.” Valencia’s is defining the conceptual home of lyric by explaining how the notion of melancholy interacts with the notion of lyric. Valencia states: “Melancholy opens up a space for lyric to emerge as a concept.”

Melancholy, an overwhelming feeling of sadness that caused inward reflection and remorse, was associated with great intellect and excellence in poetry. However, it was also risky for a person to be melancholic because it influenced their political and religious standings within their community. The individual’s ethical, moral and medical state was even questioned. Melancholy profoundly influenced literary works during the Renaissance. At that time, melancholy was also perceived as a medical notion; it was one of the four humors of the body. It was thought to be a dark, heavy substance that could cause death if it was overly-abundant. Valencia states, “by thinking of poetry through melancholy, one can think of the physical aspects of the poet.”

Obstacles in Valencia’s research include: accessing manuscripts, the chasm of time, overcoming the tendency to retrospectively project the modern concepts, and the general crisis of

the humanities. Because many of the sources are unpublished, Valencia travels to libraries in Spain or Italy to read them. An inevitable challenge in Valencia's research is assessing how the lapse in time has shifted our perceptions. Within this challenge there is also the task of understanding the difference between one's perceptions of terms and that of the authors.

Valencia refutes the crisis in the humanities, "This crisis is a challenge. I am constantly required to explain the point of what I do, whereas many of my colleagues, especially in the medical or business school, do not. It is very obvious: they are preparing students to be doctors or lawyers or to be in business. This is a challenge because it is distracting and requires intellectual energy to think about these things. It is an unfair question because the benefits of an education in the humanities are very important for society. It's exposure and engagement in critical thinking and diversity. Usefulness is a very hazy notion. As an adult, I would say that what is truly useful in life is to know how to cook, how to clean the house, how to be financially responsible, how to drive. That is very useful." Valencia believes that there should be a shift in how the humanities are perceived, because measuring a discipline by its usefulness is inaccurate and misleading.

Many people in the Humanities study diversity in many aspects: gender, race, class, languages. As a Renaissance scholar, Valencia is also able to engage with diversity across time. According to Valencia, "The Humanities can help our contemporary societies to understand, embrace, engage, and function with diversity." Valencia's project engages with aspects of intellectual history as he reconstructs lyric and melancholy.

By Catherina Aust