CRÍTICA Y ENSAYO


In her award-winning *La escuela de Barcelona* (1988), Carme Riera offered a historical synthesis of three major contemporary poets who were formed in the environment of Barcelona but who wrote or are writing not in Catalan but in Spanish: Carlos Barral, Jaime Gil de Biedma, and José Agustín Goytisolo. That initial volume was followed a few years later by a book-length study on Barral, *La poesía de Carlos Barral* (1990). This third offering presents us with another full length work, this time on the last of the poets she has been studying, Goytisolo. Obviously, the book developed out of the earlier studies and constitutes an effort to bring the critic's ideas on Goytisolo to a conclusion. Two of the six chapters had been published as independent articles as early as 1986. Other chapters presumably come from materials that were not needed in the earlier volumes. Most of the contents, however, are published here for the first time.

As Riera notes in her prologue, Goytisolo has long been popular among the general public in Spain but has received little or no attention from critics. Hers is therefore the first in-depth study of his complete work. Whereas all the poetry is mentioned up through *El rey mendigo* (1988), Riera gives considerably more emphasis to the volumes that established the poet's reputation prior to the 1980s, that is, up to and including *Los pasos del cazador* (1980). Oriented almost exclusively toward a traditional thematic analysis, Riera traces Goytisolo's ideas and intellectual development while drawing out his changing concept of poetry. A final chapter pursues a traditional stylistic analysis of his language.
In his first work, **El retorno** (1955), Goytisolo explored the elegiac mode in a series of unadorned, colloquial texts centered on his feelings of loss because of the death of his mother during the Civil War. This was followed by his most well known and probably most successful work, **Salmos al viento** (1958), which had the virtue of clothing its then fashionable social commitment in a particularly attractive guise, satire and parody. **Salmos al viento** was widely read in the Spain of the late fifties because it is accessible, humorous, and entertaining. Goytisolo thus became relatively popular in the period and highly visible as a proponent of social poetry. He followed his early success with further committed poetry in **Años decisivos** (1961), **Algo sucede** (1968), and **Bajo tolerancia** (1977).

In the late sixties and seventies, however, a problem began to appear. Social poetry fell out of favor and Goytisolo experienced a crisis or shift in his concept of the poetic. Perhaps disoriented by the changing winds of public taste, he evolved away from commitment without, however, finding a clear alternative. Riera notes that **Algo sucede** and later works begin to include poems of personal experience in a manner similar to the poetry of experience—in Robert Langbaum's well known phrase—of Angel González and Jaime Gil de Biedma. Goytisolo fails, however, to suggest the ironic self-detachment so characteristic of their work and therefore seems unable to achieve the complexity and subtlety of their vision. Though Riera is reluctant to delve very far into the consequences—perhaps because of her friendship with the poet—it is evident that Goytisolo's version of «la poesía de la experiencia» is a direct and simple self-speaking which, no matter how cynically posed, ends up being dull and unimaginative.

Then, as the seventies move into the eighties, the poet seeks to rediscover a popular vein through incursions into traditional lyric in volumes such as **Palabras para Julia y otras canciones** (1980) and **Los pasos del cazador** (1980). At this point, however, social commitment disappears altogether. Goytisolo becomes little more than an occasional poet whose work is undermined by its lack of substance in spite of the many echoes of classical poets such as Lope de Vega, San Juan de la Cruz, Lorca and others. This portends the author's most recent perspective in the 1980s, when he abandons his concern for the popular and describes the poet cynically as a «rey mendigo», that is, a figure dethroned from
an earlier eminence. If the mission of the social poet had been to bear witness to his era and denounce injustice, the task has failed in Goytisolo’s case and he has become but the cynical ghost of his former self playing out the role of unredeemable bohemian who may not be important even to himself.

Such an overall evolution is significant for what it shows about the challenges faced by social poets over the last twenty-five years as the goals and premises of their art were left behind by history. In spite of this, however, Riera’s book is disappointing because it rarely goes beyond a mere description of these issues while failing to ask important questions about the larger meaning of Goytisolo’s work. Moreover, she never poses the problem of the aesthetic achievement of the poetry, probably because she believes it has been minimal. In the end, then, the critic confirms our suspicion that José Agustín Goytisolo is a secondary poet who has failed to produce a major or original work. Having achieved early success as a committed poet, he has been displaced by subsequent changes in the literary landscape and has drifted from one thing to another without articulating a coherent vision of the whole. No wonder that critics have tended to overlook him. Superseded by history, José Agustín Goytisolo presents a picture of the poet in dissolution. Although Riera’s study may create some new interest in him and will no doubt be the standard reference on his work in the immediate future, it does little to convince us that he is an important poet and leaves us wondering why she bothered to write about him in the first place.

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La traducción de Las Románticas —versión original inglesa de 1989— abre una nueva e interesante serie de Cátedra que pretende revisar el pensamiento, la filosofía y la historia de la literatura desde un punto de vista feminista. Kirkpatrick estudia las condiciones ideológicas y sociopolíticas que en la España de 1840 hicieron posible a un grupo de mujeres presentarse como escri-