

## Friendship in Exile: Garcilaso de la Vega's Verse Epistle to Boscán

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Garcilaso de la Vega's centrality within the canon of Spanish poetry follows from the sophistication of his lyrics, the liveliness of his language, and his embodiment of the Renaissance ideal of a man skilled both with pen and sword. His appeal also lies in the way his poems unapologetically tease his readers by simultaneously frustrating and transcending their expectations. This is particularly evident in his innovative *Epístola a Boscán*, which introduced the verse epistle to the Spanish vernacular. Here Garcilaso employs a clever "bait and switch" technique to draw the reader along; he entices his readers with autobiographical truth but then retreats behind polyvalent literary language and lyric artifice, both of which preclude transparency. In other words, Garcilaso's letter to his friend Boscán presents the illusion of unmediated access to the writer's intimacy, almost like direct speech. But any literary act is in itself an act of opacity, particularly one that uses language to build sound and rhythm patterns, and is thereby intended to convey meaning beyond semantics. Any impression of proximity to the writer is shattered upon close reading, as the poetic voice keeps retreating behind the carefully constructed language of the lyric, and even the theoretical discussion of the epistle itself. Due to his choice of genre, the reader's actual proximity to Garcilaso is inevitably always in flux.

This textual fluidity accentuates the ambivalent position that its writer held in the political and cultural landscape of early sixteenth-century Spain. He had been publicly punished with exile for failing to obey the emperor in a relatively petty familiar affair, and his new Italianate verses stirred fierce opposition amongst the defenders of traditional forms. All in all, his circumstances were much more unstable than his later reputation as prince of the Spanish Renaissance would suggest.<sup>1</sup> Given that all traditions (national, poetic, and otherwise) are constructions, molded during a particular time by specific people with a particular set of interests and a certain context of production, this article proposes to read Garcilaso as participating in the construction of a hybrid tradition. And better than any other text, his *Epístola* embodies this capacity for hybridization.<sup>2</sup> As a hybrid form, the epistle exposes a variety of intertextual connections that highlight the place of Garcilaso between generic and national traditions. Indeed, the epistle embodies the multiple antitheses that its author himself experienced: the opposition between a vernacular lyric and the introduction of a foreign lyric style, the opposition between the Spanish imperial project and the feeling of individual isolation, and finally the opposition between absence and presence. Precisely this accumulation of antithetical situations allowed Garcilaso to create such an impressive poetic corpus and to develop a truly individual voice.

### A literary juggling act

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando de Herrera first used the epithet "príncipe de la poesía española" in his *Anotaciones* (1580). In the fifty years following the publication of Boscán's and Garcilaso's works, he was canonized as national heir to Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Petrarch, thus putting an end to the relationship of cultural inferiority with Italy and the classics. Garcilaso's lyrics emerged as linguistic, generic, and rhetorical models to imitate, and his own life legitimized the notion of an aristocratic author. See Ignacio Navarrete, especially pp. 126-137.

<sup>2</sup> Francisco López Estrada uses the term "hibridación de géneros" to describe Claudio Guillén's and Elias Rivers' notion that the Golden Age verse epistle is the result of *contaminatio* from other classical and Italian poetic genres, particularly the Horatian satire and the elegy, as well as prose letters (39).

The *Epístola a Boscán* entices readers with the voyeuristic lure of discovering intimate details about the most notable literary friendship of the Spanish Renaissance. It is impossible not to fall to the temptation of reading autobiographically a speaker who bears the name of the real person “Garcilaso” and takes shape in relation to another real person, “Boscán,” cast in the role of receiver of his personal account. Given that the two *dramatis personae* can be identified as unitary selves with a fixed identity inside and outside the text, their fictional construction inevitably points to the real persons outside. But seeking causal links between an author’s own life and his poetry can prove extremely problematic, and Garcilaso criticism has sometimes overindulged in reading his work as a response to his love affairs.<sup>3</sup> The poems addressed to Boscán, while very personal, are nonetheless a self-conscious literary act. Even if they contain his own sentiments, he is expressing them in the forms and poetic codes available to him at the time, either from the vernacular *Cancionero* poetry or from the Roman and Italian sources that he discovered during his exile. Elias Rivers sums up this creative tension,

We may oppose the modern concept of the “death of the author” by asserting the development of his living subjectivity: Garcilaso as a person of flesh and blood linked his own sensations and sentiments to his readings of poetic texts. These readings shaped his feelings and gave form to his own newly created texts, which transcend both his “raw” and his literary experiences. (2000: 365)

Reading and writing practices as well as personal experience inform the last poems that Garcilaso addressed to Boscán. To better understand his autobiographical lyrics it is important to consider both the poetic forms he developed and the difficult personal context that provided his source material.

Garcilaso’s verse epistle performs a complex literary act: on the one hand, the speaker conjures up his own presence through an intimate epistolary address to his friend, while on the other hand he demonstrates the difficulty of self-presentation by means of lyric artifice. The autobiographical disclosure characteristic of epistolary narration is thus called into question by a lyric voice that follows a very different set of rules. The coexistence of narrative and lyric models of self-expression in Garcilaso’s text underscores an important development in early modern poetics: the need to develop new ways to think and write about the self. Within this climate of generic innovation, the poetic letter constitutes an ideal space for self-presentation by combining the letter’s evocation of intimacy with lyric subjectivity. In this way it participates in the broader rhetorical and philosophical Renaissance project of creating a language of intimacy that can expose the more human and vulnerable side of a poetic voice and invite readers to develop affective connections with that “person”.<sup>4</sup>

The use of lyric artifice in Garcilaso’s epistle foregrounds the complex interplay of proximity and distance inherent in all letters. Epistolary writing has at its heart a fundamental

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<sup>3</sup> The autobiographical interpretations of Garcilaso’s love lyrics date from the Renaissance and have mostly focused on his alleged relationship with Isabel Freire (see Rafael Lapesa’s influential *La trayectoria poética de Garcilaso*), although Freire’s role was later questioned (Frank Goodwyn, David H. Darst). For a discussion on the persistent interest in Garcilaso’s love life amongst contemporary critics, see Elias Rivers (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Petrarch’s discovery in 1345 of the private correspondance of Cicero fundamentally changed what authors read and how they wrote, leading to the development of what Kathy Eden has termed a Renaissance “rethoric of intimacy”. For the development of a vernacular epistolary canon in the Spanish Golden Age, see the excellent collection of essays directed by Begoña López Bueno.

constitutive antithesis: Garcilaso escapes his isolation through the act of writing that conjures up his friend's presence, while as Jacques Derrida has argued so famously, the act of reading necessarily reanimates the author. This duplicitous quality of writing and language brings to life an immediate, albeit transient presence. While current theory and criticism has focused on the power of texts to invoke presence, Philip Hardie notes that this use of language is already strongly registered in ancient poetics and rhetoric (3). In the Greco-Roman tradition that later informed Renaissance poetics, verbal artists channeled the power of words to create the illusion of presence and arouse the emotions of their listeners.<sup>5</sup> The enduring power of Garcilaso's *Epístola* inheres in this performative function of language to move beyond the word to *being* (to becoming a real presence), a dynamic that is at the core of the Renaissance lyric and is also written into the dialogic nature of the epistolary.

Garcilaso's epistle opens with a declaration of his love for his friend Boscán, or more precisely, of his love for sharing his thoughts with him, despite the inability of language to fully convey them.

Señor Boscán, quien tanto gusto tiene  
de daros cuenta de los pensamientos,  
hasta las cosas que no tienen nombre,  
no le podrá faltar con vos materia,  
ni será menester buscar estilo  
presto, distinto d'ornamento puro  
tal cual a culta epístola conviene.

These initial lines formulate some of the most acute epistolary guidelines of the period.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the two main pillars of the poem's theorizing, "materia" and "estilo," are introduced by means of an apophatic definition, thus establishing what an epistle is in terms of what it is not. This use of apophatic argumentation has important implications for a discussion of the epistolary. Affirmation through negation presupposes a set of traits that the current object being defined lacks, or in other words, it presupposes the absence of an ideal state. In this sense, apophasis forms the crux of epistolary discourse, where we witness a never-ending game of affirmation through absence.

The verse epistle belongs to a secondary tradition of non-melic, introspective forms – epistles, elegies, satires– that Roman authors mastered and Renaissance poets sought to revive.<sup>7</sup> This "other" lyric was generally self-reflexive, a trait that suited their inclination to interiority and

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<sup>5</sup> Orators and poets sought to influence their audiences and leave a lasting impression by developing vivid images that impressed their senses and registered as visual representations in their memory. Philip Hardie traces the notions of vivid language (Greek *enargeia*, Latin *evidentia*, *illustratio*), and mental visual representations and the psychological faculty responsible for them (Greek *phantasia*, Latin *visiones*) in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cicero, and Quintilian, and shows their importance in Ovidian poetics (5-10).

<sup>6</sup> This *salutatio* echoes a rich theoretical tradition by which friendship as a literary motif demands the coherence of "materia" and "estilo." Claudio Guillén notes: "La tradición teórica aquí aludida es tan rica que resulta imposible señalar ningún origen específico para las referencias de Garcilaso sobre la elección de la materia o el estilo (la claridad, brevedad, y sencillez sin adorno), ni para el uso de la amistad como un cañamazo en el que tema y estilo deben adecuarse convenientemente" (105).

<sup>7</sup> Inspired by the self-conscious style of Hellenistic poetry, Roman lyricists developed a private, subjective corpus of non-melic lyric forms. See, for example, the elegies by Propertius, Catullus, and Tibullus, Ovid's *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, and the epigrams and satires by Martial and Juvenal.

a desire to give expression to a complex poetic voice. In its first lines, Garcilaso's epistle not only theorizes about a poetic genre, but also performs a major concern in early modern poetics: the representation of subjectivity. The epistle presents a complex splitting of the subject into an active voice narrating in the first person, and a passive component as object. Although the poetic voice reveals itself in the opening words by addressing the friend ("Señor Boscán"), the actual 'I' remains hidden as an implicit presence behind a discreet third-person "quien." This split of the 'I' into the poetic voice that narrates and the third person being narrated happens not surprisingly while explaining his sense of alienation from language (l.3). Again, Garcilaso undermines his autonomy when he introduces the metaphor "caballo"/ "pensamiento":

Alargo y suelto a su placer la rienda,  
mucho más que al caballo, al pensamiento,  
y llévame a las veces por camino  
tan dulce y agradable que me hace  
olvidar el trabajo del pasado

The first-person voice relinquishes authority and gives his thoughts free rein. Thinking ("pensamiento") becomes the new active agent and relegates the 'I' to a passive 'me'. The repetition of the word "pensamiento" as well as the gerunds "pensando" and "discurriendo" operate as a code for that space where the 'I' undergoes a transformation into a passive self. Later in the poem "pensamiento" cedes its agency to love, where "amor de parte mía" becomes the new active agent that dominates a passive "me/mí." This structural parallel in the poem calls attention to the effect that both thoughts and love have on the subject. In both instances, the 'I' is observing a 'me' experiencing pleasure.

But while such a reading may give the impression that the *Epístola* is another example of Renaissance lyric, a complex performance of the poetic voice, the final section challenges those expectations by introducing a different voice and much more prosaic subject matter: "A mi señor Durall estrechamente/ abrazá de mi parte, si pudierdes" (l. 81-2). Its hybrid epistolary quality is signposted throughout the text with plenty of generic markers: *salutatio*, *petitio*, *conclusio*. Thus, while a complication of the poetic voice may fill many Renaissance lyrics, the fact that Garcilaso stresses that the *Epístola* is at every moment a letter both demonstrates its generic importance and demands further analysis.

The Roman epistles that Renaissance authors were recuperating and imitating (moral, elegiac, and amatory) were generally composed in elegiac dystic, a combination of hexameters and pentameters. Faced with the challenge of finding a vernacular alternative, Garcilaso chose to write his epistle in *versos sueltos*, whereas for his elegies he used *tercetos encadenados*. This choice of blank verse reflects the feeling of informality that is most appropriate for a letter between friends.<sup>8</sup> But the lack of rhyme also has the effect of giving the epistle a certain narrative style. It clearly contrasts with Garcilaso's other compositions, where he maintains a tighter control of lyric

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<sup>8</sup> Classical rhetoric warned against affectation in familiar epistles and recommended the loose rhythm of *oratio soluta* against the more predictable rhythm of meter. For this reason, Bienvenido Morros, Claudio Guillén and Begoña López Bueno do not see any contradiction in Garcilaso's choice of an informal, familiar style and blank verse to write a "culto epístola" to his friend Boscán. López Bueno considers that Garcilaso's choice of *versos sueltos* also has the effect of giving his epistle its own generic identity in contrast to the elegy, another genre that he introduced, and for which he employed *tercetos encadenados* (22).

artifice.<sup>9</sup> This encapsulates the central contradiction in the nature of the verse epistle. Garcilaso's text advocates a poetic space where thinking can flow unrestricted by narrow formal rules. The letter's softening of formal norms and the freedom for intimate disclosure are perfectly suited to accommodate his purpose. But even in simple, unadorned language, as Garcilaso himself experiences, "dar cuenta de los pensamientos" is not an easy task. In this context, lyric artifice can play a determining role, not as mere "ornamento," but as a creator of meaning in its own right. Yet, it can be confusing to arrive at the verses with formalities more typical of a letter. The various details and seemingly superfluous comments take the reader out of the lyric and into a space of epistolary generic conventions, of social formalisms and etiquette. The lyric voice that was relating an experience of love and friendship begins to recede, and leaves behind a polite letter to a friend. In these instances, social time breaks into the lyric and undermines personal speech, and consequently the reader is denied a purely lyric experience.<sup>10</sup> This somewhat choppy structure makes Garcilaso's epistle especially transparent as an historic testimony of generic innovation.

Combining two sets of generic conventions into one single text can be both a stimulating endeavor and, as Garcilaso's text proves, deeply defamiliarizing. As a hybrid, the verse epistle offers readers a new vantage point from which to observe the possibilities for self-expression that two individual generic networks offer. Sometimes the seams where they meet are barely perceptible, and sometimes they appear violently stitched together. In either case, both in its successes and in its failures the text reveals a desire to push the boundaries of self-expression. The fact that Garcilaso chose to manufacture a new form in Spanish with which to give shape to an intimate account of the self and to address it to an other reveals a desire to connect, to be read and understood. To better grasp the depth of this desire, we must consider the context in which Garcilaso wrote this letter to his beloved Boscán.

### Maintaining a Sense of Presence

As a new form, the epistle in blank verse aims to represent the "vínculo d'amor" (l.53) between friends. But the epistolary form has another important effect, namely it allows Garcilaso to incorporate time and place quite naturally into his self-portrait. As he informs his reader, he is currently in Avignon (where Laura's ashes lay) en route back to Naples.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of this trip was diplomatic in more ways than one: he travelled to Palencia at the direction of the Viceroy of Naples to deliver a verbal account of Barbarossa's August attack on the southern coast of Italy and to convey the menace that the Turks posed to the western Mediterranean. While he may have hoped that this personal interview with Charles would help him regain his favor, it was not to be.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Herrera's commentary shows the unstable space that the epistle occupied within early modern literary criticism. He does not offer an erudite description of the genre, as he does with all other lyric forms. Besides, Herrera considers *versos sueltos* inferior to the *tercetos encadenados*, and therefore reads the opening line of Garcilaso's epistle as an "insinuación para escusarse que escribe en verso suelto" (669). Both Italian and Spanish poets were experimenting with meter to adapt the Latin dystic, and eventually the *terza rima* and the *terceto* became the meters of choice for poets writing longer Horatian epistles, satires, and elegies. For detailed studies of this development, see Elias Rivers (1993-4), Claudio Guillén (1972), and Begoña López Bueno.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Cameron explains: "[T]he contradiction between social and personal time is the lyric's generating impulse, for the lyric both rejects the limitations of social and objective time, those strictures that drive hard lines between past, present, and future, and must make use of them. (206)

<sup>11</sup> "Doce del mes d'otubre, de la tierra/ do nació el claro fuego del Petrarca/ y donde están del fuego las cenizas" (l. 83-5).

<sup>12</sup> Certainly his patron the Viceroy of Naples thought so, as soon after Garcilaso had left for Spain he wrote to Charles requesting that Garcilaso be appointed the new chatelain of Reggio. In his letter, the Viceroy admitted Garcilaso's past offenses but also called attention to the important services that he had performed (Keniston, 129-131).

The alarming news from Naples sowed the seed for the following year's military campaign against the Turks, in which Garcilaso would become engulfed and where he addressed his darkest lyrics to Boscán: sonnet XXXIII (July 1535) and the Second Elegy (August 1535).<sup>13</sup> As Richard Helgerson suggests, reading the epistle in conjunction with these other lyrics exposes Garcilaso's growing sense of isolation and a critical stance toward empire. Looking closely at the cues already present in this initial letter and exacerbated during the Tunis campaign reveals his developing sense of loneliness, or more precisely, his sense of self *in separation*.

In recent years, a productive trend in Garcilaso criticism has moved from the traditional emphasis on the poet's love life to more political readings. Frank Goodwyn (1978) initially cast doubt on the supposed centrality of Isabel Freire on Garcilaso's work and proposed to change the focus instead to his traumatic exile by Charles V. Since then, critics such as Anne Cruz (1992), Richard Helgerson (2007), Leah Middlebrook (2009), Julia Farmer (2011), and Isabel Torres (2013) have called attention to the effects that Garcilaso's involvement in Charles V's imperial project and his exile had on his life and poetry. The final lyrics that Garcilaso addressed to Boscán give expression to a subject that defines itself through the experiences of friendship, absence, and isolation. While formally distinct, this epistle, sonnet and elegy share fundamental traits: an exhortation to the friend, the author's personal experience of empire, and a growing feeling of melancholy. When read in dialogue with each other, their similarities demonstrate how self-expression is tightly connected to the need to overcome the loss of presence and to feel recognized by an other. The way they differ, however, reveals what is particular about the epistolary form of address.

Throughout the sequence, the imperial background defines the structures of power that the speaker engages with in his literary self-examination. All three lyrics draw on physical places as transhistorical witnesses of this overwhelming power, but how they depict these sites depends on the speaker's ever-changing personal relationship to empire's spread. The epistle depicts Garcilaso traveling across Europe carrying out diplomatic missions for the emperor, whereas the sonnet and the elegy expose the much darker reality of conquest, when "las armas y el furor de Marte" have destroyed cities and civilizations.<sup>14</sup> The formal diversity responds to these experiences and reflects

<sup>13</sup> Boscán had been a ubiquitous presence in Garcilaso's early lyrics: He dedicated to him the humorous Copla VII, "Del mismo Garcilaso a Boscán, porque estando en Alemania danzó en unas bodas," praised him in his Second Eclogue for teaching the young don Fernando de Toledo his "cortesía," and apologized for "mi rigor pasado y mi aspereza" in Sonnet XXVIII. But exile and prolonged service in the emperor's wars distanced them. He composed the epistle in October 1534 and in 1535 he wrote the sonnet after the battle for the fort of La Goleta, Tunis, and the Second Elegy back in Naples after the Spanish victory at La Goleta. Originally without a title, the sonnet became known as "A Boscán desde la Goleta." Richard Helgerson retitled it as "A Sonnet from Carthage," since Carthage is the city mentioned in the sonnet.

<sup>14</sup> The opening verses of the sonnet and the elegy describe the Spanish campaign in northern Africa as heir to Roman imperialism, thus establishing a connection with both its triumphs and the devastation it left behind:

Boscán, las armas y el furor de Marte,  
que con su propia fuerza el africano  
suelo regando, hacen que el romano  
imperio reverdezca en esta parte. (Sonnet "A Boscán desde la Goleta")

Aquí, Boscán, donde del buen troyano  
Anquises con eterno nombre y vida  
conserva la ceniza el Mantüano,  
debajo de la seña esclarecida  
de César africano nos hallamos  
la vencedora gente recogida. (Second Elegy)

a profound and unsettling evolution in Garcilaso's emotional state. Whereas the epistle invokes a desire to establish a connection with a friend, the elegy and the sonnet reflect the apparently contradictory state of being isolated while a part of a larger whole, i.e., being a small cog within the imperial machine. The elegy begins with a statement, "aquí... nos hallamos la vencedora gente recogida," that invites readers to think that the poetic voice has merged with a community of soldiers, a "we" (l. 1-15). But despite such attempts to surrender or abdicate his individuality, the poetic voice soon concedes his isolation as an 'I' and a despondent tone dominates the elegy until its desperate last words: "y así diverso entre contrarios muero" (l. 193).

This melancholic conclusion follows not only from Garcilaso's alienation within empire, but also from his perceived separation from Boscán. In both the sonnet and the elegy, the contrast between the author and Boscán reveals a very distinct relationship between the two friends than the epistle's familiarity. In the elegy, the figure of a vulnerable voice ("Yo, como conducido mercenario") takes shape in bitter opposition to the comforts experienced by 'Boscán' ("Tú, que en la patria, entre quien bien te quiere, / la deleitosa playa estás mirando"). The constant repetition of the word "fortuna" (which has a hold on his life) and "esperanza" (his hopes have been weakened) points to the fragility of Garcilaso's state, and leads inexorably towards the conclusion: "muero". Similarly, the last lines of the sonnet reveal Garcilaso's morose outlook, alone and surrounded by the vestiges of war: "y en llanto y en ceniza me deshago". In both cases, the choice of the present tense can be read as a declaration of the melancholic outlook of Garcilaso's lyric persona. When read together, the key words that encapsulate the elegy and the sonnet make very strong statements: "Aquí Boscán... (yo) muero" and "Boscán... Aquí... me deshago". Certainly, these two endings are very different from the epistle's *conclusio* with a modest date.

The separation from the friend that the epistle initially portrayed evolves in the lyric sequence to reveal a much deeper sense of loss. In the elegy and the sonnet, this state of mind subjugates Garcilaso's view of himself and limits his imagination to his very immediate present. Boscán is cast as a mere witness to Garcilaso's loss: his physical and symbolic distance functions as a foil to Garcilaso's miserable reality "aquí." This deictic occupies a central position in both the elegy and the sonnet. Its apparent straightforwardness, however, points at two very different, but nevertheless compatible places. On the one hand, "aquí" can be read as the physical text, thus pointing to a deictic structure of being inside the text. In this sequence Garcilaso's persona appears and disappears from the text as a narrator; he presents himself and comes to us *in* the text. As discussed above, the use of gerunds to mask the presence of the subject within actions connected to the muses also draws attention to this possibility of being inside the art object. Thus we can read "Aquí Boscán... (yo) muero" or "Boscán... Aquí... me deshago" as statements of his perceived failure to find an alternate space for self-expression, and thus for being. On the other hand, within the military context in which Garcilaso wrote the elegy and the sonnet, "aquí" can also literally refer to La Goleta, and by extension to a mythical place of imperial conquest: Carthage. Both poems depict Charles's current military campaign as a continuation of the Roman project of Mediterranean expansion in Northern Africa. But instead of being depicted in glorious terms, "aquí" contains the full scope of Carthage's tragic history and, consequently, it is the place where the poetic voice feels defeated. These autobiographical accounts record a disenchanting soldier who suffers great hardship and sorrow ("duro afán y grave pena"), just like all those anonymous soldiers around him, whose voices, personal experiences, and inevitable deaths never make it into imperial chronicles.

Even though all three lyrics seek to mitigate the loneliness felt by the speaker "Garcilaso," each one presents a different measure of the distance between himself and his friend. By

confronting the formative violence at the heart of empire, the elegy and the sonnet bring to light the consequences that this violence has for interpersonal relationships. The absence of Boscán intensifies the increasing isolation and hopelessness that the poetic voice feels after witnessing firsthand the dehumanizing effects of war. These traumatic experiences have left the poetic voice engaged in brooding self-reflection, and desperate to find reasons to retain hope. Merely a few months earlier, a much lighter Garcilaso chose to write a letter as a way to build a dialogue, and that dialogue between distant friends is only possible when there is hope, i.e., when the speaker still believes that he can be read and understood. Despite their differences, all three compositions are driven by a similar desire: addressing an other is essentially an act of hope.

Any writer's choice of form creates a series of reverberating textual echoes. These three lyrics connect Garcilaso to a tradition of poets who tried to return to some kind of presence in their friends' lives despite the absence that exile had imposed on them. Perhaps more than anyone else, Ovid stands as symbol of this necessity to fight the figurative death of exile by resisting separation and forgetting.<sup>15</sup> From his forlorn exile in Pontos, the furthest northeast corner of the empire, he wrote epistolary elegies to his friends back in Rome as a way to stay alive in their hearts and in their conversations, to remain present. Garcilaso bore his own exile in a much more central and comfortable colonial destination, Naples, which by the early sixteenth century was an effervescent center of humanist intellectual and artistic activity. But despite the contrasts in their experiences of exile and their temporal discontinuity, important connections can be drawn between the two. While their love lyrics became emblems of national poetic achievement, their "other" lyrics, epistolary in nature, present a much more complicated relationship vis-a-vis empire, tradition, and literary form. They stand out as symbols of what gets lost in literary history, of how national canons are constructed by muting those texts that conflict with their narratives of success. In order to gain a more profound understanding of Garcilaso's *Epístola*, and of the author himself, he cannot simply be considered as the organic outgrowth of a native Spanish tradition, but as part of a long line of exiles who write autobiographical lyrics about despair, loneliness, and the difficulty of expressing the self.

In their addresses to their friends both Garcilaso and Ovid write about deep inconsolable sorrows, and about a profound sense of linguistic and cultural isolation. In such a dark space, writing becomes elegiac. This connection between the letter and death was originally signified through meter: the elegiac dystic was also the meter for mourning. Writing to an other responds simultaneously to the need to negate the subject's isolation and to a desire to stabilize words against the ephemeral force of life/speech. As Gonzalo Sobejano poignantly sums up: "Lo que en la carta poética mejor una persona pide a otra [...] es sustancialmente esto: no me dejes caer en la sombra del olvido, guárdame del olvido" (36). But both life and speech are ephemeral, and thus language as a remnant of a moment that is gone is itself elegiac. The apophatic argument at the heart of the epistle (affirmation of presence through negation of absence) ultimately signals that, despite the separation, there is still hope. By attempting to establish a dialogue with an other, the letter affirms a desire to negate absence/death. Garcilaso's *Epístola* stands as a symbol of the poet's enduring hope and it highlights a trait shared by all three lyrics: the will to assert his own presence. Each text begins with an exhortation to Boscán to be his witness: "Señor Boscán," "Aquí Boscán," and

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<sup>15</sup> By making his fate the object of his poetry, Ovid became the paradigm of an exile in later Latin, medieval, and Renaissance literature. The novelty of his autobiographical epistles from exile lies in his successful fusion of the ancient tradition of writing about exile and displacement (both real and fictional), ancient epistolographic theory and practice, and his own collection of fictional elegiac epistles *Heroides* (see Antonio Alvar Ezquerro, Jan Felix Gaertner).



“Boscán.” The internal disposition of the epistle and by extension of the other two lyrics activates a subject who can only exist in the process of giving an account of the self. Boscán is the necessary other that sets in motion the construction of a speaker with a layered interiority. The significance of this need to find a witness can best be exemplified by Ovid’s own explanation of why he continued to write letters from Ponto even in his lowest moments:

Cur scribam, docui. cur mittam, quaeritis, isto?  
uobiscum cupio quolibet esse modo. (Tristia V.I., 214)

Why I write I have told you. Why do I send my writings to you, you ask.  
I am eager to be with you all in some fashion – no matter how. (215)

Although Ovid claims to write in order to be present in his friends’ lives (“vobiscum”), the fact is that at the center of this clause lies his desire to be (“cupio... esse”). Writing to an other allows him to *be*, to create an image of self – but this being remains only potential until the moment he is read. In his address to the absent friend he affirms his own existence. Ultimately, the letter makes apparent a symbolic absence that is at the very core of the individual’s experience of self. Naming the addressee creates the illusion of his presence, of a “real” connection with an actual individual. Perhaps more importantly, in addressing this other, the writer yearns for his reciprocity, literally in the form of a letter, but in fact the ultimate response would be the possibility of being understood, of being *read*. In a letter, the intrinsic impossibility of union of the human being is masked (but also revealed) as a physical separation between the writer and the addressee. The real absence of the receiver, whose presence the writer conjures up in the letter, supplants a deeper absence, a separation that will remain without an answer. Perhaps the pleasure of writing a familiar letter to a friend, or as Garcilaso would say “aqueste descuido suelto y puro,” reminds us of our essential dependence on others, even in order to see and represent ourselves.

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