Adjective Patterning in Old Spanish Epic

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It is not only the makers of advertising copy who depend on the colorful or forceful adjective to carry their message. Consider these lines from the last great “Renaissance” epic, Paradise Lost, where every noun but one supports a weighty adjective modifier:

... Him the Almighty Power
    Hurl’d headlong flaming from th’Ethereal Sky
    With Hideous ruin and combustion down
    To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
    In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,
    Who durst defy th’Omnipotent to Arms. (44-49)

The poem’s tone continues to be largely determined by somber adjectives, sixteen of them in the next twelve lines: “mortal,” “horrid,” “vanquished,” “fiery,” “confounded,” “immortal,” “lost,” “lasting,” “baleful,” “huge,” “obdurate,” “steadfast,” “dismal,” “waste,” “wild,” “horrible.” These terms are essential to the marvelous, ponderous intensity of the composition. Though some of them advance the narrative, most have the opposite effect, serving as intensifiers, each demanding the reader’s momentary attention. Except for “hideous,” but including “headlong” (used adverbially), the adjectives in the lines cited are transparent derivatives; in the reader’s visual imagination, “flaming,” “ethereal,” “bottomless,” and the others all recall the nouns they are based on. They are highly literary elements, highly poetic, but rather than the metaphoric associations frequent in much poetry, they evoke primarily relations of place, of material, of phenomenon or action. They are metonymic formations, based ultimately on relationships in space, not of resemblance.

The adjectives of medieval Spanish epic stand in stark contrast with those just noted, though they are also overwhelmingly metonymic in their derivation as well as in their function in the text. There are no vivid metaphors, no “stinging insults,” no “burning questions” or “wrenching departures,” no “cuestión palpitante,” no “vivid impressions.” They do their humble, formulaic work with dignity, with none of the trivializing effects of modern clichés. Still, each work— the Poema del Cid, Poema de Fernán González, Mocedades de Rodrigo, with the Chanson de Roland to be
taken here as a further point of contrast—has a distinctive way of using them. One useful result of their analysis may be to counteract a tendency among some critics to concentrate on similarities, particularly of formulaic phrases, which creates the impression that works of juglaría and clerecía are more alike than they really are.

We begin with a few gross figures, considering all the descriptive adjectives but eliminating others such as deictics, pronominal adjectives and numerals. For purposes of counting, a dividing line, necessarily somewhat arbitrary, has been drawn between items not counted, which include seños, and those that are, such as todos. The Cid, with its sober style, contains a grand total of 872 adjectives in 3730 lines, averaging one for every 4.28 lines. Figures for the Mocedades suggest a generic affinity with the Cid: 279 items in 1164 lines, one in every 4.17. Fernán González gives evidence, even in the brute figures, of a manner more literary or more prone to commentary on its own content, with 1097 adjectives in its 3070 lines, a rate of one for each 2.80 lines.

The numbers just cited are swollen by the massive repetition of a few favorite words: bueno, with 200 cases in the Cid, is followed by grande with 106. The Mocedades is particularly given to the automatic repetition of bueno (43 times); rey, for instance, is normally modified by bueno or some comparable modifier, although the king is represented as weak and childish in the poem. The high incidence of bueno in the Cid reflects the poem’s optimistic tone and propagandistic function, and so contrasts meaningfully with Fernán González, where the adjective most favored (or abused) is grande, with 325 instances, followed by bueno with a mere 130. Not only does this poem maintain a somber tone; its monkish author does not succeed in concealing his dim view of heroism and the military life. Thus he permits himself the word alegre only 6 times to the Cid’s 20. Figures for the Roland may be mentioned here, despite the differing place of the cognates in the lexical structure of each language: grand has some 210 instances and bon only 50; but the latter has to compete with the more frequent bel for the semantic ground covered by Spanish bueno.

Distortions introduced into the above figures by the few heavily-used adjectives can be counteracted by considering the total population of different adjectives in each text. The Cid’s stylistic restraint shows up in a modest total of 136, contrasting with 191 in the somewhat shorter...
Fernán González, 92 in the Mocedades, and 219 in the Roland (with 4002 lines). Comparisons by percentages can be meaningful among the three longer works: taking the Cid as a base of 100% frequency, Fernán González comes in at 170%, or a 70% higher count of individuals, and Roland at 150%. These figures have only approximate value because of the natural tendency of any text to repeat previous vocabulary more and more as it grows longer. By the same token, the Mocedades is too short to compare with the others. Its yield of 219% is due not only to its brevity, but also to its fondness for rhyming adjectives in -ado and -ano, which are used to make the assonance required in 84% of its lines: “conde lozano,” “pueblo zamorano” ‘Zamora,’ “sannudo e yrado,” “ledo e pagado,” “devissado” ‘(pendón) con divisa,’ and a good many more. While this particular comparison leads to no broader conclusion, the contrast between the Cid, on the one hand, and both Fernán González and Roland on the other, suggests a wide difference in emphasis or in perceptions and the way of conveying them, or in the writer’s distance from his topic and propensity for commenting on his own material, or in his attitude toward his listeners: whether he shares the narrative or hands it down, whether he writes primarily to impress a broad public or to compete stylistically with other writers, whether he respects folk tradition or wishes to improve on it, and so on.

Other differences emerge as the focus is narrowed to certain categories. Most adjectives have emotional content, either carrying distinctly positive or pleasant connotations, or else conveying markedly unfavorable judgments or unpleasant effects. A relatively small number, on the other hand, can be termed informational, usually technical or specialized vocabulary pertaining to an institution (the church) or an activity (most commonly war). The Cid stands out for its high proportion of positive adjectives, with 66 that elicit good reactions to 22 bad. Among the former are dulce, fresco, gentil, guisado, limpio, with a large proportion denoting military and manly virtues, ardido, barbado, caboso, leal, lidiador, mesurado, among others. In notable contrast with the Cid, Fernán González has many more unfavorable qualifiers, outnumbered by its good ones by only 63 to 56. The Roland again shows an intermediate ratio, with 85 to 60, and the Mocedades yields 25 to 20. Of the Cid’s 66 positive items, only 22 are found also in Fernán González, nearly all of them common words (fermoso, firme, ondrado, rico), while 16 unpleasant terms are shared, e.g., (tierra) angosta, yrado, lazrado, leaving a remainder of surplus of 40
negative items in the cuaderna vía poem. The Mocedades shares a mere 11 favorable terms with the Cid and only 7 with Fernán González.

The informative, specialized adjectives often forward the narrative action as a noun or even a verb might do: cinchas amojadas, siellas coçeras, escudo blocado, cofia fronzida, aver monedado, açor mudado, castiello... retenedor, in their given narrative or cultural contexts, provide key data. These terms are rare in all the texts, but commonest in the Cid, where they number 15. Fernán González has only 6, of which two or three are ecclesiastical (arrobispal, consagrado, perhaps cruzado “cristiano”). Its scarcity of military terms (only lorigado, perhaps agudo) contributes to its vagueness in battle scenes, which convey little sense of immediacy. Nine terms of this type have been found in the Mocedades, and 14 in the Roland, where they may provide deft visual or sensory touches: demis “distilled” (of pitch, in a simile of blackness), enpennet “feathered,” tochant “prodding” (in baston tochant, ‘a goad”).

Adjectives not belonging to the stock of commonest vocabulary items are usually derivatives, more or less transparent, taken from nouns and verbs, like the resounding examples cited earlier from Milton, and like the assonating -ado forms of the Mocedades, whose monotony is scarcely broken by the occasional -ano. In the Cid, too, most adjectives are participial formations, metonymic derivatives implying some concept akin to accompaniment: arreziado, osado, pressurado, while similar concepts also enter into non-participial items like morisco, provechoso, torniño. Adjectives used for literary effect, visual or emotional, tend sometimes to more metaphoric values, as in the expressive “tierra angosta” ('barren land,' also in Fernán González), or in “Valencia la clara,” “limpia cristianat,” “espada... linpia e clara” (3649), “blancas lorigas,” “sierra fiera e grand” (422, also 1491, “dulçe... sueño”) “espadas dulçes e taiadores,” “el alcázar ondrado,” “rica piel,” “rica cena,” to cite outstanding instances. More overtly metaphorical, perhaps is “castiello palaciano” (1727), as well as several examples of “maravilloso e grand,” with maravilloso always so paired and modifying montaña, ganancia, riqueza, batalla, poyo. Some of these expressions seem to deviate from the plain speech of the poem, toward more conventionally writerly taste, particularly the colors in “Veriedes... tantos pendones blancos / salir vermeios en sangre” (739, with an antithesis both artificial and visually forceful), and “fijas... tan blancas commo el sol” (2333), not presumably
an everyday cliché of soldierly discourse. This phrasing, with its restrained artfulness, treads a middle ground between the language of the real world and the elevated tone of literary idiom.

Fernán González, in its frequent evocation of the unhappy warrior, achieves (or recalls) a few successful figurative creations, as in “mesquinos, llorando... sus caras afiladas” (385b) and “Foia (‘huía’) Almozor a guis de algarivo” (273a), adopting a word that had passed from the original Arabic meaning extranjero to desgraciado (Corominas-Pascual 1:159). This text adopts a few figurative clichés, such as “todos... d’un coraçon ardientes” (252d), “duros coraçones” (452b), “bestión mascariiento” (11d, 493d) “el demonio,” “bueitre carniçero” (174d), allegedly applied by the Moors to Fernán González, “lobos carniçeros” (456d). A few more adjectives have some degree of transferred value: “un sueño muy sabroso” (408b), “derecho pavor” (399a), “lid pressurada” (371d, 732c). No great impulse to originality is discernible in the adoption of such phrases.

The Mocedades uses adjectives in conventionalized fashion, repeating some of them mechanically: lozano with conde, ondrado with rey, provado with traydor, sannudo e yrado, salvo e seguro, among others. The scarcity of sensory or emotional effects makes the narrative move rapidly, but with a rapidity that easily turns to perfunctory sketchiness. Metaphorical terms are limited to “negro día” (413) “día aciago,” “noche cerrada” (928) “oscura,” “antes del sol cerrado” (899) “puesto.” The poem does make one rhetorical use of the adjective not found in the other texts, a rhythmic repetition bringing out antithesis or synonymy in “alegre se va el moro / alegre se torno el castellano” (515) “grant ondra & grant prez, / grandes alegrias fejeron” (85), “Avien muy grant pavor del / & muy grande espanto” (421). These songlike constructions will later find echoes in the ballads.

While the adjectives of the two larger Spanish poems, taken out of context, show no clear systematic differences in their formation or in their styles of developing meaning, there is one specific morphological group that stands out as peculiar in Fernán González. This poem shows considerable versatility in the use of words in des-, nearly all of them
participial in form, to express negative judgments of people and circumstances: desaguisado “inconveniente,” desamparado, desarrado and deserrado “descorazonado,” desavenido “sin acuerdo,” descomunal, descreído and descreyente, desmayado (though this is of Germanic origin and therefore of opaque derivation), despagado “no satisfecho,” despechoso “indignado,” “destempradas friuras” “extremadas,” desventurado: 12 items along with several others more closely tied to verbs, such as desbaratado, despojado. The Cid offers only one form of this kind, descreído, and the similar desnudo; the Mocedades contains desaventurado and desconcertado, with comparable descomulgado. Fernán González explores varieties of misfortune and displeasure through the use of these negative formations, somewhat cerebral because they are internally antithetical, and must less vivid and dynamic than the visible details and actions specified by the Cid. The difference points to a decided contrast in the manner of conceiving the narrative. Fernán González stands back, judges and comments, while the Cid calls up actions and feelings directly. A random segment of the alphabetized list of adjectives found in this poem and absent from the Cid and Mocedades will confirm that most of its adjectives are put to use for this purpose: aquejado, ardiente, arrandado “asegurado por las riendas,” artero, arzobispal, astroso, atrevido, bajo, belo.

The vocabulary of the Roland can of course not be compared item by item with that of the Spanish poems, but it is clearly nearer the juglaresque compositions in its sparing use of adjectives to denote states of mind, being more inclined to specify essential traits: “Rollant est proz e Oliver est sage” (1093), “cele gent hardie / ki si sunt fiers n’unt cure de lur vies” (2603-4), “l’erbe verte.” Moreover, it contrasts strongly with the three Spanish texts in a peculiarity that may be passed over by the reader concerned largely with its underlying moral sense. Many of its adjectives are chosen to create vivid visual impressions— a fact that can be demonstrated by noting its many words for colors, and the scarcity of those words in the trans-Pyrenean poems.

The Cid and Fernán González mention the same three colors and no more: blanco, vermejo, and negro. The first refers to arms in both poems, and also to the sun and to the female body in the Cid. Vermejo describes a celestial portent in Fernán González, and fine leather, a face flushed with wine, or a bloodied lance and pennon in the Cid. Negro usually means “grim” in Fernán González; its single occurrence in the Cid, modifying
tierras, means “laid waste” (or “destroyed by fire”? 936). The Mocedades also uses blanca to describe a lady’s saddle, and “prietos como la mora” (‘mulberry,’ 967) for her eyes, along with two additional colors, in “capa verde aguada” (585, 589), for the distinctive garment of the pilgrim, and yndio, probably “indigo (blue),” paired always with “de oro” to describe arms (131) and coats of arms, modifying “aguila” (174) and “leon” (278).

In the Roland, blanc and vermeil are versatile in their applications, with 40 and 10 occurrences respectively; ner refers to the skin or hair of exotic warriors in 4 of 5 examples, verte always modifies erbe in fixed phrases, 17 in number. Azur makes one appearance, on a shield (1600). But in Roland this is only the beginning of the inventory of words naming colors and depicting the visual effects of surfaces. Stones may be bis (or bys) “dark,” marble may be bloi “yellow,” as may pennons and insignia. Horse colors include brun, falve, jaune and sor. Other color-words are applied to humans: eyes are vairs, hair is blont, chenut, or florit. The face of the dying Olivier is vividly visualized in four colors: “teint fut e perse, deskuluret e pale” (179). An object may reflect light, being brun “burnished, shining” (like brunnjtados in Mocedades 331), or flambeis or luisant, especially if it is oriet or orie, terms also encountered in Spain, where dorado appears in Fernán González and, along with exorado, in the Cid. Cler, with 19 examples, refers to everything from blood to the sun, as well as to open spaces and to sounds; claro is found three times in the Cid, meaning “bright” or “magnificent.” Other colors are indicated or implied, with reference to objects, by neiel “nielloed,” sasfret “blue-bordered,” listet “bordered,” roet “with circular decorations,” and so on, as the adjectives decrease in color content.

This relatively frequent reference to colors and surface textures, so subdued in Spain, may in part be attributed to the greater splendor of French clothing and equipment. The Roland thus reflects its culture, perhaps more than any Old French epic, in presenting a decorated surface of its own. The Spanish poems, in contrast, take little interest in the surface qualities that first impress the eye. The most elaborate description in all of Spanish epic is the one devoted to the Cid’s costume when he enters the court of law (3085-99). It shows a clear preference for adjectives of evaluation over those of appearance: “calças de buen paño,” “çapatos a grand huebra,” “camisa de rrançal tan blanca commo el sol,”
“un brial primo de ciclatón,” “cofia... d’un escarín de pro,” “barba... luenga,” “manto... de gran valor.” Other than “blanca,” the single color mentioned is that of the hero’s “piel vermeja,” alluding to the luxurious quality of Moorish goods, while the repeated references to gold and silver, typical of the poem, also suggest price as well as appearance. Colors in the Cid are expected to be read for their functional means, metonymically, more than appreciated as vivid visual effects.

While an inventory of adjectives does not produce results contradicting the impressions of the attentive reader of each of these poems, it does permit that reader to gain sharper perceptions of how the impressions are created. Additionally, the comparisons made lead to generalizations that are useful if not taken too categorically: tendencies to defining and decorative adjectives in the Roland, to adjectives prosaic and remote in Fernán González, empty and automatic in the Mocedades, restrained and resonant in the Cid, all very different from the intensifying, moralizing modifiers of Paradise Lost, cited here only as a convenient contrasting text. In each poem—though one might argue about Fernán González—the adjectives take their place as part of a distinctively epic idiom, with little room for the creation of metaphors which, by proposing resemblances, can too easily invite a proliferation of viewpoints. Once this process begins, the author’s own viewpoint may, like all others, be seen as relative or multiple, open to ironies at his and the hero’s expense: developments that threaten the authority and even the continued existence of the epic genre, as the mock epic becomes a possibility.

Works Extracted or Cited


