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Margaret H. Persin
Rutgers University

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The Syntax of Assertion in the Poetry of Claudio Rodriguez

Abstract
Through his original and unsettling manner of syntactical assertion, Claudio Rodriguez, the contemporary Spanish poet, subverts the conventional usage of language. But, in turn, he captures the transcendental, magical experience of language and all existence in the process of the text. That experience is based on intuition, irrationality and sensorial associations, rather than on logical connections. The reader is thus confronted with texts whose contradictory interpretive paths of signification continually subvert one another. Rodriguez wishes to communicate that it is not the end result but rather the process of the text that is the ultimate meaning. The reader's task is to participate in that process and experience firsthand the intricacies of Rodriguez's intuitive approach to reality. The characteristics of an intuitive approach to reality, irrationality, and sensorial associations establish a historical and literary connection between Rodriguez's work and that of the Surrealists.

Keywords
Claudio Rodriguez, Spanish literature, contemporary Spanish poets, contemporary poetry, language, transcendental, magical, sign, signification, reality, irrationality, sensory, sensorial associations, Surrealists, surrealism
THE SYNTAX OF ASSERTION IN THE POETRY OF CLAUDIO RODRÍGUEZ

MARGARET PERSIN
Rutgers University

Claudio Rodríguez, the Spanish poet who was the 1983 winner of the prestigious Premio Nacional de Literatura, has been recognized as the most original poet of his generation. In particular, various critics have praised his work not only for its metaphorical innovation but also for the simplicity and directness of the language employed. Typical plaudits are those of José Olivio Jiménez, in describing Rodríguez’s mode of expression: “a language style delightfully extracted from the reality of things and from the popular reserves of language, with which the poet attains one of his most outstanding expressive virtues: that of visualizing and giving sparkling, plastic form to the least significant detail of thought, thus eluding any possible barrenness to which this poetry would be inclined, considering the overload of intellectual resonances that it carries.”

It would seem then that the semantic message of Rodríguez’s poetry would also be endowed with the same characteristics as that of the poetic language employed, namely, directness of statement and clarity of meaning. But such is not the case. Carlos Bousorio, Andrew P. Debicki and others point to the unnerving results of Rodríguez’s innovation on the lexical level. While Rodríguez for the most part employs a language level derived from ordinary experience, his poetic texts are anything but ordinary. In spite of their supposed simplicity these texts are shown to be imbued with an obscurity and hermetic deepness that both confound and intrigue the reader.

The difficulty of Rodríguez’s poetry resides in not only original lexical combinations, but also unexpected and seemingly contradictory syntactical arrangements. This poet’s techniques of assertion, like his lexical experimentation, work on two different levels. The poet on the one hand purports to describe, explain, clarify and illuminate, but on the other, constantly presents to the reader for
consideration alternative possibilities of significance. His syntactic divergence includes exploiting such devices as multibranching relative clauses that eventually fold back upon themselves, the inherently ambiguous nature of negation and antithesis, and the subjunctive mode to create incongruity. All these stratagems of unconventional syntax are verbal signs and symptoms of the general and resolute textual indeterminacy that obtains in Rodriguez's poetry as a whole.

In order to understand Rodriguez's original approach to syntax, first it would be well to review briefly the current thinking on the linguistic concept of assertion. A typical definition of assertion is that put forward by Tracy D. Terrell: "a proposition expressed in a declarative sentence. More specifically, the speaker claims the position that he has announced to be true to the best of his knowledge. An assertion is a claim to truth which, on at least one reading, may be taken as the semantically dominant position in the discourse context." 1 What is unique about Rodriguez's mode of assertion is that he employs negation, the juxtaposition of antithetical elements, rhetorical questions, and the subjunctive mode—all of which run contrary to the spirit of the preceding definition—to convince the reader of the veracity of the statements that he puts forward. In addition, he often suppresses the copulative ser (to be) or conjunctions, thus forming strings of seemingly disconnected images, which generally are contained in multibranching clauses. 4 The verbs saber (to know well) and conocer (to be acquainted with) pose a special problem in Rodriguez's poetry: both imply assertion at its most basic and straightforward level, yet they regularly appear in contexts that engender doubt, ambiguity, and ambivalence concerning the speaker's attitude. Because of all these syntactical variations, it is oftentimes exceedingly difficult or impossible for the reader to ascertain the "semantically dominant position in the discourse context" that was mentioned earlier. In turn, the reader is confronted with problems of interpretation that go beyond the individual texts at hand, problems that suggest broader linguistic and ontological implications.

As various philosophers of language have noted, language shapes one’s outlook on reality. 5 A study of Rodriguez's uncanny modes of assertion thus will illustrate the poet's method of confronting reality on a variety of levels, from the most specific and linguistic to the most general and psychological. Moreover, a study of the surface
level of the poet’s language will reveal his views on the linguistic communication of meaning, the poet’s function, the reader’s role, and the relationship of life to art. Now let’s take a closer look at each of the previously mentioned syntactical deviations. Rodriguez’s systematized divergence from linguistic convention will illustrate well his subversion of the traditional rules of the communicative act.

**NEGATION**

Rodriguez employs negation purposefully, in order to decenter the focus of his texts. In contrast with a positive assertion, negation contains inherent and systematic ambiguities. For example, the statement “Mary kissed John” is not ambiguous, whereas “Mary did not kiss John” could allow any of the following semantic interpretations, according to a given context:

- Someone may have kissed John, but not Mary.
- Mary may have kissed someone, but not John.
- Mary may have done something, but not kiss John.
- Mary may have done something to John, but not kissed him.

Rodriguez takes full advantage of this language universal and utilizes negation in a wide variety of syntactic structures in order to present the reader with a host of ambiguities. Indeed, he often begins a poem with a negative statement, thus forcing the reader to consider several alternative interpretive paths. “Gorrión” (“Sparrow”) begins in such a fashion:

No olvida. No se aleja
este granuja astuto
de nuestra vida. Siempre
de prestado, sin rumbo,
como cualquiera, aquí anda,
se lava aquí tozudo,
entre nuestros zapatos. (AC, p. 178: lines 1-7)

He does not forget. He does not withdraw
this astute urchin
of our life. Always
as a loan, without direction,
as any other, here he walks,
he washes up here, obstinate,
between our shoes.

The use of negation in the opening line proves to be subversive. Instead of providing a definite context for the reader and sharpening the focus, the speaker instead disperses the meaning of the text through the multiplicity of inherent, possible contexts for the original negative statements. What is it that the sparrow does not forget? Why doesn’t he forget? Does the speaker wish to communicate a positive or negative value to the sparrow’s memory? What relationship is there between the bird’s faithful recollection and the poem’s message? By using the all-inclusive “nuestra vida” the speaker draws the reader into the text, and inexorably into the vortex of undecidability. Lines 3-5 take on a new meaning; the reader like the hapless sparrow flits from one place to the next, never staying long enough in one spot to be able to solve any of the textual riddles satisfactorily, without engendering new ones. The reader and the sparrow alike remain close to the ground: “aqui abajo, seguro, / metiendo en su pechuga / todo el polvo del mundo” ([here below, safe / putting in his craw / all the dust of the world], p. 178: 14-16). Neither soars, neither is able to leave behind the dreariness of a base existence: for the sparrow, that of eking out a life filled with hunger and dependence, for the reader, that of remaining tied to less than satisfactory circumstances, be they social, philosophical, or linguistic.

JUXTAPOSITION OF ANTITHETICAL ELEMENTS

This procedure is constant throughout Rodríguez’s poetic production. He employs this technique in order to bring to the reader’s attention dialectical tensions and, consequently, alternative possibilities of interpretation. As Tzvetan Todorov suggests, if antithesis were replaced by a direct and monosemic description, “there would no longer be the same meaning; all that would remain the same is the object evoked, the referent.”* Thus, antithesis is not so much a matter of linguistic space as psychological space created by the speaker for the reader. The aim of antithesis is not to reduce the act of naming to a literal and compact correspondence, but rather to open up the text to the readers, in a pattern of ever-widening circles of association.
Take for example the second poem of *Don de la ebriedad* which ends with:

Así yo estoy sintiendo que las sombras
abren su luz, la abren, la abren tanto,
que la mañana surge sin principio
ni fin, eterna ya desde el ocaso. (p. 44: 25-28)

Thus, I am feeling that the shadows
open the light, they open it, they open it so much
that the morning surges without beginning
without end, eternal already since sunset.

The pairing of the terms “sombras/luz” (shadow/light) “sin principio/ni fin,” and “mañana/ocaso” all within four lines of verse encourages the reader to see and feel the passage of time in its cyclic continuity. The speaker does not describe each minimal change between night and day. Rather, by providing the two extremities, he allows the reader to evoke an individual vision of eternity within the temporal flow. The speaker further evinces time’s passage by utilizing the present progressive of the verb *sentir* (to feel) and the threefold use of the verb *abren*.

The use of antithesis, like the other assertion techniques examined here, tends to decenter the focus of the text at hand, and encourages the reader to go beyond the surface level of significance. The textual referent, be it ordinary object, situation or circumstance, is only the pretext for Rodriguez’s contemplation and acclamation of more transcendental themes. Thus, in effect, present elements define absent ones, and vice versa. The process catalyzed by the juxtaposition of antithetical elements points to the whole problem of language itself, and secondarily to the ever-shifting relationship among poet, reader, text and language.

**RHETORICAL QUESTIONS**

A question is similar in linguistic properties to negation, namely, it contains inherently and systematically its own ambiguities. Rhetorical questions, like negative statements, serve to disperse the discourse context rather than to bring it into clearer focus. The speaker posits a question whose expected yet unexpressed answer
professes to assert a certain point of view. But more often than not, the question presents other and more disparate issues than it purports to resolve. Rodriguez’s questions most often are multiple, one following upon another, and utilize syntactic structures containing negatives, contrasting verbal particulars of tense, person or number, implicit comparisons or contradiction, or multiple relative clauses; all of these tend to disperse even more the focus of the text.

“Dinero” (“Money”) confronts directly the topic of linguistic inexactness and establishes language as legal tender in the commerce of communication. The poem opens and closes with questions which could be accepted at face value or in a rhetorical mode:

¿Venderé mis palabras, hoy que carezco de utilidad, de ingresos, hoy que nadie me fía? (AC, p. 182: 1-2)

.................................................................

¿Voy a vender, entonces, estas palabras? Rico de tanta pérdida, sin maniobras, sin bolsa, aún sin tentación y aún sin ruina dorada? ¿A qué la madriguera de estas palabras que sí dan aliento no dan dinero? ¿Prometen pan o armas?

¿O bien, como un balance mal urdido, intentan ordenar un tiempo de carestía, dar sentido a una vida: propiedad o desahucio? (18-26)

Shall I sell my words, today since I lack usefulness, income, today since no one trusts me?

.................................................................

Shall I sell them then, these words? Rich in so much loss, without strategies, without a purse, even without temptation and even without gilded ruin? To what end, the lurking place of these words that if they give relief they do not give money? Do they promise bread or arms? Or rather, as a poorly calibrated scale, do they try to impose order upon a time of need, to give meaning to a life: property or dispossession?
It would seem that the intermediate text (3-17) should offer possible answers to those questions, but it provides little assurance, leading in many different directions at once. There is a puzzling aphorism, “necesito dinero para el amor, pobreza / para amar” ([I need money for love, poverty / to love], 3-4), which is stated in antithetical terms and plays on the subtle morphological and semantic differences between noun and verb. And a concatenation of simple sentences seems to place in apposition money and language’s efficacy, but in truth only obscures it further:

Y su triunfo, su monopolio, da fervor, cambio, imaginación, quita vejez y abre ceños, y multiplica los amigos, y alza faldas, y es miel cristalizando luz, calor. No plaga, lepra como hoy: alegría, no frivolidad; ley, no impunidad. (11-18)

And its triumph, its monopoly, concedes fervor, change, imagination, it reverses again and opens rings, and multiplies friends, and raises skirts, and is honey crystallizing lights, heat. It does not plague, leprosy like today: happiness, not frivolity; the law, not impunity.

The repetition in lines 18-19 of a version of the opening question (“¿Voy a vender, entonces, / estas palabras?”) is a sign that the speaker recognizes his failure to furnish an answer to that question. The remaining three questions (19-26) are not answers but further (futile) attempts to express the speaker’s original intent. He has become mired in the trap of language, having been pushed even further away from the desired object. Furthermore, these parting questions are replete with terms connoting absence: “pérdida,” “carestía,” “desahucio,” and four aphoristic phrases beginning with sin. This annotation of absence is another way of pointing to language’s inexact function.
SUBJUNCTIVE OF SENSORIAL INCONGRUITY

According to Ramsey and Spaulding, the subjunctive mood is based "upon doubt, desire or some emotion or mental inquietude." Yet Rodríguez employs this verbal mood frequently to express his assertions concerning sensory experience. It is a style of expression that communicates two quite different messages. On the one hand is the poet's supposed claim of certainty concerning his message, but on the other is the mode/mood of that message, that points to a level of uncertainty. Rodríguez most commonly presents first an object, scene, or circumstance as fact. He then offers to the reader other details that are contrary to the first perspective, are as yet unattained, or cast doubt on the original statement. It is then up to the reader to assimilate the two contrasting visions, or at least recognize that the subtly presented paradox is a central element of the overall message of the poetic text. In Don de la ebriedad (poem 4), the speaker describes the images that appear around him and their movement in a continuous flux of creativity.

Las imágenes, una que las centra en planetaria rotación, se borran y suben a un lugar por sus impulsos donde al surgir de nuevo toman forma. (DE, p. 48: 1-4)

The images, one that centers them in planetary rotation, are erased and arise to a place because of their impulses where, upon springing forth, they take form anew.

But later, he expresses doubt of this vision, choosing to back away from his previous declaration of ironclad certitude:

Quizá pueblo de llamas, las imágenes enciendan doble cuerpo en doble sombra. Quizá algún día se hagan una y baste. (11-13)

Perhaps a village of flames, the images ignite a double body in a double shadow. Perhaps one day they will become one and that will suffice.
The speaker does not wish for the reader to choose one vision over the other; if that had been the case, he would have presented only one option. Rather, in giving two, one in the indicative and the other in the subjunctive, the speaker impels the reader to adopt his stance, namely, that reality is a changing, dynamic structure. One can only hope to catch a brief glimpse, attain a flash of insight into its complexity in scattered moments in time. This is the only certainty that will withstand the test of time.

"Cáscaras" ("Shells") embodies perfectly this certainty of mutability:

ese prieto vendaje
de la costumbre. que nos tapa el ojo
para que no ceguemos.
la vana golosina de un día y otro día
templandonos la boca
para que el diente no busque la pulpa
fatal. son un engaño
venenoso y piadoso. (AC, p. 160: 16-23)

that constricting bandage
of habit, that covers our eyes
so that we may not be blind.
the vain tidbit of one day and another day
appeasing our taste
so that the tooth seeks not the flesh
that is fatal, they're all a trick
poisonous and pious.

The subjunctive phrases introduced by para que serve to cancel out the meaning of the indicative verb forms that precede them. Like the previous example from Don de la ebriedad, this one prompts the reader to search for the truth somewhere between the two possibilities of (un)certain truth and (less than) total skepticism. The speaker further emphasizes the intermediate quality of truth, through the juxtaposition of blindness and sight, sweetness and decay, poison and pity. The search for truth, relative at best, must be individual. The speaker ends the poem with:
vigilan. Nunca, nunca
daran la contraseña que conduce
a la terrible munición, a la verdad que mata. (23-26)

Sentinelas

keep watch. Never, never
will they give the password that leads
to the terrible ammunition, to the truth that slays.

The incongruity achieved by the novel use of the subjunctive
mode suggests a basic and unresolvable paradox, which the poet so
clearly recognizes. The message of his texts is in counterpoint to the
means that he has at his disposal to impart that message. The clarity,
light, and oneness of Rodriguez’s lyric voice both denies and confirms
language’s (im)perfect success as a naming device. The message
indeed has been communicated, but the vehicle available to the poet
to communicate that message is riddled with ambiguity, inconsist-
sistency and inexactness.

SABER AND CONOCER

The inherent assertion of these two verbs notwithstanding, Rodriguez generally employs them in contexts that tend to negate or
undermine their denotative level of significance. Therefore the
problems that arise are two-fold: First, the speaker casts doubt on his
own statements and thus the reader is left to wonder if he is reliable, in
the mode of Dámaso Alonso’s speaker of Hijos de la ira (Children of
Wrath).10 Second, since the reader presumably understands these verbs in their dictionary definition, their prevalent usage in ambiguous
or ambivalent contexts will inevitably bring into focus the broader
issue of semantics. The reader expects to know or learn something
from the text; but there is a deception, because what Rodriguez’s use
of saber and conocer reveals is not the certainty or knowledge that was
expected from an act of assertion, but rather the syntax of knowledge.
In other words, the reader learns that syntax permits knowledge, even
though the conventions of language are dispersed on the surface level
of the text with Rodriguez’s unsystematic assertions with saber and
conocer.11

In “Ajeno” (that which belongs to another, or, he who is
alienated) *saber* and *conocer* paradoxically point to the speaker’s knowledge of “unknowledge.” His involuted assertions are posited in terms of absence, negation, interrogation, and antithesis:

Prisionero por no querer, abraza  
su propia soledad. Y está seguro,  
más seguro que nadie porque nada  
poseera; y el bien sabe que nunca  
vivira aqui, en la tierra. A quien no ama,  
¿cómo podemos conocer o cómo  
perdonar? Dia largo y aun mas larga  
la noche. Mentirá al sacar la llave.  
Entrará. Y nunca habitará su casa. (AC, p. 198: 14-22)

Prisoner by not loving, he embraces  
his own solitude. And he is certain,  
more certain than anyone because nothing  
will be his possession; and he knows well that never  
will he live here, upon the earth. How can we  
know or pardon  
one who doesn’t love? A long day, and an even longer  
night. He will lie as he takes out the key.  
He will enter. And never will he inhabit his own house.

In truth, the poem’s title “Ajeno” could also refer to the poet’s relationship to his art. Language is in him, of him and from him, but forever remains alienated from him. The poet knows that which he wishes to express, but language becomes one more barrier in achieving the perfect correspondence between the object and its naming.

The knowledge that results from Rodriguez’s deviation from conventional modes of assertion goes beyond the set of circumstances of the particular text: by confirming on one level and denying on another the assertions with *saber* and *conocer*, the poet brings into question the entire framework of assertion itself. Rodriguez casts doubt on language as an act of naming and as a finished product. To know is to enter into and experience personally the process of the poem and not merely to observe the linguistic object produced by the poet. By reshaping and redefining the syntax of assertion according
to his own needs, the poet reveals various levels of textual significance: one that is self-reflective, another that is linguistic, and still another that is philosophical.

All of the syntactical innovations mentioned here tend to diffuse the central focus of Rodriguez's poetic texts and suggest to the reader multiple paths of interpretation. Rodriguez's poetry is hermetic, but it is not closed. The titles themselves of all his collections of verse imply this freedom: Don de la ebriedad with its suggestion of abandon to Dionysian levels of consciousness; Conjuros for its preternatural power; Alianza y condena, embodying the irrational, uncanny merging of opposites and the overall indeterminacy of supposedly objective reality:14 and El vuelo de la celebración, signalling the flight to a level of understanding that lies beyond normal human capabilities.

In order to illustrate precisely the far-reaching effects of Rodriguez's syntactical arrangements, it is important to note their operation within the context of an entire poetic text. I have chosen a rather long poem taken from Alianza y condena, Rodriguez's third collection of verse.15 This poem demonstrates how Rodriguez's subversion of the traditional rules of the communicative act paradoxically allows language to communicate on two different levels, one that is linguistic and one that is extra-linguistic. In commenting about Mallarmé's style, Barbara Johnson observes that "Writing becomes an alternation between obscurity and clarity rather than a pursuit of either, a rhythm of intelligibility and mystery, just as time is a rhythm of days and nights" (Critical Difference, p. 69), and the same holds true for Rodriguez's. The rhythm of indeterminacy is what the poet avers in his texts.

The alternating rhythm of clarity and obscurity is perhaps best exemplified in the two-part poem "Brujas a mediodía" ("Witches at Mid-day").16 Its very title alludes to the interplay of the forces of darkness and light which prevail on the poet in his search to poetize and to become one with the reality of his surroundings. The poem's subtitle, "Hacia el conocimiento" ("Toward knowledge"), unequivocally reveals the relationship between the continuous struggle and the end result. An awareness of reality, ultimate knowledge, comes to the speaker (and the reader) from the constant ebb and flow of darkness and light, rather than from one winning out completely over the other in a static and finalized achievement. The preposition hacia of the subtitle succinctly captures the essence of
movement in the direction of, but not quite arrival at the desired destination. It is in the perpetual and unceasing interplay of ambiguities and inconsistencies that the speaker is able to conjure up individual forms of magic, which is both linguistic and extra-linguistic:

I

No son cosas de viejas
ni de agujas sin ojo o alfileres
sin cabeza. No salta,
como sal en la lumbre, este sencillo
5 sortilegio, este viejo
maleficio. Ni hisopo
para rociar ni vela
de cera virgen necesita. Cada
forma de vida tiene
10 un punto de cocción, un meteoro
de burbujas. Allí, donde el sorteo
de los sentidos busca
propiedad, allí, donde
se cuaja el ser, en ese
15 vivo estambre, se aloja
la hechicería. No es tan sólo el cuerpo,
con su leyenda de torpeza, lo que
nos engaña: en la misma
constitución de la materia, en tanta
20 claridad que es estafa,
guiños, mejunjes, trémulo
carmín, nos trastornan. Y huele
a toca negra y aceitosa, a pura
bruja este mediodía de setiembre;
25 y en los pliegues de aire,
en los altares de espacio, hay vicios
terrados, lugares
donde se compara el corazón, siniestras
recetas para amores. Y en la tensa
30 maduración del día, no unos labios
sino secas encías,
nos chapan de la sangre
el rezo y la blasfemia,
el recuerdo, el olvido,
todo aquello que fue sosiego o fiebre.
Como quien lee en un renglón tachado
el arrepentimiento de una vida,
con teson, con piedad, con fe, aún con odio,
ahora a mediodía, cuando hace
el sabor, contemplamos
el hondo estrago y el tenaz progreso
de las cosas, su eterno
delirio, mientras chillan
las golondrinas de la huida. (AC, pp. 151-54)

They are not old women's things
nor needles without eyes or pins
without heads. [It] does not leap,
like salt in the flame. this simple
sorcery, this old
spell. Not even hyssop
to fall like dew nor a candle
of virgin wax does it require. Each
form of life has
a point of ferment. a meteor
of bubbles. There, where the raffle
of the senses seeks
exactness. there, where
being itself takes shape, in that
living stamen. sorcery
finds shelter. It is not only the body.
with its legend of dullness. which
tricks us: in the same
constitution of the material, in so much
clarity that it is a deceit,
winks, potions, flickering
carmine. turn us about. And it smells
of widow's weeds, of pure
sorceress this September mid-day:
25 and in the folds of air,
in the altars of space, there are vices
entombed, places
where the heart is compared, sinister
recipes for love affairs. And in the tense
30 maturation of the day, not some lips
but shrivelled gums
suck from our life blood
a prayer and a blasphemy
memory and its forgetting,
35 all that which was tranquility or fever.
Just as he who reads in a scratched out line
a life’s repentance,
with doggedness, with pity, with faith, even with hate,
now, at mid-day, when it is
40 hot and appetite
is at a low ebb, we contemplate
the deep desolation and the tenacious progress
of things, their eternal
delirium, while the swallows
45 shriek in their escape.

This first part of the poem begins on an ambiguous note, since the
speaker on the one hand asserts with the verb ser, but on the other
hand states his assertion in negative terms, and does not specifically
identify the subject of the verb, only its predicate. The negation of all
that he asserts opens up to question the validity of his statements and
causes the reader to consider the various possible solutions to the
text’s inherent ambiguity. The dispersion is intensified by a series of
negative comparisons within prepositional structures, “ni de agujas
sin ojo o alfileres / sin cabeza.” All the objects designated in the first
three lines of verse also contribute to the ambivalent nature of the text.
While “cosas de viejas,” “agujas,” and “alfileres” are objects that
one perhaps would associate with a kindly grandmother who lovingly
knits pretty little things for her grandchildren, the mutation to “agujas
sin ojo” and “alfileres sin cabeza” effectively destroys their
usefulness in regard to their intended purpose and thus suggests a
darker, more sinister interpretation. A new and perplexing problem
arises in lines 3-6. It should be remembered that the verb ser was used
in its third-person plural form, "son," but in line 3, the speaker states:

No salta,
como sal en la lumbré, este sencillo
sortilegio, este viejo
maleficio.

Syntax is what permits meaning to be communicated. But in this sentence, the speaker presents to the reader a syntactical arrangement whose meaning cannot be pinned down between two distinct possibilities. The subject of the Spanish verb "salta" could very well be unspecified at this juncture in the text, and thus "sortilegio" and "maleficio" could be in apposition to "sal en la lumbré." Or, "sortilegio" and "maleficio" combined in the text without benefit of explicit conjunction could act as the singular subject of the verb "salta." But in denying a specific context so that the reader can decide which of the two is the reading to be favored, Rodriguez's text once again inevitably points to the whole issue of assertion. The reader's task is to integrate the two possibilities of interpretation into one, which is the task that goes beyond the conventions of language. But that is the whole point of Rodriguez's poetic message. As he states in the following lines of verse,

Cada

forma de vida tiene
un punto de cocción, un meteoro
de burbujas.

The "punto de cocción" and the "meteoro de burbujas" are the location where ambiguity, inconsistency and dispersion act upon one another to expand rather than destroy the text, moving it in the direction "hacia el conocimiento." What is lost by not attaining one static, finalized meaning is balanced by the ongoing adventure of the text itself. The sorcery to which the speaker refers is not the stereotyped vision of witches' brew, bats' wings and flying broomsticks. Rather, it resides in the common, everyday objects, circumstances and events that surround us on a daily basis. The poet's method of communicating this witchcraft is precisely through the metaphor of language. In pointing out how language reveals its own limitations and can be forced to give up its own secrets, the speaker emphasizes that
the ordinariness that meets the eye, that which one takes for granted, is the source of deepest mystery. His unconventional syntax is a metaphor of his view of reality. Neither syntax nor reality can be reduced to complete comprehension. Their enigmatic nature is the message, and not merely a problem to be solved on the way to total and perfect knowledge. In the tension that results from this undecidability resides the true nature of “El conocimiento.” “Brujas a mediodía” then is a metaphor and a metonymy combined: the witches’ sorcery is the closest approximation that the poet can find to express the cause/effect relationship of reality and mystery. It is through the rapprochement with the unexpected and the acceptance of unresolvability that the reader is able to have an experience that is similar to the poet’s when his imaginative and creative power has to make the leap, leaving language behind. Therefore it is the union of antithetical elements and not their contrast that will carry the magical message.

One should no longer trust the physical senses (“el sorteo de los sentidos”) or whimsical inclinations (“en tanta / claridad que es estafa, / guiños, mejunjes, trémulo / carmin, nos trastornan”) in making black and white judgments, since nothing is what it seems. The magic of reality resides in “las cosas, su eterno / delirio,” and one’s knowledge of it can only result from the flash of insight that occurs only sporadically, and on an intuitive rather than rational level.

Part II of “Brujas a mediodía” follows:

II

La flor del monte, la manteca añeja,
el ombligo de niño, la verbena
de la mañana de San Juan, el manco muñeco, la resina,
5 buena para caderas de mujer
el azafraín, el cardo bajo, la olla
de Talavera con pimienta y vino,
todo lo que es cosa de brujas, cosa natural, hoy no es nada
10 junto a este aquellarre
de imágenes que, ahora
cuando los seres dejan poca sombra,
da un reflejo: la vida.
La vida no es reflejo
15 pero, ¿cual es su imagen?  
Un cuerpo encima de otro,  
¿siente resurrección o muerte? Como envenenar, lavar  
este aire que no es nuestro pulmón?  
20 ¿Por qué quien ama nunca busca verdad, sino que busca dicha?  
¿Cómo sin la verdad puede existir la dicha? He aquí todo.  

Pero nosotros nunca  
25 tocamos la sutura,  
esa costura (a veces un remiendo, a veces un bordado),  
entre nuestros sentidos y las cosas,  
esa fina arenilla  
30 que ya no huele dulce sino a sal,  
donde el río y el mar se desembocan  
on eco en otro eco, los escombros  
de un sueño en la cal viva  
del sueño aquel por el que yo di un mundo  
35 y lo seguiré dando. Entre las ruinas  
del sol, tiembla  
un nido con calor nocturno. Entre  
la ignominia de nuestras leyes, se alza  
el retablo con viejo  
40 oro y vieja doctrina  
de la nueva justicia. ¿En qué mercados  
de altas sisas el agua  
es vino, el vino sangre, sed la sangre?  
¿Por qué aduanas pasa  
45 de contrabando harina  
como carne, la carne  
como polvo y el polvo  
como carne futura?  

Esto es cosa de bobos. Un delito  
50 común este de andar entre pellizcos  
de brujas. Porque ellas  
ono estudian sino bailan  
y hacen pis, son amigas  
de bodegas. Y ahora,
55 a mediodía,
si ellas nos besan desde tantas cosas,
¿dónde estará su noche,
dónde sus labios, dónde nuestra boca
para aceptar tanta mentira y tanto amor?

Flower of the woods, seasoned ointment,
a child’s navel, vervain
of the morning of St. John, a crippled doll, resin,
5 wonderful for women’s hips,
saffron, low-lying thistle, a stew
from Talavera with peppers and wine,
all that is the witches’ domain, things
that are natural, today all this is nothing
10 compared to the witches’ sabbath
of images that, now
when living beings leave little shadow,
gives its reflection: life.
Life is not a reflection
15 but, which is its [true] image?
One body on top of another,
does it feel resurrection or death? How
to poison, to cleanse
this air that is not one with the lung itself?
20 Why is it that he who loves never
seeks the truth, but rather prefers to seek good fortune?
How is it that without truth
good fortune can exist? There is a bit of everything here.

But we never
25 touch the suture,
that seam (at times a patch,
at times an embroidery),
between our senses and things,
those fine, small particles of sand
30 which no longer smell sweet but rather of salt,
where the river and the sea merge together,
an echo within another echo, the debris
of a dream in the quicklime
of that other dream for which I gave a world
and for which I will continue giving. Among the ruins
of the sun trembles
a nest with nocturnal heat. Among
the infamy of our laws, is raised
an altarpiece adorned with aged
gold and aged doctrine
of new justice. In which markets
of high petty theft water
is wine, wine blood, and thirst blood?
Through which customs-houses pass
as contraband flour
as flesh, flesh
as dust, and dust
as future flesh?

This is a simpleton’s quandry. A common
crime, this, to walk among witches’
trifles. Because they
do not study but dance,
and urinate, they are friends
of the wine cellars. And now
at mid-day
if they kiss us from the vantage point of so many things,
where will be their night,
where their lips and where our mouths
to accept so much deceit and so much
love?

This part begins with an inventory of items generally associated with
the magical arts; but it is not until lines 9-10 that the reader realizes
that the speaker has mentioned all of those magical objects in order to
reject them summarily, as an impoverished and frankly inadequate
metaphor of the mystery of life: “todo lo que es cosa de brujas, cosa /
natural, hoy no es nada.” In a sense then, Part II of “Brujas a
mediodía” is a response to and a rejection of the speaker’s own
assertions of Part I. Therefore the two parts are set up in an
antithetical relationship, like so many of the individual images
included in each separate part. He rejects his own assertions not
because they are untrue, but because they are too base. Once again his only recourse is to further disperse the text in ever-widening circles of association.

Lines 14-23 contain a series of rhetorical questions which pose more problems than they resolve. The negating force of “la vida no es reflejo” is further dispersed by the question that follows: “¿qué es su imagen?”; The reader is presented with one possible reply, “Un cuerpo encima de otro” (which itself lacks specificity but once again communicates the idea of coupling or suturing together), but it too is further decentered by various antithetical elements and in turn by other rhetorical questions that the supposed answer inspires in lines 17-23.

The spacing between lines 23 and 24 suggests a distancing on the part of the speaker and implies that there is a change of direction; and in truth the speaker once again states that his attempts to capture reality’s magic have failed. But as would be expected, his assertion of failure is a failure of assertion in the conventional mode. He couches this assertion in a negative and therefore more ambiguous format, and offers a series of synonyms for what he admits he has failed to name. The dissipation of his assertion is intensified further by the temporal hedging of “a veces” in lines 24 to 30. Therefore his text embodies the several images that he uses to describe his experience, “un eco de otro eco,” “los escombros / de un sueño en la cal viva / del sueño aquel,” and “Entre las ruinas / del sol, tiembla / un nido con calor nocturno.”

The image of “la sutura” of line 25 and all of the following synonyms remind the reader of the “punto de cocción” and the “meteoro de burbujas” of Part I, and also indicates a meeting point where a certain type of change takes place. And indeed in lines 41-48 the speaker refers to the mystical process of transubstantiation in his interplay of religious and secular images. The water that turns into wine and in turn into blood and the flour that becomes flesh and then dust is vaguely reminiscent of the changes that occur in those substances within a Christian context. But here the associations are more magical than theologically and doctrinally exact (and yet the context of change is given a practical and realistic cast with the words “mercado,” “aduana,” and “contrabando”). At the marriage feast of Cana—in itself an image of suturing or joining—Christ turned water into wine, and in the Mass wine is used to represent his blood; the flour of the offertory host represents his flesh, which in turn resonates with the Biblical caveat, “Remember man, dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return” (in the Biblical saying, flesh turns to dust, while in
Rodríguez’s text, flesh turns to dust and then back to flesh once again. In combination, all of these images of magical joining embody and enact the mystical transubstantiation of ordinary and common reality into the poetic process of Rodriguez’s text.

But once again the speaker steps back and asserts his failure, the distancing being indicated anew by a typographical separation between lines 48 and 49. His assertion, “Esto es cosa de bobos. Un delito / común este de andar entre pellizcos / de brujas” (49-51) sets off several associative reverberations for the reader. It will be remembered that Part I opened with the negative assertion, “No son cosas de viejas.” The similarity of the syntactic structures invites the reader to establish a clear-cut semantic relationship between the two statements, yet in the following lines of Part II the speaker admits that he may have misrepresented “las brujas” after all, once again dispersing the text in a most disconcerting manner. The reader then is not sure exactly where the speaker stands. At this juncture it would be well to review the speaker’s assertions throughout Parts I and II. He first asserted in a manner that tended to undercut the entire framework of assertion (Part I), then disparaged those assertions as being inexact (Part II, 1-23); and finally he asserted that his assertions concerning his assertions were perhaps off the mark from the very beginning (Part II, 24-60).

It is in the pursuit to unravel Rodriguez’s syntax of assertion that “El conocimiento” is revealed. The poem ends not with a bang, but with one more question, predictably stated in antithetical terms:

Y ahora,

a mediodía,
si ellas nos besan desde tantas cosas,
¿dónde estará su noche,
dónde sus labios, dónde nuestra boca
para aceptar tanta mentira y tanto
amor?

The images of lips and mouth that may meet in a kiss of simultaneous deceit and love captures the sensorial cast of Rodriguez’s message. The speaker has brought the reader to the highest point, “mediodía,” the moment of most intense clarity and obscurity, where the flash of insight overtakes for an instant the reader’s imagination.

All of the un systematic methods of assertion that have been
considered here—negation, the juxtaposition of antithetical elements, rhetorical questions, the subjunctive, and saber/conocer—function counter to their conventional usage and serve to decenter, disperse and displace the main focus of a given text. But just as importantly, they also serve to point to the whole problem of language itself. As Sala already has noted, Rodriguez does not give himself over to metapoetic reflection in his verse;\textsuperscript{17} his texts are not overtly self-conscious. But because of the innovative lexical combinations and unusual syntactical methods of assertion, language speaks not only about the topics at hand, but also about itself. In effect, Rodriguez’s texts embody the difficulty of making language coincide with something that is exterior to it, in this case the enigmatic reality of ordinary experience. Rodriguez strives to become one, to be possessed by the poetic experience that he creates in his texts.\textsuperscript{18} It is the most direct way in which he can approach and know the mystery, wonder, and enchantment of the reality that surrounds him.\textsuperscript{19} As Jesús Hilario Tundidor points out, “it is knowledge that permits that being become object, and object being; so that poesis may be realized, it needs to be in others and in oneself, it needs to be existence and to participate in the very existence of the poet.”\textsuperscript{20}

In giving himself over to this unique experience, knowledge in its most direct and purest form, Rodriguez achieves the “ebriedad” to which he refers throughout his poetic production. He states in reference to his poetic intentionality:

My only intent, in truth, is that my poetry be natural (not direct, or realistic, or symbolic, etc.) in accord with that which I can do and that which I am living. Why speak of how a poem is master and servant, at the same time, of oneself? I go on believing, as I have from the beginning, in this inebriation, in this adventure, in this danger that is defeat and triumph. I believe that this mystery, this clarity, is a good and a gift. The only truth that a poet is able to say of his verse is that “he who has tried it, knows it.”\textsuperscript{21}

It is from the perspective of irrationality, intuitive suggestion, and a rupture of conventional syntax that one can best situate Rodriguez within the trajectory of twentieth-century poetry, more specifically within the Surrealist tradition.\textsuperscript{22} As Bousoño has noted, Rodriguez admitted to an early influence of Rimbaud and other French Surrealists (\textit{Poesia}, p. 10). But the influence is more specific
and stylistically motivated than has been noted previously. One must first take into account Rodríguez’s manner of viewing concrete reality. Anna Balakian notes that

the dominant characteristic of this exterior nature and of the state of mind which classifies and simplifies is order and the mental activity based on order, i.e., logical thinking. This, according to the Surrealists, is adequate only in dealing with minor problems. Hence the revolt is not really directed against the world of matter, against the concrete, but against the mode of grasping concrete matter, i.e., through reason and rational thinking based on the concept of order, whether it be in perceiving nature or in imagining the ‘unreal’ of eternity.

This view of course is embodied in Rodríguez’s rejection of a rational approach to the poetic experience.

Secondly, Rodríguez places great emphasis on the visual experience, as an enactment of the communion between the poet and exterior reality. It is only through vision, on both a physical and mystical level, that the poet can know reality. Balakian delineates this same relationship for the Surrealists:

The Surrealists set out to revitalize matter, to resituate the object in relation to themselves so that they would no longer be absorbed in their own subjectivity. In fact, instead of abstracting the object, instead of emptying it of its physical attributes, they decided to add to its qualities through their ability to see. A strong identification took place between the see-er and the seer. Seeing was no longer considered a receiving process but an interchange between subject and object. With conscious training, the senses were to reach a point of acuity whereby their function would not be limited to accepting and storing sensations.

It is within this context, then, that the rationale for such terms as “sutura,” “conjuro,” “hechicería,” “brujas,” and others becomes evident. Rodríguez is the see-er/seer who, through his creative power as a poet, makes visible the link between ordinary reality and its enigmatic underpinnings.

On a more specific level, with Rimbaud Rodriguez shares an ebullient excitement, the wish to attain the unknown through poetry, to
view the invisible, to hear the unheard” and an unconventional usage of syntax. From Mallarmé Rodriguez has inherited a preoccupation with the power and mystery of language. And ironically, all three of these poets—Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Rodriguez—coincide at the paradoxical moment of silence, the ultimate act, the lyrical leap into the unknown beyond language. Rimbaud stopped writing at the age of nineteen: “His silence is an act of his poetic creation” (Friedrich, Structure, p. 67). Mallarmé also viewed silence as the final step in his poetic trajectory: “In Mallarmé’s reflections, ‘silence’ is one of the most frequent concepts. Thus he calls poetry a ‘tacit flight of abstraction,’ and the written page a ‘fading,’ ‘silent’ concert from which they emanated. The ideal poem would be ‘the silent poem of pure white.’ In statements like these, mystical thoughts recur, attributing the insufficiency of language to the experience of transcendence” (Friedrich, Structure, p. 88). Martha LaFollette Miller already has noted in her astute observations on linguistic skepticism that “the devaluation of words and loss of faith in them is accompanied, in Rodriguez’s poetry, by an exaltation of the world beyond human subjectivity and language, of the purely physical universe that is mute. Their silence (and visual absence of emptiness as well, variously termed clarity, light or winds) frequently assumes a positive connotation that contrasts with man’s entrapment within verbal limits (“Linguistic skepticism,” p. 107).

Through a detailed examination of Rodriguez’s unusual syntactical procedures of assertion and their functioning within specific texts, an important characteristic of his poetic style has been brought to light; the reader is confronted with texts whose contradictory interpretive paths of signification continually subvert one another. Rodriguez wishes to communicate that it is not one static integration of superficial signs that is the ultimate meaning, but rather the entire process of confronting disparate elements. Concomitantly, this same characteristic also firmly joins him to the more general currents of twentieth-century European literature. Like the Surrealists, Rodriguez becomes one in mystical communion with the reality that surrounds him. But unlike those predecessors, he retains a very Castilian grasp on the ordinariness of daily life. His originality lies in his ability to create new modes of linguistic and extra-linguistic communication without forsaking his allegiance to a particular social milieu and humanity’s responsibility to it.
NOTES

2. Carlos Bousoño. in his prologue to Claudio Rodríguez. *Poesía 1953-1966* (Madrid: Plaza & Janes. 1971), pp. 9-35, attributes the young poet’s originality to what he terms his “realismo metafórico” and “alegoría disemica.” Through this process, Rodríguez is able to endow the most common everyday objects and situations with transcendental value. Andrew P. Debicki, in his *Poetry of Discovery* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), pp. 40-58, proposes that Bousoño’s explanation is valid, but places too much emphasis on the separation of the various levels of meaning that surface in the reading of the texts. He applies the Barthian concept of linguistic codes, which suggests how a literary work may point in several different directions at once. The value of this second approach is that it favors the plurality of meaning, resonances and innuendos contained in the text.
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of the basic indeterminacy of Rodríguez’s language, oftentimes I have had to choose between two or more options possible in the original Spanish.

7. One must differentiate between presupposition and assertion. According to Paul and Carol Kiparsky, “Presuppositions are constant under negation. That is, when you negate a sentence, you don’t negate its presuppositions: rather, what is negated is what the positive sentence asserts. For example, ‘Mary didn’t clean the room’ unlike its positive counterpart does not assert either that the room became clean, or if it did, that it was through Mary’s agency. On the other hand, negation does not affect the presupposition that it was or has been dirty.” This is quoted directly from their study entitled “Fact” contained in Semantics, ed. Danny D. Steinberg & Leon A. Jakobovitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 345-69. The examples of negation in English listed in the body of this study are those of the Kiparskys.


12. In her article on linguistic skepticism. Martha LaFollette Miller discusses this issue in regard to Rodríguez’s El vuelo de la celebración. See her “Linguistic Skepticism in Claudio Rodríguez: A Counterpoint to Jorge Guillen’s Linguistic Faith.” Anales de la Literatura Española Contemporánea, 6 (1981), 105-21.

13. In his ars poetica Rodríguez defines poetry in the following manner. Germane to this discussion is the poet’s use of the word conocer and its derivatives: “Creo que la poesía es, sobre todo, participación. Nace de una participación que el poeta establece entre las cosas y su experiencia poética de ellas, a través del lenguaje. Esta participación es un modo peculiar de conocer. No es este el lugar a propósito para indagar la naturaleza de tal participación ni las características genuinas de ese conocimiento. Una característica esencial de este último consistiría en lo que se conoce acontece, está actuando en las tablas del poema. Y solo ahí. El proceso del conocimiento poético es el proceso mismo del poema que lo integra.” In Francisco Ribes, Poesia Ultima (Madrid: Taurus, 1963), p. 87. (Emphasis mine.)

14. The title Alianza y condena has inspired much spirited debate over its meaning. Claudio Rodríguez himself, in two separate interviews, comments on the essence he was attempting to grasp with such an antithetical juxtaposition. “Ambas palabras
pueden orientar, no definir el contenido del libro. Tanto nuestro vivir, como la poesía, se suma de sus formulaciones, y se amasa con ambos hechos: de acercamiento o alianza, y de distanciamiento, repulsa o condena. Las dos vias se entrecruzan, mejor, se desembocan." Cited in Antonio Nuñez, "Encuentro con Claudio Rodriguez," Insula, 234 (1966), 4. Rodriguez also has stated: "Cuando en mi ultimo libro digo 'alianza y condena,' no me refiero a la alianza como concepto. Dentro de la alianza existe la condena, igual que dentro de la condena existe la alianza. Es un proceso (para decirlo con una palabra muy cursi) dialectico." Cited in Federico Campbell. Infame turba (Barcelona: Editorial Lumen, 1971), p. 230.

15. The unorthodox techniques of assertion discussed in this essay are apparent in all of Rodriguez's poetry, as evidenced by the wide variety of examples drawn from each of his collections of verse. It is my opinion that Rodriguez has refined and systematized these techniques with each new collection.


18. See Bradford's "Transcendent Reality." Nancy B. Mandlove also espouses this view in her "Carnal Knowledge: Claudio Rodriguez and El vuelo de la celebracion" (The American Hispanist, 32-33 [1979], 20-23), but approaches the issue from a phenomenological point of view.

19. See Rodriguez's poem entitled "Porque no poseemos" (AC, p. 157) and "Un momento" (AC, p. 201). Both of these poems embody the poet's unique manner of becoming one with concrete reality.


22. Philip W. Silver and E. Inman Fox already have noted Rodriguez's relationship with the Surrealist movement, both basing their observations on the poet's originality on the lexical level. The former, in his prologue to Rodriguez's Antologia poética, examines his striking metaphoric structures, and the latter in his essay entitled "Poesía 'social' y tradición simbolista" (Actas del Tercer Congreso Internacional de Hispanistas [Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1970], pp. 355-63), mentions briefly the poet's "expresión metafórica. alusiva y algunas veces irracional" (p. 362).

24. See the poems entitled "Visión a la hora de la siesta," (C, p. 127) and "Un suceso" (AC, p. 193). This connection is especially evident in *El vuelo de la celebración*, in such poems as "Una aparición" (VC, p. 47), "Hacia la luz" (VC, p. 45), and "La contemplación viva" (VC, p. 43).


26. In *The Structure of Modern Poetry*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 1974), Hugo Friedrich describes Rimbaud's style in the following manner: "The syntax is simple, giving the statements a formal clarity. The explosions are in the ideas rather than in the sentence structure. And the effect is all the more vehement for the formal disharmony in regard to the syntax. The ideas are protuberances of the imagination: to the wildness and distance they add even more wildness and distance, not merely in successive stanzas, but from line to line, and sometimes even within a single line. . . . Furthermore, individual image complexes mix extreme opposites, uniting things that are incompatible in practice . . .!" (p. 52).

27. In Mallarmé's poetry "mystery is crucial: the poet wants to come as close to it as possible. His poetry and ideas do not move from the empirical world into onontological universality: they take the opposite course. . . . The poem is a process, taking place not in the object but in the language. . . . Poetry has always enjoyed the privilege of letting a word quiver with its multiplicity of meanings. Mallarmé forges ahead to the utmost limits of this license. He makes the infinite potential of language the actual content of his writings. . . . The language passes by as if it were expressing the most natural things—and yet it states enigmas. . . . The depths of Mallarmé's poems are governed by clarity. But the language is a singing mysteriousness which shields the ontological thought, preventing its deterioration" (Friedrich, *Structure*, pp. 70-79).