Discussions of Petrarchism in Góngora generally share two assumptions. The first is a tendency to view Góngora’s Petrarchan period as a moment of apprenticeship. The poems in his corpus that draw most heavily on Italian sources are the sonnets written between 1582 and 1585, shortly after the poet’s university studies. Critics, therefore, have often regarded the Petrarchan influence as a feature of his early poetry, a dependency that he outgrew in his later works.¹ A second common observation is that

these poems respond not to Petrarch himself but to his followers, to sixteenth-century Petrarchists such as Bernardo and Torquato Tasso, Antonio Minturno, Luigi Grotto and Jacopo Sannazaro. Góngora, in this account, would seem to represent a distant and dying echo of the Italian poet’s influence, one from which the Spanish poet would eventually distance himself.

Discussions of Góngora’s Petrarchism, indeed, have generally focused on questions of distance, on the proximity (or lack thereof) between the model and the imitation. Listing the Italian sources of Góngora’s poems, for example, Robert Jammes notes that in one case ‘il ne s’agit pas de simple reminiscences’ [it is not simply a matter of reminiscences] while in another ‘Góngora conserve sa totale autonomie’ [Góngora retains complete freedom]. Few critics, however, have engaged the conversation between the poets, the way Góngora is commenting upon the texts that he borrows.

This essay seeks to contest the vision of Góngora’s Petrarchan poetry as a moment of apprenticeship. It argues that these poems, far from mere formal exercises, represent a poetic manifesto of sorts. Entering into dialogue not only with the sixteenth-century Petrarchists but also with Petrarch himself, Góngora defines in these works his


3 Jammes, Études, 367 (my translation).
views on imitation and influence. As we will see in the analyses below, the poems draw attention to the insuperable gap between a poem and its source, argue for the superiority of imitation over mimesis and represent literature as an endless accumulation of glosses. Moreover, we will see that Góngora enters into one of the main literary debates of the sixteenth century: the opposition between the Ciceronians, who advocated the imitation of a single model, and the anti-Ciceronians, who drew freely from multiple sources. Although Góngora takes his inspiration in these poems from Petrarch (the privileged source of the Ciceronians), his vision of poetry is ultimately more on the side of the anti-Ciceronians.

This essay will focus on Góngora’s use of a well-known Petrarchan conceit: the image of flowers springing from the foot of the beloved as she walks through the fields. The main source for this motif, which critics have called ‘generative footsteps’, is RVF 165, which describes Laura’s miraculous effect on the landscape:

Come ’l candido pie’ per l’erba fresca
i dolci passi honestamente move,
vertú che ‘ntorno i fiori apra et rinove,
de le tenere piante sue par ch’esca.

[As her white foot through the green grass virtuously moves its sweet steps, a power that all around her opens and renews the flowers seems to issue from her tender soles.]

Like Persephone upon her return from the Underground, Laura renews the landscape, giving rise to a trail of blossoms. Petrarch’s motif would also leave a path of flowers in

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its wake: the conceit became a commonplace in Petrarchist poetry of the Quattrocento and Cinquecento. And Góngora would draw on this motif in at least three of his sonnets: ‘Al tramontar del sol, la ninfa mía’ (1582); ‘Tres veces de Aquilón el soplo airado’ (1582) and ‘Los blancos lilios que de ciento en ciento’ (1609).

The popularity of the motif is in part attributable to its metatextual resonance. The foot is not only an anatomical part but also a poetic term, the basic metrical unit of a verse. The woman whose feet produce flowers in the field is thus a poet of sorts, one who has composed her text on the landscape. Flowers, moreover, often have a metatextual significance. In the Middle Ages, for example, a compilation of literary texts was called a *florilegium*, and, as G. W. Pigman III observes, ‘culling flowers’ is a ‘frequent [image] of nontransformative imitation’. In RVF 165, the image of the flower-bearing feet seems to represent a natural and innocent form of creation. The use of words such as ‘candido’, ‘honestamente’ and ‘vertú’ in the passage cited above underscores the purity, simplicity and artlessness of Laura’s act. The poem goes on to describe the perfect accord between her gait, glance and speech:

Et co l’andar et col soave sguardo
s’accordan le dolcissime parole

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6 The metatextual implications of the motif are clear in RVF 125, in which the edge of the river Sorgue is ‘segnata’ (signed) byLaura’s foot. In his discussion of the motif, Mirollo cites Petrarch’s *Triumph of Fame*, which ‘says of Cicero that the grass flowered where he walked’ (‘Where’er you walk’, 183). The generation of plants and flowers serves as a metaphor for the production of signs and texts.

et l’atto mansueto umile et tardo.

[And with her walk and her gentle glance her most sweet words accord, and her mild, humble, slow gestures.]\(^8\)

In Petrarch, the motif of the flower-bearing feet goes hand in hand with an ideal of natural harmony, a spontaneous and unmediated form of creation.

This ideal of natural coherence, however, contrasts with Petrarch’s own poetic practice, which so often veers toward dispersion and dissolution. In the first sonnet of the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch describes his poems as ‘sparse’ (scattered) and underscores his internal conflict—the dispersion of the self—through a proliferation of first-person pronouns: ‘di *me* medesmo *meco* *mi* vergogno’ (‘I am ashamed of myself within’).\(^9\) Far from a natural artist, Petrarch is a highly self-conscious and self-critical poet, who is often divided against himself, acutely aware of the insufficiencies of his poetry. The contrast between the effortlessly flower-bearing feet and Petrarch’s agonised literary production is clear in RVF 208, in which the lover addresses the Rhône and asks it to carry a message to Laura. The river will recognise her when it sees the flowers with which she adorns its left bank:

Ivi è quel nostro vivo et dolce sole

ch’adorna e ’nfiora la tua riva manca;

forse (o che spero!) el mio tardar le dole.

[There is that living, sweet sun of ours, who adorns and beflowers your left bank; perhaps (oh what do I hope for!) my slowness pains her.]\(^10\)

\(^8\) RS, 310-11.
\(^9\) RS, 36-37 (emphasis mine).
\(^10\) RS, 362-363.
Laura’s spontaneous and unproblematic creation contrasts with the very mediated message of the lover-poet:

Basciale ’l piede o la man bella et bianca;
dille (e ’l basciar sie ’n vece di parole):
‘Lo spirto è pronto, ma la carne è stanca’.
[Kiss her foot or her beautiful and white hand;
tell her (in kisses instead of words):
‘The spirit is ready, but the flesh is tired’].

Petrarch’s river could be read as a metaphor for poetry and writing in general. Both the river and the text convey a message through signs in the absence of the speaker. In this poem, Petrarch emphasises the mediated nature of the message: the lover’s sentiment is translated first into words and then into kisses. The allusion to the Gospels (Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:38) in the final line suggests that these layers of mediation diminish the force of the original message, for the opposition between the flesh and the spirit is traditionally associated with the divide between words and meaning. That the flesh lags behind the spirit, then, indicates that the river’s kisses do not do justice to the lover’s words—and, by extension, that his words do not convey the full nuance and urgency of his feelings. The river, thus, represents a mediated, difficult form of communication, which contrasts with the effortless production of beauty by Laura’s feet—a natural, instantaneous and unproblematic form of creation.

In what follows, we will explore how Góngora takes up Petrarch’s image in three sonnets in order to define his own vision of poetic creation. Like Petrarch, Góngora evokes a lyric voice who is distant and alienated from the flower-bearing feet

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11 RS, 363 (my translation).
of his beloved and represents alternate forms of creation that are highly mediated and
generate. Where Petrarch seems to lament this alienation, however, Góngora turns these
mediated poetics into a positive ideal, an aesthetic that ultimately equals or outshines
the generative feet of the conceit.

Al tramontar del sol, la ninfa mía

The primary source for the first poem—‘Al tramontar del sol, la ninfa mía’—is a sonnet
by Torquato Tasso—‘Colei che sovra ogni altra amo ed onoro’ (Rime, Book I, Sonnet 5)—which describes the beauty of his beloved Lucrezia Benedidio as she walks along
the banks of the Brenta river. Like many poets of the Cinquecento, Tasso wrote lyric
poetry in the Petrarcan style, and his poem takes up three well-known conceits of the
Canzoniere. The first quatrain draws on the flower-producing feet of RVF 165; the
second recalls the evocation of Laura’s blond hair scattered in the wind in ‘Erano i capei
d’oro a l’aura sparsi’ (RVF 90); and the sextet takes up the motif of the lover-poet
addressing a river and asking it to intervene on his behalf (RVF 208).

All three conceits have metatextual resonance. We have already seen how the
flowering feet suggest a natural, spontaneous form of poetic production and how the
river is a figure for the literary text, which mediates the poet’s message. The hair in
RVF 90 has a similarly metapoetic function:

   Erano i capei d’oro a l’aura sparsi
   che ’n mille dolci nodi gli avolgea,
   e ’l vago lume oltra misura ardea
   di quel begli occhi, ch’or ne son si scarsi.
[Her golden hair was loosed to the breeze, which turned it in a thousand sweet knots, and the lovely light burned without measure in her eyes, which are now so stingy of it].

The description of the tresses as ‘sparsi’ (scattered) echoes the opening verse and title of the collection: *Rime sparse*. Just as the wind intertwines the scattered locks, so the book ties together the many disparate strands of Petrarch’s poetry.

In juxtaposing these conceits, however, Tasso also subtly reworks them. In each case, he introduces an element that counters the force of the Petrarchan image.

Consider, for example, the motif of the flower-bearing foot:

Colei che sovra ogni altra amo ed onoro
fiori coglier vid’io su questa riva;
ma non tanti la man cogliea di loro
quanti fra l’erbe il bianco piè n’apriva.

[She whom I love and honour above all others
I saw picking flowers on this bank;
but her hand did not pick as many
as her white foot opened in the grass.]

Where the opening quatrain of RVF 165 focuses exclusively on the foot and its generative power, Tasso contrasts the foot with the hand, which picks flowers from the field. Tasso’s poem is a balance of sorts that weighs the ordinary against the extraordinary effects of this woman, her consumption against her production.

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12 RS, 192-193.
Tasso adds a similar counter-force in his treatment of the scattered locks in the second quatrain. The vision of Laura’s wind-blown tresses in RVF 90 is a dangerous image. As Giuseppe Mazzotta has observed, Petrarch’s verses echo the Diana and Actæon episode in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: ‘sparsos per colla capillos conligit in nodum’ (III, 169-170) [‘binds into a knot the locks which have fallen down her mistress’ neck’].\(^\text{14}\) The allusion suggests a forbidden and dangerous sight, an intrusion upon the intimacy of a goddess and her circle. The verses that follow this vision describe Laura’s fiery eyes, which, like those of an offended goddess, shine ‘oltra misura’ [beyond measure]. Like Petrarch, Tasso juxtaposes the description of the disheveled hair with the evocation of the beloved’s eyes:

\begin{quote}
Ondeggiavano sparsi i bei crin d’oro,
ond’Amor mille e mille lacci ordiva;
e l’aura del parlar dolce ristoro
era del foco che de gli occhi usciva.
\end{quote}

[Scattered the beautiful locks of gold undulated, where Love plotted thousands and thousands of snares; and the breeze of her speech a sweet relief was from the fire that came out of her eyes.]\(^\text{15}\)

Tasso, however, has mitigated the danger of this vision. Love might be setting traps in the beloved’s hair and her eyes might flare with desire, but ‘l’aura del parlar’ tempers this excess. Lucrezia’s soothing speech allows the lover to look without being burnt. In


\(^\text{15}\) T. Tasso, *Rime*, 7 (my translation).
both quatrains, thus, Tasso balances constructive and destructive tendencies. The beloved renews the flowers that she has plucked and diminishes with her words the threat of her beauty or of her desire.

Tasso’s most radical revision of Petrarch, however, is his treatment of the river motif in the sestet:

Fermò suo corso il rio, pur come vago
di fare specchio a quelle chiome bionde
di se medesmo ed a que’ dolci lumi;
e parea dire: «A la tua bella imago,
se pur non degni solo il re de’ fiumi,
rischiaro, o donna, queste placid’onde».

[The river, pure and wandering, stopped its flow
to make itself into a mirror for those blond tresses
and for those sweet lights;
and it seemed to say: ‘For your beautiful image
if you do not condescend only to the king of rivers,
I will clear, oh lady, these placid waves’.]

In both Petrarch and Tasso, the river serves as a metaphor for the text, but where Petrarch emphasises mediation and transmission (the river will convey his message using signs) and the distance between the author and the reader (Petrarch’s absence from Laura), Tasso underscores the relation between the text and the reality that it purports to represent. The river-text is not a coded message but rather a mirror that

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reflects the beauty of the beloved. In M.H. Abrams terms, Petrarch’s river points to the expressive function of literature, while Tasso’s focuses on its mimetic aspect.\(^{18}\)

Where Petrarch’s river-text seems to involve a loss of meaning or nuance, moreover, Tasso’s has a tranquilizing or softening force. At the beginning of the poem, we see the beautiful lady through the perspective of the lover, who appears in first-person verbs (‘amo ed onoro’, ‘vid’io’). We perceive her, that is, through the lens of desire: Love itself has manipulated the image (‘ond’Amor mille e mille lacci ordiva’). In the sestet, however, the lover and the first-person verbs disappear, as the river takes on the function of representing the woman. Tasso’s second quatrain and first tercet have a parallel structure: just as verses 5 and 6 describe the golden locks and verse 8 evokes the beloved’s eyes, verse 10 returns to the ‘chiome bionde’, and verse 11, to her eyes.

The reflection in the river, however, is calmer and tamer than the lover’s vision in the octave. The fiery eyes of verse 8 become ‘dolci lumi’ in verse 11. At the same time, the movement in the second quatrain comes to a halt in the sestet, the disheveling wind replaced by the river that has stilled its flow. The river-mirror introduces a more tranquil and neutral perception of reality.

Ultimately, Tasso’s poem moves from imbalance to balance. In the opening quatrain, the nymph produces more flowers than she picks. The construction ‘ma non tanti... quanti...’ reveals an inequality, which is reinforced by the overabundance of verse 6: ‘mille e mille’. But as the poem continues, it moves toward greater equilibrium. In verses 7 and 8, the beloved’s words temper the fire of her eyes: the word ‘ristoro’ suggests not only rest and relaxation but also a restoration of a prior situation. And the culminating moment of the poem—the introduction of the river-mirror—introduces a

perfect parity. When the river stills its waters, the image reflects the beloved exactly. Tasso’s river-poem seems to represent a poetic ideal of balance, of literature as a representation of nature, which resists the exaggerations and distortions of desire.

In ‘Al tramontar del sol, la ninfa mía’, Góngora adopts the structure of Tasso’s octave, dedicating the first stanza to the generative footstep and the second to the wind-swept hair. Like Tasso’s beloved, Góngora’s nymph is responsible for both the flowering and deflowering of the countryside:

Al tramontar del sol, la ninfa mía,
de flores despojando el verde llano,
cuantas troncaba la hermosa mano,
tantas el blanco pie crecer hacía.¹⁹

And in the second quatrains, her hair similarly undulates in the wind:

Ondeábale el viento que corría
el oro fino con error galano,
cual verde hoja de álamo lozano
se mueve al rojo despuntar del día. (120)²⁰

¹⁹ Luis de Góngora, Sonetos completos, 120. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. The first verse of this poem recalls the opening of a sonnet by Torquato’s father, Bernardo Tasso (1493-1569): ‘Al tramontar del sol chiaro e lucente’ [Upon the setting of the bright and shining sun]. But where Bernardo’s sonnet draws a parallelism between the sunset and the loss of the beloved, which introduce a ‘tenebroso orrore’ [gloomy horror] into the world, the nymph in Góngora’s poem is a figure of renewal and new life. See Bernardo Tasso, Rime (Vinegia: Gabriel Giolito d’ Ferrari, 1560), V, 93.

²⁰ Góngora draws not only on Torquato Tasso but also on a sonnet by his father, Bernardo: ‘Mentre che l’aureo crin v’ondeggia intorno/ A l’ampia fronte con leggiadro errore’ [While the golden locks wave around/ your wide forehead with a graceful ambling.] (II, 112). By echoing ‘leggiadro errore’ with ‘error galano’ and by introducing the image of the poplar leaf swaying in the wind, Góngora gives his scene a gentler and more lackadaisical feel.
Although the structure of the poems is similar, however, Góngora has introduced some subtle changes. In contrast to Tasso’s and Petrarch’s versions, the wind no longer ties knots in the lady’s hair. Unlike Tasso, who retains the Petrarchan keyword ‘sparsi’, Góngora eliminates the disheveled tresses. The nymph, we might say, sports a slightly more coiffed look, which is reflected in Góngora’s flawless composition. One of the most beautiful aspects of this poem is the chromatic chiasmus or ring composition in the octave: the golden hair is surrounded by greens (the field of verse 2 and the leaf of verse 7), which are in turn encircled by the red of the sunset of verse 1 and the sun of verse 8. The octave of the Italian poem, in contrast, is an awkward and imperfect balancing act. Tasso seems at pains to recontain the disheveled and threatening aspects of the Petrarchan beauty. He counters the wildness and excess of Laura (the disheveled locks, the fiery eyes, the extraordinary flowering) with softening features (the soothing speech, the innocent bouquet), but despite his efforts the octave is always slightly off kilter. The contrast between the two poems is clear in the constructions that the poets use in the third and fourth verses. What is an imbalance in Tasso (‘non tanti ... quanti’) becomes equality in Góngora (‘cuantas ... tantas’).

With the sestet, Góngora’s and Tasso’s poems part ways. Where Tasso takes up the river motif, Góngora depicts a garland woven from the flowers plucked in verse 3:

\[
\text{Mas luego que ciñó sus sienes bellas}
\]
\[
\text{de los varios despojos de su falda}
\]

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22 In this respect, my reading differs from that of Ignacio Navarrete, for whom these verses ‘suggest the leaves of the laurel tree waving, after Daphne’s transformation, in the glare of a red sun burning with frustrated passion’ (*Orphans*, 195). I would argue that Góngora’s decision to make the laurel a poplar is a conscious departure from the Petrarchan model.
(término puesto al oro y a la nieve),
juraré que lució más su guirnalda
con ser de flores, la otra ser de estrellas,
que la que ilustra el cielo en luces nueve. (120)

As we have seen, the Italian poem moves from imbalance to equilibrium and reflection: the perfect mirroring of the beloved’s image in the river. Góngora’s sonnet, in contrast, begins with a perfect balance—‘cuantas ... tantas’—and moves toward an inequality: the nymph’s light shines more brightly than the nine stars of Corona, a constellation formed from Ariadne’s bridal crown. Notably, the shift in each poem corresponds to a change in the degree of objectivity. Tasso’s poem achieves neutrality and balance only when it eliminates the first-person perspective in the sestet. In Góngora, in contrast, the ‘yo’ becomes an agent only in the final tercet (‘juraré’). Other than the possessive adjective in verse 1 (‘la ninfa mía’), the lyric voice has no place in the octave. The introduction of a subjective point of view paves the way for the hyperbole of the final verses of the poem.

As Góngora’s poem shifts from equality to excess and from an objective to a subjective perspective, it also moves away from Nature toward artifice and aestheticism. The octave situates the nymph in a natural context, equates her with a natural object—‘cual verde hoja...’—and even makes her a producer of nature, of the flowers that spring from her foot. The sestet, in contrast, creates an opposition between a natural phenomenon—the constellation—and a man-made one—the garland—and emphasises the superiority of the latter.23

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23 For another example of the garland conceit in Góngora, see Act II, verses 1059-1063 of his play Las firmezas de Isabela, ed. Robert Jammes (Madrid: Castalia, 1984), 103.
In his response to Tasso, Góngora has replaced a scene of mirroring with one of self-fashioning, an image of the heroine adorning herself. His poetic ideal is not the humble reflection of reality but rather lavish ornamentation. This shift from nature to artifice is clear as well in the elision and even rejection of the corporeal after verse 9. In Tasso the river reflects body parts: the beloved’s blond hair and eyes. Góngora, in contrast, avoids anatomical diction. In the octave, he replaces Petrarch’s ‘capei’ and Tasso’s ‘crin’ with ‘el oro fino’, an aestheticizing metaphor. Verse 9 may make brief reference to her temples, but the act of putting the garland upon them puts an ‘end’ (término) to the corporeal diction in the poem. Notably, what Góngora praises as superior to the celestial is not the nymph’s body but her adornment, the garland. In the octave, the nymph’s person is merely the equal of nature (‘cual verde hoja...’), whereas in the sestet, her accoutrements exceed it. Where the Petrarchan image of the second quatrain emphasises the effects of nature on the human body (the wind blowing the hair), Góngora’s final image focuses on the effects of human-made artifice on nature (the woman crafting her own garland of flowers).

Finally, the use of the word ‘término’, which can also mean ‘term’, associates the garland with the introduction of language. The crown is not only the end point of nature (the nymph’s corporeal beauty) but also the beginning of a linguistic representation, an act of ‘putting terms’ on things, of replacing reality with poetic language. Verse 11 not only describes this process of assigning terms but also illustrates it. Instead of referring to the body parts with their usual names (the face or the hair), Góngora resorts to poetic terms (gold and snow). At the very point in the poem where artifice (the garland) supersedes Nature (the physical beauty of the nymph), metaphor
displaces a more straightforward representation. This double movement suggests that the role of poetic language is to go beyond mimesis, the representation of Nature.

The image of plucking flowers and renewing them is an apt metaphor for the process of literary creation, which for both Tasso and Góngora begins with an act of *imitatio*. It is interesting to note, however, the very different treatment of this image in the two poets. What is marvelous in Tasso is not the bouquet plucked by his beloved but rather the flowers that spring up under her foot, which are even more bountiful. Tasso might pick flowers from the poetic tradition, but he privileges most what springs from nature, the way his words (like the Brenta) reflect naturally the beloved’s beauty. Góngora, in contrast, gives pride of place not to the magical blooms of Petrarch’s conceit but rather to her pickings, which she weaves together into an aesthetic whole, a circular composition (a garland) much like the chromatic ring of the octave of the poem. Similarly, Góngora’s poetic ideal is an elegant interweaving of the citations plucked from the Petrarchan and classical traditions, a literary garland that exceeds and effaces Nature and referentiality.\(^2\)

\[\text{Tres veces de Aquilón el soplo airado (1585)}\]

In ‘Al tramontar del sol’, Góngora draws on the Petrarchan conceit of the generative footstep to explore modes of artistic creation. In ‘Tres veces de Aquilón’, in contrast, Góngora’s use of the word ‘despojar’ to evoke the gathering of flowers (and literary models) echoes the diction of many discussions of imitation in the Golden Age, in which the appropriation of foreign texts is compared to the taking of spoils from a conquered nation. See Rachel Schmidt, ‘Herrera’s Concept of Imitation as the Taking of Italian Spoils’, *Calíope*, 1 (1995), 12-26.
the focus is not the production so much as the reception of a work of art. In the octave, the lyric voice observes the blooms produced by his beloved Clori:

Tres veces de Aquilón el soplo airado
del verde honor privó las verdes plantas,
y al animal de Colcos otras tantas
ilustró Febo su vellón dorado.
después que sigo (el pecho traspasado
de aguda flecha) con humildes plantas,
¡oh bella Clori!, tus pisadas sanctas
por las floridas señas que da el prado.
A vista voy (tiñiendo los alcores
en roja sangre) de tu dulce vuelo,
que el cielo pinta de cien mil colores. (141)

It is important to point out that the lover does not see Clori. In the first tercet, he is not ‘a vista de Clori’ but rather ‘a vista de ... tu dulce vuelo’. What makes this flight visible is a rainbow (‘cien mil colores’) that appears in the sky. The lyric voice, that is, follows two sets of signs—the flowers on the ground and the rainbow in the sky—which he interprets as markers of Clori’s path. The lyric voice, in this sense, mirrors the reader of the text: both he and we must read and decipher signs in the absence of their creator.

The idea of reading a landscape that the beloved has traversed is a typical Petrarchan conceit. In the Canzoniere, the poet returns to the places where he knew Laura, seeks familiar landmarks and tries to recreate the past in his imagination. The most famous example of this is the canzone ‘Chiare, fresche e dolci acque’ (RVF 126)

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25 It is noteworthy that Góngora has named the woman Clori; Chloris in Greek mythology is a nymph associated with spring and the emergence of flowers.
in which Petrarch returns to the Sorgues river valley and recalls an earlier encounter with Laura on the same spot. In *The Light in Troy*, Thomas Greene draws a parallelism between Petrarch’s treatment of the landscape and his relation to the classical tradition. Just as Petrarch the lover seeks in the countryside the vestiges of Laura’s presence, so Petrarch the humanist walks through Mantua imagining the spaces that Virgil once frequented. In both cases, Petrarch resorts to an archeological form of reading, a strategy that Greene calls ‘subreading’. The poet imagines the past that is metaphorically buried beneath a landscape-text. As Greene observes, Petrarch’s reader must learn to read in the same way, to identify and ‘unearth’ the vestiges of the classical tradition that lie beneath his verses, to recognise the allusions buried within.\(^{26}\)

Just as for Petrarch the ‘clear, fresh and sweet waters’ are mnemonics for the absent Laura, so the flowers and rainbow are for Góngora’s lyric voice signs that evoke the absent Clori. The landscape becomes meaningful to Petrarch when he imagines Laura’s former presence in it. Similarly, the landscape in Góngora is not just a pretty picture, a run-of-the-mill *locus amœnus*, but rather a vestige of a meaningful past. The perception of its beauty depends on the viewer’s understanding of its source in Clori.

The poem requires a similar strategy of interpretation from its reader. The opening lines confront us with extreme difficulty. The reader initially struggles to untangle the radical hyperbaton and periphrasis of the first quatrain. The North wind (Aquilon) has deprived the green plants of their leaves (‘green honour’) three times, and Phoebus (the sun) has illuminated as many times the golden fleece of the animal of Colchis (the Ram), a reference to the sign of Aries, which the sun enters in early spring. At the beginning of the poem, in other words, three autumns and three springs have

\(^{26}\) On subreading, see Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982).
already transpired. These lines become less difficult, however, if the reader ‘subreads’ a series of ancient texts. The first two verses echo a line from Virgil’s *Georgics*: ‘frigidus et silvis aquilo decussit honorem’ (II, 404) [and frigid Aquilon shook the honours of the woods]. And verses 3 and 4 recall a passage from Ovid’s *Fasti*: ‘Nunc potes ad solem sublato dicere vultu:/ Hic here Phrixeae vellera pressit ovis’ (III, 851-52) [Now you can say with your face raised to the sun:/ he (i.e. the sun) touched the fleece of the Phrixian ram yesterday].

Just as the lyric voice in the poem must interpret the landscape, so we must decipher a series of natural signs (the barren trees and the constellation in the sky). And just as the flowers and the rainbows are significant in relation to the past (their origin in Clori), so the signs in the opening quatrain become meaningful when we recognise their origin, the literary tradition that lies beneath the surface (Ovid and Virgil). Góngora reinforces this parallelism between the vestiges of Clori and of the classic past through a binary structure. Just as Clori produces two sets of signs, one earthly (the flowers) and the other celestial (rainbows), so the opening lines describe two natural phenomena, one on the ground (the trees) and the other in the sky (Aries).

Both Góngora and Petrarch, thus, present us with archeologist-lovers, who read the past into the landscape, and ask us to be archeologist-readers, who recognise the literary tradition beneath their verses. The two authors, however, have very different views on the act of subreading. Through his archeological reading, Petrarch manages to overcome the text, the barrier between reader and writer, past and present. Walking through the Provençal landscape, his impressions are at times so vivid that he thinks he

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sees Laura before him: ‘cosí comincio a ritrovar presenti/ le tue bellezze a’ suoi usati soggiorni’ [Thus I begin to find your beauties present in their usual surroundings] (RS 460-461). Similarly, in Mantua, Petrarch’s reflections on Virgil’s haunts seem to bring the epic poet back before his eyes: ‘Atque ea praesentem mihi te spectacula reddunt’ [And these sights return you, as one being present, to me]. Through his subreading, Petrarch can recuperate Laura and Virgil, if only momentarily.

In Góngora’s sonnet, however, this type of resurrection is impossible. A gap always separates the lyric voice from Clori and, by extension, the reader from the writer. Góngora emphasises this insurmountable divide formally through the use of parentheses. In the second quatrains and first tercet, the parenthetical asides impose a distance between the subject and object, between the ‘yo’ and the ‘tú’. Just as the arrow wound described between the parentheses retards the lover’s steps, so these digressions reduce the speed of our reading, delaying the revelation of the object of his quest (‘bella Clori’, ‘tu dulce vuelo’). In Góngora’s poem, subreading does not bring back the past or overcome the divide between the reader and the text. Clori is always an absence, always gone by the time the lover-reader reaches the spot.

The only power that subreading has in the poem is that of generating other texts. Up until the now, the lover has been the reader of a text (the flowers and the rainbow), but in the final tercet we learn that he is producing a text in his own right:

\[
\text{tanto, que ya nos siguen los pastores} \\
\text{por los extraños rastros que en el suelo} \\
\text{dejamos, yo de sangre, tú de flores. (141)}
\]

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29 Cited in Greene, *Light from Troy*, 90.
The lover’s subreading and the emotional pain it has generated (the blood gushing from Cupid’s wound\(^{30}\)) result in the creation of a new text: the juxtaposition of blood and flowers. Like the lover, the shepherds read and decipher signs on the landscape. The poem, thus, presents us with a series of readers and writers. Clori has written the text that the lyric voice reads, and this act of reading generates a new text, which is read by the shepherds.

This image of a chain of readers and writers is an apt description of both the production and reception of Góngora’s own poetry. Just as the lyric voice adds his blood to Clori’s flowers, so Góngora builds his own poem on the vestiges of Ovid, Virgil and Petrarch. And just as the lover’s subreading generates new texts, so Góngora’s poem would inspire a host of followers, both interpreters and imitators, during the seventeenth century. The poet and commentator José García de Salcedo Coronel (†1651), for example, would not only write a commentary unearthing and clarifying the many allusions of the poem but would also continue the textual chain with a sonnet of his own: ‘Cuatro veces el Sol con rayos de oro/ ilustró al Aries la serena frente’\(^{31}\).

With the description of this wound and Cupid’s arrow, Góngora superimposes a hunting scene on the Petrarchan conceit. By representing the lover as chasing his beloved but at the same time pierced by an arrow, the poem recalls the topos of the cazador cazado [hunted hunter], a common conceit in Renaissance literature. In this respect, the sonnet echoes a romance written two before, which begins ‘Aquí entre la verde juncia’. In this poem, the lyric voice is a despairing lover who is pursuing a beautiful huntress who pursues him with her cruel disdain. Here again, Góngora resorts to the Petrarchan conceit, describing the trail of flowers that the beloved leaves in her wake: ‘Y el mismo monte se agravia/ De que tus pies no le pisen./ Por el rastro que dejaban/ De rosas y de jazmines,/ Tanto que eran a sus campos/ Tus dos plantas dos abriles’. See Luis de Góngora, Romances, ed. Antonio Carreira (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1998), 287-288.

García Salcedo Coronel, Obras de Don Luis de Góngora (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1636), II, 264. Like his commentary, Salcedo Coronel’s poem is an explication, an
The poem suggests that each link on this chain adds something new but also
loses some of the immediacy of the original work. This commentary is anticipated in the
opening quatrain, which resolves around two verbs: ‘privó’ (deprived) and ‘ilustró’
(illuminated). The shepherds’ perspective, for example, loses some of the beauty of the
lover’s: where the lyric voice observes two signs of Clori, the flowers and the rainbow,
the shepherds see only the former, the earthly text. The celestial phenomenon is
available only to the lover’s eyes. The shepherds, however, contribute something to the
vision of the lyric voice. Notably, the only place in the poem where the first person
plural (‘nos’) appears is the final tercet. The ‘yo’ and the ‘tú’ of the poem can come
together only in the ‘text’ that the shepherds read in the last stanza. To put it another
way, the sole union possible between the lover and Clori is that which occurs on the
page, be it the one that the shepherds read or the one that we ourselves read.

What is in Petrarch’s work a magical, if fleeting, reunion with Virgil or Laura
becomes in Góngora a textual juxtaposition. The only conversation between the ancient
and the modern, between the follower and his model, is that which happens on the page
of a new text. In its metatextual commentary, Góngora’s poem enters into one of the
main literary debates of the sixteenth century: the opposition between the Ciceronians,
who advocated the imitation of a single author (Virgil or Cicero in Latin; Petrarch or
Boccaccio in Italian), and the anti-Ciceronians, who took a more eclectic approach to
poetry. As Greene has observed, the argument was ultimately a ‘disagreement over the
distance between model and imitator’. The anti-Ciceronians were more acutely aware of
historical discontinuity and anachronism: as taste varies from one age to the next, they
believed that the artist should be free to pick and choose among his sources. The

_illumination, of Góngora’s convoluted image: ‘Febo’ is now the Sun, and the ‘animal de
Colcos’, Aries._
Ciceronian, in contrast, ‘tend[s] to deny any effective discontinuity between himself and his master’, for he conceives of Beauty as an ideal form ‘eternally accessible to all ages’. Góngora’s description of a chain of imitators, each of whom at once benefits from the innovations of the previous generation and finds himself more estranged from the original source, clearly situates him among the anti-Ciceronians. The poem conveys the belatedness of modern poets, their inability to catch up with and equal the ancients. But it also suggests another route to the lost glory, a way to recuperate Clori’s faded rainbows. For the more one lags behind the source and the longer the chain of followers that mediate one’s readings, the more colours will accrue in Clori’s trail creating a rainbow on the landscape-text.

Los blancos lilios que de ciento en ciento (1609)

Fourteen years after writing ‘Tres veces de Aquilón’, Góngora returned to the Petrarchan motif of the generative footstep in a sonnet, which spells out most clearly the metatextual significance of the conceit:

Los blancos lilios que de ciento en ciento,
Hijos del Sol, nos da la Primavera,
A quien del Tajo son en la ribera
Oro su cuna, perlas su alimento;

Greene, Light from Troy, 175.
Las frescas rosas, que ambicioso el viento
Con pluma solicita lisonjera,
Como quien de una y otra hoja espera
Purpúreas alas, si lascivo aliento,
A vuestro hermoso pie cada cual debe
Su beldad toda. ¿Qué hará la mano,
Si tanto puede el pie, que ostenta flores,
Porque vuestro esplendor venza la nieve,
Venza su rosicler, y porque en vano,
Hablando vos, expiren sus olores? (157)

Comparing the creative power of the ‘pie’ with that of the writer’s ‘mano’, the poem
draws out the association between the foot as a body part and the foot as a poetic unit;
the ‘pie’ and the ‘mano’ are poet-creators in competition with one another. Góngora’s
use of the Petrarchan motif in this sonnet, however, differs from that of the other two
poems in that the lover’s foot is not creating flowers but rather making them visible.
What is ‘crecer hacía’ in ‘Al tramontar del sol’ becomes ‘ostenta flores’ in this poem.35
Indeed, the origin of the lilies is not the beloved but rather spring (‘que de ciento en
ciento [...] nos da la Primavera’) and the sun (‘Hijos del Sol’). Where in the other poems
the beloved’s foot is a creative and natural force, here its function is more cosmetic.
What the flowers ‘owe’ to it is not their existence but their beauty.

35 This diction is quite deliberate. In a draft, the line reads ‘si tanto puede el pie que nos
da flores’, but Góngora rewrote verse to distinguish between the functions of Primavera
and the lady. On the manuscript history of this poem, see Giulia Poggi, “‘Nobody is
perfect”: sobre la primera versión “autógrafa” del soneto 302’ in De Góngora a
Poggi suggests that an earlier draft of the poem may date from 1603.
The rhetorical question of the sestet suggests the inferiority of the writer’s hand to this foot. The implied answer is negative: ‘la mano’ cannot match the power of ‘el pie’, which reveals Nature. But despite this admission of inferiority the sestet seems somewhat less than flattering. For if the beloved’s beauty trumps that of Nature (the snow white of the lilies and the blush of the roses), it is ultimately because the writer’s hand—his writing—makes her beauty triumph. It would seem that the lady is not a muse who gives beauty to his poetry but vice versa: his words rig the contest with Nature so that her splendour wins.

At first glance, the poem would seem to be circular: it moves from effect (the beauty of the flowers) to cause (the beloved’s foot) and then from cause (the hand) to effect (the triumph of her splendor). The logic of the sonnet, however, is linear. Like ‘Tres veces de Aquilón’, the poem describes a chain of causes: the lilies and roses are beautified by the beloved, who is in turn beautified by the poet’s pen. But where ‘Tres veces de Aquilón’ represents a chain of readers each of whom adds his gloss to the text, ‘Los blancos lilios’ evokes a chain of creators or writers each of which accentuates the beauty of his or her material. The sonnet, that is, introduces an element of aemulatio into the relation between a writer and his model; each artist touches up what he touches.36 The poem represents a creative contest between the foot and the hand. In seeking to make the beauty of the beloved overcome that of the flowers of nature, the poet is ultimately seeking to surpass her creation, the blooms she has beautified.

The binary structure of the poem reinforces this competition. Just as the octave has two parts—the lilies and the roses—so the sestet has two artists: the foot and the

36 On the notion of aemulatio and its importance in Góngora’s poetry, see Isabel Torres, The Polyphemus Complex: Rereading the Baroque Mythological Fable (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006).
hand. The sonnet establishes a correlation between these two pairs. The foot reflects the first quatrain of the sonnet (the ‘pie’, like Primavera, gives a gift) while the hand echoes the second (its writing reflects the ‘pluma lisonjera’ of the wind). Just as the breeze yields a flattering pen, so the composition that the lyric voice imagines—the triumphant vision of the lady—compliments her by exaggerating her beauty.

This correlation underscores the innocence of the foot and the experience and lustfulness of the hand. The foot corresponds to the white lilies, which are represented as infants, cradled and nurtured by a giving Nature. The hand, in contrast, takes on the eroticism of the wind whose phallic quill seeks what lies between ‘una y otra hoja’. The correspondence between the olores of the final verse and the aliento at the end of the second quatrain, moreover, reinforces this connection between the flattering hand that brings out the beloved’s fragrance and the wind that seeks the lascivious breath.

Both ‘Los blancos lilios’ and ‘Al tramontar del sol’ draw an opposition between the foot and the hand. ‘Al tramontar del sol’ contrasts the flowers created by the nymph’s foot with those picked by her hand and ultimately privileges the latter: the flowers gathered from the literary tradition and woven into an artistic garland take precedence over the spontaneous generation, the purely natural phenomenon. In ‘Los blancos lilios’, the hand belongs not to the beloved but to the lover. Although this hand does not pluck flowers, it parallels the wind, which seeks to deflower the rose. Once again, it is the hand that ultimately triumphs. Just as the garland (the hand-made accoutrement) outshines Nature in ‘Al tramontar del sol’, the hand in ‘Los blancos lilios’ takes credit for the beauty of the foot’s creation and thus trumps Nature aesthetically.
‘Los blancos lilios’ also resembles ‘Tres veces de Aquilón’ in its representation of a chain of sources. As we have seen, the latter sonnet draws an opposition between illumination and deprivation and suggests that imitations do both. The 1609 poem seems to represent the same opposition. The rhetorical question implies that the hand falls short of the foot or natural artist (a deprivation), while the sestet as a whole indicates that the foot is in the hand’s debt (an illumination). But where in ‘Tres veces de Aquilón’ the ‘ilustración’ compensates (if only partially) for the loss, here the illumination cancels out the deprivation, for the claimed inferiority of the hand to the foot is all too clearly a humility topos. Nature may owe its beauty to the foot, but the foot owes its beauty to the hand.

If we retrace our own steps and examine the poems side by side, it becomes clear that each version of the conceit further separates natural and artificial creation and increasingly privileges the latter. In the first poem, the nymph is both gardener and artist. Though her aesthetic production (the garland) outshines her natural production (the flowers), the conflation of the two functions in a single figure might suggest that it is her beauty—her natural glory—that allows her to triumph in the aesthetic sphere. ‘Tres veces de Aquilón’, in contrast, introduces a division of labour that clearly separates these two forms of production. Clori’s function is purely natural, and the interpretive work, the reading and rewriting, belongs to the lyric voice and the shepherds who follow her. She is a natural creator followed by imitators who cannot experience her beauty directly and can approach it only through an accumulation of glosses. In the final poem in the series, ‘Los blancos lilios’, this sense of loss is greatly diminished. Here, the focus shifts from readers to writers and from imitation to emulation. The hand not only imitates and seeks to represent the foot but also one-ups
it, bettering its creation with a ‘pluma lisonjera’. Where in ‘Tres veces de Aquilón’, the poet-follower always falls short of Clori’s feet—he is always several steps behind—the hand in ‘Los blancos lilios’ goes one step further than the foot. In these poems, Góngora’s Petrarchism is not simply an apprenticeship in the lyric mode. With his use of the motif, he may tread in Petrarch’s footsteps but he does so to define a very different aesthetic: an art that revels in its artificiality, a poetry that plucks freely from the lyric tradition.