On Constructs and Insights: Revisiting Robert Pring-Mill’s ‘Interaction View’ of Conceits for a Reading of Conceptista Devotional Verse

TYLER FISHER
Exeter College, Oxford

‘[L]a poesía es llamada teología. [. . .] Dan el nombre teologal a los poetas’.
Juan de Pineda, Diálogos, 1589 (1963–1964, i: 71)

This paper tests several of Robert Pring-Mill’s schematic clarifications of ‘the nature and functioning of the concepto’ against examples from Golden-Age devotional poetry and doctrinal treatises. In particular, it explores ways in which the conceptista conflation of figures for the Incarnation and figures for the poet’s craft can clarify our understanding of contemporary aesthetics and reading practices, thereby building on Pring-Mill’s treatment. Gaspar de los Reyes’s Tesoro de divinos concetos and Lope de Vega’s Los pastores de Belén provide the principal sources of conceptista specimens.

Among Robert Pring-Mill’s enduring contributions to our understanding of representational techniques in Golden-Age literature, his enquiries into what he identified as a ‘favourite theme — the nature and functioning of the concepto’ (Bi6: 153) — have informed some of my own reflections on the topic. I find his observations especially relevant to my work on the conceptista aesthetic.

In the course of a prolonged and productive dialogue with Alexander Parker, Pring-Mill drew upon philosopher Max Black’s ‘interaction’ theory of metaphor to clarify the peculiar workings and principles of the seventeenth-century concepto. At the risk of being overly simplistic, one could summarize Black’s main idea as follows:

First, a metaphorical expression consists of at least two subjects, one primary and one secondary. To cite a rather straightforward and fairly commonplace Golden-Age example, in the statement ‘[la] Cruz es la vigüela’ from the beginning of Fray Gaspar de los Reyes’s romance ‘A Christo puesto en la Cruz’ (1613: line 11, fol. Rv), the primary subject is Cruz, the secondary vihuela. ‘The duality of reference’, Black claims, ‘is marked by the contrast between the metaphorical statement’s focus (the word or words used non-literally) and the surrounding literal frame’ or literal context.
(cited in B12: 373; Black’s emphasis). The secondary subject, here the *vihuela* or cittern, should, according to Black’s scheme, ‘be regarded as a system rather than as an individual thing’ or isolated word. That is, this metaphorical treatment of the cross is more ‘about a system of relationships […] signalled by […] the word’ *vihuela* than it is about the musical instrument as a particular thing (373).

The system which any metaphorical expression sets in motion, Black continues, operates by “‘projecting upon” the primary subject a set of “associated implications” […] predicable of the secondary subject’ (B12: 373). These implications can, regardless of the author’s intent, work with or against the expectations and imaginative associations of any ‘speech community’ to which the metaphor is communicated. For any given Spanish reader or listener in the time of Gaspar de los Reyes, the secondary subject in our example might have evoked the *vihuela*’s frets and tuning pegs, the strings stretched across its wooden neck and soundbox, the singing of the *vihuelista*, classical accounts of Orpheus and his lyre. Indeed, Reyes’s poem goes on to develop precisely these ‘associated implications’ in its elaboration of the basic opening metaphor. But Reyes is necessarily selective. As anyone who constructs or interprets a ‘metaphorical statement’ must, Reyes, ‘selects, emphasizes, suppresses and organizes features of the primary subject’ in accordance with or in contraposition to the secondary subject’s parts and properties (373). Thus Reyes, as he subsequently pursues the implications of ‘[la] Cruz es la vigüela’, focuses on the wooden body of both implements, on the cords (musical and corporeal) stretched along their respective lengths, but not, for instance, on the pear-shaped soundbox of the *vihuela* (fols Rasyarakat-Society).

Finally — and this is the heart of his theory — Black observes that primary and secondary subjects reciprocally ‘interact’ by prompting an audience ‘to select some of the secondary subject’s properties’ in relation to the primary subject. The audience is invited ‘to construct a parallel’ set of associations which conforms to the primary subject, and this in turn modifies perceptions of the secondary subject (373). With this Black concludes the outline of his ‘interaction view’ of metaphor.

Pring-Mill emends Black’s formulation by, first, preferring Black’s earlier notion (1962) that both primary and secondary subjects should be viewed as ‘systems of things’ rather than individual terms or disconnected ‘things’ (B12: 373). This is clearly the case in the *cruz-vihuela* example I have given, in which *cruz* would signal a system of associations just as resonant, if not more so, than the cittern in the course of their interaction. Second, Pring-Mill recognizes that Black’s notion of ‘certain speech-communit[ies]’ sharing a ‘set of […] current opinions’, from which the systems of ‘associated implications’ or ‘associated commonplaces’ arise (374, 377), is more applicable to certain historical contexts and to certain cultures of literary practice than to others. The notion is more relevant, he suggests, to the *conceptista* metaphors of Golden-Age Spain, for which ‘the poet could safely presuppose […] an extensive and elaborate shared “context of metaphorical use” to facilitate the communication of specific meanings’ (375, 377) — more straightforwardly relevant, that is, to this sort of literature than to varieties of twentieth-century poetry, for instance, in which the poet cannot or will not assume his audience to possess a common store of associations, and may in fact produce imagery which operates on an ‘intentionally hermetic’, private ‘system of associations’ (377). In these two contexts, the interaction view of metaphor necessarily works very differently.
More germane to the discussion at hand, however, is Pring-Mill’s fundamental understanding that a theory of metaphor based on the dynamic interaction of two or more subjects is more helpful for an understanding of the nature of Golden-Age conceptos than a more limited ‘substitution view’ would be. The latter might account for less complex metaphors, such as the Petrarchan substitution of perlas for dientes, to cite Pring-Mill’s example, but it is inadequate to account for the sorts of metaphors which demand that an audience more actively, and even creatively, compare and contrast the subjects involved (372, 375). One thinks of the general shift in Golden-Age literary thought itself. The translatio model, which dominated sixteenth-century discussions of the problem, increasingly gave ground to a later paradigm and aesthetic which emphasized the ‘harmonies and contrasts’ between components of a metaphor to explain and justify its functions (T. E. May, cited in Terry 1954: 96).

In a sense, the evolution in twentieth-century theory, this move from a primarily substitutionary view of metaphor to a consideration of interacting subjects, was just catching up with developments in literary theory of the seventeenth century.

In order to explore further the conceptista reliance on reciprocal harmonies and contrasts — the distinctive vision of metaphor that spurs an audience to a ‘duality of scrutiny’ for understanding a concepto (B12: 375) — I would like to examine how several Golden-Age devotional writers use one particular class of figures, that of a precious metal and a baser material intermingled but not alloyed, to account for both the analytical procedure and the aesthetic involved. These figures, I will argue, register a Golden-Age understanding of the very sort of interactive, interanimating subjects which Pring-Mill perceives in conceptista poetry. Moreover, Spanish authors of the Golden Age employed illustrative figures, such as the metallic composites I have proposed for the present study, to explicate both their theology and their literary theories or aesthetic ideals. The affinity between these figures was often such that it facilitated productive interchanges between the two fields of thought, conflating religious doctrines with literary principles.

By what sort of figurative conceptions did seventeenth-century devotional poets understand their craft? For some at least, the most exemplary poetics are modelled by the Incarnation of Christ. This was a logical extension of the medieval notion of the Deus artifex. ‘[E]l divino artífice es imitado de los Poetas’, Luis Alfonso de Carvallo makes personified Lectura declare in his 1602 treatise Cisne de Apolo — though poets were not to be viewed as imitating the divine Artificer ‘perfectamente, que esto sería error, sino proporcionalmente según sus bajas y humildes fuerzas’ (Carvallo 1997: 111, 377–78). One mode of imitation is to join ‘cosas [...] profanas’ with ‘otras sagradas [...] en el artíficio y manera de decir’ (377–78), as Scripture does with types, figures, and parables, and as God accomplished in the Incarnation. The poet Gaspar Aguilar, too, in his ‘Discurso en alabança de la poesía, aplicándole al Nacimiento’ more explicitly exhorts members of his literary academy to this devout imitation. ‘Christo [...] se puede llamar verso [...] Y siendo verdad, como lo es, que [...] Christo nasce en Bethlém, nosotros que somos cristianos y hazemos profesión de poetas, será bien que vamos allá con nuestras almas y veamos de qué manera nace’ (Aguilar 1988, i: 320). Insights into the nature and function of Christ’s Incarnation, these quotations suggest, are potential insights into these theorists’ poetics. I will later pursue some of the implications of Carvallo’s statement and Aguilar’s
exhortation, but for now let me take a step back and draw one connection. A crucial figure which links these ideas of the incarnate Christ-as-text, the Supreme Artificer’s union of ‘cosas […] profanas’ and ‘sagradas’, and the Incarnation itself as a template for poetry is the figure of the intermingled metals and baser materials, for it was used in this period both to represent the dual divine and human natures of Christ’s Person and to characterize the distinct components of typically conceptista constructions. This and related figures anticipate and illustrate Pring-Mill’s observations on the ‘interaction view’ of metaphor and offer an oblique but fertile means for further insights. The following enquiry into metaliterary and metallurgical metaphors aims to shed additional light on some of the values and attitudes of contemporary writers and readers, in keeping with Pring-Mill’s persistent quest to disclose ‘the underlying suppositions’ behind literary aims and strategies (Archer & Perriam 2006: 972).

What is perhaps the clearest exposition of the figure in question can be found in the late sixteenth-century theological treatise Monarquía mística de la Iglesia by Lorenzo de Zamora (c. 1561–1614), a Cistercian abbot of Santa María la Real de Huerta (Fuente Fernández 1996: 263–64).1 Zamora takes his cue from Song of Songs 1.10, and paraphrases the verse as follows: ‘Hazerte hemos, Esposa mía, unos collares, o unos çarcillos de oro, con gusanillos de plata’ (1604: fol. C1v). Here, within the context of an apology for the use of secular literature and lowly subject matter in Christian literature and preaching, Zamora seizes upon this image of vermiculated gold and silver jewellery from the Canticles. The gold collares and zarcillos or earrings are inlaid with vermiculatas argento, the fine and irregular streaks of silver that resemble the tunnelling of worms, yielding a sort of predecessor of the combination which jewellers today advertise as ‘two-colour gold’ or ‘oro bicolor’.

‘Caen muy bien los gusanillos de plata sobre el oro’, Zamora continues, ‘deleyta la vista aquella variedad agradable que hazen, y parece que la plata sobre el oro, aunque es de menos quilates, le da un no se que, con que se levantan mas los resplandores de su lustre’. For the abbot of Huerta, the image represents, at once, an attractive variety which stimulates an audience’s attention, and an effective means of communicating truths to an audience thus awakened and attentive. Variety in oral or written discourse, he reiterates, ‘deleyta y agrada a los oyentes, y haze que con atencion oygan los sermones, y lean los libros, y se aprovechen de sus dotrinas’ (fol. C1v).

The golden foundation of the necklaces and earrings, according to Zamora’s gloss, is the ‘dotrina Evangelica, oro de veynte y cinco y mas quilates, oro acrisolado en el pecho de Dios, y escupido por su boca’ (fol. C1v). The silver component of this ‘galana junta’ represents, on the one hand, moral truths and useful historical information culled from classical pagan and secular literature. (On this basis, for example, Zamora would admit Origen’s or Gaspar de los Reyes’s comparisons of Christ to the pagans’ Orpheus.) But alternatively and more generally in Zamora’s exegesis, the silver gusanillos are lowly figures used to communicate exalted truths. Regarding this latter interpretation, Zamora writes, ‘Por esso, […] se viste Dios de tantas libreas en el Evangelio: ya se haze […] pastor, […] , ya juez, ya desposado’ (fols C1v–C2r), citing one of Jerome’s epistles to Pope Damasus, which lists an array of anthropomorphic

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1 The first edition of Monarquía mística appeared in 1594 or 1598. Bibliographical records vary in their dating of the princeps. For the present study, I cite the Valencia edition of 1604.
comparisons by which Scripture communicates facets of the divine nature. Such potentially mundane comparisons, Zamora suggests, are represented by the worm-like, silver inlay of the composite jewellery. They allow one to contemplate more effectively the golden substratum which their presence accentuates.

Zamora is careful to emphasize that the two metals of the figurative composite are not alloyed. The silver ‘gusanillos’ are woven or inlaid over the gold — ‘la plata sobre el oro’, distinct, discrete, discernible. The resulting composite, Zamora suggests, heightens the value and beauty of both components. If the gold and silver were truly amalgamated, then the reciprocal effects which Zamora values — his aesthetic of contrasts — would not be achieved. ‘[N]o cualquiera junta de cosas, se llama mezcla’, Zamora argues, ‘sino quando las cosas que se juntan, pierden el proprio ser de su naturaleza, resultando una tercera, que no sea ninguna dellas: pero quando de tal suerte se juntan, que la mas excelente convierte en si la que se le llega, entonces no ay alteracion ni mistura, sino que perdiendo la mas humilde el ser de su baxeza, recobra otro mas excelente, mas aventajado y perfeto: y la otra queda en el punto de su fineza, sin alteracion ni mudanca. [...] entonces se perficionan, entonces se engrandecen y levantan de quilates’ (fol. D 8v). The composite is necessarily heterogenous.

Fray Diego Jiménez Arias’s revised 1583 Spanish Lexicon of ecclesiastical Latin, citing the same verse from the Song of Songs, defines vermiculatus as an ‘Obra brosrlada y labrada a semejança de las rayas que hacen los gusanos’ and goes on to note in an explanation of the root-word vermis that ‘suelen los Hebreos llamar vermes a los hombres viles y despreciados’ (Jiménez Arias 1583: fol. V 4r). Herein lies the logical basis for Zamora’s figure. Like the formation of the word vermiculatus itself, that which is vile and base becomes a medley of precious metals. The wormlike can be redeemed for exalted ends.

I have discussed this image on a previous occasion in a paper which examined Zamora’s commentary on the gold and silver medley in relation to Early Modern a lo divino verse and the vogue for sacred parody. I will say no more about this aspect here. Instead, I want to focus on how Zamora carries his notions of an intentional and effective lowering of quilates into a discussion of Christ’s Incarnation.

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5 This explication of the figure, one should note, does not conform to orthodox doctrines of the Incarnation; Zamora is applying it, rather, to the literary presentation of doctrine in secular or lowly guise. Nevertheless, the distinction he draws between heterogeneous and homogenous combinations of distinct natures usefully parallels, as we shall see in the case of Ledesma’s conceptos, statements from contemporary Christology based on the Athanasian Creed. Álvar Gómez had formulated the problem thus in 1541: ‘Las naturalezas divina y humana / questan aqui juntas en persona una / no se confunden con mixtion alguna / ni tierra se torna la ques soberana / que si vuestra carne recibe de gana / no se torna carne la divinidad / que dios y hombre tienen su disparidad / en el que ha parido la hija de Ana’ (Gómez 1965: fol. d3r).
6 Covarrubias, also citing Song of Songs 1.10, registers the meaning of ‘gusanillo’ in his comment, ‘[Hay] otros gusanos tan pintados y esmaltados que dellos tomó el nombre la labor estimada que llamamos de gusanillo’ (Covarrubias 2003: 671; s.v. ‘gusano’).
7 I refer to a paper delivered at Oxford’s Research Seminar in Spanish and Spanish American Studies on 30 May 2006 and later published (Fisher 2006).
Zamora proceeds from the figurative or parabolic incarnations of the Godhead — the shepherd, judge, and bridegroom, as we have just noted — to an account of Christ’s bodily Incarnation, in a commentary on the opening chapter of St John’s gospel. As he expounds the well-known fourteenth verse, *verbum caro factum est*, he compares the Incarnation to the act of a *predicador* conveying an intelligible message to his audience. Again, matters of communication and concerns with effects worked upon an audience dominate Zamora’s attention and shape his exposition. What was the purpose of the Incarnation? What was its result? Why does the Evangelist apply the term *Logos, Verbum*, or Word to Christ? Zamora asks his readers to imagine ‘un eminente Predicador, y Letrado’ beginning an erudite sermon at the royal court: ‘[C]omiença a sembrar unos pensamientos altísimos, vestidos del lenguage, y termino que con la magestad, y alteza de lo que predica frisa’ (Zamora 1604: fol. F7v). But none among his listeners can grasp any of his meaning. Perceiving the incomprehension, the speaker reacts. He modifies his communication so that his audience can assimilate the message: ‘se humana el estilo, usa de libreas, y semejanças, al talle de los que le oyen: y quando comiençan a entenderlo, dizen que ha humanado sus palabras’ (fol. F7v). So it is with God, Zamora suggests. Before the Incarnation of Christ, the Eternal Word, the Second Person of the Trinity, was a ‘pensamiento tan alto, concepto tan subido, que a todo el mundo se le yua de buelo; por mas atencion que los antiguos Filosofos en entenderlo pusieron, no penetraron su concepto’. Thus the Deity, in a manner likened to the scholarly preacher’s revised strategy, ‘humanose, vistiose del trage del auditorio, para que el mundo supiesse los misterios que en el retrete [del] Padre estan depositados’ (fol. F7v). Indeed, Zamora speculates, this act of accessible divine communication is analogous to any form of human discourse, for which internalized, abstract ideas are necessarily conveyed by ‘imagines expressas’, embodied in words, and revealed with suitable ‘colores’:

> para declarar los secretos de nuestro pecho, y dar parte a los demas de aquello que consigio cada uno habla, sacando a plaça aquellas imagines expressas, que el entendimiento en si mismo tiene, es menester baxar el punto de los colores, humanar la alteza de las palabras, y en la tabla del ayre assentar los matizes espirituales, o por mejor dezir, dar a lo espiritual miembros de cuerpo, para que desta suerte entre por el oydo de la persona a quien hablamos, y teniendo el mismo parto en ella, sea participante de lo que en nuestro pecho pasa. (fols F7v - F8v)

In parallel with his commentary on Song of Songs 1.10, Zamora now focuses his attention on the interaction of colours, hues, and shadows as he concludes his comments on John 1. The Incarnation of Christ was not only a necessary means of communication between the Deity and His human creatures, but, like the silver *gusanillos* among the gold, it also shows off the colours of the Divinity to good effect. Our perception of Christ’s splendour is enhanced among human shadows:

> eran tan vivos los colores eternos de aquella imagen viua, era el resplandor tan grande, y la gloria tan infinita, que para que gozassemos de aquella belleza soberana, fue necesario cubrirla con las sombras de la naturaleza humana, para que por las sombras escuras del hombre, percibiessem todos la beldad de aquella estampa perfetissima, en el seno del Padre matizada. (fol. F8v)
When Christ took on human flesh, He lowered ‘el punto de los colores de su alteza, no porque perdiessen punto de lo que tenían antes, sino porque los puso en una cosa de tan poco peso, como la carne’ (fol. F 7v). Likewise, the intermingled silver and gold may be of fewer carats, but ‘la plata sobre el oro [. . .] le da un no se que, con que se levantan mas los resplandores de su lustre’ (fol. C1v).

Zamora’s interesting exegesis of Song of Songs 1.10 is not, of course, entirely without precedent. The equation of gold with ‘la dotrina Evangelica’ he borrows from another Cistercian abbot, the twelfth-century Arnaldus or Pseudo-Cyprian, and Zamora dutifully notes this source.6 The remaining points of his commentary, however, are left unattributed. What of the silver *gusanillos* and the reciprocal effects of the composite metals? There is one probable source for this interpretation, which, again, Zamora does not cite, but which, as a Cistercian who trained and later taught at the Colegio de San Bernardo in Alcalá de Henares (Fuente Fernández 1996: 264), he would undoubtedly have known. I refer to the exegesis of a more renowned twelfth-century Cistercian, St Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard’s forty-first sermon on the Song of Songs expounds in great detail the jewellery promised the bride. Here, too, the most precious of metals ‘signifies the splendor of the divine nature’ and the ‘radiance of the truth’ (Bernard of Clairvaux 1983: 206–07). To account for the silver, Bernard associates the baser metal with the necessary limitations of our mortal awareness of God, as opposed to the pure, beatific vision granted to the redeemed after death. The jewellery of mingled gold and silver, then, represents the construction of certain spiritual images in order to bring the purest intuitions of divine wisdom before the eyes of the soul that contemplates, to enable it to perceive, as though puzzling reflections in a mirror, what it cannot possibly gaze on as yet face to face (Bernard of Clairvaux 1983: 206).

The presence of the silver *gusanillos* thus facilitates perception. Bernard links the silver component to images of earthly things [. . .], [which serve] either as an aid to understanding or to temper the intensity of the divine light. [. . .] [In] shadow the utterly pure and brilliant radiance of the truth is rendered more bearable to the mind and more capable of being communicated to others. [. . .] The being of God, [. . .] in its pure state is perceived without any shadow of corporeal substances. [The silver represents] the imagery that so worthily clothes and reveals it [. . .], and [. . .] the elegance of diction which so fittingly and gracefully embellishes with greater clarity and keener enjoyment our communication of [the images] to the audience. (Bernard of Clairvaux 1983: 207)7

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6 I have not been able to locate this particular interpretation among the writings of Arnaldus, but he or Zamora may have been recalling St Jerome’s commentary on the same verse from the Song of Songs in *Adversus Jovinianum*, in which Jerome contrasts the gold of the Gospel with the silver of Old Testament law before Christ’s resurrection: ‘Antequam resurgeret Dominus, et Evangelium coruscaret, non habebat aurum sponsa, sed similitudines auri. Argentum autem quod in nuptiis habere se pollicetur, habebat varium atque distinctum in viduis, continentibus, ac maritatis. Deinde sponsus respondet ad sponsam, et eam docet, quod veteris Legis umbra transierit, et veritas Evangelii venerit’ (1845, xxiii: 252).

7 Zamora’s contemporary, Fray Juan de los Ángeles, also follows this line in his exposition of Song of Songs 1.10: ‘No puede [el alma] comprender el rayo de la divina luz en su pureza significado en el oro, y con artificio admirable le visten de plata; esto es, de semejanzas de cosas corporales, para que pueda comprenderlo’ (Ángeles 1912–1917, ii: 247).
All the key elements of Zamora’s commentary are here in Bernard’s sermon: his concern with colours and shadows and figurative clothing. And here, perhaps, are the roots of the dual values which Zamora derives from the figure of jewellery adorned with *vermiculatas argento*. To cite Bernard’s words again, they represent images which enable ‘greater clarity’ and ‘keener enjoyment’, corresponding to Zamora’s ideals of effective communication and a pleasing aesthetic of contrasts, as we have seen in his exposition.

Let us return now to the matter of *conceptista* devotional verse. Zamora, I should note, does not specifically address the *concepto* as a literary device. He casts his net much more widely to include the broadest range of discourse when applying his interpretation of the Old Testament figure: sermons, *romances*, novels, and conversational dialogue are some of the communicative modes his commentary explicitly includes. Nevertheless, the devotional *concepto* is particularly compatible with Zamora’s values and figurative models. The *conceptista* poets I will now examine seem to share similar underlying assumptions.

I first came upon Zamora’s *Monarquía mística de la Iglesia* through a reference in Alonso de Ledesma’s book of moralized, rhyming games and riddles for Christmas Eve, the *Juegos de Nochebuena moralizados* of 1611. Ledesma, the arch-*conceptista*, looked to Zamora as something of a literary father figure. Rarely satisfied with his poems until they had been vetted in literary tournaments and worked over by proof-readers (d’Ors 1974: 32), Ledesma sent Zamora drafts of his work, and the two corresponded. The abbot’s response to the manuscript *Juegos* serves as a flattering prefatory letter for the printed collection, in which Ledesma includes his own letter of reply, dated four days after Zamora’s initial review (1 December to 5 December 1608, fols ¶4r – ¶5r). True to form, Ledesma does not miss the chance to construct one of his punning ‘*metaforas, y alegorias perpetuas*’ to depict this exchange of *borrador* and letters. He, as the servile younger poet, is by comparison a mere *hidalgo* of the hinterland, reproaching himself for having impudently displayed the ‘*preseas*’ and trinkets of his meagre cache to Zamora, ‘un señor de tan gran Monarchia’ (Ledesma 1611: fol. ¶5r).

Evidently, Ledesma was familiar with Zamora’s *Monarquía mística*, in which appear the commentaries we have examined. His punning conceit in the prefatory letter also depends on the public’s recognition of the widely-read treatise. And it certainly was widely read. By the time Ledesma published this excerpt from their correspondence, Zamora’s *magnum opus* had already been translated into Italian and German, and had appeared in at least eleven Spanish editions. The full title of the work, *Monarquía mística de la Iglesia hecha de hieroglíficos sacados de humanas y divinas letras*, suggests the attraction the treatise would hold for Ledesma and poets of his school, so captivated as they were with emblematic enigmas and religious hieroglyphs. We could consider Zamora to be something of a forgotten theorist of *conceptismo*.

In one of the manuscript ‘*preseas*’ which Ledesma may have sent to Zamora, he takes up the image of a metallic composite, applying it to the incarnate Person

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8 *Metaforas y alegorias perpetuas* is the term that Fray Juan de Arenas applies to Ledesma’s work in his prologue to the first instalment of *Conceptos espirituales* (1969, i: 17).
of Christ in a *romance* ‘A la Cruz de Christo en diuersas metaforas’. The poetic speaker addresses the Cross of Calvary by means of a series of extended metaphors like the following:

Soys açadon, que descubre  
en vn monte mina nueua  
de dos diuersos metales,  
y entrambos en vna vena. (Ledesma 1969, i: 127, ll. 37–40)

The challenge in formulating a metaphor for the Incarnate Christ is the need to account for the paradoxical doctrine of ‘how the union of divine and human natures as parts can result in one person’ (Cross 2002: 30). In this instance, Ledesma achieves an acceptable balance by depicting the hypostatic union as two distinct metals existing within a single mineral vein. The treatment is sufficiently concise and sufficiently ambiguous to sidestep the pitfalls of heretical suggestion. The single mineral vein in this figure preserves the idea of a united Person, thereby avoiding Nestorianism; while the depiction of two co-present yet distinguishable metals avoids hints of Gnosticism.

Other cognate figures from Ledesma’s time do not necessarily pair metals, though consistently the two materials commingled will be of contrasting worth and differing colours. Whereas most among this class of figures signify the divine nature by gold, there is greater variety in the material which the poets choose to couple with the gold. In a later poem, Ledesma further develops the basic *conceito* of his *romance* ‘A la Cruz’, this time replacing the metal of human nature with ‘tierra’ in order to underscore more effectively the metaphysical distance between the two natures of the Incarnate Christ. The first twelve lines of his *villancico* ‘Al Nacimiento en metafora de vna mina de Indias’ announce the discovery of a golden treasure, extracted from the mine with an accompanying component of ‘tierra’:

En vn monte desta sierra,  
oy se descubre vn tesoro,  
y con ser subido el oro,  
sale con mezcla de tierra.  
No trae su propio color,  
por la mezcla con que viene,  
pero sus quilates tiene,  
sin perder de su valor.  
Que la mina desta sierra,  
es tan precioso tesoro,  
que a mi me viene de oro,  
que trayga mezcla de tierra. (Ledesma 1612: fol. B4v)

Printed marginal notes in Juan de la Cuesta’s 1612 edition offer a guided reading of Ledesma’s image. Like Zamora’s clarifying comment on how not all combinations necessarily imply blending, the marginal notes for this *villancico* insist that the ‘mezcla’ of earth and gold remains separable into its component parts. In other words, to borrow a distinction from basic chemistry, it is properly a *mixture* but not a *compound*, to reflect again the doctrine that Christ’s dual natures were united in his one Person but without confusion between the two natures. The *villancico* itself develops
a series of arguments concerning the relative worth of the two elements. The dirtiness of the gold — its change of colour — does not reduce its real value. In fact, for the poetic speaker, we are told, with a play on the phrase ‘venir de oro’ (l. 11), the union of the two elevates the worth of the terrestrial component. Thus, although the dual natures remain independent, their juxtaposition — their interaction, as it were — still effects changes in how they are perceived.

More revealing for the present discussion of perceptions and aesthetics are instances in which poets include evaluative comments on the resulting appearance of the combined precious metal and baser material. Gaspar de los Reyes, the poet I first cited for his cruz-vihuela metaphor, presents the newborn Christ Child as a gold doubloon which the shepherds find garnished with pearl trimming, ‘que sobre el color dorado / no sale mal el aljofar’ (Reyes 1613: fol. Bb 6r, ll. 27–28). Here the gold is more distinctly metaphorical as a stock sign of the divine nature, while the semi-precious pearl cogently evokes the complexion and smoothness of a baby’s skin.

Or take, for example, Juan López de Úbeda’s statement on another commonplace figure for the Incarnation, in which the poet remarks how a piece of humble ‘sayal’ is enhanced when careado with the woven gold of ‘brocado’ (López de Úbeda 1962–64, ii: 31, ll. 1–10). Again we find expressions of the same aesthetic values that Zamora drew from the image of gold and silver jewellery: effective contrast between discrete components.

We recall that Gaspar Aguilar enjoins poets to look to the Incarnate Christ Child as a model for their work. It is therefore not surprising to encounter explicit conflations in which the same class of figures is applied to both the Incarnation and to the poetic product. Let me again take an example from Reyes, this time a prefatory sonnet by Fray Andrés Marqués:

Guiò a los Reyes la fulgente Estrella,

i descubrieron la dichosa mina,

donde se junta en liga peregrina

el oro celestial, la plata bella.

I a vos (REYES) deste astro una centella

con rayos milagrosos encamina

a otra preciosia, cuya luz divina

en los efetos se parece a aquella.

Dichosos ojos, i ojos interiores,

que nos hallaron la profunda vena

de quanto puede ser precioso en rima. (Reyes 1613: fol. ¶¶4r)

To elaborate this comparison, the sonnet takes the obvious opportunity afforded by Reyes’s surname and the title of his Tesoro, but the inclusion of the united gold and silver figure is extraneous to the level of wordplay and puns. Keeping in mind the evaluative comments we have just surveyed, the prologue to Reyes’s collection can help to clarify why his text might be understood in terms of the two-metal vein. The prologue, by an anonymous ‘amigo del autor’, anticipates Fray Andrés’s figure by describing the collection as being ‘en si [. . .] todo oro’, its ‘concetos [son] diamantes finissimos’ from which ‘todo genero de personas’ will be able to mine something of utility or delight, ‘i en particular [los] predicadores’ (Reyes 1613: fols ¶6r–¶6v). This
laudatory language and the reference to Horace’s poetic ideals are not particularly remarkable in themselves. Similar examples could be adduced from any number of prologues and other preliminary matter from the period. But the example brings me back to, on the one hand, the value that Pring-Mill saw in Black’s notion of ‘speech-communities’, and on the other his distinction between *conceptos* as constructs and *conceptos* as insights.

Like so many Golden-Age texts, the prologue to Reyes’s *Tesoro* records an anticipation of a wide range of readers who will use the text to a variety of ends; some géneros of readers, like the *predicadores* here, can be expected to quarry more from the text than other readers will. In distinguishing between ‘constructs’, *conceptos* which offer little more than ‘extravagant, ephemeral’ ornament, and ‘insights,’ *conceptos* which provide ‘lasting glimpses’ of truth, Pring-Mill notes that classification as one or the other is frequently subjective. ‘Both “insights” and “constructs”’, he observes, ‘can be either ornamental or organic, depending on the way the writer chooses to employ them’ (B16: 170). Much also depends, I would note, on the particular approach of the varying types of readers or ‘speech-communities’, and this seems to be precisely the expectation of the Golden-Age *prologuistas*.

How, then, might a given speech community in Reyes’s time negotiate a *concepto* as either a construct or insight? Fortunately, there is a wealth of literary representations of one particular ‘speech community’, the shepherds of Bethlehem who come to adore the newborn Christ. In the conventional Golden-Age treatment of these characters, they are often, despite their lapses into rustic speech, depicted as prolific *conceptista* versifiers. They ‘read’ the incarnate Christ in terms of elaborate figures — proposing *conceptos*, enigmas, and glosses to comprehend facets of His Nativity. Again the equation of text and the Incarnate Christ is made apparent, as in Lope de Vega’s dedication of his *Pastores de Belén* to his son Carlos Félix. ‘Leed estas niñeces’, Lope urges, ‘comenzad en este Christus, que él os enseñará mejor cómo habéis de pasar las vuestras’ (Vega 1991: 82).9 Thus begins the most extensive treatment of the topic in Golden-Age Spanish letters. Lope’s *a lo divino* pastoral novel presents shepherds who ‘read’ the newborn Christ as an alphabet, gypsies who read a compendium of the Gospel in His palm, and Kings of the East who find an ‘enigma en brazos de María’ (Vega 1991: 367, 523, 530, 585–89).

One such ‘reading’ scene from *Pastores de Belén* exemplifies both the incarnational poetics we have surveyed as well as a Golden-Age equivalent to the ‘interaction’ view of metaphor. In the days following Christ’s birth, Lope’s shepherds assemble for literary contests, challenging one another to compose intricate glosses and poems with pre-set end-rhymes, all in praise of the Newborn and the Holy Family. At one point, the shepherd Ergasto proposes to offer three lines for a gloss, announcing that his offering will feature a ‘sentencia equivoca’. Even before hearing the verse, two of the older shepherds react with disdain. ‘Estos versos y conceptos equivocos no me

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9 The call to read ‘este Christus’ in Lope’s dedication to his son operates on the Early Modern custom of referring to a child’s alphabetic primer or hornbook as a *Cristo* or *Christus* (Bravo Villasante 1959: 25). Some medieval and Early Modern hornbooks were cruciform (Gray 1972: 269, n. 30). In other cases, printed alphabets featured the name of Christ or a woodcut of Christ in the manger before the letter A, and the instructor would point to this image to begin the recitation.
agradan’, declares Alfésibo (Vega 1991: 510). His and Aminadab’s two-pronged censure strikes at the heart of Lorenzo de Zamora’s applied exegesis. First, Alfésibo claims that the typical conceptista wordplay severely limits its ability to communicate across cultures and languages. Second, Aminadab avows that the conceptos too often denigrate sublime subject matter with lowly figures. The estimation directly challenges Zamora’s principal argument that lowly figures can be appropriated for exalted ends, and that the pleasing contrast elevates its subject matter. The shepherd Ergasto proceeds to give his three lines despite his companions’ reservations:

Hoy la música del Cielo  
en dos puntos se cifró,  
’Sol’ y ‘la’ que le parió. (Vega 1991: 511)

In response, Aminadab and Alfésibo seem to have an immediate change of opinion. ‘Es el mejor que he visto de este género’ Aminadab exclaims (Vega 1991: 511). This is rather ironic because, upon first reading, Ergasto’s lines seem to confirm the naysayers’ foregoing strictures. A strong dependence on apparently frivolous puns — something like the wordplay of the Von Trapp Family’s ‘Do-Re-Mi’ in The Sound of Music — would surely hamper the figure’s capacity to communicate beyond Spanish. The apparent frivolity, moreover, renders doubtful its suitability to convey its sacred subject matter. What might account for the turnabout in the shepherds’ opinion? Both Gracián and Pring-Mill would be quick to point out that there are ‘muchos conceptos’ in these lines, and of many different classes (B12: 372). I will touch now on just a few.

If we read Ergasto’s contribution in light of Zamora’s aesthetic values, the shepherds’ abruptly revised judgment becomes easier to appreciate. For the shepherds’ speech community, ‘sol’ and ‘la’ offer a web of associations beyond the immediately apparent puns.10 As secondary subjects, ‘sol’ and ‘la’ signify the divinity of Christ and the humanity He assumed from the Virgin, respectively. They are the two highest tones on the hexatonic scale which Lope employs elsewhere in Pastores de Belén — music, a heavenly music, which is capable of communicating across languages and cultures. The ambiguity of Ergasto’s verse leaves open the possibility that ‘sol’ and ‘la’ are here understood to be played either simultaneously or separately. If played together, they would produce a major second interval, dissonant to the ear. This dissonant result is what is known as a suspension, a signature motif of Baroque polyphony. A suspension creates drama, builds tension, and by its nature calls for resolution into a major or a minor third. The principle idea of all this — and the one which is relevant to the concepto at hand — is that the tension resolves into harmony, an appropriate expression for the Nativity of a Saviour. If, however, ‘sol’ and ‘la’ are played separately in this order, they produce an ascending melodic line, suggesting the elevation of the lowly and pointing to the redemption of humanity, the outworking of Zamora’s vermiculatas argento.

‘The conceptista’, Robert Pring-Mill writes, ‘seems […] to be interested as much in […] conflictive relationships as in […] parallels [of correspondence] because […]

10 Lope’s figure here anticipates an analogy Black uses to explain his interaction theory: ‘The implications of a metaphor are like the overtones of a musical chord’ (Black 1962: 43).
the establishment of his conceits requires him to yoke connections of both kinds together’ (B12: 376). In an age when a literary theorist would seek his models in Christ’s Incarnation and in God’s melding of discordant elements, we encounter a figurative basis for the habits of mind which Pring-Mill so cogently identifies. The interaction view is indeed highly applicable to conceptista poetics, which demand sufficient unlikeness between the discrete, principal subjects of any metaphor in order to spark an active interrelationship among them. In accordance with the aesthetic ideals outlined by Zamora, the discrete subjects ought to throw one another into greater relief, producing a pleasing and clearer perception for ‘the discerning eye’.

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Este artículo reflexiona sobre algunas de las ideas de Robert Pring-Mill, expuestas con su acostumbrado esquematismo, sobre ‘la naturaleza y el funcionamiento del concepto’ mediante ejemplos sacados de la lírica sacra y de tratados doctrinales del Siglo de Oro. Aprovechando las percepciones de Pring-Mill, se examina sobre todo la manera muy parecida en que se trataban las figuras de la Encarnación y las del oficio de poeta, un fenómeno que nos podría ayudar a profundizar en nuestra comprensión de la estética y de los hábitos de lectura de esa época. Para este análisis, el Tesoro de divinos concetos de Gaspar de los Reyes y Los pastores de Belén de Lope de Vega sirven como fuentes principales de los modelos conceptistas.

**Notes on Contributor**

Address correspondence to: Tyler Fisher, Exeter College, Oxford OX1 3DP, UK; tyler.fisher@exeter.ox.ac.uk