

UCLA

Mester

Title

BENÍTEZ, RUBÉN. *Bécquer y la tradición de la lírica popular*. Zaragoza: Anejos de El gnomo. Colección Desde mi celda., 2005.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/08k1d119>

Journal

Mester, 36(1)

Author

Sherno, Sylvia

Publication Date

2007

DOI

10.5070/M3361014695

Copyright Information

Copyright 2007 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

BENÍTEZ, RUBÉN. *Bécquer y la tradición de la lírica popular*. Zaragoza: Anejos de *El gnomo*. Colección *Desde mi celda*, 2005.

Over the course of his academic career, Rubén Benítez has deservedly achieved renown, in this country as well as abroad, as a distinguished and prolific critic of nineteenth century Spanish letters. Figuring among his considerable contributions to this field are his important studies of such literary icons as Benito Pérez Galdós (*La literatura española en las obras de Galdós*, 1992; *Cervantes en Galdós*, 1990); Mariano José de Larra (*Mariano José de Larra*, 1979); and especially Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (*Ensayo de bibliografía razonada de Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer*, 1961; *Bécquer tradicionalista*, 1971). The most recent addition to his extensive list of Bécquer publications is *Bécquer y la tradición de la lírica popular*, a compact but dense exploration of the sources, origins, and influences that helped shape the Sevillian poet's art. As he states in the book's preface, Benítez's purpose—and challenge—in undertaking this latest work, is to disprove those who, while admiring the lyric simplicity and emotionally affecting nature of Bécquer's writings, erroneously ascribe those qualities to a kind of ingenuous artlessness, a natural gift of pure inspiration. On the contrary, Benítez argues persuasively, the "authentic" Bécquer, not an "academic" poet or even highly educated in a formal sense, was nevertheless undeniably familiar with and receptive to the diverse elements that collectively defined the European cultural climate of the time. These myriad currents—the high and low, centuries-old and modern, poetic, musical, rhetorical, and philosophical—converged with his abiding devotion to the tradition of the popular lyric, and from this convergence Bécquer forged his own distinctive esthetic.

Bécquer y la tradición de la lírica popular is divided into four parts, the first of which examines the theory underlying Bécquer's "estética del sentimiento." The intimate expression of deeply-rooted feelings, complemented by the formal simplicity typically found in popular poetry and song, were not only the essential components of his concept of poetry; they were also the primary reason his work stood apart from that of his contemporaries. Benítez points out that Bécquer's *Rimas* represent the culmination of a lyric tradition whose origins can be found in Arabic love poetry; at the same time, the outpouring of passion compressed into simple, unadorned forms are the common currency of the popular lyric.

Benítez traces numerous fundamental influences on Bécquer's work, both direct and indirect. For example, the poet's familiarity with Condillac's antirationalist theories about the role of the senses and memory in the imaginative process came by way of Alberto Lista's teachings as expounded in *Ensayos literarios y críticos*. Lista believed that *sentimiento* originates in the soul and thus provides the very structure on which poetry is built. This is not far from the poet's own definition: in his *Cartas literarias a una mujer*, he equates poetry with love, and love with religion. Similarly, for Lista, the two cornerstones of poetry are spirituality and love: the former is variously exemplified by the Psalms, San Juan de la Cruz, Milton, and Chateaubriand; the models for the latter are encountered in the poetry of Petrarch and Fernando de Herrera.

Not unexpectedly, one of the key sections of *Bécquer y la tradición de la lírica popular* is the discussion of the three class of poetry: namely, natural, primitive, and popular. Some elements of Hebrew and Arabic verse are identified as natural poetry, whereas primitive poetry, presumably that of undeveloped civilizations, is best represented by the books of the Old Testament, Eastern literature, and the Caledonian bards, most particularly Ossian. The literature that spontaneously arises among the common people is defined as popular poetry: in the view of Manuel Milá y Fontanals, while *el pueblo* does not compose poetry, the continual changes, modifications and additions effected over time amount to "[. . .] una elaboración colectiva del texto" (59). Bécquer considered Augusto Ferrán to be Spain's first popular poet and in fact, the ideals delineated by Ferrán in *La Soledad*, (i.e., communication of personal feelings, simple forms, musical rhythms) are among those to which Bécquer himself aspired in his *Rimas*. Interestingly, the *Rimas* are not popular poetry per se since it is, as even Bécquer recognized, literally inimitable. Still, according to Rubén Benítez, the inextricable melding of popular elements and intense personal emotions in the *Rimas* marked a new milestone in the history of the Spanish lyric.

As explained in "Modelos," the second part of *Bécquer y la tradición de la lírica popular*, Bécquer saw himself as a repository of the Spanish lyric tradition. He cited any number of Spanish authors in his articles, but claimed three in particular as his *dioses penates*. Garcilaso de la Vega, in his perception, was the paradigm of artistic perfection, of Spanish national values and, in short, of the Spanish

soul. Bécquer held “the divine” Fernando de Herrera in high esteem as well, primarily thanks to his love poetry, and even contemplated writing a novel based on Herrera’s unrequited love for the Countess of Gelves. The third member of the trinity was Francisco de Rioja, whose *Silvas* provided Bécquer with an exemplar of visual imagery, especially the delicately nuanced colors and shades of Rioja’s flower imagery. Garcilaso, Herrera and Rioja, whose depiction of feminine beauty conformed to the same inaccessible ideal invoked by so many painters of the Italian Renaissance, was embraced by the Romantics, and later absorbed within Bécquer’s personal vision and style, surfacing in such *Leyendas* as “El rayo de luna.”

Furthermore, the ephemeral vision of woman we encounter in that legend is, in Benítez’s judgment, at least partially due not to the influence of one Bécquer’s compatriots, but to Ossian, the fictitious bard created by the Scot James Macpherson, and another significant presence in the Spaniard’s early verses. Appearing in the ode, “A Quintana,” for example, are such typically Ossianic motifs as mist and harps, the latter first identified as such by Dámaso Alonso. At the same time, Bécquer’s image of death, we learn, comes not from his lived experience in Andalucía, but instead from his youthful reading of Ossian.

Perhaps of even greater import is Bécquer’s familiarity with the art and literature of Islam, and with the ideas, sights and sounds of the East in general. His fascination with Moorish architecture, for instance, is evinced in *Historia de los templos de España*, while his first *leyenda*, “El caudillo de las manos rojas” demonstrates the author’s profound identification with the Eastern world. Imitating Oriental writing techniques and style—the close association of music and word, the expression of love and other emotions, the portrayal of nature as if filtered through mist and visited by spirits. Also intrigued by the East and an ardent devoté of the third-century poet Eben al Rumi, Lord Byron was a special inspiration to Bécquer, whose *Melodías andaluzas* was an obvious imitation of the English poet’s *Hebrew Melodies*. The German poet Heinrich Heine was another early influence for the *Rimas*, as were Victor Hugo and José Zorrilla, both of whom had knowledge of the Arabic poetic tradition.

The third section of *Bécquer y la tradición de la lírica popular* deals with the poet’s use of the conventions and forms of popular poetry. As Benítez makes clear, Bécquer’s generation customarily read

the ancient *romances*, but also the “modern” *romances* written by Zorrilla and the Duque de Rivas. Some of the *leyendas* incorporate tales and formal characteristics borrowed from the *romances*, yet the narrative quality of that typically Spanish genre appealed less to the poet and his contemporaries than the *balada*’s more lyrical style. Benítez shows how Bécquer, from childhood on, had a singular interest in the imaginary creatures of Scandinavian and Northern European lore, so it is no surprise that such legends as “La Corza blanca,” “El rayo de luna,” and “Los ojos verdes” do not take place in Andalusian or even Spanish settings; they are related instead to Anglo-Saxon or Germanic traditions. As for the *copla*, only two or three of the *Rimas* conform perfectly to the definition of that popular genre, with its characteristically epigrammatic conclusion. Yet the *copla* was not without significance to Bécquer, since he incorporated two *coplas* into the narration of the tragic *leyenda* “La venta de los gatos.” Indeed, in his perception the very spirit of the *copla* resided in the poetic expression of anguish and desperation, and these are precisely the tones resonating throughout Bécquer’s work as a whole.

In the fourth section of the book, “Rasgos internos,” Benítez turns his attention to the strategies Bécquer employed in transforming emotions into poetry. Critics have routinely identified as integral to popular poetry the direct expression of feeling, formal simplicity, and musicality (184), but these characteristics are not the exclusive domain of popular poetry. Rather, the relationship between *poesía popular* and *poesía culta* is mutually enriching, as the example of Bécquer clearly illustrates. The conversational tone of the *Rimas* is akin to the confessional quality of the epistolary genre—a tone achieved by Bécquer’s conscious use of oral elements typically found in the traditional lyric. Among the poet’s arsenal of resources are repetitions, fixed phrases, epithets, antitheses, refrains—signs of orality that facilitate memory, imbue the verses with temporality, and thus underscore the ephemeral quality of the emotions expressed. As is true of popular poetry in general, rhetorical devices and figurative language are infrequent in the *Rimas*, whereas similes, primitive poetry’s most natural form of expression, abound. In Benítez’s analysis, the frequency of the simile suggests “[. . .] una actitud casi ontológica, [ya que] Bécquer descubre en la realidad esencias ocultas que la transforman en un universo espiritualizado y misterioso” (217). By the same token, the diversity of rhythms in Bécquer, the constant alternation between long and

short lines, the regular recurrence of parallelisms so often found in the Psalms and other Hebrew religious verse, infuse the poetry with a distinctly musical quality reminiscent at once of German *lieder* and Andalusian *cantares*,—again, popular models that the poet, himself adept at both piano and guitar, consciously imitated. For Rubén Benítez, the instances of *Rimas* set to music—Tomás Bretón and the young Albéniz, to name two—and the number of musical compositions written as parodies, are irrefutable evidence not only of the estimable musicality of Bécquer's writing, but also of their ability to endure in the readers' memory.

In his epilogue, the author elaborates precisely on the question of the durability of the popular tradition and specifically, of the Sevillian poet's continuing importance in Spanish letters. To illustrate the former, Benítez cites no less than Lope de Vega, who authored his own *Rimas* in 1609, and who identified almost completely with the Spanish *pueblo*. The Romantics too imitated popular poetic forms, and Antonio Machado theorized later about how a *poeta culto* might "hacerse pueblo" in order to better imitate popular models. Machado's contemporary, Miguel de Unamuno, was also inspired to imitate the *Rimas*, while the pure, unadorned elegance of Bécquer's verses was admired and emulated variously by the modernists, Juan Ramón Jiménez, the poets of the 1937 generation, Rafael Alberti. To Carlos Bousoño, Bécquer embodied the poetic expression of profound emotion and created a vision of evanescent worlds that in turn redoubled the importance of the symbol.

With *Bécquer y la tradición de la lírica popular* Rubén Benítez has made an invaluable contribution not only to readers of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, but to those interested in the history of Spanish popular poetry and, indeed, of Spanish poetry generally. The volume concludes with the previously published "Bécquer en sus textos (El arte de la corrección)." A most felicitous choice, since it is here that Benítez most convincingly argues his thesis that, far from being the *ingenio lego* he has been mistakenly reputed to be, his creative processes and, even more significantly, his methods of self-correction, demonstrate conclusively that Bécquer was steeped in the theory and the practice of the traditional popular lyric, utterly mindful of his creative choices and, quite possibly, aware that his words, enriched by his deeply musical sensibility, would endure in the memory of his readers.

Sylvia Sherno
University of California, Los Angeles