

THE “STRANGE, GIGANTIC HYMN” OF GUSTAVO ADOLFO BÉCQUER

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In the first *Rima* of his *Obras Completas* Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer opens his heart to the reader. He tells us that this poem, and the poems that follow, are part of a strange, gigantic hymn which alerts us to the fact that Bécquer is a religious person:

Yo sé un himno gigante y extraño
que anuncia en la noche del alma una aurora,
y estas páginas son de ese himno,
cadencias que el aire dilata en sombras... (401)

But what does the poet mean when he says that he “knows” this hymn? What does he mean when he uses the terms “gigante” and “extraño,” and what does he refer to when he mentions the “dawn” that follows the night of the soul? Critics have discussed the second stanza of this poem where the poet mentions the difficulty of expressing his ideas in poetic form, or they have tried to determine the name of the woman referred to in the third stanza. Nevertheless, it is clear that Bécquer himself thought a great deal about the ideas in the first stanza, since they often appear in his other works. Therefore, I will use the first *Rima* as a point of departure for a more complete study of what Bécquer has said about religion, and I will also examine some unorthodox ideas which have not been discussed before.

As indicated by his interest in the “Historia de los templos de España,” as well as the setting of many *rimas* and *leyendas*, Bécquer usually writes in the context of Spanish Catholicism. However, works like “El caudillo de las manos rojas,” “La Creación,” and “El apólogo” show that he is well-acquainted with Hinduism, and some of his ideas—his interest in different levels of consciousness, his pantheistic concept of God, and the idea of a pre-existing soul—are not found in orthodox Christianity. Some writers have shown that Bécquer’s religious thought was influenced by other romantic writers, or by the neo-platonic thought of León Hebreo or Fernando de Herrera. However, I intend to concentrate on Bécquer’s works

themselves, and I will begin by examining what he says about the relation of poetry and religion in the *Cartas literarias a una mujer*.

Bécquer begins by pointing out that the poet has an almost feminine sensibility; then, he states that “El amor es poesía; la religión es amor” (631) which affirms that religion and poetry are equal, since both are an expression of love. In another important passage he explains that love is the basis of a universal law which governs all aspects of creation:

[El amor] es la suprema ley del universo; ley misteriosa por la que todo se gobierna y rige desde el átomo inanimado hasta la criatura racional; que de él parte y a él convergen como a un centro de irresistible atracción todas nuestras ideas y acciones; que está, aunque oculto, en el fondo de toda cosa y—efecto de una primera causa: Dios—es, a su vez, origen de esos mil pensamientos desconocidos, que todos ellos son poesía verdadera y espontánea. (629)

These statements help to explain what Bécquer meant in *Rima I* when he referred to his poems as pages of “un himno gigante y extraño.” His poetry is a “hymn” because it is also his religion; it is “gigantic” because it is based on a principle which unites the entire universe; it is “strange” because love is a mystery that can only be expressed in poetic form. Bécquer confirms this interpretation when, in an earlier passage, he says that spirit has a special way of understanding which is “misteriosa, porque él es arcano; inmensa, porque él es infinito; divina, porque su esencia es santa” (624). But what was Bécquer referring to when he said that love is the fundamental law of the universe?

Several critics note that on different occasions Bécquer describes a mystical experience,¹ and we find such a description in the second in the second letter of the *Cartas literarias*, when he refers to

aquel sueño magnífico en que vi el amor, envolviendo a la Humanidad como en un fluido de fuego, pasar de un siglo en otro, sosteniendo la incomprensible atracción de los espíritus, atracción semejante a la de los astros, y revelándose al mundo exterior por medio de la poesía, único idioma que acierta a balbucear algunas de las frases de su inmenso poema. (625)²

We see, moreover, that Bécquer’s insistence on love as the underlying principle of the universe is similar to that of other mystics. As Evelyn Underhill states in her classic work on mysticism: “Love to the mystic... is the active, connotative expression of his will and desire for the Absolute...

For him it is the source of joy, the secret of the universe, the vivifying principle of things”(86). Bécquer refers to this experience as a “sueño,” not because it was unreal, but because it was a product of his intuitive, or non-rational awareness. We will see that this view of love as the “vivifying principle of things” implies a pantheistic conception which is typical of many other romantic writers, and also is present in other aspects of Bécquer’s religious thought.⁴

As we examine Bécquer’s work, we find that he often describes the experience of divine love in an “out of body” state when consciousness ascends to a higher level of reality which he associates with the image of a “burning kiss.” As we saw in *Cartas literarias*, Bécquer declares that love envelops humanity “como en un fluido de fuego,” and we will find that he uses the image of the kiss to describe a love that is both human and divine. I will first examine the images relating to divine love, and then I will clarify what has been said about Bécquer’s attitude toward human love.

One of the earliest references to this experience of divine love appears in the first *leyenda*, “El caudillo de las manos rojas,” where it states that “el espíritu se desata de la materia... para remontarse a las regiones donde habita el amor”(60). But it is in the *Rimas* where we find the full description of rising up to feel the presence of God’s love as a burning kiss. The last three stanzas of *Rima VIII* offer a perfect example of this experience:

Cuando miro de noche en el fondo
 oscuro del cielo
 las estrellas temblar, como ardientes
 pupilas de fuego,
 me parece posible a do brillan
 subir en un vuelo,
 y anegarme en su luz, y con ellas
 en lumbre encendido
 fundirme en un beso.
 En el mar de la duda en que bogo,
 ni aun sé lo que creo;
 ¡sin embargo, estas ansias me dicen
 que yo llevo algo
 divino aquí dentro! (410-411).

In keeping with the pantheistic view of reality, the comparison of the stars to “ardientes pupilas de fuego” suggests that they are living points of conscious

energy with which the poet is able to unite in love. The image of fire—“en lumbre encendido”—combined with that of the kiss confirms both the intensity and the purity of this emotion. The limitations of human consciousness cause him to doubt; nevertheless, he is aware of the divinity which is contained within this cosmic vision: “...yo llevo algo / divino aquí dentro.”

In *Rima IX*, Bécquer continues his description of unity within the context of divine love. In this poem each point of contact is a burning kiss which symbolizes the love which holds the universe together.⁵ In the last two lines, when the river returns the kiss of a willow tree—“el sauce, inclinándose a su peso, / al río que le besa, vuelve el beso”(411)—the image of a kiss as the result of gravity suggests that it is a part of a universal law of attraction. Then, *Rima X* parallels what was described in *Rimas VIII* and *IX*, and once again it corresponds to Bécquer’s dream in which love envelops Humanity “en un fluido de fuego.”⁶ The sound of wings and the sensation of floating suggest that consciousness has left the body. The image of eyelids closed to the physical world shows that the poet has entered a state of mystical consciousness immersed in a burst of flames—“Los invisibles átomos... / ...se inflaman”—where the “rumor de besos” confirms the presence of love—“¡Es el amor que pasa!”(411).

Before I examine what Bécquer has said about life after death, I want to comment briefly on the human aspect of love in Bécquer’s poetry. Many critics have tried to determine if the woman of Bécquer’s *Rimas* and the *Cartas literarias a una mujer* was Julia Espín, or Elisa Guillén, or perhaps some other unknown woman. I do not think that Bécquer had a particular woman in mind when he wrote the *Cartas literarias*, and I agree with Francisco López Estrada that the poet “no quiso referirse en concreto a una mujer determinada”(70).⁷ As in the case of Dante’s Beatrice, Petrarch’s Laura, or Machado’s Guiomar, this is a feminine image that may on some occasions refer to a real person, but this ideal woman is more than a specific individual. For instance when Bécquer writes in *Rima XVII*:

Hoy la tierra y los cielos me sonríen;
hoy llega al fondo de mi alma el sol;
hoy la he visto..., la he visto y me ha mirado...
¡Hoy creo en Dios! (417),

he uses the image of woman to represent the same universal aspect of love which he describes in the *Cartas literarias*. When he speaks of the sunlight that has reached into the depths of his soul, we have another image of mystical illumination similar to the experience he describes in *Rimas* IX and X, and it also reminds us of the dream—“aquel sueño magnífico en que vi al amor, envolviendo a la Humanidad en un fluido de fuego” —which he describes in the letters *Desde mi celda*.

In *Rima* I, when the poet speaks of the “aurora” which follows “la noche del alma,” he refers not only to the famous poem of San Juan de la Cruz,⁸ but also to the concept of life after death. In the third letter *Desde mi celda*, Bécquer remarks that, no matter what happens to his body, he hopes that his soul will go to heaven: “En cuanto al alma, dicho se está que siempre he deseado se encaminase al cielo”(531), and in the “Introducción sinfónica” for the *Libro de los gorriones*, he expresses his belief that this will happen: “Tal vez muy pronto tendré que hacer la maleta para el gran viaje. De una hora a otra puede desligarse el espíritu de la materia para remontarse a regiones más puras”(41). However, we will see that Bécquer’s concept of afterlife is more complex than what we find in traditional Catholicism.

In addition to life after death, Bécquer has also discussed the idea of life before birth. In spite of the aforementioned interest in Hinduism, I have found no clear evidence that Bécquer believed in the idea of reincarnation; however, on several occasions he speaks of a previous existence that is similar to the one which awaits us after death. During his mysterious journey through the heavens in “Creed en Dios,” the protagonist, Teobaldo de Montagut, sees the already existing souls descend from heaven: “Por una escalera misteriosa vio bajar las almas a la Tierra; vio bajar muchas y subir pocas”(182). Bécquer repeats this idea in his essay on “La pereza” when he states: “Vamos de una eternidad de reposo pasado a otra eternidad futura por un puente, que no otra cosa es la vida”(659). The concept of an eternity that extends both before and after this life agrees with his pantheistic view of reality; since the soul is part of God, it would follow that its existence is as eternal as that of the Divinity.

The fact that Bécquer was thinking in terms of an existence before this life also helps us understand what he says in *Rima* LXXV where he describes another out of body experience and then, in the last stanza, he speaks of meeting people he has known before:

¡Yo no sé si ese mundo de visiones
vive fuera o va dentro de nosotros;
pero sé que conozco a muchas gentes
a quienes no conozco! (453-454).

In this poem, the poet's spirit ascends to an "empty" region that is not empty, where it enters a "silent" world that is not silent and then meets "unknown" people whom he knows. The only way to explain these paradoxes is to assume that he is referring to levels of reality which are seen from two different perspectives. From the limited perspective of the material world, there is only the empty silence of the unknown. However, from an altered state of consciousness which is his spiritual point of view, he sees another world—"este otro mundo que llevo dentro de la cabeza" to which he refers in the *Introducción sinfónica*(41)—and here he is aware of a previous existence and of the people who shared it with him.⁹

This also explains what happens in "Tres fechas" when the narrator recognizes a woman whom he has never seen, because he knew her in a previous existence: "era uno de esos seres que adivina el alma o los recuerde acaso de otro mundo mejor, del que, al descender a éste, algunos no pierden del todo la memoria"(368). Likewise, in his essay "Pensamientos," Bécquer wonders where he has met the unknown woman he is waiting for, and then he responds: "No lo sé. Acaso en el cielo, en otra vida anterior a la que solo me liga este confuso recuerdo"(647).

Now that we have established that Bécquer's thought includes the idea of a previous existence, we still have to determine what he said about how afterlife is achieved. In his article "La pereza" he insists that laziness is a sure path to heaven (656). Then, when he speaks of his life as a bridge between the eternity before and after, he adds: "¡A qué agitarnos en él con la ilusión de que hacemos algo agitándonos... Yo quiero ser consecuente con mi pasado y mi futuro probables, y atravesar ese puente de la vida, echada sobre dos eternidades, lo más tranquilamente posible"(659).

Does this mean that for Bécquer all our efforts to accomplish something in this lifetime are in vain? He answers this question in the letters *Desde mi celda*, and in an obscure passage from "El gnomo." Of the two sisters who are protagonists of this *leyenda*, Marta represents the materialist

who cares only for worldly pleasures, while Magdalena represents the person who strives for a higher, spiritual goal. While Marta listens to the subterranean voice of the water which promises her gold and jewels, Magdalena listens to the voice of the wind which urges her to lead a simple life:

Vive oscura como la violeta, que yo te traeré en un beso fecundo el germen vivificante de otra flor hermana tuya y rasgaré las nieblas para que no falte un rayo de sol que ilumine tu alegría. Vive oscura, vive ignorada, que cuando tu espíritu se desate, yo lo subiré a las regiones de la luz en una nube roja. (232)

If you strive for material pleasures, you will accomplish nothing. But if you are selfless and humble, you will experience love and light, and when this life is over—“cuando tu espíritu se desate”—you will achieve an even higher level of existence.

Bécquer develops this same train of thought in the letters *Desde mi celda*, where he tells us that after trying in vain to achieve his goal of fame and glory, he took refuge in a monastery in the valley of Varela. It was in the tranquility of this rural setting that he recovered his faith in eternal life, after he realized that his earlier struggles had been in vain:

Ya todo pasó. Madrid, la política, las luchas ardientes, las miserias humanas, las pasiones, las contrariedades, los deseos, todo se ha ahogado en aquella música divina. Mi alma está ya serena como el agua inmóvil y profunda. La fe en algo más grande, en un destino futuro y desconocido, más allá de esta vida... (523)

His petty desires and transitory goals have now been replaced by the faith in a future which is greater and more lasting. The sense of divine harmony—“aquella música divina”—has erased all worldly desire, and he tells us he is no longer willing to sacrifice himself to the demands of a materialistic society: “No oigo la música, que os lleva a todos envueltos como en un torbellino”(525).

It is in the third letter that Bécquer begins to relate these ideas to the concept of life after death. We already know that he hopes his soul will go to heaven—“En cuanto al alma, dicho se está que siempre he deseado se encaminase al cielo”(531)—but he now realizes that, in order to achieve this goal, he must give up the quest for love and glory. In terms that are

remarkably similar to what we have seen in “La pereza,” and in “El gnomo,” he writes:

Las palabras amor, gloria, poesía, no me suenan al oído como me sonaban antes. ¡Vivir!... Seguramente deseo vivir..., pero vivir oscuro y dichoso en cuanto es posible, sin deseos, sin inquietudes, sin ambiciones, con esa facilidad de la planta que tiene a la mañana su gota de rocío y su rayo de sol; después, un poco de tierra echada con respeto. (358)

In “Creed en Dios” we saw that while a large number of souls descend to this life from above, only a few rise up again—“vio bajar muchas y subir pocas”—and now we understand why this is so. Only if we resign ourselves to a life of self-forgetfulness and detachment from worldly desires will we return to the heavenly existence which we experienced before we were born.

Manuel García Viñó has stated incorrectly, that Bécquer was pessimistic in regard to what he says about death at the end of this letter; as he puts it: “El tono general de los últimos párrafos de la carta es un tono escéptico y amargado, incompatible con la esperanza” (68). Rather than pessimism, what Bécquer expresses here is an attitude of detachment, a clear recognition that nothing of real value remains on the material level of existence, and that what really matters is the existence which follows this life. At the end of this third letter *Desde mi celda*, Bécquer reiterates his strong desire to avoid notoriety in the manner of his death, and he concludes by saying: “Ello es que cada día me voy convenciendo más que de lo que vale, de lo que es algo, no ha de quedar ni un átomo aquí”(539). It is not that Bécquer has no hope for life after death, as García Viñó implies, but rather that the aspects of life which have value and are truly real continue to exist only in the spiritual dimension of reality.

Like García Viñó, others who have studied Bécquer’s work have concluded that he was bitter and frustrated as a result of his failure to achieve perfection in his poetry, or a state of union with his ideal woman.¹⁰ But our study of the poet’s religious thought has shown that he experienced moments of transcendent exaltation which convinced him there is more to life than pain and suffering. This dual perspective of sadness and faith has been succinctly described by José Pedro Díaz who feels that the poet’s life was divided between “un pesimismo doloroso y una firme fe trascendente”(434). We have seen that there is a relationship between these two contradictory attitudes, since it is the pain and suffering which enabled

Bécquer to experience a superior dimension of life. Thus, it might be said that suffering has value when it serves as a form of purification which allows us to put and end to suffering.

We have seen that Bécquer was a “mystic” who believed that love holds the universe together. In spite of the suffering caused by “las miserias humanas,” his experience of other levels of consciousness gave him a pantheistic conception of reality and helped him believe in life after death. Like Miguel de Unamuno, Antonio Machado, and other writers who have followed, Bécquer has struggled with the meaning of life and has come to a conclusion which has satisfied him. The reader can experience this same satisfaction from the study of his “strange, gigantic hymn.”

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NOTES

¹ Jorge Guillén compares Bécquer with San Juan de la Cruz(177), and José Pedro Díaz says that the experience which Bécquer describes in the third letter *Desde mi celda* “se describe casi como una iluminación mística”(316). For Manuel García Viñó, the *leyenda* “Creed en Dios” contains “una visión cósmica que reclama una actitud de tipo casi místico”(61), and Joaquín Casaldueiro has found in the poetry the desire for: “una mística unión del hombre con el Espíritu; unión del *yo* con el *tú*; unión de la idea y la palabra”(155).

² Referring to what Bécquer is discussing in this passage, Francisco López Estrada has described it as an experience “que resulta semejante a la que sienten los místicos cuando balbucean sobre sus experiencias de amor divino”(52).

³ Richard Maurice Bucke has also commented on the importance of love for those who have experienced what he calls “cosmic consciousness,” which is similar to the mystical experience. The person who has experienced this type of awareness “sees and knows that the cosmos... is in very truth a living presence [and] that the foundation of the world is what we call love” (73).

⁴ José Luis Varela says that Bécquer acquired his pantheistic view of reality through the influence of other Romantic writers like Schelling, Tieck, and Hoffman: “el universo es para ellos un alma viviente donde una identidad esencial reúne a todos los seres bajo la gran cúpula del Todo” (307-308). José Pedro Díaz compares Bécquer’s vision of nature to the pantheistic world of Spinoza(387), and Rodolfo José Cortina also says that “Hoy le llamaríamos ‘panteísmo’ a ese deseo de unidad con la naturaleza”(227n).

⁵ Edmund King has seen this poem as another example of Bécquer’s desire for mystical union (136), and Juan María Díez Taboada has observed that in *Rima IX* Bécquer “espresa plenamente la cosmologización del beso o la concepción del beso como ley general del universo”(104).

⁶ The image of the burning kiss also appears in other poems; in *Rima* IV: “Mientras las ondas de luz al beso/ palpiten encendidas...”(405); in *Rima* XXIV: “Dos rojas lenguas de fuego / que a un tronco enlazadas, / se aproximan, y al besarse / forman una sola llama...”(419); and in *Rima* LXVII: “¡Qué hermoso es ver el día / coronado de fuego levantarse, / y a su beso de lumbre / brillar las olas y encenderse el aire!...”(444-445).

⁷ Edmund L. King goes even farther when he says that there is neither one woman, nor several women, nor an imaginary woman, and he insists “that the language of carnal love, the image of the kiss, is the best that Bécquer can find to express his desire for union with the absolute”(141).

⁸ In his study “Bécquer y la poesía mística,” Rodolfo José Cortina compares Bécquer’s poetry with Fray Luis de León and San Juan de la Cruz. Speaking of this phrase from *Rima* I, he comments: “La ‘noche del alma’ becqueriana se une a la ‘noche oscura’ de San Juan simbolizando la unión que ambos buscan. Las demás rimas tienen por meta alcanzar esa unión” (224).

⁹ Juan Manuel Rozas has made an excellent study of *Rima* LXXV in which he relates Bécquer’s description of the out of body experience to his religious thought. After analyzing the poet’s remarks about the separation of the spirit from the body, he concludes that Bécquer has arrived at “una realidad más trascendente, religiosa” (303-304).

¹⁰ A good example of this point of view is expressed by Geoffrey Ribbans in his article, “Objetividad del análisis del desengaño en las Rimas.” Ribbans analyzes the *Rimas* where Bécquer expresses his disillusion with the experience of love and concludes that the poet “se proclama irremediabilmente extremado, cínico, envejecido” (68).

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