

## THE "EXISTENTIAL WAVE" IN BECQUER'S *RIMAS*

In *What is Existentialism?* William Barrett writes that although metaphysical concerns have traditionally been the domain of philosophy, in the twentieth century poetry "has raised the fundamental problem of man and his destiny in a startling form."<sup>1</sup> He further observes that "from the contemporary poets who are anxious about the modern age there is a direct link back through the nineteenth century."<sup>2</sup> In Spanish literature, any effort to uncover the roots of modern poetry inevitably leads one to the works of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, universally accepted as a transitional figure between Romanticism and contemporary poetry: "To understand Bécquer is to understand more about our contemporaries... (He could) be called the prophet of twentieth-century Spanish poetry."<sup>3</sup> Up to now Bécquer's contribution to succeeding generations has been seen largely in his originality in stanza forms, melodic rhythms, and sonorous vowel combinations, with major emphasis on his impact on the *modernista* movement: "precursor del movimiento moderno," as Jorge Guillén affirms.<sup>4</sup> Almost no attention has been given to the thematic import of the *rimas* beyond the four, now standard, divisions of 1) poetry and inspiration, 2) love, 3) disillusionment, and 4) anguish and melancholy.

Northrop Frye reminds us that the "real meaning" of poetry is expressed not in its surface narrative but "is conveyed through a structure of imagery and action."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, critics of Bécquer have most often ignored Frye's admonition and formulated analyses of the *rimas* based exclusively on the autobiographical content of the collection. Relatively few studies have attempted to deal with the underlying philosophical implications of Bécquer's works and the majority of these have tended to use the *leyendas* as the basis for their findings with only occasional references to some of the more suggestive *rimas*, such as LXXIII:

¿Vuelve el polvo al polvo?  
¿Vuela el alma al cielo?  
¿Todo es sin espíritu  
podredumbre y cieno?  
¡No sé; pero hay algo  
que explicar no puedo,  
algo que repugna

<sup>1</sup> William Barret, *What is Existentialism?* (NY: Grove Press, 1964), p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> Barret, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> Richard E. Chandler and Kessel Schwartz, *A New History of Spanish Literature* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), p. 355.

<sup>5</sup> *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 69.

aunque es fuerza hacerlo,  
y dejar tan tristes,  
tan solos los muertos!<sup>6</sup>

However, a close study of the imagery of the *rimas* suggests that Bécquer formulated a subtle but sophisticated exposition of an especially modern philosophical issue, namely the existential problem of being, and that he did so in more coherent terms than had any of his Romantic predecessors (Espronceda, for example) or Post-Romantic contemporaries (such as Rosalía de Castro).

Any discussion of existentialism in literature is complicated by the elusive nature of the word itself and the multiple meanings it has acquired. José Ferrater Mora, in his *Diccionario de filosofía*, concludes that existentialism "rehuye cualquier definición."<sup>7</sup> At the same time he identifies a complex of themes which appear with regularity in existentialist writings, among them: finitude, possibility, freedom, alienation, isolation, commitment, authenticity, being-in-the-world (Heidegger's *Dasein*), freedom-toward-death, etc. In isolated instances, Bécquer addresses these themes directly as in rima LXII where the poet, after sampling Love, Freedom and Glory finds himself shipwrecked once again. However, rather than the bitterness or despair so characteristic of Romanticism, one finds here a kind of "smiling" resignation and tranquility. Bécquer inherited much from his Romantic predecessors and he did not live long enough to outgrow that legacy completely, so that existential themes pervade the *rimas* but on a very subtle level, apparent only in the "infrastructure" of certain images. There are clear indications, in the repetitions of these images, that the fundamental anxiety referred to by Barnett and so prevalent in Hölderlin and Wordsworth formed an important part of Bécquer's *Weltanschauung* as well.

In her 1974 doctoral dissertation, Helen Ivanyshyn studied Bécquer's prose imagery in a Jungian analysis of the poet's personality. Among her findings is that Bécquer has an overpowering tendency to "escuchar y contemplar el agua" and a "predilección obsesionada por imágenes relacionadas con el agua."<sup>8</sup> In a little-read but typically exquisite Bécquerian composition, "Las dos olas," the poet drew upon several of these images to suggest many of the themes noted above.

Allá en el fondo, junto a la arena blanca, surge una ola imperceptible, suspira apenas, como suspira la seda, y parece el ligero pliegue de una tela azul; esa ola que nace ahí se la puede seguir con la mirada a través del Océano, porque no se deshace, no; sube y baja para volverse a levantar más lejos, herida del sol; coronada de espuma y cantando un himno sonoro... Pero es la misma; la misma que más allá aún salta y se rompe en polvo menudo y brillante contra las rocas, por cuyos flancos trepa rabiosa como una culebra que trepa y se retuerce; la misma que, cansada de luchar, cae sombría y se lanza gimiendo a través de la inmensidad de las aguas para ir a morir... ¿quién sabe?, ¡tal vez a una playa desierta..., a

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<sup>6</sup> All references to the *rimas* and other works are from *Obras completas of Bécquer*, ed. Dionisio Gamallo Fierros, 9th. ed. (Madrid: Aguilar, 1969). As an example of an analysis of the philosophical content of Bécquer's work based largely on the *leyendas*, see M. García-Viñó, *Mundo y trasmundo de Bécquer* (Madrid: Gredos, 1970), pp. 69-79.

<sup>7</sup> José Ferrater Mora, *Diccionario de filosofía*, 6th. ed. (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1979), II, p. 1089.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Ivanyshyn, "Bécquer: su temperamento (visto a través de su creación literaria)," Diss. SUNY, Albany 1974, pp. 420-21. By the same author, see also, "Aire y agua: elementos primarios en algunas leyendas de Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer," in *Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (Estudios reunidos en conmemoración del centenario) 1870-1970* (La Plata, Argentina: Universidad Nacional de la Plata, Facultad de Letras, 1971), pp. 79-87.

ahogar el último grito de dolor de un náufrago!... Y en este mar de la Humanidad, ¿qué es el niño sino la ola que se levanta cantando para ir al fin a estrellarse contra la piedra del sepulcro, como contra la roca de la misteriosa playa de un país desconocido? (*Obras completas*, pp. 687-88)

Among the various aquatic references present here, it is the *ola*, the wave, that emerges to symbolize the child who is born, sets out on life's ocean, rises, weakens and finally expires on the mysterious beach of some unknown island.

If water images are an integral part of Bécquer's prose they are an equally essential feature of his verse. A perusal of a concordance<sup>9</sup> of the *rimas* reveals abundant aquatic imagery: *agua(s)*, *mar*, *océano*, *lago*, *río*, *gota*, *raudal*, *torrente*, *cataratas*, *derramar*, *nadar*, etc., and these seem to be a key to Bécquer's proto-existential world view, as he says in rima VIII:

En el mar de la duda en que bogo  
ni aún sé lo que creo.

In Western poetic tradition water often represents "el peligro y la muerte física,"<sup>10</sup> as in Bécquer's rima XXXVII, "Lavándote en las ondas de la muerte." The most ubiquitous aquatic image in the *rimas* is simply *mar* and in broad terms it has the universally accepted value of life and/or existence—"mar de la vida" (*rimas*, III, XIV, and LXIX). As David W. Foster notes, *mar* often carries a special meaning for Romantic poets, that of "el desastre que es la existencia."<sup>11</sup> Twentieth-century writers have continued to recur to poetic waters, refining their symbolic value and imbuing them with connotations appropriate to Modern Man's uncertain view of himself in the universe. In *En torno al casticismo* (1895) Unamuno uses waves on the surface of the sea to represent the fate of the anonymous individual entrapped in an eternally changing reality.<sup>12</sup> Both Unamuno and the leading spokesman for contemporary existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, believed that water is the perfect symbol for consciousness: "l'eau est le symbole de la conscience: son mouvement, sa fluidité, cette solidarité non solidaire de son être, sa fuite perpétuelle..."<sup>13</sup>

Writing almost a century earlier, Bécquer, too, sought to aquatic images to characterize an emerging new awareness of the individual. Among a proliferation of water motifs,<sup>14</sup> one pair of images—*ola/onda*—stands out, reflecting with greatest consistency and clarity the metaphysical dilemma felt by Bécquer before the question of life and death, i.e., the problems of being:

gigante ola... qué playa buscando va (II)  
ola que rueda/ignorando por qué (LVI)

<sup>9</sup> We have used Enrique Ruiz-Fornells, *A Concordance to the Poetry of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Ivanyshyn, "Aire y agua", p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> "Un índice de los tópicos de la poesía romántica española: lugares comunes en la lírica de Rivas, Espronceda, Bécquer y Zorrilla," *Hispanófila*, 37 (1969), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> In *Obras completas* (Madrid: Afrodisio Aguado, 1958), III, P. 486.

<sup>13</sup> *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 702.

<sup>14</sup> After *mar*, used 21 times, *ola(s)* and *onda(s)* are the most frequent aquatic images in the *rimas* and other poems with 14 and 13 occurrences respectively. This frequency is all the more noteworthy when compared to the number of references to other common water images: *agua(s)* (7), *océano* (4), *lago* (3), *río* (3), *cataratas* (2).

las ondas de la muerte (XXXVII)  
En mar sin playas onda sonante (XV).

These motifs transcend the general theme of disillusionment and suggest a deeper preoccupation with the philosophical problem of existence. Although they are both manifestations of the marine world, *ola* and *onda* possess very dissimilar qualities. *Onda*, a cyclical, infinite expression of aquatic motion, represent collectivity—“agua en masa,” as it were. *Ola*, on the contrary, due to its size, integrity, and power, carries a connotation of individuality—and of the individual. Thus *ola* occurs with stylistic devices different from those that accompany *onda*; it is often used with a preposed descriptive adjective (“gigante ola,” II), it may occur as the subject of a verb describing violent movement (“olas gigantes que os rompéis bramando,” LII), and even in the plural it retains an individual quality (“dos olas que vienen juntas,” XXIV). Two stanzas of *rima* XXXVII further elucidate the collective/individual contrast exemplified in the *onda/ola* dichotomy. In

Entonces que tu culpa y tus despojos  
la tierra guardará,  
lavándote en las ondas de la muerte  
como en otro Jordán

*ondas* is a synonym for *aguas*. Whereas in the following stanza,

allí donde el murmullo de la vida  
temblando a morir va,  
como la ola que a la playa viene  
silenciosa a expirar

the simile *vida + morir = ola + expirar* reinforces once again the singular, individual character of the term *ola*. A textual variant of *rima* XV is also indicative of the importance of this image to Bécquer. In the 1868, *Libro de gorriones*, edition the third stanza reads:

En mar sin playas onda sonante;  
en el vacío, cometa errante;  
largo lamento  
del ronco viento,  
ansia perpetua de algo mejor,  
eso soy yo.

In an earlier (1866), also autograph, version of the same composition, the first line has *ola espumante* in place of *onda sonante*.<sup>15</sup> This vacillation in phrasing reflects the confusion of the poet in this work. He is an individual (*ola*) but one so lost and hopelessly isolated (*sin playas*) as to have blended into the cyclic oblivion of the sea (like an *onda*).

*Ola* appears only when the term *playa* is also present or implied, a fact which suggests that the individual/*ola* needs to know his destination in life, symbolized in

<sup>15</sup> This variant is recorded by Gamallo Fierros, p. 1240.

the *rimas* by that which limits and therefore defines the waters and the place where all waves come to an end –the *playa*:

gigante ola... qué playa buscando va (II)  
dos olas que vienen juntas  
a morir sobre una playa (XXIV).

Through this interplay of *ola/onda* Bécquer intimates one of the fundamental conundrums of existential thought—how can the individual give meaning to life without knowledge of some *terminus ad quem*?

Like Jorge Manrique centuries earlier, Bécquer recognized that death can bring with it fame, and in his function as poet/oracle he yearned for that future glory.<sup>16</sup> In *rima* LXXII *ola* is juxtaposed with other words that refer to *Gloria*:

Aura de aplausos, nube radiosa,  
ola de envidia que besa el pie,  
isla de sueños donde reposa  
el alma ansiosa.  
Dulce embriaguez  
la Gloria es.

Bécquer's capital-letter *Gloria* summarizes two of the poet's basic concerns: his search for fame and, as the capital *G* suggests, a desire for some kind of spiritual paradise independent of personal achievement. Unfortunately, in an imperfect and finite world the aspiration for fame and the search for a meaning of life inevitable carry with them a measure of suffering, an integral part of existential philosophy, and the genesis, as much as Bécquer's painful love affairs, of the anguish and melancholy of *rimas* LII-LXXVI.<sup>17</sup> Bécquer was aware that fame can likewise have a negative aspect—envy, and the individual/*ola* can be the object of this jealousy or rivalry, the target of personal and social persecution or ostracism, a common fate for the artist. In other *rimas*, however, the poet's pain transcends the social-personal plane and reaches a philosophical-metaphysical level. Upon entering that domain he becomes aware of another fundamental of existential belief (particularly as expressed by Jaspers), the fatalism which reigns over mundane endeavours, a

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<sup>16</sup> Miguel González-Gerth discusses Bécquer's concept of the poet as an oracle or intermediary between man and the supernatural; see "The Poetics of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer," *MLN*, 80 (1965), p. 195. Further evidence of Bécquer's concern with remembrance after death is found in *rima* LXI:

Quién, en fin, al otro día,  
cuando el sol vuelva a brillar,  
de que pasé por el mundo,  
¿Quién se acordará?

Posthumous fame is also the theme of the long poem, "A Quintana," and of Carta III of *Desde mi celda*, which has a decidedly existentialist conclusion: "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" (*Obras completas*, p. 539).

<sup>17</sup> This suffering may manifest itself in various ways. Northrop Frye states that some of the basic elements of existential anguish are "the imminence of death, the feeling of alienation, the pervading sense of accident and of emptiness, and the direct confrontation with something arbitrary and absurd," considerations not alien to the concept of dread or *Angst*, first used by Kierkegaard: see *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 50. Referring to the *Cartas desde mi celda*, Linda Leslie Deutsch concludes that Bécquer "is truly a sufferer, but he persists in his efforts to overcome the finitude of mortality;" see "Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's Symbolic Journey in the *Cartas desde mi celda*," Diss. UCLA 1976, p. 267.

sense of helplessness expressed poetically in *rimas* II and III.<sup>18</sup> In *rima* II the individual/*ola* is impelled by the forces of the sea (*mar*/life), indicating the inexorability of existence. Likewise, in *rima* III a *huracán* drives the helpless "olas en tropel", producing a confusing "sacudimiento extraño/que agita las ideas."

While emphasizing the role of the individual, existentialism acknowledges the social aspect of human nature. Bécquer examines the collective response to the problem of being through the *onda* image, a word which throughout its occurrences in very different contexts, still reveals a unified matrix of associations, all clearly suggestive of its anonymous, aggregate nature:

ondas que tienen vaga armonía (LXXII)  
(*ondas* = lack of precision)  
ondas verdes (XII)  
(*ondas* = part of an enumeration of "things green")  
onda en los mares (V)  
(*onda* = one of many other tenuous materials).

*Onda* is a concept without an identity of its own, more an abstraction than a material realization. Further indication on *onda*'s lack of impact is found in its use as a mirror to reflect the brilliance of other elements rather than elucidate its own qualities, and in the confusion of its chromatic and aquatic values:

tus ojos  
húmedos resplandecen  
como la onda azul, en cuya cresta  
chispeando el sol hiera. (XXVII)

Likewise, *onda* is never associated with *playa* (save the example of *rima* XV where *playa* is negated by the preceding preposition *sin*) because collective man is not preoccupied with the search for an explanation of the purpose and apparent finitude of existence. Even Ortega, who describes the collective nature of modern society in *La rebelión de las masas*, affirms that "(a las masas) no les preocupa más que su bienestar, y, al mismo tiempo, son insolidarias a las causas de ese bienestar."<sup>19</sup> For Bécquer, as for Unamuno later, the *onda/hombre masa* option is not a viable response to the existential problem.

Ortega and Unamuno are decidedly the pole-stars of early twentieth-century Spanish philosophy and their systems of thought emphasize the collective and the

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<sup>18</sup> This fatalism has its genesis in Man's absolute freedom of choice and is associated most often with the atheistic existentialists, e.g., Sartre and Camus. Francis J. Lescoe, in *Existentialism: With or Without God* (NY: Alba House, 1974), writes that when man, "bereft of all hope and optimism, is ...informed that he is condemned to freedom, i.e., that he has absolutely no basis on which to make his choices, there is little wonder that a sense of overwhelming fatalism, cynicism and deep-rooted pessimism marks the attitude of the atheistic existentialists" (p. 16). And in *La rebelión de las masas*, Ortega y Gasset writes that "vivir es sentirse fatalmente forzado a ejercitar la libertad, a decidir lo que vamos a ser en este mundo" (18th ed.; Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1969, p. 62). We do not, of course, suggest any atheistic leanings in Bécquer but there can be no doubt that he did experience moments of religious anguish as in *Desde mi celda* (see note 13) and in the already cited *rima* VIII. Bécquer's doubts in matters of religion, as expressed in the *rimas*, are alluded to by George Cornelius in "Death Attitudes in Two of Bécquer's *Rimas*," *Papers in Romance*, 2, no. 2 (1980), 149-55; see esp. p. 151.

<sup>19</sup> *La rebelión*, p. 70.

individual respectively.<sup>20</sup> In both *España invertebrada* (Second part, Ch. 1) and *La rebelión de las masas* Ortega posits the inevitable dominance of the *hombre masa* whereas Unamuno consistently stresses the importance of the individual, as in "La soledad," where he writes: "Hay quien cree que el destino de los hombres no es otro que hacer la sociedad humana... Y, si, eso fuese así, cuando tal fin se cumpla, reconocerá la sociedad humana que los solitarios contribuyeron más que los demás hombres a formarla..."<sup>21</sup> Through the *ola/onda* images, Bécquer formulated a poetic prolegomenon to the polemic regarding the role of the individual in defining man's philosophical stance vis-á-vis existence. Among his many doubts and uncertainties Bécquer, like Unamuno, concludes that in the final analysis it is the individual's responsibility to seek out and define his own essence.

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<sup>20</sup> A lengthy comparison between Ortega and Unamuno can be found in Humberto Piñera Llera, *Unamuno y Ortega y Gasset (contraste de dos pensadores)* (León: Centro de Estudios Humanísticos de la Universidad de León, 1965), see esp. pp. 117-21.

<sup>21</sup> In *Obras completas* (Madrid: Escelicer, 1967), III. p. 89.