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‘That Marvellous Coleridge’:¹
The Influence of S. T. Coleridge’s Poetry and Poetics in
Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936)

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MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO (1864-1936) was one of the most influential and rich literary minds of the early twentieth century in Spain. Being a voracious and active reader, who marked, commented, annotated, and indexed as he read, he opened Spanish literature to foreign influences. His intellectual baggage contained an extensive knowledge of and high regard for British history, culture and literature.² As regards poetry, the British Romantic poets counted among his favourite authors. And Coleridge, of whom we are concerned here, constitutes an essential vein in both Unamuno’s poetry and his theorising of literature.³

His first encounter with Coleridge’s poetry probably took place in his very early twenties. The Spanish author could not read English at that time, and there were no Spanish translations of the Lake poets available, so it is highly probable that he learnt about these poems through Vicente de Arana. In a short article published in ‘El noticiero bilbaíno’, a local journal, in 1890 Unamuno recounts how he had enjoyed Arana murmuring poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge. The poems written by these two authors produced a great impression upon Unamuno as he confessed in two letters, dated 1899 and 1901.⁴ In their poems, Unamuno saw a counterpoint to contemporary avant-garde trends, which he considered artificial and against which he directed his harshest censure. By contrast, he found in Coleridge and Wordsworth a more intimate poetry, in which nature turns symbolical of higher meanings. In fact, in Unamuno’s first recorded mention of the English lake poets, written when he was only twenty one, we can read: ‘from the balcony, a beautiful view can be seen, but I am not a lake poet, and I leave it for others to imagine this

¹ Miguel de Unamuno, 1966, *Obras Completas*, Madrid; ESECELICER. This quote v. III, p. 398, my translation. All the translations of Unamuno’s texts into English appearing in this article are by the present author owing to the fact that no published translations exist. The abbreviation OC followed by number of volume and pages will appear parenthetically in the text.

² Two authors Peter Earle and Manuel García Blanco already noted in the past century that English literature constitutes a central vein in both Unamuno’s poetry and poetics, nourished from his reading of English literature. See Peter Earle, *Unamuno and English Literature* (New York: Hispanic Institute in the United States, 1960); Manuel García Blanco, ‘Poetas ingleses en la obra de Unamuno’. *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 37, pp. 88-106, 146-165 and also ‘Unamuno y la cultura inglesa’. *Filología Moderna*, 19-20, pp. 125-157.

³ Two critics have recently approached the study of Unamuno’s reception of Coleridge in Unamuno. See Francisco Bautista ‘El poeta en su biblioteca: Unamuno y la *Biographia Literaria* de Coleridge’. *Ínsula. Revista de letras y ciencias humanas*, v. 643 (2000), pp. 11-13; María Eugenia Perojo Arronte, ‘A Path for Literary Change: The Spanish Break with Tradition and the Role of Coleridge’s Poetry and Poetics in Twentieth-Century Spain’. *The Reception of Coleridge in Europe*. Eds. Elinor Shaffer and Edoardo Zuccato (London: Continuum, 2007).

⁴ He confessed in 1899: ‘no modern French poet produces in me as deep an impression as that produced by Coleridge’s or Wordsworth’s ‘musings’, or Browning’s monotonous songs’ Rubén Darío, *Obras Completas*, vol. XIII: *Epistolario I* (Madrid: Biblioteca Rubén Darío, 1926) p. 166. Later, in 1901, he claims: ‘I have suffered the impression produced by some poets, by the great Leopardò [sic] ..., and by the English Lyrics (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Burns, etc.) which is the one I prefer’. Unpublished letter quoted in Manuel García Blanco, *Don Miguel de Unamuno y sus poesías* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1959) p. 89.

scenery, assuring them that what is imagined is more beautiful than what is seen' (OC I 171).

As soon as he was sufficiently able to read English, Unamuno bought an 1893 edition of *The Poetical Works of S. T. Coleridge*, (London: Frederick Warne, 1893). This volume, which is held in his private library, is profusely annotated with words and phrases in Spanish that translate those in English, as well as some marks which highlight specific passages from the poems, testifying to the intensity of his reading. In addition, Unamuno also placed some short vertical pencil strokes next to the titles of the poems in the content pages, as well as next to the text of the poems themselves, signalling how much he liked each poem. The poems under the heading 'meditative poems', which includes most of the so-called 'conversation poems', are the ones that show a greater number of marks.

'Reflections on having left a place of retirement' seems to have been one of his favourite poems. In a letter dated May 1899, he writes that he aims at publishing a small volume of poems including two translations, one of Leopardi, another of Coleridge.⁵ By July that year he had already translated Coleridge's 'Reflections', though it was not published until 1907 as part of Unamuno's first volume of poetry. His intention was to translate more poems by Coleridge, as he announced in a letter in June 1899, but only 'Reflections' was eventually translated. In this same missive he also announced his desire of introducing his collection of poems with a preface in which, by means of commenting his translations of Leopardi's 'Ginestra' and Coleridge's poems, he would write about the aesthetic principles expressed in his verses. He finally did not include that preface, but it is clear that in Coleridge's poems he found something else apart from a model to follow as regards the tone, structure, and topics. He also noticed the poetical reflections behind the verses, which made a huge impact on the young Unamuno. He declared: 'I keep reflections on meditative poetry, suggested by my frequent readings of Leopardi, Wordsworth and Coleridge'.⁶

The Spanish author recreated the thoughts about the imaginative poetic act that he had found expressed in Coleridge's poems in 'En Pagazarri' (In Pagazarri). Unamuno wrote this essay the same year (1893) that he perused Coleridge's volume of poems and presents a clear thematic resemblance with 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement'. In both, the poem and the essay, the strenuous ascent to the top of a hill is depicted. The apprehension of the presence of God's essence in nature is achieved at the summit but only, Unamuno writes, if you are able to 'open your soul to nature and your chest to God's air' (OC I 509). Then, the natural landscape awakes and reveals its inner spirit:

The landscapes [emerge as] a world that wakes up and reveals itself to man, showing him the hidden treasures of its spirit. [...] In the works

⁵ Unpublished letter, quoted in M. García Blanco (*Don Miguel de Unamuno*, 10).

⁶ Unpublished letter, quoted in M. García Blanco (*Don Miguel de Unamuno*, 17).

of divine and pure art, the reflection of this mysterious world hidden in the artist's soul, and found by him with patient labour, image more real of the real world than the one bestowed on us by ordinary consciousness, reveals the soul of all things outside. (OC I 510)

The speaker experiences a magnificent widening perspective of the surrounding vista, and eventually apprehends the unity of the whole universe:

One forgets the course of hours, and in an endless instant, eternal, one feels through the contemplation of the immense view the deepest world, the continuity, the unity, the resignation of its members all, and the silent song of the soul of the things outside is heard. (OC I 511)

The following step consists in the realisation of the fact that our soul also shares this essence and, therefore, the final recognition of our unity with the rest of the universe:

the intimate communion between the world outside and that hidden in our soul, which then awakes, reaches the fusion of both of them, the immense view and ourselves are one and the same. (OC I 512)

Similarly, Coleridge had claimed: 'the *essence* must be mastered ... & this presupposes *a bond* between nature in this higher sense and the soul of Man' (CN III 4397). Unamuno will go back to this topic in some short essays such as 'El Silencio de la Cima' (The Silence of the Summit) (1911), or 'Paisajes del alma' (Landscapes of the Soul) (1918) in which Unamuno, perhaps inspired by the central image of the frost in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', depicts a valley covered by a layer of snow that leads to a sublime vision of God's omnipresence. Hence, in the essay 'Adentro' (Ever Inwards) (1900), Unamuno, as Coleridge did in 'The Nightingale', uses the imperative to encourage aspiring authors to seclude themselves in and admire nature: 'Go to the country, and in solitude converse with the universe if you wish, talk to the whole congregation of all things'; 'search for Nature', 'Dive into Nature', he remarks (OC I 948, 951, 952).

If Unamuno first accessed Coleridge's view of the poetic creative act through his study of Coleridge's poems, this was later reinforced by his reading of the *Biographia Literaria* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906) in 1906 and, to a lesser extent, of *Coleridge's Essays & Lectures on Shakespeare & some other old Poets & Dramatists* (London: J. M. Dent: 1907) in 1907. This same year, Unamuno acknowledges his enthusiasm for Coleridge in a short essay entitled 'Soliloquio' (Soliloquy): 'Do you not remember what your dead friend, that marvellous Coleridge, says in his *Biographia Literaria*? [...] You have always loved Coleridge' (OC III 398). Unamuno marked in pencil and with extreme care a great number of paragraphs and statements in the margins of his volume of the

Biographia. The marked passages deal with a wide variety of concerns but the ones that echo most in Unamuno's works are those in which Coleridge discusses the intimate relation between feeling and thought in poetry, the indissoluble relation of poetry with philosophy and, most especially, the passages devoted to the imagination. Although, curiously enough, Unamuno did not mark Coleridge's famous definition of primary and secondary Imagination in the *Biographia*, he highlighted two related passages. One of which reads: 'They and they only can acquire the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition, who within themselves can interpret and understand the symbol', and follows with the well-known division of organs of sense and organs of spirit, which are framed for the corresponding worlds of sense and spirit (BL I 242). Moreover, he also highlights one of the most quoted passages from the *Biographia*, in which the imagination is described as 'Esemplastic' meaning 'to shape into one' (BL I 168). The Coleridgean Imagination is the faculty of reconciliation by means of which the tangible and the ideal, object and subject, are unified. Other ideas also reflected in Unamuno's works are the untranslatableness of poetry and the poet's internal rhyme as a requisite for the writing of good poetry.

Unamuno brings all this theoretical background along with his deep knowledge of Coleridge's poems to his *Poesías* (Poems). Unamuno composed most of the poems that complete this volume while reading the *Biographia*. A first reading of Unamuno's poems, particularly of those labelled 'meditations' and 'incidents', discloses some traces which easily remind us of Coleridge's early poems: the conversational tone and the development of the poem departing from an incident or particular natural surrounding described in detail. But most important, they show a certain view of poetry which he had consciously received from English Romantic authors. Indeed, he himself had already observed some years earlier, in 1899: 'my poetry contributes something new to contemporary Spanish literature. [...] [A]s regards its content, it resembles that of English musings, the English meditative poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Browning, etc.'⁷ Unamuno confessed:

Shortly I intend to publish a volume of lyrical poems, a sort of musings or meditations, moved I do not know whether by my familiarity with English lyrics or my education in my native Basque Country. I overall have a taste for poetic philosophy or philosophic poetry, ... but for those others in which poetry and philosophy fuse as in a chemical compound. I do not feel philosophy but poetically, neither do I feel poetry but philosophically.⁸

The passage above quoted immediately drives us to Coleridge's statement: 'No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound

⁷ Unpublished letter to Ruiz Contreras, 24 May 1899. Quoted in M. García Blanco (*Don Miguel de Unamuno*, 16).

⁸ Unpublished letter to Zorrilla de San Martín, 6 May 1906. Quoted in M. García Blanco (*Don Miguel de Unamuno*, 75).

philosopher', which was doubly underlined by Unamuno in his copy of the *Biographia*. The Spanish author made out of this idea the core message of the introductory poems of *Poesías*, particularly noticeable in 'Denso, denso' (Dense, Dense), which serve the purpose of poetic manifesto. Besides, in 'Credo Poético' (Poetic Creed), apart from vindicating simple and natural language, Unamuno proposes that the chief task of the poet must be the pursuit of the ideal in the real, subscribing to the transcendental noetic function of poetry so strongly defended by Coleridge. Hence, in his poems, as Coleridge did, the Spanish author presents a double view of nature; physical but, at the same time, spiritual, though only for those privileged minds that can perceive it through contemplation. The poems in the section 'Meditaciones' (Meditations), whose title was taken after the section in Coleridge's *Poetical Works*, are especially interesting. The poem 'Por dentro' (Inwards) reflects this twofold nature of the universe, maintaining the existence of 'another world inside the one we can see' (OC VI 241). This is the ground on which Unamuno supports his defence of 'contemplative' poetry. He declares: 'I prefer poetic poetry, the revolution of the soul of things. To me, poetry is a translation of Nature's spirit'.⁹ Coleridge's counterpiece reads: 'The artist must imitate that which is within the thing, that which is active through form and figure, and discourses to us by symbols – the Natur-geist or spirit of nature' (CN III 4397).

In turn, the poem entitled 'En una ciudad extranjera' (In a foreign City), which presents a certain thematic and structural parallelism with "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison", depicts the need to enter the abstract reign of the spiritual where the apprehension of universal harmony is obtained, but the departing point is only to be found if one is immersed in nature. The poem moves from the description of the paradoxically isolating crowd in the city to the private shelter under a lime tree, where he recalls memories of his childhood in nature and eventually finds the unity of nature and man. In this, Unamuno's theory 'possessive contemplation' consists, as Teresa Imizcoz has noted.¹⁰ It results not from a mere physical contact with the world through the senses, but from a meeting and fusion of the world and the soul of the artist who has found its inner spirit behind its external formal features. Unamuno views this relation as a continuous vital struggle: 'Our life is a continuous combat between our spirit, which wants to own the world, to make the world its own, and the world, which wants to own our spirit, and make our spirit its own' (OC I 1140). This very same idea had already been expressed by Coleridge in *Dejection. An Ode* in the widely quoted lines: 'we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does Nature live'.

Although Unamuno writes about the faculty of imagination earlier, the Coleridgean imagination appears frequently in his essays and turns central in Unamuno's poetics from the moment he reads the *Biographia*. Thus, to him, possessive contemplation is produced through meditation, and meditation, a

⁹ Miguel de Unamuno, 'Unamuno en sus cartas', in *Ensayos, v. II*, (Madrid: Aguilar, 1951), p. 37.

¹⁰ Teresa Imizcoz, *La teoría poética de Miguel de Unamuno*, (Pamplona: EUNSA, 1997), pp. 145–148.

crucial term in his poetics, is the result of the workings of the imagination. He writes in 'Recuerdos de niñez y mocedad' (Memories of childhood and adolescence): 'It was imagination ... the one that meditated ... meditation is an imaginative act' (OC I 90). Similarly, in the short essay 'La imaginación en Cochabamba' (Imagination in Cochabamba) (1909), Unamuno states: 'To meditate is imagination's doing' (OC III 526).

The Imagination reconciles opposites, the material and the spiritual, our soul and the spirit beyond the world of the senses. The Imagination is, thus, the mother of paradox. In 'Imaginación en Cochabamba', Unamuno affirms: 'The most genuine product of the imagination: paradox. [...] The greatest imaginative men have been able to see the deepest truth underlying opposite ideas. ... Imaginative richness leads man to contradict himself in the eyes of those who lack imagination' (OC III 526). Similarly, Coleridge affirms that the Imagination 'reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative' (BL II 16-17). Following this, in 'Contra esto y aquello' (Against this and that) (1912) Unamuno defines genius as 'the universal revealing itself in the individual and the eternal in the temporal' (OC III 610).

One passage on the Imagination by Unamuno is especially interesting from a comparative perspective, for it was written in a moment close to his reading of the *Biographia*. As part of a lecture delivered in August 1906, Unamuno makes the following observation:

The imagination, if anything, is the faculty to create images rather than to repeat those previously memorized; it is, above all, the faculty to see the real in the living, to re-create it within us. And if we cannot imagine what we see, or re-create it, we cannot give spirituality to the tangible world. We then repeat what we have learnt with more or less grace, but without penetrating its essence. And hence it happens that we call a poet someone who has nothing of a poet, and someone who, at most, writes verses, just as we call professor someone who professes nothing. (OC IX 187).

Coleridge first, and Unamuno later, defended the view that the faculty of imagination must not be erroneously identified with mechanical memory or language skill. Unamuno once stated: 'Imaginative poverty is to memorize codes, [...] to evoke glorious names and dates' (OC III 527). Coleridge similarly opposed imagination and fancy, the latter of which is to him just 'a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space' (BL I 305), and whose main task is to 'suppl[y] to all other faculties their objects, to all thought the elements of its materials' (BL I 104).

Unamuno argued that 'if there is a lack of ideas and too much rhetoric, this is due to a lack of imagination, from where ideas sprout, and so much memory is necessary, where words are stored' (OC III 528). Therefore, the

Imagination must not be mistakenly identified with the ability to write good lines. Accordingly, Unamuno observed in 'La Imaginación en Cochabamba' (Imagination in Cochabamba):

As regards imagination, great confusion prevails. Imagination is taken for what is nothing but the ability and the pernicious gift for talking or writing. Fluency does not imply imagination. [...] I doubt whether there is any other lyric poetry more truly poetic, more exquisite, more imaginative, more truly imaginative than English lyrical poetry.
(OC III 528)

Unamuno's admiration for Coleridge's poetry did never fail as it can be seen in his two last collections of poems: *Rimas de Dentro*, published in 1923, and *Cancionero, Diario poético 1928-1936*. In the former, he includes some poetical pieces, namely, 'Caña Salvaje' (Wild Reed), 'Incidente Doméstico' (Domestic Incident), 'La Nevada es silenciosa' (The Snow is Silent), and 'Viendo dormir a un niño' (Observing a Child Sleeping), which present significant parallelisms with some of Coleridge's conversation poems. In the latter, Unamuno devotes a short poem to the English poet entitled 'Cuna de noche Coleridge en sueños' (Cradle of Night, Coleridge in Dreams, as an open tribute to 'Kubla Khan'. The starting image of the dream in Unamuno's poem reminds us of the famous Preface; and the images of the moon, the chasm and the bursting fountain seem to recreate the central lines of Coleridge's most popular poem.