María Eugenia Perojo Arronte /
Cristina Flores Moreno (eds.)

British Periodicals and Spanish Literature

Mapping the Romantic Canon

PETER LANG

ANGLO-IBERIAN STUDIES

Edited by
Rogério Miguel Puga and Laura Martínez-García

VOLUME 3

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Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

ISSN 2698-9662
ISBN 978-3-631-88549-9 (Print)
E-ISBN 978-3-631-88550-5 (E-PDF)
E-ISBN 978-3-631-88551-2 (E-PUB)
DOI 10.3726/b19994

Peter Lang – Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford · Warszawa · Wien

This publication has been peer reviewed.

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Fernando Durán López

Chapter 11 Between Disdain and Disappointment: Three English Reviews of Martínez de la Rosa's *Obras literarias*

Abstract José María Blanco White resumed an intense literary activity as he settled in Liverpool with the Unitarians. In order to ensure an income as well as a public forum for himself, in 1835 and 1836 he wrote five long articles for *The London Review* edited by John Stuart Mill. The first piece was dedicated to the *Obras literarias* of Francisco Martínez de la Rosa, printed in Paris in 1827–8. Such a late review of a writer irrelevant to an English readership can be explained by the fact that Martínez de la Rosa was at the time the Prime Minister of Spain, a country then immersed in the Carlist War. This text is Blanco White's only critical work on Spanish literature from this period. The collection had also received reviews in *The Foreign Quarterly Review* and *The Foreign Review* in 1829. This reception shows that the interest in modern Spanish literature in the United Kingdom was marginal compared to that in Spain's ancient literature or in other aspects of Spanish culture and society.

Keywords: Blanco White, Martínez de la Rosa, Neoclassicism, critical reception, Spanish literature.

The purpose of this study is to analyse certain aspects of the poor reception in the British press of contemporary Spanish literature from the first decades of the nineteenth century as exemplified by a significant case: the *Obras literarias* [Literary Works] of Francisco Martínez de la Rosa, published in four volumes between 1827 and 1828 (i.e. during the author's exile in Paris). These volumes encapsulate the contribution of a writer who up until that date had been purely Neoclassical – his relative approximation to Romanticism happened later (Ojeda) – and who was also one of the most prominent liberal politicians of the day. Indeed, his political prominence, together with the fact that the collection was published in Paris and its anthological nature, anticipated a much larger reception than that afforded to any single work by a Spanish writer printed in Spain. And yet the bar for Britain's interest in contemporary Hispanic literature was so high that the critical response in this case rather expressed a profound lack of interest; Martínez de la Rosa eventually managed to meet the standard,

albeit barely, since the reviews I am about to discuss are all peripheral to what was then the central journalistic debate in the United Kingdom.

1. News from the Continent

Upon publication, Martínez de la Rosa's *Obras literarias* attracted a certain amount of attention from two London literary reviews in 1828 and 1829. I say "a certain amount" because these were *The Foreign Quarterly Review* and *The Foreign Review and Continental Miscellany*, periodicals expressly devoted to literary novelties from the continent and therefore predictable outlets for a publication about which English readers were unlikely to hear about in any of the great generalist reviews. Even so, neither magazine dedicated a long article to Martínez de la Rosa, but only a brief review instead in their respective sections "Critical Sketches" and "Short Reviews of Books," which initially signals a marginal level of attention, confirmed by the indifference with which one of the reviewers states that he will not discuss certain theatrical contents "for the plain reason that we have not yet perused them" ("Critical" 320). The pieces, moreover, lacked the additional punch of political news since, while the author had been president of the Council of Ministers for a few months in 1822, by this time he was just another member of the group of liberals defeated and scattered throughout Europe, as the same reviewer notes: "he is a Liberal, and as such an exile, it should seem" (319).

The two literary periodicals were very similar, but while *The Foreign Review* frequently engaged foreign collaborators, including Spanish exiles, *The Foreign Quarterly Review* employed only British reviewers (Curran 119). The difference is very clearly noticeable in this particular case. The write-up in *The Foreign Review*[1] was divided into two issues, the first part dealing with volumes 1 and 3 and the second with volumes 2 and 4; given its favourable tone and its familiarity with the fundamentals of Spanish literature, it is likely that it was written by an exile. The reviewer praised the patriotism of *Zaragoza* and *The Widow of Padilla*, evincing a close acquaintance with the historical episode of the *comuneros*, but considers it a mistake to have tried to follow Alfieri's way in the tragedy, since the female protagonist acts out of revenge and therefore cannot truly represent the national yearning for freedom; the author, said the critic, was too timid to endow the play with greatness, so that the latter would not be able to endure beyond

1 I am grateful to María Eugenia Perojo Arronte for having drawn my attention to the existence of this text.

its original context under the Napoleonic invasion. Yet the reviewer praised the beauty and purity of the play's verses, just as he did regarding the poem *Zaragoza*, "among the best detached epics of which Spain can boast" ("Short" 243). He offered some brief praise for the comedy *La niña en casa y la madre en la máscara* [The Girl at Home and the Mother at the Masquerade], although he missed "the peculiar charm of Moratín, in blending the metrical art with a perfectly natural arrangement of phrases" (244); it was, in other words, a pleasant satire whose characters and situations presented little that was particularly remarkable. In the second instalment of this critical assessment there is a disdainful comment on Martínez de la Rosa's adherence to rules "which are really losing ground" (494): a statement that rather reflects the moderate evolution of a Spaniard trained in the classicist tradition rather than the head-on rejection by an English literary critic estranged from this tradition. Finally, there is a clear disapproval of the *Morayma* and *Oedipus* tragedies, judged to be devoid of any dramatic interest. Despite these objections, this was the most sympathetic response that Martínez de la Rosa's collection received in Britain.

The harsh appraisal published in *The Foreign Quarterly Review* is more enlightening, since it stems from a purely British point of view: it sets out to measure the distance that separated Martínez de la Rosa from an English reader while taking it for granted, of course, that the latter possessed a superior advantage over the former. There is no intent in this review to understand the functioning of Spanish literature, but rather encouragement for readers to rank its merits with regard to their own literary taste, including a fair amount of condescension and a strong anti-classicist spirit. The opening sentence already posits that the literary value of Martínez de la Rosa is conditioned by his affiliation to a decadent literature – though nevertheless one about which English readers have the right to know something, however uninspiring it may be:

> Had the Señor D. Francisco Martinez de la Rosa been a Frenchman, German, or Italian, his productions should have found their own way to the temple of fame, or the chandler's shop, unassisted by us. But as in Spain literary genius or talent has not, for the last 200 years, been equally active, whilst of the activity it has displayed little or nothing is known in this country, four volumes of new Spanish poetry and prose command some attention. ("Critical" 318)

One wonders if a two-volume collection, let alone a solitary volume, would have demanded similar attention, since it took four for a new Spanish book to make its way to the Temple of Fame (that is to say, the British reviews). But apart from the disdainful superiority that the critical piece exudes, it confirms an undeniable fact: modern Spanish literature, in the eyes of British critical audiences,

possessed inherent shortcomings that prevented it from being considered a legitimate object of interest. In this sense, the critique under examination is justified as an exception, one perhaps resulting from the need to fill a little pocket of curiosity further stirred by the publication's bulky content, but not out of appreciation of the author, his work or his literary context. And, while not mentioned in the review, there is the fact that the book was printed in France: Madrid was undoubtedly much further away from the Temple of Fame.

The reviewer ignores the prose works and concentrates on Martínez de la Rosa's *Poetics*, his poem about the siege of Zaragoza, the three tragedies (of which he confesses to having read only one) and the aforementioned comedy *La niña*. The critic is reluctant to attach any value to the author's prescriptive teachings in verse: "It is not much heavier than such instructive poetry usually is, and occupies a sixth of the first volume;" since the rest is spent on comments and prose lessons on numerous Spanish writers, mixed with matters of prosody, meter or rhyme, the reviewer allows himself to claim that these are "such as we should hope no English schoolboy of ordinary proficiency could require" (319). But, above all and in horrified shock, he reveals to his readers that Martínez de la Rosa provides Homer's passages in Spanish, while he does not follow the same method in the case of quotes of Virgil's Latin. No Spaniard would have been surprised by what to an English intellectual of the early nineteenth century, trained in the direct cultivation of classical languages, must have been an unusual discovery: that Spanish scholars were not generally proficient in Greek.

Once the author's erudition has been ridiculed, it is time to scrutinize his artistic performance. The reviewer recalls that *Zaragoza* was written for a contest launched by the Central Junta of Spain and that one of the jury members was Jovellanos: "from a poem approved by such authority we shall translate a few lines" (319). Indeed, seven verses from the composition are then rendered into English, but not without first drawing the reader's attention to the fact that the Spanish and sometimes the Italians occasionally leave lines unrhymed in an irregular and arbitrary fashion (the poem is written in a poetic form named *silva*, an observation that the critic of *The Foreign Review* states simply, as if taking knowledge of this metrical formula for granted and needing no further explanation, let alone any show of surprise). This passage is the closest the reviewer gets to praising Martínez de la Rosa's work, since the piece's last page, dedicated to the author's theatrical output, conveys an overt rejection of the dramatic modes employed. He asserts that the merit of *The Widow of Padilla* lies chiefly in the circumstances of its premiere in Cádiz in 1812, notwithstanding the fact that it is ultimately a poor imitation of Alfieri:

> To us the author appears to have imitated Alfieri, whom he professes to have taken as his model, rather in his cold simplicity of plot, than in his powerful language and vigorous conception of character […] This subject was susceptible of two interests; one in the rebellion itself, provoked by insults and by real grievances; the other, in the character of the Protagonista. A blending of the desolate sorrow of widowhood, with the romantic enthusiasm of woman, (devoted in this instance to the cause of liberty in which her lamented husband had perished upon the scaffold,) with the thirst for vengeance upon his executioners, and with ardent maternal affection, might have produced an original and highly tragic character. Rosa's widow is merely a revengeful virago, whose courage and whose grief are masculine, not feminine, who makes liberty a stalking-horse, and forgets her living son in her wild passion for his dead father. We suspect that our poet's chief deficiency as a dramatist, is of deep strong feeling – no uncommon defect in the Spanish theatre. (320)

A tragic author without deep feelings and moving language deserves little esteem, no doubt, but such deficiencies are here construed as a feature common to all Spanish theatre. The critic's judgement on the comedy *La niña en casa y la madre en la máscara* [The Girl at Home and the Mother at the Masquerade] does nothing to temper such a negative view and again goes beyond the particular case. He considers that "the comedy […] is better, but neither very laughable nor very interesting. It is, however, essentially Spanish" (320). The reviewer expresses moral qualms about the play's plot, in which a married mother and her daughter fight for the love of the same dissolute young man: "It is hard to conceive how any audience, accustomed to the thronging incidents, the profuse invention, and the harassingly involved plot of the older Spanish dramatists, should cordially delight in such a dry exhibition of history and morality" (320). Thus – with an allusion to the theatre of Spain's Golden Age, and an implicit condemnation of modern Spanish drama as lacking similar virtues – concludes this perfunctory approach to contemporary Hispanic letters, the corollary of which is that there is little in them worth the time of an English reader of 1829. The mission of the reviewer has been completed: one which rather consists in confirming that there is no reason to take interest in these writers.

2. Blanco White in His Labyrinth

When José María Blanco White left Dublin and the Church of England at the beginning of 1835 to settle in Liverpool, he once again needed an income, the only thing that could have led him back to practising journalistic literary criticism (Durán López 495 ff.). Thus, between 1835 and 1836 he published five

reviews signed with the initial W. in *The London Review*. This periodical, which had reused the name of a failed magazine run by Blanco White himself in 1829, was a spin-off of *The Westminster Review*, the iconic publication founded in 1824 by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill and the mouthpiece of political radicalism and philosophical utilitarianism. Dissatisfied with the editorial line, the young John Stuart Mill (James's son) separated himself from this enterprise in 1835 in order to found, with Thomas Falconer and other associates, *The London Review*, which advocated a more advanced intellectual platform. J. S. Mill, who was twenty-nine years old in 1835, had met Blanco White years earlier in the circle of his father and Lord Holland. Although many years separated them and their religious ideas were very different, Mill respected the Sevillian, especially since his break with Anglican conservatism. He turned to him partly to help him, but also because he valued his knowledge of European thought. It is clear from the correspondence between the two that Mill hoped to use Blanco White's skills to balance his political line with lighter matters.

What is most fascinating about the relationship between Mill and Blanco White is the struggle to establish the content and focus of the latter's collaborations, since the Spaniard was not at all willing to become a mere literary critic. In fact, the first title proposed by Blanco White for critical scrutiny was not exactly apolitical: Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which had just appeared in French as *De la démocratie en Amérique*. The proposal was not accepted because Mill was manoeuvring to keep Blanco White away from political matters. A second suggestion to review the novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* by Edward Bulwer (1834) was also rejected, as Mill argued that the author was going to collaborate in the magazine and this entailed a conflict of interest, since the novel's flaws should be pointed out. Finally, he accepted the proposition to review the works of Martínez de la Rosa, which became the subject of Blanco White's first article, "Recent Spanish Literature;" Mill gave the go-ahead to a piece that did not in principle pose any problems (Mill, letter no. 122, 2 March 1835). The collection to be reviewed had been printed in 1827 and 1828, but such a late critique of a writer irrelevant to an English readership was justified by its journalistic currency: from January 1834 to June 1835 the author had served as President of the Council of Ministers and State Minister of Spain while the country was immersed in civil war. As Blanco White reported to Elizabeth Whately:

> Forced by the necessity of opposing mental distress, as much as possible, I have written an article for the *London Review*. It is on the works of the present Spanish Prime Minister. It is liked by the editors. They seem to want *literary* articles. I think the review

> itself will be in a spirit far superior to the *Westminster*. Have you seen the prospectus? It appears to me excellent.[2]

The collaboration was short-lived. Blanco White was hypersensitive as well as highly radicalized on the issue of religion, for him of paramount importance at the time. Despite courtesies and words of praise, he never really shared a common understanding with Mill about the purpose of these articles, and the link was broken when the magazine decided not to publish Blanco White's last submission. This is how he told Mrs Whately on 22 October 1837 in a letter written in Liverpool:

> I thought the editor of the *London* had treated me quite uncivilly, but John Mill wrote to me a few days ago to make an apology. He explained the apparent neglect, and the cause that the last article I had written at their desire was not published. They were obliged to try every means of alluring purchasers, and my articles have no attraction for the class among whom they may expect encouragement. He most earnestly requests my not giving them up, in hopes that when they have recovered from their pecuniary losses, they may have an opportunity of inserting something from me. I am glad that I am thus spared the unpleasant sense of an unmerited slight. I am aware that I cannot write anything to be put side by side with their best articles. My separation from the world, my great want of strength, most reduce my writing to a perfect twaddle.[3]

Thus, while being among the best critical writing by Blanco White, these reviews were conditioned by Mill's editorial surveillance, whose influence affected not only the choice of topics but the final manuscript, which he sometimes personally retouched. The selection of topics suggests Blanco White's disengagement from Spanish subjects, despite the fact that in the eyes of the British public he continued to be seen as an expert in Spanish matters. Blanco White negotiated his interests and managed to produce two reviews on English literature, another on the French historian François Guizot and two on Spanish subjects, Godoy and Martínez de la Rosa.[4] Even so, in truth, Godoy was a subject of European scope and his memoirs, published in French, were then being translated into English, so this was not exactly a Spanish novelty. The piece on Martínez de la Rosa was most likely the one that best met Mill's expectations, although I tend to

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2 Lambeth Palace Library, ms. 2164, *Whately Papers*, fols. 236–7. Letter from Blanco White to Elizabeth Whately, dated in Liverpool on 19 March 1835.

3 Lambeth Palace Library, ms. 2164, *Whately Papers*, fols. 263–4. The date seems too late for the matter at hand, but it is the one that appears in the chronologically ordered, autograph correspondence of Blanco White to the Whatelys.

4 From April 1836, the *London Review* was no longer published as such, but under the combined title *The Westminster and London Review*, in reference to the publication from which it had originally split.

believe that each man saw the assignment as serving a different goal. All in all, this splendid text is Blanco White's only critical approach to Spanish literature from this period.

3. A Spain Trapped in Time

Blanco White's review of Martínez de la Rosa is the opposite of that published in *The Foreign Quarterly Review*: long, by no means dismissive, highly analytical and formulated from within an idea of Spain, and not as an act of condescension over otherness. However, their final conclusions are not so very different. The forces at stake in the assignment were various: the Neoclassical nature of the work of Martínez de la Rosa, the political role of the author, the distance maintained by Blanco White with respect to the Spain of his time, whatever could be of interest about the reviewed work for the British public and the expectations of John Stuart Mill himself. These factors were not aligned and it is not unlikely that Mill, the magazine and its readers were willing to learn something about recent Spanish literature, the progress or setbacks of that convulsed Spain whose president was inclined to write verses and dramas; they must have wished to find out about this Spanish politician who appeared in the pages of newspapers. The paradox is that Blanco White was probably not the best writer for this purpose. His Spain had disappeared in 1810; the rest was literature, memory, reflection and agony, but by 1835 he was already considerably estranged from contemporary Spain. He himself betrays his estrangement as he expresses his views on the country's nobility of blood: "From everything we hear concerning the present state of the Peninsula, we conclude that […] the prejudices of birth […] are fast disappearing" ("Recent" 79). He is obviously speaking from hearsay of a Spain whose changes fall beyond his direct observation. At the end of the day, in other words, he was only willing and able to speak of an underlying Spain, the foundations of the civilization that he was exploring from a distant and critical stance, unaware of current developments and superficial changes. Perhaps, it was precisely currency and superficiality that his editors and his readers were looking for above anything else.

The truth is that Blanco White approaches his review in an elusive fashion, eschewing the subject and using Martínez de la Rosa to raise certain points that are only partly related to modern Spanish letters. He is least interested in discussing Martínez de la Rosa, and even if he had been willing to analyse Spanish literature in the 1820s and 1830s, he would not have been able to do so, since he was largely unfamiliar with it. He does, however, express his political sympathy for the author, whom he perhaps frequented at the salon held at

the Madrid home of Manuel José Quintana between 1805 and 1808, and most certainly in the Holland House circle in London in the years 1810–11 (in fact, Martínez de la Rosa got one of his articles published in *El Español*), and later perhaps during the politician's stays in London after 1823 (Moreno Alonso 268, 358 and 371). Blanco White treats him with kid gloves and endorses his conservative liberalism:

> In conclusion, we must protest that far from intending to turn away Spanish scholars from Martinez de la Rosa's works, we wish those works to become as popular in England as circumstances allow. Few Spanish books could afford the student of that language a better specimen of the good Spanish of our own times; and fewer still could give him a more accurate and pleasing history of Spanish poetry. The present and past exertions of the author, in favour of the liberty of his country; his sufferings in that cause, and the high and influential stations which he occupies, must be sources of a lively interest to every one who, animated by a love of the progress of mankind, shall become acquainted with the refined, enlightened, and evidently amiable mind, which could bear literary fruits so near maturity and richness, under the overcast skies of Spain. Martinez de la Rosa has our heart's best wishes, in the difficult and important task which, to the credit of the Queen Regent of Spain, must now interrupt his more pleasing and favourite pursuits. ("Recent" 93)

Blanco White's words about the figure of Martínez de la Rosa were indeed favourable, but this sympathy does not lead to a positive judgement of his literary achievements. Obviously, when he protests that his intention is not to "turn away" the gaze of English Hispanists from the politician's literary writings, he does so because he knows only too well that the review does not contain a favourable assessment. All he can claim is that Martínez de la Rosa writes well, that he is a paragon of modern style and that his works are highly commendable reading for students of Spanish: a very lowly artistic accomplishment, but ultimately a compliment after pages of reservations, frowns and digressions. In fact, the review is made up of several independent reflections that avoid focusing too much on Martínez de la Rosa, whom Blanco White views as a symptom and expression of the evils that had plagued Spanish culture since ancient times, and not as a writer who deserves to be analysed for his own sake. There is no attempt to hide this: "Our object is to present one of the best living specimens of the literature of Spain, that [our readers] may perceive the mental stage at which that nation finds itself at this moment" (81). Let us now focus on the review's sequence of arguments.

3.1. Martínez de la Rosa as an Expression of Spain's "Intra-History"

It is likely that, before Blanco White wrote this long review, he had reread the short text that he himself published in 1811 in *El Español* on the poem *Zaragoza* (Blanco White, "Zaragoza;" see also Blanco White, *Artículos* 37–42). There seems to be an implicit dialogue between the two reviews, whose opening lines take Martínez de la Rosa as a representative sample of a generation of open-minded and intellectually liberated young Spaniards; in both cases a judgement is made on the level of "progress" achieved in Spanish society. But the shift that has taken place between the two pieces illustrates the development of Blanco White's relationship to Spain: the 1822 article is optimistic about those young reformists who, had it not been for the French invasion, would have produced "a healthy revolution" in the country; in 1835, he recalled them as one of few exceptions in a sea of hopelessness.[5] Indeed, the beginning of the 1835 piece constitutes a shocking exercise in yearning and despair:

> A domestic history of Spain – a picture of the internal state of that unfortunate country during the last sixty years – unfolding the progress of the mental struggles of individual Spaniards – the vague aspirations after a moral and intellectual excellence, which they rather imagined than knew – the glimpses of hope which broke out, at distance and short intervals, through the clouds of ignorance, profligacy, and superstition which enveloped the court, on whose changeable humours and fancies depended the fate of the whole nation – a faithful, simple, unaffected portrait of the Spanish Peninsula, drawn by the hand of one familiarly acquainted with, and personally concerned in the events, but, nevertheless, free from the deep-rooted prejudices of a Spaniard – would be one of the most affecting, as well as instructive works which the now extremely rich literature of Europe could boast of. ("Recent" 76)

The phrase "a domestic history" was a common cliché in the titles of nineteenth-century books published in Britain, the word "domestic" being used both in the sense of "national" (by contrast with the universal and the foreign) and to refer to the private sphere. Blanco White wanted to merge both meanings in order to refer to a particular history of Spain that would study the latter country as separate from other nations, yet paying attention to its internal life, its moral state and the forms adopted by its civility in relation to its political, religious and social organization. Perhaps the most precise meaning of the phrase is captured

5 Alcalá Galiano's 1834 study of contemporary Spanish literature begins with a statement that is closer to the Blanco of 1811 than to his 1835 self: "At the close of the reign of Charles III […] it may truly be said that Spain had reached a comparatively high point in the scale of civilization […]" (290).

by Unamuno's anachronistic concept of *intrahistoria*, since what is actually intended is the writing of *an intra-history of Spanish culture and society*. And, of course, being both familiar with Spain and uprooted from its prejudices, Blanco White was the right person for the job. By contrast, Martínez de la Rosa was no more than a laboratory sample for perceptive observers to get a glimpse of the misfortune of a nation whose hopes had collapsed. Indeed, the argument's upshot was that the Spain of the day was a dejected country that evaded its sad reality by displaying an exaggerated and unfounded pride in its past.

Although Blanco White attenuates his statements so that they are not aggressive, he reproaches Martínez de la Rosa for being one of those Spaniards possessed of an excessive patriotic pride: "They still speak, in sounding phrases, of the golden age of their literature" (77).[6] His compliments are always minimized: individually he has great talents, but his immersion in the Spanish context thwarts them: "Martinez de la Rosa is a man whose mind, though certainly not deficient in power, is more remarkable for taste than vigour" (77–8). And he dedicates a couple of pages to outlining his personal and political trajectory as a representative of the young generation that entered public life with the French invasion, manifesting an impulse for rupture and modernity that would later come to nothing.

3.2. Neoclassicism as Poetic Orthodoxy

The article's second section provides a literary characterization of the author and revolves around the value of the Aristotelian rules. This is the most incisive and profound piece that Blanco White wrote on the principles of Neoclassicism, which he challenged here in terms that were not very different from those he had already used as a young critic in Spain. Now, however, his criticism went deeper and targeted a new key aspect: the concept of orthodoxy. While in the preceding pages Martínez de la Rosa had represented the shortcomings that afflicted Spanish civilization, in this segment he becomes an example of how respect for the classical rules is apt to impede any natural talent: "we will endeavour to give some idea of their general character, and of the critical theory which, in our opinion, has cramped the genius of the author" (80). Blanco White's point, therefore, is to diagnose the reasons why the literary output of Martínez de la Rosa is not good enough, despite his talent; yet the ultimate question he sets out to answer is why modern Spanish literature, as a whole, *cannot be good enough*.

6 In his *Obras literarias* (II, 314), Martínez de la Rosa praised the Spanish sixteenth century as the golden age of Spain's literature, on a par with those of other countries.

The portrait of Martínez de la Rosa includes some positive traits, although Blanco White's words of praise often take the form of disguised criticism: he is a better prose writer than a poet; his prose is elegant and, thanks to his exposure to European literatures, he has freed himself from the archaic affectation that dominates Spanish writers; he has made an effort to naturalize in prose "the *European mode of thinking*" (80); as a poet he is fluid and harmonious, but without any superior merit and always timid; and, above all, he has restrained the power of his inventiveness "by his superstitious reverence for the rules of a most narrow, useful, and yet dogmatic criticism" (81). This assessment gives way to a mature challenge of classicist precepts as applied in Spain: by its very nature, but also by the particular circumstance that it has been associated with the slavish imitation of ancient Spanish authors and French models. Martínez de la Rosa's poetic theories, he states, "are a very late and unseasonable echo of the Abbé Batteux, and the French aesthetic writers of that period" (82). Finally, Blanco White joins in the classicists versus romantics disputes by condemning rules insofar as they constitute a generalization based on a few poetic phenomena and derive from a kind of realism in which certain material forms of imitation (space, time, etc., in the case of theatre) replace the true purpose of art, which is to imitate ideally the actions and passions of human beings. Blanco White passes a negative judgement on such precepts for their "paltry realism" (82), a verdict that would consequently apply to all Spanish literature that adhered to them.

However, the substance of his criticism is not only aesthetic: "It is indeed painful to observe the injurious effects of this poetical orthodoxy upon our author's inventive as well as discriminating powers" (81). By 1835 the word "orthodoxy" had acquired a transcendental significance for Blanco White: one which subsumed a host of old enemies (intolerance, superstition, fanaticism, Inquisition …). Shortly after this review, he would publish his theological masterpiece, the culmination of his spiritual journey: *Observations on Heresy and Orthodoxy* (1835). His ultimate view is that the truth of faith is betrayed when it becomes orthodoxy, that is, a rigid set of rules, rites and words, with a body of unique interpreters of its meanings, which prevents the spontaneous operations of human reason from taking place. This suffices to understand the enormous pejorative burden of defining Neoclassical aesthetics as "poetical orthodoxy," which, added to the fact that he had previously spoken of "superstitious reverence" and "dogmatic criticism," shows Blanco White's transference of his religious phraseology into the field of literary criticism. Neoclassicism is thus transmuted into another form of fanaticism, and Martínez de la Rosa, together with other Spanish writers, into pathetic sectarians.

3.3. An Idealistic Theory of Theatre

From the above claims, already moving away from Martínez de la Rosa as a critical subject, a general reflection derives on theatre as an artistic form, into which I will barely enter. Blanco White never wrote an article or theatrical review *stricto sensu* on a piece performed in his day. Nor did his writings in the magazine *Variedades* substantially address this literary genre, other than considering *La Celestina* as a theatrical work, dedicating a piece to opera, analysing – or rather demolishing – a comedy by Lope de Vega, translating several Shakespearean passages and little else. In the remainder of his English phase, he became interested in Shakespeare from a poetic rather than a theatrical point of view. All in all, his response to plays seems to have always been that of a reader rather than a spectator. This is relevant, given the very central role that dramatic poetry occupied in literary controversies and in the overall crisis of the classical system of genres. Only in this review did he reflect on the performing arts, not only to challenge the rules and units thereof, but to bear witness to the demise of theatre as an artistic expression – in favour of the novel, including a laudatory reference to Sir Walter Scott – and its regression to a coarse mass spectacle:

> We must express our conviction, at the risk of some popular disapprobation, that as the drama began in the character of a show, in the early growth of refined society, so it must gradually return to its origin, and become little more than a *show*, fit only for those classes of society which, in respect to high civilization, must always exist in a relative infancy. (84)

3.4. The *Comuneros*

Finally, the review ends by discussing the only piece of Martínez de la Rosa's *Obras literarias* that deserves specific treatment: *La viuda de Padilla*. It is the historical background, together with the political significance of this tragedy, that arouses the reviewer's interest: "the struggle against the arbitrary rule of the Crown, which began at Cadiz, with the framing of the Spanish Constitution, evidently led our author to that subject" (86). Blanco White summarizes the play's plot and reproduces in Spanish verse (followed by a translation into English prose) the most valuable fragment, the widow's oath: "This scene is one of the best in the play; but, as this portion shows, it never rises above well-written rhetorical declamation" (88). The conclusion of this critical scrutiny does not stray too far from that of the anonymous reviewers of both *Foreign Review*s: the tragedy has no flaws in style or composition, but lacks warmth, sublimity and strength, "it is so completely argumentative and declamatory, that we are strongly inclined to think that the account just given of the subject is more likely to raise interest than

the play" (89). A misconception of the rules of drama has led a talented author to produce a play that is pompous and lacking in true dramatic power. The rest of the article is a digression on the *comuneros* with which Blanco White wants to show that this historical episode provided figures and scenes of great theatrical intensity, which Martínez de la Rosa was unable to grasp. The critic is reproachful of the author's failure to include Joanna the Mad as a character (the unity of place would not have allowed it without departing from historical truth). The ultimate assessment is that theatrical rules prevented the playwright from exploiting the material available to him, which in turn symbolizes the overall failure of Spanish literature. The French, Blanco White insists, had proven themselves able to take advantage of classicism and naturalize it so as to produce great works, despite the fact that classicism itself provides very little room for artistic creation; this is not the case, however, of their Spanish followers.

4. "Every book not quite contemptible"

The standards of quality and interest set by both the reviews of *The Foreign Review* and *The Foreign Quarterly Review* (especially the latter) and Blanco White's in *The London Review* are therefore unattainable in absolute terms for any modern Spanish literary product. The point is devastatingly made by Blanco White in the following comment, where only the British propensity to litotes somewhat soothes the statement's impact:

> The same painful conviction appears in almost every book, not quite contemptible, which has been published in Spain during the period just alluded to. Hopeless, defeated aspirations breathe out in every page of the best modern Spanish works. (77)

The only hope for improvement left to a modern Spanish writer – he claims – is that exile forces him to leave Spain and disabuses him of his prejudices, as had happened to Blanco White himself. That was not, however, enough for Martínez de la Rosa, who had to content himself with being, for any cultivated British reader of those decades, no more than the one-eyed man in the country of the blind: the author of a not-entirely-contemptible book.

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