

THE HALLOWED PRECINT IN BÉCQUER AND RUSKIN

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A comparison of the hallowed precinct in G.A. Bécquer's *Historia de los templos de España* (1857), which only deals with Toledo,¹ and John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (1851-53) can best be approached intertextually and intersubjectively. In this context Bécquer and Ruskin, who did not know each other's work, create their hallowed precincts, holy places in a person's private universe where, according to M. Eliade, he receives the revelation of a reality other than the one in which he participates through ordinary daily life². Like many other nineteenth-century writers, they shared a romantic literary heritage: the influence of Byron, Chateaubriand, and Scott as well as a nostalgia for a forlorn historical past whose objective correlative is the architectural ruin.

Nineteenth century critics have said that Chateaubriand, albeit in resentful but unwitting cooperation with Byron, was the creator of the romantic version of the *lieu privilégié*, especially in the section titled "Séjour à Venise" of his *Mémoires d'Outre Tombe* (1848). This myth has recently been contested³, but not to the point where the importance of his perception of the city, especially as a monument, went unnoticed by writers who followed in his wake. This perception makes possible the identification of personal and historical time, duration and oblivion:

Car si la mémoire affective renforce ce monde à part que chaque homme renferme en soi, ce monde qui est à part parce qu'il est étranger aux lois et aux destinées générales des siècles, la mémoire qu'éveille le monument est celle que partagent tous les hommes, leur communion dans une émotion retrouvée d'âge en âge⁴.

1.- Joseph R. Arboleda, "Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's *Historia de los Templos de España*" (Barcelona: Puvill-Editor, 1979), 71-5.

2.- Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Willard Trask, tr. (New York: Harvest Book, 1959), 24.

3.- Marechal-Trudeau, Michèle, *Chateaubriand, Byron et Venise: Un Mythe Contesté* (Paris: Librairie A.-G. Nizet, 1978), 89.

4.- Chateaubriand, François Auguste René, Vicomte de. *Mémoires d'Outre Tombe*, (Paris: La Pléiade, 1964), 2 vol., Quarantième Livre, Ch. 4, 169-96.

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The meeting of these two durations can easily be ascertained by looking at the two divisions which constitute the *Séjour à Venise*: "Venise au passé et Venise au présent." The former opens with a hymn to Venice, "cette ville en harmonie avec ma destinée" and closes with a mention of Chateaubriand's personal affinity for the city, "Les Bretons et les Vénitiens seraient de la même souche." The latter ends with the reverie titled: "Angoisse de l'Avenir. Apostrophe finale à Venise. Nos destins ont été pareils." The basis of intersubjectivity, then, is laid when Chateaubriand claims that the secular time embodied in monuments binds private memories together. Now in Chateaubriand's work, the tomb is the correlative where both times coalesce, which accounts for the fact that Venice is perceived largely in terms of a magnificent mausoleum: "Les tombeaux chateaubriandesques alternent entre leur signification 'vestige d'une vie détruite, et leur signification 'monument,' c'est à dire comme ruine future."⁵ We have in "Sejour" then, an intersection of personal duration and historic time, with the tomb representing the incarnation of one's emotive life as well as the emblem of human destiny.

In Bécquer and Ruskin we find the same notions about monumental and affective time. However, what makes their creation of hallowed precincts differ from Chateaubriand's is that the city becomes the personification of an ideal woman⁶. If we consider that Toledo and Venice represent monumental time, then the epiphanies they experience in the presence of tombs consolidate their time durations. And just as they evoke the splendor of the now ruined cities, they can transcend death embodied in tombs. In fact, the contemplation of the tombs of beautiful women constitutes, paradoxically, an inspirational occasion. But it is not to Chateaubriand that the glory of first personifying the city as a woman in modern times goes, but to Byron, who out of the Serenissima created the "fairy city of the heart" from an age-old *topos* that dates back to the Biblical Babylon. In *Childe Harold* (IV) the identification of the ruins of Venice is accomplished through the ruins of the self, in the larger context of the quest in search of the soul's lost unity, a pilgrimage that seeks the reconciliation of the fleeting moment and historic time.

The city as tomb is then intertextually echoed throughout their work and attains a poignancy that is intrinsically personal since, as we will see, these cities/women are intersubjective displacements of passionate attachments that left deep traces in their lives. Bécquer's and Ruskin's creation of hallowed precincts has in common that in both cases the cities are personified as ideal women and that the metonymic displacement of the city, the tomb, is also associated with a woman who has an affective association with the author.

In the *Historia* Bécquer sets out to find the traces left by lost epochs. He often reconstructs imaginatively bygone eras and in Toledo evokes historic figures who now lie entombed in its vaults. He begins by lamenting the ruinous condition of its convents, contrasting them with the poetry he finds in the funeral monuments: the jacent woman who is organically related to the history, architecture, and atmosphere of ideal love of the Bécquerian tomb also informs the personification of Toledo. We see this in a passage from "Enterramientos de Garcilaso de la Vega y su padre" in the same San Pedro Mártir. Although published in February of 1870, internal, thematic, and stylistic evidence convincingly suggest that it was written in 1857, during the time Bécquer was writing the *Historia*⁷. In tone as well as in subject it falls in the Bécquerian moment of revelation. The statues are mysteriously illumined by the light that filters in through the Gothic windows, giving the scene an effect similar to what the viewer experiences after contemplating

5.- Michael Riffaterre, "Chateaubriand et le monument imaginaire," in *Chateaubriand Today*, R. Switzer, ed. (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 72.

6.- See Jeffrey Mehlman, *A Structural Study of Autobiography Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Lévi Strauss*, (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1974), 45.

7.- Quoted in Rubén Benítez, *Bécquer Tradicionalista* (Madrid: Gredos, 1971), 294-95.

8.- Vidal Benito Revuelta, *Bécquer y Toledo* (Madrid: CSIC, 1971), 41.

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the ray of light in Fra Angelico's El Prado painting. In both instances, a line of light "signals" the object or person while the rest is surrounded by shadows); there is a stillness that permits the voice of a woman praying in front of the tomb to be overheard, a voice which the author then imagines as coming from the lips of the statues; finally there is the perception of Toledo as a mysterious woman who reveals to him the meaning of the *lieu privilégié*:

Poco a poco logré darme cuenta de lo que me rodeaba, y entonces vi a una mujer arrodillada al pie del sepulcro. Yo no he soñado a esa mujer. Viva y sana anda por Toledo: hermosa, alta, severa, que parece una figura bajando del pedestal de un claustro gótico. La he visto después en muchas ocasiones, en las iglesias la mayor parte de ellas, en la calle algunas otras, y siempre me ha parecido extraordinaria, como conjunto maravilloso de líneas puras y correctas; pero nunca, cual entonces, pude sentir toda la inexplicable poesía que irradia y la hace parecer encarnación humana del mundo de idealidad que vive en Toledo; flor pálida de las minas, que en medio de su juventud y belleza tiene algo de severo y triste, y se antoja un espíritu del pasado que vive al través de los siglos revistiendo diversas formas, y es como el alma inmortal de la ciudad muerta. (ital. mine)⁹

Historically, the woman becomes the incarnation of the spirit of the past and is likened to the immortal soul of the dead city. The poignancy of the lines: "flor pálida de las minas, que en medio de su juventud y belleza tiene algo de severo y triste" evokes a cluster of images that recall the Santa Leocadia chapter of the *Historia*. There we are not only told that she is the patron Saint of the city: "Por este tiempo vivía en la noble ciudad, de la que más adelante debiera ser patrona, una doncella hermosa y de progenie ilustre, llamada Leocadia," (853-4) but she is also described as a young flower, whose early imprisonment and martyrdom truncated her promise: "pero aherrojad un alma joven en el fondo de un calabozo; un alma cuya vida es el movimiento, y la veréis languidecer, marchitarse, perder una de sus más altas prendas." (858)

His early fascination with tradition is further focussed when, in one of the churches he visits, San Pedro Mártir, his attention is arrested by the Gothic tomb of La Malograda, Doña María de Orozco:

monumentos, célebres los unos por los personajes cuyos despojos guardan, como el del Príncipe de los poetas españoles, Garcilaso de la Vega, y los otros por la tradición, que les presta la poesía del misterio, entre los cuales puede contarse el de la *malograda*, que son acreedores a un especial estudio que ocuparía muchas páginas... Sobre la cama mortuoria, y apoyada la cabeza en dos almohadones prolijamente esculpidos, se ve una estatua yacente de mujer. Viste un capote ancho y muy plegado, con cuello alto y mangas abiertas, según la moda de su siglo. Tiene en la mano un Devocionario y a sus pies se contempla un león⁷.

This passage foreshadows one of themes that will concern him throughout his life, the sleeping woman and, despite the rather laconic description, contains a symbolic cluster of images: In the description of this "lamented woman's" tomb we witness the beginning of a lifelong fascination with Gothic sepulchers that is evident throughout his work. The special project that would occupy many pages is indeed his entire work, which in many ways is an attempt to penetrate the poetry of the mystery, that is, the continuous search for the ineffable woman who incarnates poetry.

A poem that develops the imagery in San Pedro Mártir is Rima LXXVI (1868), where Bécquer's public interpretation of history and architecture attain a private philosophic dimension; that is through the themes of life's pilgrimage, the adumbration of the mystery, the ineffable woman, and the deathlessness of love in the silence of the hallowed precinct. The poetic persona describes a reclining Gothic tomb of a woman: "En la imponente nave/ del templo bizanti-

9.- G. A. Bécquer, *Obras Completas*, 13th ed. (Madrid: Aguilar, 1973), 998-99. Hereafter quoted as *Obras*. All further references to *Obras* appear in the text.

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no/, vi la gótica tumba.../ Las manos sobre el pecho,/ y en las manos un libro,/ una mujer hermosa reposaba/ sobre la urna, del cincel prodigio..." (454) The word "nave" not only suggests the principal body of a church, but also the idea of a quest, reinforced by images of smaller vessels like "tumba" and "cuna." The pilgrimage culminates with the arrival in the west ("como el cielo guarda/ del sol que muere un rayo fugitivo") that is synonymous with the advent in Paradise ("y que en sueños veía el paraíso"). The recumbent woman's smile constitutes an *invitation au voyage* which the poetic persona readily wishes to embark: "en el alma avivaron/ la sed de lo infinito,/ el ansia de esa vida de la muerte,/ para la que un instante son los siglos..." (455)

By extension Toledo, as well as the woman who personifies her, evokes similar associations through the pure and correct lines of its architecture and tombs. The beautiful, tall, and severe woman who steps down from a Gothic niche above has the same qualities as the jacent woman who had so fascinated him. The meaning of Bécquer's hallowed precinct emerges: spatially, the tomb of the *Malograda*, the epiphany in "Enterramientos," the poem (Rima LXXVI) inspired by her tomb, all take place in San Pedro Mártir, since the imagery is identical in all three cases¹⁰; temporally there is a merging of personal duration and historic time, that is his private quest for the ineffable woman and public time personified in Santa Leocadia, all conveyed through the imagery of an unfulfilled, truncated destiny. The figures of the *Malograda*, Santa Leocadia, and the woman who incarnates Toledo, all suggest the *lieu privilégié* on the historic plane. However, the woman in Rima LXXVI, an embodiment of the poet's own ineffable woman, is described with similar imagery, we can conclude that intersubjectively both personal duration and historical time coalesce in the hallowed precinct¹¹. What so profoundly affects Bécquer in this precinct is the realization that his quest is fulfilled in the face of the death ("esa vida de la muerte") perceived in tombs. The Gothic tomb, then, is "the quiet center, connoting the fruition of ecstasy"¹² where the pilgrimage ends, death and sleep blend, and immortality is attained. The pure and correct lines are visible signs of the ideal world of poetry he intuitively perceives in Toledo. For Bécquer the world of poetry exists independently of the senses and the poet's mind only perceives it during epiphanic moments.

In Toledo his memories of the ineffable woman coalesce and achieve significance, so that the pilgrim feels all the "inexplicable poetry that she radiates." As we know from the *Cartas literarias a una mujer*, woman incarnates poetry: "la poesía... eres tú", (617) and in "Enterramientos", metaphorically, Toledo incarnates poetry. The woman at the foot of the tomb is Bécquer's ideal of romantic love, an ineffable love that lasts beyond the grave. The Gothic woman kneeling before Garcilaso's grave is the ineffable woman who eluded him all his life, who now, as the embodiment of the spirit of Toledo, comes to profess her eternal devotion: she is the soul of the melancholy city. In Toledo, then, Bécquer's pilgrimage to the *lieu privilégié* is accomplished through the intertextual and intersubjective merging of imagery in Gothic tombs, where the traits of the stone and the woman fuse into a single image. The tomb, with its associations of sleep, death, and immortality marks the end of the poet's pilgrimage in search of beauty.

Gothic Venice symbolizes for Ruskin youth, and as with all the women he knew, he endeavored to recapture the elusive freshness and nobility that had all but disappeared from her, and by implication, his life. His personification of the young Venice conveys a conscious, melancholy awareness of future past:

Such, then, was that first and fairest Venice which arose out of the barrenness of the lagoon, and the sorrow of her people; a city of graceful arcades and gleaming walls, veined with azure and warm with gold, and

10.- Bécquer, *Obras*. See Rimas LXX, LXXIV, "La mujer de piedra," "Tres fechas," "El beso," and the "Cartas literarias a una mujer" for some of the more explicit references to this theme.

11.- Benítez, 89.

12.- K. Gilbert, *Aesthetic Studies: Architecture and Poetry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), 95.

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fretted with white sculpture like frost upon branches turned to marble. And yet, in this beauty of her youth, she was no city of thoughtless pleasure. There was a *sadness of heart upon her*, and death of devotion, in which lay all her strength. (X, 171, ital. mine)

Eventually it is the beauty of her youth that he so fervently seeks to recapture and is the object of his pilgrimage. Having been impressed from his early years with the French Gothic beauty of Adèle¹³, a beauty which, lost to him as it was, became his obsession. With her memory as his guide he perceives in Venice traits and characteristics that conform to her ideal. These brought him over his life the solace of keeping her ever fresh in his mind. Ruskin's pilgrimage to Venice, then, symbolizes an inner pilgrimage in quest of the lost Eden of Herne Hill, where his passion for Adèle began in 1836. He intersubjectively perceives the ethical qualities of Venice's historical greatness in the beauty of Adèle's, Ilaria di Careto's, and Rose la Touche's Gothic features. His Venetian experiences are an intertextual construct that create a *lieu privilégié*, where historic time and personal duration coalesce in the image of a young Venice.

Ruskin's stopping at the tomb of Ilaria de Caretto in the church of San Martino in Lucca on the way to Venice constituted his *mezzo del camin* of a pilgrimage in search of beauty, love, and immortality. The following is Ruskin's recollection at the foot of "the loveliest tomb in Christendom:

I must stop to think a little how it was that so early as this I could fasten on the tomb of Ilaria di Caretto with certainty of its being a *supreme guide to me for ever after*... The accurate study of tree branches, growing leaves, and foreground herbage, had more and more taught me *the difference between violent and graceful lines*; the beauty of Clotilde [Ruskin always called her Adèle] and Cecile, essentially French-Gothic and the living Egeria of Araceli, had *fixed in my mind and heart not as a art-idea but as a sacred reality, the purest standards of breathing womanhood*; and here, suddenly in the sleeping Ilaria, was the perfectness of these, expressed with harmonies of line which I saw in an instant were under *the same laws as the river wave, and the aspen branch, and the stars rising and setting; but treated with a modesty and severity which read the laws of nature by the laws of virtue.* (ital mine)¹⁴

This excerpt from *Praeterita* (1885-89) is preceded by a series of images that have symbolic power and render his experience revelatory. In this passage, a prelude to the *Stones of Venice*, he perceives, in the imagery of the Gothic tomb of Ilaria di Careto, the merging of the imagery of Nature he had talked about in volumes one and two of *Modern Painters* with the French-Gothic image of his first love, Adèle. His arrival at Lucca in 1845 "where I settled myself for ten days,—as I supposed. It turned out forty years" (XXXV, 347), was decisive because it established his lasting fascination with Venice.¹⁵

Ruskin's personal relation to Venice is firmly grounded in the intensely private associations she evokes in him. The first mention of the theme of the *lieu privilégié* in Ruskin's work is in a letter to his father from Lucca dated May 6, 1845, which text is identical to the version of the visit recorded later in *Praeterita*:

She is lying on a simple pillow, with a hound at her feet. Her dress is of the simplest middle age character, folding closely over the bosom and tight to her arms, clasped about the neck. Round her head is a circular fillet with three star-shaped flowers. From under this her hair falls like that of the Magdalene, its

13.- Joan Evans, *John Ruskin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 48.

14.- John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds. G.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-12) XXXV, 347-349. All further references to the *Works* appear in the text.

15.- John Rosenberg in "Style and Sensibility in Ruskin's Prose", *The Art of Victorian Prose*, Levine and Madden eds. (New York: 1958), 195, asserts the fidelity to fact evinced in Ruskin's autobiography. For a similar mention of Ilaria di Caretto see Gabriele D'Annunzio's poem "Lucca" in *La città del silenzio*: "Ma oggi non Ilaria di Caretto/ signoreggia la terra che tu bagni." In *Laudi*, Milano, 1903, vol. 2, 139.

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undulation just felt as it touches the cheek, and no more. The arms are not folded nor the hands clasped nor raised. Her arms laid softly at length upon her body, and her hands cross as they fall. The drapery flows over the feet and half hides the hound. It is impossible to tell you the perfect sweetness of the lips and closed eyes, nor the solemnity of the seal of death which is set upon the whole figure. The sculpture, as art, is in every way perfect: truth itself, but truth selected with inconceivable refinement of feeling. (IV, 122)

In the Luccan letter the eyes are sealed but the morbid dwelling on the "perfect sweetness of the lips", especially as the twilight fades from them, conveys the effect, not of death, but of a gradual falling off into sleep or, if we prefer, a daily "last sinking into death", an impression that had a long-lasting effect on Ruskin.

The last evocation of the tomb of Ilaria is in the *Three Colours of Pre-Raphaelitism* (1878), where the sense of ecstasy associated with tombs is particularly salient: "And through and in the marble we may see that the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth: "yet as visibly as sleep that shall know no ending until the last day break, and the last shadow flee away; until then, she "shall not return." (XXXIV, 171) Here we notice an accentuation of the earlier melancholy that renders Ilaria more alive than dead and ever present in his memory. There is something in the beauty and youth of Ilaria, preserved forever in the marble which renders her eternal, that makes Ruskin's fascination with young women not unrelated to his evocation of a young Venice. The beauty of Adèle, Ilaria, and Rose La Touche conveys the simplicity, grace, and angelic spirituality that is best preserved in the sublimity of Gothic tombs where the features of youth are rendered immortal. The tomb, which connotes the fruition of ecstasy, is the culmination of the voyage wherein the beautiful figure of Ilaria beckons to everlasting rest.

Ruskin's fascination with Venice began early in his life, but it is principally in the *Stones of Venice* where we can see the full significance this Gothic Eden had for him¹⁶. His identification of the city of Venice with a woman has its origins in the rhetorical tradition¹⁷. Here again we can discern a Chateaubriandesque contrast between the present ruin and the former splendor which makes the city, since it is both time and duration, oblivion and memory, an ideal monument around which to develop the theme of the Ruskinian tomb. Ruskin originally perceives Venice as the personification of a medieval goddess. She is, for instance, imagined sitting on the throne of the Alps: "Mother and daughter, you behold them both in their widowhood,—TORCELLO, and VENICE." (X, 18) The throne, like the mountain and the cave, is a symbol of the eternal feminine, and the doge's yearly symbolic wedding to the Queen of the Adriatic is an ascent to that throne. It is not without a sense of high mystery that Ruskin approaches Venice, so we can compare his own love for the city as a woman, one might even think his espousal of her, with that of the Doge to Venice.

Bécquer's and Ruskin's renditions of Toledo and Venice as tombs are perceived as through a palimpsest. Toledo and Venice constitute intersubjective personifications of ideal women, whose jacent figures, like those of La Malograda in San Pedro Mártir (Toledo) and Ilaria di Careto in San Martino (Lucca), not only stimulated their creative powers to the utmost, but also allowed them to attain a measure of immortality in the sleep of death. Many symbolic connotations of the hallowed precinct arise directly from the nature of personification which, "by the vigorous efforts of the creative imagination, he (the poet) calls shadowy substances and unreal objects into existence."¹⁸ In Bécquer and Ruskin, the personifications of Toledo and Venice, the pervasive references to and associations among sleep, death, and ineffable beauty, suggest the fulfillment of a quest that underlies and gives intertextual unity to their entire work.

16.- J.D. Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius* (New York: Columbia, 1961), 205.

17.- Fleishman, Auron, "Praeterita: Ruskin's Enclosed Garden", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, (22) 4, Winter 1980.

18.- E.R. Wasserman, "The Inherent Values of 18th-Century Personification", *PMLA* 65 (1950), 444.