

BRITISH LITERATURE AND JOSÉ JOAQUÍN DE MORA'S CRITICAL THOUGHT

M^a Eugenia PEROJO ARRONTE
Universidad de Valladolid

José Joaquín de Mora (1763–1864), an academic, a politician and a writer, is one of those figures of nineteenth-century Spain that has been rather neglected by Spanish critics and literary historiographers whereas South-American scholars have extensively highlighted his relevant role for the cultural and political progress of the former Spanish colonies. Although his literary stand has been a source of controversy as either Neoclassic or Romantic, his task as disseminator of British literature and culture has been indisputable. This paper explores the impact of British late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century poetics on Mora's thought.

Key Words: Mora, Blair, Romanticism, criticism, poetics.

La Literatura Británica y el Pensamiento Crítico de J. Joaquín de Mora

José Joaquín de Mora (1763–1864), académico, político y escritor, es una de esas figuras de la España decimonónica que ha sido más bien objeto de poco interés por la crítica española y los historiadores españoles de la literatura mientras que los estudiosos sudamericanos han enfatizado abundantemente su relevante papel en el progreso cultural y político de las antiguas colonias españolas. Aunque su posición literaria ha resultado causa de controversia en lo tocante a su adscripción al Neoclasicismo o al Romanticismo, su función como divulgador de la literatura y cultura británicas está fuera de toda duda. Este trabajo examina el impacto de la poesía británica de finales del dieciocho y principios del diecinueve en el pensamiento de Mora.

Palabras Clave: Mora, Blair, Romanticismo, crítica, poética.

The influence of British Romanticism on José Joaquín de Mora is already widely attested. The English exile meant a turning point in Mora's literary bent. From then onwards, his main concern was to free Spanish literature from the long-standing bondage of the French models. He was guided by Blanco White's thorough knowledge of British literature, to whom years later, in 1830, he would pay a tribute in his *Oración inaugural del Curso de oratoria del Liceo de Chile*, where Blanco White appears in Mora's own Parnassus of Spanish writers:

...que no vacilo en colocar al lado de aquellos grandes hombres, aunque no hubiera hecho más servicio a nuestra literatura que la acertada imitación de los buenos escritores ingleses, cuyo genio se adapta más al genio castellano, que la gálica afectación de la secta mezquina que nos emponzoña. (119)

As early as 1825, Mora had confessed that, following the council of Blanco White, he had tried to infuse his serious compositions with the taste and the domineering character of English poetry: "impregnarse del gusto y del carácter dominante de la poesía inglesa" (qtd. in Monguió 79). His practice as a translator must have aided him greatly in this endeavour. Mora's translations of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1825) and *The Talisman* (1826) were the first to be made directly from the English originals. Among his translations from British literature also figure compositions by Byron, a scene from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the first Book of Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination*, and a very personal version of Hugh Blair's *The Grave*. Mora owes his literary fame to his *Leyendas españolas* (1840), in which the debt to his most admired models, Walter Scott and Lord Byron, is notorious, although the general ironic tone belongs rather to Byronic scepticism than to Scott's Romantic recreations of the past. Less known is his narrative poem *Don Juan* (1844), definitely inspired in Byron's version of the myth.

As relates Mora's critical thought, probably Hugh Blair was the most permanent point of reference. Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* were widely disseminated in Spain through José Luis Munárriz's translation (*Leciones de Retórica y Poética*, 1798–1801). It is indisputable that Blair's work exerted a remarkable influence upon the early development of Spanish Romanticism. Antonio Alcalá Galiano, Mora's literary and political associate, relates in his *Memorias* (297) the enthusiasm that Blair's text provoked in their weekly meetings at the Academia de Bellas Letras of Cadis, to which Mora also attended. Blair's influence on Mora's thought becomes conspicuous during his first period in England. In 1824 Mora contributed to the *European Review* with three articles "On Spanish Poetry". In the second article he deals with Medieval poetry. In his critical approach, Mora rejects Neoclassic tenets in favour of a Romantic stand:

We shall trace the dominant qualities of the first epoch of Spanish poetry, forgetting that we have studied Horace and Boileau. The heart and the imagination must be the touchstone by which we try those treasures which art has not adulterated, and which were not the produce of either abstract theories or views of self-love. (qtd. in Lloréns 366)

Although the sources may apparently be difficult to trace given the cultural milieu of the time, a close look at another of Blair's most popular works, his

Critical Dissertation of the Poems of Ossian (1763), reveals similarities with Mora's passage that point to something more than a mere coincidence of ideas:

We find not in Ossian, an imagination that sports itself, and dresses out gay trifles to please the fancy. His poetry, more perhaps than that of any other writer, deserves to be stiled, *The Poetry of the Heart*. It is a heart penetrated with noble sentiments, and with sublime and tender passions (...) Ossian did not write, like modern poets, to please readers and critics. He sung from the love of poetry and song. (21)

Mora's criticism of Spanish ballads ("romances") bears many coincidences with Blair's *Lectures* in basic ideas such as the value of primitive poetry as the authentic and genuine poetic expression:

...these productions possess a touching simplicity, and their style never departs from the most familiar construction. Dictated by the heart, no foreign ornament, no artificial research, betrays either toil or study. (qtd. in Lloréns 367)

In the *Lectures* Blair affirms that the pseudo-Ossian "paints in strong and lively colours, though he employs few circumstances; and his chief excellency lies in painting to the heart" (462). To Mora, primitive Spaniards were subject to a kind of intellectual lassitude which he attributes to the effects of a hot climate:

The Spaniard is naturally a singer, but he does not sing, like the Frenchman, amid the gaiety of the feast; he sings when he is alone, and when he feels himself animated by a vehement passion, or is under the influence of that vague and delicious melancholy inspired by religious affections, and the serene nights of a warm country. (qtd. In Lloréns 367)

The differences that climate exerts upon the poetic expression of primitive peoples is remarked by Blair in his *Lectures*: "Diversity of climate, and of manner of living, will (...) occasion some diversity in the strain of the first Poetry of nations" (429). In the *Critical Dissertation of the Poems of Ossian*, Blair attributes to ancient poetry the value of a historical document of human nature:

...in every period of society, human manners are a curious spectacle; and the most natural pictures are exhibited in the ancient poems of nations. These present to us, what is much more valuable than the history of such transactions as a rude age can afford, The history of human imagination and passion. (21)

In the prologue to his translation of Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Mora defends the utility of novels on account of their value as historical testimonies:

...todo eso es una novela, que puede pasar por una historia, o que por mejor decir llena los vacios de esta, en la cual raras veces hallamos otra cosa que una cansada narracion de guerras, revoluciones, intrigas, crímenes y maldades; sin que se nos presente el cuadro de las costumbres, de la vida privada, de los usos, de las preocupaciones, de las ideas dominantes en el siglo y en la nacion de que se trata. (viii)

Similar ideas are used to defend the historiographical method of his *Cuadros de la historia de los árabes* (London, 1826), inspired in Conde's famous *History*. Thus, both *History* and historical fiction participate of the same method, which is no other than the one commended by Blair for historical writing in the *Lectures*: "Imitations of life and character have been made their [novels] principal object. Relations have been professed to be given of the behaviour of persons in particular interesting situations, such as actually occur in life" (423). The Scottish Professor is teaching in his handbook Voltaire's new ideas on historiography, which many British writers and novelists had echoed. Probably Blair was not discovering anything new to Mora, but his treatise was surely always a handy reminder of central ideas of the new trends.

The coincidence with Blair is also remarkable regarding matters of style. When dealing with Young's *Night Thoughts* as an instance of didactic poetry in the *Lectures*, Blair complains that "the style is too harsh and obscure to be pleasing" (457). It was common among Blanco White, Galiano, Mora, and other contemporaries to connect what they deemed the decay of the Spanish language and letters with the evil consequences of the tyranny of the Habsburgs, which had given way to the corruptions of 'culteranismo'—a consequence of an imposed superficiality and lack of depth, as he states in the *Oración inaugural*: "...en aquellas construcciones enigmáticas y tortuosas, en aquella hinchazón estrepitosa y pueril, bajo cuya liviana hojarasca ahogó la secta Gongorina la índole primitiva del romance castellano" (115). The inflated rhetoric of the Spanish early imitators of the Ossianic style had been to the Neo-classics a repetition of the intricacies of the Spanish Baroque. By 1830, Mora, like others, found the same fault with most contemporary writings, though derived from a different source: the French Romantic models imitated (or translated) by many Spanish writers. In the series of London articles "On Spanish Poetry", Mora had penned that Spanish poetry was "still too French and consequently too artificial". Echoing Blanco White, he had commended the literary model of the British for Spanish writers: "The English style, free, natural, energetic, sometimes gloomy, but always

independent, is much better suited to Spanish poetry, than the poverty, slavishness, and uniformity of the writers of the court of Louis XIV" (qtd. in Lloréns 368–69). And in a moderate version of this article ("De la poesía castellana"), which appeared in the *Correo político y literario* in 1826, he suggests to the poets of the New World

...la lectura de los poetas ingleses, que en el cultivo de su arte han sacado tantas ventajas de la libertad literaria como su nación de la libertad política, ventaja que se percibía en el hecho de que mientras Francia tenía sólo dos poetas, Lavigne y Lamartine, brillaban en Inglaterra Scott, Moore, Campbell, Wordsworth y el inmortal Byron. (qtd. in Monguió 82)

As has been said, Scott and Byron were his most admired contemporary British writers, but Wordsworth had no lower rank in his British Parnassus. The style of Wordsworth's poetry, particularly nature poetry, has been traced in some of Mora's compositions. Wordsworth's poetics, as reflected in his most popular document, the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, must have also attracted his attention powerfully. As late as 1859, in the prologue to Cecilia's Böhl von Faber's *Cuentos y poesías populares andaluces*, Mora praised his protegée's compositions in terms that remind us strongly of Wordsworth's Preface:

...las producciones que en esta obra se encierran no pueden menos de excitar un sentimiento profundo de *admiración* y de *extrañeza* en cuantos lectores sepan distinguir en las letras y en las artes la invención original de la imitación servil, lo natural de lo afectado, lo espontáneo y genuino de lo ficticio y convencional, el idioma de la inspiración, del dialecto de la moda. Causarán *admiración* la profundidad y el colorido patético de los pensamientos religiosos; la refinada delicadeza de los afectos benévolos, y, por último y sobre todo, la profusión de metáforas, tan nuevas, tan desconocidas, tan vivas y poéticas, y además tan familiares y expresadas con tanta facilidad, que no parece sino que en aquella tierra favorecida del cielo, el lenguaje directo es la excepción, y el metafórico la regla general de la comunicación del pensamiento. Y no dejará de causar *extrañeza* que tan singulares dotes recaigan en gentes incultas y trabajadoras, sin otra educación que sus propias aptitudes y sin haber recibido otras impresiones externas que las del magnífico clima que las rodea y el aspecto eminentemente rural de sus sierras, valles y llanuras. (8–9)

The very title of this compilation is reminiscent of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth was Nikolas Böhl von Faber's and Francisca Larrea's favourite poet. Probably Mora had already got acquainted

with him in his literary meetings with the Fabers in Cadis. Cecilia must have been well acquainted with the British poet. And so was Mora, who could not have failed to notice the striking similarities between Wordsworth's Preface and Blair's ideas on poetry and poetic composition in his *Lectures*. As a matter of fact, Blair's *Lectures* had strong hold upon the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, particularly the 1800 edition in matters of such import as the concept of poetry or the corruption of genuine poetic expression through the use of an artificial style. Moreover, the so called "English Romantic manifesto" is grounded on British empirical philosophy and aesthetics, mostly as developed by the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Mora, who was a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Granada in the early stages of his career, had become an admirer of the Scottish Enlightenment (notwithstanding his indebtedness to several French thinkers of the same tradition). His allegiance to the Scottish philosophers is proved by his publication in 1845 of a handbook aimed to banish Aristotelian metaphysics from Spanish Universities under the title *Cursos de lógica y ética según la escuela de Edimburgo*.

Mora was one of those literary figures who, although their immediate impact may not seem highly significant, their relevance for a renewal of Spanish letters and cultural life in general was noticeable. Some years ago Guillermo Carnero vindicated his relevance in this respect by pointing to the indebtedness of Ramón de Campoamor to Mora's literary writings and to their common allegiance to British Romantic poets (28). Let us hope the future work by Spanish scholars grants Mora the due acknowledgement.

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