"Espíritu Sin Nombre": Names in Bécquer

Susan Lynch and Alfred Rodriguez

The most striking feature of an onomastic study of the **Rimas**, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's major poetic creation, is the extreme paucity of given names. [1] Only four such names appear in all of the **Rimas** (Ofelia, Minerva, Lázaro, Dante), but even these few must be qualified for the purpose of this study. They are not properly given names, actually identifying characters or people addressed by the poet in his lyrics. All four have connotative and/or metaphorical functions as employed in their respective poems. [2] In point of fact, then, there are no personal names at all uttered in the seventy–nine poems that constitute this significant body of verse.

The absolute omission of personal names from the **Rimas**, poetry often openly directed to another being, [3] is enough to render this æsthetic practice significant. Its absolute character eliminates whim or accident as factors and makes unnecessary any listing of exceptions and special conditions. [4] Bécquer consciously avoids giving names to the objects of his love poetry, even when these are real enough to have been identified by his biographers. [5]

Names, especially personal names, are — as philosophers, linguists, and literary critics are wont to repeat [6] — features of speech intended to lend identifiable concreteness to beings and things:

> Names identify without a shadow of a doubt, are gates to a
> character's knowable personality and bound that personality with
> isolating precision. [7]

Although somewhat surprising in its absoluteness, Bécquer's complete avoidance of personal names in the **Rimas** is perfectly consistent with the fundamentals of his poetics, as deduced by numerous scholarly studies: [8]

> La poesía, esencia indefinible, es nota, y perfume, y llama, y
> susurro, y suspiro del alma…, todo hasta lo más inconcreto,
> sugeridor e inaprensible. [9]

The ethereal and inconcrete objects of Bécquer's **Rimas**, the "disembodied souls" that a critic has spoken of, [10] would come across as far more corporeal and concrete than the poet wished if he had allowed himself the name identification that would otherwise be considered reasonable.

In this respect, then, the poet's absolute avoidance of personal name–tags for the objects of his lyrical expression stands forth as an æsthetic banner, proclaiming — just as patently as any other number of practices in the **Rimas** [11] — his will to project a poetic world of imprecise and ethereal subjects:

> Deliberately withholding a name mystifies, creates the tensions of
> risk–laden unfamiliarity. [12]

This consistent Bécquerian practice in the **Rimas** is especially striking when set against the background of the romantics that he succeeded. The most significant and representative poet of the latter group, Espronceda, may readily be placed, in this regard, at the opposite end of the scale, with an almost inescapable compulsion to identify, name–tag, the various objects of his lyrical expression. [13]

Bécquer's prose **Leyendas** could not be expected to reflect the absolute avoidance of personal names achieved in the **Rimas**. [14] The narrative genre itself – however proximate the æsthetics of poetry and prose in Bécquer [15] – makes it extremely difficult to avoid personal names completely, for name identification/differentiation of specific characters could not reasonably be avoided. Under these circumstances, Bécquer's own remark in **El Maestro Herold** indicates his awareness of the need for personalizing names:

> Para que nuestros lectores puedan formarse una idea, aunque
> pálida, de su ardiente visión, les diremos el nombre de aquel
> músico....

With this in mind, and in keeping with both the broad outline of Bécquer's æsthetic goals and their application to his prose as well as his poetry, it is not surprising to find that the **Leyendas** offer an average of less than two personal names per narration: thirty–four personal names in twenty–two prose pieces. [16] Nearly one–fourth of his stories (five) contain no personal names at all, and another five contain only one such name each. [17]

Bécquer's controlled and minimal reliance on personal names in the **Leyendas**, what frequently amounts to studied omission, may best be underscored by comparing his usage, in this sense, to that of Zorrilla in his poetic 'leyendas,' for these, despite the difference in medium, are frequently cited as the basic antecedents for Bécquer's narrations in prose.[18] As might have been expected, Zorrilla's poetic narrations offer the abundance of name fixation that was common to Bécquer's romantic predecessors.[19]

The relative paucity of personal names in the **Leyendas,** together with their total absence from the **Rimas,** clearly establishes a fundamental norm (albeit negatively expressed) of Bécquer's literary creativity: the absolutely minimal use of personal names, whether to fix real love objects or narrative characters. The mystery–enhancing effects of this consistent Bécquerian practice – when reinforced, naturally, by other æsthetic devices with the same finality – is immediately apparent in his work:

> Desea, rodeado de misterio, sumergirse en el misterio, vivir
> cercado de poesía y estar inmerso en la misma poesía; purificarse
> de la materia, para unirse al espíritu.... [20]

It is significant to note, on the other hand, that it is only this radical reduction that distinguishes Bécquer's use of personal names from that of his romantic predecessors. The literary intent and impact of what names do appear in the **Leyendas** almost invariably reflect a romantic continuity in Bécquer that scholars acknowledge. [21] The overwhelming majority of the names assigned by Bécquer to his characters are

recognizable immediately as those used most profusely by romantic poets and playwrights, and these logically reflect a fundamental identification on his part with the name–giving criteria of the former: a) names with a connotative literary charge: Beatríz, Inés, Manrique, Constanza; b) names with an apparent historical suggestivity: Alonso, Lope, Iñigo, Teobaldo, Fernando; c) names with a religious–spiritual connotative charge: Magdalena, Marta, Sara; d) names with a poetic–semantic projection: Amparo, Margarita; e) exotic names: Pulo, Tippot, Siannah, Herold; f) names with a cacophonous suggestion of the vulgar or prosaic: Baltasara, Gregorio.

On at least one occasion, as well, the reader is made privy to the creative associations that might have governed Bécquer's name selection. In **La Corza Blanca**, the feminine protagonist's transformational qualities might well have suggested the name (Constanza) of Cervantes' heroine from **La Ilustre Fregona,** who is not what she appears to be either. In both cases, of course, the name stands in ironic defiance of the character's mutability.

It is not surprising to find a character called Estéban in this story, in which tragedy results from a piercing arrow, for the name is borne by the Catholic saint invariably identified with martyrdom before Roman archers.

In conclusion, Bécquer selects and uses personal names much in the functional manner of his romantic predecessors; but it is his studied and calculated reduction of their use that sets him apart, and in radical fashion, from their name–giving practice. It is a norm that is undoubtedly instrumental in his projection of a mysterious and inconcrete universe, and it is certainly in keeping with his avowed æsthetic goals.

Notes

[1] G. A. Bécquer, **Rimas**, edición de José Pedro Díaz (Madrid: Espasa–Calpe, S. A., 1963).

[2] **Rimas** VI, VII, XII, XXIX in edition cited. Only Shakespeare's Ophelia (VI) is the actual subject of the poem, but the poet's first line, "Como la brisa que la sangre orea," and the verse that introduces her, "Símbolo del dolor y la ternura," suggest Bécquer's emblematic use of the character.

[3] Over thirty–five percent of the **Rimas** use the second person of verb and pronoun, and speak directly to the love–object. Close to sixty percent of the **Rimas** involve another being.

[4] See G. Alvarez–Altman, "Onomastics as a Modern Critical Approach to Literature," **Literary Onomastics Studies,** 1 (1974), 109.

[5] See R. Brown, **Bécquer** (Barcelona: Editorial Aedos, 1963), pp. 122–124.

[6] See, for example, E. Cassirer, **Language and Myth,** trans. S. K. Langer (NY: Harper & Bros., 1946), p. 3; and R. Fox, **The Red Lamp of Incest** (NY: E. P. Dutton, 1980), p. 191.

[7] W. F. H. Nicolaisen, "What is Your Name? The Question of Identity in Some of the Waverly Novels," **Names**, 27 (1979), 256.

[8] See F. López Estrada, **Poética para un poeta** (Madrid: Gredos, S. A., 1972), for the most recent and complete study.

[9] M. Alonso, **Segundo estilo de Bécquer** (Madrid: Ediciones Guadarrama, 1972), p. 280.

[10] J. Paley, "Bécquer's Disembodied Souls," **Hispanic Review**, 47 (1979), 185–192.

[11] See, for example, Alonso, pp. 284–308.

[12] Nicolaisen, p. 256.

[13] Espronceda identifies the object of his lyrical expression by name in more than seventy–five percent of the cases.

[14] G. A. Bécquer, **Leyendas**, edición de J. Campos (Madrid: Alianza, 1979). All references will be to this edition.

[15] See, for example, M. García-Viñó, **Mundo y trasmundo de las Leyendas de Bécquer** (Madrid: Gredos, S. A., 1970), pp. 24–25.

[16] Actually 1.05 names on the average, and even fewer if such deity names as Brahma, Vishnu and Siva were discounted.

[17] **El beso, La venta de los gatos, La creación, Creed en Dios, El maestro Herold.**

[18] See García-Viñó, pp. 25, 82; and R. Benítez, **Bécquer tradicionalista** (Madrid: Gredos, S. A., 1971), pp. 92–108.

[19] As a rule, Zorrilla populates his 'leyendas' with an abundance of named characters.

[20] Alonso, p. 281.

[21] See, in particular, Benítez's **Bécquer tradicionalista.**

Susan A. Lynch
Albuquerque Technical–Vocational Institute
Albuquerque, NM

Alfred Rodriguez
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM