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Recomposing Memory's Fragments: The Sacred Precinct in Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's *Historia de los templos de España* (1857) and *Cartas desde mi celda* (1864)

Azariah Alfante

Inscribed on a section of bare wall in the renowned thirteenth-century Monasterio de Piedra of Zaragoza are the words: “Templo destruido y sus imágenes mutiladas durante el tiempo que medió entre la revolución de 1835 y el año 1840, en que pasó a propiedad privada.” The text’s emotionally charged language refers to the mid-century disentailment laws under Juan Álvarez Mendizábal. Its phrases “templo destruido” and “imágenes mutiladas” depict the monastery’s confiscation as a tortuous experience before it passed into private ownership, thus testifying to the monastery’s resultant damage and loss of its historical community and identity. Similarly, other old church buildings in Salamanca are said to be “desaparecidos,” according to the gallery labels at the Museum of Salamanca, which was built in 1835 to house artwork taken from the province’s decommissioned religious edifices.

Destruction, mutilation, and disappearance not only personify the disentailed edifices that they describe but also connote the social experiences of trauma arising from their secularization. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth writes that trauma was originally the Greek word for “wound,” an injury inflicted on a body. The notion that trauma became an injury on the psyche was a Freudian innovation. In his essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud likens melancholia to “an open wound” (589). The physical dismantling of the religious edifice and the separation of its communities from the monastery resulted from the seismic social tensions between liberal and traditionalist sectors in nineteenth-century Spain around the so-called Religious Question, which encapsulated ideological, material, and spiritual ruptures between the old order and the new. The breaking away from the old Spain to construct the new Spain entailed a process of fragmentation.

Consequently, feelings of unease about the future and a yearning for the past found expression in and across cultural mediums. Connections between ecclesiastical architecture and literature informed much literary discourse, particularly that of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870), whose understudied writings on sacred sites are imbued with reverential awe and nostalgia. The term “nostalgia,” derived from the Greek *nostos* (“to return home”), and *algia* (“painful feeling”), was first coined by Johannes Hofer in a 1688 Swiss medical thesis. Utilizing displaced soldiers as an example, Hofer defined *heimweh*, the soldiers’ languishing

for home, as a medical condition or disease (Spitzer 90). Thus, nostalgia was originally understood as pain. More specifically, Barbara Cassin affirms, nostalgia is the “pain of return,” which is twofold in that the individual suffers while far away from home and must endure this suffering in order to return home (5). In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym asserts that nostalgia, in relation to the past and one’s home or community, tends to be expressed in two ways: reflective nostalgia, which focuses on rebuilding and filling the gaps in memory (*nostos*); and restorative nostalgia, which emphasizes loss and longing (*algia*) (41).

Drawing on the ideas of Caruth, Cassin, and Boym, I argue that Bécquer’s meticulous representation of holy spaces constitutes an act of repetition, which demonstrates that the trauma of witnessing the ruin and acknowledging its history of damage and neglect is still unresolved. He draws from both reflective and restorative nostalgia because he simultaneously ponders the very finitude and disintegration of a sacred home in a reflective nostalgia and exhibits restorative nostalgia in an artistic, symbolic sense pertinent to cultural memory. His nostalgia stems from a search for connections between religious belief—a characteristic of Spain’s social and cultural past, which provided him with literary inspiration—and the landscape of modernity. Rubén Benítez argues that, in his *Historia de los templos de España* (1857), Bécquer undertakes an artistic reconstruction of sacred monuments, privileging beliefs, ideas, and sentiments over historical documents (51). Jesús Rubio Jiménez states that Bécquer drew inspiration from the conservative French Romantic writer, François-Auguste-René Chateaubriand (1768-1848), who defended the Church during the French Revolution and commemorated France’s sacred sites and monuments in his opus, *The Genius of Christianity* (1802). In 1857, Bécquer published and dedicated *Historia* to Isabel II and other state and church officials (Rogers 312). This unfinished work reveals his strong religious convictions and mystic nature, as well as his personal interests and determination as a young writer (Rogers 311). Most significantly, his *Historia* was a literary attempt to restore a sacralized world from destruction and oblivion (Rubio Jiménez 35). Like a traveller in a foreign land, Bécquer conveys a profound homesickness in *Historia*.

Bécquer reiterates the same sentiment of yearning in his *Cartas desde mi celda* (1864), an epistolary work wherein he foregrounds the historical events and spiritual attitudes that contributed to this inability to return to the physical home of the abbey and the spiritual home of the ruined or neglected church. The inhabitants of confiscated monasteries and convents—members of religious communities—could not go back to their residences. Moreover, lay religious believers, like Bécquer, were deprived of the sacred ambience of former church spaces, which had now become lodging for travellers as opposed to the places of worship that they once were. Between 1863 and 1864, the author and his brother, the artist Valeriano, stayed at the Monasterio de Veruela in Zaragoza. While Bécquer recovered from tuberculosis, he wrote his *Cartas* and sketched. Valeriano produced an album of drawings and paintings of their daily lives and surroundings. Up to forty of their drawings, which formed most of their artistic output during their stay, were of the Monastery of Veruela (Rubio Jiménez 46, 49). In agreement with Rubio Jiménez, I hold that throughout their artistic journey in Veruela, both brothers revealed their anxiety about the effects of progress on tradition, of which the sacred, haunting space of the monastery was emblematic (51).

In this essay, I will explore Bécquer's conceptualizations of the sacred ecclesiastical space in *Historia* and *Cartas*. In my analysis of *Historia*, I deal primarily with metaphor and religious symbolism in relation to Toledo's Monasterio de San Juan de los Reyes. I focus specifically on San Juan de los Reyes because of its spiritual and historic significance to Toledo. Deploying the corporeal metaphor of the Church, Bécquer personifies the damage and negligence inflicted on Catholic religious buildings and communities, as seen in Toledo. In my analysis of *Cartas*, I will discuss how Bécquer pays homage to mysticism, which defies temporal restrictions of time through its emphasis on eternity. Here I base my discussion of mysticism on the theories of Michel de Certeau. Alluding to the Spanish mystics, who lived within their cloistered communities and traveled to found more monasteries and convents, Bécquer commemorates Spain's less conventional religious heritage. By physically producing, and literarily situating, his writings within the precincts of churches and the dwellings of religious communities, Bécquer calls attention to the wavering flame of memory, symptomatic of the fallout from political decisions in Spain, to which he personally alludes in his *Cartas*. As Boym explains, nostalgia's fundamental ambivalence derives from its emphasis on the repetition of the unrepeatable and the materialization of the immaterial (xvii).

While much has been written on Bécquer's literary corpus, his non-fiction or poetic texts, *Cartas* and *Historia*, have received considerably less attention. In her study of Bécquer's *Historia*, Sarah Sierra examines the significance of religious origins and the often-overlooked emphasis on cultural memory (477). Regarding Bécquer's *Cartas*, Francisco Javier Díez de Revenga addresses folkloric belief, maintaining that the collection and dissemination of local traditions and popular lore was a common pursuit in European Romanticism (387). Relatedly, Enrique Rull Fernández states that the *Cartas* form an itinerary, commencing with Bécquer's arrival at the monastery of Veruela and ending with an invocation of the Virgin of Veruela and a history of the monastery's establishment. Nevertheless, he concludes that the *Cartas* are fundamentally poetic rather than autobiographical, narrating a real, personal experience infused with a symbolic dimension (Rull Fernández 254, 264).¹

According to Philip W. Silver, Bécquer's work was characterized by a late conservative, Catholic, medievalizing Romanticism (xiii). His texts convey the idea that "the past is unrecoverable, and yet its interpretation remains a matter of spiritual life and death" (66). The critic asserts that the writer addresses the relationship between the divine and the created worlds through a reflection based on piety, not melancholy (74). Drawing on Silver's thesis, I argue that Bécquer's conveying of religious nostalgia is an act of sacralization. Melding the artistic and cultural meanings of religious sanctuaries, his texts "conjure" a bridge between their past and present states in an attempt to overcome the cultural and spiritual trauma caused by disentanglement. While Benítez declares that "[e]l observador no ejerce una actividad libre" (56), I hold that the author goes beyond the role of mere spectator in his *Historia* and *Cartas* to assume that of creator, closely examining and interpreting the inner lives of the temples of Toledo and the Monastery of Veruela.

It is important to note that Bécquer starts his *Historia* with Toledo, and specifically with the Monasterio de San Juan de los Reyes. It was in the third Toledo Council that the Visigoth king Reccared renounced Arianism and converted to Catholicism. Since then, Peter Linehan

states, “Spain’s spiritual awakening has been, and continues to be, dated to the metaphorical act of national baptism which III Toledo is held to have represented” (22-23). The significance of Toledo for Spanish history is evident in Patricio de la Escosura’s *España artística y monumental: Vistas y descripción de los sitios y monumentos más notables de España* (1842), which provides illustrations and descriptions of religious and civil sites and monuments throughout Spain, such as the sepulchres of the Castilian noble Álvaro de Luna, the Cathedral of Zamora, the monastery of Santa María de las Huelgas in Burgos, the former synagogue of Santa María la Blanca in Toledo, and the Cathedral of Toledo. Escosura lauds Toledo in particular as a place built by the religious piety of Spain’s ancestors (13).

I consider that Bécquer does not seek to conceal his sentimental and personal conceptualization of the religious buildings in *Historia*. Rather, he presents a highly subjective and imaginative poetic response, assuming the roles of the solitary thinker (*Historia* 771), the studious artist (772), and the creative poet (773). His artistic skills, evident in his apprenticeship as a painter, helped form the foundation of a sensitive and observant poet. Thus, imitating a pictorial artist, he describes sacred buildings in great detail, guided by his Catholic beliefs (González-Gerth 185, 186, 191). Apart from San Juan de los Reyes, *Historia* also features the synagogues of Nuestra Señora del Tránsito and Santa María la Blanca, the old mosque of Cristo de la Luz, and a wide range of then existing Catholic churches, convents, monasteries, beguinages, chapels, sanctuaries, and religious communities, so as to arguably arouse greater interest in the interconnections between Spain’s architectural and religious histories. Nevertheless, it goes beyond giving an account of each building’s background and physical features, elements principal, if not primary, to any historical-architectural text. Moreover, I posit that Bécquer’s literary “dismantling” of the sacred site into its concrete, aesthetic, historical, and religious facets doubly evokes the actions of breaking and salvaging, which, as I state earlier, mirror his unresolved state of trauma. Through the eyes of a thinker, artist, and poet, Bécquer endeavors to present himself as a witness to the silent, disembodied ruins of an increasingly secularizing Spain.

In fact, Bécquer represents Toledo’s sacred edifices as essential components of Spain’s rich diversity of spiritual histories. From the beginning, he discloses the thoughts and sentiments that underpin the entire work in question: “La tradición religiosa es el eje de diamante sobre el que gira nuestro pasado” (*Historia* 770). I consider that the writer’s subjective responses to the fates of historic religious buildings demonstrate his concern for the sacred precinct, a space associated with the redemptive properties of a threatened religious faith. From a time of excessive secularization and political upheavals, his text looks back to a past when faith constituted the source of social unity rather than disunity, and of communion, not disharmony.

According to Pedro Navascués Palacio, Bécquer was the first to call attention to San Juan de los Reyes, thus preventing its total oblivion (96). In fact, the critic posits, Bécquer’s Romantic prose influenced the decision to create the Comisión de Monumentos, even though it took until 1881 for the architect and sculptor Arturo Mélida to restore the building’s “lost dignity” (98). The monastery building had suffered damages from French troops and later lost its inhabitants, members of the Franciscan order, through the 1835 exlaustration act (Navascués Palacio 96). Bécquer’s work poignantly emphasizes the sacred status of the

monastery, lamenting the reality of its obscurity. It is on this notion of the deliberate and politically motivated forgetting of the sacredness of religious space that Bécquer seems so fixated. He first describes the complex as worthy of intellectual, artistic, and poetic attention. Although it had been previously devastated by French troops during the Napoleonic invasion and subsequently neglected after the exlaustration of its inhabitants, he suggests that literary and visual art can fill the chasm created by the losses and damage inflicted on the convent. By personifying and apostrophizing these edifices, he beckons them and the figures of the past to acknowledge his awareness: “Silenciosas ruinas de un prodigio del arte, restos imponentes de una generación olvidada, sombríos muros del Santuario del Señor, heme aquí entre vosotros” (*Historia* 830).

Bécquer here invokes a supernatural power, conferring upon himself the authority and responsibility of speaking for these voiceless figures of the past. *Heme aquí* educes the reply of Moses to the God in Exodus 3:4. “Here I am,” Moses says, acknowledging and responding to the presence of the Divine (*Douay Rheims* 53). Assuming the prophetic persona of Moses, he authorizes himself to carry out and receive the commands of the past, to recreate an image thereof through the fragments that inspire his poetic imagination and voice. He decries the forgetting of these hollowed and hallowed spaces, given their high cultural significance, which he explicitly describes using the words “prodigio” and “imponentes.” In this invocation, he aestheticizes the ruin. However, the monastery and its church are not mere displays of human craftsmanship and artistic magnificence. He accentuates their underlying mystical and supernatural meanings.

Bécquer addresses the ruined ecclesiastical edifices in the present tense as if he were directly speaking to the dead. It could only mean that, for him, the dead have not disappeared entirely, given that the Catholic sacralization of the dead premises the hope of their resurrection. In light of this theological concept, he emphasizes in *Historia* the poet’s ability to retrieve what seemingly belongs to a bygone era: “El poeta, a cuya invocación poderosa, como al acento de un conjuro mágico, palpita en sus olvidadas tumbas el polvo de cien generaciones; cuya imaginación ardiente reconstruye sobre un roto sillar un edificio, y sobre el edificio, con sus creencias y sus costumbres, una edad remota” (773). Literature takes on the act of renewal, but for both writer and reader, the act of renewal is also a duty. The written word tasks the reader with conjuring images mentally in the absence of intact visual realities and restoring them through the imagination.

Bécquer lends a poetic sensibility to the image of the sold, ruined abbey, which appears as a decrepit object, but remains replete with artistic, historical, and religious significance. His addressing the monastic complex as if it were a human being can be analyzed on three levels of signification: the cruciform church as a sign of Christ’s body, the sacred building as a house for the living, and the church as a resting place for the dead and sanctified. In his description of San Juan de los Reyes, he utilizes anatomical terms, describing its body and the nerves of its vault (*Historia* 812). On the symbolic potential of the body, Mary Douglas has remarked: “The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious” (115).

The apt, organic metaphor of the body in relation to San Juan de los Reyes acknowledges the amalgam of earthly and celestial bodies in the church space. Relics of martyrs are placed in the altar stone, situated in the sanctuary that is the head of the church. In the chapels between the aisles and the nave, the body of the church, are shrines to the saints and sepulchres. The church, by virtue of its primarily cultic function, separates itself from the secular world. Duncan G. Stroik points out that the church's role is twofold: it is a *domus Dei* ("house of God") and a *domus ecclesiae* ("house of the people of God") (64). Drawing on Stroik, I consider that the same can be said of the abbey of San Juan de los Reyes, which has its own church and is also a home for people who dedicate themselves to religion. The liturgical locus and the religious house are, therefore, sanctuaries. Both consecrated sites give each other meaning.

In *Historia*, Bécquer regards the temple of San Juan de los Reyes as the manifestation of religious tradition, the study of which will help to synthesize the "eje de diamante," the invincible foundation and core of a shared past (769). He acknowledges the myriad individuals who created the monastic complex; from the builders who constructed it, to the artists who decorated it, and to the archivists who stored history and knowledge in it:

Por último, cuando nos hayan revelado sus secretos las artes, cuando descifremos el Apocalipsis de granito que escribió el sacerdote en el santuario y aparezcan a nuestros ojos esas generaciones gigantes que duermen bajo las losas de sus sepulcros, arrojaremos sobre el confuso caos de tan diferentes ideas un rayo de la fe que creara, y este será el *fiat lux* que disipará las sombras de ese pasado desconocido. (770, italics in original)

By referring to *fiat lux* ("Let there be light"), Bécquer alludes to the Creation story in the Book of Genesis. Taking on a quasi-divine role as literary creator, he aligns himself with the monastery's builders: "El convento de San Juan de los Reyes, en sus distintas cualidades de página histórica, de edificio monumental y de fuente de la poesía, goza el triple privilegio de hablar a la inteligencia que razona, al arte que estudia, al espíritu que crea" (775). He also subsequently refers to the Tower of Babel, the biblical tower that God destroyed to punish the builders for their hubris. This scriptural reference may be interpreted as alluding to the Spanish nation in political and spiritual turmoil. The author cautions against the vanity of worldly pursuits, juxtaposing the collective giant of religious beliefs with the small, rickety Babel of secularization: "Acaso cuando, ya reunidos sus fragmentos, pongamos en pie el coloso de las creencias, sus gigantes proporciones humillen y confundan la raquítica Babel de la impiedad" (770).

For Bécquer, these fragments belong to the unifying structure of religious belief. The recovering and reuniting of these fragments are acts of remembrance. Apropos of narrative memory and the remaking of individual and collective selves, Susan Brison asks, "How does one remake a self from the scattered shards of disrupted memory?" (45). According to her, the performative role of speech is indispensable for recovering from trauma because "saying something about a traumatic memory does *something* to it" (48, emphasis in original). The trauma survivor, Brison continues, experiences a "figurative dismemberment," which

involves the shattering of assumptions, the severing of the temporalities of past, present, and future, and a disruption of memory (48). It follows, then, that to construct a narrative is to gather up these shards in an attempt to reconstruct the damaged self (Brison 46).

Recalling Brison's likening of shattered memory to shards, the "fragmentos" that Bécquer envisages assembling designate the physical and spiritual brokenness of the confiscated building that his commemorative writing will imaginatively restore. In the following passage, his mechanical metaphor of religion as the "eje de diamante" in the introduction of *Historia* contrasts in the following passage with the shattered stone and shard of ecclesiastical ruins:

Los años de la devastación, al pasar sobre sus muros, le han grabado el sello de ruina y de grandeza que lo caracteriza, y la hiedra que se mece colgada de los parduscos y fuertes machones de su ábside; los carcomidos y tradicionales hierros que, a manera de festón arquitectónico, rodean sus robustos pilares; los calados doseletes que arrojan una sombra misteriosa sobre la frente de sus rotos y mudos heraldos de granito; la majestad y la esbeltez de la espaciosa y única nave de su iglesia. (*Historia* 771)

The idealized "robustos pilares," which hold the sacred building together, have not prevented the formation of "rotos y mudos heraldos de granito" in actuality. The silencing of these personified, shattered angelic messengers suggests that the convent's foundations, the spiritual ideals for which it stands, have been shaken. What is left are passive remains, with the convent's former strength and majesty undermined by contemporary damage and neglect. Nevertheless, the verb "grabado," alluding to inscription, depicts the ruin as a palimpsest. Such a description portrays the ruin as a site worthy of reflection, which appeals to the Romantic sensibility.

Following Bécquer's detailed description of the convent's architectural and semantic (de)composition, he concludes with a personal ode to the building and its history, which might be read as a headstone epitaph: "El alto silencio del abandono vive ahora en vuestros muros, entre cuyos sillares crece la hiedra que da sombra al nido de la golondrina, hecho de leves plumas sobre el dosel de las estatuas" (837). Furthermore, he laments that the holy space has now faded into oblivion and obscurity. Faith and religious devotion buttressed the monastery's ability to stand strong for many centuries. With the dawn of a modern age, however, the monastery, and the religion that it symbolizes, must compete with the liberal pillars of industry and commerce. As the author continues, the invasive forces of war ("legiones extranjeras" and "corceles") and avarice, which are theoretically contrary to premises of religion, debilitate the monastery's structure on a physical level and eclipse its presence in the public sphere. Thus, Bécquer's religious beliefs and nationalist sentiment inform his opposition to aggressive secularization and foreign invasion:

Envueltos en el olvido y la oscuridad, pasáis luego a través de una y otra generación hasta que las legiones extranjeras profanan vuestros umbrales. Bajo las santificadas bóvedas que sólo habían recibido la nube del incienso o las preces de los religiosos, retumban el sonoro golpear del ferrado casco de

los corceles, el ronco son de los atambores y el metálico choque de las armas. Temblando los ecos, repiten los libres cantares de los campamentos y el nocturno grito de alarma de los vigías. (835)

Bécquer then invokes the mute, dormant statues around him: “¡Mudas estatuas que me rodeáis! ¡Guerreros que dormís inmóviles en vuestros nichos de piedra! Vosotros debisteis de temblar de indignación aquel día y llevar vuestras heladas manos a las espadas de granito que penden aún en vuestros cinturones” (836). By personifying the inanimate statues of the church of San Juan de los Reyes, he points to the desecration (“las carcajadas, los juramentos, las blasfemias”) of avaricious individuals, those who “siguen el oro” (836). I touch again on this literary technique below, in which the personification of sculptures also serves to signal and reinforce the supernatural milieu of the church.

Bécquer’s commanding, incensed tone transforms his reflection into an elegy, which, according to David Kennedy, “presents everything as lost and gone, or absent and future” (4). Nineteenth-century Romantic elegy, Kennedy notes, involves outbursts of anger as well as repeated phrases (6). As Bécquer takes on the role of an elegiac poet, he mourns the building and its state. In combining the building’s history with a poetic lament for its dilapidated state, he expresses a desire for the restitution of the religious faith that San Juan de los Reyes denotes. This longing for an idealized, stabilizing spirituality continues in several of his *Cartas*, to which I now turn.

In 1863 Bécquer and his brother Valeriano stayed in the Cistercian Monasterio de Veruela, which, having been established in 1145, had been abandoned on three occasions throughout the nineteenth century: in 1808 during the Napoleonic invasion, in 1820 by Fernando VII’s abolition of monastic orders, and in 1835 through Mendizábal’s disentailment laws. In 1844, the monastery was put up for sale (Rubio Jiménez 17). It is relevant to note that Bécquer wrote *Cartas desde mi celda*, published in the periodical *El Contemporáneo* in 1864 (“Notas” 1247), in the actual monastery itself. Given that the monastery is surrounded by high mountains, it is a site par excellence for prophetic reference. Marlon B. Ross declares that to speak from the mountain is the ultimate experience of the sublime, where the individual tests the power and limits of the self, stresses the solitude of self-questing, and pits the self against nature’s power (44). Biblically, prophets communicated with God on these high places. It was on the Mount Horeb that God commanded Moses to lead his people to safety and then offer sacrifice on the same mountain (Exodus 3:12), and it was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the Decalogue from God (Exodus 20). Most significantly, in his Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5-7, Jesus reinforces moral teachings from the Beatitudes to respect what was sacred. In Ross’s words, “[i]t is from mountains that prophets proclaim their truths; for the poet-prophet the mountain symbolizes the necessary solitude of the leaders of men and the necessary stance of truth—its transcendence, its elusiveness, and its immense might” (44).

Although the monastery was damaged during the French occupation of Toledo, Bécquer states in his description of Veruela’s monastery that it remains for the most part intact: “El monasterio se conserva en buen estado y es objeto de continuas visitas de artistas, anticuarios y extranjeros, que van allí a admirar la severidad y sencillez grandiosa de este asilo,

consagrado, en tiempos más piadosos, a la contemplación divina” (“Monasterio” 989). However, Bécquer points out that the edifice’s primary purpose as a monastic abode has been replaced by touristic activities, thus signaling its break from a devout, divine past. Throughout the *Cartas*, he conveys his sentiment of yearning upon relating his daily experiences and thoughts in the first person, turning such musings into a patriotic reminiscence of “*nuestra vieja España*” (“Carta IV” 541, my emphasis). As Anthony D. Smith categorically states, memory is bound to a place, particularly a homeland (75). The idea of binding suggests defiance towards an unstable and changing modern world, driven by utility, activity, and mobility (14). Bécquer’s referral to “*nuestra vieja España*” privileges ideals of permanence and antiquity, a trend common in Romanticism. The deeply solemn, melancholic undertones of his second, fourth, and tenth letters, in particular, on which my analysis focuses, are suffused with nostalgia and yearning for a religious past perceived as more enduring.

In his second letter, Bécquer describes the monastery’s surroundings as an ambience conducive to a mystical experience, a “flight” from the world. Hearing its various bells brings relief, alleviating his anxieties about the contemporary political climate and national concerns. From the problematic public arena, the author retreats to the interior realm of his soul, which the monastic space upholds:

La campana del monasterio, la única que ha quedado colgada en su ruinosa torre bizantina, comienza a tocar la oración, y una cerca, y otra lejos, estas con una vibración metálica y aguda, aquellas con un tañido sordo y triste, les responden las otras campanas de los lugares del Somontano...

Ya todo pasó. Madrid, la política, las luchas ardientes, las miserias humanas, las pasiones, las contrariedades, los deseos; todo se ha ahogado en aquella música divina. Mi alma está ya tan serena como el agua inmóvil y profunda. (“Carta II” 522-23)

Bécquer’s attention to the ringing bells and their impact on the auditory environment evokes the medieval custom of ringing church bells to summon the monastic community to prayer. In a sense, he is recalling a daily tradition in the European Middle Ages. Early Christians could only worship privately until the fourth century with the Edict of Milan, after which bells appeared in Western Europe as a common feature in liturgy and daily life. While St. Pachomius’s Egyptian rule made use of trumpets for calling members to prayer, St. Benedict’s rule in Italy employed the *signum*, the medieval word for bell (Young 293).²

Hence, the monastic origins that these sounds evoke effectively conjure an image of an enduring religious past. Furthermore, the sound network that the simultaneous chimes form across the area signals a closing of distance, bringing together communities to answer the harmonious call of religion. I suggest that Bécquer’s *Cartas* urge a retreat to the observance of faith. It may seem that this work signifies a personal spiritual experience of the individualist Romantic type, which navigates from the “externals” of religion and dogma. Yet it is crucial to point out that he upholds the icons of organized religion by his response to the bells and the “santuario del Señor.” This *milieu* contributes to a spiritual recall that beckons a union

with the past. The internal aspects of the Catholic religion, which Bécquer's passage above presents in theological terms such as "alma," "divina," and "oración," contrast starkly with the external panorama of political conflict.

Despite Catholicism being recognized culturally and politically as the official religion of Spain and hence as part of the national "body," exclaustation and expropriation demonstrated that certain parts and members of the Spanish Church were under attack. Prompted by the bells, the secular world ceases to perturb Bécquer. The phrase "todo se ha ahogado" effectively illustrates the way in which the narrative voice asserts that the divine overrides all earthly affairs, secondary to matters of the soul.

Bécquer's above-cited recourse to the symbol of deep, still waters—"el agua inmóvil y profunda"—is of mythical and spiritual significance. Asiatic and Oceanian mythologies recognized water's power in giving life and death (Eliade 158). Christianity, Mircea Eliade writes, conferred new religious values on this archetypal image, which recalls not only Noah and the deluge that cleansed the world but also the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan and his institution of baptism as a sacrament (155). Hence, the purifying nature of water is highlighted in its ability to "wash away sins" (152). According to the patristic writings of the early Christian Church, water bore a soteriological, not just a cosmological, value, bringing forth life in its natural and supernatural sense. Water as a natural, life-giving, and life-preserving element is a signifier of salvation: an eternal spiritual life. Eliade asserts that water is "*fons et origo*, the reservoir of all the potentialities of existence; they *precede* every form and *sustain* every creation" (151, emphasis in original). Given that the theological foundation of all creation is God, Bécquer's symbol of profound waters signals God's fluid presence from time immemorial.

In *Bécquer tradicionalista*, Benítez asserts that Bécquer was associated with Spanish moderates. Yet this scholar also points out certain contradictions in the author's political and cultural mindset; while he was concerned about social injustice and disparities and believed in the goal of modern progress, he was equally vehement on the matter of tradition and religion (31). Hence, at the start of the liberal crisis in 1856, Bécquer's political mindset altered in that he began to favor the notion of a society originating from "la idea religiosa," and supported the view that the monarchy was an expression of religious unity (36). Thus, Benítez argues that, from 1860 onwards, Bécquer was a neo-Catholic in his criticism of extreme liberalism at the expense of traditional values and the Catholic religion that had inspired the establishment of important monuments in Spain's history (38). In his second letter, Bécquer's criticism of Madrid as the hub of unchecked ambition now reflects his artistic traditionalism, which, as Benítez notes, took up a political stance to oppose the "piqueta demoledora del progreso" (60). Due to disentanglement, civil wars, and growing urbanization under Isabel II, religious buildings and sites of historic and artistic value were being lost or replaced by edifices focused on public utility (60-61).³

In his *Cartas*, Bécquer declares that the miseries brought about by the tensions between Church and State and the loss of social interest in Catholicism signal a break with the nation's past. In his fourth letter, Bécquer depicts the tensions between modernity, with its emphasis on the future, and the past, with its national traditions:

Yo tengo fe en el porvenir. [. . .] No obstante, sea cuestión de poesía, sea que es inherente a la naturaleza frágil del hombre simpatizar con lo que perece y volver los ojos con cierta triste complacencia hasta lo que ya no existe, ello es que en el fondo de mi alma consagro, como una especie de culto, una veneración profunda por todo lo que pertenece al pasado, y las poéticas tradiciones, las derruidas fortalezas, los antiguos usos de nuestra vieja España, tienen para mí todo ese indefinible encanto [. . .]. (“Carta IV” 541)⁴

That Bécquer confirms his faith in the future reveals that he is not pessimistic towards it. According to Joe Bailey, pessimism finds expression by avoiding the future, “using the past as a tool” (43). Instead, the author’s attitude towards Spain’s religious and cultural history is accompanied by an attempt to harmonize tradition with the demands of modern life. Thus, I concur with Rubio Jiménez’s assertion that, for Bécquer, commemorating the past is a moral obligation, and that, instead of blindly accepting excessive innovation, it would be best to establish a compromise between the past and the future (51). This ascription of responsibility to remembrance echoes Pierre Nora’s notion that one must have the will to remember sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) (19).

In the above passage, Bécquer also expresses a profound sense of grief at the ruin of churches, which are both sanctuaries and strongholds of religion. For him, the destruction of these holy places was an act of barbarism which demolished a people’s past and annihilated wonder. He compares the convenience of technological innovations and the advancement of communications with the cost of losing the nation’s past identity, beliefs, and way of life: “A medida que vuela por los hilos telegráficos, que el ferrocarril se extiende, la industria se acrecienta y el espíritu cosmopolita de la civilización invade nuestro país, van desapareciendo de él sus rasgos característicos, sus costumbres inmemoriales” (544). At the same time, in referring to “nuestra vieja España” as mentioned before, Bécquer brings up the importance of traditions for future generations: “¡[Q]uién sabe si nuestros hijos a su vez nos envidiarán a nosotros, doliéndose de nuestra ignorancia o nuestra culpable apatía para transmitirles siquiera un trasunto de lo que fue un tiempo su patria!” (543).

Bécquer describes the modern world as a place of unoriginality and unending materialist desire, representing the processes of industrialization through phrases such as “camino trillado” and “ansia de las innovaciones” (546). Tom Lewis situates Bécquer’s response to the emergence of Spanish modernity as “one of the first textualizations of powerfully felt emotions in the context of new social experiences” (423). The growing bustling city with its novelties was one of the environments that the Spanish author’s writings aimed to question and transcend. In comparison, Sierra considers that Bécquer himself was a moderate, appreciating the benefits of modernization while remaining loyal to Spain’s religious and cultural heritage (473).

Bécquer’s yearning for monastic solitude and simple living recalls Fray Luis de León’s sixteenth-century poem “Vida retirada,” the opening lines of which privilege the tranquility of living away from the world: “¡Qué descansada vida / la del que huye del mundanal ruido[!]” (*Poesía* 24). Fray Luis de León was an important figure for moderate Spanish

Romantics like Bécquer, who himself looked to other Golden Age poets such as Garcilaso de la Vega and St. John of the Cross, due to their emphasis on the interior life (López Castro 976).

What has impeded the expression and pursuit of all things spiritual, Bécquer asserts, is ignorance, vandalism, and envy in times of war:

[A]l contemplar los destrozos causados por la ignorancia, el vandalismo o la envidia durante nuestras últimas guerras; al ver todo lo que en objetos dignos de estimación, en costumbres peculiares y primitivos recuerdos de otras épocas se ha extraviado y puesto en desuso de sesenta años a esta parte; lo que las exigencias de la nueva manera de ser social trastornan y desencajan; lo que las necesidades y las aspiraciones crecientes desechan u olvidan, un sentimiento de profundo dolor se apodera de mi alma [. . .]. (“Carta IV” 543)⁵

The nation’s heritage, with its cultural customs, memories, and monuments, is subject to oblivion. Economic and political agendas have led individuals to overlook the distinct and sacred role of churches and abbeys, which results in their damage and neglect. Such destruction provokes, as Bécquer’s text affirms, a sense of deep pain, a wound to the soul on personal and collective levels. He therefore criticizes a society based on appearances at the expense of religious belief, denouncing this “nueva manera de ser” by depicting Spanish society as a materialistic body that has disposed of its religious self, its soul. The disorder and disruption that have resulted from Spain’s modernizing transformation, his text suggests, destabilizes Spain’s present and future, which liberals premised on stability and order (White 246).

Bécquer’s self-referencing as “alma” in his fourth letter (“un sentimiento de profundo dolor se apodera de mi alma”) recalls mystical writing, especially the verse of St. John of the Cross, Carmelite friar and noted figure of the Counter-Reformation. St. John of the Cross’s poem, “Llama de amor viva,” expresses the intimate communication between the soul and God. The first stanza describes the soul’s bond with God as a “llama de amor viva” and develops imagery of life, light, and heat to oppose the loss represented by motifs of death, darkness, and cold:

¡Oh llama de amor viva
que tiernamente hieres
de mi alma en el más profundo centro!,
pues ya no eres esquiva,
acaba ya, si quieres;
rompe la tela de este dulce encuentro. (52, 1-6)

In his *Cántico espiritual*, St. John of the Cross depicts the anguish of the soul, depicted as a yearning bride, for God, the biblical Heavenly Bridegroom:

ESPOSA
¿Adónde te escondiste,

Amado, y me dejaste con gemido?
 Como el ciervo huiste,
 habiéndome herido;
 salí tras ti clamando, y eras ido. (44, 1-5)

Michel de Certeau discerns the dialogic discourse in this mutual search: “*I and thou*: two terms whose difference, regained and maintained, will be lost in the relation that posits them” (90, emphasis in original). The “I,” de Certeau states, is both figurative and a figure, a symbolic representation (94). The fusion that the soul and God seek, and the language used to define their relationship, annuls the heterology between them. Symbolic of the soul’s anguish, and indicative of its impatient longing to be united with God, is its injury, indicated in “habiéndome herido.” The soul’s fervent longing is amplified in its search for the hidden “ciervo,” representative of God.

Mysticism, as de Certeau categorically states, is the anti-Babel in that mystics seek a common language after language has been shattered (88). This common medium of expression is necessary for the dialogue, which, as de Certeau defines it, is between God and the soul. In contrast with the chaotic event of the fall of the tower of Babel, which, as Bécquer noted in his *Historia*, was a botched attempt to reach the heavens, mysticism starts at a lower height. The search for God in the heavens is one of spiritual longing and love, not worldly ambition.

There exists a relationship between mysticism and ruins, in that the latter are often the milieu for the former. Due to the religious and socioeconomic struggles brought about by wars and the Reformation, Christians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the humiliation of the Christian tradition and the disintegration of a “sacred world.” Hence, ruins, the symbols and products of destruction and decay, permeated the writings of mystics. Set against these ruins was God, who remained free from “the erosion of time” (de Certeau 86). Unlike his signs on earth, God was permanent and immovable. Thus, ruins and pain are interpolated into the mystical vision. Their connotations of loss (ruins) and trauma (wound) ultimately depict a void. It is this chasm that the mystic and believer must traverse. In de Certeau’s words, the faithful “were leading lives of exile, hounded from their land by the defilements of history” (86). Mystical language represents the collective experiences of this abandonment of home and the inauguration of wandering.

The message that Bécquer puts forward in his *Cartas* is that the realm of spiritual faith—visibly defined by the abbey—is in danger of oblivion. Yet he warns the liberal Spaniards, who aim to construct their progressive world, that their vision of a unified, advanced national future has been destabilized. What has caused this structural debilitation is the state’s uprooting of the religious foundations of Spain’s national history. This act of appropriation creates further confusion, as religious sites have become objects on which values, antithetical to their original spiritual design, have been imposed.

The tenth and final letter, not published in *El Contemporáneo* like the previous nine, presents a general recollection of Bécquer’s time in Veruela, which he describes as a place built by a now-waning faith. Here he criticizes the Spanish government’s excessive focus on the economy to the detriment of the nation’s spiritual health, which he regards as crucial for

a changing world and the premises of national identity enshrined in the liberal Constitutions of 1812, 1837, 1845, and 1869. Summing up the final image of the holy ruins of Veruela, Bécquer stresses that the buildings constitute a metaphor of absence, in that they are speechless due to the trauma that they have suffered and are in a state of solitariness because they have been directly abused, ignored, and forgotten. He describes the faith that constructed this divine complex, a faith that has petered out like a dying flame, he fears, because of the century's positivism and excessive focus on the economy: "Todo es silencio, soledad y olvido en estas veneradas ruinas. La fe que, como llama viva, levantó esta oración de piedra, hoy, poco a poco, se extingue y apaga en los pechos. Este siglo positivista y burgués solo rinde culto al dios Dinero, y es su romanza preferida el sonido del oro acuñado" ("Carta X" 614). For Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism, theological and mythological religion proved incompatible with the positivist spirit, which privileged modern industry and science to challenge superstition, fear, and blind obedience (Cerezo Galán 365). By reiterating the images of light and heat encapsulated in the "llama viva" of divine faith, Bécquer reveals the gravity of the gradual extinction of religious beliefs.

The state's seizure and economic "revaluing" of ecclesiastical buildings contribute to this slow death and the task of remembering the Catholic faith becomes more difficult. Thus, Bécquer envisages the abbey as a space of "olvidadas tumbas," indicative of "una edad remota" (*Historia* 773). Now that the religious inhabitants of the monastery of Veruela have gone, both they and their former home are not what they were. The image of the tombs represents both their religious selves and their sacred place. For Jane Donohoe, the erecting of memorials is "our responsibility to the dead" (74). If the dead have ceased to be their human selves by virtue of their departure from their place, what do the living owe them? I interpret Bécquer's memorialization of the confiscated and damaged religious buildings as an act that counters what he terms "este siglo positivista y burgués," which has supplanted Spain's spiritual identity.

Lamenting a faith that grows cold in the hearts of his fellow Spaniards, Bécquer's allusions to the work of St. John of the Cross are fitting. The Carmelite friar sought to reform his monastic community by calling for, like Bécquer, a rekindling of faith within.⁶ In *Cartas*, Bécquer represents the Monasterio de Veruela as a locus that is conducive to a mystical union between the soul and God. The neglect and ruin of such an edifice, he asserts, would eliminate this possibility of spiritual unification between earthly subjects and the divine, which he sees as a necessary cornerstone for political and national unity.

In closing, I have proposed that Bécquer's *Historias* and *Cartas* convey an active religious nostalgia. I have examined his conceptualizations of the ecclesiastical space in two of his works, which are set in, or depict, religious sites and monuments. In *Historia*, I analyzed the image of the body in describing the church and abbey, as well as the author's role as poet and elegist, with the aim of demonstrating his artistic involvement with the inner lives of these historically significant loci. In *Cartas*, I explored his recourse to mysticism to convey his unease about the overwhelming vicissitudes of the modern age. While such changes met the needs of infrastructure and daily life, they also compelled writers like Bécquer to acknowledge and contemplate the gaps in Spain's spiritual architecture. The phrase "nichos de piedra" in his *Historia* encapsulates this aperture, doubly representing the concrete

ramifications of expropriation and the resultant fissures in Spain's religious self. Nor was Bécquer alone in voicing his concerns. The evolving role of religion in Spain in an increasingly modernized world was also taken up by other nineteenth-century writers such as José María de Pereda, Benito Pérez Galdós, and Rosario de Acuña, whose works connected with and responded to a variety of personal and political beliefs (Alfante 3-4). By examining his own personal experiences in relation to sacred spaces and ruins, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer endeavored to make meaning out of a "ghost" world in a time of rapid secularization and sought answers to an uncertain future in the lingering echoes of the past.

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Notes

¹ On ruins in Bécquer's *Cartas*, also see Giuliano Soria's article, "Ruinas de Monasterio e Verdura sin Alegría in 'Cartas desde mi celda' di Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer."

² Matthew D. Herrera, however, traces the practice of ringing church bells back to the fifth century, when St. Paulinus, the Bishop of Nola, introduced the practice to summon monks to prayer. By the ninth century, the custom had spread to all parishes of the Western Roman Empire.

³ The denunciation of confiscation and demolition was also common, for instance, in the writings of José de Espronceda and the editorials of the periodical *El Semanario Pintoresco Español* (Benítez 61).

⁴ In his phrase "poéticas tradiciones," Bécquer alludes to Spain's rich cultural heritage. He combines it with religion in his ninth letter, where he refers to the "verdadera poesía de la religión" ("Carta IX" 612).

⁵ The wars to which Bécquer refers here (sixty years prior to his *Cartas*) were the devastating Spanish War of Independence (1808-1814), which was fought against French invaders, the Wars of Independence in Spanish America (1808-1826), and two of the three Carlist wars that divided Spain (1833-1840 and 1846-1849).

⁶ I thank an anonymous reader for making this perceptive point.

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