

Sound as a Bridge to the Otherworld in Selected Legends by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer

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Relatively speaking, phenomena which are concrete, visible, and tangible are easy to grasp. The five senses offer insight and understanding of the world, and are, seemingly, the only vehicle through which one can understand the world. As Rochelle Forrester explains, the universe is sense dependent and humankind's method of knowing the world comes only through the senses of touch, taste, hearing, etc. (1). Since that which is tangible and easily perceived cannot offer the same sense of mystery as that which is unseen and un-sensed. It was the intangible, ephemeral parts that Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer sought to understand and capture, and he was inspired to touch the Otherworld, the domain that lay beyond the material world. To capture, or at least attempt to capture it, Bécquer relies on sound to convey his impressions and uses many of these sounds to build a bridge to the Otherworld, where everything intangible, -ghosts, thoughts, and mists- reside. There have been many accounts of visions of heaven, especially in the medieval world, which were of particular interest to Bécquer. While some of these may include accounts of choirs of angels, the bulk of the accounts focus on what the person saw, and there include crystal cities, precious stones, angels, mansions, throne, colors, and candles (Easting 77-8). However, throughout Bécquer's stories, whenever the Otherworld penetrates the veil into this world, Bécquer emphasizes sound. Because sound cannot be touched or contained, it can be considered an intangible that is also readily perceived in the material world, thus rendering it an adequate vehicle to connect both worlds. Bécquer uses sound liberally in all his legends, but especially where there is an opening into the Otherworld in order to provide transport between the worlds.

Jorge Guillén states that Bécquer was always tormented by the fundamental contradiction of spirit and matter (147). Bécquer's use of sound to form a bridge between the two worlds demonstrates his way of reconciling the fundamental differences. Furthermore, the idea of the unattainable as a principal ingredient of meaningful experience (Inglis 26) is important with regard to Bécquer's use of sound. Like many Romantics, Bécquer believed that the unobtainable is capable of inspiring emotional heights that allow one to feel fully alive. While sound is a prominent feature throughout Bécquer's *Leyendas*, this paper will limit itself to exploring its use in four.

El Caudillo de las manos rojas

Bécquer begins *Caudillo* with his typical ephemeral images such as the "sombra de la montaña," "un velo de crespón," and the "azulada niebla del crepúsculo" (39) setting a vague, shadowy scene with the promise of secrets and mystery, in an in-between place. He also sets the scene in such a place as "El día que muere y la noche que nace luchan un momento" (39). The place serves as a border, the shadowland that separates night and day, suggestive also of a place between this material world and the Otherworld. Bécquer's fascination with the passage from this world into the next is found not only in *Caudillo*, but in many of his legends. While sound is not the only way Bécquer uses to attempt to capture the ephemeral, it features prominently in *Caudillo*, especially when there is a thinning of the veil between the worlds.

The protagonist's love interest appears to belong to both worlds. Siannah enters the scene on leaves that sigh under her light foot, which Pulo hears and thus becomes aware of her presence by the sound she produces, rather than by the sight of her material body (40). Like so many of Bécquer's women, she is transitory, a being perhaps not completely of this world. Her perfume, also an intangible, stimulates the nose but does not allow capture. Siannah's breath

blends in with the sounds of Nature as if she formed a part of it, outside the concrete, rational, civilized world of human beings. While her feet produce sound, she is “muda,” further foreshadowing that she will form part of the Otherworld, the realm of the unobtainable. Siannah is also the wife of Pulo’s brother, which adds yet another dimension to her unobtainability. Yet Pulo must have her and sends his brother to the Otherworld in order to obtain her.

The love between Siannah and Pulo, bought with the blood of Pulo’s brother, augurs tragedy. Death makes its appearance before the brothers fight as Bécquer associates it with Siannah’s icy veins. The fight begins with a “grito ronco y salvaje” (40) and ends at dawn as “las aguas, los bosques, la saves, el espacio, los mundos, tienen una sola voz y esta voz entona el himno del día” (41). The sound Bécquer describes here is not as well developed as it is in some of the other deaths in his legends, but it is important in creating an encompassing picture. The impending death rips open a passageway into the Otherworld as signaled by the wild scream. Once Pulo’s brother passes, harmony is restored to the Earth as reflected by the surrounding tranquil sounds.

Later, while Pulo is on his quest to clean his hands of his brother’s blood, he fights and kills a tiger, a masculine symbol of ferocity, valor, wildness, but then it transforms into a boa, a feminine symbol of renewal and fertility and of kundalini energy – ready and able energies not yet tapped by Self, and the unconscious (51). The serpent produces a “silbo áspero y agudo,” (51) effectively communicating its desire to send Pulo into the next world. However, it is not yet Pulo’s time as he has not completed his task. Vishu is present during this test, reminding the reader that the Otherworld is ever present. Vishnu saves Pulo’s life by shooting a diamond-pointed arrow that whistles (51) and then another one to finish the serpent off. Just as the snake

had produced a “silbo” to threaten death, so does the arrow to bring death to the serpent demonstrating that sound can create a two-way path between the worlds.

Vishnu, a supreme Indian deity, is described as an all-pervading force ever present in the past, present, and future, and the creator and destroyer of all existences. The boa is capable of stealing breath, and thus life, in the material world, thereby providing transport to the next. Bécquer’s acknowledgment of Siannah’s breath evokes the serpent. She is, after all, the reason for the destruction. Only the eyes of the snake, the place where perceptions of the material world enter, are vulnerable. As Vishnu’s arrow kills it, the serpent loses its ability to visually perceive the material world and can thus pass into the next. Sight is not as important as sound in this endeavor.

After the test, Vishnu whisks Siannah away from Pulo (52) and, as Pulo searches for her, the waters of the Ganges “alzan un himno melancólico” accompanied by the “suaves notas de los pájaros” (52). The afternoon sun is on its deathbed while the birds call goodbye to the day. Pulo cries out for Siannah and cannot understand why she cannot hear him, but he only receives an echo back because the bridge to the Otherworld has collapsed and the sound is returned to him. He quickly decides to take his life so that he can reach her, but is told by a disembodied voice “que resuena en el viento,” (52) that if he dies, he will never see her again. Thus, Pulo may find no sanctuary in death until his task is complete. Clearly sound may construct a bridge to the Otherworld, but only the gods can determine who may cross it.

Later, when the Indian deities are preparing for war, Bécquer foreshadows the deadly battle between Vishnu and Shiva by describing the sunset in deathly terms: “Las nubes, amontonándose en el Occidente, envuelven el cadáver del sol en un sudario de brumas antes que descienda a su sepulcro” (54). While these are visual images, they, like sound, are ephemeral

and unreachable. Before the fighting begins there are a great many sounds such as the “terribles bramidos del caracol sagrado” and the “bocinas de marfil de los guerreros” (55), “...la llanura gime bajo el peso de sus carros y elefantes de guerra, el eco de los lejanos montes repite sus salvajes alaridos. Suena la señal del combate y de la muerte” (56). The sound crescendos as the bridge between the worlds appears again to allow passage to those who lose their lives.

Afterwards, there is “un hondo silencio” (56) interrupted only by the “silbadoras llamas, o el ronco grito del chacal” (56), like the embers of a great fire that is nearly spent, again signaling that the bridge has collapsed.

At the end of the legend, it becomes clear that Shiva, portrayed here as the Destroyer, vanquishes Vishnu in the battle. Believing that Siannah will not be given back to him, Pulo asks to see her once more before he leaves this world by his own sword. Now, his task complete, he is allowed to take his own life. His wish is granted and Siannah appears, but he is only able to whisper her name before expiring (61). The faint whisper leaves the reader with only a small glimmer of hope that Pulo will slip into the Otherworld to be with his beloved Siannah.

Maese Pérez

While the legend of the Caudillo introduces the idea of using sound to connect the Otherworld to the material world, the legend of Maese Pérez further develops it. The narrator begins the story with the announcement that he heard this legend on Christmas Eve at Midnight Mass, which is also when the bulk of the legend’s story takes place. Several other Bécquer legends also take place on a holiday, which suggests that the veil between this world and the Otherworld thins on holy days. This time violence will not be a necessary component in opening passage.

The legend's scene is set with a description of a chaotic mass of people, all of whom are preoccupied with their worldly appearance and what others think of them. There is a sense of gossipy business and recognition of worldly status and hierarchy as the people make way for those deemed more important. Through all the chatter and noise, nonetheless, Bécquer introduces the most important character, Maese Pérez, the church organist (67).

Great attention is paid to the prevailing noise and clamor, "Todas esas bandadas que veis llegar con teas encendidas, entonando villancicos con gritos desaforados al compás de los panderos, las sonajas y las zambombas, contra su costumbres, que es la de alborotar en las iglesias" (69). The sounds of all the people dominate the scene, situating it fully in the material, human world. However, as always when Maese Pérez sits down, "callan como muertos cuando pone maese Pérez las manos en el órgano" (69). Bécquer compares the silence to death, suggesting a connection between what is about to take place and the world of the dead. They quiet down as if dead, a required state of being to pass into the Otherworld.

To further support the idea of the importance of sound, the narrator states that Maese Pérez is blind from birth. Thus his world is far more focused on sound and likely aids him in his mastery of the organ. Maese Pérez's heavenly music serves as a link to the Otherworld, which the people have come to rely on as evidenced by how upset they get when he is late. When he finally begins to play, the sound of the scene changes dramatically. A single note sounds like a thread of light, indicating its ephemeral qualities and linking the sound to the heavens and the sound to a visual, more mundane sense, thus effectively connecting the material world with the Otherworld.

On Maese Pérez's last Christmas Eve, Bécquer describes a rich visual scene replete with "ricos joyeles," "cojines de terciopelo," "capas de color galoneadas de oro," and "encomiendas

rojas y verdes” (69) accompanied by the people’s murmuring in the background. Their murmuring grows louder and more chaotic when the church service does not start on time because Maese Pérez is ill. When people realize this, “comenzó a notarse tal bullicio en el templo que el asistente se puso en pie y los alguaciles entraron a imponer silencio” (70). The people have come to be lifted and to have a taste of the Otherworld, but they need Maese Pérez to achieve this. When he does not come, the crowd remains grounded in the chaotic material world as reflected by the tumultuous sounds they produce.

A man who appears to be at death’s doorway, “un hombre mal trazado, seco, huesudo y bisojo” (70) offers to play in Maese Pérez’s place, but Maese Pérez, “pálido y desencajado” (71), his appearance suggesting impending death, manages to get to church before the man can play. He declares that he knows this is the last time he will do this and he wanted to see his organ before dying. His near death condition suggests that the veil to the Otherworld will thin soon to allow his passage. Maese Pérez has every intention of sharing a small part of the Otherworld with the parishioners and knows that his special music will facilitate it.

The church bells provide a prelude to his music with their “sonido vibrante” (71) while Maese Pérez’s music trails off into the air, “Las cien voces de sus tubos de metal resonaron en un acorde majestuoso y prolongado, que se perdió poco a poco, como si una ráfaga de aire hubiese arrebatado sus últimos ecos” (70). The master has begun construction of the bridge to the Otherworld, from whose side music is also heard. “A este primer acorde, que parecía una voz que se elevaba desde la tierra al cielo, respondió otro lejano y suave, que fue creciendo, creciendo, hasta convertirse en un torrente de atronadora armonía. Era la voz de los ángeles que, atravesando los espacios, llegaba al mundo” (70). Bécquer continues with the description of the sound comparing one note to a ray of light, effectively mixing sensorial input to create the idea

of a different world, and describing how the music allows the Host to appear to the faithful (71). “La multitud escuchaba atónita y suspendida. En todos los ojos había una lágrima; en todos los espíritus, un profundo recogimiento.... El sacerdote que oficiaba sentía temblar sus manos, porque Aquel que levantaba en ellas, Aquel a quien saludaban hombres y arcángeles, era su Dios, era su Dios, y le parecía haber visto abrirse los cielos y transfigurarse la Hostia” (71). The music has made the Otherworld visible to everyone and has acquired enough energy to move even the building.

As the sound finally begins to fade, it is mixed with a woman’s scream when she discovers that Maese Pérez has crossed the bridge and has gone to the Otherworld (71). The sound of her voice serves to seal off the closure between the two worlds now that Maese Pérez has passed. The only sound that remains are the sighs and sobs of his daughter, emphasizing that the doorway to the Otherworld has closed and all that remains is the material world, which will soon return to its normal chaos. Bécquer makes a point of separating the rumblings of the everyday material world from the sounds capable of creating a path into the Otherworld, demonstrating this with the gossipy chatter that ensues after Maese Pérez’s death, similar to that which begins the story. Life in the material world will continue, only interrupted by periodic visits or sightings of the Otherworld.

The following year, the people decide that the organ will remain silent in honor of Maese Pérez. Only he has the skill to bring the Otherworld into the church and thus raise everyone’s expectations of the power of music. Everything else remains the same, “Los mismos personajes, el mismo lujo, los mismos empellones en la puerta, la misma animación en el atrio, la misma multitud en el templo...” (72). When the priest raises the host the same as last year, “las campanillas repicaron, asemejando su repique una lluvia de notas de cristal. Se elevaron las

diáfanos ondas de incienso y sonó el órgano” (73). Bécquer uses the sound and the incense to suggest that the previous year’s magic will happen once again, which it does, as he illustrates a detailed portrait of the sound produced by the organ and the Otherworld, “cantos celestes,” “una saeta despedida a las nubes,” “coros de serafines,” “himnos alados que parecían remontarse al trono del Señor” (73). Maese Pérez returns from the spirit world to play the organ, suggesting that it is the sound that allows him to interact with the material world even though he no longer has a material body. As in *Caudillo*, sound facilitates two-way motion between the worlds.

El Miserere

There is a connection to the Otherworld through sound in *El Miserere* both when the monks that create the beautiful music pass over while singing, and when the protagonist dies while attempting to grasp the music he heard. It is as if death is the only way the true music can be grasped and sense organs simply are not adequate to fully comprehend or perceive the whole music and the limited human ability to communicate with another. Each part that human beings perceive is merely a small section of the absolute because of each individual unique perception; it thus becomes difficult to share that same perception with another. Just as Bécquer struggled to fully articulate his passions and thoughts in words, so does the pilgrim have difficulty writing what he has heard, thereby making it impossible to share with anyone else.

Like several other legends, the event around which the story revolves occurs on a holy day, Holy Thursday, which commemorates Christ’s last supper, implying that the veil between the worlds will again thin to allow the protagonist and reader to peer into the world beyond, foreshadowed by Bécquer’s typical wind and creaky doors as the pilgrim leaves for the monastery.

When the pilgrim finds the monastery ruins, Bécquer immediately sets the scene with rhythmic sound in anticipation for the upcoming concert: “Las gotas de agua que se filtraban por entre las grietas de los rotos arcos y caían sobre las losas con un rumor acompasado, como el de la péndola de un reloj; los gritos del buho, que graznaba refugiado bajo el nimbo de piedra de una imagen en pie aún en el hueco de un muro; el ruido de los reptiles...” (79). The sounds of nature reign over the monastery ruins suggesting that humankind’s presence is like a passing ship in the night. “Transcurrió tiempo y tiempo, y nada se percibió: aquellos mil confusos rumores seguían sonando y combinándose de mil maneras distintas” (79) making up their own natural symphony and preparing the way for the imminent appearance of the supernatural world. The signal that the otherworldly concert is about to start is small and sounds like something manmade, “se oyó un ruido nuevo, un ruido inexplicable en aquel lugar, como el que produce un reloj algunos segundos antes de sonar la hora” (79) even though there is no clock to be seen anywhere. It is as if a switch has been flipped signaling that it is time for the two worlds to cross paths, implying that it is a regular, almost natural occurrence.

The sound of the “trueno incesante” accompanies the skeletal monks as they arrive to sing the Miserere, adding a hue of drama and suspense to the scene (79). “[F]ueron a arrodillarse en el coro, donde, con voz más levantada y solemne, prosiguieron entonando los versículos del salmo. La música sonaba al compás de sus voces...” (80). The music of the organ mixes with natural sounds as the thunder and the “zumbido del aire” the waterfall, the drops of water, and the owl and the reptiles. Bécquer uses these sounds to build tension, adding one element after the next leading to; “un alarido tremendo, que parecía un grito de dolor arrancado a la Humanidad entera por la conciencia de sus maldades; un grito horroroso, formado de todos los lamentos del infortunio, de todos los aullidos de la desesperación, de todas las blasfemias de la

impiedad” (80). There is power and apparent magic in the sound of the word that the monks have pronounced.

Nonetheless, a ray of sun representing God’s love breaks through the storm clouds and the monks appear human again and the angels appear in order to sing the Miserere with the monks. The sound is so colossal that the pilgrim cannot withstand it and falls to the ground unconscious. The presence of the celestial Otherworld has proven too great since it is not yet his time, and he is not yet allowed to cross the bridge to the Otherworld that the sound has created.

Afterwards, the pilgrim is obsessed with capturing what he heard on paper as he tries to write the Miserere down, but he finds that task impossible. This, of course, reflects Becquer’s own anguish at being unable to perfectly communicate his perceptions with another, which is a common theme in Bécquer’s writing and reflects his personal torment in perpetually having to search for the right word. Nevertheless, words pale in comparison to actual perception just as written notes cannot capture the perception of otherworldly music. Furthermore, as A.D. Inglis adds, “The difficulty is not simply that of finding words which can express an emotion of an idea, but of translating an emotion which belongs to one field of experience into terms which can be understood in another” (27). The author or poet is forever searching for the right word because the need for communication with another is so important, which is why the pilgrim struggles to write down the music he has heard so that he might share it. He attempts to do so hundreds of times, but winds up crazy and unable to finish and finally crosses that bridge. His attempt to communicate his experience to others has left him completely alone and no longer under the illusion that he can commune effectively with others, highlighting the notion of a collective solitude experienced by the romantics (Díaz-Plaja 55). Bécquer thus effectively

communicates that he hopes to create a link between his reader and himself to the Otherworld in the same manner that sound does in his legends.

Monte de las Ánimas

Monte de las Ánimas also takes place on a holiday, the Day of the Dead, which suggests that the veil between worlds is thinner, which means that not only are perceptions heightened, but spirits and people pass between the worlds much more easily. The sound of a bell heralds the beginning of the story by calling for attention. It also serves to link the world of the narrator with that of the story before a trumpet announces the beginning of the story the narrator is telling (93).

Just as Bécquer uses bells to announce the presence of the Otherworld in *Maese Pérez*, he again employs them here in association with the dead. Alonso tells Beatriz that the souls of the dead will ring the bells in the chapel on the mountain to announce their presence (93).

Sound permeates the story as Bécquer sets the scene in the palace with a blazing fire and a wind that whips at the windows as if straining at the bit to get at Alonso. The conversing ladies and gentlemen ground the story in the sound of human voices but also use their voices to speak about the night of the dead with its specters and ringing church bells (94) thus creating an array of visual and aural images. The sound of the bells and crackle of the fire evoke hypnotic sounds which help build a mood of anticipation for perception of the Otherworld. The ladies around the castle are telling stories about witches, depositing a suggestion in Alonso's already hypnotized mind.

Before he leaves, Alonso gives Beatriz a brooch that held a feather in his cap. The feather symbolizes writing creation, knowledge of the celestial realm, truth, speed, and ascension, foreshadowing his imminent passing into the next world. She rejects him with an

“acento helado” (95) foreshadowing the cold Otherworld that beckons Alonso. Bécquer emphasizes the sounds of the wind by reminding the reader of it howling at the windows, while the women speak of witches to the sad sound of the bells, all ensuring that the reader is attuned to the looming presence of the Otherworld. The sound of Alonso’s galloping horse, accompanied by the sound of the windows rattling still, disappears into the night just as Alonso will disappear into the Otherworld.

The Otherworld doesn’t just confine itself to the mountain, but enters into Beatriz’s bedroom that night, announced by the ringing of the bells at midnight. It is then that she hears sounds that are just on the threshold of hearing, the faintest whisper of her name, the wind creaking the window panes, the beating of her heart, squeaking door hinges, silence filled with murmurings, distant barking, unintelligible words, echoes of footsteps, and breathing. Bécquer uses these sounds to build the tension, and as something makes its way toward Beatriz’s room, she hears a thousand sounds but also the silence (96). There are also shapeless forms that she seems to sense with her eyes, perhaps created by what her ears are telling her. The bridge between the worlds is once again forming while ever present wind continues to rattle the windows and the sound of the water in a distant fountain “caía y caía con un rumor eterno y monótono” accompanied by the city bells (97) remind Beatriz of the presence of the death she sent Alonso to and offer her passage into the Otherworld, which she accepts.

Sound, which figures so prominently in Bécquer’s writing, is used as a device to build suspense, to widen the reader’s perception of the scene the author is creating, and create a bridge to the mysterious Otherworld that so captured Bécquer’s attention. It heralds death in all four of the legends discussed here but also brings with it the promise of a life beyond the realm of the material. Invisible sound is the only element that can pass to and from the material world and

the Otherworld and it has the power to construct a bridge for those whose time has come to cross. The Otherworld represents an unobtainable, ephemeral goal for those like Bécquer ensconced in material life, much like the idea of expressing one's thoughts to another in a full communion, an important feat. Sound, like Bécquer's words, however, can offer only an approximation to another's unique experience.

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