

Rilke in Spain: the Reencounter with Poetry

Rafael Argullol. Philosopher and writer

Between 1912 and 1913, Rainer Maria Rilke spent a few months in different Spanish cities, on a journey that, in terms of heritage, focused many of the successive approaches of German culture to the “Spanish soul”. In fact, the journey hardly changed the author’s preconceived view of the country, as his notes show, and despite the fact that, at times, his stay in Spain became unbearable. By then, Rilke had forged an image of the Spanish landscape and culture based on the vision of German Romanticism, constructed in opposition to the rationalist and enlightened hegemony of French culture. Thus, the theatre of the Golden Age, the *Romancero* or *Don Quixote* left a profound mark on the main German Romantic authors, from Goethe to Schiller, within the framework of the broad tradition of the journey to the South, or the East, which was nothing but a spectacular expression of the desire for the Other, and to be the Other, that invaded modern German literature.

On 31 October 1912, Rainer Maria Rilke left Bayonne for the Spanish border. Two days later, on All Souls’ Day, he arrived at his great objective, Toledo, where he stayed for a whole month. At the beginning of December he visited Córdoba and Seville. After leaving Seville, and disgusted by what seemed to him a lack of spiritual gravity, he arrived in Ronda on 7 December that same year to stay in the Hotel Reina Victoria. On 19 February 1913 he was in Madrid, although he only went there with the intention of seeing the paintings of El Greco and Goya. Finally, we know that, after a week, he wrote to some friends from Paris.

Therefore, Rilke’s time in Spain lasted almost four months. Nevertheless, it was an “exemplary” journey that, in terms of heritage, focused many of the successive approaches of German culture to the “Spanish soul”. Above

all, the limited impact of the poet’s real journey through Spanish lands on the ideal journey conceived in advance is striking. Rilke left Spain after having visited several cities with a vision very close to the one he had been building in his mind in the preceding years. His mental image of Spain was hardly altered by the journey; it continued to be what he had already envisaged: a borderline landscape of existence where initiatory and cathartic learning can be undertaken. Rilke went to Spain in search of his own spiritual turning point – the *nouvelle opération* – and left convinced that this had happened

If we look at his words, the spiritual healing phase begins in Ronda, where his fascination with the setting gave him a new poetic intuition, whose echo is immediately apparent in the *Spanish Trilogy*. But even more eloquent is the

case of Toledo, the city that the poet had longed to know since his youth. After a month in the city, in Rilke's words, it became unbearable for him. He needed to get away from it. However, this does not explain why the place stopped fulfilling the mission imposed by the author, and thus became a "journey of journeys". The landscape of Toledo "becomes the world, creation, mountain and abyss, Genesis. In this landscape I can only think about a prophet, a prophet who rises from the banquet, the feast, the meeting, and then, still on the threshold of the house, the gift of prophecy, the immense prophecy of implacable visions, hovers over it: such is the posture of nature around this city."

For Rilke, Toledo is the "mountain of revelation". The interior landscape of the poet communicates with the Castilian landscape, in a cosmic existentialist mystical communion. In fact, Rilke had already anticipated this communion, as shown by various notes that reflect his desire to discover Spain. Rilke's Spain, before and after the journey, is the supposedly baroque Spain in which Velázquez and, above all, El Greco, occupy a privileged place alongside the mystics and the theatre of the Golden Age. Therefore, if his journey was "exemplary", so, in a certain way, was his attitude in setting himself up as the receiver of an image of the "Spanish soul" that had been forged in German culture since the late 18th century. Rilke was still indebted to the image of Spain that was formed during the era of German Romanticism.

In the late 18th century, the "Spanish soul" served Germany as a reference against the rationalist and enlightened hegemony of French culture. While German travellers' interest in the Iberian Peninsula increased, Lessing and Herder acted as authentic discoverers of Spanish literature. In his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Lessing turns to the Spanish dramatic tradition to distance himself from French classicism, attracted by its creative freedom and capacity

for the tragicomic. For Lessing, Spanish drama, with its contempt for rules and regulations, is the best framework for the future development of modern drama. Herder is even more emphatic, as he sees Spain as the "isolated and romantic country of enthusiasm" that flees from rationalist and levelling cosmopolitanism. Against the black legend spread by enlightened culture, Herder thoroughly works on the topic of the "Spanish soul" and revives, for his purposes with respect to Germany, a heroic chivalric image whose best form of transition will be literature. According to this perspective, the *Poema de Mio Cid* or the *Romancero* would embody the "genius of a people" or the "popular spirit" (*Volkgeist*), just as, through the outlines drawn by Cervantes around the protagonist, *Don Quixote* would become an extraordinary example of that national character that German civilisation still lacked.

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The Spanish Golden Age and Calderón's "mythological drama" are present in Goethe's conception of *Faust*, where Spain appears as an expression of religious fanaticism or as a heroic and mystical "country of enthusiasm". Thus, the scales of German literary perception are leaning towards this vision, although the mark of the black legend, caused by the religious struggles that followed the Reformation and then were incited by the Enlightenment, is still present in works as important as Schiller's *Don Carlos* or Goethe's *Clavigo*. However, with respect to the latter, the growing influence of the theatre of the Spanish Golden Age, and especially, of Calderón's "universal mythological drama", in the definitive conception of *Faust*, should not be ruled out. Thus, with few probabilities of error, open Calderonian resonances

can be found in the second part of Goethe's masterpiece.

However, the apogee of "the Spanish" reached its peak in the first decade of the 19th century, and it has even been possible to speak of a true "Spanish decade". Lessing and Herder had already paved the way, but the political admiration unleashed by the War of Independence helped to enhance it. An intellectual literary component can be added to the political one: the "Spanish soul" is identified under the Calderón-Cervantes prism. Cervantes and Calderón are, thus, two points of reference, not only to understand Spanish tradition but to strengthen the possibilities of a new German literature.

Cervantes, subjected to the romantic craft, offers a prototype of the modern individualistic and anti-rationalist hero. There are many different positions regarding this approach. For Friedrich Schlegel, *Don Quixote* is the perfect example of a romantic novel, while Hegel focuses more on the archetype and sees Quixote himself as the quintessence of the romantic individual. For his part, Schelling, broadening the perspective, sees the Cervantes hero as a true myth of the human condition. Tieck, Hoffmann, Novalis... The silhouettes of Don Quixote, with his continuous exchange of reality and imagination, are especially suitable for the romantic conscience to recreate new silhouettes.

Calderón, on the other hand, is identified with a special metaphysical capacity of the "Spanish soul". The Schlegel brothers romanticised Calderón's drama to the point of elevating it, along with Shakespeare's, to the highest expression of romantic poetry. August Wilhelm Schlegel, following Herder's path, sees in Calderón's works the reflection of the Spanish "national character" and "national genius". In these same works, Friedrich Schlegel praises the glorification of the inner man, the powerful penetration into the mysteries of the

ineffable and the "poetry of the invisible" that run through Calderón's theatre production. *Life is a Dream* became one of the favourite plays of the era, eliciting numerous attempts at adaptation. We only need to cite Kleist's masterpiece, *The Prince of Homburg*, whose parallelism with Calderón's Sigismund is indisputable. Schelling perfectly sums up this climate when he writes in his *The Philosophy of Art*: "Spain produced the genius that, although its matter and object already meant a past for us, is eternal for its form and craft, and presents, achieved and materialised, what theory only seemed to be able to predict as a mission of future art. I refer to Calderón."

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The romantic and idealistic image of Spain, essentially literary but also pictorial, still refers to a certain interpretation of medieval and, above all, baroque Spain. One hundred years later, Rilke was still drawing from the same sources as he began his "initiating journey".

Rilke's Spanish journey has been set against his poor perception of the "real" country he was visiting. Even so, it is only a valid argument from a sociological approach, and Rilke, as we might suppose, is on the other side of sociology. His journey must be seen from a very different perspective that reveals the true motives of the travelling writer. Rilke assumes that figure – or perhaps that mask – with a very particular radicalism, although, by acting in this way, he simply adopts one of the intrinsic options of every writer. We could even say that, in a certain sense, it is redundant to speak of a travelling writer because, albeit unconsciously, every writer is, in essence, a traveller.

What we call literature is the unlimited metaphorisation of the – limited – journey of

life. It does not matter that this projection is carried out from an immobile stage, or that its creator rejects any physical displacement: in all cases, the writer travels driven by the essential engine of the imagination. Without that engine, there is no possibility of artistic creation at all. We could all agree on this point. Let us remember, however, that the attempts to enlighten the meaning of the imagination have always been done, necessarily, in travelling terms and, specifically, using the contrast between the empirical, everyday reality of man, and “another reality” traversed by infinite paths that lead everywhere as well as nowhere. Imagining is following, adrift, some of those paths. Writing is about trying to overcome the drift after harbouring the illusion of a set course.

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It is not surprising, therefore, that our literary heritage and awareness revolve around a perpetual journey. Homer undertook the journey with Ulysses; Apollonius, with Jason; Virgil, with Aeneas. Dante, more explicit, himself travelled through hell, purgatory and heaven while falling into a deep sleep one Good Friday in the year 1300. Similarly, many other writers nurtured other directions and, over the centuries, the renewed efforts of renewed navigators ran, for the umpteenth time, into the trails that Homer, Apollonius, Virgil or Dante had left behind. We still hear the songs of sirens, we look for the Golden Fleece or we shudder at the cries of the damned. Literature is a unique journey to which we constantly return, not to conquer a certain country but to treasure thousands of maps of a non-existent country.

That is why we cannot judge travelling writers from the point of view of the tourist,

since they know, in the best of cases, why they go to a place, while travelling writers, even without leaving home, go because they know. For travelling writers, the mythical dimension prevails over the real one, even though the physical experiences of the journey can change essential elements of their perception. The prevalence of myth is what, to a great extent, excites the play of correspondences between the desires generated by sensitivity and the spaces conceived by the imagination. In this way, the authentic geography that the travelling writer faces emerges: a mythical geography whose coordinates powerfully alter the meaning of the itinerary. The axis of the compass is oriented according to the magnetism dictated by the spirit.

Baudelaire believed that the true traveller is the one who travels for travel's sake, so he wrote in the last lines of his poem “The Journey”: “Heaven or Hell, what matter? If only to find in the depths of the Unknown the New!” For Hölderlin, the most decisive journey was the return to the origin. They were both right: we pursue what is new, the unknown, as the only way back. We look for our past in the future guided by the thirst to transcend this present which, although it is our only territory of possession, is also our prison, our limitation. We travel to break down the fence that encloses our daily life, to disrupt what appears as excessively structured and, therefore, dangerously asphyxiating. In this task, literature and journey coincide again.

In Rilke's “mythical geography” there are two myths that, although apparently contradictory, complement each other: Russia and Spain. This is, after all, the meaning of the mythical geography that anticipates the possibility of further adventures in the geographies of reality. Hence, all the itineraries of the travelling writer have, in the first instance, an initiatory component: an apprenticeship, a test, a knowledge. Also, as a complement,

a desire for change that is manifested in the assumption that the journey will provide its protagonist with an alteration of existence. To the extent that these motifs have a fundamental function, the essentially utopian character of the places towards which the traveller is oriented is understood. Naturally, these can, and most do, have some far from unreal *topoi*, but what matters, ultimately, is the utopian notion that has transfigured them, turning them into regions of desire.

The sea, the desert, the jungle, the mountains are still the sea, the desert, the jungle and the mountains. And yet, they are much more than that when they are the result of symbolic projections that identify the physical features of nature with phenomena of sensibility. The same thing happens with certain cities, whose real presence is overwhelmed by the creations of the dream. Fuelling a parallel process, the coordinates of the world have, with extraordinary frequency, a symbolic life of their own: North and South, West and East, they are far from indicating a single direction, or an area of the planet, but instead become great metaphors constructed by imagination. What they have in common, in all geographies of mythical scope, is their promise of vital alteration and, with it, their offer of freedom.

Since its beginnings, literature has been steeped in the exciting aroma that emanates from the mythical journey, although, without doubt, this aroma, in modern literature, is stronger and more penetrating, since it is linked to a greater awareness of the asphyxiation present in the writer's relationship with his daily life. In this respect, the 19th century is the exemplary century, the setting of the maximum emergence of mythical journeys and symbolic topographies. The long tradition of the journey to the South, or to the East – often juxtaposed –, is nothing more than the spectacular expression of that desire for the Other, and to be the Other, that invades European literature.

Rainer Maria Rilke is a particularly explicit exponent of the travelling writer, already shaped since Romanticism. His vital nomadism takes him, as we already know, to change his country and residence often, but the most authentic and decisive thing about this nomadism is that it is intimately linked with the development of his literary work, so that one of the safest keys for reading Rilke leads us to his condition as a traveller in reality and, of course, in imagination. With a special emphasis, the poet relates his travels – and his travel projects – with a desire for change, a permanent yearning for a *vita nuova* whose effects are felt in his poetry. Obsessed with sterility, change, for Rilke, is always oriented towards creative fertility. In this respect, it is the poet, more than the man, who needs to travel.

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The symbolism of Russia and Spain is relatively transparent if we take into account the poet's usual hermeticism. They share the extreme character in relation to a centre occupied by the European and, more specifically, German tradition. They participate in an open dimension, in a certain way exogenous, in the face of excessively structured pressure from the central core. For different reasons, they are poles of tension that provide a certain magnetism to the fabric of European civilisation, which seems to succumb under the weight of its own rationalist gravity. Both, for Rilke, are sources of otherness.

The motives for each choice, of course, are different. Russia attracts the poet because of its Slavic roots, its Orthodox religion, its steppe

dimension... For him, all this contains a special spirituality. Opting for mysticism – just like the Spanish one –, where violence and depth come together in a very dynamic manner, the Russian steppe is the ideal space to break the dykes of containment that oppressively enclose European man, the landscape where the traveller can wander like a temporary castaway waiting for a post salvation.

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Rilke, as we have already seen, inherits a strong legacy from German culture in terms of the interpretation of the “Spanish soul”. By accepting it, however, he gives it a very personal mark, full of subtleties regarding the most frequent stereotypes. Spain, like Russia, is also exogenous in relation to the endogenous pressure from the European centre, but, in this case, it is, above all, because it represents

a crossroads of civilisations that, for the poet, is very enriching: the triple Christian, Jewish and Islamic substratum of Spanish culture forms a specific spiritual scenario. If Russia is the country of chaotic shipwreck, Spain is the country where the pilgrim can hope for redemption.

This conviction explains the assessment of Rilke’s journey in Spain. No doubt, his empirical knowledge of the lands he travelled through was very limited. It is even likely that, with the exception of Ronda, the cities he visited disappointed him and, therefore, he decided to cut his stay short. However, seen from another perspective, Rilke was undoubtedly the pilgrim he wanted to be and, once the revelation was received, the “journey of journeys” had already achieved its goal. We will never know the real weight of what he saw, compared to what he had already “seen” before embarking on the journey, and what his imagination made him see at the end. Yet this lack of knowledge is not surprising: every true traveller sets out on the journey hoping to confuse what he has seen with what he has dreamed.