

Reflection on two poems: Aleixandre's "Mar del Paraíso" and Masefield's "Sea Fever"

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*One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*
John Donne



Abstract

In this article we analyze the presence of the sea in both poems "Mar del Paraíso" (Sea of Paradise) by the Chilean poet Vicente Aleixandre, and "Sea Fever" by the English poet John Masefield.

Keywords: poetry, comparative literature, Vicente Aleixandre, John Masefield

Resumen

En este artículo se analiza la presencia del mar como elemento en los poemas "Mar del Paraíso", del poeta chileno Vicente Aleixandre, y "Sea Fever" (Fiebre de Mar) del poeta inglés John Masefield.

Palabras claves: poesía, literatura comparada, Vicente Aleixandre, John Masefield

Romanticism is a movement in which the use of nature, the conjunction of opposites and of times, as well as the movement towards an origin are present. Critics have established that romantic periods in Spanish and English literature flourished in the last part of the XVIII century and the beginning of the XIX. However, even in the XX century, readers can find traces of this movement in poetic literary texts as in a Vicente Aleixandre's *Mar del Paraíso* and John Masefield's *Sea Fever*. In their texts, both writers display characteristics of the Romantic literary movement. It is important to remember what Octavio Paz affirms, regarding this literary movement, that it is characterized by "[E]l regreso del eterno presente, después del Juicio Final, es la muerte del cambio – la muerte de la muerte" (21). For him, the Romantic Movement is branded by a constant journey in and out of time, where the present is an eternal past and the past an eternal present. There is no distinction in this borderless cliff but a conjunction of both where they conform "la muerte de la muerte." In Aleixandre's and Masefield's poems, the intersection of moments may be read as a confusing instant that progress into the everlasting characteristic of the sea and its components in the life-death experiences of the persona.

The presence of the sea in both texts portrays the conjunction of times; in Masefield's text, the first line evokes a past that becomes the present when the person says, "I must down to the seas again" (1). It is the use of the adverb again that nurtures this past-present-future movement and that stretches "down"; this adverb suggests an

"up" that is with and in the persona and from which he wants to withdraw. It is in the first line of the poem that the reader can decode a convergence of times and a vision of the future and what the person wants: to go back to the seas, to go back to his origin, to go back to the eternal. Likewise, in the first line of Aleixandre's poem, there is also a conjunction of times when the persona announces "[H]eme aquí frente a ti, mar, todavía..." (1). The use of the adverb "todavía" becomes a tool that suggests that there has been a past and that there is a present. Reference to future time is not part of this line; however, through the reading of the complete first stanza, the reader senses the sea as a "luz eternal," "última expresión de un amor que no acaba," as a timeless future where, as Eliot's Little Gidding, "the fire and the rose are one," for the sea becomes the "rosa del mundo ardiente." The sea becomes the eternal and primary life-death cycle. In both poems, the persona uncovers a conjunction of times where he is the past, lives a present and requests a future in which as a romantic modernist, perfection dwells.

Another literary element disclosed in the texts is the use of dichotomies; Aleixandre's text stages a person that even when standing in front of the sea has "el polvo de la tierra en [sus] hombros,/ impregnado todavía del efímero deseo apagado del hombre"(2-3). The speaker is in communication with the Sea, but he is also part of the Earth, he becomes both, the mortal and the immortal. He is a human being and carries both elements within, the eternity that has been ascribed to the sea and the mortality attributed to the earth. In the case of Masefield's text, the dichotomy is

depicted through the sea and the aerial; the speaker establishes this attribute when the persona, wanting to join the seas, desires to go "to the lonely sea and the sky" (1). Furthermore, he wants a "tall ship and a star to steer her by" (2). For him, being in communion with the sea would be incomplete without joining the skies. Masefield's poem presents the dichotomy of the elements from "above" and those from "below," but in which, both the above and below, assemble into one to lead to eternity. The persona asks for a "windy day with the white clouds flying,/ And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the seagull's crying" (7-8). He wants the wind to blow, being this element the one considered by the Greeks as life. It is supposed to be everlasting along with "the flung spray and the blown spume" (8), for this is a never-ending characteristic of the sea. The "spume" of the sea will be present in every beach, in communication with the earth and in a way, giving to it a touch of eternity. In both poems, there is a romantic ideal of conjunction; in one, the marine with the terrestrial and in the other the marine with the aerial.

The depiction of the persona in "Sea Fever" and in "Mar del Paraíso" differ in that the former portrays a persona throughout his adulthood, without any hint of his life in his younger years. However, in the later, the speaker displays a picture of his life, from childhood to adulthood, in constant communication with the sea. Masefield's poem displays the self of a man that has achieved adulthood and who is just expecting to complete the cycle of life; "I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide/ Is a wild call and a clear

call that may not be denied" (5-6). This "call" is there, and he cannot deny it. Consequently, there is an urgency to follow the call and what is asked is "a quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over" (12). The speaker has to follow the call because it is a "must" and the use of this modal auxiliary gives the poem a tone of urgency and obligation. It is a command that is meant to be. Ambiguity has no room, death is mandatory; but death as a "quiet sleep and a sweet dream" (12). Therefore, he will not die forever for he will regain life in the sea, he will become one with the eternal.

In Aleixandre's poem, the persona depicts his encounter with the sea from his early childhood when the sea was "la sandalia fresquísima para [su] pie desnudo" (9). His first steps in life were led by the sea and the sea became the shoes that covered his naked feet. It was also an "abanico de amor o resplandor continuo/ que imitaba unos labios para mi piel sin nubes" (17-18). The sea became the air that blew for him, and it was also eternal light. Moreover, it was also feelings, for it became lips for his sun kissed skin. The persona goes further in affirming that every element in the sea were his too, "[L]a presencia de peces por las orillas, su plata nubil, / el oro no manchado por los dedos de nadie, / la resbalosa escama de luz, era un brillo de los míos" (36-38). And as in Masefield's poem, the persona hears "a call" that is "un grito, un hombre de amor, un deseo para mis labios / húmedos." This cry will lead the speaker to a "viaje hacia un mundo prometido, entre visto / al que mi destino me convocaba con muy dulce certeza." The persona is "frente al mar," looking at

the sea and knowing that his cycle will conclude in the sea, becoming eternal. Even when the persona depicts different elements and feelings in the texts, both poems portray the romantic characteristic of the “return” to the origin, to the eternal, to the never ending cycle of life.

The poems “Mar del Paraíso” and “Sea Fever” portray characteristics of the Romantic Movement even though they are part of the poetry of the XXth century. The conjunction of times is present in these texts, the part of the present and the present of the past, both looking for future in which perfection of the self is attained through death. Moreover, the confrontation of the marine and aerial and terrestrial elements of the poems depict one of the characteristics of this movement. “[H]eme aquí frente a ti, mar, todavía.../ con el polvo de la tierra en mis hombros,” and “I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky.” Thus, the mortal and the immortal as well as the past and the present morph into the origin of humanity, the eternal.

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