

## **Visionary poets: William Blake and Claudio Rodríguez**

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It is always extremely difficult to compare two writers whose works are distant in both space and time. William Blake (1757-1827) was one of the geniuses of English Pre-Romanticism and his contribution to the literary scene has been highly recognized by the critics. Claudio Rodríguez (1934-1999), from Zamora, Spain, was one of the most relevant poets of Spanish poetry in the Twentieth Century. And this circumstance is demonstrated by the fact that the latter was awarded with several distinctions as the Premio Reina Sofía de Poesía Iberoamericana and the Premio Príncipe de Asturias de las Letras.

So many reasons have stimulated me to bring together the works of these two artists. First of all the great admiration that I feel for the poems of William Blake and secondly the reading of poetry of Claudio Rodríguez. But the most important reason was the fact that they could be considered visionary poets.

In order to make a comparison between the creations of the two poets, we could start from the Formalist concept which says that every poem constitutes a universe, and so it must be seen without any connotation or relationship to the others. Though we will accept the theory formulated by Shelley and T. S. Eliot that forces us to think that all the poems are one.

If one asks what a predecessor of the English Romanticism and a Spanish poet of the Twentieth Century have in common, the first answer that comes into our minds is the condition of visionary men. Although, in the presence of this hypothesis it is necessary to demonstrate the evidence of it.

Claudio Rodríguez worked as a lector in Spanish at the University of Nottingham and at the University of Cambridge for some years, and it was there when he read English poetry and probably the poems of William Blake. I imagine that Claudio Rodríguez read Blake's poems and was attracted by the magic and charm one can find in the works of this English genius. An aura of mystery and arcane themes that makes the reader go in the depths of his poetry and unravel the darkness of a work as complex as it is fascinating.

From the very beginning of my studies of the poems of these two writers, the idea that both could be considered visionaries seemed clear. The main quality that one can notice in their poetry is that they lifted their vision to heaven just to understand the same essence of everything. Besides, this is very difficult for a common person

and as Shelley said in his essay "A Defence of Poetry": "a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not".<sup>1</sup>

William Blake considered himself a soul who is serving "heavenly messengers" like in ancient Theosophy, he must show to the people the essence of everything. This essence is hidden behind the appearance that we perceive with our senses. So, it is more important to look "through the eyes" than "with the eyes". Our senses do not allow us to look into the form of objects.

My Eyes more & more  
Like a Sea without shore  
Continue Expanding  
The Heavens commanding<sup>2</sup>

Claudio Rodríguez believed that poetry is a product of inspiration or gift which comes from the highest part of the universe. This gift enlightened objects and gave them a new brightness not perceived before. As the poet was the only one who could glimpse at this brightness, it was his work to transmit it to the rest of the human beings.

Siempre la claridad viene del cielo  
es un don; no se halla entre las cosas  
sino muy por encima, y las ocupa  
haciendo de ello vida y labor propias.<sup>3</sup>

William Blake and Claudio Rodríguez were dreamers, visionaries or mystics who acted as the bard inspired by some god or by a divine power. These two poets had to transmit their knowledge to the rest of the people, because no one else could do it. In that sense, the poet had to fuse together with nature in a cosmic union that will serve as an access to real truth hidden behind appearance.

But the poet was not the only one who could see the tricks of reality, because there were human beings who could do that. These were children. They thought about children as entirely pure, beings full of a special capacity to see the world in a clearer and more beautiful way. They were purer than anybody because their spirits were not corrupted by society in which they were living. Children played an essential role in the poetry of William Blake and Claudio Rodríguez.

Sweet babe in thy face,  
Holy image I can trace.<sup>4</sup>

Ved que todo es infancia.  
La fidelidad de la tierra,

1 Percy Bysshe Shelley. "A Defence of Poetry". *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century*. D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera, eds. London: Oxford U. P., 1966. 228.

2 "Letter to Thomas Butts", 2nd October, 1800. vv. 45-48. 713

3 Claudio Rodríguez, *Don de la ebriedad*, "Song I". vv. 1-4.

4 William Blake, "A Cradle Song". *The Songs of Innocence*. vv. 21-22.

la presencia de un cielo insoportable  
que se nos cuela aquí.<sup>5</sup>

The objects that the poet contemplated had not always something positive inside of them, and the vision that light gave them turns into darkness at that moment. Some times two opposite realities are contained in one and, so, light can be dark and darkness can be light. Both writers knew that opposites strengthen one another, like death to life and inversely just to be reborn when dying.

Blake thought that nothing is finished when someone dies, because he is going to be reborn to a new and fairer life. Though after this, he should learn how to forgive his injustices and to bring into harmony and to avoid loneliness. On the other hand, Claudio Rodríguez accepted death as something beautiful, so he did not believe that everything was finished after death.

In Christianity, this is called "psychosomatic unity" where total regeneration of the person is produced. There is a qualitative change when one grows, because the body of a child is not the same as the body of an adult person. The other is the quantitative change that comes with death.

If a human being is reborn to a new existence when he dies, he may be a good person now. Egoism, envy and lies have transformed men and only if they can forgive and avoid the materialism of this world in which they are living, could they be happy and live in harmony. Suddenly, light will come again.

William Blake and Claudio Rodríguez went through a process which led them from innocence to experience. The focus they gave to their first works was more positive than that which they gave to their latter poems. Time and social circumstances influenced their poetry and the writers started to compose moral and thoughtful poems.

From an innocent and clear poetry, full of light and happiness, they changed into another style which was darker and full of pessimism. At the end of their work, both writers were more optimistic and they had hope, because where there is life, there is hope.

The complete works of both poets are a good example of this. William Blake started showing us the wonderful side of life in his *Songs of Innocence*, but he changed his mind and wrote *The Prophetic Books*, which are more pessimistic. He returned to happiness and hope at the end of *Jerusalem*. Claudio Rodríguez reflected his most optimistic period in *Don de la Ebriedad* and became negative in the rest of his work. But in the end, the same as Blake, he changed himself into a positive man in *Casi una leyenda*.

William Blake and Claudio Rodríguez, inspired by some divine force or gift, have created a poetry full of light which takes us to supernatural regions or places where the human eye can not

<sup>5</sup> Claudio Rodríguez, "Oda a la niñez". *Alianza y condena*. vv. 73-76.

penetrate. They teach us that life is something more than objects and places we have in front of our senses and we could make a better life for everyone using love and brotherhood. From this moment we could return to light and as William Wordsworth said:

My heart leaps up when I behold  
 A rainbow in the sky:  
 So it was when my life began;  
 So is it now I am a man;  
 So be it when I shall grow old,  
 Or let me die!  
 The child is father of the Man;  
 And I could wish my days to be  
 Bound each to each by natural piety.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth, "My Heart leaps up". *Selected Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.

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