

SOCIAL CRITICISM AND ROMANTIC TRAVEL
WRITING: *LETTERS FROM SPAIN* (1822)
BY JOSÉ MARÍA BLANCO WHITE

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At the outset of the 19th century, it was fashionable for a growing European bourgeoisie to undertake journeys to southern regions. In this context travel literature, a representational product of these movements, became one of the most popular literary genres in the culture of European bourgeois readers (Bönisch-Brednich, 2001: 126). Owing to this effect, stylistic elements of the travel narrative were also employed by other genres to establish a familiar reading situation and to capture the attention of a huge readership. This essay focuses on the appropriation of travel narratives of travel by a singular and, beyond Spain, pretty unknown text of European literature: the *Letters from Spain*. These *Letters*, which were published serially in a British monthly magazine, deal with several aspects of Spanish political, religious and everyday life. The author, José María Blanco White (1775-1841), had emigrated from Spain to London in 1810 in response to ideological and political circumstances. Considered his masterpiece, *Letters from Spain* constitutes a mixture of different genres: contemporary history, autobiography and essayistic social criticism.

I will start this paper with a short biographical note to present the context of production and reception of the *Letters* in order to set these writings within their discursive fields. I will then have a look in detail at how Blanco White works with particular motifs and how he combines his critical and rationalistic perspective with the principles

of romantic travel literature. Thus, I will focus on the cognitive and ideological forms of perception of the author and the expected readership, the representation of the *other*, and the interrelations of the travel discourse with other lines for interpreting the altering realities and models of thought at the beginning of the 19th century.

1. BLANCO WHITE AND THE *LETTERS FROM SPAIN*

José María Blanco White was a Spanish priest and theologian.² He grew up in the city of Seville, a descendant of Irish grandparents who had migrated to Andalusia to evade the Penal Laws, which were established by the British crown for the political and economic exploitation of the Irish colony. Seville was particularly dominated by the Catholic Church, and the whole public sphere was impregnated by religious life. According to Francisco Durán, “if there is a true symbol for a clerical society, an ecclesiastical state, than it is the Seville of José María Blanco y Crespo” (Durán, 2005: 39-40). Blanco White chose to become a theologian and, under the existing political and ideological circumstances, this was the only way to pursue a humanistic education.

He started a splendid career and soon held high positions within the university and the ecclesiastical structures. However, since he had discovered the (censured) contemporary writings of English empiricism and the French Enlightenment, Blanco White increasingly questioned the Catholic orthodoxy he himself had to represent. In 1806 his suffering due to the clash of the hegemonic and sanctioned medieval thinking models and his own growingly agnostic perspective became unbearable. Blanco White fled to Madrid to work as a teacher. Finally, in light of the Napoleonic invasion in Spain, he decided to exile himself to England in 1810. He converted to the Anglican Church, which, in relation to his experiences with the Catholic Church, was the image of rationalism and freedom par excellence. He changed his name to Joseph Blanco White, which might be considered a symbolic expression of identity. For more than twenty years, Blanco White lived in London and Oxford, developing a strong identification with the English government system and the Church of England. He established himself very quickly, earning a living as an

² The biographical information has been taken from: Durán López, 2005, Murphy, 1989.

author and publisher. He also worked as a private teacher, teaching, among others, in the House of Lord Holland who represented the liberal-progressive Whig Party in the Chamber of Lords. During these flourishing times as an acknowledged scholar and publisher, Blanco White received an assignment from Thomas Campbell to write a series of articles about Spain. Campbell was the editor of the *New Monthly Magazine*, which had responded to the contemporary fashion of providing a stylistic variety of prose and lyrical texts to a wide range of different tastes and interests. Campbell's assignment is to be interpreted within the context of a general interest in Spanish culture and politics. Since England had supported Spain against the Napoleonic invasion, there was a high interest in gaining Spain as an ally against the restorative Holy Alliance between the European powers. The re-established Spanish monarchy was more restorative than liberal, and when in 1820 there was a successful military coup by the Spanish liberals, new hopes for a European change rose in England (Moreno Alonso, 1998: 137). On the other hand, within the movement of romanticism, Spain, like other regions on the margins of Europe, had been newly discovered. Within the romantic ideology of the times, Spain was seen as a place still spared the blight of industrialization and cultural artificiality. With its promise of authentic folk life, its particular traditions such as the bullfight and religious customs, and with the exotic heritage of the Moorish past, Spain was the fulfillment of the romantic fantasy (Saglia, 2005: 467-485).

Letters from Spain, published in the *New Monthly Magazine* between April 1821 and April 1822, clearly satisfied the expectations of the English readership. Their success is not only proved by the two succeeding editions of the *Letters* as a book in 1822 and 1825, but also by the acknowledgment of his reviewers. For example, one of the most renowned literary journals, *The Monthly Review*, reviewed the *Letters from Spain* as a "rigorous and masterly" (Moreno Alonso, 1998: 138-139) representation of Spanish culture and its political and ecclesiastical frames. Further evidence of the breakthrough of Blanco White as an English author and publisher is his contribution on Spain for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1824 (Murphy, 1989: 245-249). Another sign of the positive reception of the *Letters* was its influence on contemporary travel literature. José Alberich proved that a large number of its motifs were adopted by the English travel literature that succeeded it (Alberich, 1993).

Although Blanco White, after the publication of the *Letters*, had reached the peak of personal wealth and acknowledgement, his innate search for truthfulness would make him change his life again. Since his time in England, he had been defending the supremacy of the Anglican Church, but when in 1829 Blanco White supported the pro-Irish Law of Emancipation in public, he felt the intolerance of his conservative friends. During his stay with Bishop Whately in Dublin he realized the oppression the Irish Catholics had to suffer and he became aware that here it was the Anglican Church that acted as an enemy of religious freedom. As a 60-year-old man, Blanco moved to Liverpool, the centre of English Unitarianism, where he hoped to find his last spiritual foothold and to live a Christian life free of dogmatism. In 1841 Blanco White died at his friend William Rathbone's house in Greenbank.

2. *LETTERS FROM SPAIN* WITHIN THE DISCURSIVE FIELDS OF TRAVEL NARRATIVE, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Letters from Spain is a multifaceted series of writings that borrows from very different discursive lines and literary genres. Nevertheless, Blanco White chose the travel account as his main device in presenting Spanish life. The fictional writer of the *Letters*, Leucadio Doblado, is supposed to travel to his home country after having spent many years living in England. The similarities between Doblado's life and that of Blanco White are obvious. The *Letters* are dated between 1798 and 1808, a time when Blanco White still lived in Spain, and the specifications of movement between the places and the events correspond mainly to Blanco White's own life. Furthermore, Blanco White asserts the truthfulness of Leucadio's *Letters* in the prologue of the first book edition: "It is chiefly on this account, that the author deems it necessary to assure the Public of the reality of every circumstance mentioned in his book, except the name of Leucadio Doblado" (Blanco White, 1822: Vi). Correspondingly, the *Letters* are "[...] the faithful memoirs of a real Spanish clergyman, as far as his character and the events of his life can illustrate the state of the country which gave him birth" (Blanco White, 1822: Vi).

Nevertheless, the autobiographical intentions of Blanco White may be forgotten rapidly during the lecture of the first letter. Right from the beginning, the reader is completely immersed in the intimate

and familiar travel narrative when Leucadio describes his arrival at the harbour of the city of Cádiz:

The view of Cadiz from the sea, as, in a fine open day, you approach its magnificent harbour, is one of the most attractive beauty. The strong deep light of a southern sky, reflecting from the lofty buildings of white free stone, which face the bay, rivet the eye of the navigator from the very verge of the horizon. The sea actually washes the ramparts, except where, on the opposite side of the town, it is divided by a narrow neck of land, which joins Cadiz to the neighbouring continent. When, therefore, you begin to discover the upper part of the buildings, and the white pinnacles of glazed earthenware, resembling china, that ornament the parapets with which their flat roofs are crowned, the airy structure, melting at times into the distant glare of the waves, is more like a pleasing delusion – a kind of *Fata Morgana* – then the lofty, uniform massive buildings which, rising gradually before the vessel, bring you back, however unwilling, to the dull realities of life. After landing on a crowded quay, you are led the whole depth of the ramparts along a dark vaulted passage, at the farthest end of which new-comers must submit to the scrutiny of the inferior custom-house officers. Eighteen-pence slipped into their hands with the keys of your trunks, will spare you the vexation of seeing your clothes and linen scattered about in the utmost disorder (Blanco White, 1822: 5-6).

In this passage, Blanco White uses several elements of the travel narrative, such as personal impressions caused by changes of landscape and physical circumstances and the descriptions of characteristic situations of travel (the custom-house, the treatment of the travellers). These insertions of representative elements of travel, as well as other topics like modes of transportation and the configuration of the routes, the traveller's safety, the description of villages and landscapes, and the conditions of inns and guest-houses are repeated within the *Letters*. Another important relation Blanco draws between his writings and travel literature is his recommendation of another travel account to the reader, if he would like to get more information about the physical settings of his account:

Few travellers are equal to your countryman Mr. Townsend in the truth and liveliness of his descriptions, as well as in the mass of useful information and depth of remark, with which he has presented the *public*. It would be impossible for any but a native Spaniard to add to

the collection of traits descriptive of the national character, which animates his narrative; and I must confess that he has rather confined me in the selection of my topics. He has, indeed, fallen into such mistakes and inaccuracies, as nothing short of perfect familiarity with a country can prevent. But I may safely recommend him to you as a guide for a fuller acquaintance with the places whose *inhabitants* I intend to make the chief subject of my *Letters*. But that I may not lay upon you the necessity of a constant reference, I shall begin by providing your fancy with a 'local habitation' for the people whose habits and modes of thinking I will forthwith attempt to portray. (Blanco White, 1822: 5)

Although Blanco White refers to numerous accounts, he considers the work *A Journey through Spain* by Joseph Townsend to be the most accurate description of the country (Townsend, 1791). Nevertheless, in spite of the quality of Townsend's descriptions, Blanco White emphasizes that only the "perfect familiarity with a country" (*ibid.*) of a native could prevent the mistakes all travel writings contain. With the recommendation of Townsend's writings and his multiple allusions to these and to the texts of other travellers, Blanco White draws countless intertextual relations and presents himself as a connoisseur of travel literature. Further appropriations of the travel narrative are the scheme of chronology and spatiality in the *Letters* which the fictional narrator Doblado represents as his travel itinerary and which corresponds to Blanco White's experience. Also the stylistic device of stopping, breaking and/ or changing place between the *Letters* as well as the mixture of description, narration, interpretation and biographical self-reflection are characteristic elements of the travel narrative. Additionally, Leucadio Doblado introduces himself as a relative of the Spanish traveller Don Manuel Álvarez Espriella. Espriella, in turn, was the fictional narrator of Robert Southey's *Letters from England* (1807), which deal with English culture and customs as well as with governmental and ecclesiastical organisations (Southey, 1951: 3-11). Right at the beginning of the first letter, Doblado establishes the relation to Southey's writings:

How fortunate was our famous Spanish traveller, my relative Espriella³ (for you know that there exists a family connection between

³ Here Blanco White makes the following note: "See Espriella's Letters from England."

us by my mother's side) to find one of the best writers in England, willing to translate his *Letters*! (Blanco White, 1822: 4)

This allusion, as well as other intertextual references to Townsend and other travel writings, lead to the clue as to why Blanco White has chosen travel literature as the main genre for his *Letters from Spain*: all these references could only make sense to the audience if the texts alluded to and their writers were part of the collective memory of the intended readership. And indeed, in large parts of Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, travel literature was an integral part, if not the most popular part, of bourgeois and aristocratic reading culture, a fact also proved by the borrowing registers of reading societies and libraries (Alberich, 2001; Griep, 1980: 739). During the "heyday of the classical travel account" (Bönisch-Brednich, 2001: 126) which Bönisch-Brednich dates between 1750 and 1840, drawing upon this popular genre promised great success. By employing narrative elements of the travel account, a confidential situation of communication could be established. Blanco White's choice of this genre as a strategy of camouflage for his accounts of Spain is to be interpreted in this context, and finally, the positive reception of the *Letters* has proven him right.

Before discussing Blanco White's discursive strategies of representing the *other* and how he deals with the contradiction of his own social and cultural critique and the expectations of a rather *romantic* readership, it is necessary to pay attention to other discursive lines crossing within the *Letters from Spain*. As previously shown, Blanco White openly declares the autobiographical contents of the *Letters*. Even though he creates the fictional narrator Leucadio Doblado, the characteristics of autobiographical writing are visible throughout the *Letters*. One characteristic element is the linear development of the experiences and the state of knowledge of the narrator, who is subjected to several framing structures such as family, religion, politics, and collective customs. Furthermore, the *Letters* contain numerous reflections about personal experiences and the development of the self, a constitutive element of autobiography (Lejeune, 1982). However, the strongest connection the *Letters* display with the genre of autobiography is Blanco White's creation of another main character, Leandro. Leandro, who represents the young Blanco, is a young priest who takes his friend Leucadio around the country. The two figures of Leandro and Leucadio allow Blanco

White to split his own character and to present two different perspectives on the ongoing events experienced by the two protagonists. The *Letters from Spain* gain the most apparent semblance to autobiography within the third letter, which is Leandro's account of his childhood and his education within the religious structures of family and public life in Seville (Blanco White, 1822: 59-134).

Besides the borrowings from autobiography, *Letters from Spain* incorporates clear allusions to contemporary scientific historical thinking and writing. Related to new concepts of humankind and history, occurring alongside scholastic and theological tracks, an unprecedented interest in an empirical historiography of mankind had arisen in 18th century central and northern Europe. This interest brought forward dense institutional linkages of scholars, especially in the Protestant and liberal cities of Europe (Vermeulen, 1995). Blanco White was aware of the progress of the historical and anthropological thinking of his time, and his notebooks confirm that he used to read "from Herodotus until the latest titles of German historical scholarship" (Moreno Alonso, 1998: 24). Nevertheless he was not only a passive reader of historiography; he also reviewed scholarly literature coming from the disciplines of history and geography. He himself published many essays concerning history, geography, demography, economy and politics, such as, for example "Historians of Germany" or "Studies in Spanish History", and his contribution on the study of the history and the geography of Spain for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1824 (Moreno Alonso, 1998: 24). Within the *Letters* Blanco White's scholar style is mainly present in his descriptions of Spanish politics and political institutions in Letters two, ten and twelve, in which he occasionally compares the English system with Spanish political and ecclesiastical structures. Furthermore, historical thinking as a way of explaining current conditions becomes clear in *Letters from Spain*, as in the seventh Letter, where Blanco White deals with monastic life in Spain. He introduces his argument with a history of the different religious congregations and refers, among others, to the pioneering work of Edward Gibbons, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which had appeared between 1776 and 1788 in six volumes and is one of the classic works amongst enlightened historical thinking:

Gibbon has delineated, with his usual accuracy, the origin and progress of monastic life; and to his elegant pages I must refer you for information on the historical part of my subject. But his account does not come down to the establishment of the Mendicant Orders of Friars. [...] The Monks, as the original name implies, retired from the world to live in perfect solitude. [...] The Friars date their origin from the beginning of the thirteenth century, and were instituted for the express purpose of acting as auxiliaries to the clergy. [...] The Dominicans, however, having succeeded in the utter destruction of the Albigenses, and subsequently monopolized, for more than three centuries, the office of inquisitors, enriched themselves with the spoils of their victims, and are in the enjoyment of considerable wealth. (Blanco White, 1822: 216-217)

In this section of the *Letters*, Blanco outlines the descent and the development of the religious orders; in the second Letter, which partially deals with the social structure of Spanish society, he not only exposes the ways of life of the nobility and their modes of distinction, but also discusses the origin and the historical development of this class:

As Hidalguia [nobility] branches out through every male whose father enjoys that privilege, Spain is overrun with gentry, who earn their living in the meanest employments. The province of Asturias having afforded shelter to that small portion of the nation which preserved the Spanish name and throne against the efforts of the conquering Arabs, there is hardly a native of that mountainous tract, who, even at this day, cannot shew a legal title to honours and immunities gained by his ancestors at a time when every soldier had either a share in the territory recovered from the invaders, or was rewarded with a perpetual exemption from such taxes and services as fell exclusively upon the simple peasantry. The numerous claimants of these privileges among the Asturians of the present day lead me to think that in the earliest times of the Spanish monarchy every soldier was raised to the rank of a Franklin. But circumstances are strangely altered. Asturias is one of the poorest provinces of Spain, and the noble inhabitants having, for the most part, inherited no other patrimony from their ancestors than a strong muscular frame, are compelled to make the best of it among the more feeble tribes of the south (Blanco White, 1822: 38-39).

Blanco White explains the historical backgrounds of Spanish society to the geographically and culturally distant reader. It is his most

genuine concern to process the information he gives to his readership and to determine its core issues. Apart from his interests in historiography and neighbouring disciplines, it is also this pedagogical concern that determines Blanco White's method of historical contextualization, a clear expression of the enlightened thinking of his time.

3. SOCIAL CRITICISM AND ITS UNION WITH ROMANTIC TRAVEL NARRATIVES

We have now viewed *Letters from Spain* as a document in which the discursive lines of travel, historiography and autobiography intermingle. In effect, these writings represent a shifting historical context, one in which the history of humankind began to be perceived as a secular matter and when – due to a changed perception of the individual – the travel narrative since Lawrence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768) had become increasingly mixed up with autobiographical reflexion. In the following pages, I will show how Blanco White deals with another contemporary transition and how he reconciles his own enlightened, rationalistic perspective of social criticism with the romantic narrative prevalent in contemporary travel literature.

Spain, owing to its belated economic and cultural development and to its oriental past, was the land of romantic desires par excellence for the north-western European bourgeoisie at the beginning of the 19th century. According to this perspective, the evolution of travel literature on Spain proves that the same conditions that the enlightened traveller had characterized as features of backwardness were, in the 19th century, discovered to be aesthetic manifestations of exotic and aboriginal life (González Troyano, 1998; Alberich, 2001). Within the movement of romanticism, a re-evaluation of the *primitive* had taken place, and this change in values also led to a different model of traveling. It became fashionable to visit Spain and other margins of southern Europe to trace the charms of the backward instead of comparing the conditions with the ideals of progress, and particularly in England and France an important tradition of travel writing on Spain emerged (Alberich, 1993: 82-83). Only a few years after *Letters from Spain*, romantic writers such as Prosper Mérimée, Richard Ford and also the American Washington Irving sketched their perspectives on Spain, focusing on aspects such as religious celebrations, popular customs and particular ways of behaviour, bullfights, gypsies, and

folklore (Casado Lobato, 1996: 53-163). This romantic form of perception was also carried out and stylized in works by many local authors and artists, generally termed *costumbrismo*. The artists of *costumbrismo* and its consumers, the nobility and the small bourgeoisie who were more reactionary than revolutionary, were influenced by northern and central European romanticism, and many of them exalted the romantic figures and scenes of folk life to support a reactionary and nationalistic ideology (Álvarez Barrientos and Romero Ferrer, 1998).

But what about the *Letters from Spain* and the way they deal with the popular and backward *other* within the shifting modes of perception? As we have seen, Blanco White was a person who rather suffered from cultural closeness and religious orthodoxy, as well as superstition, and he thought he had found the essence of a liberal and rationalistic way of life in England and within its official Church. On the other hand, he obviously knew about those “little peculiarities” (Blanco White, 1822: 22) of exotic and aboriginal Spain that his English readership loved to hear about. To that effect, the *Letters* take a hybrid position between social criticism and the romantic travel narrative. Blanco White sets multiple detailed images of “romantic” scenes and figures. Nevertheless his perspective on those details on an ideological level was radically different from the romantic one. Blanco White never remains, as the nostalgic traveller did within his search for naturalness and authenticity, on picturesque surfaces. His deep intention was to present the political, religious and cultural structures of Spain through the basic manifestations of everyday life (Blanco White, 1822: 27). Of course, many of the scenes and figures described might have pleased the romantic taste, and the same facts Blanco discusses from a rationalistic perspective could be received as manifestations of exoticism and naturalness. Martin Murphy reaches to the heart of the contradictory perception of Blanco and the artistic market:

The English dilettante tended to treat as picturesque aspects of Spanish life which as an enlightened progressive he regarded as downright superstitious or degrading. For the same reason he was irritated by artists like David Roberts who treated real people and places like artistic props to be rearranged –a friar here, a beggar there– to suit the artist’s fancy or to satisfy the demand of the market (Murphy, 1989: 120).

Blanco White's detailed descriptions do not work as decontextualized "props" but serve to allow him to illustrate mental concepts such as class, religious beliefs, gender, or norms of communication. Within a progressive and rationalistic thinking, he tries to prove the backwardness of Spain, to which effect he also brings many intercultural comparisons, mostly from a conservative Anglican and moralistic perspective. He also steadily refers to the specific historical conditions that had led to the political, economical and cultural position of contemporary Spain. Hence, the motif of the romantic travel account is only a disguise for his exercise of social criticism. Accordingly, after the quoted arrival at the port of Cádiz, he still satirizes the baggage-handlers waiting at the pier, from which one wins as the "successful champion" (Blanco White, 1822: 17), as well as the unbearable noise at the marketplace where the traveller finds a "contention between three or four hundred peasants, who shall make his harsh and guttural voice be uppermost" (Blanco White, 1822: 7). But then, abruptly, Blanco leads over to his deeper intention: the analysis and critique of the factors that are responsible for the backwardness of Spain:

Religion, or, if you please, superstition, is so intimately blended with the whole system of public and domestic life in Spain, that I fear I shall tire you with the perpetual recurrence of that subject. I am already compelled, by an involuntary train of ideas, to enter upon that endless topic. (Blanco White, 1822: 8)

In the *Letters*, the frontiers between the romantic travel account and social criticism are blurred. Every single letter may also be regarded as a critical essay dealing with several aspects of Spanish Life, that lead to generalization, reflection and judgemental considerations. This model of argumentation between peculiar examples and their critical consideration is clearly seen in the following example. The two main characters of the *Letters*, Leucadio and Leandro, have just attended a theatre representation:

[...] we heard the church-bell toll what in Spain is called Las Animas – the Souls. A man, bearing a large lantern with a painted glass, representing two naked persons enveloped in flames, entered the court, addressing every one of the company in these words: The Holy Souls, Brother! Remember the Holy Souls. Few refused the petitioner

a copper coin, worth about the eighth part of a penny. (Blanco White, 1822: 169-170)

This small anecdote could appear in any travel account as a peculiar curiosity. Blanco White in contrast does not leave it as a decontextualized idiosyncrasy, but he moves on to a contextualization of the situation and interprets the fact:

This custom is universal in Spain. A man, whose chief employment is to be agent for the souls in purgatory, in the evening – the only time when the invisible sufferers are begged for about the towns – and for some saint or Madonna, during the day, parades the streets after sunset, with the lantern I have described, and never fails to visit the inns, where the travellers, who generally entrust their safety from robbers to the holy souls, are always ready to make some pecuniary acknowledgement for past favours, or to engage their protection in future dangers. The tenderness of all sorts of believing Spaniards for the souls in purgatory, and the reliance they place on their intercession with God, would almost be affecting, did it not originate in the most superstitious credulity. (Blanco White, 1822: 170)

The hypothesis and the judgment that “benevolence, under the guidance of superstition, degenerates into absurdity” (Blanco White, 1822: 172) is discussed in the following pages of the letter in a detailed way, here in a moralizing tone, there in a satirizing manner (Blanco White, 1822: 170-17). According to Blanco White, the human being is –a priori– aligned to a relation with the other world:

The best feelings of our hearts are, besides, most ready to assist the imagination in devising means to keep up an intercourse with that invisible world, which either possesses already, or must soon possess, whatever has engaged our affections in this world. (Blanco White, 1822: 171)

Due to this disposition, the human being is easily susceptible to a doctrine such as that of the purgatory, which captivates with its simplicity and pictoriality. This is particularly valid for children:

[...] while other articles of the Catholic faith are too refined and abstract for children, their tender and benevolent minds eagerly seize on the idea of purgatory fire. A parent or a brother, still kind to them

in another world, yet suffering excruciating pains that may be relieved, shortened, and perhaps put an end to by some privation or prayer, are notions perfectly adapted to their capacity and feelings. (Blanco White, 1822: 171)

But “fortunately, we still have various means of assisting our friends in Hades” (Blanco White, 1822: 171), and Blanco White presents further rituals within the frame of his argument, which may contribute to the salvation of the Holy Souls, such as the active participation on an ecclesiastical holiday, “devoted by the church to the relief of the departed souls” (Blanco White, 1822: 171) and the “lottery for the benefit of such souls as might otherwise escape their notice” (Blanco White, 1822: 172).

The example of the “Holy Souls” illustrates the conceptual design of the *Letters from Spain*. These particular and picturesque anecdotes and examples shall, according to Blanco White:

[...] enable others to perceive the general tendency of the civil and religious state of my country, and to judge of its influence on the improvement or degradation of this portion of mankind, independently of the endless modifications which arise from the circumstances, external and internal, of every individual. (Blanco White, 1822: 27)

Blanco White’s way of showing the “general tendency” is continuously connected with everyday realities; his moralistic and political interpretations are always illustrated by descriptions of human practice.

After having presented Blanco White’s method of social critique, characteristic to the enlightened and bourgeois critique around 1800, I focus on another link between the *Letters* and travel narrative, visible in many similar documents of social criticism: the staging of interculturality. In 18th-century European literature, it became modern to stage intercultural situations as a heuristic method to highlight one’s own culture from a stranger’s perspective. One of the first examples we can find is in the British magazine *The Spectator*, where Joseph Addison published fictional diary notes of an Indian king, who had spent some time in London and expresses his consternation about cultural manifestations such as theatre representations, political parties, religion, clothing and perukes (Weißhaupt, 1979: 316-318). The most popular example is probably the *Lettres Persanes* (1721) by Montesquieu, where two oriental

diplomats criticize the ambiguity of a naive belief in progress, as well as dealing with religious and public institutions (Weißhaupt, 1979: 37-69). There is also a Spanish work with this scheme, the *Moroccan Letters* (1793) by José de Cadalso; the *Letters from England* (1807) by Robert Southey have appropriated this model of representing English life and public institutions. The following extract points to the comparison and critical perspective of Espriella's *Letters*:

The wealth of this nation [England] is their own boast and the envy of all the rest of Europe; yet in no other country is there so much poverty – nor is poverty anywhere else attended with such actual suffering. Poor as our own country is, the poor Spaniard has resources and comforts which are denied to the Englishman: above all, he enjoys a climate which rarely or never subjects him to physical suffering. Perhaps the pain – the positive bodily pain which the poor here endure from cold, may be esteemed the worst evil of their poverty. Coal is everywhere dear, except in the neighbourhood of the collieries; and especially so in London, where the number of the poor is of course greatest. You see women raking the ashes in the streets, for the sake of the half-burnt cinders. What a picture does one of their houses present in the depth of winter! (Southey, 1951: 142)

Among these examples, the *Letters from Spain* by Blanco White are characterized by an intercultural perspective that highlights a distinct “culture” in a unique way. The difference is that Blanco White does not stage interculturality artificially. He was able to expose his observations and their meanings from *within* the culture. At the same time, since he had been living in England for many years, he knew about the forms of perception and the values of his readership, which forced him to explain the inner connections of Spanish realities. This obligation augments the quality of Blanco White's account in comparison to other examples of travel literature: those authors could fall back upon a tradition of stereotypes without questioning them. Blanco White, on the contrary, had to deal with two cultures and their thinking models at the same time: those of his home country, which he could perceive and interpret from within, as well as from the perspective of an outsider, and those of his readership, in order to enable a plausible and understanding reception.

CONCLUSIONS

Acting on the assumption of the hegemony of travel narratives within contemporary bourgeois reading culture, I have depicted the *Letters from Spain* by José María Blanco White as a textual union between social and cultural criticism and romantic travel narratives. I have dealt with the *Letters* as an interdiscursive document, where several coeval narrative genres and ideological lines intermingle, such as travel literature, historiography, autobiography and essayistic social criticism. This variety of approximations to Spanish political, religious and everyday life makes the *Letters* a multifaceted account of high ethnographic and historic value. For a deeper understanding of the *Letters*, it is crucial to consider the interrelations between Blanco White's biography and his work. As a defender of rationalism and liberty, he had migrated from Spain to England, and his clear intention was to convey to his English readership the inner structures of Spanish conditions and the historic and mental reasons for its *backwardness* within Europe. However, Blanco White knew about the romanticizing perspective his audience had regarding Spain, just as he knew about the popularity of travel literature. To this effect, he exploited the romantic travel narrative, applying several characteristic features in order to establish a familiar reading situation. In this contribution I have presented, in addition to the discursive variety of the *Letters from Spain*, how Blanco White falls back upon the stylistic elements and ideological lines of the romantic travel narrative in order to comply with the market and its demand for entertaining travel literature and exotic peculiarities from distant places. Romantic narratives of travel have not become unfashionable. From Lawrence, Southey and Blanco White until our times, the travel narrative is frequently chosen as a symbolic strategy for social criticism (Burroughs, 2011), but the demand for "exotic peculiarities" remains an important factor even within the narratives following "postcolonial" tracks (Schroder, 2011).

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