

Perceptions of Englishness in Pío Baroja's *La Ciudad de la niebla*

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La Ciudad de la niebla, or *The City of Fog*, as yet untranslated from the Spanish,¹ written in 1909 by the Basque author Pío Baroja, has as its background to the action the city of London. This in itself is unremarkable, as many novels of the period of various national and cultural origins can make the same claim. Again, not unusual is the fact that this novel is partly autobiographical ; not only were other travellers to Victorian and Edwardian London tempted into writing about their experiences, but nearly all the prolific output of Baroja was in some way and to some extent autobiographical. Baroja travelled to London around 1907 and stayed for a period of about three months. Neither the exact date of his visit nor the exact length of his stay can be determined from existing evidence. What we do know about the author is that he had tried to learn English, chiefly so as to be able to read his idol, Dickens, in the original version, and had been unsuccessful. We also know that he finally read Dickens in translation (French) and that his main reasons for wanting to visit the international capital were those tempting Dickensian descriptions and images of city life which he hoped to come across readily as he wandered indifferently from West to East End imitating the perambulations of his favourite author.

We propose to look at the textual content of the novel and discover not only what Baroja points out as being typically English, but why he finds it particularly abhorrent, how this is put across in the text, and whether or not he is justified in his very subjective observations. In other words, we shall discuss the perceptions of Englishness as manifest in the novel and at the same time in Baroja's own expe-

1. All translations from Spanish into English of the title and text of the novel are by I. Heald.

rience of London upon which the novel is partly based. Before dealing with those features of the country, its people and society which Baroja labels as typically English, we shall first introduce the book and the circumstances under which it was written.

The City of Fog forms part of a trilogy, a fashionable technique of the period, and is the second book, following the storyline of the first which recounts a fictional version of the attempt on the life of Alfonso XIII on the day of his wedding to one of Queen Victoria's grand-daughters, Princess Ena of Battenberg on 31st May 1906. The bomb directed at the wedding procession, hidden in a bouquet of flowers, was supposedly thrown by an anarchist who later went into hiding at the house of a University professor, Dr Aracil, who feels as a result that he has to flee the country along with his daughter, Maria. *The City of Fog* takes up the flight of the father and daughter as they arrive by steamboat in the port of London. Neither speak the language, the father is predisposed to dislike the country, and his daughter, who attempts to find a job when her father has run off with a South-American woman he has met at the boarding-house in Bloomsbury where they lodged, does try with some degree of success to learn the language and to get a job, but eventually gives up the struggle and returns to Madrid. The third book in the trilogy appears to have little to do with the first two and is not of interest here.

One may note that the experiences of Dr Aracil and Maria do in some way reflect those of Pío Baroja himself who also stayed in Bloomsbury in a boarding-house run by an Italian woman, that had been recommended to him by his brother Ricardo. Traits and habits deemed to be representative of "Englishness" are portrayed through various characters, none of which alone give a true version of Baroja's opinions but which together suggest the complexity and variety of Baroja's conflicting feelings towards the capital and its population.

As a preamble to extracts from the novel exemplifying Baroja's perceptions of Englishness we feel it may be useful to point out that his negative observations may be attributed to the disappointment he felt when he came into contact with an England which did not match his readings nor the images he had stored in his mind since he was a young boy, seeded there by his familiarity with English adventure novels. In his memoirs, Baroja admits that the authors he most admired as a youth remained his favourites throughout his lifetime. Thus, Kipling, Stevenson, Rider Haggard, Captain Marryat, Defoe and Walter Scott were highly esteemed by Baroja, though none so admired as Dickens. Baroja has supplied his own reading preferences in several places in his Memoirs, so it is unnecessary to repeat them in full here. However, it is interesting to note that the common denominator linking

the novels Baroja most likes is adventure or 'action.' : "no-one is as good at writing about adventure as an English author".²

He had great admiration and respect for the typically English adventure hero who got on with life and acted in a positive, spontaneous way. So different was this decisive mentality from the apathy reigning in Spain at the time, that Baroja had nothing but praise for those persons who took their destiny in their own hands and ventured forth to see how they could win the world. In *The City of Fog*, we can see the sort of hero Baroja admires (and the role perhaps he himself would have liked to play in real life) by his reference to what Mr Fry, a character Maria meets at her workplace, would like to be, but cannot :

He would have liked to live his life for other people, to be gallant, heroic and to stand up for the weak against the strong, but he had never had the opportunity to do it nor the imagination to dream about it. Thus, poor Mr Fry was an unhappy man.³

Although in the quotation cited above he evidently refers to the adventurer / hero type in gently mocking terms, employing a touch of irony to chastise a somewhat misplaced sentimentalism, the concept of the hero remains intact. In his own writing, Baroja places considerable importance on the qualities of the hero, although his heroes tend to be intellectualized, so that, although he admires the English hero, he does not adopt the same technique of presentation when dealing with his own protagonists. Some of the differences between his own stories and those of the classic English adventure story, are that it is far more difficult to guess the ending of Baroja's novels and they are not structured like a detective story — they are in fact far less structured as a whole. Baroja pays more attention to details of verisimilitude and looks less for sensationalism. The greatest influence exerted upon him, or at least, the most noticeable and identifiable, is that of Dickens,⁴ but whether or not he was influenced by one or all of them, and in what measure whether to the extent of plagiarism or merely in a bibliographic way, is difficult to verify, and remains a subject for further research.

2. Baroja, Pío. *Desde la última vuelta del camino (Memorias)*. in : *Obras Completas*. Vol. VI., Madrid : Biblioteca Nueva, 1947, 146.

3. Baroja, Pío. *La Ciudad de la Niebla*. Madrid : Ediciones Caro Raggio, 1972, 162.

4. cf. "Londres et l'influence de Charles Dickens dans *La Ciudad de la niebla* de Pío Baroja", in : *Rencontrer, Assimiler, Copier*. Actes du Colloque de Mars 1996, Clermont-Ferrand. Troisième Cahier, Université Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand 2. Centre de Recherches sur les Littératures Modernes et Contemporaines.

Let us now take a look at what Baroja picks out and describes as Englishness. All through *The City of Fog*, as in his other novels, Baroja is ironical at best, and at worst severely critical of England and the English. Baroja was not a stranger to travel and seems to have acquired more favourable impressions of Paris than of London — perhaps because he did not have such great expectations, and more importantly, he spoke French fairly fluently, so it is hardly surprising that he found the French people less reserved than the English given that he was able to speak to the former and not at all to the latter. Interestingly, many of the criticisms levelled at English life appearing in *The City of Fog* come from the mouth of the character called Mrs Stappleton who is of French extract and who cohabitates in the Bloomsbury boarding house with Dr Aracil and his daughter. In a comparison made between England and France, England comes off rather poorly :

This French woman could not get used to London. She found the English people uninteresting. They were pleasant but no more than that. They were just money-making machines. [...].

What is more, said Mrs Stappleton, everything was so different from her beloved France — the weather, people's ideas and habits. They even worried about different things.

'And is it all worse?' someone asked her.

'But of course.' she replied. 'Paris is the only place to live''⁵

She goes on to express what we feel are Baroja's own impressions of the London he encountered:

What I find here is a complete lack of originality. I always thought that England was the country where original, interesting people could be found, but it is just the opposite.⁶

Another character who denigrates London, criticizing the lack of vitality of its population, is Mrs Roche, another resident of the Bloomsbury boarding house and we can see that Baroja is only too aware that, prior to his coming to London, what he thought was Englishness, or the nature of the English spirit, turns out to be very thin on the ground. The action, enterprise and endeavour which he seems to have expected to come across around every street corner is not as easily accessible as he imagined:

5. Baroja Pfo, *La Ciudad de la Niebla* 24-25.

6. *Ibid.* 27.

this inability to generate enthusiasm or to protest about anything led to enormous weariness, a total apathy towards life. [...] People are very bored. The more evolved a race becomes, the more bored the people are.⁷

Thus, the spontaneous, lively and ingenious nature of the typical Englishman, which for Baroja epitomized Englishness in fiction is converted in reality into dullness — a combination of tradition, respectability and lack of imagination. The indigenous population appear to him to be far removed from the heroic protagonists of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* which he seemed to expect to find. : "No-one could possibly foresee, [...] the respectability, tradition and boredom of the population."⁸

Not only is Englishness in *The City of Fog* characterized by lack of vim, the eating habits and fare to be had is typically English and described as typically unpleasant. Baroja was perhaps unprepared for English food — civilised mealtime customs are infrequently described in adventure novels and the epicurean celebration which constitutes mealtimes in the Iberian peninsula is a far cry from what was to be found as a result of Baroja's limited wanderings. At one point in the novel, Maria is invited to go to lunch with her boss and the resulting description of what she experienced is hardly laudatory:

All the men ate rapidly and with disgusting greediness. Our typical John Bull turned into John Bull-Dog as these men acted like dogs jumping on their prey. They even glanced from side to side as if they feared that the food may be snatched from them.⁹

In his *Memoirs*, Baroja observes:

What I did not like was that they often served meat and other fatty dishes cold, whilst desserts and sweet dishes were served hot. This seemed to me to be a useless culinary inversion.¹⁰

Let us now rise above the generalities of habit among the English and deal with Englishness as manifest in the characters in *The City of Fog*, who reflect to some extent those real people Baroja met during his three-month stay in London and who give such a bad impression of England and the English. What is particularly striking is the distinct lack of descriptions of English persons in the novel. This appears to be a deliberate strategy on the part of the author, forcing us to see the English

7. *Ibid.* 56-57.

8. *Ibid.* 50.

9. *Ibid.* 102.

10. Baroja, Pío, *Desde la última vuelta del camino*, op. cit. 769.

through the eyes of other characters so that we see the racial concept (albeit negative and highly subjectivized) of Englishness rather than getting to know any individual English characters with whom we may have sympathised. The very few English characters who do appear are not given a very favourable treatment, indeed, they are dealt with in a caricatural fashion. The only British couple in the boarding house serves to demonstrate Baroja's aversion to the English in general. In his portrayal of the family at breakfast, Baroja pays special attention, as seen by the repetition in the text below, to the "chocolate-box" bows tied at the neck of the girls' blouses in a derisive, mocking way. He seems to be claiming that this style of fashion is affected and that the accompanying strictness and silence during mealtimes is an example of the English coldness of character and spirit together with the typically English phlegmatic behaviour. He goes to great pains to depict the family as archaic, out of fashion, rigidly traditional and traditionalistic as well as hopelessly complexed :

the father, [...] who permanently smoked a cigar in a cigar-holder [...] ; the mother, who was very masculine, had a long nose, a red face, large teeth and hair scraped away from her face ; [...] the daughters, two frail girls, wore light-coloured garments and had a pussy-cat bow tied at their necks.[...] Sitting upright in their chairs, they spoke not one word during the meal.

When they had finished, the whole family rose to their feet, the two girls with the pussy-cat bows led the way out, followed by their mother and then at last by their father, bowing to the rest of the diners.¹¹

Particularly noteworthy is the unkind description of the mother's countenance; we have only to register the most unflattering descriptions of the English physiognomy, prevalent in the novel and dealt with below, in order to expose not only Baroja's dislike for the English, but also his mysogyny. The women who fall from grace on the pages of his novel are dealt a severe blow when it comes to the appraisal of their physical attributes.

A bespectacled woman who was thin and ugly. She looked unfriendly, her skin was yellowish and she had short hair and long teeth.¹²

Among the singers, there were two or three thin, angular ladies whose age was indeterminate.¹³

11.Baroja Pío, *La Ciudad de la Niebla* 9-10.

12.*Ibid.* 82.

13.*Ibid.* 10.

One of the most illustrious was Miss Clarck — a woman as stiff as a board, tall and ugly with feet like barges, huge hands and a shapeless hat on her head.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that Baroja (who never could master the English language and therefore despises it) makes a link between the ugliness of these women and their mother tongue :

Some are as pretty as a picture, but for the most part, the shape of their mouths is not attractive. Many of them have tight lips which must be as a result of the pronunciation of the English language.¹⁵

Much more criticism follows ; the author makes rather ridiculous observations on the etymology and grossly exaggerates the cosmopolitan aspects of the language and those who speak it. Baroja's perception of Englishness goes beyond satire ; we cannot help but conclude that not only is Englishness utterly distasteful to him both in *The City of Fog* and in real life, but that he is determined, by a show of absurd national juxtapositions, to deny even the concept of Englishness :

An Englishman born in Holland with a French surname [...].¹⁶

'Yes, I know a few words of English that I was taught in Cuba by a Chinaman who had visited California.'¹⁷

Mr Mantz was in business in the City. His parents were German, but he felt himself to be the most English of all Englishmen in England.¹⁸

Baroja is in fact annihilating all existence of the concept of Englishness. It is our feeling that because he was unable to experience the perception of Englishness that he was pre-programmed to expect, he has decided in his novel to prove that no pure, untainted Englishness actually exists, that at the time of his visit, any true, real, Englishness-as-it-used-to-be or Englishness-as-expounded-in-literature has been diluted and diversified into extinction. We note, however, Baroja's persistent refusal to give a detailed portrait of an English person in his novel ; none of his protagonists are of English nationality in the albeit cosmopolitan capital, leading us to

14.*Ibid.* 17.

15.*Ibid.* 51.

16.*Ibid.* 9.

17.*Ibid.* 44.

18.*Ibid.* 28.

conclude that in typical Baroja-like fashion, situations are exaggerated and ridiculed to the extent of overt manipulation. Even the likeable Mr Roche, the only Brit in the book, is deliberately given the unlikely combination of Irish and Scottish origins, which although improbable, fit in perfectly with Baroja's own fetishes about the comparative superiority of the Celts (he being Basque himself). In other words, we do not seem to know exactly what Baroja's perception of "Englishness" is, we only know that it is very negative, so much so that when he eulogizes Roche, the conclusion one is invited to draw is that Mr. Roche is a good and interesting character simply because he is not English.

'You must have very few English origins.'

'Yes, so few that I am in fact Scottish, with Irish ancestry.'"¹⁹

The animosity felt by Baroja towards the English and the capital of England comes as a direct result of his own unhappy experience there. The solitude and isolation that he felt is expressed through the observation here made by Maria Aracil : "More and more deeply, more and more intensely does one experience real solitude within such a huge, black city — a city which is a world in itself."²⁰

Like Baroja, his protagonist Maria finds herself alone in the city with very few acquaintances and with little possibilities of acquiring them, undoubtedly because for them both, the potential for sociability was limited due to difficulties with the language and also to a lack of pecuniary means with which to go out and seek entertainment or company.

Finally, whenever Pío Baroja's so-called anglophilia (derived from his admiration of English literature) is discussed in literary criticisms in the annals of Spanish literature, *The City of Fog* is cited as the typical, if not the best example in which Englishness is studied by the author. However, we are of the opinion that this book, published in 1909, reflects the contradictory, if not wholly negative impressions held by Baroja after his very first visit to London. The book contains a series of descriptions which reflect a rather immature, primitive and pedantic attitude in the face of the reality of London, with no apparent tolerance for the intrinsic cultural values existing in the multi-racial metropolis of the time. Shocking and unconvincing to the reader is Baroja's stubborn refusal to furnish us with a description of a thoroughly English personage, presumably because Baroja found no-one worthy of description. Not only does this show Baroja's inability to find a hero model, but also

19.*Ibid.* 20.

20.*Ibid.* 41.

suggests that the English hero in his own natural habitat and among so many other clones perhaps becomes difficult to detect. Baroja gives a far better description of Englishness and the Englishman when abroad, or when featuring in one of his other novels not set in England. In novels other than *The City of Fog*, Baroja gives a far more convincing description of a typical English person and of typical Englishness. When we encounter an English person described outside his own environment, we can see him more clearly because he is in isolation so that the reason for his presence in the novel and the usefulness of his inherent characteristics become salient.

We can conclude by the above examination of the perceptions of Englishness in Pío Baroja's *The City of Fog* that so firmly were the author's preconceived ideas rooted in him that everything he experienced in London deviated from his expectations. Nowhere to be seen were the colourful Dickensian scenes of city life; non-existent were the heroes full of initiative, drive and imagination that swashbuckled their way through the pages of earlier adventure novels. It is thus the extent to which Baroja was pre-programmed that is to blame for the disappointment he felt, a disappointment which out of bitterness is transformed into the desire to negate everything which could be perceived as Englishness in *The City of Fog*.

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