

HUGH BLAIR AND THE INTRODUCTION OF CREATIONIST THEORY OF POETRY INTO SPAIN<sup>1</sup>

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English Version of “Hugo Blair y la introducción en España de la poética creacionista”, en Álvarez Barrientos, J. y Herrera, J., eds., *Para Emilio Palacios. 26 estudios sobre el siglo XVIII español*, Madrid, FUE, 2011, pp. 449-464.

When Hugh Blair published his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* in 1783 he let it be known that his intention was none other than to offer in an orderly fashion the fundamental ideas of rhetoric and theory of poetry that he had transmitted to his disciples at the University of Edinburgh<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, Blair’s work is much more than a systematization of the fundamental principles of the two disciplines in the title. If in relation to rhetoric Blair explains that the study of eloquence is closely connected to the improvement of intellectual faculties, and thus, with the cultivation of reason<sup>3</sup>, with respect to theory of poetry he affirms that it leads us to improve our taste and consequently to be able to criticize correctly. In this respect, going beyond rhetoric and theory of poetry considered individually, that is, following the traditional concept represented by the *studia humanitatis*, Blair’s *Lectures* constitute a rigorous attempt to respond to the theoretical and aesthetic debates that arose in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in accordance with the European reconsideration of the philosophical problem of beauty and of arts and letters:

If the following lectures have any merit, it will consist in an endeavour to substitute the application of these principles [of reason and good sense] in the place of artificial and scholastic rhetoric; in an endeavour to explode false ornament, to direct attention more towards substance than show, to recommend good sense as the foundation of all good composition, and simplicity as essential to all true ornament<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a result of the research projects entitled *La teoría europea de los conceptos estético-literarios en el siglo XVIII (The European Theory of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Aesthetic-Literary Concepts)* (18.KA4G), financed by the University of Salamanca, and R+D+I Project R+D+I of Excellence *Prensa y publicística en las Cortes de Cádiz (Press and Publicity in the Cortes of Cadiz)* (P06-HUM-01398), granted by the Regional Government of Andalusia to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Study Group of the University of Cádiz.

<sup>2</sup> Blair published his work in the same year that he retired from his professorship. It is thus a work of maturity, but is not a treatise; rather it is a compilation evidently meant to serve as an introduction. It was translated into Spanish by José Luis Munárriz and published in Madrid by Antonio Cruzado, 1798-1801 and reedited in 1804 and 1816-1817. Blair was appointed to the Regius Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh in 1762, and began to teach the material he then collected in this work. The edition I quote from here is the one edited by Abraham Mills (Philadelphia: T. Ellwood Zell & Co., 1866). For more information on the life of Blair see the Spanish translation of his work *Lecciones sobre la Retórica y las Bellas Letras* (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1804), pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

<sup>3</sup> “True rhetoric and sound logic are very nearly allied”, Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. cit., 12. For Blair, Rhetoric should be an art addressed to persuasion by means of discourse but whose principal element should be the *concept*. On the evolution of the term *rhetoric*, see Francisco Abad Nebot, “Retórica: apuntes sobre la palabra y la cosa”, *Signa: revista de la Asociación Española de Semiótica*, núm. 14 (2005): 14-36.

<sup>4</sup> Hugo Blair, *Lectures...*, ed. cit., 10

Blair, like other contemporary theoreticians, felt the need to offer a precise and if possible systematic answer to the question of the peculiarity of the belles lettres and, by extension, of the fine arts, by inquiring into the nature of literature and the human faculties (taste, genius, critical sense, *sensus communis*) that actively play a role in their production and reception. In this sense, it can be said that rather than a simple departure from the obsolete scholastic approach of traditional rhetoric<sup>5</sup> and a mere recommendation of the application of a certain dose of rationality to the study and knowledge of the belles lettres, Blair's *Lectures* have the advantage of showing the explanatory inadequacy of classicism at the same time that they establish the foundations of a critical theory of poetry with an anthropological character and an empirical basis. Whereas Charles Batteux in his well-known works *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe* (1746) and *los Principes de littérature* (1755) did not overcome the theoretical limitations of neoclassical rationalism when defending the authority of objectivity over subjectivity and imitation as a general principle of artistic creation, Blair warned about the aesthetic limitations that were the result of formulating a theoretical system in the Cartesian tradition. Thus, his treatise represents a more complex perception of literature in which the study of its nature in relation to a producing and receiving subject and the adjudication of a place in civil life constitute the true objective.

In this sense, Blair's *Lectures* as a whole amount to a literary epistemology, since he begins with the ontological explanation of the belles lettres in order to be able to establish the most suitable methods and criteria for verifying their study with a certain amount of success. Thus, the first term of his reflections is constituted by the establishment of literary specificity, and the second by the search for the intellectual foundations of his scientific and critical knowledge. His work therefore turns out to be an ontology, an argued exposition of the nature of the belles lettres, that is, a science of literature, and a literary epistemology, critical by definition to the extent that he deals with verifying the scientific validity of the theoretical discourse on literature that has existed up until that time:

[...] As there may be many who have no such objects as either composition or public speaking in view, let us consider what advantages may be derived by them, from such studies as form the subject of these lectures. To them, rhetoric is not so much a practical act as a speculative science and the same instructions which assist others in composing, will assist them in discerning and relishing the beauties of composition. Whatever enables genius to execute well, will enable taste to criticise justly<sup>6</sup>.

Starting from this basis, the general idea of the text is to offer readers a reflexive and beneficial work about literature, by means of which artistic discourse can be positively evaluated, both from the social and from the intellectual or philosophical points of view. As Blair recognizes in his introduction, this kind of knowledge has not always

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<sup>5</sup> See my article "La Filosofía y el conocimiento teórico de la literatura a fines del siglo XVIII", in AA.VV., *El mundo hispánico en el Siglo de las Luces. Actas del Coloquio Internacional Unidad y diversidad en el mundo hispánico en el siglo XVIII*" (Madrid: Sociedad Española de Estudios del Siglo XVIII/ Fundación Duques de Soria/ Universidad Complutense, 1996), II, 1, 136-1, 147.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures...*, ed. cit., 12-13. In the Spanish translation the word *genius* is given as *ingenio*. The difference lies in that the former term assumes exceptional ability when conceiving an original literary work, and in Spanish the word *ingenio* is ambiguously used to designate it. For a further explanation see my article "Notas a propósito de la distinción idilio/égloga y genio/ingenio en las *Variedades de Ciencias, Literatura y Artes* (1804-1805)", R. Senabre et al. (eds.), *Cuestiones de actualidad en lengua española* (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca/ Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 2000), 355-362.

been appreciated by the public. He goes so far as to affirm that rhetoric and pedants' criticism have helped to discredit it<sup>7</sup>. This is because eloquence has been identified with ornament, and the latter with the vacuity of sophistic discourse, whereas in his view, it should be exactly the opposite. Literature, be it oratory or poetics, demands that the person who is to compose it should broaden his knowledge. In this sense, he affirms: "[...] The study of rhetoric and belles lettres supposes and requires a proper acquaintance with the rest of the liberal arts. It embraces them all within its circle, and recommends them to the highest regard"<sup>8</sup>. In fact, it can be inferred from his declarations that rhetoric and theory of poetry are all the more necessary the more human knowledge progresses<sup>9</sup>.

In the generic sense, rhetoric is the art of persuading but by transmitting concepts: "Knowledge and science must furnish the materials that form the body and substance of any valuable composition. Rhetoric serves to add the polish; and we know that none but firm and solid bodies can be polished well"<sup>10</sup>. For Blair, rhetoric is a practical art, equally useful in any scientific discipline. Thus, its study is not only necessary for anyone who aspires to become initiated in the art of composition, but it is also essential for a correct transmission of knowledge, and by extension, for the evolution of societies:

The attention paid to it may, indeed, be assumed as one mark of the progress of society towards its most improved period. For, according as society improves and flourishes, men acquire more influence over one another by means of reasoning and discourse; and in proportion as that influence is felt to enlarge, it must follow, as a natural consequence, that they will bestow more care upon the methods of expressing their conceptions with propriety and elegance<sup>11</sup>.

As a result of this, the teaching of rhetoric has an intimate connection, as he likewise explains, with the intellectual and particularly the rational improvement of human beings:

All that regards the study of eloquence and composition, merits the higher attention upon this account, that it is intimately connected with the improvement of our intellectual powers. For I must be allowed to say, that when we are employed, after a proper manner, in the study of composition, we are cultivating reason itself. True rhetoric and sound logic are very nearly allied<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures...*, ed. cit., 13. By *pedants' criticism* he understands that which is based on the application of certain technical terms to the analysis of literary works.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. We do not know exactly what was understood by the term "liberal arts" at that time, since sometimes he mentions arts and sciences in general and other times only philosophical knowledge. Nonetheless, a reading of the whole work gives the impression that Blair tends towards this latter sense. In any case, they are in opposition to the mechanical arts.

<sup>9</sup> "The first care of all such as wish to write with reputation, or to speak in public so as to command attention, must be, to extend their knowledge; to lay in a rich store of ideas relating to those subjects of which the occasions of life may call them to discourse or to write", *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. On these same pages he points out the following: "[...] The orator ought to be an accomplished scholar, and conversant in every part of learning" and "It is indeed impossible to contrive an art, and very pernicious it were if it could not be contrived, which should give the stamp of merit to any composition rich or splendid in expression, but barren or erroneous in thought", p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10. For a more exhaustive knowledge of Blair's Rhetoric, see James L. Golden and Edward P. J. Corbett, *The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell and Whately* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990) and the edition by Lynée Lewis Gaillet, *Scottish Rhetoric and its Influences* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

There is thus a relationship of dependence between the study of the composition of argumentative discourse and the cultivation of reason. The need to express our thoughts in an orderly and intelligible way obliges us to think with the necessary coherence and exactness. Therefore, a person who is not capable of expounding his or her ideas with the required order will only transmit them in a confused way. Likewise, one who is not familiar with rhetorical principles not only will not know how to demand beauty in composition but will also be unable to perceive the paucity and confusion of the thoughts themselves: “Those who have never studied eloquence in its principles nor have been trained to attend to the genuine and manly beauties of good writing, are always ready to be caught by the mere glare of language”<sup>13</sup>.

But in addition to this individual benefit, there is another collective benefit that derives from the connection of rhetoric with the progress of humanity<sup>14</sup>. For Blair the possibility of a modern society in which rhetoric did not occupy a distinguished position was unthinkable. However, this does not come, like before, from its politicization. Regardless of the pragmatic function that an oratorical composition can have in the public sphere, rhetoric possesses a higher value linked to nothing less than the intellectual constitution of the human being: “[...]For I must be allowed to say, that when we are employed, after a proper manner, in the study of composition, we are cultivating reason itself.”<sup>15</sup>. The true mission of rhetoric is thus found in that it is linked to the (apolitical) discursive universe of intellectual creation of modern rhetorical discourse, which distances it from the persuasive social purpose it had in antiquity to convert it into the discourse of human reason.

According to what we can infer from this, modern man learns to construct an intelligent and ordered discourse with which to transmit his ideas to his fellow man through the resources that rhetoric provides, but thanks to it, he also learns to judge the discourses of others. Rhetoric, and theory of poetry as well, are not arts only suitable for the creators. As Blair points out, they constitute speculative knowledge that develops the critical capacity of individuals and societies. In accordance with this humanist ideal of modernity, rhetoric serves to organize thought and improve the rational capabilities, being necessary both for those who write and for those who will have to judge writings *a posteriori*. Its public, or better said, political importance therefore does not depend on the persuasive power that springs from discourse but rather from its intellectual strength. Rhetoric is an instrument for carrying out an anthropological communicative function<sup>16</sup>. By means of it, man can access knowledge of the methods through which understanding can appreciate the scientific validity of a discourse. It will be from this intellectual, human and of course philosophical point of view that Rhetoric will be essential for modern man and society since having an analytical mentality and a critical spirit is demanded of both. Seen thus, the *Lectures* were an advance with respect to the aesthetic reflection of classical theory of poetry and rhetoric. The rhetorical and poetological thought that they represent is linked to a higher imperative than that which the ideal of universality marked regarding the rational exactitude of rules. It was not now a matter of organizing the material provided by rhetoric and belles lettres in a unitary and unquestionable way, as in Batteux. The work of the theoretician consists of moving through them to a deeper problematic.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> See Maximiliano Hernández Marcos, “Estética y Retórica en el siglo XVIII. El caso de Baumgarten”, in Antonio Ruiz Castellanos, Antonia Viñez Sánchez and Juan Sáez Durán, eds., *Retórica y Texto* (Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz, 1998), 293-295.

This consists of going into the domain of the essentially human. Blair's text posits certain complications that Cartesian philosophy cannot respond to. Batteux, taking up the thought of Crousaz, Du Bos and André, had already introduced in his treatises explanations about terms linked to sensation and sensibility. However, even considering his entry into the sphere of fine arts and aesthetics fully legitimate, Batteux sought a fundamental principle of the structuring of artistic creation capable of explaining individual literary and artistic phenomena, such as the universal principle of imitation and the Aristotelian concept of nature<sup>17</sup>. Blair proceeds in a different manner. Even using the same sources, he proposes to carry out a methodological effort regarding the basis of the explanation of art starting from the consideration of the nature of man. This involves accepting that the artistic is human by definition and thus that aesthetics should offer an anthropological rather than a logical (Batteux) response to the problem of art and how it is grasped by the subject.

It can thus be understood that the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* are based on the existence of two capabilities in the human subject: *genius*, or if lacking, wit and taste. The purpose of his work, his critical commentaries and his poetic explanations are addressed to the subject inasmuch as he behaves publicly as a genius/wit or as a critic. As a creator, the subject will value his treatise by considering it an art thanks to which a precise idea can be acquired as to the best way to compose oratorical or poetical discourses; as a critic, that is, as a passive subject who reads or listens to them, he will find in the work a speculative science with which to learn how to judge the discourse of others. In both cases the ultimate goal is not to indoctrinate about the universality of the principles of art but rather to improve in the sensitive knowledge of human nature:

To apply the principles of good sense to composition and discourse; to examine what is beautiful and why it is so; to employ ourselves in distinguishing accurately between the specious and the solid, between affected and natural ornament, must certainly improve us not a little in the most valuable part of all philosophy, the philosophy of human nature. For such disquisitions are very intimately connected with knowledge of ourselves. They necessarily lead us to reflect on the operations of the imagination, and the movements of the heart and increase our acquaintance with some of the most refined feelings which belong to our frame<sup>18</sup>.

In his work Blair defends that belles lettres, rhetoric, theory of poetry, criticism and aesthetics as the general discipline that comprises them should occupy a distinguished and unique place in the context of the philosophy of knowledge because they allow us to analyse the intellectual process that leads the subject to understand or perceive the object from a perspective that is not only rational but human in a complex way. Such a philosophically enlightened approach responds to the 18<sup>th</sup> century eagerness to explain the problem of knowledge of art in itself and in relation to experience. In this field, Cartesian certainties about artistic knowledge disappear and in exchange what is sought is a deeper explanation of the opposition between sensation and reflection.

Belles lettres and criticism as well possess two advantages in this respect: the first consists of implementing those faculties that form part of the sphere of sensibility: fantasy, imagination and the affections, and the second implies that this space of knowledge pertains to them exclusively:

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<sup>17</sup> See Fernando Bollino, *Teoria e sistema delle belle arti. Charles Batteux e gli 'esthéticiens' del sec. XVIII* (Bologna: Università de Bologna, 1976), 88-120.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures...*, ed. cit., 13.

[...] Belles lettres and criticism chiefly consider [man] as a being endowed with those powers of taste and imagination, which were intended to embellish his mind, and to supply him with rational and useful entertainment. They open a field of investigation peculiar to themselves. All that relates to beauty, harmony, grandeur, and elegance, all that can sooth the mind, gratify the fancy, or move the affections, belongs to their province. They present human nature under a different aspect from that which it assumes when viewed by other sciences. They bring to light various springs of action, which, without their aid, might have passed unobserved, and which, though of a delicate nature, frequently exert a powerful influence on several departments of human life<sup>19</sup>.

Art and, above all, literature reach places where logical knowledge does not. As we see in the quote, literature, thanks to its ability to intervene in the sensitive capacities of human beings, exerts a notable influence on private and public life. For Blair the social function of literature comes from the fact that it permits what in civil life is translated into the improvement of taste for individual and collective use to educate us in sensibility<sup>20</sup>. Making what is artistic depend on the sensitive nature of man and establishing belles lettres as the human manifestation capable of activating them turns them into an exceptional and essential means both for reaching a more precise idea of human nature and for contributing to its education. The *Lectures* reflect the internal transformation that the classicist formulation of art was undergoing. The aim of theory of poetry at that stage could not be to establish the rules for the composition of discourse or their grouping but rather to determine how the impression is made on the spectator and how the critical judgement with which he receives it is constituted.

But the need for this judgement will prevent the establishment of a total relativism in art. That the production and reception of art or literature originate in the sense capacities does not mean that there are not common norms of taste or that taste pertains only to the sphere of sensitivity and not logic: “The pleasures of taste —declares Blair— [pertain to] a middle station between the pleasures of sense, and those of pure intellect”<sup>21</sup>. The matter that Blair tries to discern, the same as other theoreticians, has to do with the rational links of this sense faculty. If in principle it is an instinctive faculty through which it is possible to receive pleasure from the beauties of art and nature<sup>22</sup>, what is the role of reason in the field of aesthetics? In this respect Blair affirms clearly that taste is based on sensibility but he understands that the latter, like taste, can be perfected by means of knowledge and education:

[...] The beauty of composition and discourse, attention to the most improved models, study of the best authors, comparisons of lower and higher degrees of the same beauties, operate towards the refinement of taste<sup>23</sup>.

From this perspective, taste turns out to be an improvable faculty and this perfectibility comes from establishing a rational awareness of what consists of beauty in art:

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> See Lois Agnew, “The Civic Function of Taste: a Reassessment of Hugh Blair’s Rhetorical Theory”, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 28.2 (1998), 25-36.

<sup>21</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures...*, ed. cit., 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

[...] Although taste be ultimately founded on sensibility, it must not be considered as instinctive sensibility alone. Reason and good sense [...] have so extensive an influence on all the operations and decisions of taste, that a thorough good taste may well be considered as a power compounded of natural sensibility to beauty, and of improved understanding<sup>24</sup>.

In the case of intellection of what is artistic, reason constitutes a realization with respect to what is beautiful. But this conscious feeling is the product of the study and analysis of the works and the models. “[...] attention to the most improved models, study of the best authors, comparisons of lower and higher degrees of the same beauties, operate towards the refinement of taste”<sup>25</sup>. Thus, one of the fundamental qualities of taste is its improvability, but for this to occur, reason must intervene. Reason is an instrument for revealing to taste the virtues of a literary or artistic work. Man in his natural state perceives beauty depending on his greater or lesser sensibility, but only reason can account for the causes that justify this pleasure: “The pleasure we receive from such imitations or representations is founded on mere taste but to judge whether they be properly executed, belongs to the understanding, which compares the copy with the original”<sup>26</sup>. The issue being debated here is whether reason has lost the hegemonic position it held in classicist aesthetics or, if one prefers, whether there is an aesthetic judgement differentiated from logical judgement.

My view is that Blair, although on occasion tending to prioritize understanding, does differentiate the one from the other in his *Lectures*. Let us say that by *logical judgement* we should understand a judgement made without any participation of the sensitive capacities other than those which permit the passage from perception to idea, whereas *aesthetic judgement* means that the sensations experienced are the object of a subsequent intellectual evaluation. But, for this very reason, in his work there is no possibility that this judgement can be made suitably without the help of reason, or what is the same, knowledge. Thus he establishes that the characters of taste in its state of perfection are delicacy and correctness:

No taste can be exquisitely delicate without being correct; nor can be thoroughly correct without being delicate. [...] The power of delicacy is chiefly seen in discerning the true merit of a work; the power of correctness, in rejecting false pretensions to merit. Delicacy leans more to feeling; correctness, more to reason and judgement. The former is more the gift of nature; the latter, more the product of culture and art<sup>27</sup>.

In Blair’s theoretical formulation, aesthetics is not founded on reason because it cannot do without the universe of sensibility. Actually, the fundamental principle of its constitution is that it explains the relations between objects, in this case the literary works, and ourselves as subjects capable of being moved by them: “But though reason can carry us a certain length in judging concerning works of taste, it is not to be forgotten that the ultimate conclusions to which our reasonings lead, refer at last to sense and perception”<sup>28</sup>. Furthermore, Blair even considers that it is not necessary to establish the rules of beauty but rather to educate the taste or sensibility so that we can appreciate in the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

works what is commonly known as merits or values. The relativity of taste thus disappears with the help of so-called *sensus communis*:

[...] Taste is far from being an arbitrary principle [...]. Its foundation is the same in all human minds. It is built upon sentiments and perceptions which belong to our nature and which, in general, operate with the same uniformity as our other intellectual principles<sup>29</sup>.

In this sense, Blair avoids presenting his *Lectures* as a set of rules whose application to literary works will determine their merit<sup>30</sup>. On the contrary, he intends them to serve to create an *aesthetic awareness* that, having its origin in a faculty common to the entire human race, as is taste, is to be the result of a consensus among men. Thus, the universal recognition of works considered exemplary responds to a natural inclination of all humans to appreciate the authors and the works of beauty. Thus he wonders:

[...] What is there of sufficient authority to be the standard of the various and opposite tastes of men? Most certainly there is nothing but the taste, as far as it can be gathered, of human nature. That which men concur the most in admiring, must be held to be beautiful. His taste must be esteemed just and true, which coincides with the general sentiments of men. In this standard we must rest. To the sense of mankind the ultimate appeal must ever lie, in all works of taste<sup>31</sup>.

This thus confirms a displacement of the classical theory of imitation towards aesthetic concepts that depend on the specifically human, and aesthetics and even poetics will be conceived of as a philosophy of beauty. In aesthetics, the norm cannot be established by following criteria of poetical rigour but according to its ability to produce beautiful objects. As Hume was to point out in his essay *On the standard of taste*, neither a single expression nor a single origin of beauty can be established. As a result, the Aristotelian idea of imitation, as conceived by classicist orthodoxy, acquires a relative value in literary creation. As Blair points out, it is one of the pleasures of taste but not the only one<sup>32</sup>.

On this point, Blair turns out to be a faithful follower of Addison and his work the *Pleasures of the Imagination*. Like his fellow-countryman, he establishes the sources of the pleasures of taste, placing the first in sublimity, the second in beauty and the third in imitation. With regard to imitation Blair points out that its importance in the sphere of belles lettres is not to be found in a methodological requirement, as Batteux explained. It does not even constitute the fundamental principle from which all creation originates, as the French theorist also maintained. For Blair, the superiority of belles lettres derives from the fact that they cause a pleasure superior to that provided by the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind. On the Principles of Common Sense* (1764).

<sup>30</sup> "I by no means pretend, that there is any standard of taste, to which, in every particular instance, we can resort for clear and immediate determination", *Ibid.*, 25. See Pedro Aullón de Haro, "La Ilustración y la idea de literatura", in Eduardo Bello and Antonio Rivera, eds., *La actitud ilustrada* (Valencia: Biblioteca Valenciana, 2002), 151-159.

<sup>31</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures...*, ed. cit., 24.

<sup>32</sup> "If the question be put, to what class of those pleasures of taste which I have enumerated, that pleasure is to be referred which we receive from poetry, eloquence or fine writing? My answer is, not to any one, but to them all. This singular advantage, writing and discourse possess, that they encompass so large and rich a field on all sides and have power to exhibit, in great perfection, not a single set of objects only, but almost the whole of those which give pleasure to taste and imagination; whether that pleasure arise from sublimity, from beauty in its different forms, from closing, and art, from moral sentiment, from novelty. From harmony, from wit, humour and ridicule", *Ibid.*, 56.



fine arts. Such pleasure has its basis in language as it is the only creative instrument that permits imitation and description. In this line, Blair considers that literature constitutes the principal imitative art owing to the power that language has to create images that cause pleasure to the taste and the imagination regardless of whether or not they are represented in nature. In this last case, we speak of imitation, imitation that equates *belle lettres* with arts like painting and sculpture. On the other hand, description does not form a part of these arts, but rather “is the raising in the mind the conception of an object by means of some arbitrary or instituted symbols, understood only by those who agree in the institution of them; such are words and writing”<sup>33</sup>. Thus he considers that poetry is more descriptive than imitative. In this case following Alexander Gerard and what was commented on in the appendix of his book *An essay on taste* when he wonders whether poetry is really imitation, and if so, in what sense it can be spoken of<sup>34</sup>, Blair considers a key matter, which is what class or more exactly, what classes of imitation can be made when the material used is language. Reproducing almost literally the words of Gerard, he maintains that to imitate is to produce a representation of an object and that as a result, only dramatic poetry is actually imitative. What occurs in the rest of works is an imitation of objects as they are conceived by the poet’s imagination. And the pleasure caused originates in the psychological effects that a vividly expressed idea can provoke<sup>35</sup>. Poetry is an imitation not of nature but rather of the idea of nature that the poet has.

It is evident that Blair aligns himself with those who would broaden the universe of imitation to the context of possible worlds, sustained on the idea of probability and verisimilitude. Nevertheless, what is most important is that by doing so he modified the classicist form of understanding theory of poetry and of establishing the links between the creation of a literary work and subjectivity<sup>36</sup>. The reception of a work of art is thus understood as the result of the communion between sensibilities by means of a linguistic object. According to what can be deduced here, it does not have value owing to its natural referentiality; on the contrary, it attains value by virtue of its condition as beautiful. The communication that takes place with the literary work and the resulting pleasure, which comes from the reaction of the sensitive subject when faced with a beautiful object, will allow the object to be comprehended for what it means in itself and for what it transmits. It is evident that Blair approximated the formulations of the idealist theoreticians and with 18<sup>th</sup> century postulates opened the way to the questioning of the universal authority of the principle of imitation as the basis of artistic creation.

It goes without saying that this was one of the reasons why the Spanish followers of Batteux and his translator, Agustín García de Arrieta, opposed Blair’s treatise. For Moratin and writers with a pro-French tendency, Blair’s text rocked the Aristotelian model since in his treatise Batteux had already accepted the contradiction inherent in the

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>34</sup> The question posed was: “Concerning the question whether Poetry be properly an Imitation Art? And if it be, in what sense is it imitative?”, Alexander Gerard, *An essay on taste* (Edimburg: J. Bell, 1780<sup>3</sup>), 275-284.

<sup>35</sup> Regarding Ossian, see Fiona Stafforf, “Hugh Blair’s Ossian, Romanticism and the Teaching of Literature”, in Crawford, R. ed. *The Scottish Invention of English Literatures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 68-88.

<sup>36</sup> For information on the repercussions of the *Lectures* see the classical works of Don Paul Abbot, “The Influence of Blair’s *Lectures* in Spain”, *Rhetorica*, 7/3 (1989), 275–289 and “Blair ‘Abroad’: The European Reception of the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*”, in Gaillet, L. Lynee, *Scottish Rhetoric and its Influences* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 67-78, as well as my article “Batteux y Blair en la vida literaria española a comienzos del siglo XIX”, *Entresiglos*, 2 (1993), 227-235.

idea that the poet could idealize nature by perfecting it<sup>37</sup>. However, by doing so, one was still imitating it. Batteux's poetic discourse was addressed to demonstrating that this artistic process is necessarily an imitation because nature is the only source of knowledge and beauty. Blair, on the other hand, moved the philosophical grounding of art towards subjectivity, toward the manifestly human. He tried to explain how the literary impression takes place in the human soul and to determine the criteria in accordance with which those impressions were fixed in subjects and created artistic judgements and opinions. He revised the classical approach and took stock of the complexity of literary and artistic knowledge. In short, he showed the deficiencies to which a purely rational argumentation of art could lead without denying the value of the models or opposing the introduction of an undoubtedly autonomous approach to the problems of literary creation and its knowledge to literary studies.

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<sup>37</sup> Other approaches in relation to the organic interpretation of history and the relative valuation of the national models in the interest of admitting progress in literary matters were presented in my article "Batteux y Blair...", *art. cit.*