



## Analysing European Romanticism

### *Romanticism in Spain*

Spanish society at around 1800 was quite unlike that in England or France. Seventy-five percent of the population lived on the land and even more of the national wealth was concentrated in the agricultural sector of the economy. Consequently, there was no class in Spain corresponding to the work-oriented bourgeoisie which existed in countries where a significant degree of industrialisation had taken place. As one might expect, the deep Conservatism of Spanish society was buttressed by the influence of the Catholic Church, whose effect on Spanish life and thought at the time can hardly be overstated. It gave, for example, an unusual cast to the way in which the Enlightenment manifested itself. The man who did most to introduce the ideals of the Enlightenment to Spain was Benito Jerónimo Feijoo. He wrote two multi-volume works, the *Universal Critical Theatre* and the *Erudite Letters*, the nearest there is to a Spanish equivalent of the *Enciclopedia*. In these books Feijoo displays a consistent and rational approach to all the matters he considers, and a passionate belief in experimentation and free enquiry, and it is in these pages that Newtonian science was introduced to Spain. His works were frequently reissued for a generation after his death. You may wonder how such works escaped censorship. The reason is that Feijoo was a sincere Catholic, not only a Benedictine monk but also professor of theology at the University of Oviedo in Asturias. From the point of view of Spanish literature the most extreme effect of the combined conservatism of the church and the state lay in the area of prose fiction. An attempt was made by the government in 1799 to have novels banned altogether, condemning them as an inferior genre which encouraged immorality. One upshot of this was that translations of the works of Scott, officially at any rate, were banned in Spain until 1829. In one respect the history of Romanticism in Spain resembles that of France, in that it was deeply affected by political events which greatly destructed development of the intellectual life of the time. The first event was Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808. Progressive Spanish intellectuals were faced with an unenviable choice: loyalty to a country they knew to be backward, or collaboration with a usurper whose country they regarded as a model of progressiveness in many ways. Napoleon installed his brother, Joseph Bonaparte, as King of Spain in 1808, banishing the Spanish king to France. When the French were defeated by Wellington in 1813 Joseph departed and the Spanish king, Ferdinand the VII was restored to the throne. Regrettably for the modernisers, Ferdinand rapidly showed himself to be a king who wished to be an absolute ruler. For twenty years he was to rule Spain in a manner close to tyranny with a secret police force, political imprisonment, censorship and all the usual apparatus of a repressive state. The effects on Spanish cultural life were equally predictable: imprisonment or exile of liberal intellectuals. Romanticism came to Spain only with the return of the émigré after the death of Ferdinand in 1833. These writers had been exposed to the latest currents of thought and literary works in France and in England. Unsurprisingly, when Romanticism did arrive it did so with its theory ready-made from German, English and French sources, and there are no major works of aesthetic theory which emerge from the Spanish Romantic Movement. Rather what happened was the adaptation of the ideas and attitudes of European Romanticism, especially that of Byron, Scott and Victor Hugo to Spanish tastes, and specifically Spanish poetic forms. There is no space here to describe this evolution in detail but there is time to consider one very important example from the work of Spain's first major Romantic poet, José de Espronceda. Espronceda liked to present himself and to be presented by his friends as the Spanish Byron, and there is much in his short life which lends weight to the comparison. He was born in Extremadura in March 1808, the son of a cavalry officer. He was brought up and educated in Madrid where in 1821 he entered the Colegio de San Mateo and came under the influence of one of the leading liberals of the time, Alberto Lista. Lista's moderate political agenda, however, was too slow and tame for Espronceda who in his teens formed a secret political society whose members signed an oath of allegiance in their own blood with the avowed aim of killing the king. When this came to the attention of the secret police Espronceda unsurprisingly found it prudent to

move to exile in Portugal for a while, and from there in 1828 he went on to London. He moved between London and Paris between 1828 and 1832, and returned to Spain in March 1833 as a result of an amnesty. During his years of exile he carried on an extended affair with a young woman, Teresa Mancha, who abandoned her husband and children for him and later bore him a daughter. Espronceda, however, was not content to settle quietly with Teresa. On his return to Spain he read in public a poem attacking the king who was then dying, and was rewarded with internal exile and separation from Teresa for his pains. She fell into poverty and died of consumption in September 1839 at 29 years of age. Espronceda, meanwhile, began to be recognised as a poet and gained a measure of respectability, and entered mainstream politics, securing a seat in the Spanish Parliament, The Cortez, in March 1842. His success was short-lived, however. By May of the same year he was dead. The Student of Salamanca is Espronceda's most important completed work. It is a four-part narrative poem in the form the Spanish call a leyenda, literally 'a legend'. This is a reworking of the Don Juan/Don Giovanni story. What is so interesting about it, in comparison to the treatment of the story in Mozart's Don Giovanni, is just how much the story is changed in the context of the Romantic world view. The first section introduces us to the central character, The Student of Salamanca, Don Félix de Montemar, described by Espronceda as a second Don Juan. He is rapidly established as a man who fears nothing and will dare anything, and is introduced leaving the scene of a duel, his sword still wet with his victim's blood. We are also introduced to Elvira, a victim of his seduction. Don Félix knew her for only one day and captivated her, but lost interest in her at once and, entirely without remorse, abandoned her to her feelings. In Part 2 she comes gradually to realise that he will never return, that his pretended love was an illusion, and she simply dies of grief. Part 3 is cast as a scene in a drama. Here we see Don Félix as a gambler, displaying the same iron nerve and daring he exhibits in all his dealings with the world. He is interrupted by the arrival of Elvira's brother, Don Diego, who has sworn vengeance for his sister and challenges Don Félix to a duel. Don Félix remains, as ever, calm to the point of insolence, entirely without remorse for Elvira's death, and entirely unafraid. The opening of Part 4 finds him standing, equally unmoved over the corpse of Don Diego, whom he has just killed. So far the story might have figured in any of the reworkings of the Don Juan story written since the character was first drawn in Tirso de Molina's play of 1630. Thereafter, however, things begin to change. Don Félix finds himself in a place called 'the street of the coffin' and here he comes upon a ghostly, veiled female form. This form attracts him and again, fearlessly, he follows her. Mysteriously, however hard he tries he can never catch her, and soon he finds himself in a space which is not of this world. He follows her through street after street, across square after square. The pair next meet a funeral procession which turns out to be Don Félix's own. They enter a building of endless galleries, gradually leading downwards towards a room which contains two coffins, all the while accompanied by wailing spectral dancers. Don Félix's courage and daring never fail him, however, even when he finally perceives beneath the mysterious woman's veil a skull, a death's head. Espronceda describes him at this point as follows. "Just a frail parcel of humanity, the life in the bright soul there in residing he equals with God and with daring flight soars up to challenge the almighty to fight. A second Lucifer rising again, his brow by the avenging thunderbolt scarred, a rebel soul who beats fear with disdain, beaten down yes, but never marred. The man in fact who eager to break his feign the limit with which the prison of life is barred, who dares call on God and him arraign to labour for him the extent of his domain". Don Félix has here become something quite different from the original Don Juan or Mozart's Don Giovanni. He is not just a seducer, a rake, gambler and dueller, albeit a daring one. Like Faust and like Lucifer he is a seeker after knowledge, and he resents the constraints put on him by life. He resents the way in which God has ordained things, the limitation of the human condition he regards as a prison. Finally he weakens and is overcome by death, but his end is not like that of Don Giovanni. Mozart's Don lives on in hell, he is damned for all eternity and will suffer the torments which are his due. Don Félix, by contrast, is simply annihilated. There is no afterlife, just obliteration. This is not punishment since you cannot punish what has been annihilated, what does not exist. Espronceda's universe is much bleaker than Mozart's. There is no afterlife and no reason whatever to believe that the Universe embodies some form of justice. Whatever we do here, all that awaits us is annihilation. Espronceda, in fact, has turned the Don Juan story from a homily about the need to repent in good time into a vehicle to express what the scholar Mario Praz once called The Romantic Agony. The Romantics severely damaged the rationalism of the Enlightenment but they found that what they had done came with a hefty price tag attached.

The old certainties on which the Enlightenment rested were in the end comforting. The order of things was just. By contrast, to live in a universe you are convinced is senseless is not comfortable. All the activities into which the Romantics poured their energies in the hope that they would lend meaning to their lives, especially political reform and love, failed them. The result in Espronceda's poem is black despair and the seeds of the existentialist gesture of revolt. The only meaningful gesture to be made in a meaningless universe is defiance, a ceaseless act of the will. Finally, there is a general point about Romanticism. We have seen that Romanticism manifested itself in French and Spanish literature at different times, largely as a result of the political circumstances in these countries. Moreover, it was adapted in each case to suit the national artistic traditions concerned and employed, for example, verse forms which had in most cases belonged to earlier parts of the relevant tradition. If there were time to look at Romanticism as it manifested itself in Denmark, or Italy, or Poland or Russia, a different story would emerge but a story based on the same principles. Romanticism adapted itself to the culture in which it found itself and this is one of the reasons why it works, which are Romantic, are less like one another than works based on the ideals of the Enlightenment. Amongst other things the Romantics prized the inner life of individuals and the productions of different cultures, all of which could manifest imagination. Consequently, by comparison to the Enlightenment, Romanticism developed as a varied and complex phenomenon. That was the way the Romantics liked it.