A. Romanticism

The Nineteenth Century: José de Espronceda

The many attempts to define Romanticism confirm, the difficulty of doing so. Sáinz de Robles defines it as an artistic revolution against what be termed the rigidity, the coldness, the regulations, the antinationalism, the cerebralism, the pagan estheticism, the religious incredulity, the preponderance of the objective over the subjective, the declamatory emphasis, and the artistic impersonality of Neo-Classicism. He lists Romanticism's characteristics as contemplation of nature, intimacies of natural life, revival of the Middle Ages, the cult of the individual, rejection of the rules of the nation against the foreign, subjective lyricism against objective epic form, anarchy of inventiveness and procedure, the intimate connection between art and life, and absolute emancipation of the YO.

Spanish liberals had had to leave Spain under the despotic reign of Fernando VII, during which time a rigid censorship was in effect. The expression of liberal ideas and the rebelliousness and individuality which characterized Romanticism were dangerous under Fernando's oppressive, absolute monarchy. Only literary forms thought to be innocuous, such as the costumbrista - sketch or poetry were tolerated.

On Fernando’s death, however, the scene changed. Maria Cristina, the Queen Mother, called back the exiled liberals or emigrados, for she needed their support to hold the throne against Carlos, Fernando's brother, who claimed the throne. The political pattern of most of the century was thereby set: the struggle between the liberals around Maria Cristina, who wanted democracy in government, and the reactionaries around Carlos, who wanted absolutism.

Many of the Romantic poets and dramatists, who as liberals, had been obliged to leave Spain, breathed abroad, the Romantic atmosphere of England and France where the movement was already full-grown. When they returned home after the 1833 amnesty, they brought the new literary rage with them. Romanticism was nothing new to Spain, however, because there had always been an undercurrent of it in Spanish literature. The 19th century revived what was typically Spanish rather than creating something new. The battle which raged in other European countries between the Classicists and the Romantic revolutionaries was neither fierce nor prolonged in Spain. Spanish defenders of Classicism were less formidable and not organized. Furthermore, Classicism had never taken firm root in Spanish soil, and the few meritorious literary works it produced were looked upon as something transplanted from France. The public was happy to revive a characteristic feature of their tradition and was not interested in literary quarrels. All things conspired
to give Romanticism an easy victory in Spain. What the nineteenth century witnessed was the intensification and concentration of the elements of Romanticism to such a degree that other traditional characteristics of Spanish literature were subdued momentarily and suppressed. The undercurrent now became a flood on the surface and swept everything before it.

The moderation and restraint of Neo-Classicism were gone. Rules and precepts ceased to exist for the poet, for he recognized no authority and no codes of behavior. He demanded absolute freedom and believed that his pessimistic, sometimes despairing note pervaded his poems, as he observed that the reality which surrounded him did not conform to his dream world. He expressed himself and his innermost sentiments in his poetry, avoiding objectivity for the sake of subjectivity. He became interested in exotic themes, such as Oriental potentates and tier courts, and the noble Moor whom he idealized in somewhat the same fashion as Rousseau had idealized the American Indian. He was fatally attracted to the sepulchral, the mysterious, the funeral, tempestuous seas, abysses, ruins, night scenes and landscapes. His vocabulary revealed his interests and feelings, and he used an abundance of terms such as: sórdido, fúnebre, heorrido, gemido, tétrico, lúgubre, melancólico espectro, tremendo, Oy!, sombras, histérico, languidez, duda, suspira, and lágrimas.

Romantic fervor lasted only a short time in Spain. While the movement was at its height, between 1833 and 1848, only Espronceda and Arolas merited rank as lyric poets. After Romanticism was no longer the prevailing literary style, some poets continued to write in a manner which conformed to it in many respects.

José de Espronceda y Delgado (1808-1842) enjoys the reputation of having been Spain’s greatest Romantic poet. Everything about this man was Romantic except fro his manner of dying. He was born at the side of a country road as his aged father and young mother were fleeing as refugees before the invading French army. At the age of fifteen he joined a group of young conspirators called Los Numantinos who held secret meetings, masked their faces, dressed in black robes, and decorated their meeting places with red Japanese lanterns painted with skulls and other Romantic symbols. For this activity he was arrested for three months and banished to Guadalajara. In 1826 he was forced to flee Spain and went to Lisbon; but before entering the city he threw away his last two pesetas so that he would not have to enter such a great city with so little money in his pocket. In Lisbon be met and fell in love with Teresa Mancha, a Spanish colonel’s daughter. Espronceda went on to Paris and Teresa to London. When the poet followed her there
later, he found she had married a rich Spanish merchant and had born a son. She abandoned her husband and son in a trice, however, and ran off to Paris with Espronceda. Since he was there during the July revolution in 1830, it was only natural that he should fight at the barricades. When the amnesty was declared for the *emigrados in 1833*, he returned to Spain with Teresa, and became a diputado to the Cortes. His life with Teresa was punctuated by violent quarrels and ended in separation. She became a prostitute and finally died of tuberculosis. Espronceda gave indications that the storm and stress period was over and was planning to remarry (after having had two more love affairs, one with Doña Carmen Osorio), when he died of a throat infection.

It would be convenient to classify Espronceda's poetry into two types. (1) lyric and (2) narrative. To the first type belong the shorter poems, such as *Canción de pirata*, and to the latter belong *El estudiante de Salamanca* and *El diablo mundo*. Such a classification, however, is not altogether valid, for there is much in the longer poems that is lyric-the *Canto a Teresa* for example-and something of the epic in the shorter ones.

He personifies in his life and his work what we might term the Romantic frenzy. He was vehement and passionate, a born rebel who wanted to convert his dreams to reality. He was outraged by restraints, and could tolerate them neither in his art nor in society, an attitude fully revealed in his *Canción del pirata*. There, in a moment of exaltation, he dreams of being a pirate, a rebel outside the law and society, who is his own law, feared by all, and who laughs at dangers and his enemies. Here one finds revolution and anarchy, scorn for the established order, and a plea for individualism and liberty. Indeed, he scorns European civilizations a whole.

¡Sentenciado estoy a muerte!
Yo me rio:
No me abandone a suerte,
Y a] mismo que me condena,
Colgaré de una entena,
Quizá en su propio navio.
His dreams of a hero’s life. of glory and liberty and happiness, he never relinquished. But neither were they ever realized, hence his despair and pessimism.

Thus, as we see, neither reality nor women nor anything else conformed to what the poet expected or wanted, and from a moment of exaltation as in the Canción del pirata we see the pendulum swing to the opposite pole where the poet confesses his desire is eternal and insatiable, and that he believes only in the peace of the sepulcher. As Bonilla so well put it, the four principles of Espronceda’s philosophy are: 1) Doubt, the first principle of thought, 2) pain, the positive reality of life, 3) pleasure, the world’s illusion, 4) death, the solution to every problem. Combined with these are skepticism, irony, and sorrow.

Espronceda new the Romantic poets of other countries, and he has been labeled "the Spanish Byron" with some justice. The influences of the former on the Spaniard are discernible, although Espronceda possessed far too great poetic sensibilities to be a servile imitator. His Canción del pirata was obviously influenced by Byron's The Corsair, but the mysterious and obscure elements one finds in some Byronic poetry are not found in Espronceda. Philip H. Churchman, in his well-known study, finds Byron more theological, skeptical, and unpatriotic, though both poets attacked the status quo.