

'Fear' in English and Spanish Romantic Drama

María José Álvarez Faedo
University of Oviedo

It is relatively easy to realise when one feels 'fear', but providing an exact definition for that term has proved a complex task. Théodule Ribot, in his work *Psychologie des Sentiments* affirms that there exist two types of fear: a primeval fear—which is instinctive, unconscious and previous to any individual experience—and a secondary type of fear—which is conscious, guided by reason and subsequent to all experience. The former is the fear of that which is approaching, whereas the latter is what we feel after we have gone through a 'disturbing' experience. Paul Diel (1966:57), on his part, argues that fear is "the emotional response to a present trauma caused by a real danger"¹, whereas Jiddu Krishnamurti (1995: 7) identifies fear with "the movement from certainty to uncertainty". Juliette Favez-Boutonier goes even further, establishing a difference between 'anxiety'—which is "born from the prospect of danger, even if unknown"—and 'fear'—which "involves the presence and the awareness of danger" (Mannoni, 1984: 56).² From the many definitions of 'fear' I have had access to, I have selected these ones, because, as I shall explain later, they are those which best fit into the Romantic approach to that 'disturbing' feeling.

As regards the term 'Romanticism', in the 19th century it started to be applied to the resurgence of instinct and emotions in major works of art - paintings by Turner, in England, or Goya, in Spain, for example -, and literature: in England, "the Romantics" was the collective name applied to William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Sir Walter Scott, George Gordon Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. In Spain, there appeared Mariano José de Larra, José de Espronceda, José Zorrilla, Angel Saavedra, Hartzenbush y el Duque de Rivas, as its major exponents. In the field of drama, from the above-mentioned writers (poets and dramatists³), I am going to focus my analysis on Lord Byron, in England, and, on José de Espronceda in Spain. And to be more precise, on two works which share similar characteristics: Byron's *Manfred*—a dramatic poem⁴ about a man tormented by guilt, because he blames himself for the death of his beloved one—, and Espronceda's *The Student of Salamanca* (1837-40)—a poetic tale which presents a third part which is a dramatic scene⁵ and deals with the story of a dissolute and licentious man who leads a madly-in-love-with-him young lady to commit suicide.

1 All the quotations from works written in a language other than English have been translated into English by the author of this paper.

2 I am indebted here to my sister, Belén Álvarez Faedo, who is currently researching on the subject of 'fear' for her PhD theses, and has provided me with invaluable information and bibliography.

3 For further information on British Romantic drama, see Burroughs's *Women in British Romantic Theatre* (2000), Baines & Burns's *Five Romantic Plays, 1768-1821* (2000), Hoagwood & Watkins's *British Romantic Drama: Historical and Critical Essays* (1998), Jewett's *Fatal Autonomy: Romantic Drama* (1997), Donkin's *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1829* (1995), Purinton's *Romantic Ideology Unmasked* (1994), Watkins's *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama* (1993), Gillespie's *Romantic Drama* (1993), Julie A. Carlson's *In the Theatre of Romanticism* (1991) and Richard Allen Cave's *The Romantic Theatre: an International Symposium* (1986). As regards Spanish Romantic Drama, see José García Templado's *El teatro romántico* (1991), Juan Ignacio Ferreras's *El teatro en el s. XIX* (1989), Russel P. Sebald's *Trayectoria del romanticismo español* (1983), Ricardo Navas Ruiz's *El romanticismo español* (1982) and E. Allison Peers's *Historia del movimiento romántico español* (1954).

4 Other dramas by Lord Byron are *Marino Faliero* (*An Historical Tragedy*), *Sardanapalus* (*A Tragedy*), *The Two Foscari* (*An Historical Tragedy*), *Cain* (*A Mystery*), *Werner* (*or The Inheritance: A*

Both Byron and Espronceda, two of the most popular writers of the age in English and Spanish respectively, established themselves through characters such as Manfred or Montemar, both selfish outcasts, cruel and dangerous to know. Byron's and Espronceda's heroes seem to be, at least in part, tormented self-projections. Actually both writers played a large part in shaping the stereotypical passionate and rebellious Romantic author. Furthermore, it was "Byron himself who popularised the moral ambiguity of the Byronic hero, both in his poetry and, with his reputation as a wicked and infidel lord, in his life" (Frye, 1968: 31), and, that same moral ambiguity also shared by the character of Montemar in *The Student of Salamanca*.

As early as 1820, the French writer Charles Nodier stated that: "Romantic poetry springs from our agony and our despair", and he continued in the following terms: "This is not a fault in our art, but a necessary consequence of the advances made in our progressive society." (Butler, 1981: 3). Nodier describes what Romantic poets feel as "agony and despair".⁶ Those two feelings are the consequence of an inner sense of fear which is present in their works, to the extent that readers still shudder when going through the pages of Byron's *Manfred* or Espronceda's *The Student of Salamanca*.

What do the Romantics fear?

The Romantics offer a negative and defensive response to the period of social crisis they were living in—the late eighteenth century is an age of revolution and political change. That 'defensive response' to the reality surrounding them could be related to the secondary type of fear which, as we explained at the beginning of this paper, Ribot (1941) defined as 'conscious, guided by reason, and subsequent to all experience'. And it was certainly subsequent to an experience all Europe had been affected by: the consequences that the Fall of the Bastille in 1789 and the execution of Louis XVI in 1793 brought about; nevertheless, Romantic artists, with the exception of the English ones, did not start to be identified with the radical cause in politics until events in France began to build up to the "July Revolution" of 1830. In fact, the Gothic or Medieval taste related to Romanticism in England, was, at first, identified with extreme political conservatism.

But there was also a symptom of social change provoked by the expansion of trade and industry brought about by the industrial revolution—the rising population created problems, such as the fact that the poor found themselves with too many mouths to feed. That worrying social panorama could be interpreted as the 'present trauma' Diel referred to a century later (1966: 57) when he identified 'fear' with an 'emotional response to a present trauma caused by a real danger'—being that 'real danger'—the threatening perspective

Tragedy), and *The Deformed Transformed (A Drama)*.

⁵ For further information about the dramatic nature of *The Student of Salamanca* see Robert Marrast (1985: 77). *Blanca de Borbón, Ni el tío ni el sobrino* and *Amor venga sus gravios* are the titles of the rest of Espronceda's dramatic production.

⁶ To support this thesis which relates 'fear' to Romanticism, we also have the testimony of E. T. A. Hoffmann, who wrote in 1810 that Beethoven was a Romantic composer because his music "sets in motion the lever of fear, of awe, of horror, of suffering, and awakens that infinite longing which is the essence of Romanticism" (Honour, 1979: 24).

of a social panorama that was getting worse and worse.

Besides, it was in 1814 that a serious discussion in the life-sciences between science⁷ and religion came out into the open in Britain. A year later Napoleon's final defeat reopened the seas, offering appealing prizes to great voyagers: glory for their own nation, shorter trade routes to the east, new markets, a chance both to colonise Asia, Africa and the Pacific, and to explore the Arctic. The still unknown consequences those explorations would bring about were disturbing food for the Romantic writer's thought, and would give way to that fear Krishnamurti (1995: 7) defined, as 'the movement from certainty to uncertainty', and Favez-Boutonier had called 'anxiety', identifying it as the fear "born from the prospect of danger, even if unknown" (Mannoni, 1984: 56).

Since culture is a way of expressing experience, we should expect to find those tensions, conflicts, fears and signs of those times of transition reflected in drama, and the Romantics do so in different ways. I have discerned four main ways of expressing fear in Romantic drama, which usually appear interrelated: Gothic fear, sepulchral fear, fear of the abnormal or unknown and fear of fate.

1. Gothic fear

The taste for Gothic coincides with a taste for new and ancient religious cults, both in England and in Spain. It has been argued, that due to the stricter distinction made—between orthodox Christianity and magic—by the religious reforms of the Reformation, the population of Western Europe found themselves deprived of magical and superstitious relieves (the sacraments, pardons, ...) which medieval Catholicism offered its believers. The devout medieval victim of misfortune could pray for the intercession of the Holy Trinity, the Mother of God or a saint; he could try to expel the Devil with exorcism; he could use rituals to protect himself in his progress from life to death, such as the last rites and absolution. Curiously, though not surprisingly, in the rational eighteenth century, Gothic fiction enjoyed that almost ritual aspect.

The typical plot of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel involves a beautiful, frail and innocent protagonist in terrible danger and distress, placed in a hostile, threatening and mysterious environment. But there's always the hope and the intuition that, in the end, the feared evil either never succeeds or it does not even come. The difference between Gothic fear in the 18th century and the Gothic fear of the Romantics, is that, in the latter, readers and audiences may have to face horrifying evil and its pernicious effects in the end.

The typical Romantic dramatist is a dreamer, since dreams and symbolism—to which a great significance is attached—are closely connected. There is a persistent and extremely attractive suggestiveness in language, which is ornated by very subtle dreamy

⁷ At that time, there were three contemporary scientific proposals which dealt with the vitalist problem pragmatically or experimentally: one by Erasmus Darwin, who claimed that single-cell parasites generate spontaneously, other suggested the reanimation of a corpse electrically by means of a galvanic battery, and the third, announced the reconstruction of a body which would then also be reanimated.

associations attached to words, or simply by the choice of words that remind us of dreams. If we analyse Byron's *Manfred* and Espronceda's *The Student of Salamanca* to study the techniques they use in order to create that gothic atmosphere, we can find the following:

a) They set their stories in a world threatened by the active and overwhelming power of Nature —storms, clouds, rain, thunder, hail, wind ... This can be exemplified in Espronceda's *The Student of Salamanca*, where, from the very beginning of his work, he conveys the threatening atmosphere which is going to hunt his tale from then on: "The sky was completely dark, / no stars were discerned above, / mournfully whistled the wind, ..." ⁸ (I, 21-23), and also in Byron's *Manfred*, when the spirits chant the powers of Arimanes, who can actually control the destructive forces of nature:

Hail to our Master! —Prince of Earth and Air!
 Who walks the clouds and waters —in his hand
 The sceptre of the elements, which tear
 Themselves to chaos at his high command!
 He breatheth —and tempests shake the sea;
 He speaketh —and the clouds reply in thunder;
 He gazeth —from his glance the sunbeams flee;
 He moveth —earthquakes rend the world asunder. (II.iv: 389)

b) According to Romantic architects, Gothic construction in stone was the perfect expression of architecture, thus, Gothic Revival churches were built since Christian architecture was identified with medieval Catholicism. This trend in architecture also influenced Romantic writers, who set their works in Gothic castles —Byron sets Act I, scene i, in a "Gothic Gallery" (1994: 380)—, gloomy mansions or eerie churches, characterised by their many —sometimes even secret— rooms, and long winding corridors and stairs, as the ones described by Espronceda:

And reaching the end of the corridor,
 Montemar does follow his quiet guide ,
 and thus does he go down a long,
 narrow, in-a-mess, crooked
 and black-marbled spiral staircase ... (IV.1309-1313)

c) These Gothic buildings are usually surrounded by a Gothic, sinister, dark and gloomy atmosphere and threatened by mysterious characters —such as the spirits that hunt Lord Byron's dramatic poem— which contribute to that sense of fear provoked by the uncertainty of what may be found behind that darkness and enhanced by the rumble and wails of that furious nature which is challenging us from outside. This is the sort of fear present in Espronceda's lines:

⁸ This work has been translated into English by C. K. Davies, but I am offering my own English version.

they also explore the displeasing vestiges of medievalism: therefore, religion appears as superstition and magic in these lines from *The Student of Salamanca*: “when he pronounced such insolent outrage / the lamp of the crucifix lit itself / and he saw a veiled lady, in white garment / kneeling before the image” (IV.745-48).

The remote implies the threat of the otherness: the virtuous hero or heroine, usually identified with conservative and moral middle-class characteristics, emerges in relation to the challenging, cruel and rule-breaking nature of the play’s villain. Elvira is a young lady who dies of love, believing that her death is the punishment she receives for the passion she feels for Félix de Montemar. Manfred’s remorse⁹ “is caused by some obscure and destructive relationship with the one whom he loves” (Watson, 1993: 278), because, as Montemar had done with Elvira, Manfred had also provoked his lady’s death when he broke her heart. But Manfred and Montemar are different villains, even though they share the basic characteristics of the Romantic tragic hero whom Northrop Frye (1968: 42) identifies as a “tragic lover” -explaining that “it is an excess of consciousness, which isolates the lover instead of uniting him to his beloved, that causes the tragedy”, and concluding in the following terms: “what begins as love ends in frustration, torment, or suicide”-, whereas Marilyn Gaull (1988: 169), on her part, drawing on the ‘heroic’ characteristics of the Romantic character, describes it as “a threat, an alien, a rebel, even an outlaw with criminal associations”. That difference between Byron’s tragic hero and Esproceda’s heroic villain lies in the fact that the former regrets the loss of his beloved one, feels remorse and would like to put an end to his suffering -in the fashion described by Frye-, whereas the latter is a libertine who, far from regretting the loss of Elvira, rejoices in it, and never repents, not even at the end, therefore embodying the ‘threat’ referred to by Gaull.

4. Fear of fate

Human beings have always been afraid of their fate, which is also connected to the unknown, since we ignore what awaits us at the end of our existence. Accordingly, that fear of fate can be studied in three different spheres:

a) Fear of death:

Northrop Frye, in *A Study of Romanticism* states that “man is the only animal that knows he is going to die”, and explains that “this consciousness is now regarded as the source of anxiety (Angst), and hence, usually, as something feared and to be avoided, even (if not especially) in thought” (1968: 61). The fear of death has also been connected to the fear of the passing of time, of disintegration and ugliness, therefore they regard death as something terrible. That is the reason why Montemar is horrified when Elvira’s skeleton holds

⁹ The subject of Manfred’s guilt is dealt with by Jon Blackstock in his article “The Brotherhood of Cain: or, Manfred’s Place as Gothic Hero” (2002).

And as he falls down the stairs, he does
blaspheme and swear in a foul language,
and as his frantic vertigo continues to grow,
and as he falls so fast into the depth,
as he now hears the whistle of the hurricane,
as, in confusion, the world passes before him,
as he hears screams, voices and hands clapping,
and applauses and sinister guffaws of laughter ... (IV.1325-1332)

2. Sepulchral Fear

Tombs and graveyards tend to make people feel uneasy, either because one may disturb the rest of the death buried there, or because they may hide secrets that it is better to keep buried, or, rather, because of both, as these lines by Espronceda suggest: "in the mysterious / tempestuous night / an accursed witch / sings in a husky voice / and from the sepulchres / the dead are raised / and there sound the echoes / of their hollow steps / in the solitude" (IV.948-956).

Nature plays, once more, an important role here: night-time, darkness, and both stillness and storm, as the threatening background for the sight of those sepulchres and those corpses slowly rising from them, may make the bravest spirits shudder with fear.

Superstition and legends also play an important role here, since they predispose the victim to be afraid, and, aware of this, Espronceda exploits this resource from the very beginning: "It was well past midnight / thus do ancient stories go / when in sleep and lugubrious / silence, the earth shrouded, / the alive seem to be dead / the dead leave their graves" (I.1-6).

3. Fear of the abnormal and the unknown

The Romantics emphasised the abnormal so much that some even ended up in the morbidly erotic. For them, perversion ought to signify abnormal pleasures: the sight of monstrosities ought to stimulate the appropriate revulsion, thus causing a movement of rejection, negating and conserving the awful threat to self and society by turning the horror into sublime terror.

We can also detect an influence of the Oriental mind: the Romantics turn their eyes to the East, because they feel a certain attraction towards the remote, the spiritual, and, in a way, a wish for a return to nature. That is the reason why, for most Romantics, the Middle Ages offered a kind of far-away spiritual home, because it was mysterious and remote.

Still, a certain sense of threat is provoked by exotism, the unknown. While the Romantics find those remote periods extremely appealing,

him tight and 'lovingly': "He eagerly tries to get loose in vain, / and the more angrily he struggles, / the tighter he is held and the more he is wanted / by the rough spectre who inspires him with horror" (IV. 1566-1569). The horror of the spectacle -the "monstruous body" as Kelly Hurley (1996: 24-31) would call it- makes Montemar realise and, consequently, fear that the 'abnormal creature' might seek revenge, therefore: his death.

b) Fear of the wrath of God:

When the Romantic characters defy God in some way, the wrath of God falls upon them. For example, Don Félix de Montemar challenges God and invokes the Devil, but it is Elvira's lost soul who comes to punish Don Félix and to take him away. Similarly, Manfred invokes the spirits, and the Demons come ready to take him with them.

c) Fear of the devil:

Once more related to the Middle Ages are the treatises on necromancy, thus there are many works based on the subject of Dr. Faustus, and we even have the German Romantic Goethe writing his own version of it, which inspired English and Spanish romantic drama: "Byron takes over the solitude of Faust, his absolute differences from ordinary men. Manfred's character is self-absorbed and passionate; he desires forgetfulness of that which is within him" (Watson, 1993: 278). Don Félix de Montemar shares that "solitude", and he is definitely different from "ordinary men" as well, but he seems to have signed a pact with the devil before the plot begins, since, by then, he has forgotten what 'to feel remorse' means.

Those were, very briefly, the different techniques Romantic artists used, both in English and in Spanish drama, in order to make their readers and the admirers of their art, in general, feel fear.

I hope this account has given you an insight into the Romantics, their reasons for feeling afraid, and their ways of expressing fear, which, according to the analysis of our corpus of study, Byron's dramatic poem *Manfred* and Espronceda's dramatic tale in verse *The Student of Salamanca*, are subject to the same patterns both in English and Spanish drama.

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