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Espronceda: Poetry and the Essay as *Literatura comprometida*

For most Hispanists the name of José de Espronceda evokes an image of the "representative man" of Spanish Romanticism: mysterious, rebellious, donjuanesque. We likewise associate his name with such well-known compositions as "Canto a Teresa," "A Jarifa en una orgía," "Canción del pirata," and *El estudiante de Salamanca*. That his image exists and persists is not surprising given the history of Esproncedian criticism from the first biography by Ferrer del Río and the review of *Poesías* by Alberto Lista through standard contemporary treatments like those of Ángel de Río and Ricardo Navas Ruiz.¹ With few exceptions, *esproncedistas* have concentrated largely on the poet's life and interpreted his work in a limited biographical context, misinformed, unfortunately, with biographical data that was more fanciful than factual. Thus Esproncedian criticism has been marred by the failure to interpret the totality of the poet's work—poetry, fiction, drama, and essay—as a reflection, not only of his own personal crisis but also as a part of the socio-political conflict of Spain in the first third of the nineteenth century.² Such a study is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper but herein I propose to reconsider a few selected passages of Espronceda's poetry in the light of his little-known essays and to suggest from these examples that Espronceda was not an "exagerado y teatral declamador de voz hueca y ademán desafiante" but rather a committed artist, and that his work reflects a more coherent critique of Romantic Spain than previously believed.³

Espronceda's essays certainly merit the attention of the literary critic. While not by definition a formal thesis or dissertation, the essay does provide a structured, analytic version of the author's thinking presented in a discursive style. The personal nature of the statement is not diminished but the more direct, less connotative language gives the reader easier access to the ideas behind the words. If, as Terry Eagleton affirms in his study, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, "Science gives us conceptual knowledge of a situation, [and] art gives us the experience of that situation," then the essay lies somewhere in between, providing a useful key to the artist's vision of reality as reflected in his creation.⁴

Espronceda's essayistic writings are limited to the well-known pamphlet, *El ministerio Mendizábal*, eight newspaper articles, and his five *discursos* before the Cortes between March and May of 1842.⁵ While these bear widely diversified titles, they all deal in some way with contemporary political events and issues, events and issues in which the poet was actively involved. We are all aware of his participation in the "Numantinos" and of his revolutionary activities during his stay abroad from 1828 to 1834; much less known is the fact that before serving in

the parliament in 1842, Espronceda was twice an unsuccessful candidate for *diputado* (in 1836 and 1837), served as a representative for the cabinet of Mendizábal in 1836, and undertook the legal defense of *El huracán*, a Madrid newspaper espousing Republican ideas. With this biographical background, it is hardly surprising that Espronceda's essays reveal a sophisticated understanding of political and economic questions.

In typically Romantic fashion, motifs of freedom and rebellion against oppression abound in Espronceda's poetry: "Es el pueblo! . . . su independencia aclama" ("El dos de mayo," p. 266); "¿Quién sus hijos triunfante encadenó?" ("Canto del cosaco," p. 257); "Inspíranos tu fuego,/ divina libertad:/ y al trueno de tu nombre,/ déspotas temblad" ("Canción patriótica," p. 157); and "El yugo del esclavo,/ sacudí" ("canción del pirata," p. 227).⁶ Such references reflect a sympathy for the poor and powerless as well as a critique of the dominant caste but in light of the essays this rhetoric can be shown to be only the poetic expression of a more systematic commentary on the Spanish class system. The sarcasm of the refrain from "El mendigo," "Mío es el mundo, como el aire libre,/ otros trabajan porque coma yo" (*Poesías*, 275), is converted into a poignant attack on the economic policies of the then reigning government in the pamphlet *El ministerio Mendizábal*: "¿Cómo se atreve el Gobierno, a disponer de los bienes del Estado en favor de los acreedores sin pensar aliviar con ellos la condición de los pobres. . . ? Si el señor ministro desea que los fondos suban, mire por la paz y la prosperidad de los pueblos, líbrelos de la miseria que los acosa por todas partes, y verá entonces como se reanima el comercio y nuestro crédito se afianza" (BAE, 575). Through a conscious effort by the government, Spain had been shielded from most of the social and philosophic ramifications of the French Revolution and the most immediate results of the continued dominance of the Ancien Régime were economic. Espronceda recognized the failure of Mendizábal's policy of disentanglement; rather than a program of true agrarian reform it represented the transference of ecclesiastical wealth to the only other group with enough capital to buy up church lands: already powerful landlords, aristocrats and members of the still very small middle class.⁷ Excepting the Catalan textile mills, the Industrial Revolution had scarcely touched the Iberian peninsula and no real working class had developed. The theme of economic inequality is alluded to in Canto V of *El diablo mundo* when Salada warns the naive Adán that "entre esas gentes altivas/ Quien más de nosotros vale/ No alcanza sino desprecios/ En premio de su donaire./ Nuestros enemigos son,/ Y el modo de ser iguales,/ Es en la misma moneda/ En que nos pagan pagarles."⁸ These poetic motifs are paralleled by Espronceda's statements on specific issues, as in his discussion of mercantilism and protective tariffs in the article "El gobierno y la bolsa" and in his address to parliament on April 8, 1842.

The poet can claim no credit, of course, for originality in his stance on the economy, and even a cursory overview of leading spokesmen

for liberal economic policies shows that Espronceda was certainly well acquainted with their theories. His remarks echo closely those voiced by Francisco Martínez Marina, one of the founding fathers of economic liberalism in Spain. Martínez—by no stretch of the imagination a revolutionary; he was rector of the Universidad de Alcalá and Director of the Real Academia de la Historia—might very well have been the prime source of Espronceda's thinking in his attack on Mendizábal's plan of disentanglement. In his principle politico-economic treatise, *Teoría de las cortes* . . . (first published in 1813 with a second edition in 1820), Martínez also stressed the necessity of returning ecclesiastical mort-main properties to the working classes:

El primero de los medios . . . que reclama la razón, la justicia y el orden de la sociedad, es moderar la riqueza del clero en beneficio de la agricultura y del pobre y aplicado labrador, poner en circulación todas las propiedades afectas al estado exlesiástico y acumuladas en iglesias y monasterios contra en voto general de la nación, restituirlas á los pueblos y familias de cuyo dominio fueron arrancadas por el despotismo, por la seducción, por la ignorancia y por una falsa piedad. . . .⁹

Espronceda undoubtedly also gleaned much from the writings of the most famous of Spain's nineteenth-century economists, Álvaro Flórez Estrada, whom the poet cites and whose own critique of disentanglement appeared in *El español* one month before Espronceda's pamphlet (February 28th).¹⁰ But whatever his sources, either direct or indirect, it is apparent that in matters of the economy Espronceda was in the mainstream of liberal thought and it ought not therefore surprise us that such a commitment in the political sphere should manifest itself in his poetry.

Beyond the question of economic freedom, Espronceda also proposed a total restructuring of the class system and in this sense he can rightly be called a revolutionary. Spanish society had changed little from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century; the titled nobility of the medieval period was gradually being replaced by a plutocratic system, but while these two groups struggled for power the masses of Spanish citizenry still formed an economically and politically impotent lower class: "una de las características fundamentales de la estructura social española del siglo XIX," writes one historian, "es la inmovilidad, la resistencia a toda transformación social profunda."¹¹ Recognizing this stagnancy, Espronceda suggests that true equality can only come through "la emancipación económica de las clases productoras, hasta ahora miserables siervos de una aristocracia tan inútil como ilegítima" (M, 9). This desire for something akin to a proletarian revolution had a large impact on Espronceda's little-read and much-maligned historical novel, *Sancho Saldaña*. Critics have attacked the work for its lack of a cohesive plot and clearly-defined protagonist, stereotyped characters, and ponderous style. In spite of its artistic faults, *Sancho Saldaña*, like many of

the poems, anticipates and mirrors Espronceda's preoccupations and hopes for the future of the lower class, represented here by the collective *pueblo*. This concern results in a historical novel in which the past is not idealized, the nobility is criticized, and the common people, the *pueblo*—a group traditionally excluded from the genre—play an important role. In his prologue to the first critical edition of *Sancho Saldaña*, Ángel Antón Andrés writes that "el pueblo es magnífico en su lucha contra el poder opresor."¹² Espronceda himself refers to the *pueblo* as an "enemigo acérrimo de los traidores" ready even to "desobedecer al rey mismo, arrebatados, sin duda, del ardiente amor a la justicia que los animaba" (II, 298). Life among the nobility, on the other hand, is depicted as "un mundo deletéreo donde pulula una aristocracia inútil y decadente, incapaz de móviles generosos."¹³ The message of the novel, in contrast to Walter Scott's idealization of the Middle Ages, is the need for "una renovación total de aquella 'irracional' sociedad feudal absolutista,"¹⁴ a social structure that, as we have noted, had not yet changed in Spain. Contrary to the personal pessimism expressed in "Canto a Teresa" and "A Jarifa en una orgía," Espronceda viewed the nineteenth century as a period of positive change, "un siglo de transición, sociedad compuesta de restos de la antigua y pedazo de la naciente," as he writes in "Libertad, igualdad, fraternidad" (M, 9).

A preoccupation with time is also a significant aspect of the personality of one of Espronceda's literary creations, D. Félix de Montemar of *El estudiante de Salamanca*. The French critic, Michele Sauvage notes that the Don Juan character is fundamentally a revolutionary who desires a break with the past, whose orientation is decidedly the present with little or no concept of the long-term implications of his behavior: "Le comportement de Séducteur n'est qu'une activité révolutionnaire. . . ."¹⁵ Don Félix, of course, is also uninterested in the future:

La vida es la vida; cuando ella se acaba,
 acaba con ella también el placer.
 De inciertos pesares ¿por qué hacerla esclava?
 Para mí no hay nunca mañana ni ayer. (ES, vv. 931-34)

If we recall Eagleton's comment that literature is a statement of the experiential—what it "feels like"—we can understand that Félix represents but another facet of Espronceda's own psyche, the soul of the revolutionary in the moment of inspiration, the man of action, concerned with the present. The future of the revolution is the province of the thinkers and theoreticians, and as we see above, of the essayist.

Espronceda's biography and poetry support the traditional view of the rebel, the outcast, the revolutionary. He certainly did participate in numerous *motines* and revolutionary societies; it seems likely that he was even active in the radical secret society, La Isabelina; and while Hispanists have paid little attention to Espronceda's role in the development of Republicanism, historians have recognized him as one of the

leaders of the movement.¹⁶ A superficial analysis of the poems inevitably leads to the vision of Espronceda as a promoter of violent revolution: he refers to "esa caduca Europa a nuestros pies" in "Canto del cosaco" (*Poesías*, 257) and in his sonnet "A la muerte de Torrijos" we read:

Españoles, llorad; mas vuestro llanto
lágrimas de dolor y sangre sean,
sangre que ahogue a siervos y opresores,
y los viles tiranos, con espanto
siempre delante amenazando vean
alzarse sus espectros vengadores. (*Poesías*, 190)

However, as Espronceda became gradually more radicalized politically his stance vis-à-vis revolution became more moderate; the poetic theme of revolution is mitigated considerably in the essays, a change of attitude evident in the events of the last five years of his life. The need for social revolution, so intensely but amorphously espoused in early verse, becomes a plea for structured evolution. As early as 1834, in an article titled simply "Poesía," Espronceda wrote that "en política, como en poesía, la perfección está en conciliar el mayor grado de libertad con el mayor grado de orden posible" (BAE, 580), something Spain had seemed forever incapable of achieving. Eight years later, just two months before his death, he is still proclaiming the need for peace: "Lo que necesita la Nación es reposo, tranquilidad" (Discurso of March 11, 1842; M, 21). Being well acquainted with the behavior of people in mobs, Espronceda fully appreciated the fact that chaos leads to still further splintering of society's elements. He undoubtedly drew from his personal experience in describing the reaction of the citizenry in *Sancho Saldaña* and in this passage from *El diablo mundo*:

Y ya el disorde estrépito aumentaba
Y la mentira y el afán crecía,
Y la gente y la gente se empujaba,
Codeaba, pisaba y resistía.
El semblante y los ojos empinaba
Cada cual para ver si algo veía
.
.
.
Nadie a la voz del compañero atiende,
Nadie acude a la ajena pesadumbre.
Nadie presta favor y todos gritan
Y en confuso tropel se precipitan. (*DM*, vv. 2677-82, 2721-24)

What must have disturbed him most was the way in which dissatisfaction with government and continual disorder was used by politicians to propagate their own power.

Given the history of nineteenth-century Spain, Espronceda's desire for peace and stability seems like an unrealizable goal, a hope that

could only be entertained by an idealistic poet, a "poet of the Revolution . . . , [with no] grasp of political doctrine," as James Fitzmaurice-Kelly wrote over fifty years ago.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the essays propose a rational approach to the delicate question of orderly change. In addition to the economic reforms mentioned above, Espronceda affirms the need for the reorganization of government itself so that it could have a *stronger* role in leadership. In a speech of March 11, 1842, he notes that the nation needs "un Gobierno, un pensamiento que, dirigiendo el movimiento del pueblo, abra las fuentes estancadas de la riqueza pública . . ." (M, 21). Further, he declares that the government must represent the interests of the people and not serve only the plutocracy: "Los pueblos entenderán de una vez el Gobierno constitucional; lo verán identificado con sus intereses, y se aprestarán a defenderlo, porque tendrán la convicción de que, defendiendo al Gobierno, se defienden a sí propio" (M, 22). For the modern reader this appears to be vague rhetoric but one must remember that Spain had had several constitutions and differing forms of rule, and in this speech Espronceda is espousing, if not a democratic system of government, at least a democratic society.

The democratic ideal implies equality of opportunity for all citizens, a goal often frustrated in reality. In his effort to reintegrate himself into society, Adán, in Canto V of *El diablo mundo*, echoes the poet's lack of comprehension at institutionalized inequality: "¿Por qué nacen/Pobres como yo los unos/Y nacen los otros grandes?" (DM, vv. 4365-67). The poet found solutions to this problem in the theories of Henri Saint-Simon and these are best expressed in Espronceda's most incisive essay, "Libertad, igualdad, fraternidad": (he writes) "La igualdad significa que cada hombre tiene una misión que llenar según su organización intelectual y moral, y que no debe encontrar trabas que le detengan en su marcha, ni privilegio que delante de él pongan hombres que nada valieran sin ellos; significa, en fin, que todo sea igual para todos y que la facilidad o dificultad de su merecer esté en razón de la igualdad o desigualdad de las capacidades y no de los obstáculos, que antiguos abusos o errores perjudiciales establecieron" (M, 9).¹⁸

If Espronceda's early works are the product of a generalized discontent with the structure and functioning of Spanish society, *El diablo mundo*, begun in 1840, is a poignant focusing of that dissatisfaction and one of the best examples of committed literature of the Romantic period. The polymorphic nature of the work has been amply commented on but until recently little has been said of its extensive commentary on contemporary society and politics.¹⁹ Some of the most penetrating lines of the entire work are directed at the bureaucracy. Of the Spanish cabinet we read:

Basta, silencio, hipócritas parleros,
 Turba de charlatanes y eruditos,
 Tan cortos en hazañas y rastreros
 Como en palabras vanos infinitos:

Ministros de escribientes y porteros,
De la nación eternos parásitos. (*DM*, vv. 2653-58)

The sarcasm of this and numerous similar passages reflects Espronceda's demand for a reorganization of the bureaucracy: "¿Qué empleados inútiles se han abolido. . . ? En España, donde hay sinnúmero de empleos inútiles, oficinas enteras, asilo de hombres ineptos y holgazanes que deben al favor únicamente destinos o al abandono y descuido de los gobernantes, es una medida importante, y producirá un ahorro considerable la supresión de todas ellas" (*BAE*, 576).²⁰

This outline of some of Espronceda's concerns as expressed in poetry, fiction and essay does not necessarily reveal a systematic program for social reform, a criticism levelled at the poet from numerous commentators, among them Homero Castillo, Joaquín Casaldueiro, and James Fitzmarice-Kelly.²¹ Clearly, however, the artist is not obligated to present such a plan. In his study of *The Literature of Commitment*, Charles I. Glicksberg writes that

The politically committed writer takes with the utmost seriousness his responsibility to society, but that responsibility cannot, he discovers, be carried out with conspicuous success. The frustrations that attend his creative efforts are born of the realistic knowledge that his books, however honestly wrought, achieve but little in helping to shape a better world. If he resorts to forthright exhortation, he defeats his own ends as an artist. He must paint life as it is, not as he would like it to be, if his work is to be stamped with the seal of authentic conviction. Yet his aroused conscience impels him to utter his moral protest. He will not make his peace with the Establishment; he continues to cherish his right to criticize. He persists in his state of alienation, an intransigent member of the opposition.²²

Considered in isolation, Espronceda's essays are nothing more than minor historical documents. For Hispanists, however, they are a means by which we can establish a direct link between "art" and "object," between literature and society. While they are not works of high literary merit (compared, for example, to the articles of Larra), the essays do reveal an ideological matrix which yields a more cogent and coherent interpretation of the body of Esproncedian poetry. Without the context of the essays, many poems appear to be amorphous social commentary; read alongside the essays, Espronceda's poetry becomes an incisive political and social statement in response to specific policies of the Old Order.

David J. Billick

NOTES

1. Antonio Ferrer del Río, "Biografía de Espronceda," *El laberinto*, vol. I, no. 2 (16 November 1843), pp. 3 and 16; and "Don José de Espronceda," in *Galería de la litera-*

tura española (Madrid: F.P. de Mellado, 1846), pp. 235-51; Alberto Lista y Aragón, "Poesías de D. José de Espronceda . . .," in *Ensayos literarios y críticos* . . . (Seville: Calvo-Rubio, 1844), vol. 1, pp. 82-85; Ángel del Río, *Historia de la literatura española*, 1st ed. (New York: Dryden Press, 1948); Ricardo Navas Ruiz, *El romanticismo español, historia y crítica* (Salamanca: Anaya, 1973).

2. Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, et. al. make the same judgment in *Historia social de la literatura española (en lengua castellana)* (Madrid: Castalia, 1978): "Andaríamos mal encaminados si no viéramos la obra total de Espronceda (poesía, teatro, novela, artículos) como expresión directa de su ideología política" (vol. II, p. 97). The French Hispanist, Robert Marrast, in his *José de Espronceda et son temps; littérature, société, politique au temps du romantisme* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1974) has undertaken this kind of comprehensive study but the vastness of his effort (vol. I contains 720 pages and over 3,000 footnotes) yields a somewhat diffuse treatment of the subject. Regarding the political import of Espronceda's theater see Stephen Vasari, "El sentido oculto de la comedia *Ni el tío ni el sobrino* de Espronceda," *Romanische Forschungen*, 88 (1976), 395-402.

3. Ángel Antón Andrés, "Prólogo" to *Sancho Saldaña* (Barcelona: Barral, 1974), vol. I, p. 27. Future references to *Sancho Saldaña* are from this edition and will be indicated with volume and page numbers in parentheses.

4. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), p. 18.

5. The following is a chronological list of Espronceda's essays with the modern edition wherein they can be found: either Jorge Campos, ed., *Obras completas de D. José de Espronceda* (Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, vol. 72; Madrid: Atlas, 1954), abbreviated in the text as BAE with page numbers in parentheses; or Robert Marrast, ed., *Espronceda, Articles et discours oubliés* . . . (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), abbreviated as M, also with page references in parentheses: "Poesía" (Jan. 24, 1834), BAE, pp. 579-80) "Influencia del gobierno sobre la poesía," (Febe. 28, 1834), BAE, pp. 581-82; "Libertad, igualdad, fraternidad" (Jan. 15, 1836), M, pp. 7-10; "Destrucción de nuestros antiguos monumentos artísticos" (unpublished during Espronceda's lifetime), M, pp. 10-12; "El gobierno y la bolsa" (Mar. 7, 1836), BAE, pp. 582-83; *El Ministerio Mendizábal* (April 1836), BAE, pp. 573-79; "Al congreso de señores diputados" (of uncertain authorship, June 3, 1841), M, pp. 16-19; "Política general" (May 19, 1841), BAE, pp. 592-96; "Política general" (July 1841), BAE, pp. 596-99. Five recorded speeches before the Cortes (from March through May of 1842) can also be found in M, pp. 19-41.

6. All references to the shorter poems are from Robert Marrast's edition of *Poesías líricas y fragmentos épicos* (Madrid: Castalia, 1970), hereafter abbreviated as *Poesías* with citations made through page numbers in parentheses.

7. Jaime Vicens Vives, *Historia social y económica de España y América* (Barcelona: Editorial Teide, 1959), tomo IV, vol. II, pp. 89 and 355. Larra was similarly disenchanted with Mendizábal's failure to assist the lower classes; see David Thatcher Gies, "Larra and Mendizábal: A Writer's Response to Government," *Cithara*, 21, no. 2 (May 1973), 74-90.

8. *El estudiante de Salamanca/El diablo mundo*, ed. Robert Marrast (Madrid: Castalia, 1978), vv. 4424-29. Cited parenthetically hereafter as ES and DM respectively.

9. *Teoría de las cortes ó grandes juntas nacionales de los reinos de León y Castilla* . . . (Madrid: Impr. de Fermín Villalpando, 1813), vol. I, p. 125. Also available as vol. 219 of the BAE.

10. Larra and Espronceda "fueron casi los únicos que entendieron la crítica de Flórez Estrada a la desamortización de Mendizábal"; José Luis Aranguren, *Moral y sociedad; la moral social española en el siglo XIX*, 4th ed. (Madrid: Editorial Cuadernos para el Diálogo, 1970), p. 84.

11. Eloy Terrón, *Sociedad e ideología en los orígenes de la España contemporánea* (Barcelona: Península, 1969), p. 19.

12. Antón Andrés, p. 31.

13. Antón Andrés, p. 30.

14. Antón Andrés, p. 34.

15. *Le cas de Don Juan* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953), p. 129. Even Gregorio Marañón who puts much emphasis on the psychological aspects of Don Juan still recognizes that he is "un rebelde frente a la ortodoxia social y religiosa del ambiente" (*Don Juan, ensayos sobre el origen de su leyenda*, 3rd ed. [Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1944], p. 93).

16. John Fagg notes that by 1840 Espronceda was "a well-known republican, and indeed a prized asset of the movement." See Fagg, "The Republican Movement in Spain, 1790-1868" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Chicago, 1942), p. 40.

17. "Espronceda," *Modern Language Review*, 4 (1908), 32.

18. As in the case of disentanglement, one can find similarly worded passages in *Teoría de las cortes* of Martínez Marina: "En todo gobierno sabio la fortuna, el destino, el honor y la dignidad del ciudadano debe corresponder á su industria y aplicación y talentos" (I, 100). The theories of Saint-Simon were certainly available in Spain by this time. By 1840, organized meetings were being held to discuss the works of such "foreign radicals" as Robert Owen, Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier (Fagg, p. 46), and early in the same decade biographies and summaries of Saint-Simon's ideas begin to appear in Madrid newspapers (see Iris M. Zavala, *Románticos y socialistas; prensa española del XIX* [Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores, 1972], p. 119).

19. See Judith Navarro, "Reinterpretation of Espronceda's Poetry as Expression of his Ethical and Artistic Commitment" (Ph.D. diss., Pittsburgh, 1973) and Stephen Vasari, "Interpretación temática y simbólica de *El diablo mundo* de Espronceda" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1970).

20. A criticism voiced by Galdós some fifty years later in *Miau* (1888), and a plan proposed by Martínez Marina in 1813: "El segundo medio sería reducir al *minimum* posible los empleados públicos, los que no contribuyen con sus brazos ni con su industria á multiplicar el bien y la riqueza nacional, los que han abrazado ciertas profesiones mas gravosas que útiles á la sociedad y los que viven á costa del tesoro público ó á expensas de los particulares" (*Teoría de las cortes*, I, 126-27).

21. See Homero Castillo, "Filosofía y arte de Espronceda," *Hispania*, 34 (1951), 357-62; Joaquín Casalduero, *Espronceda* (Madrid: Gredos, 1961); and Fitzmaurice-Kelly, *op. cit.*

22. *The Literature of Commitment* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1976), p. 44.