

The Mysterious Lady: An Enigmatic Figure in the Fantastic Short Story of Nineteenth-Century Spain

In the early part of the nineteenth century, Spain, in the heyday of Romanticism, was producing many poems and short stories, some of which deal with the elusive figure of a witch, beautiful enchantress or mysterious lady.¹ This figure is portrayed in the fantastic short story as a supernatural being among men who causes "confusión de lo onírico con lo real, de los sueños con la vigilia"² (confusion between that which is dreamt and that which is real, between oneirons and watchfulness).³ Bécquer's "Los ojos verdes" ("Green Eyes") and Galdós's "Theros" are both examples of this type of fantastic short story found in Spain but also in other cultures almost as a universal phenomenon, which conjures up the figure of a mysterious lady or pagan goddess who seduces a young male protagonist as an act of mischief or evil, only to lead him to his ultimate doom. A better understanding of this dangerous female entity can perhaps be achieved by studying the fantastic short story itself as the genre which breathes life into her haunting and unearthly form.

The fantastic short story, also known as a tale of horror, has its origins in Romanticism, a literary movement characterized by aesthetic rebellion or a strong reaction against the French Revolution, whose excesses had been tolerated in the new Age of Reason guided by the spirit of rationalism.⁴ According to Hegel, rationalism left man as content as a worm with but water and soil, after his having experienced the privilege of living beneath a brilliant constellation of gods and miracles.⁵ The romantic preferred the shadows of doubt cast by that which was irrational, or a dead but nevertheless idealized past, to living in a much abhorred present.⁶ In the nineteenth century, that which was romantic came to mean something imaginative, evoking the supernatural or fantastic. The Spanish horror story first appeared

as an excerpt within more lengthy romantic novels, but it was soon to emerge as a new genre significant enough to exist on its own considerable merits.

Spain, very much inspired by the spread of the increasingly popular form of German Romanticism, started by such authors as Hoffmann and Tieck, disciples of Schelling whose works had been translated into Spanish so as to become familiar to a contemporary Spanish readership,⁷ created its particular version of the romantic-fantastic short story, by means of the Becquerian legends. Rafael Llopis traces this type of short story back to two sources; a black stream and a white stream, the black being of English origin and containing morbid and macabre elements, the white being mainly of German extraction composed of bits of poetic fancy and fairy-tale wonders; the stuff of legends, with the addition of some degree of melancholic humour.⁸ The fusion of these two sources produced the fantastic short story, an admittedly grey area which takes us into the realm of the supernatural, that which escapes from or is on the verge of a "scientific" or realistic explanation, or beyond the surrounding world of concrete, knowable facts.⁹ Although Bécquer and Galdós had viewpoints that were diametrically opposed, the one being romantic, the other a hard-core realist, their respective works, "Los ojos verdes" and "Theros" can both be categorized as fantastic short stories, made complete by adding a vital supernatural element, in this case that of the mysterious lady, she who disturbs the very soul of man rendered vulnerable and helpless due to the intensity of his own desires.

"Los ojos verdes" and "Theros" conform to Todorov's generally accepted definition of the fantastic, as a vacillation between the superstitious and the natural explanation of events. The Latin *superstitio* means to be left paralyzed with fear before an object or person, hence to hesitate.¹⁰ Here the object or person causing this fear or anxiety is a mysterious lady. The individual fears this supernatural being and is also afraid of himself, of his being unable to resist the passion aroused by the lady in question. In short, he is fearful of being possessed by a supernatural force beyond his control. The words "El joven vaciló un instante; un sudor frío corrió por sus miembros"¹¹ (The youth hesitated for a moment; he broke out in a cold sweat) describe Fernando's doubt, the fact that this protagonist is no longer so sure as to whether or not he wishes to remain with the lady of

the fountain. "Theros" presents us with a narrator who also admits that the mere sight of this woman's eyes with their livid flashes "le puso algo intranquilo"¹² (made him feel somewhat uncomfortable). Fernando finds himself "atraído como por una fuerza desconocida . . . más y más al borde de la roca"¹³ (drawn as if by some unknown force . . . ever closer to the edge of the precipice) that is to say death itself. The gentleman in "Theros" has his judgment clouded as well, in that he says "apenas pude formular este pensamiento angustioso: 'Estoy en las calderas infernales'"¹⁴ (I could but barely formulate this one agonizing thought: 'I'm in the depths of Hell').

In both instances, there is a clash between that which is imagined and that which is real, a shock which causes some hesitation in the protagonist and in the reader as well.¹⁵ There are elements which are modelled on reality, but arranged in a manner to which one is not accustomed and this feels strange and disconcerting, negating that very same reality but presenting it in such a way as to seem real or at the very least possible.¹⁶ The protagonists represent reality; they are portrayed doing ordinary things which are interrupted by the apparition of supernatural beings: Fernando is in the midst of hunting in pursuit of an injured stag in the woods (probably in a mythical medieval period),¹⁷ while the narrator in "Theros" is travelling by train to Madrid. That which is unreal suddenly comes upon them, erupting into their daily lives. Fernando confirms that he thought he had "visto . . . una cosa extraña . . . los ojos de una mujer"¹⁸ (seen . . . a very curious thing . . . a woman's eyes). In "Theros" the narrator is traveling alone, when all of a sudden he is surprised by a woman, ". . . sentía que me tocaban en el hombro. Sorprendiéndome esto, porque me creía solo en el coche"¹⁹ (I felt that I was being tapped on the shoulder. This came as some surprise, because I believed myself to be quite alone in my compartment.)

The ambiguity which arises out of this shocking real-unreal encounter makes us wonder what the real nature is, although we know their origin must surely be supernatural, of the women who appear in the stories.²⁰ Doubtless attempts are made to explain away these phenomena using clever rationalizations. After all, Fernando remembers, "yo me creí juguete de un sueño"²¹ (I believed myself to be dreaming) and the narrator in "Theros" declares "yo fui de los seducidos"²² (I was one of those seduced), in other words, that he

had indulged himself in a tavern with more than his fair share of alcohol before his sighting of the lady in the train. Furthermore, several references are made to paintings, again suggesting that these ladies do not exist, at least not within our notion of reality. "Yo recordaba vagamente haberla visto en pintura, no sé donde . . . en alguna región, no sé cuál, poblada por la imaginación creadora de los dioses del arte"²³ (I vaguely remembered having seen her in a painting, I'm not sure where . . . in some place or other, I don't know where, in a place over which presides the fertile imagination of artistic muses) says the narrator in "Theros." "Yo creo que he visto unos ojos como los que he pintado en esta leyenda . . . cuento con la imaginación de mis lectores para hacerme comprender en este que pudiéramos llamar boceto de un cuadro que pintaré algún día"²⁴ (I believe I saw eyes such as those that I have described in this legend . . . I'm counting on my readers' imagination in this to make me understand that which we may call a little sketch of a canvas which I hope to paint some day) states the narrator of "Los ojos verdes." Nevertheless, the protagonist destroys our presumption in having discovered a mundane explanation for that which has occurred. In the very same sentence in which Fernando suggests the possibility that he is in fact dreaming, he still insists: "pero no, es verdad; la he hablado muchas veces, como te hablo a ti ahora"²⁵ (but no, it's true; I spoke to her many times, just as I am now speaking to you).

As we can see, the focus of the protagonists' problems seems to center around the supernatural element which alters their lives, namely the mysterious lady herself. This lady possesses powerful weapons in her eyes, capable of blinding the would-be suitor in "Theros," "no era fácil contemplarla, porque sus ojos eran como pedazos del mismo sol . . . quemando la vista"²⁶ (it was not easy to contemplate her, because her eyes were like pieces of the very sun itself . . . burning one's sense of sight). Green eyes lead Fernando to damnation, as he is prepared to lose everything "por una sola mirada de esos ojos"²⁷ (for but a single gaze into those eyes). The mysterious lady's dress is also of note, as an addition to her supernatural aura. The lady with the green eyes is a water nymph "vestida con unas ropas que llegaban hasta las aguas y flotaban sobre su haz"²⁸ (clothed in garments which reached down to the waters and floated just on their surface). We are told in "Theros" that "no era fácil imaginar

atavíos más originales . . . no tenía alguno"²⁹ (it wasn't easy to imagine more original attire . . . she wasn't wearing any). Not even the voice or words uttered by these ladies is normal; they seem instead to emanate from another world: ". . . sus labios se removieron como para pronunciar algunas palabras; pero sólo exhalaban un suspiro . . . débil . . . como el de la ligera onda que empuja una brisa al morir entre los juncos"³⁰ (her lips moved as if to utter a few words; but they only exhaled a sigh . . . tenuous . . . like the light flutter emitted by a delicate breeze as it fades among the rushes). The narrator in "Theros" further confirms this fact: "A esta palabra siguieron otras que no pude entender bien"³¹ (Along with this word of hers there followed others which I was not able to comprehend very well).

The lady described in "Theros" and "Los ojos verdes" seems not only to be strange and ambiguous due to her outward physical appearance, but also as we soon learn, as a result of her angelic-diabolical countenance as well. On the one hand, the lady with the green eyes is "hermosa sobre toda ponderación"³² (beautiful beyond compare), but there is also mention made of "la fuente de los álamos en cuyas aguas habita un espíritu del mal"³³ (the fountain of the poplar trees within whose waters resides an evil sprite). "Theros'" "hermosa imagen" (beautiful picture) is at the same time an "endemoniada ninfa" (wicked wood nymph). This mixed message from a female entity most probably stems from the Christian idea of man's fall from grace, which traditionally holds Eve responsible for Adam's weakness and subsequent condemnation to live forever barred from Eden.³⁴ The notion springs from the idea that women are "el instrumento más eficaz que el demonio ha tenido, y tiene para engañar a los hombres"³⁵ (the most perfect instrument the devil ever designed, and has for the purposes of deceiving men). In "Los ojos verdes" the woman kills the youth Fernando, while in "Theros" she abandons her lover, but in both cases she is an agent who harms the hapless protagonists, the one by causing the loss of his life, the other by making him lose his peace of mind. Thus, these ladies pertain to that "auténtico arsenal de variedades de los arquetipos femeninos, de estas mujeres cuyo principal don es el de encantar, el de hechizar, el de seducir, el de reducir"³⁶ (veritable army of feminine archetypes, of these women whose chief talent is to charm, enchant, seduce and reduce) their partners. As for these beings themselves, they admit

that they are not mortals: "Soy la sazón universal"³⁷ (I am the vernal equinox) reveals the lady in "Theros," and as she disappears on September 22nd, the last day of summer, one knows that she represents this season, as an ancient pagan goddess of the sun. In the same way, the lady of the green eyes is not an ordinary woman, but rather "espíritu puro"³⁸ (pure spirit). It is of interest to note that the ladies' lovers are men who distinguish themselves as being superior to the rest of the mortal masses. The water nymph confides in Fernando "soy una mujer digna para ti, que eres superior a los demás hombres"³⁹ (I'm a woman who is worthy of you, as you are far above other men). The ladies can perhaps be explained away as a form of madness or an hallucination, because no one sees them except for the protagonists. The "Theros" narrator describes his lady as "conservando siempre aquel natural fantástico que la hacía invisible para todos excepto para mí"⁴⁰ (always maintaining that fantastic nature which made her invisible to all but me). Fernando adds "que al parecer sólo para mí existe, pues nadie la conoce, ni la ha visto, ni puede darme razón de ella"⁴¹ (that apparently she only exists for my benefit since no one knows her, nor have they seen her, nor can they tell me anything about her).

At this point, it should be mentioned that one of the major differences between "Los ojos verdes" and "Theros" is the moral-didactic tone of the former Becquerian work. "Theros," rather than dealing with any overtly moral teaching, seems more intent upon playing with the fantastic, hence with its humour making the reader laugh. "Los ojos verdes," on the other hand, instead of provoking laughter, contains mystical elements. Fernando's love of a spirit is taboo according to local superstition, and any transgression of this law will mean the destruction of the individual offender.⁴² Fernando's servant Íñigo warns his master that "el que osa enturbiar su corriente (de la fuente del espíritu), paga caro su atrevimiento"⁴³ (he who dares disturb its current (that of the spirit's fountain) will pay dearly for his insolence). But typically the youth pays him no heed and dies for his sin. On the other hand, the hero in "Theros" does not seek forbidden love with the goddess, but rather wishes to flee her presence and even goes so far as to advise her on how she should behave. "Señora, tenga la bondad de vestirse . . . Ese traje, mejor dicho esa desnudez no es lo más a propósito para viajar dentro de un coche

de ferrocarril"⁴⁴ (Madame, please have the decency to clothe yourself . . . that suit, rather your nudity is not the most suitable attire for travel inside a train compartment) he admonishes her and later, "Señora . . . Es muy doloroso para un caballero huir . . . pero . . ." (Madame . . . It is very embarrassing for a gentleman to flee . . . but . . .) he confesses his discomfort to the rather forward young lady. Fernando dies for having believed himself to be above superstition and is thus punished for his impatient pride. But the "Theros" narrator suffers nothing but the sad loss of his beloved. "Theros" is humorous in its style with passages such as "mi compañera . . . profundamente aficionada a mi persona, no quiso dejarme, y me siguió . . . y se aposentó en mi mismo cuarto"⁴⁵ (my companion . . . deeply attached to my person, refused to leave me, and followed me . . . and installed herself in my personal quarters). "Los ojos verdes" is more mystical, communicating with Nature: "En las plateadas hojas de los álamos . . . en las ondas del agua, parece que nos hablan los invisibles espíritus de la Naturaleza, que reconocen un hermano en el inmortal espíritu del hombre"⁴⁶ (In the silvery leaves of the poplars . . . in the watery waves, it seems as though Nature's invisible spirits are speaking to us, that they recognize a brother in the immortal spirit of man).

The "Theros" lady is a rogue, wreaking havoc on Madrid's weather, causing storms, etc.; "No he visto pánico tan horrible . . . (dice el narrador) y cómo reía la pícara al ver tales estragos!"⁴⁷ (I never saw such terrible panic . . . (says the narrator) and how the little devil was laughing at seeing the results of her mischief-making!) Nevertheless, in "Los ojos verdes," apart from that which we suspect happens to Fernando, there is nothing which tells us what the lady of the green eyes is really like. We only know of her through the mouths of other characters in the story who speak of traditional legend and superstition. Fernando, in his frustrated attempts to procure more information demands of the nymph "¿querrá que dé crédito a lo que de ti me han dicho?"⁴⁸ (do you wish me to believe that which they've told me about you?) In "Theros" the story seems more realistic, since the narrator is the protagonist himself, a live firsthand witness of the account to follow: "Vi a una mujer, . . . ¿por dónde había entrado. . . ? He aquí un punto difícil de aclarar"⁴⁹ (I saw a woman, . . . how did she get in. . . ? That's a difficult question

to answer) muses "Theros'" narrator in the first person, talking to his listening readers. "Los ojos verdes" vacillates in its narration between that of playing a game and adopting the more serious tone of the romantic. At first we are told "Hoy, que me ha presentado ocasión . . . he dejado a capricho volar la pluma"⁵⁰ (Today, since the occasion has so presented itself to me . . . I have allowed my pen to fly to wherever it so wishes to go) only to be transported via a third person to the past, "En aquel momento se reunía a la comitiva el héroe de la fiesta, Fernando de Argensola . . ."⁵¹ (At that moment long ago the retinue was joined by the hero of the festivities, Fernando of Argensola). As opposed to Bécquer's romantic style which attempts to convert a fountain in the woods into a precious universe where every plant and drop of water suddenly breathes with a spiritual life of its own, Galdós in his realism speaks to us as if to say in a more down-to-earth fashion, "well you're not going to believe this, I myself have doubts about the matter, but anyway . . ." before steeping us into the story at hand.

Nevertheless, even if by somewhat different routes, both Bécquer and Galdós present us with this mysterious lady, a popular element in the fantastic short story. This lady is ideal, an ideal woman because she is unattainable, an impossible dream. She functions as a sort of pole of attraction or lightning rod for the protagonist's feelings, his anxieties, his aspirations. The pagan world invades the real one, in that mythological but not necessarily Christian entities reveal themselves suggesting a parallel but contiguous existence to our world, made known by the apparition of ambiguous or inexplicable beings.

The spatial plane of the fantastic short story is relatively unimportant as compared to the human feelings which are involved with one's encounter with the fantastic element, in this case a mysterious lady. The reader is forced out of routine life and experiences the aesthetic pleasure of fear in confronting the unknown. For this reason there is continued popularity in fantastic works of a more all-encompassing nature as seen in Hitchcock and in Spielberg for example, or in programs such as *Night Gallery*, *The Twilight Zone* or *The Next Step Beyond*, whose plots often resemble works like the stories dealt with in this essay. But according to Borges, the source of the fantastic's appeal is to be found within us. Stories such as "Los ojos verdes" and "Theros" are a symbol of us, our lives, the universe, the insta-

bility and the mystery of our existence. The mysterious lady belongs to a type of literature which leads us to the philosophy that life is a dream and that only appearances really exist. It forces us to ask not only purely literary questions but rather things that we have all at some time felt or will perhaps feel in the future. Is the universe, our life, part of that which is real or is everything the product of a huge imagination or the fantastic? Perhaps there is some kind of fusion of life and death where real and unreal planes disappear, where there arises the occurrence of premonitions in dreams and inexplicable coincidences which throw us into constant doubt. Would this not perhaps be the key to the fascination which the fantastic holds throughout the centuries? It leads to doubts and as Descartes pointed out, doubt is the basis of our existence; dare we say that whosoever thinks of the fantastic or doubts it is himself really existing, for there is some merit in the words *Dubito, cogito, ergo sum!*

NOTES

- 1 Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (New York: Humanities, 1963) 43.
- 2 Jorge Luis Borges, *La literatura fantástica* (Buenos Aires: Olivetti, 1967) 9.
- 3 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
- 4 Rafael Llopis, *Esbozo de una historia natural de los cuentos de miedo* (Madrid: Júcar, 1974) 33.
- 5 Tobin Siebers, *The Romantic Fantastic* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984) 26.
- 6 Llopis 33.
- 7 Henry Charles Turk, *German Romanticism in Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's Short Stories* (Lawrence: Allen, 1959) 21.
- 8 Llopis 45.
- 9 Emilio Carilla, *El cuento fantástico* (Buenos Aires: Nuevo, 1969) 20.
- 10 Siebers 32-34.
- 11 Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, "Los ojos verdes," *Obras completas*, ed. J. García Pérez (Barcelona: Ferma, 1967) 44.
- 12 Benito Pérez Galdós, "Theros," *Obras completas*, vol. 6, ed. Federico Sainz de Robles (Madrid: Aguilar, 1942) 436.
- 13 Bécquer 45.
- 14 Galdós 434.
- 15 Antonio Risco, *Literatura y fantasía* (Madrid: Taurus, 1982) 65.
- 16 Risco 14.
- 17 Risco 132.
- 18 Bécquer 42.
- 19 Galdós 431.

- 20 Risco 67.
- 21 Bécquer 42.
- 22 Galdós 431.
- 23 Galdós 432.
- 24 Bécquer 38.
- 25 Bécquer 42.
- 26 Galdós 432.
- 27 Bécquer 43.
- 28 Bécquer 42.
- 29 Galdós 432.
- 30 Bécquer 44.
- 31 Galdós 432.
- 32 Bécquer 42.
- 33 Bécquer 39.
- 34 Francisco J. Flores Arroyuelo, *El diablo en España* (Madrid: Alianza, 1985) 118.
- 35 Arroyuelo 118.
- 36 Arroyuelo 136.
- 37 Galdós 434.
- 38 Bécquer 41.
- 39 Bécquer 45.
- 40 Galdós 435.
- 41 Bécquer 41.
- 42 Joan Estruch, *Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, relatos de terror y de misterio* (Barcelona: Fontamara, 1982) 16.
- 43 Bécquer 39.
- 44 Galdós 432.
- 45 Galdós 435.
- 46 Bécquer 42.
- 47 Galdós 435.
- 48 Bécquer 44.
- 49 Galdós 432.
- 50 Bécquer 38.
- 51 Bécquer 39.