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Images of the soul: loneliness as a pictorial object during the Romantic period¹

Loneliness as an iconographic topic has been widely represented throughout the History of Western Art. Due to its incorporeal character, its pictorial sensitization was carried out through religious iconography or through its allegory until the 19th century.

Although these iconographies remained, their representation acquires a more personal character from the Romanticism. The subjectivity with which the subject is treated must be linked to the birth of a new sensitivity. This new affective regime, associated with the development of liberal theory, above all prioritizes the individual expression: the self.

This individualism will also lead to a new conception of art for which loneliness will play an important role. Creation will be understood as the highest expression of the self, and as a result of the individual work of the solitary genius.

In view of the above, the aim of this article is to analyse what the iconographic patterns under which loneliness is represented in romantic painting are, and why this feeling becomes one of the most frequent topics of artistic modernity.

Keywords: loneliness, iconography, Romanticism, aesthetics, affect theory, 19th century

0. From loneliness as an aesthetic ideal to an extreme individualism

Due to its incorporeal character, until the 19th century loneliness has been represented plastically through different iconographic patterns.

¹ The translations of the quotes in the text are mine.

Roughly speaking, its representation was made through its allegorical form or Christian iconography. In the case of allegorical forms, according to Revilla², loneliness takes the form of an austere female figure, leaning on a book, and sitting in a calm desert landscape. However, through Christian iconography, loneliness materializes under the representation of either penitent saints or hermits, or the Marian invocation of Our Lady of Solitude.

The representation of loneliness until the 19th century is related to contemplative life and meditation. It symbolizes the ascetic ideal of loneliness as a path to perfection, except in the last of the abovementioned cases. In its Marian devotion, loneliness is represented as emotional and dealing with the absence of a loved one. Although both contemplative and emotional types of loneliness kept on being represented plastically along the length of the 19th century, some changes were introduced with regard to their iconography. Contemplative loneliness will no longer be represented only by hermits, but also through the figure of the artist. Likewise, emotional loneliness will be figured both in the Virgin and through bourgeois women and female literary characters. With them, from the end of the 18th century, new ways of understanding and expressing loneliness began to emerge due to a whole series of socio-political conditions.

On the one hand, the development at this time of the idea of intimacy and private space will have as a consequence the increase of spaces and practices linked to loneliness. Intimacy begins to be related to private and family life, and to be clearly differentiated from the public sphere³. On the other hand, the disappointment posed by the failure of the Enlightenment project plunged Europe into a deep solipsism. This new philosophical trend was caused by a loss of confidence in reason and enlightened morality. Then, solipsism contributed to the creation of a tragic consciousness in the subject and had an effect on the increase in images devoted to loneliness. This failure meant the emergence of a new political regime based on the presuppositions of liberal theory, which promotes individual initiative. Likewise, along with the new

² Revilla, *Diccionario*, 695.

³ Bolufer, *Lo íntimo, lo doméstico y lo público*.

political system, a new emotional regime was developed, and the new romantic sensibility also promoted the development of the self⁴.

For all these reasons, on an artistic level, individual and solitary expressions of artists start being valued since Romanticism. This means that artworks are no longer conceived as *mimesis* and start being conceived as expression of the deepest part of being. Hence, Romantic loneliness must be linked to the development of a radical individualism. It speaks of the self-reflective capacity of man to have his own expression. It is, therefore, of a rational type. It is based on the principle of individualization allowing the subject to recognize his difference and on the dual character of his consciousness that confronts reason and feeling, subject and world. For this reason, at a pictorial level, its representation takes shape in the opposition, since the self can only be defined in the difference with the other. This means that the representation of the solitary man is a representation of a confrontation with nature or with society, which may be factual or emotional.

This cult of the self that began at the end of the 18th century reached its zenith with the development of Freudian theories. In these theories, the patriarchal character of the thought concerning us is confirmed, since nineteenth-century loneliness is masculine because the self is also masculine. In fact, when loneliness associated with women takes place in the Romantic period, it tends to acquire an emotional character. This difference between a masculine rational loneliness and a feminine emotional one is a consequence of the association that bourgeois morality makes between the sentimental and the feminine. Thus, when speaking of the crisis of Western thought in the 20th century, Tarnas⁵ talks about the crisis of the solitary modern man. This is so because, for him, this crisis is caused by the excessive importance that patriarchal thought has given to individuality. In the following pages we will try to unravel which are the pictorial patterns established by Romanticism for the representation of loneliness.

⁴ Labanyi, "Pensar los afectos".

⁵ Tarnas, *La pasión de la mente occidental*, 553-9.

I. Modern man and the tragedy of the discovering of his loneliness

The representation of loneliness in Romanticism is materialized, as we said, in an opposition. The most common is the one that faces an individual and the world, represented in nature. This is the case of Caspar David Friedrich's *The Wanderer over a Sea of Fog* (1817). In this work, the wanderer turns his back on the viewer, facing the abysmal nature that opens before him. When facing nature, the wanderer becomes aware of himself as a subject. He contemplates a landscape of which he is not a part, and in that contemplation he makes "ineluctable the split that separates in us what we see from what is looking at us"⁶, meaning that the wanderer recognizes the split between nature and man. Loneliness is materialized, therefore, in this split. It is in it where the individual senses and the painter represents loneliness. However, although this split is represented through a natural abyss, the split Friedrich refers to is soulish.

For this German painter, "the landscaper's task is not the true representation of air, water, rocks and trees. It is his soul and sentiment what should be reflected"⁷.

Friedrich is interested in the projection of his feelings onto nature. Friedrich's landscapes, like most of the romantics, are primarily using Rosenblum's term *sentimental fallacy*⁸. For this reason, nature is no longer pastoral or bucolic as it was in its allegorical representation. It has become tragic, like the spirit of the romantic man.

The wanderer faces the abyss, absorbed in the contemplation of "a negative and abysmal infinity in which [his] subjectivity is broken into thousand pieces"⁹. Only in his loneliness, facing the world, he does maintain his individuality. That is why he turns his back on us, because through this position the painter reinforces the romantic idea of the self as opposition to the world. However, in this confrontation, individuality, the subject, while being overwhelmed, becomes tragic. That is, he

⁶ Didi-Huberman, *Lo que vemos*, 13.

⁷ Friedrich in Arnaldo, *Fragmentos*, 53.

⁸ Rosenblum, *La pintura romántica*.

⁹ Argullol, *La atracción del abismo*, 17.

yearns for his return to nature, even if it means its destruction. This idea of the eternal return is what Friedrich collects when he writes: “I must surrender to what surrounds me, unite with the clouds and with the stones, to be what I am. I need solitude to commune with nature”¹⁰.

Also, for Jean Jacques Rousseau, loneliness and nature are indispensable conditions for the encounter with the self. According to the French philosopher in his *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782): “Those hours of loneliness and meditation are the only hours of the day in which I am all myself, no leisure, no obstacle and when I can say truly that I am what nature pretended”¹¹. In his loneliness, the individual takes conscious of himself. That is, he becomes autonomous and self-reflective. The connection of both thoughts, that of Friedrich and that of Rousseau, is not accidental if we consider the influence that the French philosopher had on the Jena school.

Likewise, the choice in both cases of the traveller or the wanderer in order to represent loneliness is, for some authors, due to their nomadic condition. The absence of identification, or communion, of the character with the environment reiterates the idea of loneliness. In them it is evident, as Augé has well studied, that these are places:

where no identity, no relation, no history does not recall matter, where loneliness is experimented as going beyond or empty the individuality, where the movement of images allows us to gaze those that see it run away from the hypothesis of a past and the possibility of a future¹².

Romantic’s loneliness is, therefore, a tragic one, that of discovering the temporality of their existence. The humanistic man, as Argullol states, is the one that “unconsciously intoxicated in the whirlwind of his discoveries, he had to discover his smallness, his loneliness, his impotence”¹³. This impotence of the human being in the face of the future of the world, and its temporality is pictorially represented by the difference in sizes. The figure –finite– has ridiculous dimensions

¹⁰ Grummt, Busch, Börsch-Suppon. *Caspar David Friedrich*, 158.

¹¹ Rousseau, *Les rêveries*, 12.

¹² Augé, *Les non-lieux*, 111.

¹³ Argullol, *La atracción del abismo*, 18.

with respect to the nature that surrounds it, –infinite. We may see this in another of Friedrich’s most recognized paintings, the *Monk by the Sea* (1808-10). The confrontation of a character with the sea is another usual resource to represent romantic loneliness. The sea for the romantics hides in itself the life and death¹⁴, drive, the idea of eternal return to which Friedrich himself referred.

Similarly, the human-natural confrontation is sometimes personified through other elements that already speak of a human absence. We are referring to ruins or memorials, such as the *Goethe Memorial* (1832) by Carl Gustav Carus. In them, what confronts the world is no longer the human, but its absence. Loneliness is represented in the space that life must once have occupied. This idea is embodied even more clearly in the Christian cross. With or without the figure of Christ crucified, the cross refers to death. It symbolizes human pathos at the idea of abandonment of the deity and the absence of meaning in life.¹⁵ In any of the cases, through the cross, ruins or men, the idea that persists in romantic landscaping is that of death. Therefore, the loneliness to which romantic landscapes alludes are metaphysical ones, it is due to the mental-bodily immanence that turns man into an autonomous but perishable individual.

II. The modern artist and a desire of loneliness

If the discovery of the metaphysical loneliness of the romantic man is a consequence of the evolution of the humanist man, so will his concept of creation. For the romantics, as for the Renaissance, creation is above all an intellectual activity. For this reason, they consider loneliness as an unconditional requirement for creation. After the bourgeois revolutions, the abolition of the guild structures and the patronage system of the Old Regime enabled a new form of work. Studios now appear as substitutes for the workshop¹⁶. The studios represent spaces of loneliness in themselves. However, the interest that his pictorial representation has for the romantics is not once again mimetic as in the case of nature.

¹⁴ Guillén, *Naufragios*, 12.

¹⁵ This image finds its reference in the biblical text: “My God! My God! Why have thou abandoned me?”

¹⁶ Gombrich, *La historia del arte*, 475-497.

In works such as *Studio in Moonlight* (1826) by Carl Gustav Carus, the interest continues to focus on the human-nature relationship. Carus represents a night-time view of the studio. The fascination that romantics feel at night, as Novalis collects in his *Hymn to the night*, is due to the fact that they recognize in it the time of the creator. The night, in the poet's words allows man to be "alone, as he was never that lonely"¹⁷. In this case, all the expressiveness of the work is concentrated in the representation of the moon. The moonlight symbolizes for the romantics, as Argullol has explained, the unconscious and the dreamlike. Therefore, with this representation the painter alludes to the intellectual dimension of creation¹⁸.

Likewise, in the portraits made by Georg Friedrich Kersting, the variations that he introduces from the 1811 version to the 1819 version are striking. In the former one we already see the painter absolutely concentrated on his task. However, in the last one we are deprived not only of the view of the painting, but even manual activities are completely replaced by mental activities. In the second of the canvases Friedrich is only contemplating. However, this contemplation is not of nature, in fact, the window as usual in his creative process, is closed by the shutters that he built himself. The loneliness of the romantic artist is not, therefore, the physical loneliness imposed by the isolation of the studio. As we said, romantic loneliness is caused by the conception of creation as an intellectual activity and of the artist as a genius.

The genius, understood as a person who has a special capacity that keeps him out of the social mass, begins to claim greater autonomy in his creations. Nineteenth-century artists, fed up with the rigid values imposed by the academies, begin to claim freedom in the creative process. This is how it is collected in the *Letter from a Young Poet to a Young painter* that Kleist wrote in 1810:

It is completely incomprehensible to us, poets, that you painters, whose art is so infinite, should decide to sacrifice entire years occupying yourself in copying the works of your great masters. The teachers, whose courses you attend at school,

¹⁷ Novalis, *Himnos a la noche*, 14.

¹⁸ Argullol, *La atracción del abismo*.

do not tolerate, you say, that you bring your fantasies to the canvas before it is time for it. If we, poets, had found ourselves in your case, before we would have beaten our backs with infinite lashes that satisfied that atrocious prohibition.¹⁹

The assessment that romantic artists make of solitude is closely related to the humanist vision that Petrarca offers about it in *De vita solitaria*. In both cases, loneliness appears as an immanent and necessary condition of contemplative life and creation. They consider both physical solitude essential, since it implies having their own space to work, and psychic, since it implies the ability to decide on creation. For this reason, beggars, gypsies, orphans, and the poor will not only become the theme of many of his works, as we see in Delacroix's *The Orphan in the Cemetery* (1823) or Gericault's representations of mad people, but they will also become the reference for building themselves as geniuses. Since, the loneliness derived from the social unacceptance suffered by all these characters is at the same time the one that allows them to enjoy maximum freedom. Being on the margins of society, they are freed from the impositions of social canons. For all these reasons, the representation of artistic loneliness is also that of an opposition. In this case of the individual, it is an opposition with society, and it is part of the affirmation of the romantic man's individuality, as was the representation of loneliness in romantic landscaping.

III. Loneliness, thy name is woman

The concept of freedom unites the metaphysical and creative loneliness of the romantic man. In both cases, loneliness is the counterpart of enjoying a series of freedoms that humanist man has conquered. However, female loneliness is not due to the freedom that the affirmation of individuality implies. Thus, Carolina Coronado expressed it in some verses from 1846: "Freedom! What does it matter to us? What do we win? What do we have? As a tribune, an imprisonment; and by right, a needle".

Conquers of liberalism were male ones. For women, bourgeois ideal meant a coming back. Nineteenth-century patriarchal morality

¹⁹ Kleist in Arnaldo, *Fragmentos*, 92-94.

sent the feminine gender to the interior of houses “obligating them to have domesticness, pureness and submission as never seen before”²⁰. That is why the representation of feminine loneliness is linked to the domestic spaces. Even in canvases of symbolic marked character, as Friedrich’s, the feminine scene is usually indoor spaces –but from some exception. Then, in *Woman at the window* (1822), Caroline Bommer faces to the tragedy of her destiny, as the wanderer did, but this time, inside her house.

However, in the representation of solitary women in their intimacy, they are usually occupied on any activity. As we said before, it is in this period that private and intimate spaces begin to be delimited confronted to public spaces and, in relation to this, many practices requiring loneliness start emerging, as reading²¹. Representing women reading or sewing, as Carl Gustav Carus did was originated on the principles of bourgeois morality. This is based on the Christian-Jewish morality, which considers leisure as sin.

Along with the representation of feminine intimacy, loneliness can be also embodied through the romantic ideal. This loneliness is caused by the temporal or permanent absence of a loved one. It is also represented through widows, easily recognisable by the iconography of mourning and by drawing from several sources related to the literary tradition that goes back to courtly love. The development of the ideal of romantic love, as has been widely studied, lays its foundations on that of courtly love, and consequently also the vision of women at the time refers to it. Then, due to the emergence of romantic novels and the recovery of the *topoi* of courtly love, several 19th century literary characters are marked by a temporary or permanent absence of a loved one, such as Ophelia, Marian, Juliet, the Lady of Shalott, or historical characters like Joanna the Mad of Castile, in which loneliness is represented in the shape of substance content.

Therefore, female romantic loneliness is again based on an opposition: the one that from the 19th century on, man and woman, reason and feeling began to confront. This is sentimental due, as we

²⁰ Caso, *Ellas mismas*, 130.

²¹ Bolufer, *Lo íntimo, lo doméstico y lo público*.

said, to the association that since the 19th century begins to be made between the concept of the feminine and that of the sentimental.

IV. Conclusions

In short, as evidenced in this article, we cannot just speak of loneliness but of “lonelinesses” as multiple ones. For this reason, its pictorial representation gets multiple shapes: from the figure of a traveller to artists, orphans o bourgeois women figures. Nevertheless, all of them are based on the relational character of this affect. Loneliness is always represented through the way the subject interacts with the space. It is evidenced at a pictorial level through their gaze, since it is understood as the door of the soul.

However, all of them are based on the relational character of this affect. Loneliness is always represented through the forms of interaction of the individual with his environment: in his opposition. This opposition can be structured in relation to nature, society or gender, but in all cases it must be linked to the creation of the romantic individual, since it finds its basis on the implementation of the political and social system of the 19th-century bourgeoisie. On a pictorial level, this opposition is normally represented in the confronting of the gaze of man or the human with nature. The gaze that constitutes for Nancy the place where the subjectivity of the individual operates is presented, either lost in the contemplation of the horizon, or collected in itself “a different way equally infinite.”²² This introspective gaze does not look at the viewer or anything else. It constitutes the affirmation of the subject as an autonomous, and therefore lonely, individual.

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²² Nancy, *La mirada*, 16.

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