

## A SIMPLE MEDITATION ON SPANISH TRAVEL FOR THE INGENUOUS TOURIST

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**C**AN the traveller abroad penetrate the ethos of a country? If there is such a thing, the traveller, properly so-called, may do so. But is the modern tourist properly to be called a traveller? Both elements in our preliminary question are so doubtful that it is difficult to see whether what we want to say is worth the attempt. But at least, when abroad, we are conscious of difference, whether it is superficial or deep we are less able to gauge. The danger is of supposing it, on the one hand, to be all a matter of climate and food-supply, and, on the other, of carrying it so deep as to forget our common humanity. As to the tourist, we can admit him as a traveller on this simple point of difference: if he seeks difference as a titillation, for the sake of a change, to forget for a fortnight the monotony of his office and the anxieties of his personal life, he is, what he is perfectly entitled to be, a man on his holiday; but if he is prepared to study his subject beforehand, to bring philosophic principles to bear on the differences, he observes in the new environment, to reflect on them afterwards, to beware of false generalisations and biassed conclusions, he is a serious traveller, if only for a fortnight, even though merely a tourist.

A tourist is not necessarily ingenuous and an observer of Spain not, necessarily, disingenuous; how difficult it is, however, even for the same person, to avoid being either.

For, in the first place, how to define a civilisation? How to determine the ethos of a country? Not all Englishmen play cricket, yet cricket is an essential part of the English ethos. England invented football, yet the growing devotion to league matches in Spain cannot be said to convey to the Spaniards any touch of English civilisation. Is it a basic national temperament that makes national character? But there are more nations than temperaments; yet it is more than superficial group interests that constitute a national ethos, that makes Scot different from Englishman, Portu-

guese from Spaniard. Part of it is surely the presence of some (not one) temperamental types and the norms of feeling that come to obtain as a result of them. The traveller must not ingenuously assume, for example, that all Spaniards fight bulls.

But then also, not to be disingenuous, he must take into account all he sees. Preconceived notions of Spanish pride, Spanish religion, tempt the axe-grinder to overlook 'hate, envy and contempt, the three furies of civil society' which a seventeenth-century Italian warily took for granted everywhere. If the traveller reports everything in the garden lovely, it is the traveller we suspect, for we know gardens.

Besides the bull-fight, the religious processions, there is the beach, the café, the *tertulia*, there are (a favourite entertainment) subscription-lectures, poverty, vice, slums, there are the outskirts of Madrid. In short: *en todas partes cuecen habas* ('They boil beans the world over').

Let our traveller see all these and see that two polarisations of Spanish life are nobility, indeed, and also, as we should expect, vileness as its complement. Goya gave us the nobility of war (*El dos de mayo*) and also its disasters (*Los desastres de la guerra*), the gaiety of bourgeois life (if we will admit it as an approach to nobility) and the nightmares of the *proverbios*; so Velázquez with the grandeur of the Court and the pathos of the dwarfs; Murillo with the Court of Heaven and the squalor (cheerful, it is true) of the beggars; and Spanish literature with its novels of chivalry and its picaresque. See both sides, then, of Spain, as the Spaniards themselves do. Even El Greco who, as an observer, is rather over-rated, gives us an occasional hint of delinquency in the faces, especially the eyes, of some of his holy personages.

In all the profusion of first impressions of Spain, the one thing that cannot fail to strike the observer is the extraordinary skill the people have for bestowing the impress of their personality upon matter, with a minimum of elaboration and the utmost economy of the material used. For example, the use of the castanets (two small pieces of hard wood) achieves a remarkable range of sound and expression; the *copla* (a folk-form of verse: four lines, each with three

beats, and *bd* in assonance) with its unequalled terseness and expressiveness;<sup>1</sup> the bull-fight, the length of which is only due to its six-fold repetition of the essential situation, a bull to be killed by a man with a sword; the religious processions and the typical Spanish cult of holy images, which can be reduced essentially to the display to the people of simple, plastic representations of aspects of the Incarnation; the extreme sonority and illusion of sound perspective wrung from the exiguous resources of plucking the six strings of the guitar.

This power of leaving the bare impress of personality upon matter, with deftness, speed and, above all, flourish, characterises Spanish art and culture. The gift of rapid and spontaneous expression is theirs. Spontaneity, expressionism, panache and inability, indeed the absence of will, to repeat a successful achievement (in *cante hondo* the singer improvises his heart-rending notes according to a musical manner, but never twice in the same way; think, too, of the endless transformations of that virtuoso of art, Picasso, who, to be sure, illustrates what we are trying to say in more ways than this)—all are hall-marks of the Spanish character.

Style, not form, is the aim and method of Spanish art—think of Velázquez and his passion for the glancing surfaces of things and his technique for rendering the nuance of colour rather than the outline of shapes—and this has as its corollary the stress on the individual executant rather than on the school of traditional form. In fact (and one feels in saying so rather like George Borrow announcing to the

<sup>1</sup> Some examples in translation: Two leaves I always carry,/ Plucked from the Paradise Tree;/ 'Freedom' on one is written,/ On the other 'Poverty'. Do you think because I sing/ That my life glides joyous by? / My life is like the swan's/ And I sing because I die. Towards Death we are ever marching/ From the very day of our birth;/ There's nothing we less remember,/ And nothing so sure on earth. God rules above in Heaven,/ In Hell he rules who can,/ And in this little world/ There rules the richest man. For him who has no money/ Four things still open be: / The hospital, the prison,/ The church and the cemetery. These versions (with one small alteration) are taken from the late Havelock Ellis' *Sonnets with Folk Songs from the Spanish*, Golden Cockerel Press, 1925. The examples printed in the text below are from the same source and also from Sr de Madariaga's essay on the subject in *Shelley and Calderón*, London, 1920.

Protestant world—what is moreover a fact—that the Spaniard is not a fanatic) Spanish culture is a culture which is maintained with a minimum of tradition and a maximum of individual effort. In contrast to England (the cosy, the social, the co-operative, the multiple order, the organised pageant), Spain (the bare, the exposed, solitude, individualism, egoism, a rich disorder, the improvised, transient display) is a country without traditions, with a painful discontinuity of institutions: even reduced now to having neither parliament nor king (while England, after the calamities of the seventeenth century, has found a way of retaining both), and with a two-hundred years history of unstable reform and over a century of *pronunciamento*, civil wars and *caudillos*, till at last a *caudillo* is the country's only recourse.

The ingenuous (and the disingenuous) tourist must bear in mind that this personalism, this 'pronouncing', is a fundamental quality of Spanish culture. The assertion of the personality is encouraged, personality is admired (to have charm, wit, expressiveness, *gracia*, is called *tener ángel*, as if a celestial spirit informed the person lucky enough to have the gift of pleasing), but this is not necessarily to reject character: heroic deeds (we remember, for example, the defence in 1936 of the Alcázar of Toledo and the sacrifice by its Commander of his son) abound in Spanish history and are admired above all things, and heroic deeds are not performed without personality. But character does not produce art, which ought to warn us, of course, that we have not finished with a nation when we have studied its cultural manifestations. We must note, too, that this stress on personality is not quite the opposite of the ideal of self-effacement, nor do these two neatly correspond to the opposition arrogance-humility. St Teresa of Avila is personality canonised. But we obviously feel ourselves in a danger-zone here. The ingenuous must beware.

We are brought by this nearer to our subject. There is a temptation to attribute cultural qualities to credal adherence, especially if we like the qualities and share the creed. The Catholics of England and Ireland have examples and warnings near at hand to guard them against this particular temptation, yet the continental tourist is apt—even though

English or Irish—to fall into this trap. The glamour of abroad, the consciousness of a shared faith are too strong, and, too, the ingenuous traveller is here liable to turn into the disingenuous.

Three things in which a people may be observed and in which (if in anything) they display their peculiar characteristics are their approach to love, their games and their life of the spirit.

Nothing could be more useful for examining the first than the typical *coplas* we have already mentioned. Though not all deal with the theme of love, as we have seen, the majority of them do.

You gave me a drink of water  
 As you came from the well,  
 And with that water you gave me  
 A soul as well.

I know no song to sing you,  
 From memory all have gone;  
 This only I remember,  
 That in the sky stars shone.

For loving a seraph in heaven  
 My hopes of heaven are gone.  
 Well! We cannot have two heavens,  
 And I am content with one.

Thou sent'st me a message  
 That my soul was thine.  
 And I answered thee  
 'Twas God's, thine and mine.

I shall give you all my heart,  
 I shall give you all my life,  
 But my soul I shall not give you  
 For that treasure is not mine.

I love you more than my life,  
 I love you more than my heart.  
 I don't say more than my soul  
 For my soul I owe to God.

Needless to say, not all *coplas* are as conscious of spirit as these, and some, without being offensive, are hardly suitable for quotation in this journal, but these are well-known examples whose translators culled them from one or other of the great nineteenth-century collections. They are enough to show even the popular awareness of the spiritual and that even in the midst of the most engrossing of passions. Their attitude to love may be described as the conscious endurance of an absorbing delight by an awareness grimly determined to retain some hold, even in surrender, on dignity, identity, a morsel of inner freedom.

In the eighteenth century, a famous bullfighter wrote a treatise on his art, and we will yield sufficiently to popular preconceptions to read what he has to say of it, as representative of the Spanish approach to sport and games:

In the fight are to be observed continual deeds of wonder and taste. A beast—perhaps the fiercest of all—is seen to be outwitted by men to an extent that seems impossible, the most sublime skill being displayed in these bloody actions, in that it is entirely based upon courage and the spirit. And it is worth recalling what Queen Amalia said of the bull-fight, namely, ‘that it was an entertainment in which shone valour and skill’.

The traditional religious imagery of Spain plays an important part in popular religious feeling. These images and their seasonal processions are sometimes regarded as a highly elaborate piece of theatrical propaganda. In fact, they are intensely simple and naïve. The images themselves are often an extreme example of Spanish expressionism: sometimes only the face and hands are carved in the solid and the rest of the figure is a frame for the dramatic folds of the rich robes with which they are draped. The great majority present some aspect of the Passion, a plastic composition of place taken out to the streets for the least prayerful to meditate on at least once a year. Many of them are the focus of a *cofradía*, a brotherhood for those living in the world, with a simple rule of life. One of the most popular of these images in Madrid is that of Jesús Nazareno, known as the Cristo de Medinaceli. If you belong to the confraternity of this image of Jesus, the Nazarene, as he

was mocked by the soldiers, clad in a purple robe and crowned with thorns, you are invited to meditate daily on a monthly series of 'points'; here is a passage from the meditation of the twenty-eighth day:

Beloved soul, contemplate the wound in my side:  
enter thereby into my heart, which is the place of thy  
repose, the haven of refuge amidst the storms of life. . . .

To enable thee to enter, it was opened with a spear.

And here is one from that of the twenty-ninth:

Oh Jesus! . . . If only I could enclose thee in the  
sepulchre of my heart! Always dwell hidden in me, and  
let no one, apart from thee, have any entry into me.

In all these examples of the popular culture of Spain, it is the individual soul that is appealed to or expressed. It is individual style, the style of the individual that is in the foreground.

Here, for the ingenuous and the disingenuous alike, we must digress a little. There never has been, except in the constitutional sense, a Catholic country. The prophetic images of salt, leaven, light, uttered by the Messiah sufficiently indicate what our expectations ought to be. If it comes to that, there rarely or never is an individual fully Catholic, until, at least, mystical transformation makes him one. Do not, then, go to Spain in the ingenuous expectation of visiting a nation totally converted to Christianity. Do not, disingenuously, identify Spain with Full Catholicism. (That, perhaps, is reserved for the Church Suffering and Triumphant.)

Rather, go to Spain curious to see what aspects and phases of Catholicism are particularly developed by this people. Perhaps now we may draw the two main points of this meditation together. The insistence on the individual, on personality, the expressionist emphasis on flourish, on style, gives us one aspect of the basic temperamental unity or tendency to unity that we sought. The other elements we have noted supply us with some further suggestions: extreme economy of the material, yet not without the richness given by intensity of treatment; a sense of dualism between matter and spirit, passion and resistance; a haunting by *la otra vida*, the sanction of the next world; an awareness of God (and

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we think of St Teresa's nuns *embebidos en la divinidad*, absorbed in the divinity); a great love for Christ as the Redeemer, the Bringer-back to life by death and an underlining of death as it comes to us all; a certain passivity even to suffering, in this life: all this we may regard as the Spanish sense of values. The acute sense of personality demands a scale of values in which nothing but the best shall be available for spirit so conscious of itself. It is through this gateway of the Spanish soul that the divine tradition of Roman Christianity makes its entry and mediates infinity to the intense craving of the Spaniard for the enlargement and fulfilment of personality.



THE BLUE GUIDES, ed. by L. Russell Muirhead: WALES (21s.); SHORT GUIDE TO LONDON (15s.) (Ernest Benn).

It is hardly necessary to recommend so firmly established a series of guides as that edited by Mr Russell Muirhead, but new editions of the Wales and London volumes are now available and they include much new material as well as the familiar features. The full equipment of maps, town plans and practical information provides the traveller with what he needs, and the new editions are models of concise and unambiguous topographical writing. The Catholic tourist will find his special interests provided for (though it might have been useful to print the hours of services in the principal London churches), and such places as Holywell and Caldey are adequately described in the Wales volume (though it is no longer true to describe the high altar at Caldey as 'being built of stones from the chief monasteries of England': this altar was destroyed by fire in 1940; and it was in 1913 and not 1914 that the Anglican community previously there was received into the Church). The Welsh pronunciations indicated seem often arbitrary, though the introductory chapters on 'The Land of Wales' by Professor Fleure and on 'The Welsh Language' by the late Professor T. Gwynn Jones, remain from the first edition (1922) as authoritative introductions to a foreign land.

I.E.