

VICTORY AND DEFEAT IN SPAIN

WITH the ignorance that is so common in matters concerning Spain, it is often stated and more generally thought that Spain was an obstacle to the Renaissance. If by Renaissance is understood the Reformation, then the statement is true. As it stands it is far from the truth. It is lamentable enough that the simplest facts about Spain should not form part of the average Englishman's education, but such ignorance is unpardonable in a Catholic. This attitude towards Spain has a long and interesting history behind it, but it is time it were abandoned. Mere misguided supposition should give way to intelligent search and, what is even more important, to intelligent understanding.

No period of Spanish history is more instructive and enlightening than the Renaissance and post-Renaissance period from 1475 to 1700. It was the period that saw Spain rise from a group of medieval states to the premier position among the nations of the world and then sink down into a condition of almost complete political insignificance. The Renaissance in Spain explains both medieval and modern Spain. It is the logical development of the one as well as the necessary cause of the other.

The feudal system never really existed in medieval Spain. The people were never directly subject to the barons, and the kings, in order to curb the power of the latter, never hesitated to grant liberties and some measure of independence to the municipalities. But at the same time they never did this unless they were compelled to, and whenever possible they sought to undermine the democratic spirit of the towns. The whole political history of the Middle Ages in Spain

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is a long struggle between the absolutist tendency of the monarchy and the independent rights of the people.

The humanistic movement was interested in man for his own sake. It was the proclamation of his dignity and liberty in the order of Nature. With the Renaissance and the Reformation this movement blossomed forth into the cry for the liberty of the individual conscience in face of Authority. This meant a break with tradition; and the new freedom claimed for the individual personality would have caused a disruption of society had not a new external force appeared to keep men together. The outcry against one Authority caused the rise of another. The so-called liberty of conscience was purchased with the loss of political freedom. The Authority of the State had arisen and nationalistic Europe was brought to life.

Nowhere is this political development clearer seen than in Spain. Absolutism was the aim of Ferdinand and Isabella, and the people acquiesced in it because for them it meant peace and prosperity, because it destroyed the powers of the turbulent nobility and brought the devastating anarchy of the preceding reigns to a close. Absolutism in government brought with it national unity. Castile and Aragon were united and the Moorish kingdom of Granada added to the Christian kingdom. Religious unity was acquired by the expulsion of the Jews and the often forcible conversion of the Moors who remained in Spain. At last after seven and a half centuries Spain was one.

But the Catholic Kings were only the beginning. Isabella died in 1504 and her daughter Juana the Mad succeeded to the throne with her Hapsburg husband Philip the Fair. He died in 1506 and Ferdinand ruled Castile as regent till his death in 1516. One year later the young Prince Charles of Hapsburg and Burgundy landed in Spain to take over the dominions devolving

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upon him through the incapacity of his mother and the death of his grandfather.

The discontent which had lain dormant during the reign of the Catholic Kings flamed out under the absolutist rule of the young monarch. It was the last cry of medieval Spain and the final phase of the long struggle between King and Democracy. The municipalities rose in revolt against Charles's exorbitant demands for money to spend abroad. Charles himself was in Germany, unconcerned save in his campaign for the imperial crown. In 1519 he was elected Emperor of Germany, and in 1521 the Battle of Villalar in Spain crushed the revolt of the cities. Medieval Spain was dead. Political tradition was broken. Spain found herself for the first time in the centre of European affairs with all democratic freedom gone, and with a foreign king who was the head of the Holy Roman Empire.

The Renaissance therefore brought to Spain a new system of government and a national spirit. But the new ideas penetrated no further. In the same year as the municipal revolt was crushed Charles convoked the Diet of Worms, which was to pass judgment on the new ideas of Luther. The two events are significant. Henceforth the religious unity of Europe became Charles's great ideal, and to quell the rise of Protestantism in Germany the economic resources of Spain were to be drained and her manhood scattered over the battlefields of Europe. Though the Renaissance had caused in Spain a political break with the Middle Ages, yet henceforth she was to appear in Europe as the champion of medieval tradition in the face of the humanistic revolt against Authority. Authority had confronted Europe with a new and formidable Spain at the command of one man, who was to use her as a tool for imposing upon Europe the ideal of the Spanish Empire which Charles V engendered,

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fought for, and bequeathed to Philip II. Unwittingly Spain was to be sacrificed for Europe.

The discovery of America in 1492 opened up new fields for the spread of this ideal of Empire. It was an ideal that had to be imposed upon a resisting world by means of force, tyranny and war, and these means became in themselves ideals which swelled the sails of the little ships in which the Spanish conquerors crossed the Atlantic in never-ceasing numbers. But force and violence bring tragedy in their train. When the ideal failed—and it was one impossible to achieve—Spain fell too, and fell very low.

The Renaissance, seeking for the principles of human liberty, saw in the art of Greece the glory of man, for in it, it saw man as the creator and the subject of art. In the Europe of the Renaissance there were two streams of culture. The Renaissance proper, centred in Italy and encouraged by the Popes, was primarily an artistic movement. But the art it championed was an 'art for art's sake.' Its basis was purely aesthetic and no longer religious, and in this sense, as it created purely sensuous and material beauty, it was 'pagan.' The richness of the art of Raphael and Michelangelo, the gorgeousness of Renaissance architecture, the love of ornamentation, of splendid costumes, jewels, luxury and riches, were all 'pagan' in their essence and in direct opposition to the religious artistic tradition of the Middle Ages. And this movement was centred in Papal Rome.

Against this tendency there arose the second cultural force of the period, the Reformation. It was a protest of nations of backward culture, not a movement based on the aesthetic beauty of art, but on directly religious feelings. In its sincere form it was the opposition of a religious, if scrupulous earnestness, to the sensuous beauty of classical art and the material glories of Rome.

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The Spanish spirit was opposed to both in their extreme forms. It sought to harmonise the two and to create a culture that should be both religious and artistic. What could it be but a truly Catholic culture? In this way Spain provided the necessary steadying influence in Europe. She was united to Rome as the centre of Catholicism, but sought to impose upon her a reformed Catholicism. She felt the immediate need of reform. Reformatory measures had been introduced into Spain earlier than elsewhere. In the same way as the Catholic Kings had reformed the political abuses of the country, so the great Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros reformed not only the clergy but religious life. Spain became the centre of the Counter-Reformation and of the great Scholastic Revival. Her theologians led the Council of Trent. She produced St. Ignatius and the Jesuits, she produced St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, the great reformers of religious life. She became the true centre of Catholicism and the land of saints. Catholicism flourished anew, Rome triumphed, but Spain fell to pieces in exhaustion.

This is the great tragedy of Spain. Europe had lived in religious unity until the Reformation, but Spain during the whole of the Middle Ages did not know what religious unity was. There Mohammedanism and Christianity had fought for the mastery while Judaism quietly flourished. The whole religious spirit of medieval Spain had been toleration. While the heretics were being crushed in Southern France in the thirteenth century, Christians, Mohammedans and Jews could live in social peace side by side in the Spanish cities. When the Renaissance brought into Spain the ideal and the reality of political unity and centralised government, when Spaniards awoke to the national spirit, they cherished the ideal of religious unity, and having accomplished this ideal by force, and having assured its permanence by the introduc-

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tion of the Inquisition, they turned to find that Europe had lost religious unity. Spain, that had hoped to form part of united Europe, found that Europe had lost its unity at the very moment when she had regained it. Spain stood alone. What was to be done? Europe had to be restored to its former state, the heretics had to be overcome. Spain must free Europe as she had freed herself—by force. For a century and half Spain waged ceaseless warfare, on land in Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Africa; on sea against England, the Turks and the Moorish pirates. Despite this there continued through all these years the ceaseless conquest and colonisation of America, the conversion of the savage inhabitants, as well as the opening up of discovery and trade in distant Asia.

It was in every way an age of extraordinary vitality and amazing achievement. The great imperial and religious ambitions and ideals of Spain explain the great spiritual vigour of the nation, the stupendous output of energy and the vast influence upon the whole world. It was an age that was bound to produce a great culture. New universities were founded and flourished. Valladolid, Alcalá, and Salamanca became great theological schools and the home of Catholic philosophy and theology. She produced a great literature, especially rich in the novel and the drama, and with an endless wealth of religious and mystical writings. In painting it was the age of El Greco, Ribera, Zurbarán and Velazquez. In architecture we find the beautiful plateresque style, Herrera, and his masterpiece the Escorial.

All this could not last. Already in 1588 the fate of the Armada was the beginning of the end, and in 1647 the hitherto invincible Spanish infantry was defeated at the Battle of Rocroi. In 1700 the last degenerate member of the great Spanish line of the Hapsburg kings died a pitiful death. With the com-

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ing of the French Bourbons, French modes of life and French thought, Spain at last succumbed to Europe.

Charles V had always believed in his ideal of religious unity and a universal empire, and the nation followed him willingly. He would never accept the Reformation as a fact, and Spaniards would not recognise that a new era had begun in the world's history. But Charles V saw that he himself had failed, and in 1556 he handed over his enormous Empire to the care of his son, Philip II, who continued exactly his father's policy. Charles retired to the monastery of Yuste, where he died in 1558, a broken man. Philip II ruled in the face of adversity for the space of forty years, never flinching from the hardness of his unrealisable ambitions until with perfect resignation he died a heroic and a saintly death, conscious that he was bequeathing the destinies of a great but dying nation to unworthy hands. The nation, however, would neither accept nor admit its own inevitable decay. But the consciousness, rarely directly expressed, of Spain's decadence flowed inevitably into literature and found expression in the works of the great minds of the time in a gentle sadness. *Don Quixote* is the saddest book in the world; yet it is characteristic of Spain that it can also be the most humorous.

Three great men can be chosen to represent the tendencies of the time: Luis de León, Quevedo, and Cervantes.

Luis de León (1527-1591) was an Augustinian, a man of saintly life, a great humanist, biblical scholar and theologian. Moreover, he was the first really great poet of Spain. Like most great poets he was a great thinker. There is not very much difference between great philosophy and great poetry. In most philosophy, especially Augustinian philosophy, the understanding serves love; in poetry love serves the understanding. The great philosopher understands

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the problems of life, the great poet feels them. Luis de León was a great thinker and a great lover, the result was a great poet.

In this he is typical of one side of the Spain of the Renaissance in that he embodied the idealism of the Spaniards and divorced himself from reality to follow the pure idea. His poetical work, like all great poetry, is scanty. In subject-matter there is little direct description of sensuous experience. It is all Idea. Flesh is necessary in human life to express the spirit, but in Luis de León it is almost absent.

His poems are the fruit of his philosophy, matured in the understanding by long study. They are a poetical quintessence produced after long meditation in an intensity of spiritual emotion. A true Augustinian, his foundation is Platonic. The Platonic conception of love dignifies and ennobles material reality, carrying the soul away by means of ideas. León lived in this Platonic world where pure ideas, shorn of all contact with reality, become eternal in the mind. It is this spiritual and eternal value of ideas that he expresses in his poetry, necessarily through the medium of the senses, but with as little sensuous contact as possible.

This is the religious and ideal side of the Spanish Renaissance. The material and realistic aspect is best represented by Quevedo.

Quevedo (1580-1645), one of the greatest figures in Spanish literature, is a very different but a no less fascinating character than Luis de León. His intellectual eminence and his literary output were enormous. A very great classical scholar, he was also at home in scholastic philosophy. In his works he tried his hand at all subjects. He wrote philosophical, religious and political works. He was a great poet and a great novelist, but it is as a satirist that he is best known.

León's characteristics as a great poet are his expression of the ideal and his perfection of form.

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Quevedo is quite the opposite. The abstract, the ideal, and plastic beauty were alien to his nature. He had a profound sense of the reality of things. He is Aristotelian in the sense in which León is Platonic. He recognises the truth of reality, lives in direct contact with it, and never seeks to idealize his experience. He is a realist in so far as he is opposed to the ideal and the abstract. In this he stands in the direct line of Spanish literary tradition, and he is a typical Spaniard of all ages. But he is not a realist in so far as so-called realism is opposed to a future ideal, because he lived in profound dissatisfaction with the present and felt a longing for some future reality which, because it was future, was also ideal. In this sense, Quevedo and the countless Spaniards like him are idealists without ceasing to be realists. Their attitude to life is individualistic. Universality, symbolism, perfection and purity of style, all these things are of no use to them, for they do not help them to attain their end. They are not concerned with things for their own sake, but only in so far as they have reference to their own lives. For this reason all their philosophy is centred upon one theme: the salvation of the human soul. For them all philosophy must tend to this goal, and is only of interest in so far as it does so. Truth for truth's sake means as little to Quevedo as 'art for art's sake.' For him the whole of philosophy is summed up in moral teaching, in a practical moral code to guide men to heaven.

In the age in which Quevedo lived all the exterior glories of the dying Empire were being consumed in a blaze of luxury. No such thing had been known before, but with the death of Philip II decadence set in and revealed itself in the false glitter of riches. Quevedo lived in this sumptuous atmosphere of the court, fully conscious of what it meant, and in his works there appears for the first time in Spanish literature

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the definite consciousness of the national decadence. The result is a bitter pessimism. The gentle melancholy of Cervantes was alien to Quevedo's forceful and irascible genius, which found in his famous *Visions* a better vehicle of expression in bitter denunciations of the corruptions of society, in a mordant satire and a biting and brilliant wit, pervaded throughout with a strong feeling of invincible moral rectitude.

Cervantes (1547-1616) is neither an idealist like León nor a realist like Quevedo. He wielded a weapon which was unknown to them. León took refuge from the sordidness of reality in intellectual contemplation. Quevedo sought relief from the corruptions he saw around him by bitterly attacking them with the full force of his wit. Cervantes had another way. He had humour at his command. León did not conquer reality, he evaded it and ignored it. Quevedo did not ignore it, neither did he conquer it; he railed at it. That was a confession that it had conquered him. Cervantes, on the contrary, laughed at it with a gentle all-pervading humour, and humour is the panacea for all evils. He conquered the unpleasantness of reality because he rose superior to it. His whole life was one long tale of misfortune, suffering and tribulation, but his indomitable spirit was never crushed. He laughed and he made others laugh. Quevedo also laughed and made others laugh, but it was a laugh at caricature and was very near to disgust. The laugh that Cervantes raised was very near to tears, for it struck at the fount of human love and pity.

It seems that *Don Quixote* can never be fully understood, for each new reading brings greater understanding. But it cannot be understood at all adequately by the reader who is ignorant of the Spain of the time. An attempt has been made to explain how Spain attempted to reconcile and then overcome the antagonistic forces of the Renaissance, and how the inevitable

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result was failure and decay. Some Spaniards ignored the state of the country. Like Luis de León they sought refuge and peace in higher things than the things of this world. Others, like Quevedo, grew furious at it and turned to abuse in their inability to reform. Others, like the great Jesuit writer Gracián (1601-1658), cultivated an aristocratic superiority over what they considered the uncultured vulgarity of the mob. Others again, like the writers of the picaresque novels, accepted the new conditions with cynicism or without comment. Cervantes alone could laugh gently at the weakness of the country and the foibles of his fellow-men.

Don Quixote is one of the saddest books in the world because it is the tragedy of faith battling against the reality of society; the tragedy of lost illusions; lost hopes; ideals which cannot be fulfilled; the mockery and scoffing at a valiant soul; the irony of that same indomitable spirit unable to see or realise that mockery; the tragedy of having to laugh at someone worthy of the most profound pity. It is the work of an old man, himself retaining the fulness of unquenchable humour after a life of tribulation and the direst poverty. Cervantes was fifty-seven years of age when he completed the first part, and sixty-eight when he completed the second. But the novel is more than the work of an old man, it is the epic of an old country. The whole book, especially the closing chapters, is full of fatigue and the desire to rest. The analogy with the Spain of the time is too obvious to be fanciful. Like Spain herself, Don Quixote had struggled against the rest of the world to force upon it by violence alone his ideals in which he believed with unquestioning faith. Reverses and misfortunes brought no realisation of the trouble in either case. Don Quixote awoke only to die. Spain awoke when it was too late. Don Quixote was a tired knight even before his final defeat. Cer-

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vantes was also a tired man, and Spain was a tired country. All three longed for peace and rest. Yet Cervantes had no bitterness in him. He was the gentlest of souls, full of love and good will for all. He could only look at life with a quiet smile through the lenses of his humour. His humour could almost distort what was sad into something funny and joyful, it coloured it all with the gentlest of ironies and a sweet sadness. He could raise a laugh where a tear would have been more appropriate, but the tear was not far behind. It was a gentler and a more tolerant tear, purified, almost joyful, because it brought a smile with it as well.

Don Quixote can represent Spain and Cervantes himself. There was greatness in them all. When Don Quixote died, there died one of the greatest characters in all literature. When Cervantes died the world lost one of her great men. And with the failure of the Spanish Empire a great nation was brought to ruin. Spain was defeated, but the spirit of Cervantes can triumph even over defeat.

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