



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The last good land : Spain in American Literature

Suárez-Galbán, E.

Citation

Suárez-Galbán, E. (2005, November 29). *The last good land : Spain in American Literature*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4437>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4437>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

SUMMARY

Regardless of whether it is true or false, the saying that opposites attract certainly seems to hold true as far as the American authors who have written about Spain that we have here studied are concerned.

Our first chapter delineates the national differences that in principle produce the contrast that in turn makes the United States and Spain opposites. With the failure of the Council of Trent in its attempts to reunify Europe religiously, the Counter Reformation that Spain was to direct began to veer Spain away from the rest of Western Europe and its interpretation of modern society and times. In a sense, however, the Counter Reformation simply continued a historical pattern that had been shaped during the Middle Ages when the Iberian Peninsula came under Arab rule. More interestingly, as the northern Christian kingdoms reconquered lands in the hand of Arabs, a new society was born, wherein the three main components (Jews being the third) collaborated mutually in order to safeguard their respective interests. It was precisely in the United States that this tricultural view of Spain came to the fore, due mainly to the efforts of the Republican exile Américo Castro. If the religious dimension of the three groups (or castes, as Castro preferred) is the most visible one, as their very names indicates (*moros, judíos y cristianos*), the overall repercussions and reactions affecting the Spanish world view of said dimension followed naturally. Thus, as the Renaissance paved the way towards modern times in different areas, Spain remained tied in many ways to the tenets of its medieval caste system. But just as important as the perpetuation of Semitic thought, was the reaction against certain aspects of this thought that happened to coincide, to some degree at least, with what the rest of Western Europe was accepting as "new", "modern" perspectives ushered in by the Renaissance, especially in those lands where the Reformation triumphed. Rationalism, material wealth (Capitalism, in one word), a certain brand of individualism allowing for class change (the self-made man) and the rise of the bourgeoisie, all problematic, if not blatantly condemned during the European Middle Ages, in Spain became identified with the now condemned castes - Jews and Muslims - after the culmination of the polemically-labeled *Reconquista*.

Thus, the Spanish contrast and opposition to what would become guidelines for the realization of the "American Dream" and way of life, were well-established by the eighteenth century when the United States achieved its independence and began to seek its uniqueness as a nation. As our second chapter proposes ("Americans in Europe"), two attitudes concerning Europe prevailed among American writers and intellectuals well into the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the idea of an American experiment, neither drastically rejecting, nor fatally repeating the European experience, became the goal of such figures as Jefferson and Franklin, due to a great extent to their residences in France. A goal shared later to a greater or lesser degree by the so-called Nativists in their search for a genuine

American intellectual and literary expression that would lead to Emerson's "American Scholar". On the other, the Cosmopolitans, or "Brahmins", formed a supposedly contrary camp, accused of attempting to impose an elite, caste system tantamount to prolonging the European intellectual and literary tradition. Spain, feared during colonial times as a menacing power to English rule, gradually began to be viewed as an answer to a new menace, that of the Industrial Revolution that threatened that other American dream of a just and equal society.

Such is precisely the case of Washington Irving's 1832 *Tales of the Alhambra*, as analyzed in our third chapter. Irving's international reputation as the first American writer to truly transcend national boundaries, thus carried along with it his vision of Spain as a land not tainted by the new ills of industrialism. American writing on Spain would in one way or another prolong Irving's ultimately naive view of an exotic land that resisted and rejected what Marx and other nineteenth-century intellectuals saw as the evils of a system that subjected mankind to an economy that inevitably led to social alienation and personal dehumanization. Despite this obvious idealization of a more complex Spanish historical process, *Tales* did at times hit the Spanish historical nail on the head in those passages in which Irving underlined the oriental contribution, and more pertinently, its permanence in Spanish thought and society. Intuitively, remotely and indirectly as it may have been, Irving nonetheless cannot be denied the status of a forerunner of what Castro and others would take to even greater length and depth in the twentieth century.

Ten years later, Longfellow's, *The Spanish Student* (chapter IV), rather than elaborate on these more interesting aspects of Irving's *Tales*, typifies, stereotypes and pigeon holes Spain as a land, more than idealized, simply idyllic. Basically an adaptation, at times approaching mere translation of classical Spanish works, and possibly contemporary ones, complete with popular sayings, traditional characters and situations, Longfellow's closet drama affords nonetheless a unique example of the Romantic fervor for Spain that swept both Europe and the United States. It also provides another historical value, that of documenting the strong attraction that Spain still held for American writers and readers at a moment when the tide was about to change abruptly against Spain and its historical role in the world.

The very title of our next chapter - "From Romantic Idealization to Realistic Ambiguity, or from the Civil War to the Cuban War" - already announces this shift from one extreme to the other. Growing hostilities to Spain, as it repeatedly rejected American offers to buy Cuba, crept into literature as early as Melville's story, "Benito Cereno", in the fifties. Perhaps subtly in this case, but not so later on when the Inquisition, Philip II and Spanish Catholicism became the targets of writings and books that reproduced the spirit of what would become known as "yellow journalism", of which Spain was the first victim as far as nations are concerned. If Prescott and others during the thirties and forties saw in the Spanish conquistadores a model for the conquest of the American west, Spanish historical cruelty began to usurp this view. No doubt, the American Civil War delayed this increasing anti-

SUMMARY

Spanish tendency. No doubt also, American letters did not always docilely follow the growing antipathy of American politics towards Spain. Borderland literature, focusing on the Southwest, extending to Bret Harte's California stories (and chronologically into the twentieth century, with the Spanish-based writings of Willa Cather and Katherine Ann Porter), for example, cultivated nostalgia for a less violent Spanish past of missionaries instead of conquistadores. James Russell Lowell's *Impressions of Spain* (1878-1879, published 1899), amidst criticism, still obviously reveal a love for Spain, as do the writings of William Cullen Bryant, despite his support for the Cuban cause. Even Stephen Crane's war dispatches at times praise Spanish bravery at the cost of the Cuban guerrillas. And if by the outbreak of the second Cuban War of Independence in 1895, it is safe to say that the dye was clearly cast against Spain in general, this did not prevent William Dean Howells from publishing shortly after this war (1905) a devastating attack in his story "Editha" against the false patriotism caused by the politics related to this war. Indeed, it would not be at all risky to state that American writers during this period of hostility kept alive a redeeming torch that counterbalanced to some extent the darkness into which Spain had been thrust by the media.

Howells's *Familiar Spanish Travels* (Chapter VI) some years later (1913) reinserts us into Irving's view of Spain as a land that has retained the human and social goodness that the United States was losing for Irving and had definitely lost for Howells (even if Howells does not share Irving's love for the oriental or Arabic influence in Spain). Present Spain was what Howells as a youth thought and hoped the United States would be. His is a true case of literature defining life, at least as far as *Familiar Spanish Travels* is concerned: what he had read about Spain, he found corroborated in his journey. The nostalgia that his work exudes is not for a Spain lost in a more preferable past, but rather for the future that his own country had lost by not following Spain's example.

With George Santayana's *Persons and Places* (Chapter VII) our study enters into both the realm of autobiography (memoirs, more specifically) and that of an important American literary manifestation, i.e., immigrant literature. This latter reality does not seem to have much following among critics, perhaps due to Santayana's insistence on his Spanish identity, exploited unconvincingly by some critics. That his oeuvre is in English (he failed at an attempt to write in Spanish), and that he arrived in the United States at an age sufficiently young to acquire a basically American education, more than explains his place within American letters. His dual background, however, complemented by his philosophical bent that inclined him towards an objective view of reality, allowed him to gage and weigh both worlds impartially, recognizing virtues and vices in each, even if at times the reader gets the impression that the nostalgia for his Spanish youth disguises a preference for the Latin over the Anglo-Saxon. Harvard and Ávila, the places between which he alternated for years, symbolize geographically his duality, although the inevitable sensation of being a foreigner everywhere, so common to many immigrants, ultimately prevails. Furthermore, while he may coincide with others in stereotyping certain aspects of Spain, once again his philosophical vocation

leads him to explain the reasons behind generalizations and typified national conduct.

The next chapter remains within autobiography, even if in the unique way in which Gertrude Stein conceived her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Typically, Stein's ego assures the reader that she moved rubbed elbows with such renowned Spanish figures as Picasso and Juan Gris. Unreliable as it is, given Stein's ex cathedra proclamations regarding Spain without bothering to explain and illustrate, still *The Autobiography* reveals at times a keen intuition that at once leaves the reader equally frustrated and pensive. Not to mention her contribution to Hemingway's discovery of Spain (and indirectly to so many who follow his example to this day) when she recommended he visit Pamplona during the San Fermín feast.

The date (1922) of John Dos Passos's *Rosinante to the Road Again* makes him a pioneer, along with Stein, of the Lost Generation's rediscovery of Spain. Here already, through the contrast with Spain, is the Dos Passos of *Manhattan Transfer* and the *U.S.A.* trilogy, condemning contemporary American life. Irving's footsteps are once again deeply embedded also on the path that Dos Passos's *Rosinante* is following. Mixing Spanish literature with travel and conversations, the Spain that Dos Passos evokes cannot hide its author's lament for his own land gone astray (similar to Howells then). And in this the young Dos Passos, identified with left wing politics at the time, one can retrospectively perceive the right wing anarchist that would become manifest some years later, precisely in Spain during its Civil War.

Waldo Frank's *Virgin Spain* is yet another example of Irving's lasting, direct or indirect influence, as its very subtitle evidently indicates (*Scenes from the Spiritual Drama of a Great People*). That the book begins in northern Africa tells us that Frank had "done his homework" with respect to Spain's historical background, as his text will go on revealing. The accusation that Frank's is a mystical, religious and prophetic view of Spain springing from his Jewish background, may well turn out to be the first of several ironies. For regardless of how we classify it, the fact remains that *Virgin Spain*, following up on what Unamuno and Ganivet had already proposed, foreshadows by at least some fourteen years the interpretation of Spanish history that Castro was to develop from 1940 on. Another irony lies in the original plan versus the finished version of the book: the expulsion of the Spanish Jews seems to have been among the primary motivating factor for Frank's initial interest in Spain (another was his interest in Latin America), but, contrary to what might be expected from an American Jewish writer, his fascination for Spain would extend to the figure most responsible for said expulsion. And if Frank does not wind up excusing Isabel the Catholic's decision in this respect, he certainly provides an explanation for it that borders on justification (i.e., the unity of Spain). As with others we have seen, said fascination responds to the contrasting example that Spain offers as a more humane society versus that of the United States.

SUMMARY

Hemingway is the only author in this study to take up more than one chapter. The two lengthy chapters (XI and XII) dedicated to him, in themselves already single out his exceptional position in American letters among those who have chosen Spain as a topic. Even so, we have had to limit our analysis to his short stories, for to take on novels such as *The Sun Also Rises* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (not to mention the melange *Death in the Afternoon*), would have been excessive, indeed requiring a separate book. Furthermore, while those works have received considerable attention, his short stories (as is the case generally with this genre) have been less treated, and, especially in the case of the Civil War stories, somewhat mistreated, from our point of view. In the first collection of stories dealt with, those of *In Our Time* and *The First Forty-nine* (according to the Finca Vigía edition classification) that touch on Spain (along with the posthumous "Landscape with Figures", also studied here), "Papa" may be said to be "licking his wounds" produced by the First World War and its ideological aftermath, so fundamental for an understanding of the spirit of the whole Lost Generation. Bullfighting and bull fighters, but also waiters and less heroic persons and professions exemplify the Spanish attitude towards life and death that for Hemingway was both an aesthetic and an ethical answer to the trauma of death intensified by his experience of the war. Likewise, in the Spaniard's content with his own personal success of a job well done, regardless of all acclamation by others, Hemingway perceived an answer to the American obsession of competition, recognition and public success that plagued him all his life.

More of the same is also true of what we have termed The Civil War Stories found in the second collection mentioned. Here, however, Hemingway risks the danger of mixing politics and literature. Negative criticism was neither lacking nor tardy, to the extent that the label of "Stalinist" began to be applied to these stories. Our vision is otherwise, insisting that a closer analysis of these stories reveal a criticism of the Republican Spain that Hemingway nonetheless supported actively. Only the last of the original Civil War Stories, which takes place, incidentally, in Cuba, but with the Spanish conflict as background and reference of an international struggle, seems to us to tip the scales in favor of politics over literature.

Lillian Hellman and Josephine Herbst, each in their own so different manner (the former from her hotel, the latter from the trenches), reminisce in the sixties of the past century on their days in Spain during the Civil War. A Gender Studies approach also establishes a clear contrast between the two, Hellman generally tied to the more traditional view of women, as opposed to Herbst's more radical one explicitly demanding a change in a male-dominated world. Both coincide, however, in considering Spain, its Republic and Civil War as the most memorable moments of their lives, which by this time had been darkened by the anti-left movements and persecutions that swept the United States after the start of the Cold War and into the fifties. Nor did disenchantment with the Left hinder their enthusiasm for the solidarity and justice that they experienced in Spain, even if their nostalgia smacks at time of a resignation that seems to deny the possibility of renewing the old dream

of a society such as the one they had hoped so passionately for Spain, and for a world on the brink of disaster.

For this was precisely what these Americans authors saw in the Spanish Republic, along with those of other nationalities, true, but perhaps more acutely in the case of the former due to the devastating effects of the Depression that shattered an American dream, already shaken by the dehumanization of an economic system that despite its rapacity still could not avoid the catastrophe of the thirties. The liberal, idealistic, communal stance taken by the Spain that won the 1931 elections simply reinforced the traditional idea of a more humane, just society that had managed to escape modern evils. Once again, Spain's misunderstood history, its refusal in more ways than one to live in the present of its western European context, seduced many Americans into believing that their social ills could be remedied by the Spanish example. Naïve as it sounds, men, women, black and white, all dreamt the same dream, and many lived it (and others died) by travelling to and fighting in Spain in "the good fight", "the poet's war". Even the terminology became contagious with an idealism concerning war never to be repeated.

So it was that Langston Hughes conceived the Spanish Republic as the end of racism through a comradely conduct that allowed for black officials to lead white troops during the Civil War. Coming from the open racism of the United States, it was only natural that Hughes not perceive other forms of racism, less evident and more disguised, but nonetheless there. The Spain of the thirties may be said to have culminated his love affair with the Hispanic world, and as the two women writers just discussed, Hughes' memoirs recall his work as a reporter in Republican Spain as a moment of unlimited hopes and dreams. The Jamaican Claude McKay, also discussed in this chapter (XIV), while absent from Spain during its Civil War, nonetheless shared many of the attitudes of Hughes concerning the differences between the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin world with respect to racism. He preferred the latter, and yet to him, Harlem was home, to recall one of his most famous novels, *Home to Harlem*. In his writings, the heroic, adventurous Spain of conquistadores, pirates and buccaneers of his youthful readings retained only the glamour and none of the cruelty, while his travels through Spain won his admiration for a people he considered more interested in the individual per se than in his or her ethnic or social background, in contrast with the Anglo-Saxon world.

Saul Bellow's "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" (Chapter XV) condenses into a short story of some thirty pages the stifling Spain of Franco, along with the theme of the values attributed to Americans versus those of the Europeans. Revealing a tight web of symbolism which includes the use of Spanish names and terms, Bellow undermines the stereotypes of the materialist American as opposed to the idealist Spaniard. In his case, however, Spain is not limited to its national borders: following the symbolic character of the story, Spain, the land both of Don Quixote and Franco, is the modern world and times. Poetry has been displaced by science and material interests everywhere.

SUMMARY

Anglo-Saxon versus Latin, Catholic versus Protestant, William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* harps on this theme as perhaps no other work here analyzed, including Santayana's. Like Bellow, Gaddis was convinced that Europe was not the answer for American writers, whose world, like it or not, was that of the United States after World War II. And yet, curiously enough, a balance of pros and cons in *The Recognitions* might very well incline the reader in favor of the Spanish ways over the American ones. This, however, is only one of several possible readings, all complicated by Gaddis's irony and tongue in cheek humor.

If Hemingway is an exception in our study in view of his outstanding stature as far as American letters on Spain are concerned, Richard Wright in *Pagan Spain* becomes another kind of exception, that of an American whose general view of Spain is a negative one. Of all the authors treated, Wright is the only one to tip the scales definitely against Spain and Spaniards, even when one takes into account that this ex-Communist, still-liberal black American is commenting on Franco's right-wing dictatorial Spain. Ironically enough, Wright reveals against Spaniards, gypsies and Catholics the prejudices he felt in his own country due to his ethnic background. The pendulum has swung for once to the opposite extreme, thus verifying the saying that the rule always has its exception.

With Nelson Algren's *Who Lost An American?* (Chapter XVIII) the waters recede to their normal level of American fervor for Spain. Actually, normal is not really the correct term, for, with the exception of bullfighting, Algren's enthusiasm for Spain and everything Spaniard is really the complete, opposite extreme of Wright's. So far as to have claimed that as Spain goes, so goes the whole world. Obviously, Algren, whose first novel was published in 1935, is yet another American author who is recalling the promise of the thirties that Spain held for the world.

Another black American constitutes another exception in our survey of Spain. For all their praise and admiration of Spain, the authors dealt with, including Hemingway, visit, and at most reside for some time in Spain. Chester Himes is the only one to have lived permanently, and died, in Spain. And as his memoirs reveal, he does so without any of the idealization concerning Spanish ethnic attitudes that we have seen in other black American authors. On the contrary, Himes, a natural complainer, repeatedly attacks Spanish racism and prejudice, though he does balance the picture by recalling that blacks were not common then in Spain, and rather than hatred, it was sheer ignorance that explained the Spaniard's mixture of fear and curiosity when faced with a black person. In the long run, his yes/no, accusation/modification attitude towards Spanish racism would seem to balance out in this respect the distance between Hughes and McKay, on the one hand, and Wright on the other.

Our final author, Barbara Probst Solomon (Chapter XX), still active in the Spanish press, initiates her contact with Spain with a dangerous, youthful adventure, helping two prisoners to escape from a Franco work project. Love affairs and

contact with anti-Franco factions inject her writing with a keen political analysis missing in others. Her immersion into Spanish intellectual life also provides her with a no less keen historical perspective, especially in the more mature of the two books here analyzed, *Short Flights*, which abandons the blinking, starry-eyed view of Spain in *Arriving Where We Started*. So intimate and so intellectually and emotionally familiar was Solomon's attachment to Spain, that the reader at times has to reflect and remember that the book being read was written by an American.

Our conclusion inevitably reiterates that the positive attraction that Spain held for American authors was due in all cases to Spain's historical role and evolution opposite to those of the United States. These American national "growing pains" of a country speeding on -especially after its Civil War - to a world leadership that implied hard, industrial, economic realities that in some ways contradicted the original ideas and ideals of the Founding Fathers, made these writers idealize a nation that had turned its back on modern ways and times. Appearances sufficed to convince generations that Spain had managed to successfully and consciously resist modern ills. Different aspects of Spanish history and reality successively came under this same illusory interpretation. In this respect, however, Americans had simply "swallowed whole" the naive notion of Spain as simply Quixotic (and Quixotic as simply idealistic), an idea that Spaniards themselves to this day can propagate with amazing reception. Americo Castro's thought would change for the intellectual world this incomplete version of Spanish history. Interestingly enough, more than one American author, dating back to Washington Irving and up to Waldo Frank, fascinated by Spain's exotic, oriental past, seems to have intuited Castro's thought. Interesting also is the ethnic mixture of our authors, from WASPS, to Jews, Blacks, and immigrants, as well as the mixture of genders, all lending their particular views to the same issue of Spain. Finally, the recent entry of Spain into both Democracy and the European Union cannot hide that the prevailing, traditional views and attractions that Spain has held for centuries will hardly remain the same. Exactly what the future holds in this respect, of course, is out of our present reach.