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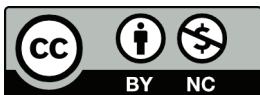
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THE GENERATION OF 1898 AND CERVANTES:
THE INVENTION OF DON QUIXOTE
AS A NATIONAL SYMBOL

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A few months after suffering a humiliating defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898, the famous novelist Benito Pérez Galdós argued that having lost the last vestiges of its once enormous colonial empire, Spain's greatest remaining source of pride was its magnificent cultural past, especially the great masterpiece of Miguel de Cervantes, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*. Consequently, Galdós felt ashamed that the author of this brilliant novel was not honored with a worthy monument¹. Although he took no further action to amend this situation, some years later a few of his friends—all of them connected to the country's main liberal newspaper *El Imparcial*—would take the initiative to celebrate the tercentenary of the publication of the *Don Quixote* in May 1905. In the fall of 1903, José Ortega Munilla, editor in chief of *El Imparcial* and a novelist himself, and his friend and colleague Jacinto Octavio Picón tried to find support for the idea within the Real Academia Española. On 2 December 1903, a full-page article by Mariano de Cavia, the newspaper's most popular commentator, announced the initiative to a broader public². Immediately afterwards, Ortega Munilla and Picón tried to win over the government for their plans. As a result, official support was announced by the conservative Prime Minister Antonio Maura in January 1904³.

¹ Pérez Galdós, «Cervantes».

² Cavia, 1905.

³ See also Storm, 1998.

The intentions of the initiators were revealed in Cavia's article. It was not the novel of Cervantes that was in need of recognition, the festivities, in fact, were meant as «a great act of Spanish resurrection». All the nations, specifically the former Spanish colonies, were invited to participate in the «most luminous and splendid celebration that was ever held by any nation to honor the greatest glory of its own race, speech and national soul»⁴. Twelve days later the editors explained that the commemoration should «confirm the spirituality» of the Spanish people and function as a program of «national resurrection».

In the years between 1898 and 1914, the *Don Quixote* commemoration was probably not surpassed by any other attempt to unite the whole nation through one giant celebration. Between 5 and 9 May 1905, local committees all over Spain organized historical processions, exhibitions, concerts and other ceremonies. Schools, universities, and corporations held special meetings to commemorate the masterpiece of Cervantes and innumerable discourses were held. Provincial authors stressed the importance of the contribution of their own town or region to the work of Cervantes. The major journals and magazines also dedicated some pages, and more than once a special issue, to this classic of world literature⁵. However, the official festivities in Madrid were not as successful as hoped. The inadequate official support of the government, and the rather poor popular celebrations disappointed many observers⁶.

In general, the discourses and publications that occurred during the commemoration were rather uninspiring. It seemed more important to emphasize the topical interest of the book than to provide an objective or original analysis of Cervantes' novel. Yet the commemoration also signified a turning point in the appreciation of Cervantes and his fictional hero. His novel was already seen as a classic of world literature, and the author was widely praised as a great Spanish literary hero. However, in 1905 it would be three members of the Generation of 1898 who shifted the focus from Cervantes to the protagonist of his novel and who turned *Don Quixote* into a national symbol.

⁴ Cavia, 1905.

⁵ Sawa y Becerra, 1905.

⁶ Soldevilla, 1906, pp. 147-148.

During the commemoration, most authors used the opportunity to propagate their own projects to regenerate the country, while focusing on Cervantes and his novel. This became clear during the official celebrations, which were the domain of the political right. Although Maura had resigned at the end of 1904, the conservative party was still in power, with Raimundo Fernández Villaverde as Prime Minister. As a result, Spain's most outstanding conservative scholar, Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo was invited to give a lecture at the Universidad Central, whereas Juan Valera, the grand old man of Spanish letters, could address the Royal Academy.

Valera, who already in 1864 had dedicated an influential essay to the masterpiece of Cervantes, maintained that the novel was in the first place an entertaining story in which the author aimed to criticize the exaggerated aspects of the romances of chivalry of his own time. Although Valera rejected overtly ideological interpretations, his own vision also carried political overtones. According to him *Don Quixote* was not a pessimistic book, and instead of a plea for social reform, it was rather a defense of a respectful attitude towards the authorities. «Progress is not achieved by a furious anxiety to disturb and destruct», clarified the writer, «but by conserving and slowly and persistently improving the existing situation»⁷.

Menéndez Pelayo confirmed his friend's point of view. The *Don Quixote* should be taken as a comical book, in which Cervantes indulgently criticized false ideals and anarchic individualism. Like Valera, he took Cervantes' classic as a warning against radical change and risky adventures, and as a plea for social discipline and common sense. But although Menéndez Pelayo was no longer the aggressive Catholic polemist of his younger years, he still underlined Cervantes' sincere loyalty to the traditional faith⁸.

The instrumental use of the *Don Quixote* commemoration as a means to achieve national regeneration could also be found in lectures that were given by more progressive authors. Jacinto Octavio Picón, in his discourse in the Academy of Arts, incited his fellow-countrymen to use *Don Quixote* as a model. Just as the knight from La Mancha had loved his ideal Dulcinea, so the Spaniards should devote themselves entirely to the well-being of their fatherland and

⁷ Valera, 1905, pp. 152 and 157-158.

⁸ Menéndez Pelayo, 1905, pp. 7 and 28.

the reign of justice. Working hard to extirpate «backwardness, fanaticism, idleness and routine», Spain could slowly be converted into a wealthy and fortunate country⁹.

A similar message, disseminated in a lecture at the Medical College of Madrid, was given by the well-known scientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal. To him, Don Quixote represented the enterprising and civic values that were so scarce in Spain. Instead, the country was dominated by ignorance and resignation, best symbolized by Don Quixote's squire Sancho Panza¹⁰. José Canalejas, in his discourse in the *Ateneo*, underlined the importance of the last chapters of the book, where Don Quixote returned to his senses. According to this prominent liberal politician, Spain should, like the hero of Cervantes, return to reason, recover its own forces, and work hard to realize a «progressive transformation» of the country. In this way Spain could once again become a great nation¹¹. Others, like the anthropologist Rafael Salillas and Ricardo Royo Villanova, were more pessimistic. Maybe, they argued, it was already too late to revive the agonizing Spanish nation¹².

Those who not only wrote a piece for the occasion, but produced substantial and highly original works were some of the members of the so-called Generation of 1898. Moreover, contrary to the majority of the authors who directed their praise to Cervantes, they primarily identified themselves with Don Quixote, whom they considered an authentic representative of the national spirit. Apart from some commemorative plaques and the first plans for the imposing statue that many years later would be erected at the Plaza de España in Madrid, the most lasting remains of the tercentenary consequently were the *Ruta de Don Quijote* (The Route of Don Quixote), Azorín's travel impressions, Miguel de Unamuno's philosophical reflections upon the *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* (translated both as *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho* and *Our Lord Don Quixote*), and Francisco Navarro Ledesma's biography of Cervantes. But, why exactly did these relatively young authors dedicate so many pages to Cervantes' fictional hero?

⁹ Sawa y Becerra, 1905, pp. 173-185.

¹⁰ Ramón y Cajal, 1905.

¹¹ Canalejas, 1905.

¹² Salillas, 1905 and Royo Villanova, 1905.

José Martínez Ruiz had only recently adopted the pen name of Azorín when he was invited by José Ortega Munilla to visit La Mancha, and subsequently publish his impressions in *El Imparcial*, thus confirming the leading role of this newspaper in the promotion of the *Don Quixote* tercentenary. Although the newspaper initiated this journey, Azorín's interest in Cervantes' protagonist was not new, since he had already written various articles on the *Don Quixote*¹³.

In *La ruta de Don Quijote* he showed his aversion to the noise and restlessness of life in big modern cities, although the countryside did not convince him either. He depicted the inhabitants of La Mancha with the mild irony that was characteristic of his writing style. According to his chronicle, he was strongly impressed by the solitude of the never-ending plains. In this rural area, where people continued to reap the harvest in the same way as in the era of «the Celts», time seemed to have stopped. Azorín maintained that after having spent some time in La Mancha one began to understand the behavior of Don Quixote: «Tell me, would you not understand in these dream landscapes, the eccentricities, the unrestrained fantasies of the great madman? The imagination begins to run wild in these plains: all kinds of visions, delusions and tortured fantasies come to our mind»¹⁴.

Not only could the geographical circumstances explain the behavior of Don Quixote, but also that of the population. The monotony of the plains was reflected in the drabness of daily life in the villages and the resigned attitude of their inhabitants. Sometimes people wished to escape from daily routine and grandiose plans were made. They began to execute them with great enthusiasm, but the phase of frenzied activity generally passed quickly. In Argamasilla, the villagers began to construct a magnificent church, but interest eventually declined and the building was not finished. The same happened with ambitious plans to construct a canal and a train station. Disappointed with the slow and difficult progress of the projects, the population lost its energy and fell back into apathy¹⁵.

¹³ Martínez Cachero, 1995.

¹⁴ Azorín, 1995, pp. 91-96 and 155-157.

¹⁵ Azorín, 1995, pp. 108-109.

Azorín was also influenced by the environment. The landscape touched him deeply. The vast emptiness of the plains corresponded with his own view on life as an enterprise without a clear goal. Although the seducing horizon was always visible and the radiant sky stretched over the traveler like an eternal and unlimited promise, they both remained unreachable. When he became aware of this tragic insight, every movement on this immense plain seemed to lose its meaning. Although he shielded himself behind his laconic attitude, the tragic figure of Don Quixote, the landscape of La Mancha and the life of the inhabitants of the countryside seemed to attract him profoundly¹⁶.

By accepting the fatal influence of the environment on man, Azorín seemed to free himself of the responsibility to determine his own path in life. Life was shaped by external factors and there was nothing one could do to change it. One could oppose them, like Don Quixote did, but as could already be seen in the novel of Cervantes this was a hopeless task. Nonetheless, this was not the whole truth. Already before leaving Madrid, thus already before the landscape of La Mancha could have had an impact on him, Azorín felt frustrated and apathetic¹⁷. Moreover, although the landscape seemed to overwhelm him, he wrote his chronicles for *El Imparcial*. Consequently, he did not let himself be carried away completely.

Instead of succumbing to the paralyzing influence of his natural surroundings, Azorín hoped to overcome it. In a passage in which he briefly abandoned his ironic tone, he praised the English ways of doing. According to him, the English felt great admiration for Don Quixote's idealism, but they knew how to balance this idealism with their own perseverance. This harmonic combination of imagination and will power explains why the English succeeded in constructing such a prosperous society¹⁸. It is clear that the author hoped that his fellow countrymen would follow their inspiring example.

Miguel de Unamuno's extensive reflections upon the life of Don Quixote and Sancho were without a doubt the most profound and original work that was published during the commemoration.

¹⁶ Azorín, 1995, pp. 111-115.

¹⁷ Azorín, 1995, pp. 77-81.

¹⁸ Azorín, 1995, p. 158.

Instead of Azorín's apparent melancholic resignation, Unamuno's text had a bitter and almost aggressive tone. Although he had already gained some literary fame and in 1900 had become rector of the University of Salamanca, he felt misunderstood and lonely¹⁹. His discomfort revealed itself in his fierce criticism against almost everybody. He attacked the interpretation of Valera and Menéndez Pelayo that Cervantes only wanted to write a parody of the chivalric romances by asking himself: «Since when does the author of a book have to be the one who understands it best?» What Cervantes thought did not interest him, he interpreted the adventures of Don Quixote as he liked²⁰. Often, his comments were very original. Thus, he maintained that Don Quixote had not left his village in order to right wrongs and offences, but to achieve immortality²¹.

In his elaborate comments on the adventures of Don Quixote, Unamuno criticized many aspects of his own time. Although he also denounced the traditionalists and the Jesuits, his preferred targets were his progressive compatriots. He argued that the windmills against which Don Quixote had justly fought could be compared to the locomotives, automobiles, telegraphs and machine guns of current times. Many of his compatriots continued to look for the panacea, the elixir that could solve everything at once. People still preferred to set their hopes on pillage or on the lottery instead of on the effectiveness of hard work. There were equally simplistic solutions for political problems, such as «regenerative knowledge, catholic ointment, anticlerical emetic or the tariff plaster». However, people preferred not to think about what truly mattered in life²².

Antonia Quijana, the niece of Don Quixote, particularly became the object of his scorn. She was the personification of the «common sense» that unfortunately was still dominant in Spain. She did not believe in love, or in glory; only the «hypnotizing quietness» of the home and the «security of the chickpeas» mattered to her. Laurels only served to give taste to cooked potatoes. In her arms, Unamuno complained, «all heroism was drowned». This way the country would never progress. Thanks to the dictatorship of common sense

¹⁹ Salcedo, 1964, pp. 109-139.

²⁰ Unamuno, 1905, p. 9.

²¹ Unamuno, 1992, pp. 170, 344-345 and 441.

²² Unamuno, 1992, pp. 199-200, 216-217, 373 and 492.

and moral pettiness there was peace. He preferred peace, but only after sincerity had triumphed over deceit and hypocrisy²³. A barbaric, vegetative life, without reflecting on one's own situation — which according to Unamuno characterized the attitude of most of his compatriots — was not a dignified existence. His urge to wake up the Spaniards and make them think for themselves proceeded directly from his view on what it means to be truly human.

His great hero, with whom he identified himself, was Don Quixote, the faithful knight that persevered against the grain in his utopic struggle against the world. Don Quixote was destined to become immortal, to attain «eternal fame and glory». Nevertheless, Unamuno did not only see him as an embodiment of his own ideas, but also as a national symbol par excellence. If there was a Spanish philosophy, then it would be the philosophy of Don Quixote, the yearning for immortality. He repeated his idea that this yearning for immortality was a specific national characteristic. Because of their poverty and hardship, Spaniards clung to life and did not want to lose it. The well-to-do, on the contrary, often suffered from melancholy and they became tired of life. However, among Spaniards, of whom Don Quixote was the best example, this decadent *tedium vitae* could not be found²⁴. Thus, in a somewhat provocative sense Unamuno converted the economic backwardness of Spain —which was a major concern for politicians and intellectuals at the time who all wanted to regenerate the country— into an advantage. Moreover, he projected his own preoccupation with individual mortality onto the entire nation. According to him, the «cult of immortality» was typical of the largely unconscious faith of the Spanish people. Therefore, «spirituals» like Don Quixote, with his faith in immortality, could lead the spiritual renewal of the nation²⁵.

The identification of Don Quixote with the Spanish nation, which could be found both in Unamuno and Azorín, was facilitated by the application of the theory of the *Volksgeist*. For them, Don Quixote was the product of the «national spirit», whose influence they also felt. The limits between the individual, the nation and a national symbol were fluid; all experienced the impact of the

²³ Unamuno, 1992, pp. 271–272, 305–314, 336, 409, 479, 492 and 519–522.

²⁴ Unamuno, 1992, pp. 161–163, 345, 481 and 487–488.

²⁵ Unamuno, 1904, pp. 36–37.

same geographical circumstances and the same historical traditions. For Unamuno and Azorín, the nation was no longer subordinated to a specific ideal for the future or an unrealizable political utopia, but had become an end in itself. One should live one's own life and develop one's own qualities within the limits set by the natural environment and the heritage of the past; and this applied both to the individual and to the nation. What mattered most, was to awaken the latent energies of the nation by reconciling it with its cultural roots²⁶.

During the commemoration of 1905, it would be Francisco Navarro Ledesma who most passionately defended this nationalist interpretation of Don Quixote. He had been the best friend of Ángel Ganivet, who is often seen as the main precursor of the Generation of 1898, and his ideas were in many ways similar to those of Unamuno and Azorín. Navarro Ledesma therefore could be seen as a secondary member of the Generation of 1898, although because of his early death in September 1905, he has been almost completely forgotten. Like Azorín and Unamuno, he identified himself with the Spanish nation and its symbolic representation, Don Quixote. However, he did not so much criticize (parts of) the Spanish population or leading elites as those who wanted to alienate the nation from its roots²⁷.

In an extensive travel account in a special issue of the magazine *Blanco y Negro* Navarro Ledesma described Don Quixote's La Mancha with much sympathy. He praised not only the landscape, but also the rural lifestyle of its inhabitants, by characterizing the simple life of a few shepherds as «almost paradisiac». He suggested that his readers should make «profane pilgrimages to the holy places that hosted the fading energies of the Spanish nation». In order to assimilate innovations from abroad, he argued, it was necessary to know and cultivate the idiosyncratic personality of one's own country. Further, Spain's originality was best preserved among the ordinary people in the countryside²⁸.

Navarro Ledesma also published an extensive biography of Cervantes. In this book he pleaded for readers to follow the example

²⁶ See also Storm, 2001.

²⁷ Storm, 2008, pp. 29–30 and 43–45.

²⁸ Navarro Ledesma, 1905a.

set by Don Quixote. On a personal level, he combined freedom with grandeur, courage and a love for adventure²⁹. In a lecture at the Ateneo of the Madrid, he argued that the gentleman from La Mancha could also, like a «common Father», lead the struggle for national rebirth. This time, his appeal acquired almost religious features: «Our Father and Lord Don Quixote will give us his blessing, and his creator, the divine, the ingenious gentleman Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra will bestow upon us the biggest of the gifts of the human Spirit ..., the gift... of the redeeming Joy»³⁰.

In brief, it can be concluded that thanks to the writings of Azorín, Unamuno and Navarro Ledesma, which were all published in 1905, the emphasis shifted from Cervantes to Don Quixote. For these intellectuals the character of the novel, more than the author himself, embodied the collective identity of the entire nation. Because of their tragic view of life and the accompanying exalted nationalism, typical for fin-de-siècle Europe, they converted Don Quixote into a national symbol. This new interpretation would soon become widely accepted³¹, as became clear, for instance, in the magnificent monument that would be erected in the Plaza de España of Madrid in the following decades. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza occupy the central spot in the square and thousands of tourists still return home with a picture of this now arch-Spanish icon.

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²⁹ Navarro Ledesma, 1905b, p. 576.

³⁰ Navarro Ledesma, 1905c, 474-476 y 480-481.

³¹ Moreno Luzón, 2012 y Guereña, 2008.

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