

## THE TESTIMONY OF LITERATURE, SPAIN (1618-1658)<sup>1</sup>

The eleven years between the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) and the so-called Peace of the Pyrenees (1659) are a political and social turning-point in the history of Latin Europe. The centralized power of the monarchies asserts itself, weakening the nobility and giving an increasing importance to the royal bureaucracies, to the *noblesse de robe*. Those changes are not entirely equivalent to what the Due de Saint-Simon called "l'anéantissement de la noblesse." Nor are they completely either what the same bitter pen described as the beginning of "un long règne de vile bourgeoisie": but those eleven years do mark without any doubt the victory of the bureaucrats over the aristocrats, of the lawyers over the landed oligarchy. My purpose here is to discuss the writings of Gracián —and specifically his *Criticón*, (The Critic)— in the light of those changes in the social and political structure of the Baroque monarchies of Latin Europe; or rather, to hear Gracián's explicit and implicit testimony on the nature of those changes.

Gracián's book was published in three successive stages, 1651, 1653, 1657, corresponding to three periods of a European journey. It is, of course, a book of essays —I continue to be shocked by those scholars who persist in calling it an "allegorical novel" —it is indeed a long "essay on the times." Gracián saw himself primarily as a spectator of his European century— if I am allowed an anachronistic license I would say that Gracián was actually the first Orteguian Spanish "spectator" before Ortega. His field of vision and thought was the totality of Europe. And in many ways he was the last Spaniard —until Ortega precisely— to be a normal European, without the self-consciousness of so many latter-day

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“Europeizantes”. The Pyrenees, after all, were not a wall of separation; less so, by far, than at the time of the famous French royal exclamation of 1700 —Il n'y a plus de Pyrénées. And from the very southern hill-side of the Pyrenees, at Huesca, Gracián was looking into his Europe with that acuity of exceptional witnesses of their times in whose testimony one finds the documentary key to historical changes.

I have to open now a methodological parenthesis on the validity of using literary texts as mirrors of history. As we all know, the last twenty years of scholarly research in the Spanish-speaking nations have been marked by the intellectual impact of a book published in 1948, Américo 'Castro's *España en su historia*. Although Professor Castro is not by training a historian—in the strict sense of a student of political, social, institutional and economic history—his work has altered substantially the interpretation of Spanish history from the Moslem invasion of the Iberian Peninsula to the end of the Hapsburg dynasty in 1700. But since Américo Castro has made use almost exclusively of literary sources he has aroused the anger of some distinguished Spanish social scientists. Perhaps one of the most violent—or at least the most vocal—in his anti-Castro statements has been the ethnographer Julio Caro Baroja, a nephew of the novelist Baroja and one of the most important scholars in today's Spain. Caro Baroja writes (I translate literally):

When eminent authors of our days speak of the "historical reality of Spain" (the title of Américo Castro's book in the second edition was *La realidad histórica de España*) they refer repeatedly to the ways in which Spaniards ex-press themselves on life. But I would suggest, without intending to reduce the importance of the term rhetorical, that they speak of "the rhetorical reality of Spain" instead of the "historical reality" of this country.

And Caro Baroja adds that he cannot give documentary priority to the verbal remains of the past. He states also that he is opposed to considering

writers as having played a central role—even a sort of symbolic one—in the history of a country: "[these gentlemen seem to believe] —he says sardonically— that what matters finally in the history of a people is a small number of persons who know how to exploit their linguistic aptitude." Let me add here that Julio Caro Baroja has an attitude very similar to what his uncle the novelist Pío Baroja called, in self-definition, an anti-Latin and anti-rhetorical view of human expression. Baroja was a Basque and Basques are said to be laconic.

Of course, Julio Caro Baroja is quite right in warning Spanish scholars about the dangers of the exclusive use of literary texts as historical documents. Seeing, for instance, that when speaking of the Spain of the 1830's some Spanish historians of literature refer to Larra's essays as faithful portrayals of Spanish life and manners, I agree with Caro Baroja. We know that many of Larra's essays are translations from the French minor essayist Joüy, who was describing French life and manners. There is here, in Caro Baroja, an attitude comparable to that of Sainte-Beuve when he wrote: "Ceux qui, en tout sujet, ont par l'éloquence une grande route toujours ouverte, se croient dispensés de fouiller le pays." Yes, indeed, in Spain very few scholars have been inclined *to fouiller le pays*, to dig in the countryside. But, on the other hand, it is obvious that Caro Baroja's reluctance to admit as historical document any text showing capacity for verbal articulation is a sort of scholarly extremism rooted in the mistrust of the typical Basque farmer—and let us add, the mistrust also of that other rural man, Jean-Jacques Rousseau— when facing an articulate speaker; for the Basques, and for that Swiss, eloquence is almost always a synonym of untruth. The work of my teacher Américo Castro does not need any defense—it stands by itself and I must say that in spite of Caro Baroja and others it will last as long as Spanish is one of the main languages of this planet—and not only because of his eloquence. But this is not the occasion to talk about Américo Castro's impact on Spanish scholarship.

And now, back to Gracián and to his testimony on the changing Europe of the 1650's. He wrote the first part of *The Critic* in Huesca between 1646 and 1651, as a very eminent historian the Jesuit Father Battlori has shown. Gracián was then the inhabitant, so to speak, of the library of his close friend Lastanosa, one of the best private libraries of Spain and probably of Europe. Its catalogue has been published by Professor Karl-Ludwig Selig: *The Library of Vincencio Juan de Lastanosa, Patron of Gracián* (Geneva, 1960). The manuscript of this catalogue is today in the Royal Library of Stockholm, having been taken there in the late seventeenth century by Sparvenfeldt, a Swedish man of letters who went to Spain in one of his "gotiska resa," journeys looking for documentation on the Gothic origins of the Latin European nations. Within that excellent library—and Lastanosa's house was also a museum, and he even had a small zoo in his very special gardens—Gracián looked across the Pyrenees into the rest of Europe and from that library he also observed the Spanish monarchy. Gracián's location is new in the Spanish intellectual history of that century: it actually represents a change of perspective that is, in itself, an essential aspect of his testimony. Merleau-Ponty, the late French philosopher, established what I believe is a useful distinction: "Il y a un centre de l'histoire qui est l'action politique et une périphérie qui est la culture." If we contrast Gracián with his Baroque predecessor Quevedo, that distinction is quite applicable because Quevedo, forty years before, in the 1610's, was placed in the very center of power while Gracián was to be in that periphery of history which is culture. And in a very strict sense in his case: Huesca is in the geographical periphery of Spain, and Gracián was in the library of Lastanosa instead of being like Quevedo in the corridors of the Madrid center of power, the Royal Palace. This displacement of the main intellectual spectator of his times shows already what has happened in that Europe of the Baroque. Let me indicate immediately that Gracián did not consider that he was a sort of exile; nor can he be compared to those

writers who in the Renaissance write in praise of the village against the court. Gracián does not make a single allusion to rural happiness, to the so-called purity of country life: for Gracián life was culture and culture was not necessarily found in the village. But it was not found in the court either. Here is the novelty of Gracián, and the novelty of Lastanosa, his patron. Court and Culture are self-excluding, as also are Politics and Morality. A contemporary of Gracián, a distinguished Spanish diplomat, wrote the following in his book *El embajador*:

There are two ways of being a good man, one is the absolute way, and it can not be achieved if one is a member of the government unless the King or the Republic would be perfect. The other way is the relative one, this meaning that one will love what is just (*amará, las cosas absolutamente justas*) but in practice one will follow the orders of the King and the laws of the land.

We have here the well-known theory of the tacitists of the Baroque Age of Latin Europe. But Gracián, at least in *The Critic*, did believe that it was necessary for the person to achieve as much moral goodness as possible and this, of course, was tantamount to withdrawal from the center of power. The aim of culture was the making of the Person, and only away from Power could this aim be reached.

This was a radical change in the orientation of the intellectual in Spanish life, because since the middle of the fifteenth century men of letters had tended to be in the center of power —as royal secretaries, for instance. Quevedo, of a family precisely of royal bureaucrats, had attacked those writers who opposed political action. But Gracián had no doubts: *un hombre de bien*, a man of integrity, had to be removed from the center of power. That is, for Gracián there are two kinds of men, two possibilities of life for men: to be *ordinary* and to be *persons*. And his essays are a theory

of the person, a description of the road to personal perfection. This road does not go through the court, through the capital of the Monarchy.

I should indicate that "Court" became, in Spanish, equivalent to "Capital," to Madrid. That court is seen by Gracián embodied, so to say, in the Madrid theaters, and these are what he calls *acorralada necedad*, that is "the stupidity of the corral," having in mind that theaters were called "corrales" because of their original location in back patios of houses or palaces. Gracián has, thus, utmost disdain for an author applauded in such "corrals," Lope de Vega: he was, Gracián said of Lope, full of "viento popular." (And, of course, this negative characterization of Lope's art is perhaps the best formula of his art for us today: "llenóse de viento popular"). The Court, the Capital, the Theater, are dominated by what Ortega would have called the Masses; and I should put in here another parenthesis and point out again the similarity of some aspects of Gracián, and Ortega. Those masses of the Capital are noisy and noise is, for Gracián, the very negation of the possibility of expansion for the person:

Acertaron a pasar por una plaza, la de mayor concurrencia, donde hallaron un numeroso pueblo, dividido en enjambres de susurro, aguardando algunos de sus espectáculos vulgares. (They went through a square, full of people, spread in swarms of murmur, waiting for their vulgar spectacles.)

The intensity of Gracián's disdain for the masses is seen in that coupling of *enjambres* and *susurro*: he wants, of course, to show men in groups in that square as swarms of bees. Any man who wants to be himself, who wants to be a person, must get away from the noise of those swarms. This includes also the Princes of the Monarchy; they also ran the same danger and they were not protected by the level of their social highness:

aunque sea un príncipe, en no sabiendo las cosas, quererse meter en hablar de ellas, a dar su voto en lo que no sabe, ni entiende, al punto se

declara hombre vulgar y plebeyo, porque el vulgo no es otra cosa que una sinagoga de ignorantes presumidos. (The Prince if he talks when he does not know becomes also a vulgar man, because vulgarity is the assembly of pretentious, ignorant men.)

Let us put aside the anti-Semitic note in the text just quoted. Gracián warns in that text that the Prince must be aware that the Court is a constant danger, intellectually speaking, because men are constantly talking about what they do not know. This, of course, is related to Gracián's cautions regarding words and verbal expression: his sense of stylistic economy.

But above all the Court, Madrid, is the center of falsehood and individual servility. "Los áulicos siempre están contemplando el rostro del Príncipe y brujuleándole los afectos" ("The courtiers are always observing the Prince's face as if it were the North star"). That Gracián was expressing himself sincerely is seen in his letters to Lastanosa, from Madrid, in the spring of 1640: "Me volvería con mucho gusto al estudio de Vuestra Merced, todo es embeleco, mentiras, gente soberbia y vana..." ("I would return with pleasure to your library. All here is lies, people full of pride and vanity...") But what is perhaps quite a shock for readers of our day is Gracián's view of the University, and in particular of the University of Salamanca, the oldest in Spain. Since a man who wants to be a person should have culture it would be assumed that Gracián sees the University as the proper place for such a man, for such a process of becoming a person. Not in the least! The University, and Salamanca specifically, is described as "plaza de armas contra las haciendas." That is, the University of Salamanca had been primarily a School of Law, whose graduates would become royal officials. The motto of the University since the 13th century had been, "the King for the University, the University for the King." In short, the University was seen by Gracián as the human source of what was to be called, later on, in France, *une armature d'avocats*. The early

French Republic was considered to have such a skeleton of lawyers, but in fact all the post-Renaissance monarchies were built upon such an *armature*. And those lawyers were seen by the nobility as their real enemies, since they were both the mind and the hand of the centralist Monarchy. Historians of Spain have not seen this important fact of social conflict: and of course I cannot blame them for not having seen it, because the Spanish monarchy of the Baroque Age did not show institutionally this conflict as in France. There was nothing like the French highly organized *noblesse de robe* in Spain, and the aristocracy did not express itself as in France. Or rather the aristocracy had expressed itself only through some writers, writers such as Quevedo, who were its mouthpieces, in a literal sense. It is true that Gracián did not like Quevedo. He thought Quevedo wanted to please vulgar tastes. He refers to Quevedo as being similar to tobacco leaves: they are pleasant to smell but they go up in smoke. Quevedo was also the opposite pole of Gracián, being such a verbal torrent, a writer who excelled in abundance instead of the excellence in conciseness characteristic of Gracián. But there is a clear connection between the two regarding their identification with an aristocracy—with an oligarchy—which sees its power slowly but surely eroded by the men of black gowns, by the Salamanca graduates. I cannot go into details now concerning Quevedo, but I should point out that he was closely identified with the Duke of Osuna, one of the great military and diplomatic leaders of Spain, whose life ended in prison after having been recalled from his high government position in Italy. In Quevedo's attack against the universities there is, first, the reference to the general political consequences for a powerful nation when the government is in the hands of Bachelors of Law instead of in the hands of army captains:

las monarquías siempre las han adquirido capitanes, siempre las han corrompido bachilleres ... los ejércitos, no las universidades, ganan y defienden .... (Monarchies have always been established by captains, and



they have always been weakened by bachelors of laws . . . the armies, not the universities, create and defend...)

And' then Quevedo adds that when a nation gives rewards to those who study humanities it begins actually to offer prizes to "scheming, to malignity, to negotiation." And the lowest point in a government is reached when the victorious military leader has to obey the university graduate, when the brave has to follow the orders of the "doctor." Quevedo was, obviously, expressing the anger of men such as the Duke of Osuna.

But Quevedo points out also that all those bureaucrats are doing something more important for themselves than just placing them-selves above the aristocratic class in the political positions of leader-ship. They are dedicated also to becoming wealthy through their legal maneuvering by acquiring properties of the aristocracy:

Mucha gente baja se ha vestido de negro en los tinteros; de muchos son los algodones solares; muchos títulos y estados descenden del burrajear, (Many lower people have acquired their black cloth [that is, their nobility] in the inkwells: for many of those the cotton [used to clean the pens and as blotters] is their ancient homestead; many titles and estates come from the burrajear [the daily penning]...)

I doubt if in other countries of Latin Europe the hatred of the landed nobility for the *noblesse de robe* was expressed so openly. Gracián, as if writing a sort of postscript to Quevedo, will say, everybody knows that there is no such thing as a poor lawyer.

There is no doubt that Gracián saw the social mobility taking place in the Spain of the 1650's as the victory of the "many." And it is understandable that some anti-démocratie writers of the last century have used Gracián for their criticism of the Europe of the masses. Of course, I cannot agree with the late Aubrey Bell when in his book on Gracián he

writes: "It was not to be expected that Gracián, who made superiority his motto, should be attracted by democracy and he handles it severely in *The Critic*." I frankly do not see where Gracián deals with democracy in his essays. It is true that he contrasts the lives of the few chosen persons with all the others, and he called them "todo lo demás es número" ("and the rest is numbers"). It is true also that he claims that masses of men do not understand nuances and that they are not therefore good judges in matters of artistic and literary taste. That is why Gracián never admired Cervantes, because the author of *Don Quijote* had had popular success. And Gracián complained bitterly about what he called the intellectual preponderance of barbers: "si el barbero del lugar no quiere, nada valdrá el sermón más docto" ("if the village barber does not approve of it, the best sermón will be considered as worthless"). All these views have nothing to do with a criticism of democracy. On the other hand, Gracián was writing to praise the values and the historical function of the aristocracy, of the aristocracies. And that was the principal reason for his extraordinary impact on the Europe of the Baroque Age.

In 1650 a young Englishman who had just graduated from Cambridge University arrived in Madrid to learn Spanish and to try to arrange for payment of a debt that the Spanish monarchy had with his father. Weeks and months passed and, not wanting to waste his time, he registered at the University of Alcalá to study Spanish. There he was well received and liked: his knowledge of Latin and interest in poetry made many friends for him. And some of these were reading then the first part of *El Criticón*, just published in 1651, with the pen-name Lorenzo Gracián. Paul Ricaut, who was later to be known as Sir Paul Ricaut, and who became an illustrious member of the Royal Society (he was to be also an important Arabist) left Spain without his monies but with the beginning of a translation of that first part of *El Criticón* which he published in 1681 in London, after having been in several countries of the Near East as an English diplomatic representative. Let me add in parenthesis that Ricaut

was the first to point out the connection between Gracián and the Arabic treatise of Abentofail, *The Self-taught Philosopher*. This little episode has, also, a special historical significance by showing the contrast between the impecunious condition of the Spanish monarchy and the exportable resources of its culture. Spain was obviously going downhill, politically speaking, but Gracián was to be read as probably no other Spanish writer—until Ortega again—has been read beyond the Pyrenees. And one of the reasons for his impact was precisely that *The Critic* (and other works) were giving to the embattled aristocracies of Latin Europe some sort of consolation. I think that the late Fernand Baldensperger, in his article, "L'arrière-plan espagnol des *Máximes* de La Rochefoucault," has pointed out how all the Frondeurs were psychologically strengthened by the *morale* de seigneurs coming out of Spain. I do not know if I should agree with Baldensperger when he says that Gracián was a sort of typical Spanish intellectual: "un de ces intellectuels d'outremonts qui appliquent leur savoir á renforcer et guider l'autorité." It is true that the three Spaniards who have been widely read, and who have had considerable influence, outside of Spain in their own times, have been Gracián, Juan Donoso Cortés, and José Ortega y Gasset. And of the three of them, at least two are obvious defenders of authority and of the identification of culture and aristocracy. But Baldensperger is mistaken when he sees Gracián as the official exponent, so to speak, of the Spanish monarchy. His influence comes precisely from the fact that he also expresses in Spain "un désenchantement d'aristocrates á demi resignés." And if Gracián was able to "articuler fiérement" the views of that aristocracy it was partially because the Spanish nobility also felt itself being displaced by "un long règne de vile bourgeoisie" in spite of all other appearances. The structure of the Spanish state was not then "moins bourgeois" than in France: I would even say that it was a little more so. I should mention here that when Gracián selects two names to exemplify his idea of the person that he calls *hombre substancial*, he puts together the Duke of Osuna and the

Prince of Conde. Two men of the same temper, and one of them had died in defeat and in prison: he was the Spaniard, not the Frenchman.

In conclusion we could say that Gracián's explicit and implicit testimony opens a new view on the social tensions within the Spanish Monarchy of the Baroque Age. And this shows again that literature is always a mirror of the times. On the other hand, it is not the only one, and we must always use it only as a way of seeing a historical period from within itself. Quevedo said once that in his sort of journalistic writings he was giving his eyes to the reader: *doy a leer mis ojos*. He meant that he was being truthful, an impartial observer. This was not the case in Quevedo's *Anales de quince días* nor in similar accounts of political change in his days. But if we do reject Quevedo's *quevedos*—the type of glasses used by Quevedo were given in Spanish his own name —if we reject Quevedo's visual equation we would be left very much in the dark. Because his personal equation is indeed an essential factor in his own times— in the history of his age. And Gracián's personal equation is also a substantial component of a Spanish and an European historical change. The historian of literature and the historian of society have nothing to lose by joining their efforts to achieve the aim of historical reconstruction: to make of distant men credible characters in the fiction of centuries and nations that we call history.