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# Ángel Ganivet and the Crisis in the Idea of the Spanish Empire

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## ABSTRACT

The works of Ángel Ganivet, particularly his *Idearium Español*, a controversial interpretation of Spanish history, were one of the main inspirations in the crystallization of the “Generación del ‘98” [Generation of ‘98]. This intellectual group reacted against the lack of vitality and the ineffectiveness of the Spanish Restoration regime, which, constitutionally speaking, had begun in 1876. At a time when political decadence and the volatility of the Spanish political system were becoming endemic, aggravated by the humiliating defeat of the Spanish navy in the war against the United States in 1898 and the resulting loss of the last remnants of the Spanish Empire, Ganivet’s controversial perspectives, brilliant though limited by an inevitable lack of balance, came as a breath of fresh air for those young concerned professionals who were preoccupied with the reality of their country becoming a problem for its inhabitants.

Rather than calling for Spain’s joining the “race for empire”, in which the rest of Europe was immersed at that time, Ganivet interpreted the Spanish discovery and colonization of America as a historical mistake, as it diverted Spanish energies from what was then and now a core national necessity: the concentration of national energies within the Spanish frontiers. In Ganivet’s opinion, this was the Spanish priority.

The theoretical corpus of Ganivet, an author who was pivotal in the formulation of different intellectual interpretations and projects for the regeneration of Spanish national life, provides a significant opportunity for analysis of the Spanish imperial experience, not in a period of historic splendour but in the one of its last critical phases, a time of national frustration and unrest. In our opinion this is an innovative and relevant approach in the context of a joint study of the subject of Europe and its Empires.

*La crisis imperial española, acaecida a lo largo del siglo XIX y que culminó con la guerra hispano-estadounidense y la pérdida de los últimos retazos del imperio con una derrota humillante de la armada española da cuenta de la postración política, económica e in-*

*stitucional del país surgido de las turbulencias de las guerras napoleónicas. El régimen de la Restauración, inaugurado con la retorno el trono español de la casa de Borbón, en la persona de Alfonso XII, en 1876, pretendió regenerar y racionalizar las estructuras políticas españolas; sin embargo, el alcance de esa labor reformista pronto se mostró como muy inferior a lo que eran tanto las necesidades del país como las exigencias de amplias capas de su elite intelectual. La reacción ante la debacle en la guerra con los Estados Unidos y la traumática pérdida de las últimas colonias encontraron en autores como el heterodoxo Ángel Ganivet un referente, por su nada convencional interpretación del pasado imperial de España y por plantear todo un programa político para el futuro del país, ajeno a las tendencias imperantes en ese momento.*

*Ángel Ganivet, autor cuya trayectoria se vio truncada por su suicidio en 1898, tras una vida de esfuerzo, preñada de fatalidades y sinsabores, destacó por presentar en sus obras, pero sobre todo en Idearium Español una visión de la historia de España en la que el descubrimiento y colonización de América se considera como un elemento eminentemente negativo en su devenir, al apartarla de lo que debía haber sido su realización histórica. Para Ganivet, esta debía haberse basado en una concertación espiritual dentro de sus propias fronteras o, en todo caso, en la forja de un imperio africano. Dentro de lo que, resulta innegable, es una formulación atractiva pero también contradictoria, el programa de Ganivet para el futuro de España incide en la necesidad de apartarse de cualquier aventura imperial, debiendo ser el contenido último de los esfuerzos españoles la búsqueda de una regeneración del ser español.*

*Resulta a todas luces atractivo, abordar el estudio de una experiencia imperial no en un momento de esplendor o de expansión sino en el de sus últimos estertores. El análisis de la obra de Ganivet, no sólo por su significación, sino por su influencia como precursor de los ideales e inquietudes de la Generación del 98, permite abordar el traumático ocaso del imperio español con una perspectiva tan atractiva como novedosa. Por otro lado, al mismo tiempo que la suerte de las armas españolas se dirimirá en un desigual combate con las fuerzas pujantes de los Estados Unidos, Ganivet confrontará su propia perspectiva con la de otro precursor del "98", Miguel de Unamuno, en un intercambio epistolar público presidido por la discrepancia en las ideas motrices de uno y otro autor y, no en menor medida, por una admirable cordialidad en los términos en los que se entabló esa polémica.*

Despite some striking attempts by several historians to relativise the historical significance of Spain's imperial experience, this historical episode clearly had major implications for global political and geo-strategic history, the history of ideas, and for the economic history of Europe itself. Its importance also lies in the fact that it was against this backdrop that Spain was to forge its own theoretical notion of itself from the 16th century onwards. While the historical imprint of Spain's imperial venture – with its inevitable combination of light and shade – is evident, the decline of empire and the

resulting intellectual debate at the end of the 19th century were equally significant. We must not forget that Spain had gone from being a global empire and a major European power to becoming one of the “sick men” of Europe, stripped of its international position, deprived of every last vestige of its old empire, and reduced to economic impotence. While any discussion of “Europe and its Empires” (the theme of this volume) will necessarily focus first and foremost on the trade, economy, social contradictions, military excesses and vicissitudes of empires at the peak of their power, we must also follow Gibbon’s example and analyse the intellectual debate as to the history and idea of empire as a political institution. This is particularly important because while Europe was embarking on the second great wave of its imperial race – inside and outside the continent – Spain was forced to face up to its own inability to emulate other nations and its failure as a nation. Indeed, far from there being any prospect of recovery or some national catharsis, Spain was fighting over the last shreds of its empire (Cuba and the Philippines) in an unequal struggle with the United States that would ultimately end in humiliation.

#### THE STARTING POINT

In this dark context, an intellectual debate began to emerge that was eminently critical of the causes of Spain’s decline and its history; ultimately it was to produce images and interpretations of the Spanish imperial experience that were as new as they were unflattering. While the loss of the last colonies led to a debate on the “problem” of Spain, even before the “Disaster of ‘98”, there had been discussions on Spain’s situation in the highest quarters. Of crucial importance in this process were the discussions between Ángel Ganivet and Miguel de Unamuno, conducted in a public exchange of letters. These were significant for their influence on subsequent intellectuals and because they defended opposing points of view but were nonetheless convinced of the need to find common ground within their disagreement. Even before Spain’s stunning defeat by the United States, the calls for a national debate – particularly from Ángel Ganivet – were fundamental and tremendously representative arguments for the “Generation of ‘98”.

In the course of the 19th century, Spain lost its colonial empire in the Americas and suffered a profound crisis, marked by the political instability of the years following the Napoleonic wars. While the genesis of Spanish American independence was rooted in a gradual national consciousness in the Spanish Americas and in socio-economic factors that do not fall within the scope of this chapter, the loss of the Spanish navy at the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) and the crisis that arose in the relationship between the metropolis and its colonies as a result of the Napoleonic invasion, the power gap and the War of Independence also contributed to the formation, between 1810 and 1826, of practically all the Latin American countries. And to make matters worse for Spain, this process was played out against the backdrop of political impotence on the part of

the absolutist regime established in Spain after the Napoleonic wars. The result was not only an independent Latin America, but one that was divorced in political and economic terms and in its cultural values from its former metropolis<sup>1</sup>.

While the American possessions were declaring their independence, Spain was about to enter one of the most fraught periods in its history. Between 1808 and 1876, it was the stage for revolutions, military uprisings, civil wars, regime changes, continuous institutional crises and economic weakness. In a vain attempt to give the incipient liberal regime some semblance of stability, no fewer than ten constitutions or draft constitutions were mooted, none of which enjoyed the backing of the country's political class<sup>2</sup>. Two dynasties disputed the throne and their struggle resulted in the two "Carlist" Wars (1833-1839 and 1872-1876). Though limited in their territorial scale and material significance, these conflicts merit the description of civil wars and served to highlight the level of instability during the period<sup>3</sup>. From 1870 to 1873, Spain was ruled by a third dynasty, the House of Savoy, following the overthrow of Isabella II – a frankly incompetent monarch – in the "glorious" revolution of 1868. This regime was in turn succeeded by a republic (the First Spanish Republic), itself brought down by an impossible political model, a cantonal system that would culminate in open confrontation between the different cantons. Ultimately, its death warrant was signed by a military uprising<sup>4</sup>. Such a situation did little to promote any far-sighted foreign policy. At the same time, Spain's continued economic penury (until its colonies declared independence it had offset its domestic deficit with colonial revenues), prevented it from embarking on any attempt to form a second-generation empire or taking part in the carve-up of Africa. Nonetheless, in the mid-19th century, Spain, in keeping with the spirit of the times, embarked on a token war in Africa (1859-1860), joined Napoleon III's France in a punitive expedition against Cochin China (1860-1862), briefly reincorporated Santo Domingo (1861-1865) and went to war with Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador (1865-1866). Spain was not an imperial power, nor could it yet remotely aspire to be one, but the dreams of a new Spanish expansion were evident in its foreign policy formulation. All of these ventures ended in political frustration.

After the fall of the First Republic, the House of Bourbon was restored to power under the figure of Alfonso XII, son of Isabella II. The essential priorities set by this new regime (the "Restoration", which nominally survived until 1931), were to bring peace to the country following the Second Carlist War and the upheavals of the First Republic and to establish a system that would guarantee political stability and ensure that the army returned to its barracks and ceased to play a role in national politics. The architect of change was Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, who proposed ambitious and previously unachievable objectives. The new regime and the new constitution ushered in an eminently conservative system in which political instability was replaced by a peaceful alternation of power between the two official parties, Cánovas' conservatives and the liberals. The aim was to achieve popular indifference and build a model of conservative

*'democracy from above'*, supplanting popular representation with a system based on the tyranny of political clientelism (what became known as "Caciquismo") in the electoral constituencies (primarily in the rural areas, which were in the majority and which benefited most) and, ultimately, to submit the election results to the Ministry of Governance (the interior ministry). The system sought to maintain the pre-eminence of the country's economic elite with more stable protection than in previous constitutional experiments. The regime turned its back on the changes around it, such as the workers' movement and the rise of regionalism and nationalism, which were attracting more and more of those who were disgruntled with the system. In short, it was a system which might be effective but never inspiring. The untimely death of the young and dynamic Alfonso XII, in 1885, aged only 28, and the murder of Cánovas in 1897, in the midst of the Cuban crisis, dealt a hard blow to the fledgling regime, which would henceforth be concerned first and foremost with its own survival.

'98

The restoration coincided with a renewed interest in the issue of Spain's decline. This had not been a major theme of debate during the pro-independence cycle of the first half of the century and subsequent upheavals, but now circumstances had changed. Many authors trace the origins of the debate on Spain's decline and reflections on the causes of its loss of empire (together with an analysis of the "Disaster of '98"), to the loss of Spain's last three colonies, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, following the Spanish-American War of 1898. While it is true that the disaster served to bring together and encourage various strands of thought on this issue, the "regenerationist" debate had begun years before, inspired by new ideas from abroad, developments in domestic politics and a new international political scene – still in its infancy – in which the issue of empire again raised its head. The imperialist side to Napoleon III's reign, the impact of the creation of the new German Reich and the French and Italian defeats at Fashoda and Adwa respectively (suggesting a crisis in the Latin world); British (and, to a lesser extent, French and Dutch) colonial and commercial expansion in Africa and Asia; in short, the combination of international circumstances that combined to represent a new race for empire, led sectors of the Spanish intelligentsia to reflect on Spain's decline, its inability to join in the process effectively, its internal weakness and on the very nature of its past greatness. At the same time, scientific and technological advances and the postulation of new philosophical paradigms surprised and disturbed the intellectuals of Spain, at the time necessarily quietist.

The interpretation of history itself, the search for something specifically Spanish, was to be a constant factor in these reflections. As Joseph A. Agee has remarked, well before 1898 (indeed, from the mid-century), a certain intellectual agitation had arisen and a debate on the problem of Spain had begun:

[...] the Generation of '98 were not the first interiorists; the Krausist movement, introduced to Spain by Julián Sáenz del Río, also called for an introspective look at history, in order to transcend Spain's historical aspects and find its hidden spiritual path<sup>5</sup>.

Indeed, from the mid-19th century on, proponents of German idealism and more specifically the idealism of Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781-1832, a disciple of Hegel) and his followers Heinrich Ahrens and Wilhelm Tiberghien, came to have a notable influence on Spanish academic and intellectual debate. Krausist ideas, with their emphasis on the role of education, left a deep impression on Spanish intellectual circles. They also stressed the importance of examining the philosophical nature of the Spaniards and the defining elements of their history (in eminently religious, though not Catholic, terms; the Krausists held the church responsible for Spain's ills, which set them against the Catholic hierarchy<sup>6</sup>) and led to the formation of a singular educational project: the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* [Free Institution of Education], which was to have a major impact on Spanish progressive ideas. In the context of these ideas and the situation at home and abroad, together with a perception among many intellectuals that the Restoration was no more than a mediocre bandage for Spain's problems, a movement known as "Regenerationism" arose. It embraced a disparate set of authors, intellectuals and professionals who shared a common belief in the need for reform – not only superficial, but in depth reform – of Spain's political structures. The movement rejected the political course of Spain's recent history and more importantly, identified the Restoration with the corruption of the electoral process and the predominance of agricultural elites, preventing any real progress in the country. Leading regenerationists included Joaquín Costa, Macías Picavea and, later on, Santiago Alba, all of whom, to a greater or lesser extent, took their ideas from Krausism. Nonetheless, it is important to note the relative lack of coordination or community of thought among the members of the regenerationist movement and the heterogeneous and (sometimes) contradictory nature of their specific political positions. Costa is a case in point; despite his denunciation of the regime's deficiencies, in 1885, he took a passionate and bellicose nationalistic stance over Germany's assertion of rights in the Caroline Islands, which were still under Spanish jurisdiction at the time<sup>7</sup>.

The "Disaster of '98" was to bring a certain unity of opinion to the regenerationists and by extension to the new intellectual Generation of '98 – similarly heterogeneous, but strongly coordinated in its concern regarding the problems clearly arising for Spain following the loss of its final colonies and what they considered to be confirmation of the Restoration's failure. The regenerationists saw themselves as capable of reviving Spanish political structures. At the time, there was general agreement that Ángel Ganivet and Miguel de Unamuno were the forerunners of the debate and the concerns that united this group of writers and intellectuals. Unamuno, who had by far the longer and more prolific life of the two, was to be accepted as a full member of the generation, an honour many scholars were to deny the less-known and more controversial Ganivet, whose

untimely death coincided with the Disaster of '98. As Ortega y Gasset was later to say, however, the deliberations of both men – on the essence, history and future of Spain – acted as precursors to that entire generation of thinkers. As Javier Varela says:

The Generation of '98 were the first intellectual group in a modern sense. It was precisely at that point that the term "intellectual" first appeared [...]

The core group consisted of "The Three", Azorín, Baroja and Maetzu [...]

To a greater or lesser extent, they all recognised their immediate masters to be Unamuno – from his eccentric position in Salamanca – and the more distant, aesthetic and thematic Ganivet. In November 1903, Azorín, Unamuno and Maetzu all paid tribute to Ganivet in the Ateneo with a young Ortega also taking part [...]<sup>8</sup>

But the purpose of this chapter is not to offer an in-depth analysis of the constituent parts of the Generation of '98, but rather to focus on its controversial forerunner, Ángel Ganivet, and his view of Spain's history, imperial past and decline. From the perspective with which he looked back at the Spanish empire – we can return to this point – he could gain an overview in which Spain's situation could be seen as anything but prosperous. He did not even see it as a reality that belonged exclusively to the past. It came at a time when the dramatic evaporation of Spain's imperial experience was a leading topic of debate. For Ganivet, looking back on the Spanish empire meant looking back on the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella and the expansionist monarchy of the Habsburgs. He paid passing attention to the 18th century, the bureaucratic and social development of the empire, the Bourbon enlightenment and the Enlightenment in general.

Product of a positivist and rationalist education<sup>9</sup>, Ganivet tended to transcend the conceptual limits of this education. He was a man of his time, who was strongly influenced by the virtues of technical progress outside Spain (albeit only to reject them). His didactic eagerness, his desire to be more than a minority writer, to reach and influence a broad readership, led him – like Unamuno – to turn his hand to journalism as the main platform for his ideas. He wanted to create clearly different approaches; in particular, though, he wanted, from an unconventional perspective, to offer novel interpretations of Spanish history and to propose an agenda for extracting Spain from the crisis that would transcend mere politics. Ganivet echoed the concerns of his time from a position of the highest academic excellence. It was a position that was to win him the friendship of Unamuno: the two men met when they were both candidates for the chair of Greek at the University of Granada (1891). Coming from entirely different backgrounds, their separate ideological careers were marked by their different perceptions of Spain. Unamuno was a Basque who had seen the industrialisation of his country and the rise of the Spanish periphery at the expense of an outmoded Castile. Ganivet, on the other hand, reaffirmed the values of historical Castile and his thinking was shot through with a deep distrust of the rise in Spanish regionalism.



## ÁNGEL GANIVET, IDEALISM AND FATALISM: HISTORIOGRAPHIC IMPACT

No study of Ángel Ganivet can ignore his truly dramatic background. Born in Granada in 1865, he lost his father when he was only ten years old. When he was twelve, he was obliged to work for some time in a law firm. At the age of nineteen, he went to study at the University of Granada, where he simultaneously read Philosophy (Arts) and Law. As Herbert Ramsden says, “[...] intelligence and hard work; the avoidance of student revels; distinctions and prizes – this, it appears, is the story of Ángel Ganivet’s life during the years 1880-88”<sup>10</sup>.

Having graduated in philosophy with extraordinary honours, Ganivet moved to Madrid to study for his PhD and complete a law degree. Madrid university life, much more open than Granada’s, brought the young student into contact with some of the most fashionable philosophical theories of the time, particularly Krausism. In 1889, in order not to continue as a burden on his family, Ganivet sat the civil service examinations for the post of government archivist, obtaining a post in the library of the Ministry of Economic Development. Having gained his long-awaited economic independence, Ganivet moved to Granada, relinquishing his share of the family inheritance in favour of his sisters (in a gesture that says much about his character). A few months later he faced a major setback when his PhD thesis (*Contemporary Philosophical Spain*) was turned down. The thesis addressed many of the issues that were to appear later in the *Idearium Español*, including the absence of guiding “mother ideas” in the country’s thinking. Ganivet promptly sat down and wrote a new thesis that summer, *Importancia de la Lengua Sánscrita y Servicios que su Estudio ha Prestado a la Ciencia del Lenguaje en General y a la Gramática Comparada en Particular* [The Importance of Sanskrit and the Services its Study has Performed for the Science of Language in General and Comparative Grammar in Particular], which presented language as the main instrument for understanding the differing nature of nations. After the rejection of his first thesis, this second one must have required an enormous intellectual effort. It was a tremendously ambitious project, which involved preparing a whole new study, on an entirely different theme, but it presented original ideas and obtained the highest possible grade. The importance of this work, which reflects Ganivet’s increasing maturity, was that for the first time it set out the writer’s personal view of national history as the substantive axis for historical studies. He was to elaborate on this idea in the *Idearium Español*:

[...] the essential thing in history is the tie between the facts and the spirit of the country where it has taken place: only at that price can a true, logical and useful history be written.  
[...]<sup>11</sup>

In the purely personal arena, during these years Ganivet entered into a (controversial) relationship with Amelia Roldán, who was to bear him two children. They lived together intermittently in Madrid, Antwerp and Helsinki but never married; in the context of the social norms of the times this was reprehensible conduct. Their relationship appears

to have been plagued by infidelity on both sides and some authors have speculated that as a result, Ganivet may have contracted syphilis during his time in Madrid<sup>12</sup>.

Driven by a desire to better his personal position – and very probably a wish to return to his home city – Ganivet sat the examinations for the Chair of Greek at the University of Granada. As we have seen, it was on this occasion that he met Miguel de Unamuno and struck up a friendship with him. While the Bilbao philosopher was to continue in the academic world, Ganivet performed a volte-face, entering the Spanish diplomatic service, where he obtained a post at the consulate in Antwerp (1892). It was during his time as vice-consul in the Belgian port that he penned one of his most important works of fiction, *La Conquista del Reino Maya por el Último Conquistador Español Pío Cid* (written in 1893 and published in 1897). The book is a comical look at the colonial experience of an archetypal explorer, Pío Cid, and is set in fabled far-off kingdom. From the outset, Ganivet's work during this period was marked by his profound scorn for the cold, industrial and mechanical culture of Belgium:

[...] he found little to admire in the Belgians and their culture. He was often painfully aware of being in an alien environment whose growing mechanization and commercialization he detested<sup>13</sup>.

In 1895 Ganivet was promoted and appointed Spanish consul to Helsinki. In a series of articles published under the general title of *Granada la Bella* in the paper "El Defensor de Granada" he set out his impressions of the cities he visited in the then Grand Duchy of Finland, comparing them to his beloved home town. He appears to have already begun work at this stage on the *Idearium Español*, setting himself the target of providing an analysis "of the ideal constitution of the Spanish race". All the indications are that he found his new posting far more creatively inspiring, but while he had left Belgium behind, an existential crisis he had first suffered there continued to develop. Although this affliction is not reflected in the subjects or contents of his studies, it had nonetheless reached an advanced stage. Two books, *Cartas Finlandesas* and *Hombres del Norte* (1898) (a study of leading Nordic figures, such as Jonas Lie, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Henrik Ibsen, Arne Garborg, Vilhelm Krag and Knut Hamsun) show how stimulating he found his new destination – although they are not exempt from a certain Spanish chauvinism and Ganivet's own sometimes cutting humour. Ganivet saw how visible elements of identity were in Finnish culture.

His second novel, *Los Trabajos del Infatigable Creador Pío Cid* (1898), which narrated the explorer's continued adventures, was also written during this phase. By October 1896 he had completed *Idearium Español*; 1898 was an especially prolific year for the author, seeing the publication of *El Porvenir de España*, the "four open letters" (published with Unamuno in "El Defensor de Granada"), which established the cordial disagreement between the *Idearium* and the Basque writer's *En Torno al Casticismo* (1895).

Ganivet's prolific work in 1898, was however, to be his last. After his transfer from Helsinki to Riga, he continued and even intensified his literary work. He wrote a play, *Vida Nueva*, and committed himself to writing two new episodes of his *Hombres del Norte*. However, on 29 November Ganivet ended his life by throwing himself into the River Dvina. Days earlier, he had been diagnosed as having a dangerous persecutory mania:

[...] Many other factors have been suggested as having contributed to Ganivet's suicide: his isolation from friends, his vegetarianism, the rigours of a northern climate, constant overwork; his lack of religious faith, a family history of insanity, Spanish misfortunes in Cuba, the imminent arrival in Riga of Amelia Roldan (because Ganivet was afraid he might be persuaded to forgive her alleged infidelity, say some commentators; because he was ashamed to have her see him in his distressed condition, says another)...<sup>14</sup>

Given the author's untimely death and the fact that his combined oeuvre barely stretches to 2,000 pages, it is somewhat surprising to see how controversial his work was to become, primarily because of its use by the victors in the Spanish Civil War. But it is important to note that before that critical moment came, there was general agreement, from Ortega y Gasset, a convinced admirer of Ganivet, to Manuel Azaña, far more sceptical, as to the value and depth of Ganivet's theories in *Idearium Español*. It is clear, even if the connection between the two elements is more than circumstantial, that the defence of the notion of territoriality as the driving force of the history of the nations, the demand that Spain, far from joining larger European movements, should devote itself to its own forgotten values (religion, stoic spirituality and own territoriality), link him to the philo-fascist policies of early Francoism. Certainly, these resonances are suggested by the Francoist ideological corpus, with its inferences on autarchy, religious display, exalted nationalism, expansionist ambitions in Africa and proclamation of a kind of "spiritual empire". Yet the relationship is merely coincidental; there was nothing at the end of the 19th century that could have indicated that Spain (and Europe) was standing on the brink of a slope leading to a civil war of colossal proportions and consequences. Nonetheless, it is these features that have fired some of the fiercest criticisms of Ganivet (see the work by Herbert Ramsden), academically brilliant but perhaps excessively bellicose.

Antonio Sánchez Trigueros notes that one paragraph in particular in Ganivet's work ties in to some of the more sinister areas of 20th-century thinking, and has sparked many of the criticisms against him:

[...] faced with Spain's spiritual ruin, we must put a stone in place of our heart and if necessary, we must throw a million Spaniards to the wolves, if we are not all to be thrown to the swine<sup>15</sup>.

Sánchez Trigueros has also pointed out that Miguel de Unamuno's work too – after careful trimming and manipulation – was used to serve the ideology of 1939<sup>16</sup>. From a 21st century perspective, in the light of the many studies that have been written on the author and taking his work as a whole, this clearly has to be seen to be nonsense.

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPANISH EMPIRE, PAST AND PRESENT

Far from calling the country to arms, or giving ideological succour to radical ideologies, Ganivet's aim was to promote a kind of Spanish spiritual retreat, after centuries of fruitless wars and a collective departure from its true nature:

[...] one of Ganivet's purposes in writing the *Idearium* was to exhort his country to abandon its expansionism and seek a regeneration based on its perennial spiritual values. At a time of difficulty for Spain, Ganivet insisted that Spain's grandeur had been misunderstood, misinterpreted and undervalued; that the Spaniards' true greatness lay in their stoic ethic and their spiritual values, regardless of their wealth and territorial expansion<sup>17</sup>.

Here we should note that there are certain theoretical inconsistencies in Ganivet's thinking, resulting from the intellectual volatility of his views. Those contradictions are particularly evident when he turns to the Spanish imperial experience. Ganivet condemned Spanish expansion, but gave his blessing to Spain's undertakings in the Americas. At the same time, he regretted that the Americas and not Africa had been the preferred object of that expansion. In the light of the 19th-century crisis in empire, he called on Spain to concentrate its vital forces, proposing that the country should be sealed off against any external influence and any possibility of Spain's losing its way in fresh international adventures. At the same time though, in *El Porvenir de España*, he called for the creation of a colonial empire in Africa, to fulfil the wishes expressed in Isabella the Catholic's will. This inconsistency in Ganivet's thinking has been stressed by one of his greatest critics, Herbert Ramsden:

Ganivet the champion of *européismo*, or Ganivet the staunch traditionalist? Ganivet, the upholder of Spain's mission in Africa, or Ganivet the advocate of Spain's withdrawal from such involvements? Ganivet the democrat or Ganivet the Falangist? Ganivet the Socialist or Ganivet the Carlist? [...] <sup>18</sup>.

From the very beginning of *Idearium Español* Ganivet clarified the political programme he proposed for Spain:

The only starting point for the restoration of Spanish life is the concentration of all our energy within our own territory. With bolts, keys and padlocks, we must lock all the doors through which the Spanish spirit has escaped from Spain, to be spilled in the four corners of the west, and whence today it expects its salvation to come [...] <sup>19</sup>.

As to that specifically Spanish Empire, the canonical one forged in the 16th century, Ganivet largely denies its value. He felt that Spanish imperial expansion was merely a pale reflection of what Spain might have been, if it had stuck to the course set in its "mother ideas" (to use the term he himself coined in his failed doctoral thesis):

The Golden Century of Spanish arts, however admirable, is no more than a shadow, a sign, of what it might have been, if after the Reconquest, we had concentrated our forces and applied ourselves to realising our own ideals. The energy accumulated in our struggle against the Arabs was not merely warrior energy, as many believe; it was [...] spiritual energy<sup>20</sup>.

These “mother ideas” are explained in the first part of the *Idearium*. From the dynamics of Spanish history during antiquity comes the influence of Seneca’s stoic philosophy; the weight of the medieval experience (the retaking of Al-Andalus), further crystallised in Spanish religious mysticism and the fruit of Arab influence in Spain (“without the Arab’s detracting from the Christian, but rather giving it a brighter tone, the most marked movements in Spanish religious spirit were born”)<sup>21</sup>. Another aspect, controversial when viewed from our own present day perspective, was also expressed with warlike fanaticism:

The most original and fertile creation of our religious spirit sprang from the Arab invasion. [...] While in the schools of Europe, Christian philosophy crumbled in sterile and at times absurd debates, in our country it was transformed into permanent war; and just as reality did not spring forth among quills and inkwells but amidst the clash of arms and the boiling of the blood, it is not written in volumes but in popular war poetry [...] <sup>22</sup>.

We should also mention the particular importance Ganivet assigned to geographical factors in the formation and being of nations, very specifically in his interpretation of Spain. This territorial conception of history to which we have already referred was to become essential to Ganivet’s thinking. Unamuno expressed it thus in *El Porvenir de España*.

The most enduring feature of a country is the spirit of the territory. [...]

This is not a peculiar criterion: on the contrary, it is universal, since there exists a means of achieving true human fraternity, which is not to unite all men in artificial organisations, but to affirm the personality of each one, linking differing ideas for the sake of concord and opposing ideas for the sake of tolerance [...] <sup>23</sup>.

In keeping with the geo-political thinking of the times, marked perhaps by theories on *Lebensraum*, Ganivet’s stance was close to these notions of a controversial political geography.

For Ganivet the insular or continental condition, or the specific condition of Spain (the peninsula *par excellence*, as he himself wrote), conceived almost as an island, should have resulted in a special relationship between Spain and its surroundings. It should have shaped the very essence of a foreign policy, but one that was quite different to that that forged after 1492 and particularly from 1517 on<sup>24</sup>. Spain, forged between two continents, an island with two gateways (the Straits of Gibraltar and the Pyrenees) was for Ganivet an “ill-guarded house”<sup>25</sup>, exposed in his own words by the Spaniards’ incapacity or unwillingness to defend their borders against all foreign influences. It was a sort of “international park”<sup>26</sup>:

Spain is a peninsula, or more precisely “the peninsula”, because no peninsula comes so close to being an island as ours. The Pyrenees are both an isthmus and a wall; they do not prevent invasions but they insulate us and allow us to preserve our independent character. In fact, we have believed ourselves to be an island, and maybe that mistake explains many of the anomalies in our history. [...] <sup>27</sup>

While Ganivet sees expansionism as being justified among continental and island nations (the archetypal representative being England), he considers that Spain's particular situation, far from leading it to build a modern empire, should have resulted in its taking shelter behind the Pyrenees:

[...] our action in the centre of the continent was an immense political absurdity, a stupidity whose only excuse was and is that it was supported by the prevailing ideas of the time on political law and the practice of government. By insisting on acting as if it were a continental nation, Spain, a peninsular nation, condemned itself to certain ruin; whereas a nation fortifies itself by acquiring new territories that are within its natural sphere of action, it weakens itself with the actions of others which bring with them circumstances that are both unfavourable to its own interests and enduring. [...] <sup>28</sup>

Reading *Idearium*, one concludes that, faced with the two possible futures that its territorial condition offered Spain, Ganivet felt that the specific circumstances of the country's medieval history (which elsewhere he praises as helping to forge the Spanish character) had led it into an expansionism which ill befitted it. Medieval Spain, fragmented into different political units during the Reconquest, and the growing dominance of Castile, consecrated by the discovery of America, pushed the Aragonese Crown and Portugal into new ventures in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic respectively, in the face of Spanish external interests. Other nations, which did not have the necessary strength to undertake such quests, also embarked on this expansion and the projection on other stages of the warrior ideal forged during the Reconquest. But the Spanish ideal, its warrior mysticism and its stoic philosophical heritage, provided Spain with a spiritual force which belied its relative lack of material capacity. As a result of this drive, Spain extended its borders across the globe, relinquishing custody of ideals that it should have preserved like a priceless treasure. At the same time, the Reconquest fostered in Spain a north-south structural division (Portugal, Castile, Aragon), which contravened the position Ganivet considered desirable. In a somewhat vain exercise, more aesthetic than realistic, he wrote:

[...] How much more logical a division from right to left would be, leaving in the north a Kingdom of Spain and in the south, a Kingdom of Andalusia, a vandal state, semi-African and semi-European. [...] <sup>29</sup>

In all Ganivet's reflections on this speculative vision, he drew a clear link between the experiences of Spain's imperial past and his own period in the late 19th century.

Our entire history demonstrates that we owed our triumphs more to our spiritual energy than to our strength (for our strengths were always fewer than our works). Let us not seek today to trade in papers and entrust our future to a merely material power. Before leaving Spain we must forge within the territory ideas that will guide our actions; walking blindly forward can only bring us hazardous and ephemeral triumphs and certain and final disasters <sup>30</sup>.

Somewhat surprisingly, Ganivet did lend his support to the creation of an African empire, invoking Isabella the Catholic's will. Ultimately, it meant completing paths that had been laid down in the Middle Ages. And it would have meant extending the Reconquest *sine die* to fulfil the Spanish territorial principle:

[...] having closed all the doors of the nation, this last one must be left open if we are not to remain entirely in darkness. I consider that on completion of the Reconquest, the African policy was entirely natural. Had we devoted all our national forces to it, we would have founded an indestructible political power, both because it would have been born logically out of our medieval history, and because it would not have brought us into conflict with the interests of Europe [...]<sup>31</sup>.

Controversially, Ganivet considered the colonisation of the Americas to have been a break with the trends determined by Spain's "mother ideas". In his opinion, these ideas should have driven Spain to pursue its reconquest further in Africa. He reiterated this view in an exchange of letters with Unamuno, where he qualified many of his ideas. However, Ganivet argued in favour of Spain's work in the Americas, feeling that the American policy remained a priority amongst Spain's international concerns:

Our past and our present bind us to the Spanish Americas; when we think and work, we should know that we are not thinking and working only for the peninsula and its adjoining islands but for the great demarcation on which our fate and our language are based. Just as it was difficult to retain our material domination, it is easy – now, more than ever, that our dominion is entirely extinguished – to retain our influence, in order not to grow spiritually smaller, the most distressing of all declines. [...]<sup>32</sup>

Challenging Unamuno, Ganivet argued that there had been much Spanish idealism in the colonisation of the Americas:

You say, friend Unamuno, that Spain went to the Americas in search of gold, and I say that the Spaniards – not all of them – may have gone in search of gold but that Spain was driven by an ideal. That ideal was founded in Spain during the Reconquest, when the aspirations of Spain and the church merged and when faith was embodied in political life. [...] Individual motivations should not be confused with those of the nation. [...]<sup>33</sup>

## EPILOGUE

In the strengthening of ties between Spain and its old colonies we can see a nexus between Ganivet's past and the present in which he lived. The driving idea, not so much in censuring the decisions of the past, but in setting out an agenda for the future, remains the same: to seal Spain off from any foreign influence in a quest for the regeneration of its national life. His vision flickers erratically, casting out a prediction which is in many ways ambiguous and disputable. And this could not come through an emulation of foreign experiences (remember Ganivet's aversion to industrialisation, which he had

seen during his time in Antwerp), nor through Spain's embarking on fresh adventures abroad:

Neither in the North, nor in the West, nor in the East shall Spain find a promise of aggrandisement through its policies abroad [...] We need to rebuild our material strengths in order to rebuild our domestic affairs, and our ideal force to influence the sphere of our legitimate foreign interests, to fortify our prestige among the peoples of Hispanic origin. As for the restoration of our ideal, nobody can be in any doubt that it must be exclusively our own work: we may receive outside influences, take guidance from the words and deeds of other nations; but unless we Hispanicise our work, unless the foreign is subjected to the Spanish and as long as we continue to live in today's uncertainty, then we shall not rise up again. [...] <sup>34</sup>

Spain's prostration aroused in Ganivet what one might define as a "national zeal", a certain Spanish chauvinism. In his view, it was precisely because Spain had led the way in the 16th century, becoming the first nation to forge a modern colonial empire, that it was also the first to complete the cycle, culminating in the loss of that empire, and the need to seek domestic regeneration. In doing so, it had no viable model to fall back on; rather he proposed that it should become itself again. The model for those who would redirect it must be based on an awareness that

[...] Spain was the first European nation to be made great by policies of expansion and conquest; it was the first to decline and thus complete the material evolution, spending itself over extensive territories, and it is the first that must now set itself to completely restoring order, politically and socially; it therefore finds itself in a different position to other European nations; it should imitate none, but must rather initiate new procedures, adapting to new events in history. [...] <sup>35</sup>

This sort of intellectual Darwinism, a reflection of theories that were in vogue at the time <sup>36</sup>, was expressed by Ganivet using Don Quixote as the model and incarnation of Spain's essence <sup>37</sup>, likening the country to the Spanish *hidalgo* [gentleman], whose madness, transposed to the national situation, took the form of Spain's imperial ambition, its quests abroad, the search for adventure, and a satisfaction which could only be found in itself: "[...] Don Quixote set out on three quests and [...] Spain has only completed one; it still has two left in which to heal itself and die. [...]" <sup>38</sup>.

For Ganivet, the possibility of Spain embarking on new overseas adventures was political nonsense. The following remark illustrates particularly well his personal idea of the ideal colonisation, utterly opposed to economic exploitation or the quest for profit which marked the race for empire developing at the time in Africa. He saw this mercantile, exploitative colonialism as being utterly opposed to what he saw as Spain's essence as a nation (though not – as we have seen – to that of all Spaniards):

There are those who trust in the colonies, as if we did not know that with our system of colonisation, the colonies cost us more than they give us [...]. The true colony must cost the metropolis something, for colonising does not mean doing business, but civilising peoples



and giving expression to ideas. Let other nations practise utilitarian colonisation and let us continue with our traditional system which, for better or for worse, is ultimately ours. We have come too far to change course now, and much as we might like to, we cannot take another bearing. Even if we could we would not advance at all by superimposing on a building constructed according to our ideas a different body and a different style, copied perhaps without discernment. [...] <sup>39</sup>

Bearing in mind that the colonial wars in Morocco were to contribute to the Restoration's humiliation in the reign of Alfonso XIII, to the fall of the monarchy itself, and to the proclamation of the republic, as well as to the creation of a military state "*à l'Africaine*" – as the revolt that sparked the Civil War would show – Ganivet's declarations were remarkably prescient.

Can there be anything more absurd than a Spanish colonial undertaking in Africa? Given that we are still recovering from our American colonisation, given that we have two large colonies which, far from bringing us the strengths we lack, are like two open drains, two causes of the break-up of the little we had managed to found – how then are we going to embark on fresh colonial undertakings? Were we to do so, we would pay for it eventually: an economic disaster, a civil war, an experiment in republicanism, some new attack on our independence [...] <sup>40</sup>.

As we have already said, though, Ganivet's contradictory work often contains both statement and counter-statement. In *El Porvenir de España*, he was not as scornful of the possibility of Spain's finding a place for itself in the carve-up of Africa.

You will tell me that Africa is all divided up like holy bread; but the whole world, or most of it, was also once divided between Spain and Portugal, and look what we have come to now. [...] <sup>41</sup>

It is, in our opinion, clear that the basis of the main criticism that can be made (and that, actually, has been made) of Ganivet's theories and political essays is a certain ambivalence, a lack of consistency and continuity in his exposition, that makes it quite difficult to categorise them satisfactorily; these final reflections, in our opinion, help to demonstrate this clearly. More than a result of any intellectual inconsistency, this can only be attributed to a certain effervescence of Ganivet's exposition and to the fact that, in any case, it was impossible for him at times to escape from the trends of his era, determined by the fluidity of the imperial paradigm and by a quite universal consideration of empire building as a political, economical, scientific and cultural priority for the nations seeking to increment their prosperity and power.

The originality of Ganivet's works, in relation to his perception of the Spanish empire is, first of all, that he presents a highly innovative vision of this experience and its significance, a heterodox and polemic vision which created the basis for a lively debate. This interpretation came in a moment of a political crisis, in a precise moment (the Spanish-American war and the disaster of the Spanish navy in Santiago de Cuba and Cavite) that symbolises not only the final and more dramatic stages of the decadence

and failure of this empire but also the complete incapacity of the Restoration regime to overcome it or to produce new political paradigms to stimulate the development of regenerative formulas for the failing political system.

In this context, in which the loss of Cuba and the Philippines was going to act as a catharsis for the crystallization of a new generation of highly committed intellectuals and with the structural deficiencies of Spanish political and cultural reality, Ganivet's *Idearium* acted as a sort of catalyst. It presented not only a significantly original analysis (whatever imbalances can be detected in it) and an interpretation of the meaning of the imperial experience but also a program for the future, that at a very early stage was confronted in an exciting, elating and friendly, but also extremely academic way, with the divergent interpretations of another precursor: Miguel de Unamuno.

The inconsistencies and excesses of Ganivet's proposals made them an easy prey for some of the political radicalisms of the 20th century; it would be unfair to base a study of his works on this sad reality rather than on his relevance as a bright iconoclast who defies categorisation. In any case, any study of the significance of the imperial experience in the history of Europe would be incomplete without reference to the Spanish case. Rather than present a canonical case study of the years of imperial splendour, we considered it much more interesting and historiographically innovative to present a study of the intellectual approach to the concept of empire in time of uncommon crisis, political unrest and military defeat.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> On the process of independence of the American states, see J. Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808-1826*, New York 1986; F-X. Guerra (ed.), *Revoluciones Hispánicas. Independencias Americanas y Liberalismo Español*, Madrid 1995; J.M. Portillo, *Crisis Atlántica. Autonomía e Independencia en la Crisis de la Monarquía Hispánica*, Madrid 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> On the succession of sterile constitutions promulgated throughout the 19th century, one regenerationist, Macías Picavea wrote: "The Constitution. The work of schools and parties in constant communication with the court and its components; fiction, in written form only, never a living reality; an artificial reflection of the latest Parisian fashion; the people are utterly detached from it", [...] R. Macías Picavea, *El Problema Nacional*, Madrid 1979, pp. 180-181. Quoted in F. Tomás y Valiente, *Códigos y constituciones, 1808-1878*, Madrid 1989, p. 132. This is essential reading for an understanding of the development of and complications faced by Spanish constitutionalism.
- <sup>3</sup> On the death of Ferdinand VII in 1833 a conflict arose which, although merely dynastic in its origins (the King's brother, Don Carlos, refused to recognise Ferdinand's daughter, Isabella, as queen, arguing that his own claim was greater under the succession rules of the Spanish crown), developed into a confrontation between an absolutist faction grouped around Don Carlos and a liberal party united around the young Isabella and her mother, María Cristina of Naples.
- <sup>4</sup> During these years, the army had become a major political player on the Spanish stage, enthroning and unseating regimes in a system that highlighted the incapacity of a feeble political class to assume control of the liberal system it sought to introduce; figures such as Espartero, Narváez, Prim, Serrano and Martínez Campos reflected the predominance of the military estate in the exercise of political

- representation. The military had been strengthened by the Napoleonic wars and independence in the Americas; 19th-century officers, forged in this situation and imbued with a combination of liberal ideals and military intransigence, became the leading players on the political stage. See G. Cardona, *El Poder Militar en España hasta la Guerra Civil*, Madrid 1983.
- <sup>5</sup> J.A. Agee, *Unamuno y Ganivet ante el Problema de España*, Atlanta 1979, p. 3. Cf. S. Juliá, *Historia de las dos Españas*, Madrid 2004; J.-R. Aymes, S. Salaün, *Les fins de siècles en Espagne*, Paris 2003; C. Serrano, *El Turno del Pueblo: Crisis Nacional, Movimientos Populares y Populismo en España*, Barcelona 2000; P. Cerezo Galán, *El Mal del Siglo. El Conflicto Entre Ilustración y Romanticismo en la Crisis Finisecular del siglo XIX*, Madrid 2003; S. Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire, 1898-1923*, Oxford 1997.
- <sup>6</sup> Agee, *Unamuno y Ganivet* cit., pp. 79 ff.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Varela, *La Novela de España. Los Intelectuales y el Problema Español*, Madrid, 1999, p. 121. The dispute was resolved by Pope Leo XIII, who decided in favour of Spain's claim to sovereignty. After the "Disaster of '98" the islands were sold to the Second Reich. For the international adventures in the years prior to the Glorious Revolution, see J. Zamora, J. (ed), *Historia de España de Menéndez Pidal*, vol. XXXIV, *La era Isabelina y el sexenio democrático*, Madrid 1996. pp. 328-335.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Varela, *La Novela* cit. p. 148-149.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. P. Concejo Álvarez, *La crisis del 98 en Ganivet y Unamuno*, in F. Sevilla, C. Alvar (eds) *Actas del XIII Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas*, Madrid 2000. p. 131.
- <sup>10</sup> H. Ramsden, *Ángel Ganivet's "Idearium Español"*, Manchester 1967. pp. 1, 2.
- <sup>11</sup> A. Ganivet, *Idearium Español. El Porvenir de España*, Madrid 1999, p. 109, (Edited by E.I. Fox).
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Ginsberg, *Ángel Ganivet*, London 1985 p. 22.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- <sup>14</sup> Ramsden, *Ángel Ganivet's "Idearium"* cit., p. 12
- <sup>15</sup> A. Sánchez Trigueros, *El Idearium Español en el Contexto Ideológico de Fin de Siglo* in J.C. Rabaté, (ed); *Crise Intellectuelle et Politique en Espagne à la Fin du XIXe siècle*, Paris 1999, pp. 196.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- <sup>17</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium Español* cit., p. 29.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- <sup>24</sup> The year Charles V landed in Spain. Claudio Sánchez Albornoz considered this to be the start of the "short-circuit of modernity".
- <sup>25</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium Español* cit., p. 71.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- <sup>36</sup> Cf. M. Esteban de Vega, *Los Conceptos de Decadencia y Regeneración en la España de Fin de Siglo* in Rabaté (ed); *Crise Intellectuelle* cit., p. 75.
- <sup>37</sup> A common device among the Generation of '98 and, more generally, in the literature of the early 20th century. Examples include Ortega, Unamuno and Alcalá Zamora.
- <sup>38</sup> *Idearium Español* cit. p 205.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

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