I

Julián Sanz del Río

1. The good tidings

In the history of nineteenth-century Spanish thought there is one moment that deserves special attention: it is the moment when Julián Sanz del Río, holder of the chair of History of Philosophy at the University of Madrid, rose to deliver the inaugural address of the 1857–1858 academic year.¹ Far from being the conventional homily that might have been expected on such an occasion, his Discurso sketched out an entire program for the articulation of human knowledge, a vast projection into the pedagogical sphere of a philosophy that aspired to a state of universal harmony. The speaker envisaged a university, a sort of Civitas Scientiae, where all the multiple activities of the intellect would flow together, and from which, once their union had taken place, they would flow out again to enrich the spiritual seedbed of all humanity. It is hardly necessary to state that the university of which he spoke was an abstract one which, ‘as the worthy abode of a divine idea’, could prudently be located in the unattainable sphere of utopia. Using the words of his old friend and fellow student Henri-Frédéric Amiel, Sanz del Río might have said that ‘the Ideal poisoned for him all imperfect possessions’. As a utopia, the university envisioned by Sanz del Río attempted to evade immediate and distasteful reality. The new organization would be the sanctuary where worship would be offered to the future ‘ideal of humanity’, and where the men who were adepts of the new doctrine – namely, the harmonic rationalism of Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781–1832) – would carry out their priestly mission.

It may seem an exaggeration to compare the Spanish branch of Krausist philosophy to a religious cult, but in fact Sanz del Río himself offers a basis for such a comparison in a number of places in his Discurso. After sketching with broad strokes the structure of Krausist doctrine, the speaker admonishes the members of the university
community who are listening to him, ‘Once raised to this spiritual priesthood... it will be your primary duty to teach the truth, to propagate it and live wholly for it... You must honor your teaching with the witness of your conduct and defend it as the religion of your calling, under the Religion that unites us all.’ Possession and teaching of the truth, metaphysics and pedagogy, priesthood and proselytizing: in the Discurso, which is Sanz del Río’s first philosophical publication, the dual aspect into which the activities of the Spanish Krausist movement were divided is already apparent. Indeed, it is the preface that anticipates by three years the appearance of Ideal de la Humanidad para la vida (1860), a work in which, by adapting Krause’s Urbild der Menschheit (1811), the Spanish thinker endowed the budding movement with a code of doctrine and conduct.3 Sanz del Río’s later writings merely elaborate the conceptual outline drawn up in the Discurso, an elaboration that was only partial, for the leader of the Spanish Krausist school could not, for a number of reasons, accomplish more than a preliminary task of ideological transplantation. It was his followers who developed the Krausist movement’s intellectual program, exploring with the aid of the new doctrinal instrument the domains of philosophy, law, history, pedagogy, religion, and the social sciences.

But a master, a body of doctrine, and a group of disciples are not sufficient reason to confer on the Krausist school the attributes of a religious cult, nor would the fact that it also gave rise to spectacular conversions, heresies, apostasies, and persecutions. Other philosophical sects display similar vicissitudes in the course of their evolution. What is really remarkable about the Krausist movement, in contrast to other philosophical systems which consider philosophy as something more than a mere adjunct to theology, lies in the profound religious spirit that informs all its doctrines, its metaphysics as well as its ethics, its aesthetics as well as its philosophy of history. Krausism has often been defined as a systematic theosophy. And indeed, unless an effort is made to dig into the system’s theosophic subsoil, we will reach the mistaken conclusion that it is an empty metaphysical construction, like so many that arose under the influence of Kantian criticism. But the fact is that a very strong current of religious concern flowed from the doctrine to its supporters and aroused in them the sense of a very pressing mission whose ultimate goal was universal brotherhood, a new ideal of humanity according to which humanity is thought of as ‘a collective person in unity of idea and purpose, and of constructive work toward that purpose.’4 Such were the ‘good tidings’ preached by Sanz del Río on
the occasion we have just described. Reading between the lines of this convoluted and wordy *Discourse*, we can discern the pattern that the Spanish Krausist movement means to follow in its struggle to bring about the new order of things. This pattern includes the following postulates: (a) a definition of the content and method of scientific knowledge; (b) a new vision of man as synthesis of the universe; and (c) a harmonic organization of humanity. But the objectives set by the speaker in presenting his doctrine are not reduced to these three alone. Krausism is not simply an epistemology, a philosophical anthropology, and a philosophy of history. It is a systematic philosophy, or attempts to be one, in which the different facets of the real can be accommodated and harmonized. But, in addition, at the very heart of the system beats a reforming and humanitarian impulse that translates into a program of action substantially similar to those expressed at about the same time in the social philosophy advocated by such men as Fourier and Saint-Simon. This activism, whose roots are to be found in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, appears frequently in the nineteenth with whiffs of messianic inspiration. As a result of the positivist view of history, or under the influence of Hegelian philosophy, all of Europe heard the echoes of some social panacea or other. Kraus was, therefore, very much a man of his time in proclaiming that, after a long period of confusion, humanity was about to cross the threshold of full maturity. But the German philosopher added an intensely personal touch by identifying the ideal of political and social perfection with that of religious fulfillment. The advent of the better world would result from a rational grasp of the idea of God and of divine order. In this respect it should be pointed out that Kraus revitalized the tradition originating in the fourteenth-century German mystics. Up to a point, his philosophy can be considered as the rational extension of the mysticism of men like Heinrich Suso, Johannes Tauler, and especially Master Eckhart. To the ingenuous pantheism of these men was closely linked a desire for social concord built on a foundation of Christian ethics. Their respective aspirations could be summarized, in Eckhart’s words, by the establishment of a society in which men would live ‘in such a way that virtue would no longer be an effort’.

2. Years of apprenticeship

The circumstances that had determined Julián Sanz del Río’s philosophical mission seem fortuitous at first glance. It might be said that an
inconstant star had guided this introverted and austere Castilian from the moment when he emerged as a Doctor of Canon Law from the University of Granada in 1836 to that other moment in 1867 when, having drawn the fire of the reactionary faction, he was stripped of his university chair by arbitrary decree of one of Isabella II’s ministers. His professional life, therefore, coincided with the reign of Isabella II, during which Spanish life, in the absence of solid virtues, had to settle for making a virtue of improvisation. In 1837, after a previous and abortive attempt in 1822, the University of Madrid was improvised with the few assets – not all of them useless – brought from the decrepit University of Alcalá de Henares. In 1845 Pedro José Pidal improvised a ‘modern’ plan of studies for higher education, using the French university system as a model. In 1852 an improvised Faculty of Philosophy was given university status. By means of the quick and easy procedure known as ‘a stroke of the pen’, the youth of Spain was to be given suitable instruments for intellectual work. Reforms and counter-reforms followed hard on each other’s heels, and the rapidity with which they took place was itself an indication of their pitifully small positive content. Most of them had been conceived by politicians playing at pedagogy, and reflected the exquisite vacuity that lurked under the rhetorical flourishes of the period’s political life. They were not really plans for university studies, but plans of study that might perhaps have been useful had university studies in fact existed. But there were none. There were no competent professors, no libraries, no laboratories.

No one thought of studying…Instruction was pure farce, a tacit agreement between teachers and pupils founded on mutual ignorance, slovenliness, and almost criminal neglect. The experimental sciences had been forgotten; physics was studied without ever seeing a machine or a piece of apparatus… If anything was left of the old order of things it was lack of discipline, disorder, the bribery involved in voting and the provision of chairs by examination. 8

It was indeed a sorry picture, made still more lamentable by the hypocrisy and irresponsibility of official pedagogues. With the possible exception of jurists and theologians, there was scarcely anyone competent to perform the teaching work that the reformers of public instruction were supposedly trying to carry out. Under such circumstances it is not strange that someone had the idea of improvising a body of professors charged with the dual task of teaching the youth of university age as well as preparing future occupants of chairs. And in
fact Pedro Gómez de la Serna, Minister of the Interior during the last government of Espartero’s regency, appointed Julián Sanz del Río, by a decree of 8 June 1843, interim professor of philosophy at the newly established University of Madrid, under the express condition that the appointee spend two years in Germany perfecting his philosophical knowledge in the ‘chief schools’ there.

Sanz del Río’s philosophical baggage before his trip to Germany is a matter for conjecture, but there is no question that it was not excessive. Until then his academic and professional career had been confined to the area of civil and canon law, and, in view of the way the study of law was understood in Spain at the time, it is doubtful that the future professor could have extracted from it any nourishment for his metaphysical concerns. Before 1843 his knowledge of German philosophy had been indirect and desultory. His German was very imperfect, as can be inferred from his own statements. He may have had no other information about the post-Kantian idealist philosophers than that which could be found—in vague and distorted form—in the eclecticism of Victor Cousin and the spiritualism of Royer-Collard. A short time before he became the vigorous and unquestioning exponent of Krausist ideas, his only knowledge of Krausist philosophy had come from reading the Cours de Droit naturel by the German jurist Heinrich Ahrens, who taught, from his chair at the University of Brussels, a system of philosophy of law directly inspired by Krause’s doctrines. Ahrens’s book was translated into Spanish by a friend and colleague of Sanz del Río, Ruperto Navarro Zamorano, and successive generations of Spanish and Hispano-American jurists have profited from this Spanish version published in 1841 and reprinted many times. But his first contact with Krausism, though superficial and confused, seems to have aroused in Sanz del Río an interest bordering on obsession. Krause’s progressivist and humanitarian ethics served as the back door through which the budding philosopher slipped into the labyrinth of the ‘brand-new philosophy’. The ‘chief schools’ which he was supposed to study in Germany, according to the terms of his appointment, were reduced to one: harmonic rationalism. And this exclusiveness, openly dogmatic in nature, was to give direction for several decades not only to speculative studies but to the whole intellectual renascence in Spain.

Paris represented the first stage on this journey in search of philosophical adventures. Victor Cousin’s eclectic spiritualism, offspring of a mariage de convenance between the Scottish school and post-Kantian transcendentalism, had been officially accepted and held sway in the
French capital. This brilliant and innocuous philosophy responded to the laudable desire to harmonize the most widely disparate doctrines in a spirit very characteristic of the times, which had also inspired the reigning July Monarchy – a monarchy also anxious to reconcile the irreconcilable. In Paris Sanz del Río had an interview with the high priest of French philosophy, and his impression both of the philosopher and the philosophy is tinged with a good deal of scorn:

[Philosophy] as a pure science and an independent science is not cultivated with any degree of profundity or sincerity; people work in philosophy, but subordinating it to an end which is not philosophy but rather . . . politics, social reform, and even purposes that are hardly noble, such as vanity. . . . I visited Monsieur Cousin and, though I would not dream of judging him as a man, I will say that as a philosopher he contrived to lower even the rather poor opinion in which I held him. I regret more every day the influence that French philosophy and science – a science of imposture and pure appearance – have exercised among us for more than half a century. What has it brought us except a disinclination to work for ourselves, false knowledge, and especially immorality and petulant egotism?  

The pervasiveness of Sanz del Río’s aversion cannot be exaggerated. To begin with, it is very unusual for a cultivated Spaniard of the period to condemn forms of a foreign culture which had been nourishing the thought of his own country for a long time. It is true that ever since the early years of the eighteenth century there had been repeated outrages against the abject imitation of everything originating in France, but they were not accompanied by censure of French cultural values. They were more likely to be complaints arising out of an injured sense of patriotism or, more precisely, out of a fear of losing by foreign invasion everything deemed essential for the existence and persistence of the national genius. The disdain shown by Sanz del Río toward French philosophy – and which is only a symptom of a generalized scorn for everything French – responds to reasons of a very different kind. Against xenophobes and cultural nationalists the standard-bearer of the Spanish Krausist movement would always insist on the need to go beyond Spain’s borders in search of stimuli for the country’s spiritual rejuvenation, convinced as he was that any authentic renascence is – as Azorín was to say later – the fertilization of national thought by foreign thought. But he was to deny vehemently that such stimuli could be found in a culture like the French, which besides being incompatible with the Spanish spirit also threatened to destroy the ethical bases on which that future renascence would necessarily have to be built.  

Considerably more profitable was the visit made by Sanz del Río in
the summer of 1843 to Heinrich Ahrens in Brussels, a visit no doubt motivated by the enthusiasm he had felt on reading the *Cours de Droit naturel*. His determination to dedicate himself entirely to the study of Krausist philosophy, with the ostensible aim of using it as a means to judge the suitability of other doctrines for teaching purposes which might interest the Spanish government, dates from his visit to Brussels. The summary aversion with which he regarded French philosophy, and the indifference he was later to exhibit, in Germany, for any doctrine but Krause’s, make us suspect that when he proposed to go abroad he was chiefly guided by the desire to examine at close quarters a form of speculative thought that he already considered to be the only one worthy of study and admiration. In this respect it must be admitted that he did not carry out faithfully the official mission on which he had been sent.

If due note is taken of his obsessive preference for Krausism, the significance for Sanz del Río of his interviews with Ahrens is understandable. The German jurist had studied under Krause in Göttingen before 1831, the year when both professor and pupil had had to flee from that university center, where at the time a deeply suspicious intolerance was attempting to smother any attempt at ideological non-conformity. It was Ahrens who, impressed by the Spanish student’s neophyte zeal, suggested to Sanz del Río the idea of settling in Heidelberg, where two of Krause’s distinguished disciples were teaching: Baron Hermann von Leonhardi, the master’s son-in-law and editor, and Carl David August Röder, interested, like Ahrens, in the philosophy of law. Sanz del Río worked with both men from the autumn of 1843 to the end of 1844. In Heidelberg he lodged as a pupil in the home of the historian Georg Weber, whose *Allgemeine Weltgeschichte* he was to translate into Spanish years later. And as a fellow pupil he had a young man from Geneva who was also much given at that time to the study of Krausist philosophy: Henri-Frédéric Amiel.

3. Teaching career

After his return to Madrid in 1844 Sanz del Río modestly declined to occupy the chair of philosophy he had been offered, claiming that his professional preparation was still too deficient to allow him to confront the responsibilities of university teaching. And to correct this deficiency he spent ten years in retirement in the town of Illescas, systematically rethinking and patiently reworking Krause’s philosophy. At last, in
1854, he returned to academic tasks. His innate shyness and a certain puritanical austerity of word and gesture gradually dissipated over the course of years, in the warmth of his hearers’ enthusiasm. Professors, literary men, and political figures abounded among the students who crowded his classroom, where, for the first time in Madrid, glimpses were offered of faraway ideological horizons and new methods of study and work were contrived with remarkable discipline and enthusiasm. Sanz del Río’s influence was extraordinary from 1857 until his death in 1869, a period that witnessed the emergence of the first generation of Spanish Krausists. In greater or lesser degree these men were spurred by the desire to break down the wall of provincial distrust which, by isolating Spain from European thought, had condemned the country to spiritual apathy and material penury. But their contemplation of contemporary Spain – ignorant and garrulous, indigent and bleeding from many wounds – also made them feel the need of breaking with the Spain of the past, the Spain that had arisen from the Counter-Reformation and buttressed Catholic imperialism, the Spain that was both militaristic and priest-ridden and which, rightly or wrongly, they held responsible for the miseries of the moment. Received ideas, traditional beliefs, tiresome clichés, and the trivialities of the cultural nationalism then in vogue were of no avail in this task of carrying out a historical ‘purification’. According to the views of this generation, it was essential to fight under any ideological banner whatever so long as it was radically new and offered at least a faint hope of rescuing the country from its prevailing spiritual atrophy. It is useless to repeat, as has been done so many times, that Krausist philosophy was not the solution, that when Sanz del Río went to seek enlightenment he merely got entangled in the metaphysical web spun by a German philosopher who even today is unknown to most of his countrymen. Menéndez Pelayo’s inventory of the Krausist movement, which he describes as ‘a horde of fanatical sectarians . . . a sort of Masonic lodge, a mutual aid society, a tribe, a circle of illuminati, a clique . . . something, in short, murky and repugnant to every independent soul’,18 would no doubt be plausible if it were accompanied by an explanation of how such a sinister alliance could seduce men whose rectitude and independence of judgment were unquestionable even at the time. In the absence of such an explanation, Menéndez Pelayo’s invective must be relegated to the barren terrain of overblown rhetoric. For it was not enough to lament the scorn shown by the inquisitive and dissatisfied young men of the time toward the cultural values of the Spain of the past, nor could these lost sheep be
brought back to ‘true knowledge’ and ‘sound philosophy’ merely by setting the critical bibliography of *La ciencia española* under their noses. Neither suggestions of a return to Luis Vives’s ‘criticism’ or Fox Morcillo’s ‘harmonism’, nor impressive lists of authors and works that reflected the Spanish cultural past could produce the desired effect at a moment whose chief characteristics were lack of appreciation – no doubt largely unfounded – for that past, and a new feeling of perplexity about the future. Even Juan Valera, who always maintained an equal distance between ingenuous praise of things Spanish and idolatrous admiration for things foreign, revealed the gnawing dismay felt at the time by those who most prided themselves on their moderation and equanimity. ‘I venture to say that in the last fifty or sixty years’, he wrote in 1868, ‘it seems we are worse off than ever... The important thing now is not to praise ourselves in public, nor to boast about what we were, but to point out our own faults.’

This was the state of uneasiness which was largely responsible for Sanz del Río’s success; he, for his part, though he could not hope to set it at rest, did succeed in bringing it to the surface and placing it in a setting where it could have positive results. For a metaphysical anxiety lay at the core of that uneasiness, and this in its turn usually carries the promise of an intellectual flowering. Like all genuine teachers, Sanz del Río was essentially an *accoucheur* of ideas. The young men who listened to him, often without quite understanding him, were distressed as much by the difficulty of diagnosing their own unrest as by their desire to give form to the flashes of thought evoked by their teacher’s words. The very abstruseness of an unfamiliar and technical philosophical language, the tortuous clauses vibrating with intractable echoes of German syntax, the demonstrations *more geometrico*, were so many challenges to the listener’s timid curiosity, to his mental stamina, and at the very least aroused the perplexity that is the threshold of speculative thought. To begin with, these young men learned that it is not easy to make philosophy, and that the difficulty of making philosophy was practically insuperable in a cultural setting that had remained almost entirely isolated from modern philosophy. In philosophical matters – and to this degree Menéndez Pelayo was right – Spanish thought had yielded its most mature fruits in the sixteenth century. But of essentially new philosophy, the philosophy that began with Descartes, almost nothing was known, and even if something had been it is doubtful whether the seeds of that knowledge would have taken root in the subsoil of Spain, so long barren of intellectual rigor and discipline. Sanz del Río and his
followers were the first to immerse the Spanish mind in modern rationalism. Had they done no more than this the cultural scope of their work would have been considerable, for understanding European culture means, in large measure, understanding the cultural forms assumed by that rationalism. To accept or reject Europe – as Unamuno later realized – meant accepting or rejecting the rationalist world-view that had reigned supreme ever since the seventeenth century. All the rest meant putting the cart before the horse, mistaking the accidents – the objective forms of culture – for the substance, the primacy of reason over the other faculties of the psyche. Compared with the attempts at Europeanization which had begun in Spain in the eighteenth century, the Krausist movement was the first to see clearly to the root of the problem. The others had contented themselves with advocating the adoption of foreign ways of thinking and acting; that is, political ideas, economic doctrines, social practices, literary forms, styles in art, without realizing that such ways were organic manifestations of a certain attitude toward life which – fortunately or unfortunately, for the moment it does not matter which – was unknown in Spain. If advocacy of a Europeanized Spain is accepted, the conclusion will have to be that the Krausists viewed the problem more logically than their predecessors. It was not isolated forms of European culture that they were eager to transfer to the Spanish side of the Pyrenees. It was the rational interpretation of the world that fed those forms. For, as Sanz del Río proclaimed, ‘such is the force of reason...[that] either alone or in company, favored or persecuted, time has no power over her; each new word of hers opens a new horizon, extends and affirms, after great struggles, the realm of truth’.