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THE LITERATURE OF THE SPANISH PEOPLE

From Roman Times to the Present Day

BY

GERALD BRENAN

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TO

THE MEMORY OF

ROGER FRY

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THE scope and purpose of this book require a few words of explanation. This is the history of a literature. Unlike most such histories, however, it does not confine itself to books written in one language, but describes the literary productions of a people—in this case the Spanish people—in whatever language they may have been written, from the earliest times to the present day.

Let me show what in practice this amounts to. The first chapter treats of the Latin literature of the Peninsula, written during the Roman and Visigothic periods, but only in so far as it can be considered to be truly Spanish. That is to say, it attempts to show the native element in these writings emerging from the Roman and West Mediterranean. Even Prudentius, thoroughly Spanish in feeling and education though he is, has been examined solely from this angle.

The next chapter, which is longer, discusses the brilliant and sophisticated literature that was written in Arabic. Here there are really two subjects—the classical literature in prose and verse, in which it is not possible to distinguish any specifically Spanish element, and the popular poetry of what we may call the jongleurs. Of the first I should have had nothing to say, especially as I do not read Arabic, if it had not seemed to me that the kind of images and conceits found in this poetry deserved mention for the reason that later on, in the seventeenth century, much the same kind of imagery reappears in a Baroque context. One cannot see Góngora or the Andalusian poets who followed him in their proper perspective—nor, for that matter, Juan Ramón Jiménez or García Lorca—unless one realises that they were obeying a tendency peculiar to their race and environment.

With regard to the second kind of Spanish Arabic poetry—

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that of the jongleurs—my obligation was clear. This poetry was written only in Spain, was derived from a popular poetry sung in Romance and had a long line of descent in Spanish literature. No effort of the imagination is required to see that Ibn Guzmán and the Archpriest of Hita belong to a similar school of jongleuresque poetry, or that the popular *copla* that is sung in the streets of Seville today is descended from the *markaz* or *jarcha* of Spanish-Arab popular song. One of the most striking things in Spanish literature is the persistence of the native folk-song and the influence it has had upon even the most sophisticated poets.

In my third chapter I describe the appearance of the Castilian border epic—so comparable to that of the *romance* or ballad two centuries later—and then the sudden spate of Galician-Portuguese lyric poetry that followed it. Galicians and Portuguese shared at this time one culture and one language: the political division between them was less than that which divided the Duchy of Normandy from the Île de France. Moreover this poetry acquired such a prestige that Galician became for a time the recognized language for lyric verse throughout Castile, not only among the nobles but also to some extent among the people. Its influence in forming and giving music to the Castilian lyric of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was capital, all the more since it did not operate through direct imitation by the court poets, but welled up in a devious and unconscious way in popular song. For this reason no history of Castilian poetry could be written without some account of the Galician *cantigas de amigo*.

Round about the year 1500 there was a short period during which Portuguese poets wrote in Spanish as well as in their own language, just as in earlier times Castilians had written in Galician-Portuguese. I have therefore given a few pages to the greatest of these bilingual poets, Gil Vicente, though only as regards his Spanish works. After this Portuguese literature broke away from Spanish and took its own course. At about the same time Galician ceased to exist as a cultural language and sank to the position of a provincial dialect. In this it continued until the 1860's, when the Federal Movement brought a brief renaissance and a burst of poetry. It seemed only natural to discuss this, all the more since

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Galician is a language or dialect that has not travelled so far from Spanish as has modern Portuguese.

Over the question of whether I should include Catalan literature I have had hesitations. Catalan is a branch of the *langue d'oc* or Provençal language and much less closely related to Spanish than are Portuguese or Galician. Moreover this literature—divided into two parts, a medieval and a modern—is extensive. I have therefore compromised. That is to say, I have given a brief sketch of medieval Catalan, concentrating on the figure of Auziàs March, a great and original poet who is almost totally unknown to modern readers, and have said nothing of the revival of Catalan literature in the nineteenth century. March was in any case not a Catalan but a Valencian, and he wrote according to the rules of Provençal prosody in a literary idiom which was greatly influenced by that used by the troubadours. If I can succeed in drawing to him the attention of those Englishmen who read Provençal, I shall not have misspent my time, for as a poet he towers above the other exponents of *lo Gay Saber*.

Finally I should say that I have brought this work to a close with the rise of the generation that was born after 1890, thus excluding García Lorca and the contemporary school of poetry.

Perhaps it is desirable that I should say something of the various objects I have had in mind in writing this book. The first has been to persuade English readers to sample the delights of Spanish literature. It is not so extensive a literature as English or French, but it is a very concentrated one, possessing a strong flavour and idiosyncrasy. Both history and geography have combined to give it a character unlike that of other European countries: history, through the Arab occupation, the religious idealism induced by the Counter-Reformation and the frequent periods of anarchy and civil war; geography, through the division of the country by high mountain ranges into separate regions each with its own culture, by the aridity of the soil and by the sharp changes of vegetation and climate. It is thus the literature of a people who have scarcely ever known security or comfort. As one reads it one cannot fail to be struck by the fact that from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century the note of hunger runs persistently

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through the novels, or that such a large number of Spanish writers have either spent some part of their lives in prison or else been exiles. These things account for the tautness and alertness that characterize so much Spanish literature and for the background of melancholy and nostalgia (*soledad*) out of which even the gayest passages—and much Spanish literature is gay—have sprung. They also account for the realism.

Spanish prose can of course be read in translation, though with a considerable loss of quality, but the poetry has to be read in the original. Now Spanish lyric poetry has no rival in Europe except English. Since it has never had any influence outside its own country, it is virgin territory, and it invites discovery because there is so much in its forms and its imagery that accords with modern tendencies. Also, though melodious, it is austere—little given either to wordiness or to rhetoric. For these reasons I would like to urge not only poetry lovers but practising poets to sample it. To read prose with proper appreciation it is necessary to know a language well, but poetry can often be enjoyed after a comparatively slight acquaintance. This is particularly true in the case of Spanish poetry, because it is written in a strongly stressed language whose vocabulary is mainly Latin, and it makes little use of idiomatic expressions. Except in satirical verse, the gulf fixed between the language proper to poetry and that to daily speech is great. Anyone therefore who is prepared to give a few evenings to a Spanish grammar and to spend his holiday in Spain will be in a position to start reading it. As for Galician poetry, it is scarcely more difficult to a Spaniard than is Scots poetry to an Englishman. The person who can read Spanish will therefore easily master it.

Another purpose that this book is intended to serve is that of a history of the literature written by Spaniards. Literary history is, in one respect, merely a branch of a total history that includes in its various departments political history, social history and the history of art. With this in mind I have taken any opportunities that seemed to be offered for showing in what way Spanish literary works are to be regarded as an expression of the national spirit in successive ages and, incidentally, to use this for throwing

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light on the character of the Spanish people—supposing, that is, that peoples really have a continuous character. It is partly for this reason that I have included short chapters on the Roman and Arab periods. It may be thought that this is extending too far the scope of a critical study of literature. But what limits can be laid down? Literature comes out of and leads back into life, and we should read very narrowly indeed if we never allowed our thoughts to stray from the book before us to the character of the people and culture that produced it. Besides it is through its art and literature that the essential spirit of a country or age is most readily grasped.

However, the main object of a literary history must necessarily be to display and, if possible, account for the various tendencies, movements and revolutions of taste and sentiment that take place among the writers and poets of every successive age. These movements are governed partly by changes of feeling due to alterations in the social and political environment, and partly by technical considerations inherent in the literary medium itself. This second factor has received very little attention from English critics. We in our amateurish way tend to think of writers as solitary geniuses who appear for no particular reason, express themselves and their age and vanish again. All that we grudgingly allow to literary tradition is the fact that it provides 'influences'. Now this to my mind is a very perfunctory way of approaching any art. It pays no regard to the fact that the succession of works of literature in any country, arranged in their various forms and categories, has, except in periods of hesitation, a logic and unity of its own. We can see this more clearly if we look at the history of painting. From Giotto to Rafael and on through the Venetians to Rembrandt and Velazquez there is a steady and logical line of development, inherent in the nature of the art itself and only in part influenced by the ethos of the age and country in which the pictures were painted. The same is true from Constable and Delacroix down to the painters of today. This development, which exists in music too, may be less obvious in literature, but it is there all the same and I believe that the most important advance that could be made towards an objective understanding of the growth of literature would be to take some account of it.

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Preface

For tradition ought not to be thought of simply in the light of influences coming down from the past. That is not, as a rule, how it affects the artist, who himself chooses from among his predecessors the few whose guidance he requires. The poet, novelist or painter feels himself rather in the position of an explorer or pioneer: behind him stretch the lands already discovered and settled—before him are the new regions he must enter and map. That is to say, he will always have a compelling sense of something to be done that has not been done before: not merely a sense of what he personally can do in the way of expressing and developing his special gift or vision (though this also has to be considered), but an intimation of what the art he practises calls for and of the line—to be regarded as something like the grain in wood—along which he must move if he is to make progress. This may lead him—as in the case of Cézanne or Hopkins or Góngora—to a position where his work is isolated and does not express in any important respect the spirit of the age he lives in. In other words, what a tradition gives is not so much a series of works to be absorbed and imitated, as a pressure, coming out of the nature of the art itself in the position in which it has been left by his predecessors, which forces him to cross a new frontier. In most ages the various types of literature find themselves in this predicament, and the great writer is simply the man whose superior energies enable him to carry out an advance, the general necessity and direction of which many lesser men may have perceived. In this book I have endeavoured, whenever the indications seemed clear, to show this pressure at work.

However, the main emphasis of this book is laid, not on this elusive question of the literary-historical process, but on a critical examination of the principal poets, dramatists and prose writers. For this reason I have given a considerable amount of space to the outstanding figures and have dealt more briefly with the others. A large number of minor figures have been omitted altogether, or awarded only the briefest mention, in order to avoid cluttering up the book with names and so distracting the reader.

I must explain what I believe to be the proper approach to literary criticism. The business of a critic is, as Baudelaire said, to

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approach every work with an open mind and in the greatest possible state of aesthetic receptivity. He should never for a moment forget that a poem, a novel or a painting can be anything—that is to say, can have any form or content—so long as it evokes feeling, and that only when he has humbly and passively submitted himself to the work of the writer or painter will he be free to stand back and make comparisons and judgments. One has, therefore, the right to ask of the critic that he should allow no bias or preconceived opinion to affect him in his initial state of in-taking, only bearing in mind that one cannot expect his receptive organs to be adequate on all occasions. In one place at least in this work—in the appreciation of Gracián's prose writings—I am aware of probable deficiencies in mine, and there must be other pages where, in the labour of reading a great many books, I have failed to register properly. Such lapses I regret. But since I believe that one of the principal functions of art and literature, second only to the immediate delight and elevation of mind they give, is the manner in which they display the range and diversity of mind and experience open to human nature—thus putting us into the skin of persons very remote and different from ourselves and so mitigating our chronic state of self-imprisonment—I have not attempted to lay down any laws or principles, aesthetic, moral or religious, by which poems or prose works should be judged. Works of art and literature are, in my opinion, to be valued by the depth and quality of the experience they convey, and by the immediacy and clarity with which they convey it, rather than by their moral or ideological rightness. Ethical considerations only come in when they affect that experience by extending it or diminishing it.

I emphasize this view, which I believe to be the only one permissible to a critic, because the tendency shown in recent years to look at literature through the glasses of an ideological preconception and to rate highest those authors whose attitude to life is most in harmony with that of the critic seems to me regrettable. When these views are expressed by a great and admired poet, when they are echoed and drawn out by the little senate who take their laws from him, when the tone adopted is narrow, smug

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and cantankerous, when these dogmatic assertions are meekly received by readers who do not accept the ideological premises that dictated them, who can help being saddened by the decline in intellectual standards that is thus displayed? Literary criticism has its ethics, and it is the business of those who dislike the growth of the totalitarian mentality to resist the subjection of art to dogma and to stand out for the free examination and enjoyment of the literary production of all races and ages. Art and literature are to be judged by broad humanist standards, or by none at all.

Above all one should beware of the poet or philosopher critic. Poets have things to say about their art that are of the highest value and which no one else but poets can say. But the very fact that they are engaged in writing poetry of a specific sort means that—unless, like Dryden, Goethe, or Baudelaire, they are men of great breadth of mind and sensitivity of reaction—they are likely to have narrow and partial views on literature. We do not consult Lenin or even Lloyd George for an objective view of the political history of their countries, and so I do not see why we should expect from poets in a revolutionary age—and most ages are revolutionary in poetry—any better or juster view. Certainly we do not get it. The history of criticism by poets is strewn with dogmatic statements of contempt for their great predecessors and of absurd over-estimations of others. It may well be that such a narrowness of view is often a necessary condition of their work, though painters are less prone to show it, but at all events those of us who are not of the trade ought not to allow ourselves to be imposed on. For literature is by no means the possession of a small group of writers, who inevitably have their own axes to grind, who are all more or less cannibal-minded, but of its lovers and appreciators, wherever they may live and whatever their professions or modes of life may be. They alone are the judges of finished work and for them alone, with rare exceptions, is something like impartiality and a wide range of receptivity possible.

The critic then, if I am right, has to take into account the historical setting in which the work was produced: he must consider the problem which faced the writer, the means that were

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at his disposal, his artistic canons and intentions. He should not, for example, disparage Milton and Góngora for having written in a Latinized idiom, or Joyce, Pound and Cummings for preferring a jargon of their own invention. Rather he should submit himself with humility to what a writer has to give, and only when he is certain that he is attuned to it proceed to interpret and give judgment. If there is enough of the true stuff of poetry or literature in any writer, his work will always be worth reading. Yet the critic should also remember that he is a man of modern sensibilities and feelings. Every age has its special tastes and interests, and these will inevitably reduce the attractiveness of certain authors and increase those of others. Without abandoning therefore his fundamental impartiality, it will be only reasonable if he gives particular attention to those writers who have most to say to his contemporaries. Indeed he will only show that he is qualified to address his own age if in a certain measure he shares its tastes and point of view himself.

A final word must be said about the stress I have felt obliged to lay on medieval verse forms. The reader will, I fear, grow somewhat tired of the words *cuaderna vía*, *arte mayor* and *cantigas de amigo* and still more of *zéjel*, *estribillo* and *villancico*. But in the Middle Ages the form and genre are the important thing and not the genius or personality of the author. Each verse form is sustained by a school—one might almost say a guild—of jongleurs and poets, who supply a particular social need in much the same way as any other craftsman. Even such an apparently vivid personality as the Archpriest of Hita was following closely a traditional pattern and much of his, at first sight, amazing originality must be assigned to this. Except where, as in Italy, the spirit of classical literature makes itself felt, medieval poetry is deeply immersed in the traditional and anonymous.

With regard to the spelling of early poetry, I have followed, with slight simplifications, the rule set by Sr Dámaso Alonso in his excellent Anthology. That is to say, I have modernized it, keeping the older form only when it indicated a difference in pronunciation. Over Arabic words I have adopted what seemed in each case to be the most useful compromise.

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Preface

I would like to express my thanks to Don Juan Ramón Jiménez for his kind permission to quote the whole of one of his poems together with short extracts from four or five others. I would further like to express my thanks to Dr Arthur Waley for the help and encouragement he has given me over the early chapters, to Dr F. J. E. Raby for information about Mozarabic hymns, to Mrs Isobel Henderson for reading and criticizing the first chapter, to Professor J. B. Trend for his valuable suggestions, to Don Alberto Jiménez for information about modern writers, to Mr J. L. Gili for invaluable help with the bibliography, and to Mr C. J. Hope-Johnstone for reading the proofs. I am also indebted to my wife, Gamel Woolsey, for the help she has given me in many parts of this book and especially in translating poems. It is only fair to state that I set her an almost impossible task by insisting that they should, in almost every instance, be word for word translations of the original, because it is this original that I should like the reader, if he has any Spanish at all, to read. It was only within these limits that she was free to seek what is the natural goal of every translator—some equivalent in English of the form and spirit of the original poem. Here we both agreed that, if this could be obtained for a few lines, a certain lameness in the rest of the passage could be tolerated. In every translation much has to be sacrificed. Poems that could not be put into verse without some loss of literalness have been given in prose.

6 February 1951 GERALD BRENAN

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In this edition I have corrected the errors that had crept into the first edition, have added to the bibliography, and have done my best to bring the passages on Arabic poetry up to date. This last has not been easy. The book had been finished and was ready to go to press when Mr S. M. Stern made his dramatic discovery of eleventh-century Spanish lyrics embedded in Hebrew poems, and I added an appendix to record it. Since then he has made further additions to our knowledge. In the last number of *Al-Andalus*, for example, he has cleared up the precise differences between the verse forms of the *zéjel* and the *muwassaha*, which had puzzled previous Arabic scholars, and has reinterpreted certain technical terms, such as the *markaz*. I have emended the text as best I could to accord with this new information and have added a footnote.

But the subject is growing. Quite recently, Mr Stern tells me, twenty-four Arabic *muwassahas* containing *jarchas* or short stanzas in Romance have turned up in Morocco. These *jarchas* conform to the same type as those already discovered in Hebrew poems—that is to say they consist of verses put into the mouth of a girl of the lower classes and expressing her grief at being separated from her lover. Many of them, like the Galician *cantigas de amigo*, contain appeals to her mother. No doubt within a few years a whole anthology of these little lyrics will have been dug out of the Arabic and Hebrew strata in which they have been lying buried and then this chapter on the Arab period, which I regard as important for a proper understanding of Spanish literature, will need to be rewritten.

On looking through this book again I find a number of passages which I should like to rewrite. These mostly occur in chapters where I allowed myself to be influenced by the sense of hurry and urgency which from time to time comes over those who are

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engaged on long books. Thus I did not give enough space to the sixteenth century or to the drama of Lope de Vega, I dismissed too lightly the poetry of Quevedo and I dealt with Gracián, a writer whom I read with effort, in a perfunctory way. Perhaps also, as some reviewers said, I should have devoted more space to the twentieth century. Opinions will always differ upon where to bring a history of literature or an anthology to an end.

I have been criticized too by several people whose knowledge and judgment I respect for my interpretation of Calderon. If I have erred here, as I think I have, it has not been for lack of taking pains. I went to as much trouble to understand this playwright and to trace the way in which his work had developed as I did over any other writer. But I do not see how anyone can interpret his *comedias* in a satisfactory way while we remain in our present state of ignorance upon his intellectual background. The theological controversies of seventeenth-century Spain, the development of Jesuit casuistry, the influence of Jansenist ideas, the new attitude to pagan mythology are subjects that have never been adequately studied by scholars, and until this has been done very much in the intentions that lie behind Calderon's plays will remain unexplained. A young Hispanist scholar, Mr Pring-Mill, has suggested to me that the key to a great deal of what I found obscure lies in the Jesuit-Dominican controversy over free-will and predestination, and I think it probable that he is right.

Another reviewer has pointed out that in my preface I promised to 'display and, if possible, account for the various tendencies, movements and revolutions of taste and sentiment that take place among the writers and poets of every successive age', but that in fact I have carried this out very imperfectly. No doubt I promised too much. A book which fulfilled such a plan would need to examine in detail the work of a large number of minor writers and to probe into obscure origins, and this would give it a different and much more prolix character than I intended. But I think that I have made reasonably clear the main tendencies and revolutions of taste and that anyone who reads this book will get an impression of Spanish literature, not simply as a collection of separate writers of genius, but as an organic and continuous whole.

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Certainly it is desirable to obtain this. Just as one must have a certain acquaintance with the total work of a poet before one can receive the full effect of any single poem written by him, so one must possess some general familiarity with a literature if one wishes to draw the greatest possible benefit from any particular writer who contributes to it. This is not only for the obvious reason that poets and novelists draw so much of their style and content from previous poets and prose writers, but because there may be—indeed often are—elements in books or poems that do not acquire their full amplitude of meaning until long after the death of their author. To take a famous example from French literature, the line from Racine's play *Bérénice*, *Dans l'orient désert quel devint mon ennui!* could not stand out as it does until after the time of Baudelaire. Every great poem or passage of poetry is a sort of machine which acts on the mind through its faculty for calling up and condensing round it in a vivid way a body of associations and if, with the passage of time, the number and emotive power of the associations available to it should happen to grow, its potency will be increased proportionally.

To conclude, I will say that my aim in writing this book has been a modest one. I wished to draw the attention of English and American readers to Spanish literature, to show them what was most worth reading in it and, when the occasion offered, to help them to a better appreciation of it. I make no claim to special knowledge and, though I have done my best to absorb the work of scholars in the field I covered, the point of view from which I have written has been that of the person who reads literature for pleasure. I wrote to teach myself as well as other people and I would like to think that the sense of discovery I often felt while working on this book may have helped to make it more stimulating to readers. All the efforts of critics are wasted unless they lead us back to an increased understanding and enjoyment of the originals.

I have been influenced too by another consideration. It is becoming more and more the custom today for literary critics to leave all discussion of the early periods of literature to specialists, who alone are supposed to have the qualifications necessary for

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writing upon them. I believe that this retreat to the narrowness of modern times is a mistake and must eventually end in a large tract of literature becoming fossilized. If it is the business of the specialist or academic person to provide information and guidance of a detailed and circumscribed kind, it is that of the general writer on literature—the man of letters or critic—to make use of that information to carry out his ordinary task. In this there is no one who can take his place. The business of turning over and airing past works of literature and rearranging them in the *musée imaginaire* of modern times demands the services of a professional writer, and it is no disparagement to the academic person (who may sometimes be such a writer too) to say that someone else can do this sort of work best. It is thus because I think that literary critics must be prepared to take risks and, after due preparation, exercise their pens freely on the early periods of literature that I, who am no scholar, have been encouraged to write this history. If my book has any merit, it may be, I think, because I have approached the subject from this angle.

12 *September* 1952 GERALD BRENAN

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