

Introduction

The Spirit of the Age in Literature and Liberalism: Spain and its Empire after 1808

ANDREW GINGER

University of Stirling

Two hundred years ago, in 1808, a chain of events began that was ultimately to transform both peninsular Spain and a significant proportion of the globe. Following the overthrow of the Spanish monarch Carlos IV by his son, Fernando, Imperial France under the rule of Napoleon I took its opportunity to capture Spain, seating José Bonaparte I on the throne. A series of uprisings broke out across the country, and crises of governance erupted across the vast swathe of the Americas that was ruled by the Spanish monarchy. In the space of the six years of the ensuing conflict, known in Spain as the ‘War of Independence’, Spanish control over the American continent was fatally weakened, the Inquisition was abolished both by the Bonapartists (1808) and by the resistance against them (1812), and peninsular liberal nationalism was crystalized in the anti-Bonapartist Cortes (Parliament) called in Cádiz in 1810, which drew up the constitution of 1812. The shockwaves of these events resonated throughout the nineteenth century and beyond: the collapse of one of the largest empires the world has seen, continual crises of governability and frontier conflicts across the Spanish-speaking world, and the rise of liberal political processes and discourse over a vast area of the south and central Atlantic and out to the Pacific coast. Understandably, since the nineteenth century and to this day, 1808 has been viewed as the foundational moment of the modern Spanish-speaking world, and in the reshaping of the globe; its longer legacy is as important if not more so than the

immediate events of the year itself. For that reason, the bicentennial in 2008 saw the beginning of a series of anniversary celebrations across Spanish-speaking countries. In Britain and Ireland, Hispanists held commemorative academic events at Kings College in London, the National Galleries in Scotland (both of these in collaboration with Spanish diplomats), and at the Association of Hispanists annual conference. In intellectual and cultural terms, a key legacy of 1808 was an abiding imperative to root thought and the arts in what came to be called the *spirit of the age*, *el espíritu del siglo*. The phrase was most famously used in Spanish by Martínez de la Rosa in his work of that title (1835-51; reissued in 2008 by Bibliobazaar), but the general trend in thought that it represents both preceded and exceeded his specific deployment of the phrase. As late as his 1922 novel *El Incongruente*, the avant-gardist Gómez de la Serna depicted a protagonist (Gustavo) as a ‘caso agravado del mal del siglo’ (1947: 10). Immediate experience of the contemporary critical, even cataclysmic moment, which had so altered the world, became the focal point of reflection and creativity, even of existence itself. Recognition, in the strongest sense – *anagnorisis* – of this constitutive character of one’s being in time, this *maladie du siècle* as Musset famously put it, was the starting point and stimulus of a quest for comprehension undertaken by the understanding and imagination. Writers, artists, and thinkers sought in History an account of the dislocating but transformative forces now metamorphosing and defining contemporary life, and hoped to glimpse the latter’s destiny. Writers and artists of the Spanish-speaking world were far from alone in this enterprise, which was shared, in variants, across much of the West and beyond, as people attempted to come to terms with a succession of not dissimilar, interconnected disturbances and changes (on Britain, for example, see Himmelfarb 2007). Spanish-speaking intellectuals consciously engaged with debates elsewhere, relating and

comparing their own experience with those of others, just as they often saw 1808 as their own distinct entry-point to the shared modern world.

But subsequently, for much of the twentieth century, nineteenth-century Spanish cultural and intellectual reflection on the *spirit of the age* enjoyed a peculiar but defining place in the minds of critics and theorists. It was at once still absolutely central and yet became also utterly marginal to considerations of the 'modern period'.

On the one hand, it was deemed foundational, because of its association with the forging of the modern world, on the other, it was regarded with deep suspicion. The two perspectives were joined in a view that there was something very wrong, deeply flawed, with the way that the Spanish-speaking world had entered the present-day.

Three interrelated factors seem to have been decisive here. The first is a disdain among Hispanists for the achievements of much of nineteenth-century Spanish cultural and intellectual life, seen as the fountain of later ills and failings, especially before the latter part of the 1870s (for example Butt 1978). The second, as Iarocci (2006) has noted, is a tendency to write the history of the modern period of culture and the intellect in the West primarily with reference to the North-West Atlantic, thus relegating 'the South'. And the third is a strain of more general hostility to the 'Romanticism' with which debates on the *spirit of the age* were often identified. This animosity is to be found among critics and theorists throughout the West, from T.S. Eliot to the New Criticism, and reaching its culmination in aspects of High Theory in the later twentieth-century (not least McGann 1983). For reasons that are not entirely clear, but perhaps deserve further investigation, such sentiment seems to have been particularly marked among modern Anglophone Hispanists whose aesthetic taste, with notable exceptions, has tended to be almost relentlessly 'Post-Romantic'. Even allowing for the influence of a critic like Sebold, there has never been a strong

counterveiling, pro-Romantic critical tradition of the sort embodied by Abrams in British literary studies (for a useful account of the British critical tradition, see Christie 2004).

Three key objections stand out within this concatenation of animosity. First, the Romantic obsession with the *spirit of the age* was, at best, a misguided attempt to see history and culture as the ordered, organic self-expression of humanity, and, at worst, false consciousness in the service of bourgeois oppression (a particularly notable exponent of this criticism was McGann 1983). Second, writers and intellectuals, before and since, who view history and identity as constructs, matters of continual craft and artifice, are eminently preferable; Post-Romanticism is aesthetically and even ethically superior (Eliot 1920; or, Foucault 1977). Third, in the case of the Spanish-speaking countries, the already dubious worth of Romanticism is rendered worse still in its Hispanic incarnations, because these are fundamentally flawed attempts to establish a modern culture, and lack serious relevance to the major intellectual and cultural achievements of the West (again, Butt 1978 implies this viewpoint). This was true of the Hispanic Romantic period in its widest sense, that is, including not just intellectual and cultural life, but its supposedly dismal political and social context.

But at the very end of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first, in the years preceding the bicentenary of 1808, Hispanists and others have begun to question this dominant interpretation and to sketch an alternative view. In so doing, they have returned to a renewed and nuanced understanding of the *spirit of the age*. Across a range of disciplines, attention has focused critically on the supposed superiority of the Post-Romantic over the Romantic, and even the distinction between the two. It has often been imagined that the ‘Romantic’ view of history failed to be

critical of its own supposedly ahistorical perspective on time. But to this charge, Chandler (1999) replies that all such criticisms are themselves unthinkable outside of the intellectual framework within which the spirit of the age was originally explored. In Scottish, English, French and Spanish studies, scholars have shown that there were many forms of 'Romantic' historicism that did not necessarily depend on the elevation of an essential, transcendental consciousness above embodied and linguistic 'construction' and 'reconstruction' of identity (examples in addition to Chandler include Manning 2002; Jenson 2001). More still, a head-on defence has been mounted of both the distinct northern and southern European veins of Transcendental Idealist historiography, with their visions of history as the fulfillment of 'laws' by a spirit or the Idea(s) (most famously perhaps Žižek 1991; see Ginger 2008 for a revised view both of French and Spanish Transcendental Idealism, and of historicist reconstructions of identity in Spain). Such enterprises can themselves reasonably be interpreted as efforts to show how sense can be and is made of contingent crises. Some twenty-first century thinking thus engages directly and creatively with the nineteenth-century's obsession with the *spirit of the age*, precisely in its own contemporary quest to re-open the question of what it might mean to be in time. The nineteenth-century world and its historical consciousness has returned as our shadow. It is our phantasmal interlocutor, like Nicola Barker's Darkmans who makes an 'uncertain approach' to her character Gaffar as the latter declares '*See? I make my own history*' (2007: 838).

At the same time, it has become increasingly difficult to sustain the view that there was something uniquely wrong with the Spanish-language cultures and societies that emerged in the wake of 1808. The focus in this special issue is on the Spanish peninsula and its falling empire in the nineteenth century through a series of

significant cases that shed light on the changes in the period from the disruption of 1808 through to the loss of most of the remaining overseas territories. (The collection does not seek to address the complex trajectory of the Spanish Americas once independence movements erupted in earnest.) Revisionist historians of Spanish economics, politics, and society, such as Shubert (1990), Cruz (1996), Ringrose (1996), and Burdiel (1998; 1999), have shown how outdated historical interpretations of change in the West reinforce the view that Spain was backwards. These authors turn away from concern with seeking an elusive, perhaps chimerical revolutionary ‘bourgeoisie’, and from teleological assumptions about economic development, for example that industrialization is the single most important measure. They look instead to the significance of subtler reconfigurations of social and economic networks across and beyond Spain. In common with some other revisionist historians of Europe, Ringrose and Cruz consequently emphasize gradual change led by elites with its roots in the eighteenth century. But Shubert and Burdiel, along with others such as Thomson (2008), have shown the comparative strength of liberal institutions and practices in European terms, their direct social and economic impact and relevance, and the extent of increasing politicization and mobilization of the wider population during civil conflicts. The significance of such work is that it enables us to re-understand the spirit of the age, and the legacy of 1808. Once one leaves aside the view that the liberal state and what Marichal (1977) once dubbed the *new society* should have been founded on a revolutionary bourgeoisie or on widespread industrialization, it is possible to comprehend what the vast transformations of politics, society, and economics amounted to. We are left with a new, more nuanced vision of what the spirit of the age, and for that matter *liberalism*, meant. If we might call this a more positive view of the Spanish nineteenth century and its legacy, that is

not because we could reasonably see the changes as unequivocally a ‘good thing’ or because we might choose to ignore the contingent chains of events that gave rise to them. It was, after all, initially invasion, war, and even dynastic conflict, not revolution, that broke the back of the *ancien régime*. The new interpretations are positive rather in the broader sense that they emphasize the power of the contingent historical dynamic to transform lives, and to do so in ways that at least provided a possibility, among other potential outcomes, that such change might be for the better. The views of Burdiel and Thomson dovetail with the work of intellectual and cultural historians such as Portillo Valdés (2000) and Ginger who have emphasized that the thought and culture generated in Spain’s territories in the first seven to eight decades of the nineteenth century makes a major and distinctive contribution to developments in the West. This has involved significant re-evaluations, of the national liberalism of 1812, for example, and of the literary canon. The latter had previously been carved out to present bold experimentation as something sporadic rather than sustained before the very end of the century. Such reinterpretations contribute to reshaping the overarching historical narrative of modern Western ideas and culture. As Iarocci (2006) has remarked, even within Postmodernism, and for all its protestations of concern for the marginalized, the major theoretical reference points were almost always predominantly canonical intellectuals of the North-West Atlantic. The reassertion of the broader sweep of the nineteenth century connects with but adds significantly to the work of Labanyi (2000) and others who have shown how established canonical Spanish writers of the late nineteenth century, such as Galdós and Pardo Bazán, are important figures in much broader terms, especially because of their distinct contribution to Post-Romanticism. Valis has remarked that once one takes a longer view of the century, and acknowledges the importance of revisionist

history, the question is not how the (mis-)match of modernity and modernization points to backwardness, but ‘how the maladjustment between modernity and modernization brings about a modern consciousness in nineteenth-century Spanish society’ (2002: 120). Perhaps even the word *maladjustment* might be qualified, given the nuanced findings of the new historians. Indeed, the first seventy to eighty years of the Spanish nineteenth century do not simply present a significant variant of how modern consciousness might emerge, with a lasting legacy to the present day, as Valis shows. They were the theatre of action for major thinkers and writers in Western terms, just as in politics, Spanish liberalism was a strikingly enduring and potent, even surprisingly inclusive force in its own right.

Where does all this leave us at the opening of the twenty-first century, looking back on 1808 and its legacy, on the spirit of the age? The barrier erected between the Post-Romantic and the Romantic is giving way, and our complex connection to the spirit of the age and its historicism has now been renewed, even as our understanding of what these actually meant has been radically reshaped. At the same time, the impact of the cataclysm of 1808 in Spain and its empire contributes significantly to that wider spirit precisely through reconceived interpretations of the modern political, intellectual, and literary culture of the nineteenth century. Situating ourselves now in relation to the spirit of the age means recognizing - again in the strong sense of *anagnorisis* - the possibilities and potential which were, and are disclosed in efforts both to shape and to comprehend the forms of the contingent historical dynamics and experience unleashed in 1808.

The essays in the present collection have been grouped into three sections that relate to major issues in resituating the legacy and aftermath of 1808 in place and time, in comprehending the spirit of the age. The first (Davies, Eissa, Ferris) consider the

Atlantic dimensions of Spain and its empire after 1808, the second (Lawless, Ginger) cases of the renewal of the literary canon, and the third (Muñoz, Round) genealogies. In practice, these three concerns continually overlap: the Atlantic is both the site of a significant part of the transformations afoot and also a way therefore to understand the genealogy of changes; the renewal of the canon is deeply intertwined with reinterpretations of nineteenth-century efforts to understand such genealogies.

Davies, Eissa, and Ferris consider respectively a liberal family dynasty (the Labras) emerging from 1808 with major involvement both in Spain and Cuba; the circumstances of the transformation of political culture in New Spain in 1808 following events in Spain; and the efforts of Spanish intellectuals to adjust their thinking to a decisive change in the Atlantic world in the nineteenth century, the progressive rise to hegemony of the United States which was ultimately to take from Spain much of its remaining overseas territories (Cuba and the Philippines). Both Davies and Eissa take on board major contributions of the revisionist history of liberalism: Davies in underlining the role of kinship within the social and even regional network of a military family, and Eissa as his starting point that 1808 in the Americas was not the immediate signal for independence movements to take over. But each in turn seeks out the substantive senses in which 1808 was to change the Spanish-speaking world. For Eissa, the conflicts and debates around New Spain's curious indictment of its Viceroy for treason against the Spanish monarchy represented neither a fundamentally new acknowledgement of the value of public opinion, nor (evidently) an immediate rejection of Spanish sovereignty. Rather they mattered because they so intensely politicized what was considered *public opinion* among different groups vying to claim true legitimacy. A new political culture was thereby conceived. In turn, Davies underlines how the idea of the significance of

1808, and the subsequent parliament and constitution, was propagated through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth not least through close family ties and, above all, as a game of Chinese whispers, in which its meaning was continually altered and renewed in response to changing circumstances and new intellectual, political, and social imperatives, including the anti-slavery campaign. One of these major historical transformations was the alteration in the balance of power in the Atlantic, effected by the decline of Spain following 1808 and the rise of the US. Ferris shows how the latter development played an increasing part in the thoughts of Spanish intellectuals seeking to comprehend technological modernization. Once more, Ferris acknowledges the nuances of the picture, the blend of hostility to and admiration for American advances, in the context of a less dramatic but by no means inconsiderable transformation of Spain's infrastructure. But she also shows how it was precisely this pattern of nuances in Spanish thought that helped enable thinking about technological change to advance within the context of that troubled, small empire.

The Chinese whispers spread too through the continual crises of governance that beset Spain, taking a new turn in the 1860s and early 1870s as the reigning Bourbon family was for the first time widely opposed and then formally deposed by forces within (1868), and even constitutional monarchy temporarily broke down with the Republic of 1873 to 1874. Lawless and Ginger focus their reconsideration of the Spanish canon on those years, on literary efforts to express what the situation meant for attempts to conceive of a genealogy of the spirit of the age. Specifically they focus on the writings and impact of Antonio Ros de Olano (d.1886), born in 1808, literally a child of the new age, an *enfant du siècle*. Ros de Olano is by no means the only major figure to have been re-evaluated as part of the changing canon of the first seven

decades of the nineteenth century; Álvarez, Ovejas, Flores, the prose of Castro, and the thinkers behind the constitution of 1812, among others, figure prominently in the reconceived literary and intellectual histories of the period. However, Ros has become emblematic of this change, as far as literature is concerned, as is signalled in the decision of Editorial Crítica to include Jaime Pont's 2008 edition of his works in its *Clásicos y modernos* series, where he figures in the exclusive company of Lope de Vega, Calderón, Sánchez Ferlosio, Martín-Santos, Galdós, Alas, and the *Poema de mio Cid*. Lawless examines Ros's 1868 story 'Maese Cornelio Tácito' finding in it an attempt to write about the genealogy of the age in a way that is stripped of hierarchies and clear, defining structures, and instead seeks the meaning of names in a world of scatology and disproportions. Ginger finds in Ros's 1873 work *Jornadas de retorno* and his earlier *Doctor Lañuela* (1863), a key reference point for a social network of literary friends engaging in a complex dialogue in response to the political events of the early 1870s. These exchanges amounted to a 'literature of the First Republic'. Such a perspective helps us interpret the significance of a re-evaluated Alarcón and of Valera's canonical novel *Pepita Jiménez*, as part of sophisticated efforts to conceive of national genealogy when profound strains appear in efforts to grasp the relationship between 'lo grande' and 'lo pequeño', the overarching and the local, the grand narrative and the anecdotal. The momentary dilates and the scale of supposedly grand narrative contracts in these literary experiments. Neither Lawless nor Ginger see these developments in isolation from earlier or subsequent trends. Rather, Lawless relates Ros's alternative genealogies to ongoing debates about the possibility or otherwise of objective historicism, and Ginger sees in the 'literature of the First Republic' reflections on an ever-impending collapse, always already present in the history of Spain after 1808.

Taken together, what these first two sections of the collection suggest is that the genealogy of the spirit of the age, stemming from 1808, took winding, rather un-Hegelian paths as its historical potential unfurled, and, just as importantly, that this contested, mutating course of modern Spain's genealogy was explicitly acknowledged and addressed by intellectuals of the time. Arguably, the significance of writings about the spirit of the age lies less in any given version of the contours of history, than in the fact of debate about them, and in the multiple, often experimental, even at times open-ended forms that such discussions took. In the final section, Muñoz and Round echo such sentiments. While Muñoz shows just how deeply and self-consciously contested were Spain's foundational narratives, Round explores not just the subtle pathways of literary genealogies in Galdós, but also the parallel complexities and uncertainties that we now encounter in identifying them.

Muñoz focuses on one of the core elements of Spain's historical genealogy: the country's continual association in Western minds with the Inquisition. As he shows, an obsession with and quandary over the Tribunal's constitutive role in national narratives continued through the middle of the century, well beyond the point when the institution had been closed down. The fraught debates about genealogy carried over into the realm of literature, where writers undertook imaginative explorations of the national narrative. Carolina Coronado's *La Sigea* shows just how self-critical and, in that sense, intellectually fertile such discussions could become, as the writer brings into question highly gendered beliefs that true nationhood implied submission to a master narrative.

'Recognizing' the significance of the spirit of the age, therefore, means acknowledging that the nineteenth-century's contested, collective quest for genealogies contained within itself an open-ended potential for continual self-

questioning. Round's essay on the great nineteenth-century novelist Galdós, and his enigmatic *El amigo Manso*, both completes the special issue and once more takes up the spirit of the age. Round does something more than to investigate how a Spanish intellectual might have engaged in complex efforts to situate his work in the historical legacy of thought and literature. Rather the article is itself an experiment in the enigmas of genealogy, pondering an apparently close connection between Galdós and Chaucer that appears in the reader's eye but cannot, at least as yet, be fully accounted for. In that sense, Round himself renews the true spirit of the age. To do so cannot mean crudely asserting the ongoing relevance of past ideas to twentieth-first-century life, or delighting in some supposed evolutionary continuity from 1808 extending to the present day. It means instead sensing the more fragile resemblances and recurrences that echo across time, attending to history's endless Chinese whispers, and finding ourselves in and among them.

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