The Spanish “difference,” widely publicized by tour-istic rhetoric, is really the routinized and commer-
cialized echo of a powerful and enduring historical image: that of Spain as a refuge for sensitivities in flight from the spiritual diet of modern society. Yet as we know, the per-
sistence of manners—the indispensable ingredient of the difference—would eventually become the source of a painful dilemma that would make of nineteenth-century Spain the stage of an irreconcilable encounter between those for whom the abandonment of ancestral habits was the country’s most urgent task, and those for whom the preservation of those same habits represented Spain’s sur-
vival as a human entity, a particular “being” in the world.

We are dealing with two different and largely antithet-
cal conceptions of nationality. One is nationality as a
means, as an instrument for specific social functions,
goals, and achievements of which it is the protagonist,
artifact, and beneficiary. The other is nationality as actor,
as creature, as a form of life through which a special
historical memory and spiritual style move, speak, and
gesticulate.

The first of these visions, that of nationality as a project
within modern-day aspirations, explains the impatience
and anguish with which so many Spaniards came to view
their history during the past century. The modern world
is characterized by a peculiar and vast reification, in the
triple sense of the word: an object as external fact, objec-
tivity as an external criterion (empirical and impersonal)
for evaluating reality, and an objective as a specific goal of
things to be obtained. This is a world which sets the terms
for success and failure in remarkably explicit and pro-
grammatic ways. In this world the respectability and legit-
immcy of political entities are assigned through their
capacity for recruiting, mounting, and launching of eco-
nomic forces: life’s expectations and rewards are defined
as susceptible of being measured, accumulated,
organized, and planned, as something to be satisfied by
means of structures systematically designed to that end:
and finally, the institutionalization of scientific progress
toward domination of the material and even social en-
vironment provides the foundations and direction of
knowledge.

This was the world in which Spain protruded as a pain-
ful and scandalous exception. Other societies could claim
civil and technical achievements, accumulate goods, dis-
charge energies, equip their peoples with vigorous and
useful knowledge—look to the future. Yet in the “con-
quering” nation par excellence, the presumed founder of
the modern nation-state—the press, literature, and public
opinion were filled with voices lamenting Spain’s inca-
pacity to join the course of the reigning historical impetus
by contributing to its agenda or matching its expertise.

The French Encyclopedists had exhibited Spain as a
vast gap in the universe of lights, and now domestic critics
joined them by concluding that their country had arrived
at the gates of contemporary life Tibetanized (as Ortega y
Gasset phrased it) by confining attitudes and beliefs and
exhausted under the weight of a tradition in ruins. For
these critics Spain was not only backward, it was also a
cheapened nation. Modernity was, above all, serious busi-
ness. Marx spoke not as a social revolutionary but as a
man of his time when, in The Communist Manifesto, he
placed modern engineering above gothic cathedrals and
became retrospectively irritated at the waste of human
energies during such periods as the Middle Ages, which
oscillated between spurs of great activity and a custom-
ary lethargy. Modernity constitutes urgently structured
work and the rationalized use of the clock. The “progress”
of efficient societies is clearly marked by the elimination
of festivities, of “consuming” daily time with traditional
forms of expression from conversation to music during
work, the erosion of ancestral forms of identity such as
costumes, dance, and song—in other words, manners,
that become associated with stagnation and “ignorant”
partialism, odious to the universalistic spirit of “pro-
gress.” Spain was the archetypal land of ritual luxury, of a
majestic and ironic fatalism, of a brilliant and seductive
artisanship of leisure. It should therefore come as no sur-
prise that the anguished witnesses to the “enormous
Spanish inferiority” viewed their enduring and opulently
picturesque surroundings as the baroque leavings of an
anguishing national stagnation.

There is, of course, another nationalism. It is what so-
ciologists call “cultural nationalism,” where the texture
and theme of a society is understood as an inherently
autonomous symbolic phenomenon, such as the panoply
of feelings, habits, forms of pleasure, sadness, or exalta-
tion, and intellectual or imaginative styles peculiar to a
certain community. For this version of nationalism, cul-
ture is not, as for social or political nationalism, an
instrumentality of objectives or a repertory of functions, but an artistic and dramatic event: the language, melody, theater, and choreography of attitudes and behavior through which the spirit of a collective entity manifests itself. This phase of nationalism, hand-in-hand with the diligent and alarmed invectives of the antitraditionalists, also appeared in nineteenth-century Spain, assuming a particularly militant tone and posture that constitute the proud counterclockwise. Durch the aesthetic-traditional rearguard against those who mourn the "muscular" failure of contemporary Spain. For cultural nativism the main thing is the essence: the search, display, enjoyment, celebration—be it festive or solemn, defiant or loving—of something irreducible, irreplaceable, and unmistakable, the so-called national identity, with its palette of tastes, images, and peculiarities—religious, jovial, aristocratic, or popular. This Spanish nativism runs the gamut from colorful manners to intellectual doctrines. To this we should add the literature of the Hispanophiles—the bountiful sentimental anthropology created by French, British, and American writers—which, while representing a special phenomenon in certain respects, clearly belongs in the catalog of the great romantic malcontents of the nineteenth century: the rejection of a world philosophically stripped by rationalism, depersonalized by industrialization, and trivialized by the utilitarian appetites and impertinent and degraded aspirations of the masses.

Extending to the general structure of life and to its symbolic fruits Baudelaire's dictum that there is nothing more horrible than a useful man, the cultural credo of materialism. This is what art historian Bernard Berenson calls the "blessings" of backwardness. What for some, both within and outside of Spain, appeared as archaic debris hoarded by tradition, for the chorus of international Spanish literati it represented a country where everyday life could still be experienced as aesthetic invention and significant drama. The rejections and accolades, the lamentations and exaltations of traditionalism go beyond a debate on the pros and cons of Spanish "passiveness" in the contemporary world. We are dealing with something more complex, subtle, and unexpected. That presumed passiveness hides a stage of extraordinary albeit peculiar cultural activity.

According to Peter Burke in his Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, what characterized Europe until the early sixteenth century was the uniformity of its values. Popular culture was a second culture for the educated and the only culture for everyone else. But when we look upon Europe in the 1800s, the clergy, nobility, entrepreneurs, and professions (and their women) had abandoned popular culture to the lower classes, from which they were more separated than ever by profound differences in worldview. The Reformation demanded a university-educated clergy: in Catholic countries priests were now being trained in seminaries. Gone was the old parish priest who wore masks, joked from the pulpit, and danced with his parishioners on holidays. The nobility and its bourgeois imitators, for their part, embraced Castiglione's ideal of the new refined gentleman, rejected "common" language for that of the court, and avoided all popularisms (Lord Chesterfield advised his son to avoid common proverbs). The British gentry began to attend Oxford and Cambridge. In France the educated abandoned the popular poetry of the Pléiade in favor of classical norms, and both in France and in England chivalry romances were relegated to the lower classes. The bard died in Scotland and Wales; jesters became outmoded and festivities repugnant.

This process seems to have been subverted, derailed, or ignored in Spain, where a courtesan culture—with the elaborate aesthetic of ritual courtesy assumed in other countries—did not take off, and where the upper classes acquired a peculiar weakness for plebeian tastes. Among the lower classes there emerged an imitation of the aristocracy—all the more remarkable inasmuch as the adoption of gentlemanly postures did not appear as an instrument for social climbing but as a pure attitude toward life embraced by individuals whose socioeconomic status remained humble, precarious, or even clearly marginal.

This could be partly due to the fact that in Spain the aristocratic spirit did not involve either higher education or an exalted lifestyle, but rather a certain manly indifference toward them. In many of Quevedo's works, noblemen proclaim their station through slow speech and poor handwriting, some even boasting of their illiteracy. Coarse prose and a clumsy pen were viewed as aristocratic traits. At the same time, pride, the emblem of knighthood, extended from the noblest to the lowest; the sin of pride grew in inverse proportions to social status—witness beggars insulting those who were not prompt to give them alms. Letters and reports from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travelers tell of an ostentatious indifference toward gain and productivity both among the artisanry and the aristocracy, while literature provides pseudoaristocratic redefinitions of lawless lifestyles.

One of the most bizarre aspects of Spanish cultural nativism during the nineteenth century was a heraldic and reverential cult of history that transformed it into a constant return to a world of noble circumstances (artistic, military, moral, psychological, or ideological) and seigneurial wills, enterprises, and destinies. Another bizarre trait was the exaltation of a pompous style of chivalrous behavior, in whose haughtiness nobility and arrogance were inseparably joined (in the belated case of Zorrilla's romantic Don Juan Tenorio there is a truly diabolical insolence). This was not viewed as the product of blind vanity but as the knight's dramatic obeisance to his own nobility.

These two visions or models share an aesthetic and aristocratic intent. The historical scenes and episodes reconstructed by an imagination in search of the memorable and solemn, necessarily tend toward a vignettelike artistic composition, with its stereotyped eloquence and message. In this case, the scenes and characters depicted