

Azorín in motion

By Julián Marías

Azorín's work has been through very different phases in the way people have read it, its completeness, configuration and content being affected in the process. During his long life – all 97 years of it – his works were read particularly in the form of newspaper articles, which made them widely but fragmentarily known, and made the writer very popular through that form of reading. After his death a large number of books remained, these being only partially available, little known, and familiar only to a small readership; as time went by, the editions became rare and hard to find; then came the dreaded time when they were dropped from the catalogues, which turned even the most frequently read and familiar works into rarities; and then finally along came the professional “dissuaders” advising against reading them. That is where we are now.

This, however, substantially affects the vision of Azorín that prevails today, and makes it particularly inappropriate. A vision that is not only fragmentary but also contrary to the real sense of his work, a vision of it as static, almost paralytic, devoid of continuity. The reality is the very opposite: Azorín must be seen as being in motion, as a writer dominated by temporality, by change, by drama; what may look like immobility is really something else: a serene, attentive, lingering contemplation.

Azorín's work is primarily narrative: he was a novelist first and foremost; from the time of his first novels, "La voluntad", "Antonio Azorín", through his masterpiece "Doña Inés" (1925), dedicated to the philologist Menéndez Pidal, and down on through all his subsequent novels and the hundreds of stories that marked out his life. Yet there is more: his treatment of physical reality, particularly that of Spain, was also dynamic: the land, the landscapes, the

villages, towns and cities, all are viewed in temporal terms, attentive to the passage of time, the traces it leaves behind, and its dates. This is naturally extended to take in the characters in the historical drama: the authors, the figures studied, described in their own periods, in their historical situation, in their irreplaceable posts. If all the writers evoked and studied by Azorín were brought together – from the early epic *Poema del Cid* to writers much younger than Azorín himself – we would be looking at the best and most insightful history of Spanish literature. This treasure awaits the attention of scholars, only very scantily accorded so far.

The breadth of knowledge Azorín accumulated on all that was real in Spain over the centuries is astonishing. His knowledge of the theatre is admirable, but it is never inert – rather, its real nature is evoked, with its internal dramatic quality; his understanding of what it meant in each particular period, in each genre, in the various authors, results in a particularly lively vision that brings it back to life, throbbing again, and restoring its strictly dramatic meaning in all its rigor once more.

Which is more or less the opposite of what is generally held, the fixed, immobilised view of this writer now in circulation, missing his exceptional richness. Azorín has turned out to be the great unknown one. His riches are exceptional: he dealt with a huge number of genres, authors, historical figures and periods; and he paid vastly more attention than any contemporary of his to the various dimensions of the real. All that is there, on offer, judiciously interpreted, with incredible love and understanding, and featuring that particular quality that could be precious yet which has instead acted as a stimulus for misapprehension, for misrepresentation: his serenity.

Azorín was never in a hurry; it is as if he had unlimited time; he lingered long on viewing the reality of things, in his calm, slow evocations that omit no detail. And

precisely with the aim of saving and preserving the motion, the change, time passing and being left behind. All this was taken in by some during Azorín's lifetime, and rarely since. It remains out there as a vast possibility offered to all but received by very few. The importance of Azorín in the context of his prodigious generation strikes me as second to none.

I am not fond of hierarchical orderings or classifications, yet I am not far from thinking that the figure of Azorín is in many ways the richest and most complex of all the writers belonging to that 'Generation of 98'. When set against his all-embracing vision, with its astonishing wealth and concern to leave nothing out, the other extraordinary visions of his contemporaries appear as particular, partial views, albeit of enormous value and wonderful intensity. An essential feature of Azorín, underpinning that unique scope of his, was his unlimited generosity. His attention was directed at everything: landscapes, towns and villages, cities, phases in the history of those places that looked dead yet were full of hidden life – all these served to nourish his vision, thereby enabling us to possess them too; historical figures, great and lowly, seen at the right moment, with the right perspective, and with the pulsating presence we need to be able to understand the world they lived in; and his understanding of old abandoned houses, full of flavour, full of the meaning of the life that left its mark in them. We can possess Spain's entire history just as it happened, in the reality of it as saved and preserved by his sharp, generous, creative vision, a vision that was intolerant of the successive deaths of time's steps.

I see the work of Azorín as a huge possibility, as a promise offered to us all today as we face this vast and unsuspected horizon, an account that balks at no aspect of our reality dating back almost two millennia, all that went into making us, where we all come from, what we are. Nowhere else is there to be found preserved such a lively

and faithful view of Spain in its entirety over the course of the centuries. Azorín was not a man of genius – by which I mean he did not seek to be a genius, or to act as one. He contented himself with looking, with setting down what he saw, interpreting it naturally in a creative way, with a generosity that astonishes; for astonishment is what I feel at his having written a whole volume on the work of his contemporary, neighbour and friend Pío Baroja. Who else has ever done such a thing? He subjected almost the entire reality of Spain, over centuries and centuries, to this treatment. The result is simply astounding. All that is needed is to set that reality in motion and to devote to it a small fraction of the generosity with which it was contemplated, interpreted, preserved and saved by Azorín.

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Julián Marías (Valladolid, 1914) – philosopher, essayist, a student and friend of Ortega y Gasset – is one of the most outstanding figures in the contemporary intellectual scene. Julián Marías has a doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Madrid. When he was studying there, he became a disciple and friend of the thinker Ortega y Gasset, and together they founded the *Instituto de Humanidades* (Humanities Institute) in 1948. His career has taken him to teaching posts in leading American universities such as Harvard and Yale.

The quality of this work was been acknowledged in numerous distinctions, prominent among which were his election to the Spanish Royal Academy in 1964, and the Prince of Asturias prize for Communication and Humanities in 1996.

His extensive output includes over 60 published works and a large number of articles for the media.
