

THE CUSTODIANS OF TRADITION: THE PROBLEM OF “AUTHENTICITY”
IN THE COMPILATION OF SPANISH FOLK BALLADS¹

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The Canon of What “Folk” is: A Paradigmatic Text

It should come as no surprise that a people such as this one, devoted to its old customs and free from the influence of the new trends—as though the waves of modern civilization and the invading torrents of strangers were stopped by and crashed against granite walls built by nature—; it should come as no surprise, I say, that such a people preserves in its memory many of the old ballads, distant echoes from other eras, the unhappy voice of the Middle Ages coming from the ruins of convents, boroughs and castles that moans over the centuries, complaining against the extinction of the national spirit and chivalric virtues! [...] The reader must accept, without a doubt, the authenticity of this compilation. In turning oral tradition into a written one, I kept very much in mind the necessity that the romances published here had to be documents, which any scholar could rely on for research; and so, here they are, plain and unabridged, just as ordinary people keep them . . . (J. Menéndez Pidal ix-xii)

Those words were written by Juan Menéndez Pidal in 1885, for the introduction to the folk ballads of Asturias that he had collected. Because other folklorists soon followed his lead, the publication in Spain of similar compilations multiplied over the succeeding decades. It was an effort that has continued to this day without interruption and, as a result, the number of collections of folk ballads of every type available in Spain today is practically countless.

I have chosen the words of Ramón Menéndez Pidal's eldest brother because they reveal, more clearly and bluntly than any other theoretical introduction to a similar compilation, some of the principles that would guide later on, all the way up to the present, the collection effort: for instance, the idea that folk ballads are a *natural, spontaneous* expression of a people's soul and that, by fixing in writing the oral tradition of such a people, the compiler must operate with the *authenticity* that the material requires or deserves. Consequently, the number of corrections or additions must be very few, if any.

Furthermore, Juan Menéndez Pidal strove to argue for the moral value of romances: a stand still taken by those who, inside the classrooms, today call for the revival and teaching of what they perceive as “the traditional culture,” pointing to its exemplary or ethical dimension: “In the romances

to which I refer—he wrote—, one cannot but see the rustic candor of the patriarchal peoples and the simplicity of the biblical stories” (xiv). In several paragraphs, he opposed the quality of life in the countryside—highly desirable, in his opinion—to the hustle and bustle, and artificiality, of the cities: another theme that would become a folkloristic commonplace in the compilations published over the following century. As he put it: “I need to breathe in the rustic air of the mountains and that atmosphere of liberty and honest plainness in which the peasant lives” (iii).

Predictably, he also made a reference to the need to urgently salvage the people's wisdom, supposedly in danger of dying out. This alarm call, issued not only by him but also by other folklorists of the time, would sound throughout Europe for many years to come. He wrote: “It dawned on me the idea of writing down and publishing two works which local writers had neglected, but which I deemed to be urgently needed; partly because their constituting elements were bound to disappear in the near future, and partly because the research involved was to shed light on dark aspects of the history of Asturias” (viii). This emergency call for the recording of folklore—resulting in his compilation of 1885—was apparently justified by the wave of transformations then engulfing the rural way of life that he had known, transformations which he regarded as catastrophic.

In short, Juan Menéndez Pidal's introduction to his collection of Asturian ballads was paradigmatic for the study of folklore; his essay included the full list of key concepts on which he had constructed the canon of what ought to be considered as folk: namely, *authenticity*, *plainness*, *spontaneity*, *antiquity*, aesthetic and moral *exemplariness*, *oral tradition*; in sum, the power to express *the soul of a people*, or *a national spirit*.

The ideas behind those concepts were far from original. They enjoyed wide currency within the Romantic movement, insofar as Romanticism promoted a great deal of interest in the folk traditions of different peoples and nations.

Seemingly as if he wanted his readers not to miss anything in the full catalog of the defining traits of Romanticism, one even finds in Juan Menéndez Pidal's words a further element which is almost the seal on the whole set: the invocation of *mystery*. As he said: “Attracted by the narratives and the *mystery*, I entered the hidden caverns..., warmed myself in the spacious home of the farmer and heard him tell centuries-old stories and superstitious beliefs.” (vi-vii).

What I wish to argue here is that the canon that he established—and which is still current—does not comprehend everything that might be understood by that generic adjective, “folk”; but rather those expressions regarded as “folk” by the criteria that I just mentioned.

The purpose of such a canon was, and is, not so much to explain or understand what “folk” is as to select that which, identified as “folk,” is also deemed as valid or valuable; in other words, that which, by supposedly being *authentic*, deserves to be recognized as “folk” or “traditional”: a distinction that only the compilers of “living relics,” the guarantors of tradition, the authenticators of “a real people,” can award.

Preserving Tradition: Juan and Ramón Menéndez Pidal Among the Compilers and Students of Folklore

Juan Menéndez Pidal's compilation of Asturian romances was thus a seminal contribution—despite his seemingly modest claim to the contrary. In turn, this compilation followed up on the incipient surveys of the oral tradition in Asturias that other men had conducted before him: such as Agustín Durán (1828-32), whom Juan Menéndez Pidal sincerely praised (J. Menéndez Pidal xi-xii).

By validating the aesthetic choice of saving and imitating the folk, Menéndez Pidal was perfectly aware of the response and repercussions that his collection would have as a standard that others might follow.

And, indeed, his work with the Asturian romances did not fall on barren soil. The collection of romances in Asturias advanced a step further when, in 1909, his brother, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, began his own project of compilation with the help of Asturians interested in folklore, such as Aurelio de Llano or Eduardo M. Torner. Ramón's work was more sporadic, perhaps because he aimed already at a general collection of the “modern tradition” of the romances, which he regarded as “tantamount to the texts of the Old Collection” (qtd. in Cid 128 and 135). However, the fact remains that both Juan and Ramón did work on the romances of Asturias. In addition, Ramón's project continued that of his elder brother; and this sequence attests again to the influence that Juan's book had at the time, even though such book is not so well known today.

In time, to be sure, Ramón did come to revise and take issue with many of Juan's opinions on the romances in general, and about their origin in particular. He also departed from Juan on the definition of science and its goals. Yet, the two brothers shared, I submit, “ideals,” and the “ways” or “means” to attain them, but also some obsessions and “prejudices” (Portolés 64-80). And they were not alone. In those years, thousands of Spaniards had the same concern, almost an obsession, regardless of their ideological leanings; it was the concern with the construction and reconstruction of Spain, the true sense of her history, and the defense of her unity.

In some of Ramón's most revealing works, such as that in which he defined the difference between “folk poetry” and “traditional poetry” (*Poesía popular*—and where he recounted the contributions of Romanticism to the field—, he still embraced the aesthetic values of oral poetry, in a “tone” and with a style that were largely coincidental with those of Juan in his essay of 1885, where the latter had stated: “The established poets have always regarded with indifference, even contempt, these literary expressions [i. e., those of oral poetry], which are so humble and yet so precious. The same people have branded a childish pastime and a minor pursuit the effort that some of us have dedicated to such expressions in long vigils of constant research” (J. Menéndez Pidal 3).

Ramón, too, became excited with the beauty of the people's verses, of which he wrote—in his commentary to some of the lyrics contained in Salinas' *De música*—that they exhale “a zephyr of charm that originates in what we can call, quite openly, *the soul of the people*” (*Estudios* 161-162).

Both Juan and Ramón employed the naturalistic metaphor of the tree and the seed, the former in connection with the dialects, the latter in reference to the diffusion of the romances. Juan wrote: “Dialects are like leaves detached from *the tree* from which they grew. They all fed upon the same sap and, now, scattered on the ground, resemble one another. Some will turn over to the earth *the fertile seed* that they carry, and this seed will take root and grow again into new languages. And some leaves will deteriorate by different accidents; they will shrink, dry, wither and, eventually, die out” (61-62).

Ramón wrote: “The romances, begotten by the epic spirit of Castile and the novelistic substance of the European ballad, spread the old Castilian fictions as *winged seeds* that, carried by the winds, took root all over the soil of the Peninsula, from Catalonia through to Portugal, and then crossed over the seas to the lands of Spanish and Portuguese America” (*Castilla* 27). The liking for the small, the local, the seemingly marginal, originated as well in the Romantic revision of the value or importance of cultural manifestations. Romanticism not only fundamentally changed the received order of the literary genres; it altered as well the use of the conventional formats of plastic art. And it abandoned the model of balanced proportions that had been characteristic of sculpture and painting in the 18th century.

However, the key transformation was not so much a matter of scale or size as a matter of point of view, of change of perspective with respect to what ought to be, or nor to be, “great” or valuable. Small identities, for instance, became important again, to a degree that was almost unprecedented.

The notions of “corruption,” “degeneration,” the “false” or “inauthentic,” and the “artificial”—as opposed to the “truthful,” the “pure,” the “authentic,” the “natural and spontaneous”—became indispensable points of reference in most of the attempts made to study folk culture, both within and out of Spain.

For example, Ramón Menéndez Pidal explained that: “the versions that were traditionally elaborated among the educated classes in the Golden Age constitute *the true Romancero* [*the true Collection of Romances*] as we know it” (*Flor nueva* 31-32). And yet, one might ask: where is the line that separates the “truthful” from the “false” in works that are claimed to be—interestingly enough—“folk”; that is, the works of a people and for a people who, in strictness, might be any of us? That people, are *we* or are *we not*? (Dundes 19-20). More precisely: *who* draws that invisible line and why? And why, and for what reason, have they appointed themselves as the judges who give an opinion on what is *authentic*, as though they were infallible watchmen on the *authenticity* of the folk?

The Romantic Invention of the Folk: An Incursion upon the Reasons of Authenticity

As I mentioned earlier, Juan Menéndez Pidal, in his quoted essay on the Asturian ballads, made a number of critical references to the evidence of progress then unfolding around him. One might think that such references fit in well with his “Romantic discourse” on what folk was and, consequently, that his essay is a good example of an identification that has often been made about Romanticism; that is, its identification with the rejection of progress and with conservative ideologies.

But this view of Romanticism is simplistic as well as reductionist. For one thing, there were many ways of being a Romantic, depending on the time as well as the place (Peers 151-153); for another, Romantic attitudes towards the folk were neither univocal nor unidirectional.

Although it is true that the dichotomy between progress and tradition became significant only after the rise of Romanticism, no less true is it that this dichotomy joined others in the larger debates about culture, art and the history of human development. Because of the perception, by some elites, that changes brought about by progress transformed or resulted in the disappearance of something that, perhaps, was a common good, those elites became aware of the possible value of that which they perceived as threatened—a value that had received no attention before, or not to the same degree. All of a sudden, the beautiful, the good and the authentic had to be rescued from a building supposedly in ruins.

Although the context of unceasing economic, social and political changes of the past century—with its revolutions, restorations and movement of frontiers—may help to understand the new interest in the traditions—seen as objects under threat, in danger of extinction—, those changes fail to fully explain such interest. Political or military turmoil was not a novelty of the 19th century, though it might seem that disturbances did occur rather frequently at the time.

If the 19th century saw the rise of Romanticism and, with it, not only the “discovery of the people” (Burke 28-29)—a people which, if real, would always have existed—but also saw the invention (or reinvention) of tradition (Hobsbawm, Ranger 13-14), it was not just because of those political and socio-economic transformations with which we are familiar, that is, the consequences of industrialization, the mass migration from the countryside into the cities, the rise of the nationalist movements, or the construction—or reconstruction—of identities, in a process in which folklore did play, and continues to play, a determining role (Bendix 7).

If in the 19th century the folk was marked as a valuable attribute, it was also because the rise of Romanticism brought about, too, a no less critical transformation: the emergence of a different

sensibility, of another perception of the aesthetic which wreaked havoc on the received ideas about a people's historical and cultural heritage, including the very ideas of history, culture and art.

The introduction of a concept such as “folk culture” to assess human achievements radically altered—even subverted in some cases—the standards with which the value of the cultural was to be measured. And if the standards changed, so did the norms, which were even pronounced to have been abolished. The criteria whereby to decide about the good and the beautiful also changed.

The very concept of *cultural heritage* owes a great deal, of course, to the French Revolution (Pomian 85-95) as well as to the idea that this heritage belongs to a nation as a whole. But it was under Romanticism that this concept clearly prevailed. What was crucial about the change was not so much that the Romantics “discovered” the people; nor even that, to the Romantics, the folk was the closest cultural expression to nature. The essential point was, instead, that, by discovering other forms of creating and transmitting knowledge or beauty, the Romantics introduced a value, or a system of values, that had been virtually unknown in the way of appreciating culture.

I am aware that the use of the adjective “Romantic” often carries negative undertones, or is aimed at discrediting something as obsolete and unreliable. Nonetheless, it was under the influence of Romanticism that the major debates that would dominate the discussion in our century appeared; if not for the first time, certainly with the first impetus. It was then that the dichotomies of tradition vs. progress, rural vs. urban, local vs. universal, folk vs. educated, nostalgia vs. utopia, past vs. future, started to reach transcendence, to eventually become seminal and, yet, biased and manipulatable at the same time. They were debates and dichotomies of which we have not yet rid ourselves, let alone overcome. They are the terms by which we still abide, and the limits of the maze in which we are.

The people was observed, and very soon came the realization that I pointed out before: namely, that not everything about the people, or of the people, needed to be collected, studied and valued as “folk,” according to the canon of the “folk” that was being constructed. Clearly, not the whole people qualified as “people.”

The peasants were the preferred objects of observation; apparently because they were the largest “folk” population in Europe, but also—perhaps—because they could be identified with some remote, permanent essences of the nation. That people, less crushing, immediate and bothersome than the urban masses, was the perfect excuse to construct a distant “other”; distant but not too far away: more like an ancestor, still alive and “natural”; a people that, moreover, could be put in connection with the medieval past, so attractive to the Romantics.

Yet, such a people never existed in reality. It was only a utopia projected backwards and then used as a model for the future: a contrived time when the nation was only one, and all of society's estates would live in harmony with one another and work in pursuit of a common goal.

In the 19th century, then, a new strategy was tried by certain elites who had known better times—elites who descended from the lower aristocracy in the countryside and were bound to lead a

grey, difficult and precarious life in the cities. They would always long for their high status in the forgotten rural milieu. These former aristocrats were the first to enroll in the Romantic battalion that was sweeping Europe, not just Spain. Other urbanites joined them: members of the petty bourgeoisie who also missed the old order, as well as unpretentious employees and scared merchants and craftsmen who had survived defeated revolutions. All of them set out to save the heroic zephyr of yesterdays, to reconstruct “fatherlands”; if not from the beginning, at least from the Middle Ages. To them, the *people* was still there, intoning the oldest ballads, remembering the ancient heroes.

What the Romantics intended—what they sought to salvage from the depths of the folk—was a timeless world dating from the period before Roman rule or having been miraculously preserved between that period and the succeeding one. (The Roman period was regarded as one of foreign “domination” and, therefore, an interlude in the development of most European peoples.) That archaic, unreal world the Romantics dreamed about—a world of villages that were in peace with one another—sheltered for them the peoples' true identities, which were thus saved from the disaster: identities that were the medicine for all sorts of crises and disturbances. Juan Menéndez Pidal wrote:

The rapid and numerous means of communication, and the idea of cosmopolitanism that the 19th century represents, kill, unfortunately, the provincial spirit. The waves of *civilization*, with its new trends, overflow the mountains and flood this corner of the Peninsula, slowly erasing with their advance the venerating relics of yesterdays that this province has preserved. (x)

With their fervor for the local and their invention of the folk, the Romantics, the majority of whom were neither fully “progressive” nor fully “traditionalist”—since progress and tradition were, within this movement, but two faces of a single polyhedron (Alborg 21)—unleashed the forces of ancient demons which they would fail to control or, perhaps, never intended to. To them, order was to be sought through chaos; harmony was in the past or will be in the future. Their ultimate dichotomy was the opposition between construction and destruction.

By incorporating the folk into the received canon of the culturally valuable, the Romantics shook the soundest foundations of that canon. Yet, they widened it as well. They significantly enlarged its perspective capacity. Before them, artistic creations were perceived as valuable and worthy of preservation only if they were datable (that is, placeable in a specific period) and somehow authenticated by being the unique work of a recognizable and recognized author. Nowadays, the same holds true for the manifestations of the “Great Tradition” (Bendix 15).

But ever since the era of Romanticism, a high value has been set, too, on the countless versions of one or more anonymous authors, of a people without name or face, and with cultural traditions which are thought to be ancestral and yet survive in the present and must be saved before they die out: the value of the “Little Tradition” (Redfield 40-59).

How can one tell that these works and traditions are authentic, when authenticity happens to be the only source of their value? Besides, who will judge them to be authentic?

The etymology of the word “authentic” teaches us that, in Greek as well as Latin, the term was used in reference to something done “with authority”; thence its eventual meaning as “authorized” for anything.

On the subject that concerns us here, we must conclude that authenticity is largely granted by the compiler in his act of compilation. It is he who decides who can be the carrier of the “authenticat(e)able” material and who cannot. It is he who decides which material is authentic and which one is not.

And it is he who guarantees that the transfer from the oral to the written is done properly.

The compiler of folk ballads does not tell us how what exists is, or how he sees it. It is rather while selectively saving that which he judges to be valuable that he decides what it is that “is”, what exists and what does not. He *authorizes* what must exist. The anonymous people speaks, but does not realize what it speaks about. It does not know the “authentic” value of what it knows. It has no inkling even of the value of the “authentic.”

The compiler is, then, the great authenticator; the person who watches over tradition so that it continues.

He is the custodian of tradition.

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Notes

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