

# Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

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Volume 33

Issue 2 *Identities on the Verge of a Nervous  
Breakdown: The Case of Spain*

Article 7

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6-1-2009

## The Spanish Case for Europe. The Power of Cultural Identity

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### Recommended Citation

Navajas, Gonzalo (2009) "The Spanish Case for Europe. The Power of Cultural Identity," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 33: Iss. 2, Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1704>

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## The Spanish Case for Europe. The Power of Cultural Identity

### Abstract

Europe has not been for Spain an easily assumed identity, a home within which Spaniards could find accommodation. Yet, for the first time in modern history, Spain has become fully integrated in the political and economic system of Europe and it functions within it as a strong and dedicated partner. Paradoxically, this new order has developed simultaneously with the increasing assertion of the local nationalities. I propose that the current political and cultural situation in both Europe and Spain has created the appropriate conditions for an extensive reexamination of the conventional European/Spanish paradigm. That is so because the circumstances on both ends of the relation have changed and, for the first time, both sides not only desire but they need the reconstruction and redefinition of a relation that has been destructive for both parts. What Francisco José de Goya, Julián Sanz del Río, and Manuel Azaña, among others, conceived as a nearly impossible and illusory task can now become a reality. From Francisco Zurbarán, El Greco and Pedro Calderón de la Barca to Federico García Lorca, Luis Buñuel and Pablo Picasso, the various manifestations of its culture have been Spain's unquestioned achievement. This cultural continuum is the most promising entryway for Spain in the *Heimat* of Europe. I also propose that the issue of the various historical nationalities within Spain can be approached from the perspective of what Andrzej Stasiuk calls the "private histories" of the minorities of Europe. In the last part of the article, I study Spain's transcontinental identity. Without ignoring the legitimate issues raised by private narratives, I suggest that the country's full insertion in the global reality and its immersion in realities that are beyond its own will lead to the contextualization of the internal national divide and the emergence of new and more productive approaches towards its resolution.

### Keywords

Spanish history, Europe, cultural identity, new order, Spanish/ European paradigm, assimilation, reconstruction, Goya, Sanz del Ría, Azaña, Zurbabám, El Greco, Pedro Calderón de la Barca García Lorca, Buñuel, Picasso, Heimat

## The Spanish Case for Europe. The Power of Cultural Identity

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### I. Local and Supranational Identities

As it is common in long and complex relations, the history of the interconnections between Spain and Europe has been conflictive and problematic. Alternatively and often concurrently, Europe has been for Spain a battleground for ideas and political and economic strategies, a remote and forbidding entity as well as a privileged place where to learn and grow, a feared and inaccessible reference as much as an object of desire and yearning. Finally, in the last three decades, Europe has emerged as a distinct option for the realization of a long aspiration of the full integration of the country in the world.

What Europe has never constituted for Spain is an easily assumed identity, a home within which Spaniards could find accommodation. The strained relation between Spain and Europe applies not only to Spain. Other European countries have had a troublesome relation with Europe, including countries like Germany or England, that traditionally have had a leading role in the configuration of the defining nature of Europe. In fact, the last great internal conflagration within the European continent that nearly caused its extinction and generated a loss of status and general decline for Europe was initiated by Germany, a nation located physically and culturally at the heart of Europe.

A characteristic of the Spanish situation is that, since the battle of Rocroi in 1643, which signals the beginning of the retreat of Spain from the continent, Spain has never been fully a part of Europe. That alienation has often been self-inflicted by the rejection of

the country to be integrated in Europe. To be different was a matter of self-assertion, as the philosopher Miguel de Unamuno argued. At the same time, it prevented the building of effective and meaningful channels of communication between the country and Europe. Spain and Europe were apparently two entities doomed to perpetual separation and lack of mutual understanding and affection for each other.

This fateful situation was exacerbated during Franco's regime, a period that confirmed the most extreme views that the two parties entertained about each other. The last three decades, however, have signaled the emergence of a new approach. For the first time in modern history, Spain has become fully integrated in the political and economic system of Europe and it functions within it as a strong and dedicated partner. From being placed tangentially in relation to Europe, Spain has become one of the pillars of the new Europe that has emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century to the extent that Spain is currently one of the countries with one of the strongest pro-European records. The paradigm reversal has been as dramatic as it has been sudden and, to a certain degree, unexpected. From being at the outskirts of Europe, the country has moved to the center of the European reality where it has assumed a proactive and even leading role.

Paradoxically, this new order has developed simultaneously with the increasing assertion of the local nationalities and the movement toward the questioning and redefinition of the traditional identity of Spain as a nation. At the same time that the country has achieved at last an undeniable integration in the wider European realm, internal forces are demanding a substantial and even radical reconfiguration of the country. The conflict between the drive toward the external projection into the European scene and the groups that claim in favor of the restructure and in some cases fragmentation of the country may seem destructive and it may be viewed as a threat to national integrity. I would like to propose that, on the contrary, the redefined orientation of Spain toward Europe as well as the repositioning of its various national components may offer an opportunity for finding a new model of social and cultural dialogue and interchange.

Admittedly, this process is difficult and complex since it im-

plies the reconsideration of deeply entrenched tendencies in Spanish political and intellectual history. It is, nonetheless, an essential task because what is at stake is not only the continuation of the most prosperous and prolonged phase of the modern history of Spain, but also its expansion into a more advanced state.

The key to the success of this task is to find a balance between the local and the global forces of Spanish society. The process to achieve this balance must include a detailed consideration of the history of misunderstandings and mistrust that has characterized the relations between Spain and Europe so that that relation may reach the complete redefinition it requires. At the same time, it must accept and assimilate the movement toward the assertion of the local nationalities and cultures that has characterized the political and cultural evolution of post-Franco's Spain.

As Néstor García Canclini argues, the global condition has brought about the break-up of the traditional demarcations of national identities in the name of economic progress and social and cultural mobility in the new era of digital communication (33). Despite its innovative qualities, that break-up has made apparent, however, the insufficiencies and inequities of the global condition and its orientation toward the creation of supranational bodies. Because of its impersonal nature, the European framework may lead to the loss of an identity that *velis nolis* was assured by the old model of the nation. The supranational model may also be an effective subterfuge for the marginalization of the smaller national entities that may be considered a hindrance in the construction of all-comprehensive political systems.

Let us consider the various positions in the long process of the divide that has constituted the relation between Spain and Europe. Historically, Europe has been for Spain an elusive and problematic Other with which the dominant political forces of the country had to contend from a position of weakness and inferiority. At the same time, although in general distant and unfriendly, Europe has also been a required intellectual and cultural referent and a refuge from persecution. With the advent of the movements of opposition to the *ancien régime* in the second half of the eighteenth century, Europe, especially France and England, provided intellectual guidance for the selected groups of writers and artists who dared question

established norms. Furthermore, European countries became the destination for the many exiles that the country produced due to the policies of exclusion and negation of difference that characterize modern Spanish history. This prolonged process of intellectual hemorrhaging of the most vital and creative components of Spanish society continued unabated and peaked with the massive exodus of the great majority of the entire intellectual elite that was able to evade the consequences of the Civil War and its aftermath.

At one end of the ideological spectrum that has defined modern Spanish history, Europe is an all-powerful icon and a place of hope and protection. José Ortega y Gasset offers a precise version of this conversion of Europe into a privileged realm where it is feasible to achieve the goals that the Spanish intellectual class cannot realize in Spain itself. Ortega's position is abstract and philosophically idealistic since for him Europe is above all a cultural home where he finds comfort and support, especially in the academic world where he achieved the high recognition and status that was denied to the majority of other Spanish intellectual figures (23). For other exiles, such as novelist and essayist Juan Goytisolo, Europe represented the option of political freedom that he attempted, unsuccessfully, to import into the country. I believe that, in the current situation in which the political structures of Spain are roughly on a par with those of the rest of Europe, Ortega's position becomes more directly relevant and productive.

From the other end of the ideological spectrum—that corresponds to introverted and traditional Spain—Europe occupies a very different space. Rather than a coveted point of destination, Europe is a negative and dangerous counter-reference to be avoided and denied. Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo is one of the representative figures of this defensive current that historically adopts various configurations, always with the intention of preserving what is considered the precious essence of the country. Once again, Spain is not alone in this divide of its society vis-à-vis modernity. Other countries experience similar internal divisions. What is peculiar of the Spanish situation is that, as a consequence of the Civil War (1936-39), an extreme form of this position achieved absolute power and was able to materialize it in political and cultural terms.

The most distinctive and unique position is that of Unamu-

no who, after advocating a model of European integration for the country (*En torno al casticismo* 'On Traditionalism'), ultimately renounces that path and proposes instead a thorough process of introjection of Spanish culture into Europe. For Unamuno, Spanish identity is not at stake. It is rather the deterioration of the European soul that can only be redeemed through the adoption of the Spanish cultural and spiritual paradigm. Unamuno's proposal focuses on the cultural field (Don Quixote, Saint Theresa, Saint John of the Cross are his iconic figures), but it has implications that surpass the cultural milieu and spread into the political and social areas. Unamuno's choice, with its equivocations and ambiguities, reveals a mistrust of the principles of modernity that are linked to the more advanced and progressive conceptions of Europe. His Nietzschean exhortation toward the "quixotization" of Europe conveys a view of Europe as a hindrance for a genuinely national identity and his assertion of the exclusive and unique nature of Spain is tantamount to the continuation of the national insularity vis-à-vis an increasingly evolving world (*Del sentimiento* 'The Concept' 231).

Goytisolo offers the opposite view. From *Reivindicación del conde don Julián* 'Reivindication of Count Julian' and *Juan sin tierra* 'Juan the Landless' to many of his essays, he rejects Spanish identity *in toto*. In fact, his reactualization of the invasion of the country by foreign forces through the renewed act of treason of a revived Count Julián is a metaphor for the erasure of the entire history of Spain from 1492 up to the present. In Goytisolo's case, Europe is a vantage point from where to judge and evaluate critically the uninterrupted chain of mistakes and aberrations that, to his view, constitutes Spanish political, social, and intellectual history. Goytisolo's position is as absolute and uncompromising as that of his counter-referents. What for Menéndez y Pelayo is the source of the country's greatness ("España, cuna de San Ignacio," "luz de Trento," "Spain, cradle of Saint Ignatius," 'light of Trento,' Sánchez de Muniain 5) constitutes for Goytisolo the main reason for his rejection of Spanish history.

Goytisolo is not alone in this view of the country as a deformed caricature of the European model. Ramón del Valle-Inclán (*Luces de Bohemia* 'Bohemian Lights'), Pío Baroja (*El árbol de la ciencia* 'The Tree of Life'), and Luis Martín Santos (*Tiempo de silencio* 'Time of Silence') exemplify this unforgiving view of Spanish history. Like

the protagonists of those works, Goytisolo's alter egos, i.e. Alvaro Mendiola in *Señas de identidad* 'Marks of Identity,' have abandoned all hope for the country. Goytisolo's physical separation from his country of origin corresponds to his rejection of five centuries of a history that, according to his interpretation, has only produced violent exclusion and oppression.

This has been the polarized view of the history of Spain for all modernity. Is this model, founded on the intractability of Spanish problems, the intrinsically diseased nature of the country's condition still consistent with today's reality? Is the national cultural discourse destined to continue in the twenty-first century the divisions of the past or, on the contrary, is it possible to find integrative paths that may open up the apparently permanent impasse of Spanish history?

My position is that the current political and cultural situation in both Europe and Spain has created the appropriate conditions for an extensive reexamination of the conventional European/Spanish paradigm. That is so because the circumstances on both ends of the relation have changed and, for the first time, both sides not only desire but they need the reconstruction and redefinition of a relation that has been destructive for both parts. Let us consider the factors that have changed.

First, the European historical and political scene has been fundamentally transformed. For the first time in the last five hundred years, Europe has ceased to be the main dynamic nucleus of historical progress and change, and that center has shifted to other areas of the world, especially the United States. It should be noticed that this change was originated in Europe itself and it has had Europe as its main agent or culprit. The decline of European influence and power was provoked by the excesses of Europe itself and in particular the rivalry and confrontation between its central powers, Germany and France.

Thus the source of European decline was not located outside of Europe—as the voices of doom in the 1920's, Oswald Spengler, Arnold J. Toynbee, and Ortega y Gasset, had predicted—, but it was inside the most inner heart of Europe. The grandiose and permanent redesign of Europe that the masters of the Third Reich had envisioned for the continent ended up as the formula for its demise.

The consequences were devastating and nearly apocalyptic, but they forced the reconsideration of the principles that could reconstitute the nature of Europe. Instead of a disparate and unmanageable amalgamation of different countries, Europe was confronted with the imperative of mutual understanding and unification. Spain could not be excluded from that new order and, once the obstacle of Franco's dictatorship was removed, it was welcomed in the European fold.

In addition to the changes in the European scene, Spain also experienced a transformation that reversed not only the somber decades of Franco's period but centuries of isolation and negative differentiation. The old dichotomies that consumed the national intellectual discourse, from Mariano José de Larra to Ortega y Gasset and Martín Santos, gradually ceased to have the persuasive and all-absorbing power that had seemed so natural earlier and their overcoming appeared within reach.

Suddenly, the integration was not only feasible but it was in fact the only reasonable option for both components of the relation. The integration was facilitated because both parts shared a common interest in it and the relation could be actively bidirectional in various areas. Spain could receive many benefits from its inclusion in Europe, but it could also be, in turn, a powerful element in the construction of the European project of unification that emerged precisely as a consequence of the chaos created by the division between the diverse national entities of Europe. As a consequence of these developments, it is now possible to reconnect with the long and tortuous trajectory of the various attempts to insert the cultural discourse of the country within the intellectual mainstream of European culture. What the painter Francisco José de Goya, the philosopher Julián Sanz del Río, and the politician Manuel Azaña, among others, conceived as a nearly impossible and illusory task can now become a reality.

European culture can thrive only when based on the preservation of the difference of its many national components. European cultural integration cannot come at the expense of negating or ignoring the history of internal enmity and confrontation that has characterized Europe for a great part of its history. At the same time, although Europe must recognize and study that past history,

it should not be to the extent that the painful memories of the past overwhelm the efforts of reconstruction and reconfiguration of the present. In the Spanish case, the reincorporation of the past cannot dismiss the tense and odd relation that the country has had with regard to what is a motivating drive of European history and culture: the advance toward the freedom of national societies and its members from the impositions of ideological forces intent on domination rather than tolerance and liberation.

The history of Spain not only has not taken this common path, but during long periods it has been directly at odds with it. Spain has been only a partial contributor to that distinctive trait of European history, but, at the same time, through literature and art, it has made major contributions to the collective archives of European cultural history. This cultural continuum is the best entryway for Spain in the *Heimat* of Europe. From Francisco Zurbarán, El Greco and Pedro Calderón de la Barca to Federico García Lorca, Luis Buñuel and Pablo Picasso, the various manifestations of its culture have been Spain's unquestioned achievement.

Additionally, this cultural contribution is a way to offset or at least partially compensate for the errors and excesses of the past. Other nations that have always been at the forefront of the European project proceed and act according to similar principles. Germany, for instance, can correct and amend through culture—from Bach and Beethoven to Thomas Mann—the fatal errors of its political policies that caused much destruction through time. The country that is responsible for massive suffering is also the country that has contributed extensively and significantly to the universal cultural patrimony. What the facts of history separate, art and culture may reunite by contributing to the creation of a commonly shared cultural Imaginary with which all societies can identify beyond their differences.

The insertion of Spain in the wider European realm has two overall effects: on the one hand, it closes the trajectory of alienation and separation that has marked the relation between the country and Europe. At the same time, internally, it may contribute to soften and moderate the division and strife that have torn the various communities and parts of the country. The wider European identity not only does not need to overwhelm the local, but it may enhance it in

new ways. In fact, being a part of the European cultural and political identity may be the safest and most effective path for the insertion of the various European nations and cultures in the global paradigm. It may also be the only way to preserve the distinctive and unique nature and character of the smaller national entities in the age of the global economy and universal instant communication.

## II. The Local Identities

The Polish writer, Andrzej Stasiuk, refers admiringly to what he calls the “private histories” of the minorities of Europe—he mentions Poles, Croatians, Slovenians, and Romanians—that aspire to be full partners in the European Union with the same status as the rest of its members (103). He asserts the need to give those narratives high prominence within the developing collective European Imaginary in order to recognize and unequivocally confirm their existence. However, although essential, this recognition needs to be contextualized and be made compatible with the construction of a European narrative since to give preference to the national histories and interests over those of Europe is a major reason that has contributed to slowing down the integration of the continent.

The issue of the interrelations of the various national and cultural entities in Spain—which remains one of the unresolved issues of the post-Franco era—may find a promising approach following this theoretical framework that attempts to find the common ground between different political and cultural projects.

To be sure, this approach cannot suddenly do away with centuries of the misunderstandings, hostility, and war that inform the majority of private histories. The Franco period magnified these traits to the point of threatening the obliteration of the personal histories in addition to the languages and the cultures that constitute them. It is not an easy task to come to terms with all the episodes of the suppression of local cultures and the forceful imposition of a grandiose and vacuous imperialistic vision.

Certain events in particular have an indelible force in the collective conscience of the small nationalities in the country. For example, the death of the President of the Generalitat, Lluís Companys, shot in the Montjuic castle in Barcelona after being turned over

to Franco by Gestapo agents, highlights in a tragic and epic manner the oppression of a small and defeated community at the hands of an implacable victor. This episode will always remain as a defining part of the “private history” of Catalonia. At the same time, the absolute attachment to an epic view of the nation may not be the most effective manner for a community to insert itself in the contemporary condition that, as Gilles Lipovetsky claims, is characterized by the supremacy of the *hic et nunc*, a constant present that has been relieved from burdensome past ties (85).

Ernest Renan argued that the creation of a national conscience originates on pathos and emotion rather than rational processes and objectivity (19). This is why dramatic episodes like Company's death weigh more heavily on the collective Catalan conscience than analytical facts and data. Several Spanish national societies, like Catalonia and Euzkadi, have yet unsettled historical claims that lead to resentment and a possible desire to disengage themselves from an oppressive Spanish history that has denied them the opportunity for full realization. That would correspond to Renan's version of national identity. Pathos would thus prevail over pragmatic factors. That is, however, an idea that does not correspond to the current world reality in which immediate and local identities have been re-configured and reconstituted according to global and supranational parameters.

In an international debate that took place in 2003 on the definition of the elements constitutive of Europe, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida argued in favor of the Kantian values of ethical and political universalism and an inclusive view of culture that would permit to unify within one single European paradigm cultural proposals as diverse as those of Goya, Goethe, and Sartre. Both thinkers claimed that, in the development of a European collective conscience, Europeans needed to be Kantian in order to overcome the divisions and the all consuming involvement with divergent and often directly opposite political and ideological paths that have characterized European history (Habermas and Derrida 8). According to this view, the focus on local history would prevent the concentration on the construction of a wider entity to which eventually all Europeans could belong.

This view was attacked in particular by voices coming from sev-

eral states of the continent since they thought it was promoting an elitist and abstract notion of Europe that could only motivate and persuade a reduced group of academics, intellectuals, and other culturally sophisticated groups. Stasiuk ironically referred to the invasion of the two hundred million “wild, cunning, and exotic” Eastern Europeans that would threaten to create chaos in the heart of Europe (104). Yet, this is not the first time that the creation of a new national entity is the final outcome of the process of the maturation of an idea. Both Italy and Germany, for instance, became nations as the final result of an originating intellectual project.

Europe cannot appear today merely as an option among others for the countries of the continent in the way that it was conceived in the first decades of the twentieth century. It is rather an imperative and factual reality conditioned by the specific parameters of the present world. There is no pragmatic and effective alternative to Europe and the integration of the various local entities within the supranational European body. It is likely that the European identity will never produce the emotive effusion that national histories have provoked and still provoke in many cases. At the same time, the alternatives to Europe lead to the compartmentalization of the continent and the very devaluation of the nations that compose it in the international scene. This reality applies to Spain as much as the other European countries.

### III. The Transcontinental Identity

Unlike the majority of European countries, Spain has a dual identity that transcends the borders of the continent. Although primordial and essential, the European component of the identity is only a partial element. Linguistically, culturally, and economically, Spain is linked to the vast Hispanic community that spans the American continent and, through immigration and digital communication, it extends increasingly to other areas of the world. There are other European countries, like England, France and Portugal that also have dual world identities. With these countries, Spain is the nation that can claim a plural cultural and linguistic nature that extends beyond the European scene.

That identity is not exempt from conflicts that stem from the

traumas of the colonial experience whose ramifications last until today. The transatlantic part of the Spanish identity is burdened by the weight of historical facts that reflect a record of hostility and strife that should not be erased or forgotten. The cultural framework emerges once again as the most promising approach to overcome these historical difficulties.

The new global era has accelerated the arrangement of the world's cultural dynamics in several linguistic and cultural camps. The Anglophone block, which has at its epicenter the United States in addition to Great Britain and its old territories, is the most visible one. English has become the *lingua franca* of commercial, digital, and visual exchanges. Yet Spanish is increasingly becoming the second linguistic and cultural international camp or area of influence, extending beyond the European continent and spreading into Central and South America and increasingly the United States where the significance of an approximate number of fifty million Hispanics is manifest not only demographically but also in the areas of the economy and culture. Only second to English, Spanish has achieved the status of the other international language in the world today.

Therefore, it behooves Spain to be an integral part of this increasingly more powerful block with which it shares common interests that transcend an often conflict-ridden history. The unifying force of culture can contribute to soften and even overcome the historical divisions. Jorge Luis Borges, García Lorca, Pedro Almodóvar, and Guillermo del Toro, among many others, can build bridges that otherwise would not exist. The vehicle of art, when added to a common language and mutually shared cultural codes and practices, is a powerful tool of international projection in a rapidly evolving world.

To dismiss or not to take full advantage of this venue would be self-defeating and unproductive. When the tide of cultural history seems to be, at last, on the side of Hispanic culture, Spain should maximize its participation in this favorable trend. This opportunity does not preclude the need to promote the other languages and cultures of the peninsula. To the contrary, the international interest in those languages can be enhanced through their links to the Hispanic world. The academic programs of several world universities testify to this fact. In those programs, for instance, the teaching of

Catalan language and culture takes place within or in connection to the departments of Spanish whereas separately or on its own that teaching would have been impossible or it would have faced more trying circumstances and a more limited mode of realization.

#### IV. Conclusion. The Posthistorical Nation

The awareness of history and the establishment of solid links between the past and the present are essential for the strength of national communities. However, the strict attachment to history, particularly the one constituted by the long and convoluted trajectory of European civilization, can be a burden and a deterrent for transformation and cultural progress. Spanish history fully corroborates this rule since the social, ideological, and cultural divisions rooted in the past have all too often determined the evolution of events in the present. The uniqueness of the political developments after Franco's death, leading to a consensual agreement—a will to forget—to put the divisive past aside in a deliberate act of collective amnesia, is that it signifies a rare departure from the deterministic force that the past has had in defining modern Spanish history.

To agree to forget is not tantamount, however, to erasing the effects of history. This is the reason why the ideological divisions that lead to the confrontation of the Civil War have recently been reopened in a way that may be seen as questioning the validity of the agreements among the various political forces during the transition period. According to this view, those tacit agreements could be interpreted as only provisional and parenthetical and they could be reopened when the circumstances would allow it. The violent crimes committed during the Civil War are an example. During the Franco period, only the violence in the Republican side could be publicly exposed and discussed. With the advent of democracy, the violence of the nationalist side became a legitimate subject of discussion and even judgment.

A similar situation of redefinition of the previous premises developed in relation to the characterization of the identity of the nation. The ontological view of the nature of the Spanish identity based on supposedly eternal values and principles has yielded to a more fluid concept that takes into account the various components

of the country. Instead of a model of national identity based on a regressive view in which a monolithic past was the exclusive causal agent of the present, Spain seems to have opted for a view that attempts to balance more evenly the contributions and roles of the different parts of the country. That approach has produced a change in the internal dynamics of Spanish society. The conflicts in the areas of education and fiscal responsibilities between the parts attest to the difficulty of the task.

Within this context of shifting internal circumstances, the grounds of the discussion shift toward the external and international arena. The central premise of the new orientation of the discussion is that the full immersion of the country in realities that are beyond its own will lead to the contextual relativization of the seriousness of the internal situation. Without ignoring the legitimate issues raised by the private narratives, this proposal fully inserts the country in the global reality of today and it channels it toward the two most natural and realistic venues for Spain's insertion in the world: Europe and the Americas. It is also an option that continues the tradition of international projection that, from Picasso and Buñuel to Goytisolo, Isabel Coixet, and Rafael Moneo, has produced the most uniquely national and at the same time the most universal manifestations of the country.

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