

# *'A Spaniard in essence: Seneca and the Spanish Volksgeist'*

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY)

Open Access

Baldwin, O. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3558-3467> (2021) 'A Spaniard in essence: Seneca and the Spanish Volksgeist'. *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 28. pp. 335-352. ISSN 1874-6292 doi: 10.1007/s12138-020-00571-2 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/92914/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12138-020-00571-2>

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12138-020-00571-2>

Publisher: Springer

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading





## 'A Spaniard in essence: Seneca and the Spanish Volksgeist'

Oliver Baldwin<sup>1</sup> 

© The Author(s) 2020

### Abstract

Throughout the 19th century, Europe underwent processes of profound national reconfiguration, which provoked the creation of modern nation-states and nationalism. As other European countries, Spain also resorted to the re-appropriation of Greco-Roman antiquity in order to reaffirm its national narrative of identity after its own national crisis, the so-called Disaster of 1898, with which Spain lost its overseas empire. Seneca appeared at this time as the embodiment of the Spanish Volksgeist, the spirit of the Spanish people and nation, in Angel Ganivet's *Idearium español*, first published in 1897. This article shall explore how Seneca was conceived, and later re-appropriated and reshaped, as the embodiment of Spanishness, by intellectual and political circles of a nation in mid-reconfiguration. Through an analysis of Ganivet's theory of *senequismo* and its influence on Spanish historiography, thought and culture during the early 20th century, we shall be able to better ascertain the cultural, historic and social impact in Spain of Angel Ganivet's statement that 'Seneca is not a Spaniard, a son of Spain, by chance, he is a Spaniard in essence'.

After the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), European society began to reflect on what constituted the uniqueness, differences and essence of each European nation. This provoked, at once, the birth of nationalism and of nation-states. A national consciousness had already begun with the Independence of the United States of America in 1783, which established a truly new nation of vast importance, and the French Revolution in 1789, when France had to metamorphose from the paradigm of Absolutism to the epitome of Republicanism. This continued with the independence of Greece in 1832 and the long process of Italian Unification (1815–1871), when two new European nations not only had to reconfigure their status, but also define a common identity which they had not enjoyed since antiquity—if then. This process of national reconfiguration and creation culminated in the German Unification of

---

Oliver Baldwin is British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Reading, Reading, UK.

---

✉ Oliver Baldwin  
oliver.a.baldwin@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Department of Classics, University of Reading, Reading, UK

1871, as a direct result of the Franco-Prussian War and the defeat of Napoleonic imperialism.

The legitimating factor in the creation of these nations was the identification of both a common history and a common essence, explained principally in psychological terms. Both national history and national essence had to be extracted from a history which, at times, simply did not exist, since there was no unified nation before the culmination of revolution, unification or independence. The very changeable, convulsive and contradictory nature of European history made the identification of these two factors extremely complicated and albeit unachievable.

One of the means by which to establish a national history which explained the grandeur of the nation was—most often than not—the use of Greco-Roman antiquity, either by imitation, historical parentage or confrontation. If the nation could link, model and reconfigure its identity in connection with antiquity, it could claim for itself not only the grandeur and prestige of ancient Rome or Greece, but also a certain historical pedigree which would justify and legitimate the identity and history of the new nation-state. This phenomenon offers too many examples for them all to be cited here.<sup>1</sup> The use of antiquity as a legitimating link in the creation of the new nation would evolve to well-known extremes, such as Mussolini's characterisation as a second Caesar or Nazi Germany's admiration for Spartan values, also used as propaganda by the Metaxas' regime in Greece.<sup>2</sup>

Although Spain might be considered as an old nation, since it became a political unity *de facto* in 1516 and *de iure* in 1716, it participated at the end of the 19th century, in very similar theoretical and chronological manners, in both phenomena: national reconfiguration and the use of antiquity as national legitimisation.<sup>3</sup> In 1898, the Cuban War of Independence (1868–1898) ended with the independence of Cuba in what would be known as the Disaster of 98. Such an alleged disaster did not only include the loss of the Cuban colony, but also the loss of all remaining Spanish

<sup>1</sup> For more on this process see *Graeco-Roman Antiquity and the Idea of Nationalism in the 19th Century: Case Studies*, ed. T. Fogel and R. Warren, Berlin; Boston, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. *The Usable Past: Greek Metahistories*, ed. K. S. Brown and Y. Hamilakis, Lanham, 2003; M. Wyke, *Caesar: A Life in Western Culture*, Chicago, 2008; *Sparta in Modern Thought: Politics, History and Culture*, ed. S. Hodkinson and I. Macgregor Morris, Swansea, 2012, pp. 253–342; J. Chaptot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*, Oakland: 2016; *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, ed. H. Roche and K. Demetriou, Leiden, 2017; H. Roche, 'Mussolini's "Third Rome", Hitler's Third Reich and the Allure of Antiquity: Classicizing Chronopolitics as a Remedy for Unstable National Identity?', *Fascism*, 8 (2), 2019, pp. 127–152.

<sup>3</sup> For comprehensive studies of Spanish nationalism and its evolution see e.g. J. Álvarez Junco *Spanish Identity in the Age of Nations*, Manchester, 2011; *Historia de la nación y del nacionalismo español*, ed. A. Morales Moya, J. P. Fusi, and A. De Blas Guerrero, Barcelona, 2013. An in-depth study of the uses of Greco-Roman antiquity in early Spanish nationalism is still lacking, although readers can find an approximation to this phenomenon up to the 1930s in O. Baldwin, 'Seneca's *Medea* in Republican Spain: Precedents, Creation and Impact of its 1933 Production', PhD diss., King's College London, 2019; and during the Franco regime in A. Duplá, 'Notas sobre fascismo y mundo antiguo en España', *II Congreso peninsular de Historia Antigua*, 1993, pp. 337–352; *Antigüedad y franquismo (1936–1975)*, ed. F. Wulff, and M. Álvarez Martí-Aguilar, Málaga, 2003; O. Baldwin, 'Caudillo de España: Viriatus, Trajan, Franco', in *Rome and Iberia: Diversity of Relations from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. A. Grzelak-Krzymianowska and M. J. Wozniak, Lodz, (forthcoming).

colonies in Asia and America. Spain therefore found itself bereft of its overseas empire, which was even older than its unified national identity. It became no more than another European nation, and an impoverished and humiliated nation at that.

The Disaster of 98, and the process that led to it, provoked an intellectual response of national self-reflection and introspection.<sup>4</sup> Since Spain was no longer an international imperial power, it had to ask itself what Spain truly meant as a nation, in order to understand its history, its essence and its future mission and worth in a Europe in mid-transformation. The two most influential and distinguished thinkers to ponder on the question of the essence of Spain were Miguel de Unamuno and Angel Ganivet, whose books *En torno al casticismo* (1895) and *Idearium Español* (1897), respectively, immediately became the cornerstones of the whole debate.<sup>5</sup>

Both Unamuno and Ganivet did not believe in conventional historiography as a source of knowledge for the identity of any nation. They believed that it could not be learnt from the noise of historical facts and dates, but that, instead, it had to be taken from a continuum that ran through history. It would be in the Spanish Völkerpsychologie and Volksgeist that one could find the answer to what Spain is.<sup>6</sup> It was under this premise that they both set out to find the answer to such a question.

Angel Ganivet followed the steps of the sociological positivism of Hippolyte Taine, whose motto 'we must search out the causes after we have collected the facts',<sup>7</sup> could perfectly summarise Ganivet's work, which he explains as follows:

However, what is essential in history is the bonding of facts with the spirit of the country where they have taken place; only at this cost a true, logic and useful history can be written.<sup>8</sup>

According to Ganivet, in the 1890s, Spain 'lacking a dominant idea that moves it, hesitant between opposed motives that counterbalance each other, or dominated by an abstract, unrealisable idea, remains irresolute, not knowing what to do and undetermined to do anything'.<sup>9</sup> This undetermination and irresolution, which Ganivet terms *aboulia*, is the main problem Spain had in its crisis. Spain had to understand the mother-ideas behind its national spirit and reinvigorate them, putting them at

---

<sup>4</sup> See J. Krauel, *Imperial Emotions: Cultural Responses to Myths of Empire in Fin-de-Siècle Spain*, Liverpool, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Garrido Ardila, *Etnografía y politología del 98: Unamuno, Ganivet y Maeztu*, Madrid, 2007, p. 31; J. P. Fusi, *España: la evolución de la identidad nacional*, Madrid, 2000, pp. 13–14; J. L. Gómez-Martínez, *Américo Castro y el origen de los españoles: Historia de una polémica*, Madrid, 1975, p. 20; E. Inman Fox, *La invención de España: nacionalismo liberal e identidad nacional*, Madrid, 1997, pp. 112–32.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of the uses of the Hegelian Volksgeist and Ganivet and Unamuno's theory of Spain's essence, see J. Cruz, 'Tradición histórica y tradición eterna. De Ganivet y Unamuno', *Anuario Filosófico* (Pamplona) 31, no. 1, 1998, pp. 245–268.

<sup>7</sup> Translated by Van Laun in H. Taine, *History of English Literature*, I, London, 1920, p. 10. See Cruz, 'Tradición histórica y tradición eterna' (n. 6 above), p. 246.

<sup>8</sup> A. Ganivet, *Idearium español*, Granada, 1897, p. 80. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. For an English translation of *Idearium español*, see J. R. Carey's in A. Ganivet, *Spain: An Interpretation*, Carey London, 1946.

<sup>9</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium español* (n. 8 above), p. 144.

the centre of the nation's life, thus acting as a beacon of hope and greatness for the Spanish race:

But we have not had a purely Spanish period, in which our spirit, already constituted, may give fruit in its own territory. [...] A race's action through force is important; but its ideal action is more important; and this only reaches its peak when external action is abandoned and all its national vitality is concentrated within the territory.<sup>10</sup>

Although judging the characteristics of the essence of Spain in Ganivet is complicated, one may count seven predominant features: peninsularity, arabising spirit, individualism, conquering spirit, Christianity, warrior spirit and *senequismo*.<sup>11</sup> That *senequismo*, Lucius Annaeus Seneca's own essence, may here be counted among the characteristics of Spain's *Volksgeist* is undoubtedly intriguing. Why may a Roman philosopher, born in Hispania and alive in the first-century AD, be the embodiment of a central characteristic of the essence of the Spanish spirit in its 19th century form? Let us here seek to understand how Ganivet establishes his theory of Spanish *senequismo*, and in what way and for what reason does it exemplify a central aspect of the Spanish spirit (I) and delve into the reception and afterlife this theory enjoyed or suffered (II and III).

## A son of Spain

When one looks closely at the idea of an inherent *senequismo* in the Spanish *Volksgeist* in Ganivet's *Idearium Español* (1897), one is surprised to discover there is no discernible systematic approach or set of arguments by which he makes such a claim. His claim is vague, unclear and, it seems, balanced on a style of intellectual intuition, lyrical exaggeration and historical persuasiveness which brings *senequismo* closer to a philosophical construct than to any firmly anchored exposition of evidence.<sup>12</sup> However, the claim is central to *Idearium Español*, and due to its centrality, it is offered in the strongest and grandest terms imaginable:

Seneca is not a Spaniard, a son of Spain by chance, he is a Spaniard in essence; and not Andalusian, for when he was born the vandals had not yet arrived in Spain; were he to have been born after the Middle Ages he perhaps would not have been born in Andalusia, but in Castile.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 81–2.

<sup>11</sup> For different sets of mother-ideas in Ganivet, see Garrido Ardila, *Etnografía y politología del 98* (n. 5 above), pp. 81, 170; Cruz, 'Tradición histórica y tradición eterna' (n. 6 above), pp. 249–52.

<sup>12</sup> For a similar critique, see Gómez-Martínez, *Américo Castro y el origen de los españoles* (n. 5 above), p.18; M. Azaña, *Todavía el 98*, Madrid, 1997. Benson argues that *senequismo* is both a counter-narrative and a complement to Ganivet's modernism, see K. Benson, 'El yo escindido. La narrativa de Ángel Ganivet entre la tradicionalidad senequista y la renovación modernista', in *Estudios sobre la vida y la obra de Ángel Ganivet. A propósito de las Cartas finlandesas*, ed. H. Díaz de Alda, Madrid, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium español* (n. 8 above), p. 6.

The anachronistic claim that Seneca is a son of Spain will not go unnoticed by any informed reader. To make a man born in Cordoba, in the Roman province of Hispania, fifteen centuries before any notion of a Spanish nation, a Spaniard is historically adventurous, whatever the special conditions and distinct identity Hispania may have enjoyed within the Roman Empire.<sup>14</sup> The anachronism continues both in the mention of Andalusia and Castile. The above mention of vandals not having yet arrived in Spain when Seneca was born suggests a historical caution lacking elsewhere. But the mention that, 'were Seneca to have been born after the Middle Ages', Castile would have been his natural birthplace, and not Andalusia, the region where Cordoba stands, may be at the centre of Ganivet's intended point. By Castile, Ganivet is referring to the Christian kingdom that would be at the centre of the national configuration of Spain from the Middle Ages, clearly distinguishing it from a more Muslim-related Andalusia. In this way, Ganivet's intention is that the essence of Seneca, his spirit, and not the historical person, is so firmly connected to the spirit of Spain, that no other place would satisfy his Spanish pedigree but the centre of Spanish political, religious and expansionist existence, Castile. It is in this that we may understand the idea of Seneca being a Spaniard in essence. Seneca's own essence, and not his historical being, is innately Spanish, as Ganivet sees it, and therefore it is not chance, fortune, i.e. his historical birth, that makes him a Spaniard, it is his essence that makes him 'a son of Spain'. Right before the lines quoted above, Ganivet has introduced the figure of Seneca with the following words:

When one examines the ideal constitution of Spain, the moral, and in a certain way religious, element discovered within it, as if serving it as its foundation, is stoicism; although not the brutal and heroic stoicism of Cato; nor the serene and majestic stoicism of Marcus Aurelius or the rigid and extreme stoicism of Epictetus; but the natural and human stoicism of Seneca.<sup>15</sup>

Ganivet gives no further explanation of what he means by 'the natural and human stoicism of Seneca'. We are told Seneca's stoicism is somewhat different to all others, but we are never told in what way.<sup>16</sup> The uniqueness of Seneca's stoicism may be hinted just after the lines quoted above on Seneca being a son of Spain in essence:

All of Seneca's doctrine is condensed in this teaching: Do not let yourself be won over by anything foreign to your soul. Think, among the accidents of life, that you have within you a mother force, something strong and indestructible, as an adamantine axis, around which the mean incidents that form the plot of daily living turn; and whatever the occurrences that may fall upon you; may

---

<sup>14</sup> On Hispania see e.g. J. S. Richardson, *The Romans in Spain*, Oxford, 1996; A. C. Johnston, *The Sons of Remus: Identity in Roman Gaul and Spain*, Cambridge, MA, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium español* (n. 8 above), pp. 5–6.

<sup>16</sup> Laffranque explores the usefulness, or lack of it, of each stoic interpretation to Ganivet's world view and Spain, with the predominance of Seneca over the others, yet failing to consider Seneca's autochthony; see M. Laffranque, 'L' Inspiration stoïcienne chez Angel Ganivet' in *Caravelle: Cahiers du monde hispanique et luso-brésilien*, 6, 1966, pp. 5–31.

they be what we call prosperous, or what we call adverse, keep yourself firm and upright, so at least all may always say of you that you are a man.<sup>17</sup>

This Senecan teaching is not a direct quote of any of Seneca's work, but Ganivet's own particular reading and understanding of Seneca's words.<sup>18</sup> Although we have a clearer picture of what Ganivet meant by Seneca's unique stoicism in his distillation of Seneca's teaching, we are still unaware of why this is unique. This uniqueness of Seneca's stoicism remains unfathomable, and has led many to question it and even to pursue it as a line of research.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, the intention here is not to assess the truthfulness of Ganivet's claim of Senecan stoic uniqueness, but to grasp the meaning and implications of Ganivet's theory of Spanish senequismo.

The Senecan teaching of resilience is, according to Ganivet, 'Spanish; and it is so Spanish that Seneca did not have to invent it, for he found it already invented'.<sup>20</sup> It is not from his intellectual capacities or his learned mind that Seneca extracts his central teaching—or Ganivet's interpretation of it—but directly from the well of his innate Spanishness. Seneca's essence, now in its intellectual and stoic aspects, proves itself once more to be innately Spanish. But Ganivet follows the Spanishness of Senecan thought and essence with a logical deduction:

The Spanish spirit, coarse, shapeless, naked, does not cover its primitive nakedness with artificious clothing; it covers itself with the vine-leaf of senequismo; and this concise garb remains adhered forever and it reveals itself as soon as one delves slightly into the ideal surface or crust of our nation.<sup>21</sup>

The internal logic to Ganivet's reasoning is somewhat indisputable. If Seneca is in essence a Spaniard, if he is who and what he is due to his Spanishness, it is perfectly understandable that such a tight equation may be reversed: Spain is inherently senequist, because Seneca is innately Spanish. Spanishness and senequismo are therefore established in Ganivet's *Idearium Español* in a never-ending loop in which each identity constructs and nourishes the other.

This may not seem as philosophically constructed if one is to remember the intention Ganivet had in writing his essay: the identification of an historical continuum that runs through all the historical events Spain has ever undertaken and undergone. Senequismo is the first to appear in his *Idearium Español*, one suspects because it is the oldest component of the Spanish continuum. Equating Seneca to Spanishness and Spain to senequismo, in turn, responds to the understanding that, within this continuum, the restrictions of chronology are somewhat blurred: Spain's present or even the origins of its national consciousness are directly linked to the most ancient of Spanish distinctive characteristics, senequismo. It is connected with it in

<sup>17</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium español* (n. 8 above), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Laffranque agrees with this lack of specific source; see Laffranque, 'L' Inspiration stoïcienne chez Angel Ganivet' (n.16 above), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> J. C. García-Borrón, *Séneca y los estoicos: Una contribución al estudio del senequismo*, Barcelona, 1956.

<sup>20</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium español* (n. 8 above), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

an accumulative manner, and in a bidirectional movement, for the history of Spain may be responding to Seneca and Seneca himself may be responding to aspects of Spain's essence that may not surface until—much—later in Spanish history: 'it is not possible in history to put one set of facts before another, like figures or objects in a painting; it is all melted in the personality of the nation', Ganivet explains.<sup>22</sup> The intention is here not to observe the accumulation of history in a horizontal manner, but as a vertical number of—liquid—strata on which historical facts and events stand. In this way, Ganivet identifies Seneca, and therefore senequismo, as a substratum of the essence of Spain, which not only defines Spanishness, but is also in turn nourished by such an essence.

The knowledge of a senequist substratum in Spain's essence appears in a personal confession Ganivet makes, which serves as both a subjective reason for the claim and a revelation of its apparent truthfulness and existence:

When I was a student, I read the works of Seneca. I remained stunned and astonished, as someone who, having lost their sight and hearing, would recover them suddenly and unexpectedly and saw objects, which with their ideal colours and sounds were earlier agitated in his interior, appear now en masse and take the consistency of real and tangible objects.<sup>23</sup>

The implication here is clear. Ganivet, a Spaniard, managed to understand ideas and concepts inherent to him being a Spaniard only intuitively, until the time when, in Seneca's words, they were revealed with 'the consistency of real and tangible objects'. This revelation took place because Seneca is the embodiment of Spanishness and Spain is the entity derived from his essence. The allusion to Ganivet's student years serves as the basis for Lafranque's consideration that: 'From the beginning to the end of Ganivet's intellectual life, Seneca's morals and the vital attitude it entails are therefore of capital importance in his eyes'.<sup>24</sup> This understanding of Seneca as a substratum of the Spanish essence, and the interconnected nature of such a relationship, explains Ganivet's following observation:

It is immense, even better said, immeasurable, the part belonging to senequismo in the religious and moral configuration, and even in the common law, of Spain; in its art and vulgar sciences, proverbs, maxims and sayings, and even in those branches of the sciences on which Seneca never set his mind.<sup>25</sup>

Ángel Ganivet was most certainly aware of the profound impact Senecan literature and thought had had in Spain since the 13th century, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries,<sup>26</sup> and this is most probably what lies behind this claim. Spain's total

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>23</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium español* (n. 8 above), pp. 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Laffranque, 'L' Inspiration stoïcienne chez Ángel Ganivet' (n.16 above), p. 6..

<sup>25</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium español* (n. 8 above), p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. K.A. Blüher, *Séneca en España: investigaciones sobre la recepción de Séneca en España desde el siglo XIII hasta el siglo XVII*, Madrid, 1983; L. Fothergill-Payne, *Seneca and Celestina*, Cambridge, 1988; E. del Río Sanz *La influencia del teatro de Séneca en la literatura española*, Logroño, 1995.

permeability to senequismo, and vice versa, is further exemplified by Ganivet with a connection that may seem purely anecdotal or incidental, but that Ganivet exposes in the most enthusiastic of terms: the connection between Seneca's bloody suicide and the tradition of Spanish blood-letters.<sup>27</sup> This most surprising of connections serves Ganivet to claim that Seneca 'has influenced our medical sciences as much as Hippocrates and Galen'.<sup>28</sup> Such a bloody influence is self-evident in Ganivet's eyes, since 'Spain alone outdoes all other nations jointly in the number and excellence of its blood-letters'.<sup>29</sup> Spain has such excellent blood-letters because Seneca led the way with his bloody suicide, a most natural form of suicide, given the numerous and excellent blood-letters of Spain, Ganivet believes. Blood is here the conduit in the bidirectional movement of Spain's historical continuum, which may explain Miguel Servet's discovery of pulmonary circulation in the 16th century, according to Ganivet:

And who knows whether the discovery of blood circulation by Servet, which is after all the only notable thing that Spaniards have contributed to the practical science of men, may have also its origin in Seneca and the crowd of his acolytes.<sup>30</sup>

Ganivet ends his exposition of Spanish senequismo and Seneca's Spanishness with the following claim: 'Without having to find subterranean relations between Seneca's doctrines and the morals of Christianity, one can establish a patent and undeniable relation'.<sup>31</sup> Christianity and stoicism are both at once 'the end of an evolution and the beginning of another evolution in a contrary sense', according to Ganivet.<sup>32</sup> Stoicism and Christianity are the product of the decline of rational philosophy and Judaism, respectively, and also the beginning of two paths which are compatible with each other, even complementary, he claims:

Christianity found its field already ploughed by stoic morality, which had sown noble, just and humanitarian doctrines throughout the world but lacked the juice to fertilise them.[...] While apparently only one propagation is discovered, that of Christianity, another secretly took place, that of gentile philosophy, now Christianised; and the point at which this conjunction took place, the graft, was stoic morals. And so in Spain, which was the seat of the most logical stoicism, not the most perfect or the most human, senequismo is merged with the Gospel in such a way that of our Seneca, if one cannot rigorously say

<sup>27</sup> This proposition was seen as rather absurd by M. Fernández Almagro, *Vida y obra de Ángel Ganivet*, Valencia, 1925, p. 209.

<sup>28</sup> Ganivet, *Idearium español* (n. 8 above), p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

that he "has the smell of a saint", one can affirm that he has all the feeling of a Doctor of the Church.<sup>33</sup>

Since Ganivet understands Christianity to be one of the central characteristics of Spain's essence, it is only understandable that both Spanish Christianity and Seneca may be equated in the same vertical and bidirectional way as Seneca and Spanishness were earlier. Seneca is thus finally consecrated as a precursor of Spain's own autochthonous style of Christianity—some may read Catholicism: 'Spain was the nation that created its own, most original, style of Christianity, inasmuch as originality is possible within Christianity'.<sup>34</sup> The Trinitarian equation therefore unfolds as the combination into one same Spanish essence of Christian senequist Spain, Spanish senequist Christianity, and Spanish Christian senequismo. This threefold connection guarantees a further Christian conduit by which Seneca and senequismo may play a role in the continuum of Spanish history and through which to influence—and be influenced by—Spain's essence as a nation.

After this, we hear no more about Spanish senequismo and Seneca's Spanishness in *Idearium Español*, and we would grievously hear no more of Ganivet's theory at all. Ganivet committed suicide in a second and sadly successful attempt in Riga in 1898 in an ironic act of Senecan persistence and *ars moriendi*. His theory of senequismo has remained as vague and unclear as it was expressed in *Idearium Español*. Even so, Ganivet's theory of Spanish senequismo and Seneca's Spanishness soon became attractive and many attempted to acknowledge, integrate, expand, celebrate or destroy it in subsequent generations.<sup>35</sup> Spanish senequismo became indisputably established as a theory of the Spanish Volksgeist which anyone willing to engage in such an issue had to contend with.

## Seneca and the crowd of his acolytes

Miguel de Unamuno, the other major theorist of Spain's essential continuum, responded, already in 1898 to Ganivet's theory of senequismo in a letter to him: '[Quoting Ganivet] "It is painful to say, but one must say it, because it is true; after nineteen centuries of apostolate, the pure Christian idea has not prevailed a single day in the world". Nor will it prevail, my friend Ganivet, while there are nations and with them wars, nor will it prevail in Spain while we do not liberate ourselves of pagan senequist moralism, whose exterior similarity with the crust of Christianity even you have mistaken'.<sup>36</sup> These words seem to prove that the issue of Spanish senequismo was controversial from the very publication of *Idearium Español*. Ganivet replies in a more emotional manner, perhaps demonstrating the core of

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 9–11. Pérez de Ayala agrees with this thesis; see R. Pérez de Ayala, *Nuestro Séneca y otros ensayos*, Barcelona, 1966, pp. 14–15.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Yet, surprisingly, Azaña's own critique of Ganivet in the 1920s does not analyse *senequismo* in depth; see Azaña, *Todavía el 98* (n. 12 above).

<sup>36</sup> M. Unamuno and A. Ganivet, *El porvenir de España*, Madrid, 1912, p. 41.

his approach to senequismo: ‘You speak of “de-paganising” Spain, of liberating it of pagan senequist moralism, and I am an enthusiastic admirer of Seneca’.<sup>37</sup> Even so, Unamuno had not previously negated a certain senequist scent in the Spanish essence, even though he may have relativised its impact, in *En torno al casticismo* (1895): ‘Our Spanish vices, ever since Lucan and Seneca, *culturismo* and conceptism, spring from the same source’, he states.<sup>38</sup>

The controversy continued for decades. Its strongest manifestation was set at the centre of a historiographical dispute on the origins of Spain as a nation, spanning three decades, from the 1940s to the 1970s.<sup>39</sup> The nature of the debate is intense and complicated and there is here no space to reproduce it; nor does it fully interest the subject of these pages, since senequismo takes a life of its own, detached from Ganivet. Let it suffice to establish two relatively rigid blocks in the historiographical dispute: the defenders of the origin of Spain in its most remote past, including Roman antiquity, and therefore Seneca, on the one side, and those placing the origin of Spain at the time of a self-conscious belonging to such an entity, that is, after the tenth or eleventh century, on the other.

The defenders of the first block were sympathisers of Seneca’s impact in Spain’s configuration, in Ganivetan terms. Their main argument, in brief, was the existence of certain anthropological factors that proved the existence of Spanishness throughout the history of the Iberian Peninsula. Spanish history was thus to be considered as a river, or a succession of strata, that poured down Spain’s existence from its remote past. This perception is the basis of the leading historian Ramón Menéndez Pidal claiming, in 1947, that the ‘facts of History do not repeat themselves, but the man that develops History is always the same’,<sup>40</sup> and later adding:

A Spaniard [...] carries within himself a particular instinctive and elemental stoicism; he is an innate senequist. Certainly much is owed to him [Seneca], and in turn Seneca, purifier of stoicism, owes much to the fact that he was born in a Spanish family.<sup>41</sup>

The main defender of this position was the historian, minister of the Second Spanish Republic in 1933 and Prime Minister of the Republic in exile, Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, primarily in his *España: Un enigma histórico* (1956).<sup>42</sup> Sánchez-Albornoz saw the history of Spain in a similar manner to Ganivet, as being constituted by a series of interdependent strata that gradually and historically created and nourished the existence of an *homo hispanus*. This *homo hispanus* existed in a historical evolution spanning from Seneca in the 1st century AD to Miguel de Unamuno and José Ortega y Gasset in the 20th century AD, passing also through

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>38</sup> ‘En torno al casticismo’ in M. Unamuno, *Obras completas. VIII: Ensayos*, ed. Ricardo Senabre, Madrid, 2007, p. 124. See also Unamuno, *Obras completas. VIII*, p. 532, 1027.

<sup>39</sup> See Gómez-Martínez, *Américo Castro y el origen de los españoles* (n. 5 above).

<sup>40</sup> *Historia de España*, 1.1, ed. R. Menéndez Pidal, Madrid, 1947 [Reprinted in 1982], p. ix.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>42</sup> This book was itself a response to *España en su historia* (1948) by Américo Castro, the main defender of anti-senequismo.

its Muslim incarnation in Ibn Hazm in the 11th century AD.<sup>43</sup> Sánchez-Albornoz clearly explained the existence of a *homo hispanus* in essentialist terms in *Españoles ante la historia* (1958):

Seneca, for example, never felt he was Spanish and even wrote occasionally against the great Spanish national hero, Viriathus. But having been born in Córdoba, his Andalusian lineage affected his temperamental heritage and the forging of his character. Mommsen, Menéndez Pelayo, Gaston Boissier and other contemporary scholars of great credit have already concretely linked some aspects of Seneca's works with the Spanish roots of his family. Nowadays it is possible to discover in him new and newer features of his vital and psychological Spanishness; I have highlighted them when studying Spain's historical enigma. There is even the possibility of suspecting that the nuances he engraved into the stoic doctrine are due to his Spanishness. And it is therefore licit to begin the magnificent series of great Spanish thinkers with him, which ends, for now, with Unamuno and Ortega.<sup>44</sup>

The other block strongly fought against any Senecan influence in the configuration of Spain, attacking such a claim as fallacy. They primarily argued that such a thing as *Spanishness* could not have existed before a conscience of belonging to the entity of Spain, which could have formed at some point after the Muslim invasion of 711. Therefore, Seneca, born under the Roman Empire centuries before the existence of Spain, could not have participated in a bidirectional essential relationship with—a not-yet-existing—Spanishness. Americo Castro, the strongest defender of this view, dismissed senequismo in the following terms in 1956:

It is difficult to persuade many Spaniards that Seneca was a Roman philosopher or moralist, penetrated by stoic thought, and not a mysterious reflection of Iberian forms of life and thinking.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps the strongest attack towards senequismo was that levied by the intellectual and Literature professor, Segundo Serrano Poncela in a compendium precisely dedicated to Americo Castro's eightieth birthday. Serrano Poncela, in his chapter 'Seneca entre españoles', glosses on the main points of Spanish senequismo and Seneca's Spanishness in order to either question or entirely debunk them, such as Seneca's own—apparently negative—opinion of the provinces, Seneca's minimal impact on Golden Age theatre, and his—only—relative influence on Quevedo. Of Ganivet he writes: 'Here you have the Zeus Semnotes [sic], creator of popular Spanish senequismo!'.<sup>46</sup> In his view, following Castros', above, Seneca is a vessel into which Spaniards have poured their ideas of Spanishness, then extracting its

<sup>43</sup> See C. Sánchez-Albornoz, *Españoles ante la historia*, Buenos Aires, 1958, pp. 32–74; C. Sánchez-Albornoz, *España: un enigma histórico*, Barcelona, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Sánchez-Albornoz, *Españoles ante la historia* (n. 42 above), pp. 68–9. Pérez de Ayala largely coincides with this reading; see Pérez de Ayala, *Nuestro Séneca* (n. 32 above), pp. 12–13.

<sup>45</sup> A. Castro, *Dos ensayos*, México, 1956, p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> S. Serrano Poncela, 'Séneca entre españoles', in *Collected Studies in Honour of Americo Castro's Eightieth Year*, ed. M. P. Hornik, Oxford, p. 394.

essence from it in turn, thus creating, as Serrano Poncela puts it, a ‘Seneca ad usum Hispaniae’<sup>47</sup>:

Senequismo is much like a sacred monster for many Spaniards, a stimulating bulk sub specie aeternitatis placed there as the essence of Hispanity, an ethical catalogue, virtuous panacea, a Mosaic tablet containing the ethos of the Peninsular.<sup>48</sup>

More intellectual responses to Ganivet’s theory of Spanish senequismo are to be found in Ramiro de Maeztu’s *Defensa de la Hispanidad* (1934) and María Zambrano’s *El Pensamiento Vivo de Seneca* (1944). These two responses, in their dialogue with Ganivet’s ideas, aid in perhaps further understanding Ganivet’s unclear and vague theory. But what is remarkable about these two responses is that they were written by two intellectuals who would stand on each side of the conflict that would divide the nation for forty years during and after the Spanish Civil War. This comes to prove the pervasiveness of Ganivet’s theory, which permeated the whole of Spanish society.

Ramiro de Maeztu, one of the leading theorists and thinkers of Spanish National-Catholicism, is sympathetic to the theory of senequismo in his *Defensa de la Hispanidad*, but he makes certain clarifications and corrections to Ganivet’s ideas.<sup>49</sup> He agrees that a senequist manly resilience to life’s changes is innate to Spanishness, although he does not quote but paraphrase Ganivet: ‘we conduct ourselves in such a way that ‘it can always be said of us that we are men’, since misfortune does not discourage us, nor do we ever lose, as a people, the meaning of our relative worth within the totality of peoples in the world’.<sup>50</sup> Maeztu admits he is unable to find where Ganivet got this teaching from in Seneca (‘I have not found it’), and even questions Ganivet’s reading and source of this—apparently—Catholic idea: ‘Ganivet does not extract it from Seneca, but from the catechism’.<sup>51</sup> Maeztu defends that Spaniards innately understand the relativity of victory, glory and strength, therefore conceiving the Spanish *adamantine axis* as a flexible, relative and even imagined pillar of Spanishness, and not strong, resistant and unmoveable, as Ganivet had defended. Maeztu therefore obliquely questions Spain’s real stoic—senequist—substratum, revealing it is in fact due to its Catholic characteristics:

What we Spaniards do not do, and in this Ganivet was mistaken, is to suppose that we have ‘within us a mother force, something indestructible, like an adamantine axis’. This is what stoics believed; but stoicism, or the feeling of self-respect, is an aristocratic persuasion which was embraced by some superior men, so convinced of their own excellence that they did not believe it attainable by mere mortals. And although Spain has produced and continues to produce men of this sort, their sentiment has not been able to be disseminated, nor

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 392.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>49</sup> Maeztu had already essayed his ideas on *senequismo* in *Acción Española*, 01-03-1932, 16-06-1933.

<sup>50</sup> R. Maeztu, *Defensa de la hispanidad*, Madrid, 1946, p. 60.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

the nation has paraphrased Saint Augustine, to tell itself, like Ganivet does: "Noli foras ire: in interiore Hispaniae habitat veritas". [...] What we have believed and believe is that truth cannot belong to anyone, in a class of non-transferable property.<sup>52</sup>

But it is María Zambrano, a feminist republican intellectual in exile after 1939, who finally establishes a clear, defended and understandable theory of Spanish senequismo in her truly remarkable, intelligent and charming essay *El Pensamiento Vivo de Seneca* (1944).<sup>53</sup> It is important to state that, although Zambrano may be responding to a theory seeded by Ganivet, she is intending to develop her own theory of why Spain has such a tight connection with Seneca. This proves how far the theory of senequismo had grown in almost half a century, to the point of disentangling itself from its main agent. After having acknowledged Ganivet's words on Seneca in *Idearium Español*, María Zambrano goes on to try to answer the reasons behind such a deep connection with Seneca and why this is so puzzling. She then explains probably the clearest formulation of the process behind the cyclical 'rebirth', as she calls it, of Seneca:

Seneca returns, simply, because we have sought him, and not because of the brilliance of his thought, nor because of anything he may have to offer to the bold knowledge of today. He returns because we have discovered him as a palimpsest buried under our angst, alive and eternal under oblivion and disdain.

It is therefore in virtue of a situation we are living through, that his treasure comes to our mind. We remember it, we return to it as if to an old abandoned house where we feel safe. And in this way, the first sensation we have in facing the present times, which is the first moment of this genre of rebirths, is relief, as if we had found a safe place, a possible retreat we did not count on. But the second moment is of a certain fear, of insecurity and restlessness, because we do not know with certainty what this encounter means.<sup>54</sup>

Zambrano then reveals why the figure of Seneca is so powerful and pervasive for Spanish culture. The reason is his example both as a man and as a thinker, but chiefly as a man. Spain has been a willing recipient of Seneca's 'imago vitae sua', in Tacitus' words (Ann. XV: 62), as Zambrano's use of pictorial and sculptural references demonstrates: 'Seneca exhausted his own limits; his figure has the corporeity of a statue; and his thought the precise delineation of his style'.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> Zambrano essayed many of her ideas in 'Un camino español: Séneca o la resignación' in *Hora de España* XVII, 1938, pp. 11–20. Laffranque sees traces of senequismo in Zambrano's *Pensamiento y poesía en la vida española*, 1938, and *Agonía de Europa*, 1945; see M. Laffranque, 'De la guerra al exilio: María Zambrano y el senequismo de los años 40', *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 413, Nov. 1984, pp. 103–120. See also L. Moreno, 'Séneca, estocismo y senequismo en María Zambrano' in *El tiempo luz: homenaje a María Zambrano*, ed. A. Iglesias Serna, Córdoba, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> M. Zambrano, *Séneca*, Madrid, 1994, p. 25.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 28–29.

Zambrano then goes on to develop her theory of what could be termed *applied senequismo*, by which she exposes her understanding of the principal features of Senecan thought and life and hints or points towards possible teachings and applications of such features in her contemporary—Spanish—society. The features she identifies are, in broad lines, the following: reason as relief and consolation,<sup>56</sup> resignation,<sup>57</sup> intellectual participation in society,<sup>58</sup> compatibility with Christian rhetoric,<sup>59</sup> intellectual fatherhood,<sup>60</sup> the importance of time,<sup>61</sup> ‘strategic pessimism’,<sup>62</sup> and aesthetic ethics.<sup>63</sup> In Zambrano, the theory of senequismo takes a more corporeal form, it is more systematic, it enjoys an intellectual consistency lacking before. But Zambrano understands that Seneca has, by the time of *El Pensamiento Vivo de Seneca* (1944), become a truly Spanish archetype of Spain’s national psychology, and that, in its absorption, the ‘*imago vitae suae*’ is the property of Spanishness and a protagonist of its historical and cultural continuum, as if in a play by Calderón de la Barca:

He died before the footlights of the world, as a bullfighter, as a divo, like all who have lived for the world. And he was a sage because, being so in life, his own death did not surprise him and he knew how to live it, perform it. Seneca is a theatre mask, of the Great Theatre of the World, and of the greatest theatre in the world, which has been Spanish theatre.<sup>64</sup>

## The vine-leaf of senequismo

Even though Ganivet’s theory was undoubtedly influential and pervasive in intellectual and studious circles, its true impact and importance is proven in its popularisation, its impact in broader society. Popularisations of ideas at times create a mutation in their parentage, teleology or thought structure, but these are the risks of an idea being disseminated and ‘owned’ by a society. Ganivet’s senequismo underwent a process of popularisation after its appearance in *Idearium Español*, alongside the impact Ganivet’s corpus had in political parties in the left and the right of the political spectrum.<sup>65</sup> But the most important and clearest demonstration of the popularisation of Ganivet’s theory of senequismo is to be found in, and surrounding, the performance of Seneca’s tragedy *Medea* in 1933 in the Roman Theatre in Mérida.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 57-9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 62-4.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-7, 69-70.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-9, 74-5.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 77.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 80.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-8.

<sup>65</sup> See Garrido Ardila, *Etnografía y politología del 98* (n. 5 above), pp. 179-194.

<sup>66</sup> For this production see Baldwin, ‘Seneca’s *Medea* in Republican Spain’ (n. 3 above).

The idea of staging Seneca's *Medea* had originated in a conversation between the Minister of Education and Culture of the Second Spanish Republic, Fernando de los Ríos, and Miguel de Unamuno. On the 14th of December 1932, after the premier of Unamuno's play *El Otro*, De los Ríos wondered if he did not find it unjust that Seneca had been admired as a philosopher but neglected as a playwright.<sup>67</sup> Unamuno agreed with the minister and accepted to be the translator of one of Seneca's tragedies. *Medea* was chosen. The staging of *Medea* thus became part of the Republic's cultural agenda, whose objective was to bring ethics through aesthetics, according to the minister himself,<sup>68</sup> a similar idea to Zambrano's later reading of aesthetic ethics in Seneca.

The genesis of this production of *Medea* may seem anecdotal, but a closer look may suggest a more intentional tone to the whole meeting: Why was there a need to address such an apparent injustice against Seneca? The minister, as a learned man and an intellectual in his own right, must have been aware of the importance Seneca, as a Spaniard, had after Ganivet's theory, and the man he was speaking to was Ganivet's friend, colleague and interlocutor on senequismo. Ganivet's theory of senequismo and its implications seem to have been indirectly echoed in the genesis of the staging of Seneca's own *Medea*.

But the echoes of Ganivet's theory of Spanish senequismo and Seneca's Spanishness do not end in the meeting between the minister and Unamuno. They become a central feature of the whole production. This is best seen in how Seneca is portrayed in newspapers speaking of the production. We find in them echoes of Seneca's essential Spanishness and his status as Spain's first intellectual, but especially, first dramatist.<sup>69</sup> This is most clearly expressed by the stage director of Seneca's *Medea*, Cipriano Rivas Cherif:

The Roman Cordobés affirms in his *Medea* a personality with unmistakable features of a character all of its own, which, being once secular, places the first milestone of a cultural tradition which does aspire to worldly unity, but within the freedom of a national consciousness.<sup>70</sup>

Seneca has therefore become, in popular imagination, 'very Spanish, even more, very Andalusian, very Cordobés', as the newspaper *La Libertad* described him.<sup>71</sup> This is the reason why, in a critique of a bullfight that took place on the same day of the *premiere* of Seneca's *Medea* in Mérida, on the 18th of June 1933, the critic imagines a very Spanish Seneca as a bullfight aficionado:

---

<sup>67</sup> See Baldwin, 'Seneca's *Medea* in Republican Spain' (n. 3 above), pp. 57, 71.

<sup>68</sup> *El Sol*, 24-07-1932); *El Socialista*, 01-03-1932.

<sup>69</sup> On Seneca as first Spanish dramatist see *El Sol*, 13-04-1933, 14-05-1933, 21-06-1933; *Luz*, 13-06-1933; *Diario de Córdoba*, 20-06-1933; *Crónica*, 02-07-1933. For an analysis of Spanish reception of Seneca as tragedian see Baldwin, 'Seneca's *Medea* in Republican Spain' (n. 3 above), pp. 87–101. See also Pérez de Ayala, *Nuestro Séneca* (n. 32 above), pp. 20.

<sup>70</sup> Rivas Cherif in *El Sol*, 11-06-1933.

<sup>71</sup> *La Libertad*, 02-09-1933.

A dramatic silence entered the bullring [...] as if searching for Seneca, who, if we exclude the ovation which was to explode in [...] Mérida, being always a lover of tragedy, himself would have come to the bullfight, wearing his broad Cordobés hat as a good aficionado, in order to see whether, in effect, it had truly been a phenomenon.<sup>72</sup>

Seneca had thus moved beyond being Nietzsche's 'Toreador der Tugend (Toreador of virtue)'.<sup>73</sup> He became a living aficionado, who could enjoy a good show of bullfighting, one of the instruments of 'the process of nationalisation of culture' in Spain's 19th century, as Fusi explains.<sup>74</sup> The bidirectional movement in the continuum established by Ganivet in his *Idearium Español* seems to have reached its natural evolution by 1933: Seneca erupts from his liquid and permeable substratum to attend a bullfight among his fellow Spaniards.

The senequist continuum also appears in the treatment of *Medea*'s translator, Miguel de Unamuno, in much of the press, as a style of rightful intellectual descendant of the first Spanish intellectual, Seneca, an idea that would be amply shared by other intellectuals later, such as Zambrano, Sánchez-Albornoz and Pérez de Ayala.<sup>75</sup> In this way, in the text spoken on stage at the 1933 production of *Medea*, the continuum of Spanish intellectual and dramatic talent was resurfaced and rekindled in the union of the first and the latest embodiments of Spain's eternal talent, as the following example in *La Libertad* evidences:

One of the wisest choices in the happy complexity to which we are referring is the coincidence in such a high artistic endeavour of these two greatest of universal Spaniards: Seneca and Unamuno. Setting aside the characteristic differences of their times, and the twenty centuries that separate them, they are both spirits of total art: they are poets, dramaturges, essayists, epistolographers [sic] and, above all, philosophers and thinkers. And more than philosophers, they are both moralists.<sup>76</sup>

The impact of both the learned debates and the popularisation of senequismo in Spain is to be most evidently found in the essay 'Nuestro Séneca', written by Ramón Pérez de Ayala and published posthumously in 1966. Pérez de Ayala was an influential writer and intellectual, who had been a leading member of republican circles, director of the Museo del Prado and Ambassador to the United Kingdom during the Second Spanish Republic before his exile to France and Argentina after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and his final return to Francoist Spain in 1954. Pérez de Ayala, in 'Nuestro Séneca', offers a display of his knowledge of the intellectual and cultural debate surrounding senequismo in a very personalistic style which, despite its common recourse to inspired readings, stands as a very stimulating synthesis of

<sup>72</sup> *La Libertad*, 20-06-1933.

<sup>73</sup> See F. W. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Duncan Large, Oxford, 2008, p. 43.

<sup>74</sup> Fusi, *España* (n. 5 above), p. 192.

<sup>75</sup> Zambrano, *Séneca* (n. 53 above), pp. 69–70; Sánchez-Albornoz, *Españoles ante la historia* (n. 42 above), pp. 68–69; Pérez de Ayala, *Nuestro Séneca* (n. 32 above), pp. 12–13.

<sup>76</sup> Haro in *La Libertad*, 02-09-1933. See also *Luz*, 13-06-1933, and *Crónica*, 02-07-1933.

the history of senequismo. Among a series of biographical comments on Seneca, in his essay Pérez de Ayala agrees with a certain senequist substratum and essence in the Spanish nation and spirit, whose latest manifestation, he claims, is to be found in none other than Miguel de Unamuno himself, and which can be seen also in the Antonine emperors as well as in Spanish Catholicism<sup>77</sup>: 'Seneca was Christian without his knowledge'.<sup>78</sup> He coincides with others in seeing in Seneca, Lucan, Martial, Quintilian and Prudentius a common Spanish literary sensibility, remarking that Seneca is 'the most Spanish and universal' of these,<sup>79</sup> and he offers his own translation of some verses from *Thyestes*,<sup>80</sup> later claiming that Seneca is a 'revolutionary of theatre' surpassing the Greek tragedians.<sup>81</sup> To his mind, Senecan stoicism is pervasive in Spanish culture and history, to the extent that Pérez de Ayala claims emphatically: 'The picaresque novel, an exclusively Spanish genre, and inimitable, is saturated with stoicism and senequismo'.<sup>82</sup> Pérez de Ayala's opinion on Seneca the Spaniard could not be clearer: 'Seneca is the luminary silhouette of the Hispanic genius, in its most personal and irreducible aspects, and consequently, in its more universal and permanent aspects'.<sup>83</sup> Yet Pérez de Ayala reveals the penetration of senequismo in the larger culture of Spain when he offers a picturesque, sentimental and personalistic portrait of the philosopher and tragedian from Cordoba that mixes almost all of the elements in the concoction of senequismo we have been able to explore throughout this article:

The first time I saw, in the Prado, the bust of Seneca, without yet knowing who it could be, I could see the appearance of an old gypsy. In this deceitful impression, not only the capillary disposition of his hair and sideburns, in very flamenco fashion, were there, but also the aquiline refinement of his facial features. [...] If not to a gypsy, said head could have well belonged to a retired bullfighter. It used to be said that the famous "Lagartijo" used to speak like a Seneca. And Nietzsche called Seneca the 'toreador of virtue', for scarcely unreasonable reasons [...].

Needless to say that the art of bullfighting was not practised in Spain until the middle centuries. But, if not with wild bulls, Seneca had to fight with even more dangerous enemies throughout his life, staking his own abilities, on occasion his noble courage, and in a bad experience even his instinct of preservation. This, in bullfighting jargon, is what we call reversing one's face, a swift-footed escape, taking the olive branch and jumping the barrier.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Pérez de Ayala, *Nuestro Séneca* (n. 32 above), pp. 9–15.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 34–6.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 25.

## Conclusion: Spanish Seneca

Ganivet's unclear and vague theory spoke of a senequist substratum of Spain's essence, in which Seneca became the embodiment of Spanishness, including its own particular take on Christianity, and in turn Spain became the entity derived from senequismo. This theory would then fit the intention of grasping a historical continuum that could help in understanding Spain's essence and in turn aid in finding a direction for a nation in mid-reconfiguration, an endeavour Ganivet shared with Unamuno. But little could Ganivet imagine, given his early death, that his idea of an inherent senequismo in Spain and an innate Spanishness in Seneca would have such a strong and fertile afterlife. It remained at the centre of the debate on the origins of Spain through three decades, and, ever since the publication of *Idearium Español*, it became a subject for fruitful intellectual thinking. But most of all, Seneca became a stock character of Spain's historical and even social imagery by the 1930s, and a figure who was so alive in the imagination and minds of Spain that to revive him through *Medea* and Unamuno, and to portray him as at once a bullfighter, a gypsy and an aficionado, seemed not only justifiable, but completely natural.

After this analysis, one seems to add a further reading to Ganivet's claim that Seneca is a Spaniard in essence. Seneca is *Spanish* both in the gentilic and essential meanings Ganivet intends, but Seneca becomes *Spanish* also in a possessive sense, after having been accepted into Spanish society and culture with such stamina: Seneca is not only *from* Spain, Seneca does not only *embody* Spain, but Seneca also *belongs* to Spain. Whether Ganivet was right or wrong in his theory of Spanish senequismo, it seems that history made it possible for Ganivet's Senecan vine-leaf to be worn with pride and joy in Spain for many a decade to come.

**Funding** The current article has not been funded by any institution or funding body.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.