

## Two odes to Santiago Ramón y Cajal

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Poetic eulogies that celebrate the legacy of illustrious scientists are not uncommon. They may appear shortly after exitus or many years later. Such is the case of two poems dedicated to the memory of Spain's neurohistologist extraordinaire, Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852–1934), co-winner of the 1906 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with the Italian pathologist Camillo Golgi (1843–1926) in recognition of their work on the structure of the nervous system. Below I provide English translations of two odes that I unearthed from the used book market, one in an antique store in Barcelona and the other in Málaga. The poems are signed R. de Córdoba and Manuel Laza Zerón, and dated 1934 and 1997, respectively (Figure 1).

The sobriquet “Rafael de Córdoba” belongs to the Spanish writer Marcos Rafael Blanco Belmonte.<sup>1,2</sup> A prolific author and translator of prose and poetical works in Castilian, he was born in Córdoba in 1871 and studied pharmacy in Granada and Madrid between 1887 and 1897, but never practiced it. His professional vocation was literary and journalistic. In 1896, Blanco Belmonte became editor of the periodical *La Unión* and published in newspapers such as *Diario de Córdoba* and *La Revista Meridional*. Upon moving to Madrid, he became editor of the newspapers *El Español*, *Revista ABC*, and *El Imparcial*, and collaborated with illustrated weekly journals, including *La Ilustración Española y Americana*, *La Lidia*, *El Gato Negro*, *Revista Blanco y Negro*, *La Correspondencia de España*, *La Moda Elegante*, *Revista Blanco y Negro*, *La Última Moda*, *El Cantábrico*, *Las Provincias*, and *Nuestro Tiempo*. He was honored by the Córdoba Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts for his poetic collection *Al sembrar los trigos* (“Sowing the wheat”),<sup>3</sup> and by the Royal Spanish Academy for *La lanza de don Quijote* (“The spear of don Quixote”).<sup>4</sup>

Blanco Belmonte translated poetry, short stories, novels, and theatrical works originally written in Italian, Portuguese, French, German, and Russian, using, in addition to his real name, the pseudonyms R. de Córdoba, M. White, and Araceli. Thus, he translated works by Victor Hugo, Ada Negri, Abílio Manuel Guerra Junqueiro, Pierre-Jean de Béranger, Alphonse Daudet, José Maria de Eça de Queirós, Lucie Félix-Faure Goyau, Saint Francis of Assisi, Elisabeth of Wied (Carmen Sylva), Jean Baptiste Alphonse Karr, Alphonse de Lamartine, Pope Leo XIII, Mikhail Lermontov, Catulle Mendès, Paul Meurice, Louis-Gustave Fortuné Ratisbonne, Jean Richepin, Léonard Sylvain Julien Sandeau, Friedrich Schiller, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Paul Armand Silvestre, René François Armand Prudhomme, Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, Oscar Wilde, and H. G. Wells.<sup>1,2</sup> The philologist Julio Cejador y Frauca (1864–1927) described Blanco Belmonte as a traditional epic and lyrical poet, without the taint of French lyricism or the elements of modernism, who sang for abandoned children and the Motherland and sought to offer a humble voice to the disadvantaged, with a fiery eloquence that brought to mind the Romantic poet Manuel José Quintana y Lorenzo (1772–1857). Blanco Belmonte died in Madrid on September 15, 1936, a victim of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>5</sup>

Here is an English translation of his ode to Ramón y Cajal:

**In Memoriam—On the loss of Ramón y Cajal**

## I

He was an immortal genius, the Sovereign  
who lit up the path of science  
with the effulgence that the divine radiates  
in the most noble and pure of what is human.

He was an immortal genius; he ripped the arcane  
with the firm greatness of the seafarer  
who, winner of time and destiny,  
provided a world to the Castilian empire.

He was the new Columbus of the sublime;  
the precursor who taught and redeemed;  
the one who, anointed by God, created an orb...

The diver, who in the sea of thought  
threw himself into discovering the great wonder;  
the conducting fibers of Thought.

## II

Spain was with him. And he was Spain,  
a Spain of sublime intuitions,  
of mystics, of sages, of lions,  
of inextinct faith in maternal drill.

He was Moses; the world accompanied him  
In crossing the regions of science.  
He was Spain in search of more blazons  
And climbed to the summit of the feat.

And he was Santiago, with the heart of an artist,  
diction, apostle and author of the conquest  
from the fields that the Ebro fertilizes.

And he was more, much more...He was the glory  
that in our History set forever  
a magnificent sun: his brain.

—Marcos Rafael Blanco Belmonte, 1934

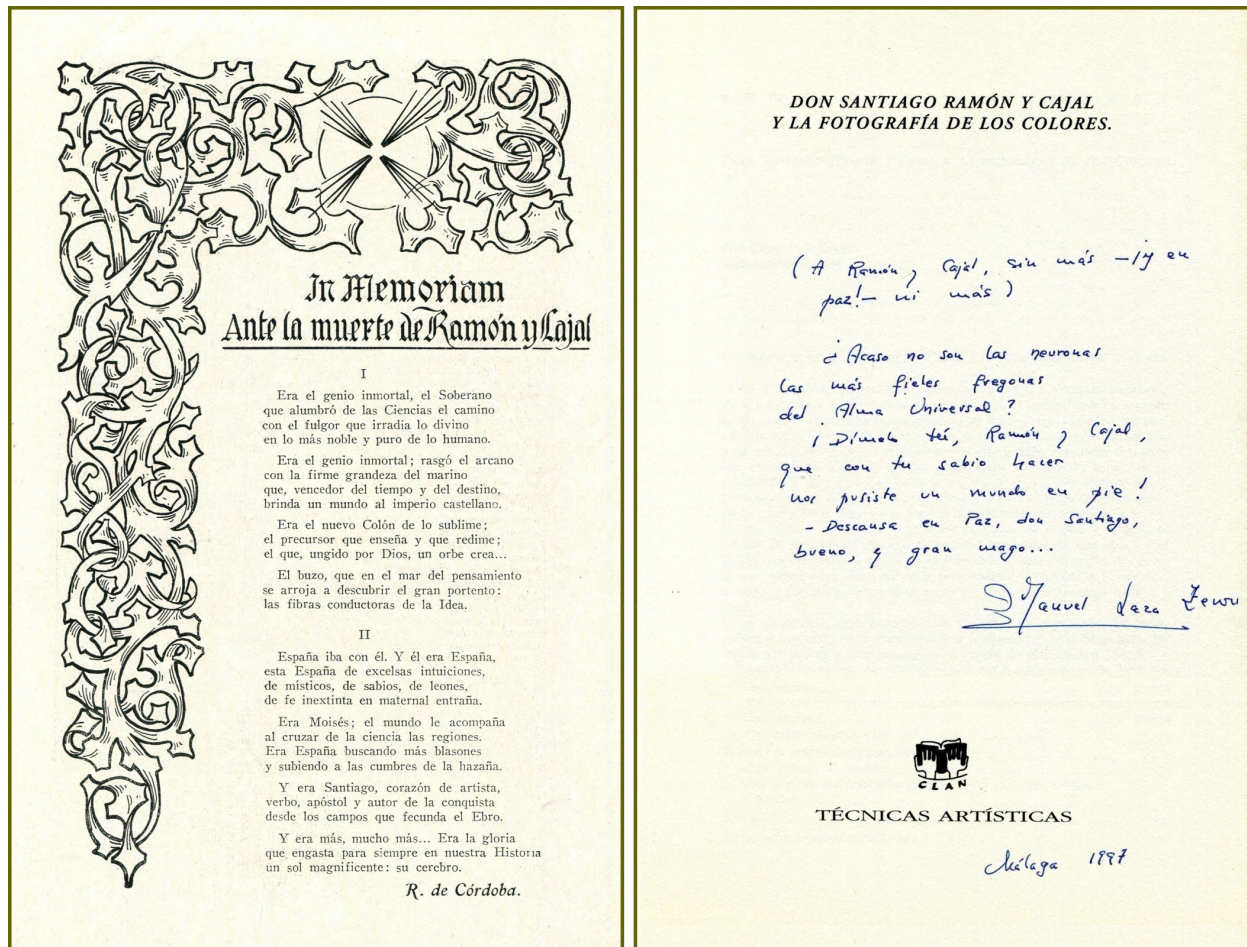


Figure 1

- (Left) Reproduction of the original Spanish version of the poem in the memory of Ramón y Cajal by "Rafael de Córdoba" (aka Marcos Rafael Blanco Belmonte) from the periodical *Blanco y Negro*, published in 1934.
- (Right) A handwritten ode to Ramón y Cajal by Manuel Laza Zerón, dated February 24, 1997, reproduced from the half-title page of a modern edition of Cajal's *Color photography*. Author's archive.

The poet, essayist and novelist Manuel Laza Zerón was born in 1944 in Málaga. He studied philosophy and literature in Granada and held a professorship of literature at an institute in Seville. Laza Zerón has exerted a mode of literary criticism and wrote a study on the poetry of José Hierro del Real (1922–2002), and a critical anthology of *El libro del buen amor* ("The book of good love") by the medieval Castilian poet Juan Ruiz Archpriest of Hita (1283–1350), considered one of the masterpieces of Spanish poetry. Further, he has produced a long series of essays on modern Spanish novels and novelists, and published the novel *Piel de fondo* ("Background skin"),<sup>6</sup> and a series of poems under the title "Name and other poems."<sup>7</sup>

His ode to Ramón y Cajal was handwritten on the half-title page of a modern re-edition<sup>8</sup> of Cajal's technical monograph on color photography.<sup>9</sup> Here is an English translation:

**(To Ramón y Cajal, no longer with us,  
– and in peace! – no longer with us)**

Incidentally, aren't neurons  
the truest mops  
of the Universal Soul?

Let us declare that you, Ramón y Cajal,  
with your acumen  
purged a superior world for us!

—Rest in Peace, don Santiago,  
virtuous and grand sorcerer...

—Manuel Laza Zerón, 1997

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