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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Erotic Mysticism: Subversion and Transcendence in Latin American Modernista Prose by Nancy LaGreca

Review by: Camilla Sutherland

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Erotic Mysticism: Subversion and Transcendence in Latin American Modernista Prose. By NANCY LAGRECA. (North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages, 310) Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2016. 179 pp. \$65. ISBN 978-1-4696-3077-9.

Nancy LaGreca identifies a crucial and intimate relationship between eroticism and mysticism in the work of modernista writers, proposing that non-theistic erotic mysticism played a key role in the construction of a particularly subversive philosophy that worked to undermine the hegemonic power of scientific, political, as well as religious discourses within late nineteenth-century Latin America. This was a period that saw the rise of positivism provoke existential crisis in the modern individual, prompting a counter-attempt by the Catholic Church to draw the disenchanted back into the fold. LaGreca's monograph charts the ways in which modernista writers responded to this atmosphere of competing ideologies by attempting to 'win over the souls of their readers by offering a new religion of ecstatic and aesthetic pleasure' (p. 16).

The monograph is divided into five chapters, in addition to an Introduction and Conclusion, and proceeds chronologically, spanning the period from the 1890s to the early 1920s. LaGreca maintains that the purpose of this study is not to trace a line of influence between modernismo and historical mystic writing, but rather to highlight the innovative character of certain, often underexamined, modernista texts—an aim that is broadly achieved over the course of the work. She is careful to acknowledge the slipperiness of the two central concepts of her study; within the modernista context, she reveals to us, erotic pleasure is detached from the strict realm of the sexual and expanded to include the sensual ecstasy found in the contemplation of art and nature. Modernista writers were likewise not beholden to any one particular vein of mysticism: their usage of it, rather, served the central aim of '[opening] up readers' minds to more diverse ways of desiring, creating, living, and believing' (p. 69), far removed from the realm of Christian mysticism. The concerted distancing from a specific Spanish mystic tradition is usefully read as part of a broader modernista concern with constructing a form of literary expression unique to Latin America, one which severed itself from Spanish cultural traditions.

Erotic Mysticism contributes to existing attempts to move beyond conceptions of modernismo as a solely aesthetic mode; LaGreca skilfully counters the charge of narcissism levelled at modernistas by critics of the time (and within subsequent scholarship), by emphasizing that the writers under consideration embarked on their creative journeys with the express aim of *transcending* the self 'to form part of a greater energy' (p. 82). This monograph forms part of the move within recent criticism that exposes the elements of social critique at the heart of modernista writing. While the erotic and aesthetic emphases of such writing have at times been framed as apolitical, LaGreca reveals that these writings in fact 'contained social messages aimed at facilitating a more open-minded society in the wake of ever-increasing messages to conform to national ideals of citizenship' (p. 19).

In spite of a chapter dedicated to the work of Aurora Zoila Cáceres, where the discussion of modernista 'open-mindedness' and subversion falls short is in its failure to engage critically with the issue of gender. LaGreca's reading of Díaz Dufoo's 'Documentos humanos' (1895), for example, conspicuously fails to acknowledge the problematic gender dynamics at work in this text. The figure of the dejected wife of the poet, abandoned for the 'calentura' of the male intellectual's inner world (with which she cannot compete), raises key issues about the gendered discrepancies in access to the subversive transcendence of modernista erotic mysticism that unfortunately remain unexamined. Likewise, the characterization of women as conduits to the sublime—accessories, rather than equal partners in the transcendent erotic experience—demanded further attention throughout the study.

Overall, however, the text convincingly identifies erotic mysticism as a central preoccupation and mode of subversive praxis in modernista prose; it successfully recuperates texts and writers hitherto overlooked in scholarly discussions and offers a portrait of the conflicting and contentious ideologies that dominated intellectual life during turn-of-the-century Latin America, one that will be illuminating to scholars of modernismo and beyond.

UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN

CAMILLA SUTHERLAND

María Zambrano: A Life of Poetic Reason and Political Commitment. By BEATRIZ CABALLERO RODRÍGUEZ. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 2017. xi+220 pp. £95. 978-1-78316-975-7.

As the first book in English on Spanish philosopher María Zambrano (1904–1991), this is a most welcome volume. Zambrano is not an easy read in any language, and Beatriz Caballero Rodríguez, while not oversimplifying Zambrano's complex and subtle thought, lays out the philosopher's main ideas with clarity and sophistication. She also has an original thesis for those already familiar with Zambrano's vast oeuvre and the many commentaries on it. Not all Zambrano scholars will be comfortable with the central thread that argues for her subject's status as a political philosopher from the start of her writing career in the 1920s with *Horizonte del liberalismo* to the late *De la aurora* (1986). Such a thesis overrides the Zambrano trajectory upheld by such venerable scholars as Ana Bundgård and Jesús Moreno Sanz, who have divided Zambrano's work into several stages—her early work while still in Spain that focused on a political message and her later work written in exile in Mexico, the Caribbean, Rome, and Switzerland, which they see as increasingly mystical or less engaged with political circumstances and theory.

Caballero Rodríguez's argument involves some philosophical manoeuvring that may not convince everyone, but it did me. In Chapter 5, entitled 'Zambrano in (re-)construction', she outlines the writer's ideas on the experiential self, which in turn forms the basis of a political self in works that do not appear at first glance to take the outside world into account. Bolstering her argument is Caballero Rodríguez's situating Zambrano within a philosophical landscape that includes