

Book Reviews

Idelber Avelar. *The Untimely Present: Post-Dictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. xii + 293 pp.

Avelar's text, which significantly expands on his 1996 doctoral dissertation, is an exceptionally valuable addition to the study of current trends in Hispanic literature in general, and of South America in particular. Combining philosophy, politics, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies, the author applies a penetrating critical approach to the literature produced in the 1980s and 1990s in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. With this approach, the author succeeds in demonstrating how the writers of the so-called "postdictatorial" period engage in the process of mourning following the defeat of national politics while, at the same time, they link the defeat of state political systems to the postmodern devaluation of "the literary." Avelar's book is a fascinating treatise on the state of literature in the postmodern period and what value and purpose literature may still have in a world saturated by the immediate availability of information, the commodification of society, and the global homogenization of culture.

The book is divided into eight chapters, accompanied by a brief introduction and afterword. In the introduction, Avelar identifies his two principal purposes for the text. The first is to assess "how and under what conditions of possibility contemporary postdictatorial literature and culture engage the past" and the second is to interrogate "the status of the literary in a time when literature no longer occupies the privileged position it once did" (1). The author also explains his underlying hypothesis, asserting that the South American dictatorships were the result of the power of "transnational capitalism" to force a transition from "state" to "market" and that this dramatic change represents the defeat of the "cultural politics" of the 1960s literary Boom (11). The author proposes that, despite its at-

tempts to compensate for the backwardness of South America by projecting a progressive, "auratic" image of modernization, the liberal political ideology of the Boom period was preempted by dictatorships that thwarted modernization by condemning their countries to minor partner status in a new economic world order. Avelar's second chapter describes the new authoritarian hegemony and makes the important point that as dictatorship brought about a socio-cultural "epochal transmutation," there was a move towards the powerful use of allegory in the literature produced in these countries. The two preliminary chapters, then, provide a background and a base for the analysis of the literary texts by Ricardo Piglia, Silviano Santiago, Damiela Eltit, João Gilberto Noll, and Tununa Mercado, explored in Chapters 3 through 8.

Chapter 3 makes use of Piglia's groundbreaking reinterpretation of Argentine literary tradition as a bridge to the fourth chapter where Avelar analyzes Piglia's *La ciudad ausente* (1992), a text identified by the author as a "treaty on postdictatorial affects and the task of mourning work" (107). Chapter 5 explores Santiago's *Em liberdade* (1981) in which Santiago uses the novelist Graciliano Ramos and his *Memórias do cárcere* (1953) as a point of departure to invent an apocryphal diary about what happens after incarceration as a political prisoner. Chapter 6 investigates Damiela Eltit's *Lumpérica* (1983) and *Los vigilantes* (1994), positing that a shift in the Eltit's use of temporality (eternal return vs. last days) is representative of the development of postdictatorial literature in general. Chapter 7 explores several of João Gilberto Noll's novels which are linked by a "corrosive, negative picture of the voiding of memory and impoverishment of experience after catastrophes" (19). The final chapter scrutinizes Tununa Mercado's *En estado de memoria* (1990), which Avelar considers the "postdictatorial novel par excellence" because it "narrates the conditions of possibility for writing after a catastrophe" (228).

All the writers studied in this text share a common experience as witnesses to the defeat of political structures that brought about brutal dictatorships and the suffering that resulted from them. The title of Avelar's text indicates that in addition to this commonality, the authors also share a particular "untimeliness," a purposeful post-modern tinkering with the linear concept of time (the past contaminated by the present and the present contaminated by the past) which gives their writing potency and incisiveness in the transitional period following the fall of dictatorship.

The ultimate result of Avelar's readings is a text that provides genuinely thought-provoking, insightful, and at times, stunning analyses of both the literary texts and the cultural contexts in which they were produced. The scholarship is keen, thorough, and wide-ranging. The author generates some truly inspired interpretations of highly complex works, and opens them up for a deeply enriching analysis. My only criticism of Avelar's text, however, lies in an occasional exaggerated complexity of language which at times obscures the point that the author is trying to make. In spite of this singular drawback, I find that Avelar's book is a highly meritorious accomplishment and a worthy addition to the study of South American literature and culture.

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Jacques-Denis Bertharion. *Poétique de Georges Perec*. Saint-Genouph: Nizet, 1998. 300 pp.

Recognizing that Georges Perec's writings are characterized by an extreme variety of structure, theme, and approach, Jacques-Denis Bertharion nonetheless sets himself the daunting task of locating "une pratique d'écriture homogène" (7) among them. The first part of his book includes three chapters devoted to Perec's *Un Homme qui dort*, which Bertharion reads, borrowing a term from Philippe Lejeune, as an autobiographical fiction. He suggests—reasonably enough—that the novel's mode of address, in the second person singular, reveals "un certain questionnement du sujet" (24), and that writing, for Perec, is a way of coming to terms with difficult personal experience. The reader should interpret *Un Homme qui dort*, he argues, as "le moyen d'oublier l'impossibilité du deuil" (33), and he identifies two poles in Perec's autobiographical writing, on the one hand anamnesis and on the other the quest for unity.

The second part of the book, entitled "L'expérimentation poétique," devotes five chapters to Perec's association with the Oulipo, his work on the PALF ("Production Automatique de Littérature Française") dossier, his heterogrammatic poetry, and his homophonic exercises. Bertharion sees an insistent practice of metalanguage at work in these texts, and an elaborate system of ruse as well. The latter

involves an "escamotage du Je écrivain" (106), he argues, as if Perec's wish were to write himself out of his work, in order to inhabit merely language, and language alone.

"De l'exhibition du code" includes three chapters focused on *Un Cabinet d'amateur*, *La Vie mode d'emploi*, and "53 Jours," the novel that Perec left unfinished at his death. In the two former texts, Bertharion sees a richly furnished specular discourse in which the novels boldly put on display the chronicle of their own elaboration. In "53 Jours," he finds two guiding principles: the idea that it is impossible to understand the past, and the notion that reality is impossible to seize, describe, and explain (126). He identifies a "mutilation du réel" in the novel, and concludes that "le réel n'est qu'un mirage dans l'écriture" (182-83). That is correct, I believe, but only in a trivial sense. For one can read much of literary history as the struggle to come to terms with reality, and the interest lies perhaps in the approach to that difficult problem, rather than in its resolution. Moreover, Perec himself struggled unflinchingly with that problem throughout his career, from *Les Choses* onward, trying to represent reality in its most fundamental—yet elusive—manifestations, what he would come to term the "infra-ordinary."

In the fourth part of his *Poétique*, Bertharion returns to the autobiographical dimension of Perec's writing in order to interrogate Perec's search for meaning and identity in his personal history. Here, he suggests that the Oulipo's influence frustrated Perec in his efforts to address those issues: "L'Oulipo n'ouvre qu'une perspective illusoire, repoussant dans un futur indéterminé tout discours sur soi, enfermant l'auteur dans des jeux où il s'illusionne lui-même" (210). That is a notion which would astonish many Oulipians, and undoubtedly Perec himself, who proclaimed on many occasions that the Oulipo allowed him on the contrary to express himself in ways that he had hitherto found impossible. More broadly still, Bertharion argues: "L'écriture expérimentale est une écriture de *surface* qui dissimule une parole enfouie dans les *profondeurs* de la conscience: cette parole doit ressurgir, affleurer (210; emphasis in original). He might do well to reconsider that assertion, in the light of, say, Mallarmé, Joyce, Borges, and Queneau—or, to take a more recent example, Jacques Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir*. More immediately still, are we to believe that Perec's own *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, a highly experimental text, is merely an example of superficial writing?

"Les ruses autobiographiques" offers four chapters on Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, and of his analysis, Bertharion offers

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two main reflections on Perec's autodiegetical writings. First, he feels that Perec fails in reading and interpreting the "traces" of his past which he puts into question; second, he believes that the ruses which Perec constructs "désignent chez Perec un sentiment [sic] d'étrangeté à soi" (273), as if Perec's painstaking inquiries into his past had only led him further away from himself. In the final part of this book, entitled "L'écriture et le deuil du sens," Bertharion argues that Perec's work is founded largely upon silence, upon the unsaid; and he concludes—reductively, in my view—that "*l'écriture est pour lui une manière extraordinaire de signifier son amour pour sa mère*" (290; emphasis in original).

Poétique de Georges Perec is a reasonably learned piece of scholarship; Bertharion knows Perec's œuvre well, and many of his analyses are detailed. It is flawed, however, by a variety of considerations. Bertharion's discussion is often long on minor texts (the PALF, *Vœux*) and short on major ones (*Les Choses*, *La Disparition*, *La Vie mode d'emploi*, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*). Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to read—not because of the complexity of the ideas advanced, but rather because those ideas are expressed infelicitously. For instance, Bertharion shows a talent for breaking down open doors: "La lecture comme l'écriture procèdent de la dynamique de la *signification*, au sens où l'entendait Barthes: il s'agit de deux activités déclinant les *procédures de la production du sens*" (8; emphasis in original). Some sentences are simply badly constructed: "C'est ce parcours d'écriture dont on peut suivre, comme suggérées, les orientations principales dans *Un Homme qui dort*" (43); while others are turgid: "Par ce constant jeu sémiotique s'opère un salutaire dés ancrage [sic] vis-à-vis de la réalité: le domaine de l'écriture est le lieu de la disparition maîtrisée et de la dissimulation, l'espace de la mise en scène du discours" (11). Throughout the book, Bertharion practices a heavyhanded abuse of italics, as if his reader were too slow-witted to identify the important terms in his argument; and upon occasion the italics drown the words in plain type: "L'écriture oulipienne appert comme une *conduite de protection*, comme un *rempart dressé par Perec contre les atteintes de son histoire personnelle*" (46). Finally, though the book is workmanlike enough, the reader familiar with Perec's writing and the body of criticism devoted to it will not find many new insights here, very little ground that has not already been traversed by people like Philippe Lejeune, Bernard Magné, Claude Burgelin, and so forth.

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Anthony J. Cascardi. *Consequences of Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 268 pp.

In his book, Anthony Cascardi sets out to give an account of the far-reaching events the enlightenment has been able to engender in the history and philosophy of art and politics over the last 200 years. This is a tremendous task and he wisely narrows it down to the analysis of responses to the thought of Immanuel Kant, whom he somewhat surprisingly views as the major influence in the history of enlightenment thought. In a first instance, Hegel might be a more obvious choice, but it will become clear later on why Cascardi made the choice he did. Given the sheer wealth of individual strains of thought he takes to the text, the following has to be a simplified rendering of his book, since a more complete description would be prohibitively expansive.

Already in the first chapter, Cascardi states what the goal of his text is: “. . . the question of our relationship to the enlightenment is better understood in terms of the difficulty of locating any position that would be categorically inside or outside the enlightenment, inside or outside objectivity, inside or outside systematic thought” (5). This postmodernist move allows him to keep open the question of the enlightenment throughout his text. In a further step, however, he also refuses to underwrite the divisive discussions of the 1980s on modernism and post-modernism, viewing the latter as well within the boundaries of the enlightenment, an enlightenment self-criticism. To further his goal, the detailed well-argued following chapters then engage a variety of writers in their treatment of Kantian aesthetics, and here especially his *Critique of Judgment*.

In Chapter 2, “Aesthetics as Critique,” Cascardi gives a concise and well-informed interpretation of Kant’s writings on the beautiful and the sublime. It is at this point also that he begins his quarrel with Habermas, rejecting the latter’s attempt to finish the project of enlightenment simply by adding his theory of communicative action. According to Cascardi, Habermas (as well as Arendt in her *The Human Condition* (1958) and *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1982, ed. Ronald Beiner) fall prey to a categorical fallacy in their adaptation of Kant:” The Habermasian theory of communicative action . . . nonetheless elides Kant’s reference to the “sensus communis aestheticus” with the “sensus communis logicus” (150). As a consequence, both Habermas and Arendt understand community as medi-

ated conceptually rather than, as Kant says, “aesthetically” (150). This turn represents the nucleus of Cascardi’s argument with the philosophers discussed and he sharpens it further in his criticism of the philosophy of democracy. Hereby, he would like to see this openness of judgment, which Kant expounds for aesthetic judgments, applied in judgments pertaining to social life, eclipsing both cognitive and moral judgments in the process. After having brought to light some of the aporias in the theories of Habermas and Arendt, he goes on to introduce four more recent thinkers who, up to a point, have been more successful in making use of Kant’s aesthetics in their thoughts on social phenomena. Cascardi begins with Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatist approach and his “ironic perspective.” He cites positively that in his approach, Rorty does make use of the openness of reflective judgments promised by the Kantian aesthetico-political viewpoint, but ultimately Rorty’s is a perspective which does not satisfy Cascardi’s belief that a democratic society is made possible not via an ironic perspective, but rather by its own limitations, its own empty center. He has more luck with Roberto Unger’s *Knowledge and Politics* (1975) and his consecutive writings which attempt to find “‘solutions’ to the antinomies of Enlightenment thought.” While Unger does incorporate the symbolic rifts and aporias of society, ultimately he “fail[s] to deal with the propensity to form a symbolic order that goes beyond particulars” (186), doing away with theory altogether. Cascardi then discusses Lyotard’s *Just Gaming* (with Jean-Loup Thébaud, 1985) and *The Differend* (1988) and his introduction of the affective moment into social thought. Lastly, he turns to Slavo Žižek’s *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor* (1991). Apart from putting emphasis on the enjoyment factor, Cascardi specifically seems to endorse Žižek’s approach in the following quotation: “The difference between Žižek and his philosophical predecessors, however, lies in the fact that the Slovenian understands the “indeterminacy” of structures arising not just from the impossibility of the very desire for transcendence. Inevitably, this desire meets with some impediment, which as a form of the Lacanian Real, gives rise to ever new symbolizations by means of which one may endeavor to “‘integrate,’ ‘domesticate,’ or otherwise reduce it, but which simultaneously consigns those efforts in failure” (206).

One final philosopher figures prominently in Cascardi’s rendering of the enlightenment, namely Wittgenstein. He adds him to his lineage of enlightenment figures by discussing Wittgenstein’s later

writings on language, its contingencies and its relationship to objects: "What a Kantian reading of Wittgenstein nonetheless shows is that language embeds a practical form of reflection based on the contingencies of life-forms that cannot be legitimized by anything other than their internal coherence. Our moves within languages-games register nothing more or less than the depth of the commitments that we make" (239).

Finally, *Consequences of Enlightenment* is brought to a close by another look at Adorno's aesthetics. His and Horkheimer's "Dialectic of Enlightenment" had of course already been hinted at and sublated by the title, and was already present in the first chapter. He endorses much of Adorno's social aesthetics; however, critical junctures in Adorno, such as the objecthood of art, are discounted. As is Adorno's insistence on the possibility of truth in the interpretation of and the authenticity immanent in art itself.

The array of knowledge Cascardi displays is mind-boggling, and gives rise to some exciting and crystal-clear passages. Yet, in the end he fails to provide strictures which would pull his argument together. Rather, one is left with this feeling of "Yes, but what now?" As an intentional act, this might seem an apt conclusion to his reading of Kant's aesthetics. And yet, one is left with the wish for a more solid interpretation, especially when it comes to the foundations of politics and society. This also goes for the selective treatment of some of his sources. For instance, Cascardi does quote from Benjamin's *Art in the age of its mechanical reproduction* (248), but only in regard to Benjamin's well-known notion of "aura," leaving aside the more interesting passages in Benjamin's text on the problems associated with attempts to aestheticize politics. Furthermore, given his book's indebtedness to the Adorno/Horkheimer title, this reader would have preferred Cascardi to perhaps also refer to other texts that deal with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno's aesthetics in a somewhat different, critical theorist way, such as Kunneman/de Vries's *Die Aktualität der Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1989) or texts by Christoph Menke-Eggers, one of the more prolific proponents of Critical Theory today.

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William Cloonan. *The Writing of War: French and German Fiction and World War II*. Gainesville, FL: UP of Florida, 1999. 200 pp.

In his contribution to the interdisciplinary book series entitled "Crosscurrents: Comparative Studies in European Literature and Philosophy," William J. Cloonan promises a study of how the World War II "radically affected the writing of novels in Germany and France" and offers his readers an examination of six "successful efforts to create fiction about the war" penned by Céline, Günter Grass, Siegfried Lenz, Claude Simon, Michel Tournier, and Christa Wolf. Citing Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Cloonan locates the uniqueness of the Second World War in both Auschwitz and its cultural aftermath, particularly in their implicit repudiation of the Enlightenment as an exclusively progressive social phenomenon, and sees in his text selections "original responses to World War II . . . that articulate . . . how that war was different from the preceding ones and would have lasting ramifications for the writing of literature." Cloonan concludes with a short discussion of what these texts have to offer the contemporary reader and of "how contemporary literature can still have an important social function."

While Cloonan has formulated engaging questions about the emergence of post-Holocaust literature, *The Writing of War* suffers from the author's methodology, which at times weakens his central thesis considerably. For example, Cloonan feels compelled to justify his rejection of the term "Holocaust" by arguing with Lacoue-Labarthe that its epistemological origin in ritual sacrifice "implies that [the Jewish victims'] deaths have some vaguely understood redemptive or didactic quality." Because " 'Holocaust' suggests that the victims' destruction serves a higher purpose, that the living will discover some moral reinforcement from their deaths." The author favors the term "Final Solution" throughout his study. Unfortunately, Cloonan does not offer a nuanced account of the similarly controversial phrase "Final Solution," an exercise he might have used to specify the historiographical and linguistic stakes of his project.

In explaining his overall focus on French and German texts, the author reasons that "France and Germany were the principal continental belligerents, whose lands comprised the main battlegrounds on the Western Front," which "provided citizens of these nations with a wartime experience quite different from and arguably more intense

than that which the Americans or even the British encountered, in that their countries were never invaded." This approach implies that Cloonan places a premium on the experience of war as a criterion for discussing the subject, yet Cloonan's negotiation of literature, historiography, and culture makes little distinction between writers of different nationalities and backgrounds and thus misses an opportunity to engage their texts in a comparative manner.

Later, Cloonan expresses his surprise that "there appeared to be no major novels written by women." He speculates that women "were rarely active participants in the actual fighting; most often they were denied this involvement because of their sex and all the suppositions that traditionally surround being a woman." If the author had related this finding more explicitly to circulation figures or to a discussion of the novel as genre, his explanation for the paucity of women writers would be much more plausible. Part of the problem may lie in his reticence to engage with the corpus of "war literature," for which genre demarcation has posed a great challenge for contemporary scholarship. Another part may lie in his often contradictory generalizations: "Any novel written about warfare by a German artist of the postwar era either directly or subliminally alludes to World War II, but it would be a mistake to assume that *Cassandra's* principal subject was that conflict. In this novel warfare becomes less a historical reality than a metaphor for male-female tensions. . . . In this respect *Cassandra* is an example of a tendency among German women authors to see war, any war, as the most overt example of the male silencing of the female voice."

Cloonan offers few guidelines on assessing the "seriousness" of authorial intent, which constitutes part of his selection criteria, and omits to discuss what qualifies as a (war) novel. Cloonan adds that "[t]he avoidance of closure was also a quality I was looking for in the books to be discussed because I believe the finest fiction about the war raises more questions than it answers and, by doing so, indicates that many social and literary issues stemming from the war remain unresolved today." Interestingly enough, he criticizes several authors on this account. On the one hand, Cloonan repeatedly states that the most successful texts are those which elide all direct references to the war and yet assign blame where blame is due, yet on the other, he criticizes several writers for various textual "distraction[s] from the wartime events."

And finally, despite arguing that “of all the elements that contributed to focusing on French and German fiction, the most important is the relationship to the Enlightenment tradition,” Cloonan readily dismisses a rigorous study of the subject: “[W]hat is required is not a detailed study of the Enlightenment with all its complexity and contradictions but rather an assessment of how the Enlightenment, regardless of whether it be well or poorly understood, has affected nonspecialists in that field, namely authors whose writings about World War II betray to some degree the influence of the eighteenth century’s most important and amorphous contribution to Western civilization.”

Several editing oversights distract further from the author’s genuine insights. For example, Cloonan translates the title of Grass’s *The Tin Drum* as *Blechstrommel* (instead of *Die Blechtrommel*), refers to the immediate postwar German moment as “Jahre Null” rather than “Stunde Null,” sets the publication date for Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* in 1948 rather than 1947, mistakenly correlates the informal “du” in German to the formal “thou” in English, and uses the phrase “interior emigration” for “Inner Emigration.”

To its credit, *The Writing of War* is an ambitious book that explores literature’s role in understanding cultural phenomena while critiquing precisely that attempt. Yet in his conclusion, Cloonan turns away from the specificity of the Holocaust and leaves one in doubt as to what kind of concrete engagement with “Auschwitz” and World War II would be necessary to produce an “adequate” narrative about the war both now and in the future.

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Vance R. Holloway. *El Posmodernismo y otras tendencias de la novela española (1967-1995)*. Madrid: Fundamentos, 1999. 396 pp.

Vance R. Holloway’s *El Posmodernismo y otras tendencias de la novela española (1967-1995)* is an ambitious and well-researched contribution to contemporary Spanish literary studies. Holloway, who approaches his subject from a new historicist perspective, revisits criti-

cal evaluations of Spanish novels published between 1967 and 1995 in an attempt to synthesize and/or challenge the various and disparate "tendencies" identified by other critics of late twentieth-century narratives. Focusing his study on the works of fourteen novelists who together have published over one hundred novels in a period of over two decades, Holloway concludes that there are three principle tendencies in contemporary Spanish narrative: the "descriptive novel"—both experimental and postmodernist; the "social novel," and the "novel of existentialist crisis." Each of these tendencies is elaborated in a separate chapter, with corresponding analyses of particular works within each category. The last three chapters of Holloway's book are monographic essays on the three authors who have received the most critical attention to date, Merino, Mayoral, and Millás.

In the first chapter, "Metodología e historia," Holloway elaborates his new historicist approach and argues that the historical conditions in postwar Spain justify the application of a generational concept. He identifies what he calls the "Generation of the Seventies," that is, those writers born in the first decade of the postwar period (1939-49) and who began to publish in the late 1960s and early seventies, as the predominant literary figures of the last three decades. This generation, he contends, configured the evolution of the Spanish novel until at least the end of the eighties, and continued to influence the narratives of the early nineties. Holloway has selected fourteen novelists from this generation (each of whom has published at least five novels in a period of over two decades) on which to focus his study: Félix de Azúa, Luis Mateo Díez, José Antonio Gabriel y Galán, José María Guelbenzu, Marina Mayoral, Eduardo Mendoza, José María Merino, Juan José Millás, Vicente Molina Foix, Alvaro Pombo, Soledad Puértolas, Lourdes Ortiz, Germán Sánchez Espeso, and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. It is through this sampling that Holloway has identified the three principle literary tendencies he espouses.

Holloway devotes the second chapter to a study of the two predominating narrative techniques associated with the Generation of the Seventies: a late avant-garde modernism and the "postmodern" novel, which makes its appearance in 1975. Challenging the notion that postmodernism has been the dominant paradigm in the contemporary Spanish novel, Holloway presents a historiography of the term, sifting through and differentiating its usage by various theorists. This is a particularly worthwhile chapter for those who are unfamiliar with or confused by the competing definitions of the term,

and not all readers will share Holloway's conclusions. Through an analysis of some of the earliest published works of the Generation of the Seventies, primarily of those who are considered the "Novísimos," Holloway concludes that, while these works may seem to coincide with Lyotard's concept of the "postmodern," they have much more in common with a prolonged avant-garde experimentalism associated with modernism. Holloway clearly thinks that the term "postmodernist" should be reserved for those works that reach the kind of synthesis between the realist tradition and the avant-garde espoused by Hutcheon, Barth, Jencks, and Eco: a return to the pleasure of a well told story that incorporates double codes, irony, self-reference, intertextuality, generic hybridism, and a blend of high and popular culture.

Mixing apples with oranges, Holloway then shifts from elements of formal expression to thematic considerations to identify the other two predominant tendencies in late twentieth-century Spanish narrative: the "social novel," which he defines as that which deals with society as a collective influenced by its historical context, and the novel of "the crisis of the individual," which presents an individual's private life, sentiments, and psychological make-up. Manifestations of the social novel are the novel of the proletariat, the detective novel, the generational saga, and the historical novel.

The last three chapters deal with José María Merino, Marina Mayoral, and Juan José Millás, whose works best reflect the predominant tendencies of the period studied. While previous critics had signaled a tripartite formulation in Merino's narratives—quotidian and historical reality, metafiction, and myth and fantasy—Holloway's analysis examines the unity which emerges in the blending of the three formulations: the use of both myth and metafiction in the representation of the contemporary human subject. Similarly, Holloway's study of Mayoral's works attempts to bridge what previous critics see as two disparate paths in her narratives, one an emphasis on tradition and continuity, the other on social change and transformation. The third monograph focuses on Millás's *El desorden de tu nombre*, chosen as representative of a thematic and discursive consistency in his novels, that of the crisis of an alienated individual within a postmodern paradigm (the incorporation of popular elements, the pleasure of a well told narrative, self-referentiality, and the simultaneous insertion and subversion of values which question human nature and the impact of language on individual identity). Holloway

concludes that the novel ultimately offers two contradictory readings: one in which the protagonist triumphs, another in which his victory is only illusory.

Given the overwrought application of the term “postmodern” in current assessments of the late twentieth-century novel, and the myriad attempts to define the predominant tendencies of the period, Holloway’s book is a “must read” for all those engaged in the current theoretical debates, and is sure to elicit challenges. His monographic essays, on the other hand, draw carefully on the extant criticism in an attempt to synthesize them as well as to illustrate the conclusions reached in his panoramic overview of the predominant tendencies.

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Patrick O’Neill. *Günter Grass Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999. 184 pp.

This is a well written and lively appraisal of arguably the most significant—and certainly the best known to international audiences—post-war German novelist. O’Neill combines an in-depth understanding of Grass’s artistic and political activities with a strikingly detailed knowledge of his oeuvre, and succeeds in making this most inventive, limber and elusive of writers accessible to non-German-speaking readers, in keeping with the spirit of the ambitions of the Twayne World Author Series in which the book appears. The style is concise, usually clear—O’Neill is occasionally, and understandably, defeated by the opaque contortions of the narratives he attempts to condense into a couple of paragraphs—and always very readable. It is very much to be recommended to students of German embarking upon their first reading of a Grass text, or to interested readers of international fiction. What it does not do, however—and this in spite of the “pitch” reprinted on the back cover of the book—is offer much that is new to university professors. This is not a piece of original research, or new thinking, on the novelist Günter Grass, or on Grass the political thinker, but a more than good and extremely effective summary of established positions coupled with a restating of background information on the author’s domestic and international reception. This is especially the case in the opening two chapters, “The Role of the Writer”

and "Aspects of the Absurd." These present material familiar from many others sources without any new angle or attempt at a critical analysis of Grass's public persona or political activities.

O'Neill's book, therefore, is descriptive in the main. It excels in plot summary, despite the occasional opacity mentioned above, and in pointing out the developments in Grass's fiction—and O'Neill focuses overwhelmingly, and unashamedly, upon the fiction, with occasional, not terribly informative asides about drama, poetry, and the plastic arts. The author's work is thus periodized into five interconnected phases: the Danzig Trilogy; novels of the late 1960s and early 1970s examining the tension between action and impotence in politics; *The Flounder* with its theme of the relationship between fiction and history; the 1980s and Grass's increasingly environmental pessimism, and, finally, the author's post-unification output. Above all, O'Neill's focus on Grass as a writer, on his versatility and skill, offers a welcome respite from the conventional insistence upon his texts as documents of the author's opinions in the public sphere, or, more typically, their dismissal as political tracts. *Günter Grass Revisited* is full of fascinating cross-referencing between the novels, insightful comment on style and tone, debts to the Baroque and European novel tradition, and appreciation of literary quality. This attests to O'Neill's skills in close-reading and his attention to details often overlooked by other critics (including the writer of this review!). The persistence of themes is also highlighted: National Socialism, Enlightenment, the role of the artist, and art's capacity (or otherwise) to influence society, to name a few. Indeed, one of the book's strengths is its mounting insistence upon Grass's work as a self-reflexive engagement with the author's own literary and political activities.

The strengths of O'Neill's book are also its major weaknesses. Description edges out interpretation: only in the chapter on *Dog Years* did this reader feel that the author was really enthusiastic about the analytical endeavor, in part because he is so clearly determined to rescue this (his favorite) novel from accusations of incomprehensibility, and of lack of form and meaning. Particularly striking here is his assertion that *Dog Years* is a "narrative about narrative and its concealments, its subterfuges, its slippages and its creative possibilities," a forceful summary of the author's categorisation of Grass as a post-modern writer *avant la lettre*. O'Neill's preferences for certain works over others leads to some striking imbalances: *Dog Years* gets 15 pages, whereas *Local Anaesthetic* is dismissed in a mere seven,

despite the author's approving quotation of Grass's own comments that he considered the latter to be of "central importance" to "the formal development of his work as a whole." Elsewhere a perhaps overly excessive admiration for the subject at hand appears to banish interpretation as an offense to the integrity of the work of art. O'Neill's passionate defence of the texts he is discussing occasionally means, in fact, that the attempt at interpretation is abandoned altogether, as for example, in the chapter on *Too Far Afield*, which is almost entirely given over to attacking the (undeniable) narrow-mindedness of the critics who panned the novel when it appeared. Again, this raises the questions of the book's potential audience: much of O'Neill's background information on Grass's reception will be indispensable for the non-German-speaking reader or the undergraduate student struggling to understand why the author can be so popular abroad (especially in the United States) and yet apparently so reviled in his home country. The professional Germanist may well find these lengthy passages on well-known events less illuminating, and may sense the absence of interpretative insight.

In conclusion, this is a book that can be strongly recommended for undergraduate teaching, European literature, or general fiction courses. It explains the basics well, and its style is unpretentious and refreshing. Its plot summaries are on the whole, excellent, its background information accurate, and its recapitulation of the major critical debates extremely handy. It is not original research, despite some excellent insights, its tracing of the patterns of stylistic, formal and thematic developments and its attempts to link Grass to wider traditions. I found it helpful to refresh my memory, and was grateful that O'Neill was able to do this without patronizing me, and in an engaging fashion. I suspect that this was more his intention, that the book is really aimed at non-expert readers, and that the hyperbole on the back of the book raises false expectations of what is, in fact, an extremely competent, well-written course accompaniment or general introduction.

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Pamela Maria Smorkaloff. *Cuban Writers On and Off the Island: Contemporary Narrative Fiction*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999. xxiii + 100 pp.

This slender volume concentrates on two variants of Cuban literature: one produced on the island itself and the other derived from "a Cuban diaspora based in the United States" (vii). The author further limits her study to "a corpus of writers of narrative fiction whose works exemplify a conscious engagement with the island's history as continuum" (vii), thereby eliminating authors, such as Cabrera Infante, who profess to have suffered a rupture with Cuban history or who reside somewhere outside the U.S. or Cuba. Smorkaloff views her work as merely the starting point for a discussion of Cuban fiction.

After the author's preface and acknowledgements, before the actual text begins, there is a ten-page "Chronology: Selected Authors, Works, and Historical Events since 1900," divided into decades. This listing notes birthdates of various authors as well as the publication dates of certain works, along with key events in Cuban history. Cabrera Infante figures prominently in this chronology, although he is omitted from the body of the text. After four chapters, the text ends with a brief conclusion, notes and reference, selected bibliography, and an index of names and key terms.

By its brevity, Chapter 1, "The Home and the World: Situating the Twentieth-Century Cuban Literary Tradition," performs the function of an introduction. Here Smorkaloff posits the basic dichotomy between the regional and the universal, the "home" and the "world," in her terms, as one of the informing principles for Cuban-derived literature. She likewise introduces us to several of the authors she will discuss in detail in later chapters, including Alejo Carpentier, Achy Obejas, Miguel Barnet, and José Lezama Lima. Using the example of the Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez, Smorkaloff illustrates the distinction between Cuban writers, Cuban authors in exile, and Cuban-American writers. This latest, youngest generation of authors represents a synthesis of the two cultures represented by the hyphenated term. The work of these young writers "was never nourished by a Cuban landscape yet [it] seeks to reconnect, free of the constraints of nostalgia and false memory, with the social, human, cultural, and historical experience of the island" (9).

The second chapter focuses on two master writers, Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima, as well as the testimonial novel, a

subgenre vibrantly alive in Cuba. Due to the thematic limitations of Smorkaloff's study, many authors are, of necessity, omitted from her study. This limited focus, however, leaves readers with the impression that only a few noteworthy writers ever existed in Cuba. Smorkaloff's style of reference likewise confuses readers since she sometimes refers to works by both their Spanish and English titles, with no indication as to whether she is actually referring to the English translation of those works or not. Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*, for example, is usually called *The Lost Steps*, until the conclusion, when it becomes *Los pasos perdidos* again, for no perceptible reason.

Chapter 3, "Canon and Diaspora: A Literary Dialogue," is the only one divided into subsections. The first portion of the chapter, "Rapprochement," contains an extended analysis of Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo*. The young female protagonist of this novel has to deconstruct the false memories of her family's escape from Cuba until, "free from the tyranny of the official story, Juani is already on her way back to Cuba, back to a source capable of generating other versions" (43). For Smorkaloff, the plot of this novel symbolizes the process many Cuban-American authors go through in coming to terms with their hyphenated natures, eventually returning to their cultural roots, sometimes with actual trips to the Cuban homeland. The second subsection, "Isolation," contains brief studies of several authors, including Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Cristina García, Virgil Suárez, Roberto G. Fernández, and Marisella Veiga.

Next, Smorkaloff attempts to place the small corpus of writers already discussed into the larger context of contemporary Latin American literature. She reviews in some depth the works of the Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez and the Mexican novelist Paco Ignacio Taibo, before concluding with a brief commentary on a short story by the Cuban author Miguel Barnet. By showing us this larger context, Smorkaloff hopes to prove that the writers she has chosen to study have exhibited a "lucid, syncretic transculturation" rather than the type of acculturation seen in "earlier immigrant narratives in which the characters become American by ceasing to be *other* in a process . . . based on self-denial" (70).

In her conclusion, which reads almost like an introduction, Smorkaloff includes a hodge-podge of new material—personal information, chapter summaries, a sketch of Cuban history, and new critical perspectives—to support the thesis she has reiterated throughout the text. Her inconsistent system of documentation is also illus-

trated in this section; for example, there is a numbered endnote citing in full José David Saldívar's *The Dialectics of Our America*, when this work has already been referred to intertextually in the previous chapter. Elsewhere, the first reference to a text, either fictional or critical, is endnoted, with subsequent references cited within the body of each chapter. The listing of primary and secondary sources is comprehensive, thereby rendering the simple identifying endnotes superfluous.

Since such a large portion of this thin volume refers to non-Cuban works, there is only space for minimal coverage of the subject matter announced in the title. As the author herself warns, her work should be considered a point of departure only and not a comprehensive study of Cuban writing. The non-specialist reader could easily come away with the impression that Alejo Carpentier is the only notable author of Cuban origin, since he is mentioned so often. The same reader might likewise confuse Cuban writers with those from other countries, since so many of the latter are discussed, sometimes at greater length than the former. Despite its obvious limitations, this text should provide at least some basic orientation to Cuban narrative literature for the non-specialist.

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