BOOK REVIEWS


Exile occupies a central place among the defining features of Hispanic literatures. Numerous writers from Spanish America, and many from Spain, were forced to live and write outside their homelands, incorporating reflections on this situation into their writing. It is surprising, however, not to find a substantial body of critical attention devoted to this matter. Sophia McClennen’s book responds to a pressing need to theorize an issue that involves many questions concerning notions of power, identity, and memory—all of them pivotal to the study of Hispanic culture on both sides of the Atlantic. By adopting a comparative perspective, she also goes beyond the context of the Spanish-speaking world to reflect on the concept of “exile” and its problematic appropriation by post-modern critical theory. Her main concern in this respect is how a metaphoric use of the concept tends to ignore the pain and difficulties of the actual experience of exile, by focusing on how it liberates subjects from the constraints of nationhood. McClennen stresses the need to localize and reflect on the political circumstances behind any exile’s situation, before adopting the term as a de-problematized marker of a post-national condition. Her book thus focuses on the work of three writers for whom exile was imposed as a result of their writings, when dictatorial regimes gained control of their countries. These writers are: Juan Goytisolo, exiled in France during Franco’s rule in Spain; Ariel Dorfman, exiled in the United States as a result of Pinochet’s coup in Chile; and Cristina Peri Rossi, exiled in Spain from the dictatorship in Uruguay. The Dialectics of Exile carefully studies how these authors confront, in their texts, the conflicts raised by their experiences.

McClennen’s decision to concentrate on just these three writers is explained in the book’s introduction, where she indicates that they can be understood as case studies for developing a theory of exile literature. The book title summarizes her approach to this theory. She mentions that many studies
on exile literature tend to adopt a binary approach, where the exiled writer is seen as either confined to mourning and nostalgia, or liberated and open to creative perspectives by the experience of displacement. McClennen describes this approach as restrictive, and mentions how texts written in exile tend to include many instances of both positions, often linked to each other. As an alternative, she proposes to study how apparently contradictory concepts in these works appear in a dialectic tension, as authors explore the conflictive emotions that come with exile. The dialectic approach, succinctly described in the second chapter, is the main contribution of this book. It allows for studying exile literature as a manifestation of how concepts associated with the fragmentation of post-modernism interact with the legacy of modernity. The most important of such concepts is the nation and its derivatives, such as nationalism and transnationalism, but also significant are many others related to perceptions of historical time, linguistic representation, geographic location, and cultural identity. From the third chapter onwards she delves into how each of these aspects appears in exile literature.

McClennen’s efforts to localize and study the actual implications of being an exile guide much of her analysis. By carefully reflecting on how authors who have experienced the dislocations of exile respond to them in their writing, she challenges appropriations of the concept by contemporary critical theory. In this sense, McClennen’s book itself works in a dialectic tension, between abstract theoretical concepts and concrete references to how they are problematized in these writers’ works. In her analysis of their relationship to the idea of the nation we can see this process at work. Goytisolo, Dorfman, and Peri Rosi were all forced to live abroad by dictatorial regimes. They thus became separated from their national context; both in the merely geographic sense, and in terms of how they were “removed” from their history. Did they become transnational and transhistorical through this experience? McClennen’s answer, based on eloquent references to these writers’ works, is both yes and no. She shows how exiled writers remain deeply attached to their nations, and at the same time define themselves as belonging to alternative transnational communities, conformed by marginalized subjects. They also write against oblivion of their own defeated national projects by confronting the discourse of dictators who invoke pre-modern ideas of the nation while, at the same time, promoting modern notions of progress and market economy. As a result, these writers create in their works alternative models of both pre-modern and modern versions of the nation, combining them and questioning the process in a post-modern way. We can see in this analysis how the post-modern aspect of these literary works is inseparable from the concrete historical and political circumstances that led to the exile
of these writers, and how it coexists with other elements, which can be modern and pre-modern.

The book’s emphasis on the importance of analyzing exile in a historically-situated way is also present in those chapters that study aspects of linguistic representation and cultural identity. The experimental language of these writers appears here not only as a result of the linguistic dilemmas of post-modernism, but also as a concrete effect of being outcast by authoritarian regimes that tried to impose their own rule over language. McClennen shows how exiled writers want to find a home in language (and see it as their only means of political intervention) but at the same time distrust language because they know it is an instrument of power. They thus include both aspects of language in their writing, problematizing binary notions that see writing as either engaged or disengaged with the world. The book offers many examples of how this tension appears in the writings of Goytisolo, Dorfman, and Peri Rossi. With regard to cultural identity, the author links questions on identity in these works with the debate over multiculturalism versus identity politics, with their respective emphases in either assimilation or dissimilation. The book shows how exiled writers at the same time cling to their national identity—describing it as an essential part of them—and explore a more open approach to the concept where every individual configures his or her own defining features. The tension here is once again inseparable from the circumstances of exiled writers, forced to develop a new identity in a foreign land, while still having strong ties with the one they left behind.

With its insight on questions of the nation, history, language, and cultural identity, this book makes an important contribution to debates on the ways in which postmodernism is linked with the legacy of modernity. For anyone who studies how exile writing reflects on notions of power, identity, and historical memory, McClennen’s analysis is essential reading because it opens a new model for examining old dilemmas in this area. Readers familiar with Hispanic literatures may wish to see more references to the many other Spanish-speaking authors who experienced exile. On the other hand, this focus on just three writers allows for an in-depth analysis that strengthens the theoretical contributions of the book, helping the author present her case convincingly. The Dialectics of Exile may leave some other readers longing for a resolution of the tensions that appear profusely in this book, as they do in the works of exiled writers. It is, however, precisely here where McClennen’s analysis is particularly fruitful, opening an important avenue for the study of literary works that rely so strongly on ambiguity and the confrontation of opposing forces. One can imagine many other exiled writers, from different geographic and linguistic contexts, whose works opt for strategies that are
similar to the ones used by Goytisolo, Dorfman and Peri Rossi. What this book shows clearly is that in studying tensions and apparent contradictions within such works, we can gain great insight into the power structures they are confronting, while at the same time reflect on the literary process itself, and how it responds to different and often conflictive forces at once.

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As Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, the editors of Magical Realism: History, Theory, Continuity (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995) explain, the term magic realism [magischer Realismus] was used by German art critic Franz Roh in the preface to his 1925 essay, “Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism,” to describe a new tendency in the art of his time, in which mystery “hides and palpitates” behind represented objects (16). After the essay was translated into Spanish, the term was taken up from the 1940s by South American writers and critics and, shortly thereafter, by North American scholars of contemporary Latin American literature, to characterize and validate a genuinely Latin American literature. Since the late 1980s, magical realism has spread to areas outside of the Western world, with Indian and African writers, among others, writing in this mode. Critics in both the Americas and Europe now view the term “magical realism” as possessing international significance as a critical term, and magical realist fiction as constituting an important strain of contemporary world fiction, while exploring its relations with broader trends such as modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. Indeed, the present writer’s co-edited book, Magical Realism, referred to above, was one of the major contributors to this movement to historicize, theorize, and internationalize the concept of magical realism.