Review of Michael Iarocci, *Properties of Modernity: Romantic Spain, Modern Europe, and the Legacies of Empire* (Vanderbilt UP, 2006)

An epigraph about a current international news program presenting “Europe” as composed of Britain, France and Germany introduces Iarocci’s exploration of Spain’s location – both in the past and in the present – “somewhere off to the side of modern Europe” (xi). The author explains that Spain’s peripheral location on the “symbolic map of European modernity” (xi) had a profound effect on readings and interpretations of Spanish romanticism, and he brings Spain into modernity’s ever-elusive “center” by examining the complexities of subjectivity in Cadalso (*Noches lúgubres*), Ángel de Saavedra (*Don Álvaro*), and Larra (the 1836 articles). Before turning to the Spanish authors, in Chapter One Iarocci traces the development of the idea of modernity, and its association with rationalism, which Hegel and Weber linked exclusively to Britain, France and Germany. The author of *Properties of Modernity* proposes we keep this context in mind as we study romantic historicism’s nostalgic vision of Spain as mystified past. The second part of Chapter One is a lucid history of interpretations of Spanish romanticism by Hispanists from E. Allison Peers to Philip Silver, culminating with the conclusion that traditional ideas of romantic historicism have consistently structured readings of Spanish romanticism to fit paradigms established for and by the privileged space (Northern Europe) of Romanticism: for Spain, the script of romanticism is always written elsewhere.

Exploring Spanish romanticism on its own terms, Iarocci examines the connection many assume between romanticism and liberalism, and concludes that, on the contrary, “romanticism was often a rather disgruntled tenant within the house of liberal modernity” (48), because of liberalism’s impersonality. This is a key point for Iarocci’s entire study: since Spain did in fact modernize and incorporate the ideals of liberalism, it is natural that sensitive souls like Cadalso, Saavedra, and Larra would react to the consequent rise in materialism, selfishness (*interés*), and “prose” (as opposed to poetic idealism), while decrying the loss of hope and possibilities for subjectivity. It is not that they lament the lack of modernization, but rather that they feel the pain of modernization achieved.

Another aspect of of Spanish romanticism that Iarocci finds

essential is the identification of one subjectivity with another. In *Noches lúgubres*, for example, the character Tediato comes to represent human suffering in general, reaching out to readers in the acknowledgment of shared loss. Don Álvaro performs a similar function, reminding his audience that the poetry of possibility – specifically the promise of the colonies – has been sacrificed by modernity, while Larra’s narrator reveals that for Spain, “modern liberty” is an “agent of death” for traditional values (170). Still, the expression of these laments along the chain of linked subjectivities has its limits: there are also subjects who suffer silently, and whose proximity to the protagonists is illusory, since they are not actually given a voice by these texts that go only so far in championing equality. These would be Lorenzo the gravedigger in *Noches lúgubres*, Leonor and the slave in *Don Álvaro*, and Larra’s servant, merely imagined to be free from desire, and allowed to speak only during Carnival. As Iarocci concludes, “the modern selves we have considered often fail to see the pain of subordinate others around them, and even when they do, their gaze tends to transmute alterity into identity: The other becomes a figure of the self’s pain” (209-10).

Properties of Modernity is convincing, exciting, and easy to follow. Iarocci is a superb writer, and his wit never distracts from his overall arguments. For example, his chapter subtitles are funny and engaging. To be fully appreciated, they must be encountered as one reads the book rather than being taken out of context, but just to give a few examples (not a complete list), Chapter One (“From the Narratives of Modernity to Spanish Romanticism”) features “The Land That Time Forgot” and “What’s Past Is Prologue: Romantic Historicism in Spain;” Chapter Two (“Beginnings without End: José Cadalso and the Melancholy of Modernity”) “A Different Sort of ‘amor in morte;” Chapter Three (“Rethinking the Modern in Saavedra’s *Don Álvaro*”) “The Purging of Possibility,” and “Strange Liberties;” and Chapter Four (“Late Larra, or Death as Critique”) “An Obituary for Transcendence,” and my favorite, “No Souls’ Day.” The reader of *Properties of Modernity* never feels abandoned by the author, who takes great pains to make his ideas clear.

When presenting his vision of Spanish romanticism and Spain’s relationship to traditional concepts of modernity, Iarocci uses a memorable analogy, which I will quote in its entirety, because its usefulness extends far beyond Spain to become a

schematic for understanding “modernity” in general:

The rift between these two modes of conceptualizing modernity may be understood more clearly by imagining the following centuries-long conversation between modern Europe and its others. “You are not modern” – northern Europe proclaims in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – “you are barbaric, you are backward, you are lazy. We know, we are civilized.” In the nineteenth century, modern Europe pauses for a moment to add, “It’s strange that we didn’t see it earlier, but your backward ways have a certain charm, a romantic appeal that you really ought to cultivate. Be who you are! We just love it!” Gradually, however, over the second half of the twentieth century, modern Europe’s global others begin to respond: “The modernity you celebrated, the modernity from which you so often judged us, it is not of your own making. It never was. Although you think of us as others, without us you never would have been modern to begin with.” Modern Europe, sitting at an early twenty-first-century postmodern café blinks several times and responds in a slightly puzzled, patronizing tone: “Have you not realized that all our talk about modernity was a phantom, a language-game? We smile wryly at those of you who still want to make claims about the modern. If it weren’t embarrassingly teleological, we would be tempted to call you backward. Whatever the case, do get over thinking that there really was ever anything called modernity. Accident and contingency, that’s what history is about. We know, we are postmodern ironists. (41)

In short, this book is obligatory reading for anyone interested in Spanish romanticism and modernity – it is accessible to all, and will be indispensable for specialists.

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