Review of Noël Valis, *Reading the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Novel: Collected Essays* (Juan de la Cuesta, 2005).

Valis's *Reading the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Novel: Collected Essays* will be a welcome addition to any specialist's library, but could also serve as a masterful introduction to the nineteenth-century Spanish novel for readers less versed in the texts Valis analyzes. Those of us who have acquired (and admired) her articles over the years will benefit immensely from this book, because we now have an extensive selection of her pieces bound in an attractive volume – much better than loose articles stuck in cramped filing cabinets! There are other advantages to having these essays in book form – they complement each other, with footnotes to help the reader go from one article to another in pursuit of an idea developed over more than one essay, and several of these pieces appear here for the first time in English, so that the common language brings the articles together in yet another way.

The book is divided into four sections: Leopoldo Alas (Clarín), Benito Pérez Galdós, Other Novelists, and the Fin de Siglo. The section on Alas contains four essays on *La Regenta* ("Order and Meaning in *La Regenta*," "Last Sentences: *La Regenta*," "On Monstrous Birth: *La Regenta* and the Inchoate," "Hysteria and Hysterical Context in *La Regenta*) and two on *Su único hijo* (The Perfect Copy: *Su único hijo* and the Flaubertian Connection," "Death and the Child in *Su único hijo*). The articles chosen for the Galdós section are "Art, Memory, and the Human in *Tristana*," "Miau and the Display of Dialectic," "*Ángel Guerra*, or the Monster-Novel," "Romanticism, Realism, and the Presence of the Word: *Fortunata y Jacinta*," and "Authority in Galdós" (includes a reading of *Doña Perfecta*). The division titled "Other Novelists" is composed of "Eden and the Tree of Knowledge in Fernán Caballero's *Clemencia*," "Pereda's *Peñas arriba*: A Reexamination," "Pereda and the Tourist Gaze," "Pardo Bazán's *El Cisne de Vilamorta* and the Romantic Reader," "Confession and the Body in Emilia Pardo Bazán's *Insolación*," and "The Hospital Body: *Misterios del hospital*" (analysis of 1882-83 serialized novel *Misterios del hospital*, of uncertain authorship). Finally, for "Fin de Siglo," the essays included are "Novel into Painting: Transition in Spanish Realism" (focuses on Picón's *Dulce y sabrosa*, Clarín's *Doña Berta*, and Galdós's *Tristana*), "The Female Figure and Writing

in *fin de siglo* Spain” (on various works by Picón), “Valle-Inclán’s *Sonata de otoño*: Refractions of a French Anarchist,” and “Decadence and Innovation in *fin de siglo* Spain” (an examination of texts by Valle Inclán).

While many of the articles’ titles suggest that the pieces are studies of individual novels, anyone who has read Valis’s work knows that making this assumption risks ignoring the rich textures of her readings. To take just one example, “Hysteria and Historical Context in *La Regenta*” explores the uses of history in literary interpretation, Galdós’s *La de Bringas*, recent critical work on *La Regenta*, the reception of Santa Teresa in the 1880s, the conflicts in Spanish Catholicism of that period, contemporary theories on hysteria, the novels of Eduardo López Bago, and the silences of Clarín. Clearly not just another close reading of *La Regenta*. In this article and in others, Valis returns repeatedly to the “big” issues of the realist novel, inquiring into the nature of art, the imagination, individuality, and originality, and observing how ordering impulses pair and blend with their opposites (decomposition, the monstrous, the inchoate, and the scatological). Even so, Valis finds that these texts speak to the possibility of human creativity, and the drive of the individual to fashion a self, or rather, the series of selves characteristic of modernity.

This idea serves as the basis of a recharacterization of “pure” realism, but also lends itself to Valis’s project of establishing connections, whether between critical and more costumbristic realism (Fernán Caballero and Pereda creating a new, improved reality, but always in dialogue with critical realism), or between early and late realism. As Valis demonstrates, when the material world “drift[s] away” in 1890s novels, this shift is a “gestation” rather than a rejection of realism/naturalism (10), in the sense that dreams and other products of the imagination involved in narrative self-fabrication issue from the materiality of the body. In the turn-of-the-century novels that feature woman as art object and artist, fashion becomes emblematic of the “display of identity, . . . fleeting and elusive” (11) that makes up the creation of modern selves in succession. At times the selves fabricated in these novels are artists (*Su único hijo* and *El Cisne de Vilamorta*) permeated by the individualism of romanticism, even as they inhabit the realist novel. Even in the later works Valis analyzes, she finds that whatever the degree or sort of impersonality featured in the novels, there is always an opposing “personal ‘need for meaning as a form of moral pressure’” (12). This dynamic

continues into the author's present, as Valis explains in her introduction. As she reread and organized the essays, she identified with Galdós's *Tristana*, and was reminded of her own transformations, and the fact that "art, like personality, is the complex creation of meaning for the elusive self" (9).

At the same time, despite the importance of continuity to her discussion of these novels, Valis is responsible to history, remaining respectfully silent at those moments when she perceives authorial reserve or ambivalence (Clarín on Santa Teresa, Pardo Bazán on "the inner life of the body" [13]), and issuing the warning to critics which she explores thoroughly in "Hysteria and Historical Context in *La Regenta*": "Our own modernity, which pounces upon sameness and representativeness, sometimes prevents us from seeing what is truly different – and thus opaque – in these texts" (13). To use an analogy, we should remember that in the fabrication of the individual's personality, one self follows another, thus connecting to its predecessor, but the proliferating selves are also different. As Valis explains in relation to *Tristana*, personality is revealed to be impermanent (118). In the same way that we recognize difference and impermanence in the creation of individual personality, we would do well to acknowledge discontinuity in historical periods, rather than imposing our cherished notions on the imaginative expressions of the past. Again the *Tristana* essay is relevant:

What then is art? It is the making of personality. We like to think of personality as a process of accretion, a layering of personae. This is a comfortable, stable notion of the human that prevents us from thinking too much about the endless stripping away we also experience at the same time, like Peer Gynt's peeling of the onion. But Galdós shows us in *Tristana* (although he doesn't always develop it sufficiently) a succession of images of ourselves – and others – that frequently, and even deliberately, obliterates our previous self. (128)

We might imagine that a similar procedure is in effect as we conceive of our present while time passes – successive images are superimposed, but many are erased. When we look back to the past, Valis would have us recognize that some of the imaginative representations of history are lost like the peeled layers of the onion. Rather than trying to recapture them, we should simply

acknowledge the possibility that they once existed, however irretrievable they are now.

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