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Review
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Cities in Ruins: The Politics of Modern Poetics. By Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2010. xii, 363 p.

What is it about ruins that continues to attract us? What exactly is their political and cultural valence? And how should we read their central presence in modern poetry about the city? The questions Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel raises in this thought-provoking and elegantly written book transcend the five poets who are her primary focus: Baudelaire, Cernuda, Eliot, Paz, and Neruda. She uses the poetic motif of ruination as a jumping-off point for reflections on such broader concerns as the relationship of modern poetry to history and political commitment and the configuration of the scholarly fields from which we read and analyze poetic texts. "Modern poetry on ruins," Enjuto writes in the introduction, invoking Žižek and Benjamin, "performs an awakening call to the lurking 'real,' to the violence of history in the making" (1). Fittingly, she opens the book by recalling the ruins left in New York City and Madrid by the attacks of September 11, 2001, and March 11, 2004—fittingly, because the ruins of the present inevitably shape the way we read those of the past. The personal opening is characteristic of Enjuto's essayistic, dialectic, and meandering style of writing and thinking that is one of the book's attractions.

Enjuto's evocative first pages sent me to my bookcase, in that same meandering spirit, to open a volume that had been tempting me ever since I had bought it on impulse sometime before: *The Ruins of Detroit*, a colossal catalog of contemporary urban desolation published in 2011 by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre. Leafing through the heavy tome of large full-color photographs, I ventured an improvised self-diagnosis, taking my own affective temperature. The images moved me, but why? The crumbling, blackened façade of the Michigan Central railway station, the caved-in ceilings of the United Artists Theater, the peeling wallpaper of the Fort Shelby Hotel, the abandoned dentist's office in the Broderick Tower—what made these pictures so powerful?

Initially, I decided that the images fascinated me as a cultural *memento mori*—the ruin-related motif that, as Enjuto-Rangel notes, had its heyday in the Baroque period. What is new and bustling today may be destroyed or deserted tomorrow: *sic transit gloria mundi*. Then I recalled the obvious fact that these spaces were not destroyed by war, earthquake, or epidemic, but were voluntarily abandoned for greener pastures. These images should thus remind us less of our own inevitable demise than of our fickleness: the fact that, in modernity, our loyalty to the disenchanted world of things we inhabit is shaky at best. This subtle shift in perspective turns the *memento mori* on its head: it is not we who are abandoned to our mortal fate by a cruelly immortal world; it is the world that is abandoned by us, tossed in the trash or left behind like a pet tied to a roadside tree. The only problem with this thinking is that in fact the mass desertion of urban Detroit was of course not voluntary at all. It was the result of an economic crisis that was itself caused by an abandonment or betrayal: the betrayal of the American working class by the forces of global capital masquerading as agents of progress.

What makes Marchand and Meffre's images of Detroit so eerie is the absence of humans—or, for that matter, any life form other than plants. This is how we imagine the city might look after a neutron bomb attack. In fact, of course, the effects of both war and progress prove to be uncannily similar. Théophile Gautier's description of the "spectacle curieux," in a Paris being remade by Haussmann, of "ces maisons ouvertes avec leurs planchers suspendus sur l'abîme" and "leurs escaliers qui ne conduisent plus à rien" (these houses, opened up, with their floors suspended over the abyss / their stairs that no longer lead to anywhere) could just as well have been written in Barcelona in 1938, in Dresden in 1945, or in Belgrade in 1999 (27). Indeed, as Enjuto points out, since the mid-nineteenth century progress and war have been the two main forces responsible for producing urban ruins. And when modern poets like Baudelaire and Neruda write about these ruins, she argues, they do so in a historical and political mode in order to question or critique the violent destruction that both progress and war leave in their wake. At the same time, poems

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about ruins also allow these poets to reflect on their cultural past and their own place in their respective literary traditions: "modern poetry," Enjuto writes, "prioritizes in different ways the role of literary and historical memory and employs representations of the changing city and its ruins to reflect upon a crisis of perception" (24–25). Modern poets' reading of ruins, in other words, is indicative of their relationship to history, be it political, economic, or cultural. Enjuto contends that her five featured poets are sharply critical of specific historical processes, but never to the point of denying history—that is, change—altogether. At key moments, most notably the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), the mourning over loss, destruction, and defeat allows at the same time the possibility for a politically infused faith in history (what Enjuto calls "picking up the pieces")—the hope for "a political, spiritual, and ecological resurrection" (205). This faith, like the solidarity with the Spanish Republic, emphatically transcends national boundaries.

Enjuto mobilizes Svetlana Boym's distinction between "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia to show how Baudelaire, Cernuda, Neruda, Paz, and Eliot largely avoid the "narcissistic, melancholic reading of destruction" typical of the Romantics. According to Boym, restorative nostalgia aims to reconstruct the past as it was—it "evokes the national past and future"—whereas reflective nostalgia "is more about individual and cultural memory" (4). While restorative nostalgia "takes itself dead seriously," reflective nostalgia "can be ironic and humorous" (4). Although politically quite diverse—Paz and Eliot display conservative if not reactionary streaks—all five poets reintegrate the Baroque and Romantic legacies in a critical or ironic mode and, Enjuto argues, "*historicize* the city's process of transformation and elucidate its decay" (7, my emphasis).

Following a brief introduction, Enjuto's second chapter pairs Charles Baudelaire's *Les tableaux parisiens* with Luis Cernuda's *Un río, un amor* and *Los placeres prohibidos*, works that emphasize the "role of memory and awakening, the shock experience and the sexualization of the urban space" (16). Their incorporation of urban ruins marks a distance from Romanticism. Whereas "Romantic poems on ruins, either fake or real, tend to dehistoricize the past, the context that produced those ruins, to focus on the self as the main subject of the poem," Baudelaire and Cernuda "historicize the remnants of the past. The historical is not only prevalent in the specification of dates and names, but also captured in their reflection on time and decay" (87). The third chapter deals with what Enjuto calls the "burlesque Baroque" in T.S. Eliot and Octavio Paz—the two most narrowly literary and politically conservative of the five. Their work—*The Waste Land*, "Himno entre ruinas," "Homenaje y profanaciones"—reflects a preoccupation not so much with "ruins as the stage of historical conflicts and contradictions" as with "intertextual dialogues, . . . parodic re-evaluation of the Baroque and Metaphysical poets, that is, with becoming palimpsests of textual ruins" (274).

Ruins featured prominently in the images of the Spanish Civil War, which was the first armed conflict in Europe to involve wide-scale city bombings and the first to be extensively covered by the modern visual media. Robert Capa and Gerda Taro, daring and innovative photojournalists, visited destroyed sections of Madrid in February 1937. In the notebook they used to collect the best shots from their contact sheets, a handwritten caption reads "*Le bombardement de Madrid (surréalisme)*." The curious parenthetical note points to the close connection between modernist aesthetics and the representation of the effects of modern warfare, even in a medium as straightforwardly realist as documentary photojournalism. It was no coincidence that it was Picasso who most memorably decried the suffering of civilian victims of the war (in *Guernica*), and it was the generation of poets steeped in the formal experiments of the avant-garde who traveled to Spain in large numbers to express their solidarity with the Spanish Republic in its fight against the Nazi- and Fascist-supported military rebels led by Francisco Franco.

The fourth and longest chapter of *Cities in Ruins* deals with poets' creative reactions to this battle. Cernuda and Paz figure prominently here, of course, alongside Pablo Neruda,

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but also the work of other Spaniards (Rafael Alberti, Miguel Hernández, Antonio and Manuel Machado), Latin Americans (Nicolás Guillén, César Vallejo), and English-speaking poets (Langston Hughes). In eighty sprawling pages, Enjuto covers not only these poets' politicized war poetry but also the debate surrounding the historical memory of that war in Spain today and the way in which the emerging field of Iberian Transatlantic Studies allows for a more productive understanding of the literary responses to the conflict in Spain—which were driven by a sense of solidarity that was itself transatlantic—and, for that matter, modern cultural production in Spain and Latin America generally. Among other things, she analyzes the cultural-nationalist legacy in Spanish war poetry, the different invocations of a feminized Spain in pro-Republican and pro-Franco texts, and the representation of the war from exile. She also rightly questions the relative scholarly neglect of texts deemed too "propagandistic" for serious critical consideration.

The fifth chapter deepens the analysis of Pablo Neruda's work, making the case that Neruda's experience in Spain marks a turning point in his work and that we should read his poetic reflections on the ruins of pre-Colombian Peru through the contemporary ruins of Republican Spain: "The ruins of Madrid and Machu Picchu, portrayed in Neruda's poems, have eliminated the melancholic feelings of Romantic ruin and his previous melancholic mediations on death and solitude"; in his *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* Neruda "intends to rescue the history that 'speaks' through the Inca city" because "the poetic *I* is not only an individual, with his own existential dilemmas, but a historical agent, able to interpret the past and modify the course of history" (230, 232). A brief final chapter or epilogue brings home the book's main arguments: "the poetic portrayal of the modern city in ruins is part of an aesthetic, ethical, and political critique of the new versions of progress, the process of modernization, the brutality of war or the erasure of the historical traces of the past"; it also allows the poets to "reread and rewrite their historical and literary traditions" (273).

Enjuto's book reads like a collection of essays in the classic sense: thought flows freely, ideas emerge with a refreshing kind of unpredictability, and she is not afraid to go off on tangents and touch on many different topics. This also means that some thoughts are more fully developed than others and that sharply formulated insights alternate with some less stylistically fortunate phrases and orthographic slips (such as the consistent misspelling of Vallejo's *España, aparta de mí este cáliz*). Taken as a whole, however, *Cities in Ruins* offers comparatists, Iberianists, and Latin Americanists as much delicious food for thought as Detroit's thriving urban gardens now offer to the loyal souls who stuck with their city.

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Postmodernism and Cultural Identities: Conflicts and Coexistence. By Virgil Nemoianu. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010. 392 p.

One problematic term is trouble enough, but three are at the root of Virgil Nemoianu's work: postmodernism, culture, and identity. In placing them in the context of conflict and coexistence, Nemoianu sets for himself a difficult task: how can such complex and contested terms dwell in conflict and coexist at the same time? It is to Nemoianu's credit that

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