

Silver, Philip. *Ruin and Restitution: Reinterpreting Romanticism in Spain*. Vanderbilt UP, 1997. 175 pages.

In this polemic and densely written study, Philip Silver aims to offer the reader nothing less than a “different master narrative regarding Spanish Romanticism” (23). Whether he succeeds in this ambitious project is not immediately clear. In the process, however, he does accomplish a number of other important feats. Thus, in his attempt to deconstruct received critical notions on the Spanish romantic movement, he starts to lay bare the ideological underpinnings of Spanish literary historiography and its canon — arguing, among other things, that Machado, Azorín, Unamuno, or Ortega y Gasset “have escaped historico-literary revision *because* their spiritualized Castile-centric nationalism provided a rationale for the positions of Republican, Leftist, and Falangist intellectuals after the Civil War,” or that exiled Republican critics invented a Romantic tradition that reflected their own political concerns, but that was never really there (34, xiii-xv). A second important contribution of this book is the attention it calls to the predominance and persistence of deeply *conservative* ideologies in the tradition of Spanish liberalism. This conservatism is manifested in Spanish liberals’ steadfast misgivings about democracy and their fear of “the masses,” as well as in their tendency toward authoritarianism, elitism, and Castilian centralism. Silver convincingly shows the presence of these tendencies not only in Larra, Espronceda and Bécquer, but also in the intellectual generation of the turn of the century, including Ortega (31-37). But while these are some of the book’s strongest aspects, they are not its main focus.

Silver’s point of departure for this book is constituted by two conundrums. The first one of these is the disputed existence, nature, and periodization of Spanish Romanticism. As he writes: “although most scholars speak as though there were a Spanish Romanticism, there is no consensus

about just where, between 1794 and 1898, to locate it” (xi). The second problem is the extraordinary flourishing of twentieth-century Spanish poetry after several centuries of barrenness, and the fact that a good part of that poetry could be said to contain at least an intertextual remnant of Romanticism. Silver rejects the different ways in which literary historiography has attempted to account for this phenomenon, either by attributing it to the influence of Latin-American *modernismo*, with Darío as a “missing link,” or assuming any kind of continuity between Spanish modern poetry and a belated but nevertheless authentic or “high” Spanish romanticism. For Silver, there is no question that this relationship is characterized, instead, by a radical *discontinuity*.

In answer to these two problems Silver formulates five main arguments: “first, that a conservative-liberal romanticism helped a nationalistic political centralism consolidate a factitiously unitary Spanish culture; second, that Spain produced no high romantic *movement per se*; third, that the *discontinuity* romanticism-contemporary poetry is compensated for by a *piecemeal restitution of high romanticism*; fourth, that this redefinition of Spanish romanticism will provide new understanding of many other poets besides Bécquer and Cernuda; and last, that a literary movement like romanticism, that evades all attempts to contain it, still has much to teach us” (xv). The book has five chapters, each of which is shorter than the preceding one.

The first one focuses on the sociopolitical history of nineteenth-century Spain, arguing that Spanish Romanticism was little more than a nationalist project at the service of the conservative-liberal bourgeoisie. In Spain, Silver argues, North-European Romanticism is only partly adopted, and turned into a legitimatory strategy “in the bourgeois struggle for political and cultural hegemony” (7). Its relative weakness as a class, however, forced this “anemic” bourgeoisie into a political alliance with the still

powerful forces of the Ancien Régime. This in turn helps account for its conservative tendencies, notably its rejection of democracy and any true participation of the *pueblo*. Instead, *moderado* liberalism based its claims to power on a Romantic nationalism suffused with a nostalgic, unproblematized idealization of Spain's medieval past. Nationalist and centralist versions of Spanish history would also come to dominate the liberal *Historias generales* written between the 1840s and '60s. They would be further strengthened by the so-called Generations of 1898 and 1914 (Unamuno, Azorín, Antonio Machado, Ortega). In fact, Silver states, they still determine "our present view of much medieval and modern Spanish history" (xiii). (Here Silver's conclusions largely coincide with those formulated by E. Inman Fox in *La invención de España* [1997].)

The second chapter further outlines Silver's theoretical framework. Comparing Spanish romanticism with its North-European counterparts, he finds it lacking in an aesthetic and philosophical respect. For Silver, the relative "height" or authenticity of romanticism is commensurate with the extent to which its representatives are willing to accept the radical implications of their destabilizing philosophical premises. An indication of this radicality is, for example, the romantic's ability to resist the temptation of a nostalgia for a unified subject and social stability. True high Romanticism, by contrast, is characterized by a sense of metaphysical crisis and a dialectical consciousness of temporality or "historicality." In a complex excursus Silver explains and adopts Paul de Man's critique of European high Romanticism as defined by Abrams. With De Man, Silver defines Hölderlin's "historical poetics," ultimately a poetics of failure, as the movement's most authentic moment.

Starting out from these definitions, Silver outright rejects the notion of a Spanish high romantic movement. According to Silver, even Spain's "highest" Romantics, such as Larra, Espronceda, and Bécquer, never rise above the level of North-

European preromanticism, still rooted in eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought, or the later, "tamed" version of high Romanticism that Virgil Nemoianu has called Biedermeier. "[T]he dominant historicist-influenced mode of Spanish romanticism," Silver writes, "was virtually without a consciousness of temporality, of 'being-historical'" (53). In the final part of this chapter Silver reviews and rejects the four major theories of Spanish Romanticism (proposed by E. Allison Peers, Angel del Río, Russell P. Sebold, Octavio Paz, Edmund L. King, and Juan Luis Alborg).

The third chapter focuses on Bécquer's *Historia de los templos de España*, arguing that Bécquer is not the high romantic or proto-symbolist that literary history has made him out to be. Rather, he is a "Biedermeierish" "proponent of a religiously tinged national romantic sublime," both culturally and politically conservative (73). The fourth chapter explains the poetics of Luis Cernuda as the restitution of an authentic high romanticism in Spain. For Silver, Cernuda's poetry anticipates M.H. Abrams's "romantic plot" of "an initial union with nature, corresponding to childhood ...; then, a Fall; and finally a redemption, through the Imagination's reeducation by Nature" (56). Cernuda's later poetry also manifests a "postromantic sublime" centered around the problem of representation. This conclusion may not be surprising considering Silver's previous books on Cernuda's legacy.

In the short final chapter, Silver formulates a "methodological conclusion," in which he relates the weakness of Spanish Romanticism to the fact that Spain was, itself, the favorite object of the North-European romantic gaze. Partly adopting the French, German and English idealizations of their own national past, Spanish Romantics could not resist the temptation of an ultimately unproductive and unironic national narcissism. That is why "Spain's version of historical Romanticism did not allow for alienation, retrospection or imaginary projections into the future" (123).

*Ruin and Restitution* is an important and daring book, but it is not without problems. Some of these are an inevitable consequence of the polemic character that, at the same time, constitutes its attractiveness. To bolster his own argument, for example, Silver tends to oversimplify those of other critics. Also, it is at times too clear that the book, as Silver admits, has taken a long time to complete. Thus, he states that “lately” attention has been drawn to Spanish reactions against French liberalism, but the article he cites, by Donald Shaw, is from 1968 (4). Nor is it true that the “Generation of 1898” is still a “virtually uncontested” concept, as Silver claims. Finally, the book’s editing leaves something to be desired; it strangely reads as a not too elegant English translation from Spanish (in fact the Spanish translation appeared a year before the English original).

The book’s most polemical aspect, however, is the very basis of Silver’s provocative plot: his representation of Spanish romanticism as inauthentic, weak, low or lacking—in comparison to an authentic, strong, high and complete European counterpart. While Silver claims to take on the unquestioned ideological premises of Spanish literary historiography, such as its “centralism” and “teleology,” his rhetoric of “authenticity” and “strength,” “early” and “late,” is, in a way, ideological and teleological itself. In fact, by uncritically assuming North-European romanticism in its definition by Anglo-Saxon criticism as the yardstick with which to assess Spanish romanticism, Silver patently internalizes a kind of North-European centralism himself. There is something dangerously circular in the way he defines “real” Romanticism as its manifestation in German, French, or English literature and goes on to use it to calibrate the situation in Spain, only to find that the Southern periphery does not measure up to the metropolitan standard. This impression is further strengthened by his argument that modern Spanish poetry is founded on a “piecemeal restitution” of the “detritus” of European Romanticism, a language which conjures up the image of peripheral poets

roaming the metropolitan trash-heaps in search of literary recyclables. In this sense, Silver betrays a problematic adherence to the tenets of the literary-critical tradition whose ideological underpinnings he purports to demystify — such as the idea that a “master narrative” of Spanish Romanticism is desirable and indeed possible (23).

A second unresolved tension in this book is that between Romanticism as an aesthetic, transhistorical or even ahistorical phenomenon and as a sociopolitical one. In spite of the ample attention he gives to Spain’s political and social history, ultimately Silver applies a standard that wants to be “purely” literary. This is also clear from his reliance on De Man. For Silver, it seems, literature and politics are in the end antagonistic entities. If Spanish Romanticism was thwarted, it was because “politics took the romantic event prisoner” and because “the historical Romanticism that did exist ... became contaminated by politics” (42, 70).

A third problem is the author’s seeming obsession with naming, terminology, and categorization. Here his study verifies its debt to Hispanic philology and its tendency to treat generalizing abstractions constructed by literary historiography as standards with which to measure individual authors and texts. For example, Silver spends several pages discussing the differences between Abramsian high romanticism, Nemoianu’s notion of Biedermeier, Juretschke’s “historical Romanticism,” Flitter’s “Romantic historicism” and Marrast’s “national-romanticism.” It is a kind of debate which recalls the fierce but ultimately pointless disputes in Hispanist philology over the differences between *modernismo* and the *noventayochismo* or, for that matter, the “Spanishness” of certain works and authors. The problem with this kind of literary criticism is that the demands of the critics’ cherished master plots tend to take precedence over close readings and historical contextualizations.

Indeed, in this book, too, the actual textual evidence is surprisingly slim given the import of Silver's revisionist arguments. There are few close readings, and hardly any quotes from primary sources. Silver disqualifies Espronceda as a "high" romantic, arguing that even his later works such as *El estudiante de Salamanca* and *El diablo mundo* are "rooted in an eighteenth-century aesthetic epistemology"; but the only proof he adduces for this claim is the presence in these texts of Gothic elements and the fact that "Espronceda's ideolect of 'illusion' conceals a decidedly preromantic poetics" (20-22). Bécquer befalls the same fate based on a selective reading of his prose, while his *Rimas* are hardly mentioned. Sometimes one gets the impression that, submerged in the mass of secondary literature on Spanish romanticism —both literary-critical and historical— and mesmerized by the intensity of the debates surrounding it, Silver slights the texts themselves. As a consequence, his arguments become highly abstract and sometimes hard to follow. Occasionally the lack of concrete examples makes his points seem futile or forced, in spite of their apparent strength. There is no doubt, for example, that representation of Spain in the works of Unamuno, Baroja, Azorín, and others was profoundly Castile-centric, but the reader wonders how fair it really is to read a "denigration of micro-nationalism" in Antonio Machado's allusion, in "A orillas del Duero," to the "clamor de mercaderes de muelles de Levante" (37). So while some of Silver's arguments are stronger than others, even where he is most convincing the proof he adduces weakens. All this notwithstanding, Silver's book is an original and pathbreaking study whose impact may well be felt much beyond the narrow confines of the scholarship on Spanish Romanticism.

Sebastiaan Faber (Oberlin College)