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# Review of *La novela naturalista hispanoamericana*, by Manuel Prendes

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on *lo cursi* as a sign of resisting modernity within Granadine culture while also affirming its various aesthetic expressions as a form of nostalgia linked to marks of local identity. The chapter on *la movida* also merits praise, not only for the breadth of historical perspective brought to bear, but for the creative use of *lo cursi* to understand this frenetic period of change in Spain. As Valis sees it, *la movida* embraces narratives and behaviors with a postmodern hue, but also turns “*cur-silería*, kitsch, and camp into a central metaphor for modern Spanish culture” (280), understood in the historical context of rupture and continuity that shaped the transition to democracy following the death of Franco.

*The Culture of Cursilería* is a book difficult to summarize but easy to praise. Valis argues convincingly that *lo cursi* both inhabits and shapes the conflictive face of modernity in Spain over the past two centuries. *Lo cursi* reveals the ascension of provincial life to national stature and establishes links between the concepts of home and national identity. The intricacies of Valis’s arguments accrete to complexity of concept and analysis, yet are pleasantly accessible because of the author’s straightforward, engaging style. Winner of the 2003 Kathryn Singer Kovacs Prize from the Modern Language Association, Valis’s study prompts us to see culture in ways we have not seen it before, and hence to understand Spain during the past two centuries with new and usable perceptions.

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PRENDES, MANUEL. *La novela naturalista hispanoamericana: evolución y direcciones de un proceso narrativo*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2003.

In his study, Prendes undertakes an analysis of the naturalist movement in Spanish America. The introduction sets the literary and socio-historical context for his study by briefly discussing other literary movements in nineteenth-century Spanish America and by commenting on the ways that politics and social thought influenced novelists. Prendes then reviews the extant criticism about naturalism, focusing on criticism published in Spanish, although the bibliography includes references to several critical works written in French and English. He aptly points out that Spanish American naturalist writers have begun to receive more critical attention in the past couple of decades, although he does not connect this to the fairly recent surge of interest in nineteenth-century Latin American literature in general.

In chapter one, Prendes gives an overview of European naturalism and defines naturalism as “la busca de una justificación en la fisiología o en la herencia bioló-

gica para todas las manifestaciones del sentimiento o de la voluntad, y el rechazo [. . .] de una interpretación ‘trascendente’, teológica o bien racional, de los objetos y fenómenos” (31). This definition allows him to connect naturalism to positivism, which, of course, was immensely popular in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latin America, and particularly in Mexico and Argentina, the countries in which naturalism most flourished.

In chapter two, Prendes turns his attention to the rise of naturalism in Spanish America, beginning with a reference to its “intermitencia geográfica” (57), which he links to the uneven processes of development, industrialization, and modernization on the continent. He then proceeds to describe the naturalist movement in individual countries, beginning with Argentina. He goes into detail about the ways in which naturalist literature circulated in those countries and how Spanish American intellectuals reacted to it, including primary sources from contemporary newspapers and letters that demonstrate the heated debates that took place when novels such as Zola’s *Nana* were translated into Spanish and published. Prendes gives careful recreations of the Spanish American reception—both positive and negative—of naturalist texts one country at a time, which occasionally results in some repetition. It would also have been helpful to have some idea of the audience for these novels, other than the intellectuals who so passionately argued about them.

Prendes begins the third chapter by discussing the problems of periodization for critics of Latin American literature, affirming that many critics have attempted to impose European literary movements on Latin American literature. Prendes prefers a division that sees roughly the first half of the century, 1800–1860, as privileging politically motivated novels, while during the period from 1860–1914, in his view, the link between literature and politics became less important. Nonetheless, he then describes the similarities among Romanticism, *modernismo* and naturalism. Thus, although Prendes at first critiques traditional literary periodization as alien to Spanish American literature, this chapter continues to emphasize the importance of conventional literary history by painstakingly tracing the points that naturalism has in common with Romanticism on the one hand and *modernismo* on the other, something which his readers may or may not find useful.

The fourth chapter, “Direcciones ideológicas,” initiates Prendes’s analysis of the naturalist novels themselves. Here he examines naturalism’s involvement with social and political issues. Prendes affirms that the novel, especially according to naturalist writers, “posee unas características de documento humano, principalmente sociológico, que la convierten en un instrumento de utilidad social e inestimable apoyo a las ciencias e instituciones que persiguen el conocimiento y la mejora de las condiciones de vida en la sociedad” (136). To this end, he asserts, novelists often made use of prologues and other paratextual devices as they laid out their socio-political agendas and instructed their readers in the correct manner

of reading and understanding their texts. Prendes then discusses particular themes in the works of specific authors, subdividing the category of “the political” into contemporary politics; the city/country binary; and religion and positivism.

Similarly, the next four chapters look at specific aspects of the naturalist novel, such as determinism, stylistic elements, narrative techniques and the construction of the narrator, and general themes and motifs. In each case, Prendes gives various examples from different naturalist novelists, ranging from Eugenio Cambaceres to Heriberto Frías to Clorinda Matto de Turner, among many others. This structure means that several aspects of the same novel may be addressed in as many as five different chapters. While this allows Prendes to make some generalizations about common elements in a wide selection of naturalist novels, it also prevents him from giving thorough readings of the individual texts.

Prendes concludes by arguing that the naturalist novel evolved into the regionalist novel, or *novela de la tierra*, another genre marked by its efforts to establish a uniquely Spanish American literature and to explore Spanish American reality, and that similar elements seen in naturalist novels also appear in the “*novela proletaria*.” In his view, naturalism made possible a through-going critique of contemporary reality, and this critique continued to appear in novels throughout the twentieth century.

*La novela naturalista hispanoamericana* offers a helpful overview of its subject. While Prendes does not propose a radical new reading of naturalism in Spanish America, his book is, for the most part, a helpful resource for those seeking an introduction to naturalism’s most important elements and authors.

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GARZA CARVAJAL, FEDERICO. *Butterflies Will Burn: Prosecuting Sodomites in Early Modern Spain and Mexico*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2003. 310 pages.

Despite its promising title and the study of a broad sample of legal cases against sodomites in Spain and Mexico during the early modern period, *Butterflies Will Burn* leaves the reader with a feeling of disappointment. Tackling important issues such as the legal code in Spain, strategies of self-preservation used by practitioners of anal sexual intercourse, the complexities of homosocial and homosexual desire, its perceptions and misunderstandings, and the extreme cases of torture experienced by many of the accused sodomites requires theoretical and sustained analysis that the author does not deliver. The book does have value, but such value is not related to the theoretical claims it seeks to further.

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