

Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Anxo Abuín González & César Domínguez, (eds.). *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2010, 750 pp.

The first volume of a two-volume work forms part of a larger project entitled *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* initiated by the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). The intention of the project is to introduce comparative methodology in the writing of literary history, and by doing so, to break with the traditional narrative pattern of literary history that has confined itself to the construction of specific nations and peoples in a periodological model. By examining literary periods, artistic movements, genres, themes, styles, narrative structures and reception across national boundaries, the project aims to explore sites of exchange and dialogue within larger regions such as Africa, the Caribbean, Eastern Central Europe, Scandinavia and the Iberian Peninsula.

The title describes the delimitation of the object of study as geographical (the Iberian Peninsula), not national or linguistic (Spanish and Portuguese). Moreover, the use of the preposition 'in' in the wording of the title itself also indicates that the volume does not pretend to focus on the 'peninsularity' of the literature in question, but rather to treat the literature in its peninsular context. Additionally, the plural of the title indicates the intention to avoid the traditional reductionism that makes Spanish literature synonymous with literature written in Castilian. This first volume gathers contributions from 38 authors, each a specialist within his or her field. The articles are organized in five different sections, and each of these sections is organized and edited by a general coordinator who has

selected the team of experts, and who introduces the theme of the section. The five sections and their coordinators (indicated in parentheses) are as follows: 'Discourses on Iberian Literary History' (Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza and César Domínguez); 'The Iberian Peninsula as a Literary Space' (Sharon Feldman); 'Multilingualism and Literature in the Iberian Peninsula' (Ángel López García); 'Dimensions of Orality' (Paloma Díaz Más); and 'Temporal Frames and Literary Intersystems' (Fernando Gómez Redondo). As the observant reader will have noticed, none of these headings adheres to the traditional categories one would expect a literary history to follow (periods, genres, and so on). Instead the logic structuring the work derives from discourse theory and social systems theory: discourse, space, language, media and systems. This is a refreshing change, and the abundance of interesting topics treated makes it impossible to mention one without committing an unjustifiable omission of others. Nevertheless, I will comment on two closely interrelated topics.

In his contribution, César Domínguez explains how the concept of 'meta-geography', which was proposed by Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen in *The Myth of Continents* (1997), might provide a new theoretical constructivist framework for a revised history of literature, which has traditionally been based on national literatures. Domínguez points out that, according to Lewis and Wigen, meta-geography is concerned with the spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world (p. 66), and a meta-geographical literary history of the Iberian Peninsula should henceforward consist of an analysis of the spatial codes involved in the construction of the historiographical discourses and in the emergence of a canon of that region (p. 129). Domínguez not only proposes a methodological hypothesis; he also engages

with a preliminary analysis of the traditional discourse of Spanish and Portuguese literary history. And his conclusion is convincing: the image of Spain as exotic and different (from France and Germany) has remained dominant since its emergence in the early nineteenth century (p. 129). According to Domínguez, this traditional imaginary has served as a foundation for the central position Spanish historiography has attributed to Castilian literature, in opposition to Portuguese and regional Iberian literatures. Domínguez also argues that the same traditional imaginary is responsible for the marginalization of Iberian literature in a European and international context.

Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza seeks in his contribution to account for this marginalization of Iberian literature and culture within the European cultural system (the canon) by analysing the relation between Spanish literary history and Spanish national discourse. Spanish literary history emerged, like the literary history of other European nation states, as a distinct discourse during the eighteenth century, and developed in the nineteenth century. Unlike other European nation states, however, Spain was deprived of practically all extra-peninsular possessions in this period. Spanish society was deeply affected by the decline of its political and economical influence in Europe, which resulted from these territorial losses. The image of Spain in Central European discourse was thus immersed in the myth of 'the black legend', *la leyenda negra*, of medieval and backward Spain (pp. 11 ff.). Aseguinolaza provides a convincing description of how the national Spanish discourse of the mid-nineteenth century emerged as a dialectics between these alienating constructions of Spain in German Romanticist literary history (the Schlegel brothers, Bouterwerk et al.) and an intentional appropriation by the conservative Spanish state (p. 28). According to Aseguinolaza, this appropriated discourse implied that Spanish literature was inferior

to the literature of Central Europe, first and foremost German and French. In contrast, César Domínguez's meta-geographical point of view stresses the marginalization of the Iberian Peninsula as an interstitial space between Europe and the Orient, between Christianity and Islam. This Orientalist discourse, which originated in France and Germany, had an immediate influence on the comprehension of European literary history from its very birth (pp. 80–91).

I think both explanations of the marginalization of Spanish and Portuguese literary traditions contribute to the necessary rethinking of the position of Iberian literature in a global context. Globalization processes and the transgression of national borders make it urgent to rethink the traditional national paradigms of historiographic discourse in order to focus on transcultural experiences and hybrid identities. This volume is a valuable contribution to this challenge, although one might wonder whether the geographical criterion for the delimitation of the object of study is the most obvious. Another relevant criterion might have been language, which would have created a framework for two volumes on the Spanish/Spanish-American and Portuguese/Brazilian transatlantic relations.

One might also ask whether this two-volume collection of essays actually qualifies as an overview of literary history. While it is difficult to evaluate how thoroughly the work covers the history of the literary production in the Iberian Peninsula on the basis of only one volume out of two, it is disappointing that the contribution on recent literature and culture treats novels and essays that are mainly over 15 years old. And what has become of the characteristics normally praised in Spanish and Portuguese literature? Where is the mysticism of San Juan de la Cruz and the elegant wit (*conceptismo*) and the eloquent rhetoric (*culteranismo*) of the Spanish Baroque? Francisco de Quevedo and Luís de Góngora y Argote, two of the giants of the Spanish Baroque, are

only treated *en passant*, as examples of literary descriptions of Southern Spain (pp. 278–279). The introduction states that the second volume will include a section on genres and literary repertoires; it is certainly to be hoped that that such omissions will be compensated for there.

All such criticisms aside, however, it is obvious that the intention with this series of works is to rethink the paradigm of literary

historiographic discourse, and this implies that the intended reader is an advanced student or scholar of the literatures in question. This taken into account, the volume must be regarded as a valuable contribution, both to the rethinking of the discipline and to the comprehension of Iberian literary history.

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