

RESEÑA

Mary L. Coffey and Margot Versteeg (Eds.)
***Imagined Truths: Realism in Modern Spanish
Literature and Culture***

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In their introduction to *Imagined Truths: Realism in Modern Spanish Literature and Culture*, the editors Mary L. Coffey and Margot Versteeg begin with the observation that “realism has never gone out of fashion” (3). Indeed, for well over 100 years one of the main criteria for evaluating works of fiction has been the extent to which the subject matter objectively reflects the contemporary world. This accepted benchmark for what makes a work realist—as well as others such as: the painstakingly detailed descriptions of the physical world, the use of protagonists from the middle class, the narrator’s adherence to the scientific method, etc.—came into existence in 19th century France. Realism, however, is not contained by any geographic borders; no one country can have a monopoly on it. Those of us who study in depth the great realist novels from other cultures (beyond the French borders) have often lamented their absence in most discussions of European realism and its subgenre, naturalism. Nonetheless, critics have long considered French realists and naturalists—such as Gustave Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers, Émile Zola, and their predecessors, Honoré de Balzac and Stendhal—to be the principal innovators and masters of the movement, followed by English authors like Charles Dickens, despite their reticence to include topics that might be construed as crude, thereby seemingly avoiding total objectivity. Likewise, the great Russian novelists like Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky are often included in supposedly comprehensive studies of the movement, even though they were also quite different from the French, primarily because of their spirituality.

Spain also had great realist writers such as Benito Pérez Galdós, Emilia Pardo Bazán, Leopoldo Alas (“Clarín”) and others. But, at least in part because they were not widely read and promoted in influential cultural centers like Paris or London, their accomplishments are often ignored or at least diminished by non-Hispanist scholars. There are only a few exceptions, like George J. Becker’s *Master European Realists* (1982), which contains a chapter on Pérez Galdós. *Imagined Truths*, however, is a collection of essays, all in English, that counters many of the established approaches to Spanish realism. In the introduction, which should be required reading in all graduate level courses on the topic, Coffey and Versteeg reveal that their intention is “to begin the process of mapping out the unique nature of Spanish realism with the framework of modern Spanish literature” (5). By approaching the movement in this way, the editors refute the worn-out depictions of Spanish realists as imitative, backwards, marginalized, uncivilized, on the periphery of modern Europe, alternative, different, slow to adopt artistic innovation, etc. While the framing of the topic in this way is certainly valid and innovative, it does minimize some insightful research, like that of James Mandrell, whose article on Spanish realism and the European context has been influential for many scholars throughout the years. The editors found the argument that a cultural barrier was to blame for the unfamiliarity of Spanish realism across the rest of the continent—put forth by Mandrell and others—to be “ultimately unconvincing,” because it implied that Spain was “not truly a part of Europe” (8-9).

Even though they seemingly dismiss his assertion, which coincides with that of Mandrell, that Spain held a marginal position in Europe, his observation that Spanish authors had a conflicted relationship with realism ultimately leads their discussion to the profound insight that they “simultaneously admired and rejected” French trends and attempted to appropriate the movement (9). These observations lay the foundation for the following section of the introduction, which is perhaps the strongest because it highlights some of the more relevant arguments for the essays that follow. Revealing articles and prefaces written by Pérez Galdós and Pardo Bazán are quoted to strengthen the argument that Spanish realism was based not on contemporary French styles, but rather on autochthonous sources, such as *Don Quijote* and the picaresque novel. In the brief discussion of Miguel de Cervantes’s influence on the movement, Coffey and Versteeg use for the first time the term

“imagined truths,” which gives the title to the book. They do so in reference to Harry Levin’s classic work, *The Gates of Horn*, and they highlight an aspect of Cervantes’s masterpiece, namely its ability to give the “illusion of reality” (12). It is well established that *Don Quijote* influenced French realism, a fact that allowed the Spanish to make the argument that they were reappropriating realism by removing the crude descriptions that the French added, and returning to it things that had previously been stripped from it, like humor.

The essays in *Imagined Truths* are divided in four sections, the first of which, entitled “Nineteenth-Century Spanish Realism: Root and Branch,” includes three essays on the influence of Cervantes and *costumbrismo* in Spanish realism. Catherine Jaffe’s “Arabella’s Veil: Translating Realism in *Don Quijote con faldas* (1808)” is a fascinating analysis of how a French translation of an English novel, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752), which was obviously based on Cervantes’s masterpiece, was then translated into Spanish. Jaffe deftly argues that Lennox’s protagonist in the Spanish translation of the novel would be a precursor to, and perhaps even a model for, other female Quijotes in Spanish realist masterpieces such as Galdós’s *La desheredada* and Clarín’s *La Regenta*.

The other two chapters in this section highlight the important role played by *costumbrismo* in the development of Spanish realism. Although Mariano José de Larra and Ramón de Mesonero Romanos are perhaps the most prominent *costumbristas*, worthy of their own chapters in a book such as this, Enrique Rubio Cremades’s essay, entitled “Between *Costumbrista* Sketch and Short Story: Armando Palacio Valdés’s *Aguas fuertes*,” argues that Palacio Valdés’s collection of texts entitled *Aguas fuertes*, not unlike the work of Larra and Mesonero Romanos, shows how the genre “gradually lost its romantic fixation on the universal or essential qualities of ‘lo español’ [Spanishness] and evolved into a series of more realist portraits of daily life” (72). This is Rubio Cremades’s first publication in English, and Versteeg’s translation is excellent. The final essay in this section, Rebecca Haidt’s “Money, Capital, Monstrosity: Metaphorical Matrices of Realism in Antonio Flores’s *Ayer, hoy y mañana*,” is intriguing because it focuses on a lesser-known writer whose works are rarely, if ever, considered as precursors to realism. Nonetheless, Haidt expertly explores how this seven-volume work is more than a mere collection of *costumbrista* scenes, but rather an early example of Spanish realist discourse that centers on money and technology, which would be common problems presented in works at the height of the genre. One valuable insight I most appreciated in this essay is that Flores, much like contemporary Fernán Caballero, “positioned himself as a realist,” before the meaning of the term was even agreed upon, lending credence to the argument that Spanish realism can trace its roots to national sources (81).

The three essays in the “Root and Branch” section are masterfully written and, like other essays in *Imagined Truths*, force us to reconsider the Spanish realist canon. The inevitable downside of expanding the canon, however, is that other texts and authors get pushed somewhat to the margins. The aforementioned Fernán Caballero, for example, whose *La Gaviota* is considered to be one of the first examples of Spanish realism, is only mentioned in a footnote to Rubio Cremades’s essay (74). Other politically and religiously conservative novelists, like José María de Pereda and Pedro Antonio de Alarcón are rarely brought up, which is not surprising, as scholars have been disregarding them more and more as time goes by. Both are mentioned briefly, again by Rubio Cremades in his essay, and their names also appear in the introduction as authors who shared Galdós’s views on realism, even though there is no elaboration on their views, not even in a footnote. While Pereda’s conservative views may turn off some critics, and his novels may not have stood the test of time, as those of Galdós and Pardo Bazán have, Galdós himself called Pereda the “portaestandarte del realismo literario en España” in his prologue to *El sabor de la tierra*. Galdós goes on to say that Pereda “[h]izo prodigios cuando aún no habían dado señales de existencia otras maneras de

realismo, exóticas, que ni son exclusivo don de un célebre escritor propagandista, ni ofrecen, bien miradas, novedad entre nosotros” (171). Perhaps the reason why these writers are underrepresented here is because, as Coffey and Versteeg write, “conservative Spanish *costumbrista* writers would prefer to look backward to a Spain that existed in the past, before the nation’s dramatic change of position on the global stage” (16). Thus, their writings maybe did not accurately reflect contemporary society, which is one of the principal tenets of realism. And, of course, it is impossible to include essays on every Spanish realist and realist forerunner. Nevertheless, Fernán Caballero, Pereda, Alarcón, and Juan Valera, for that matter, represent influential branches in the development of Spanish realist thought that should not be forgotten.

Part Two of *Imagined Truths*, entitled “Modernity and the Parameters of Nineteenth-Century Realism,” includes four essays on “the best-known nineteenth-century Spanish realists” – Galdós, Pardo Bazán, and Clarín – that address questions of modernity while testing realism’s limits as a literary mode” (22). Peter A. Bly’s essay, for example, “The Physician in the Narratives of Galdós and Clarín,” explores the figure of the doctor in Galdós’s *Gloria* and Clarín’s *La Regenta*. Bly reflects on the influence of sciences such as physiology, bacteriology, radioactivity and psychiatry in realism in the 1870s and throughout the 1880s, brought about naturalism, spearheaded by Émile Zola. Realist and naturalist authors of the time would frequently employ characters who were doctors, since it was a way to incorporate the methodology of modern medicine into fiction. Interestingly, Bly shows how the growing figure of the doctor was not always welcome in Spain, since it represented a rival to Catholic priests for women’s confessions (114). Ultimately, Bly argues that “Galdós and Clarín questioned the limits of scientific inquiry to provide effective answers to the needs of individuals” (111).

“Travelling by Streetcar through Madrid with Galdós and Pardo Bazán” is a posthumous essay by Maryellen Bieder, in which she explores how these authors address the questions of space and modernity via the image of the streetcar in two short works, “La novela en tranvía” and “En tranvía.” Similarly, Linda M. Willem’s contribution, “Urban Hyperrealism: Galdós’s Dickensian Descriptions of Madrid,” deals with the issue of urban space, but argues that Galdós was emulating Dickens, whom he lavishly praised in more than one text. Remarkably, this essay is perhaps the only one in the collection that makes the case of foreign influence in Spanish realism. Of course, we know from the critical essays of the great Spanish realists that there was what Harold Bloom would call an “anxiety of influence” regarding French realism and naturalism. In fact, literary criticism from Galdós, Pardo Bazán, Clarín and others underscored, time and again, that Spanish realism purposely went against French trends; in the words of Jo Labanyi, “Spanishness is constructed as that which is not French” (12-13). While there could be evidence elsewhere of an anxiety of negative influence of English literature, Dickens clearly is an example of a positive influence for Galdós. The final essay in this section, Susan M. McKenna’s “Observed versus Imaginative Communities: Creative Realism in Galdós’s *Misericordia*,” examines the author’s mixture of fiction and reality, framed as another example of Cervantes’s legacy, in his representation of Madrid. Through the analysis of seemingly contradictory terms like “observed imagination” and “creative realism,” McKenna shows “how Galdós moved beyond the conventional bounds of realism to promote national regeneration and expand artistic expression” (192).

Part Three, “Stretching the Limits of Spanish Realism,” contains two essays that further develop our understanding of Pardo Bazán and Clarín, and one on philosopher and essayist María Zambrano. Joyce Tolliver’s “Colonialism, Collages, and Thick Description: Pardo Bazán and the Rhetoric of Detail” explains how the novelist’s lengthy descriptions of the material world reverberate the echoes of the former Spanish empire. Randolph D. Pope’s “Embodied Minds: Critical Erotic Decisions in *La Regenta*” begins with an observation that the real city of Oviedo seems to be overtaken and

transformed by the fictional city of Vetusta. In other words, the fictional world seemingly has changed reality. Pope suggests an explanation for this, namely “how decision making is vividly and illuminatingly described in *La Regenta*, in a way that corresponds well to our contemporary understanding, especially as it encompasses emotions and the body” (236). In other words, readers of realist novels such as this one are able to relate to what Pope calls the embodied thought of the characters, in which the physical body reflects what is experienced in the mind in the process of decision making. Finally, in “María Zambrano on Women, Realism, and Freedom,” Roberta Johnson reflects on the philosopher’s affinity for Cervantes and Spanish realism –especially the works of Galdós, in whose novels she identified with the female protagonists– at a time when her contemporaries rejected the genre.

Finally, in Part Four, entitled “The Challenges of Genre: Spanish Realism beyond the Novel,” the essays analyze Spanish realism in letters, theater, and the short story. Cristina Patiño Eirín’s fascinating “Writing (Un)clear Code: The Letters and Fiction of Emilia Pardo Bazán and Galdós,” translated by Coffey, explores the romance between these two giants of Spanish literature. Although we only have access to the letters written by Pardo Bazán, as well as some from her confessor and others that were apparently unsent, Patiño Eirín theorizes what Galdós’s letters could have contained. Furthermore, she invites us to rethink how their works reflected their lived experiences. In “Volvia Galdós triunfante”: *Fortunata y Jacinta* on Stage (1930),” David T. Gies explores the challenges in adapting a famously lengthy nineteenth century masterpiece novel to a twentieth century stage production. Galdós’s rich and expansive fictional world could never be reflected in its entirety in the theater, but the endeavor to do so may very well have spurred some theatergoers to pick up the novel. Of special interest is the essay’s appendix, in which there are numerous critical reviews of the play from various contemporary newspapers and journals. Lastly, Stephanie Sieburth’s “When Reality Is Too Harsh to Bear: Role-Play in Juan Marsé’s ‘Historia de detectives’” suggests that in the short story about boys who pretend to be detectives in post-Civil War Barcelona, Marsé rewrites both *Don Quijote* and *La Regenta*. Although it was written long after the Spanish realist movement ended, Sieburth argues convincingly that Marsé’s text has a lot in common with realism.

Perhaps the greatest feature of *Imagined Truths* is its cohesion. Although realists themselves can be contradictory, these critical essays complement each other perfectly. Coffey and Versteeg deserve a lot of credit for crafting a volume of 13 essays from a diverse group of highly respected scholars – comprised of more women than men, from both sides of the Atlantic– that speaks with one voice. That said, their assertion that the book is “not only the first volume to focus exclusively on the phenomenon of realism within the context of modern Spanish literature in more than a quarter-century (since Yvan Lissorgues’s 1988 publication) but also the first to be written in English since Jeremy Medina’s 1979 study,” while not incorrect, could give the impression to readers who are new to the topic that there have been few if any noteworthy contributions to the field in the past 30 years, thereby minimizing, most certainly unintentionally, insightful books such as Noël Valis’s *Sacred Realism: Religion and the Imagination in Modern Spanish Narrative* (2010), Rubén Benítez’s *Cervantes en Galdós* (1990), Francisco Caudet’s *Zola, Galdós, Clarín. El naturalismo en Francia y España* (1995), Denise DuPont’s *Realism as Resistance: Romanticism and Authorship in Galdós, Clarín, and Baroja* (2006), Edward H. Friedman’s *Cervantes in the Middle: Realism and Reality in the Spanish Novel from Lazarillo de Tormes to Niebla* (2006), Dale Pratt’s *Signs of Science: Literature, Science, and Spanish Modernity since 1868* (2001), and Jo Labanyi’s *Gender and Modernization in the Spanish Realist Novel* (2000), among others (19).

As a final note, it must be said that *Imagined Truths* is dedicated to scholar Harriet Turner, whose influence is felt in every essay. Her research is quoted liberally throughout the work and guides the contributors’

observations at every turn. Coffey and Versteeg state that their “goal has been to follow in Harriet’s footsteps in making the complexity and richness of realist texts written in Spanish accessible and comprehensible to new generations of readers” (vii). *Imagined Truths* is truly a fitting tribute to a colleague and friend to so many in the field.

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