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# BOOK REVIEWS

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Bernard McGuirk. *Latin American Literature: Symptoms, Risks, and Strategies of Post-Structuralist Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1997. 265p.

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It is perhaps no coincidence that the so-called “boom” of Latin American literature is contemporaneous with the boom of post-structuralist criticism. In fact, some scholars see the roots of both events in France, during its 1960s hey-day of experimental literary forms and theoretical practices. Jorge Luis Borges’ self-referential play, Julio Cortázar’s anguished narrators, or Susana Thénon’s sexual/textual acts, for instance, all seem to lend themselves to Derridian, Lacanian, or Cixousian analysis, and Bernard McGuirk’s study capitalizes on this literary-critical connection, offering insight, especially pedagogical insight, into the process of approaching Latin American literature with post-structuralist criticism. McGuirk’s book provides methodological examples of applying post-structuralism to Latin American texts, and while this creates a few analytical and theoretical shortcomings, it nevertheless invites further investigation by teachers and critics of Latin American literature.

Itself a post-structuralist text that “takes risks” with wordplay, McGuirk’s study proposes to employ “strategies which open up symptomatic differences not only *between* but also *within* cultures” (xii). Symptomatic of post-structuralism, difference lies within the text, McGuirk argues, and as with Latin American culture, Latin American literature always already deconstructs its own discursive constructs of difference. This approach thus collapses the gap between theory and literature to show that Latin American texts symptomatically perform post-structuralist practices by “resist[ing] reductivist binarisms and polarities” (29). To prove his point, McGuirk offers a variety of different, and at times divergent, post-structural readings of Latin American poetry, short fiction, and narratives.

Framing the book is an opening analysis of Pablo Neruda’s sexual/textual poetics and a closing discussion of Susana Thénon’s poetic disruptions of patriarchal discourse. In the middle chapters, McGuirk cites Hayden White, Michel Foucault, Harold Bloom, and Jacques Derrida to show how the poetry of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, Rubén Darío, and César Vallejo offer metahistorical narratives that un-

dermine *modernismo* as an institutional category of literary history. He continues with Darío and Vallejo by examining their intertextual anxiety of influence “to show how poetic influence works *technically*” (84). Following Todorov’s lead, McGuirk then turns to the poems in Vallejo’s *Trilce* and provides a systematic reader-response approach to the collection’s scatological subtext. Unfortunately, perhaps because he offers multiple post-structural readings of individual texts, much of McGuirk’s poetic analysis lacks coherency. Also, he often shifts from one post-structural theorist to another, always with Derrida at the center, as if forms of post-structuralist criticism were interchangeable. McGuirk’s critical strategy, then, opens up texts to multiple interpretations symptomatic of post-structuralism, but he also risks post-structural incoherence, giving perhaps too much credence to McGuirk’s belief that literary criticism “may ensure that one’s own reading, each and every time, will be rendered, soon, unreadable, a deconstructed, displaced authority” (114).

McGuirk is at his best, however, when he discusses the prose works of Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and Carlos Fuentes. Borges receives three of the book’s last six chapters, but they’re worth it. In the most uncharacteristic chapter, for instance, McGuirk offers a cultural studies approach to “Death and a Compass” as he examines it in the context of popular detective fiction, the BBC’s film production of the short story, and Hollywood’s *Dick Tracy*. Along with intertextuality in Borges’ short stories, Borges himself, McGuirk continues, is an “intertext” in “Borges and I,” a problematic identity that, along with the plot of “Emma Zunz,” defers “the very reality toward which it gestures” (185). He then gives a quite convincing Lacanian reading of Julio Cortázar’s “The Other Heaven,” concluding that “[t]he narrator’s incapacity to reach full political maturity remains attached to a similar sexual incapacity on the Lacanian model” (152). Finally, McGuirk focuses on the images of the mirror and scissors in Carlos Fuentes’ *Terra Nostra* to highlight his point that narratives deconstruct, “cut,” their own binary representations.

There is some confusion in the book, though, as to whether literary difference is symptomatic of post-structuralism or if post-structuralism is symptomatic of literary difference. Of course, this is a circular argument, but McGuirk’s analysis slips back and forth between the two positions, claiming on the one hand that difference is a symptom of post-structuralism and, on the other hand, that literary texts always already perform post-structuralist strategies. This confusion creeps out in McGuirk’s discussion of Vallejo’s poetry, which he sees as “not only peculiarly susceptible to the strategies of post-structuralist analysis but also strikingly symptomatic—or prefiguring—of the risks of post-structuralism’s own ... discursive tensions (97-8). Either way, Latin American literature is post-structuralist.

What is unclear in McGuirk's analysis is *why* it performs post-structuralism. McGuirk does offer what he calls the "third term," "*trans-*," to characterize the discursive slippage between binary opposites (7), but this discussion appears only in the opening and closing pages of the book, leaving the study as a whole with an only vaguely explained theoretical framework.

Moreover, noticeably absent from the study is any significant discussion of Latin American racial/cultural hybridity, Latin America's layers of colonial history, or the fluidity of post-modern subjectivity, all three of which enact post-structural patterns of difference in terms of race, power, and identity that might explain the construct of difference within Latin American literature. With an analysis of only one female author, McGuirk also misses the chance to examine more extensively the relationship between gender, sexuality, and discursive difference. Finally, McGuirk's "Derridian perspective," as he calls it (1), limits his study's use of post-structuralism. Bakhtin's notion of "dialogic" discourse, or Jameson's idea of the "political unconscious," are both post-structuralist approaches that can open up a socio-political analysis of Latin American literature. Even if it glosses too quickly the complex relationship between Latin American literary production and the production of post-structural criticism, McGuirk's book nevertheless offers some generally insightful approaches to Latin American literature, especially for teachers who want to introduce their students to alternative readings of Latin American texts. ✱