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**Review of *By the Grace of God: Francoist Spain and the Sacred
Roots of Political Imagination* by William Viestenz**

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WILLIAM VIESTENZ. *By the Grace of God: Francoist Spain and the Sacred Roots of Political Imagination*. U of Toronto P, 2015. 223 pp.

As T-shirts of *La Roja* (currently less successful on the field than in the national imagination) and snapshots of Holy Week processions continue to dominate Spain's brand image, it is hard to overestimate the usefulness of sacred or sanctified symbols in preserving Spanish nationalism in the age of official secularization. What happens, however, to this happy partnership of sovereignty and mystical unity when the state enshrines Catholicism itself to assert nationhood, as occurred during Franco's regime? This is the question hovering over William Viestenz's fascinating book as it looks back at the "Francoist alliance of the political and the theological" from the vantage point of present-day post-secularism (3).

Jo Labanyi's *Myth and History in the Contemporary Spanish Novel* (1989) and Noel Valis's *Sacred Realism: Religion and the Imagination in Modern Spanish Narrative* (2010), which Viestenz cites among many others, have uncovered the importance of fiction in supplying modern visions of sacred communities, subjects, objects, and values to soothe anxieties caused by Spain's incomplete secularization. A welcome and well-informed addition to this body of work, Viestenz's study approaches literature as a channel for "political imagination" that disrupted or reasserted Franco's National-Catholicism by laying bare the inconspicuous consequences of its rituals: the closure of time, the abolishing of mercy and grace, scapegoating, and other manifestations of exclusionary violence triggered by fear of contamination.

Carefully avoiding simplistic conflation of the Catholic and the sacred, Viestenz's research is grounded in Carl Schmitt's assertion in *Political Theology* that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (qtd. in Viestenz 4). Viestenz's approach to "sacred nationalism" is informed by thinkers ranging from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to María Zambrano, from Hannah Arendt to Slavoj Žižek. Having succinctly explained in chapter 1 how nations are reified metaphysically as sacred entities and what literature has to do with it, the author turns, in chapter 2, to what he considers the pivotal moment when the "thinking of 'Spanishness' through religious terms" shifted to a metaphysical, superficially secularized "category of self-immanence": the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century *regeneracionista* discourse (12). The book's subsequent chapters offer theoretically lucid and historically contextualized close readings of several texts, both canonical and little-known, written in either Spanish or Catalan by authors who worked in different parts of the Peninsula and in the diaspora: *Incerta glòria* by Joan Sales (1956–1981) in chapter 3, *Reivindicación del Conde Don Julián* by Juan Goytisolo (1970) in chapter 4, *Volverás a Región* by Juan Benet (1967) and *La mort i la primavera* by Mercé Rodoreda (1961–1986) in chapter 5, *Tiempo de silencio* and *Tiempo de destrucción* by Luis Martín Santos (1961 and 1975) in chapter 6, and, finally, *Les hores*, *El caminant i el mur*, *Final del laberint*, and *La pell de brau*—four books of poetry by Salvador Espriu (1952, 1954, 1955, and 1960, respectively) in chapter 7. As the author explains, such a "chronological span corresponds, not coincidentally, to a post-Second World War retrenchment within Francoist rhetoric of a sacred mandate to promote Spain's Catholic first causes" (13).

The readings are well grounded in the author's knowledge of the conditions of production and circulation of each text. The book's main focus, however, are the characters, chronotopes, plots, and language that reveal how fictional communities are bound together by processes of exclusion, purification, consecration of communal spirits, and reification of enemies. Thus, the analysis of Joan Sales's *Incerta glòria* illustrates the mechanisms of victimhood and scapegoating. The chapter on Juan Goytisolo argues that Conde Don Julian's relevant profanation of Spain's tribal idols nevertheless collapses with the imposition of a new "structural authority" embodied in the illusion of an independent, self-validating subject (88). Viestenz's chapter on Juan Benet and Mercé Rodoreda examines these authors' techniques of creating communities tied together by ritual sacrifice and locked in fictional settings where time eternally repeats itself. The reading of Martín Santos's texts, framed by that writer's declared intention to destroy "la España sagrada" (117), replacing it with "las Sagradas Escrituras de la mañana" (qtd. 119), ends with Viestenz's conclusion that "a literature conceived as a sacred text denouncing the dogmatism of the regime's ideology concomitantly participates in a new conception of the political founded on the collective reception of literature within the intimacy of the home" (144). The final chapter, dedicated to Salvador Espriu, leaves the reader with the poet's compelling utopian vision of a community bound, not by violence or exclusion, but rather by the common task of constructing a new temple of fraternal love.

Viestenz is at his best conducting strong, erudite close readings, and his attention to the deep structures operating independently of the authors' intentions or explicit religious references reaps productive readings of those texts that are well known and demonstrates the relevance of the ones that are under-researched. As with most books of close readings, what is mostly satisfying here is the experience of following the author on the exhilarating journey of his tour de force analyses. Some of these, however, are so deeply immersed in theory that the reader may find the book's intention—to help her understand the political imagination of Franco's times and the role that literature played in articulating, problematizing, or countering its sacred core—lost in the mystical woods, where primary and secondary sources echo each other in disregard for chronology, for example when the author tells us that "Adolfo Muñoz Alonso, Franco's director general de la prensa" in 1961 "strongly echoes Agamben's theoretization" from 1995 *Homo Sacer* (72), and Martín Santos, in his 1961 *Tiempo de silencio*, "echoes Foucault's thought" from 1975 *Discipline and Punish* (140).

Still, it is precisely the book's interpretative power that leaves the reader wishing to know whether, following Viestenz's take on the Franco-time political imagination, one can catch a glimpse of any sacred nationalism beyond the "play" of archaic signifiers and glean some insight into institutional or cultural practices that brought the sacred or re-sacralized Spanishness into the mainstream. Glossing on Jacques Rancière, Viestenz rightly asserts that "political imagination is impossible without such things as discourse and the visual and plastic arts" (180). So how did the literary images of ritual violence analyzed here relate to the attempts at releasing violence into the public sphere, championed by the French and Iberian surrealists in the 1930s? Or how did fraternal visions of Espriu, for example, relate to the evolving strands of Catalanism? Or, coming

closer to our times, how did the de- and re-sacralizing texts of Goytisolo, Martín-Santos, or Benet relate to the all-too-visual consecration of Spain's national unity through a collective performance of *touristified* rites, implemented by Carl Schmitt's notorious follower in the Spanish government—Manuel Fraga Iribarne? Though Viestenz's work does not tackle these questions, there is other research available to help satisfy a reader once her curiosity has been stirred up. For example, Robin Adèle Greeley's *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War* (2006), which looks at both sides of the French-Catalan border to trace the debates concerning ritual and political violence, and Justin Crumbaugh's *Destination Dictatorship* (2009), a book that cross-references Fraga's political imagination with the practices that this imagination inspired, are good companions to Viestenz's thoughts on the many sacred communities conjured by Iberian writers. The reader interested in these subjects will also find useful *The Sacred and Modernity in Urban Spain Beyond the Secular City* (edited by Antonio Cordoba and Daniel García-Donoso), published after Viestenz's book.

As Viestenz rightly argues, secularization has always been a moving target in Spain. Following the nineteenth-century fragmentation of religious discourses and practices that took on the guise of laicization, the idea of Spain's nationhood as a sacred unity and a transcendental destiny survived in a variety of forms and shapes, ranging from the enshrined state apparatus imagined by neo-Catholics, to the anarchist visions of "divine violence," to the dreams of a holy tourism. As Europe's governments continue to look for ways to strengthen the borders and enforce Europe's still one-sided laicization laws, Viestenz's incisive and timely book empowers its readers to go beyond the ideas of official secularism or religiosity and tackle dangerous questions about the archaic structures of thought hovering over modern nationalisms and communicated through culture.

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