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Review of Silvina Schammah Gesser, Madrid's Forgotten Avant-Garde: Between Essentialism and Modernity

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Gesser, Silvina Schammah. *Madrid's Forgotten Avant-Garde: Between Essentialism and Modernity*. Sussex Studies in Spanish History. Eastbourne, UK and Chicago, IL: Sussex Academic Press, 2015. 23 + 324 pp.

Exactly what has been forgotten about Madrid's avant-garde and why? These are the key questions answered by Silvina Schammah Gesser's *Madrid's Forgotten Avant-Garde: Between Essentialism and Modernity*. Gesser moves to recover that which has been erased from memory: her genealogy of the Madrilenian avant-garde recuperates its pre-history — the so-named Generation of 1898, forebears like the philosophers Miguel de Unamuno and José Ortega y Gasset — as well as its geographical unconscious — the Basque country, Catalonia, and Andalusia. For Gesser demystifies the notion of both the avant-garde as breaking totally with the past and the idea of Madrid as center. She also delves into the role played by Catholicism in Spanish culture, including its influence on avant-garde cultural production, shining light on the farthest ends of the political spectrum.

Gesser measures Madrid's complex "intellectual and artistic climate" before the Spanish Civil War destabilized it, in order to "reveal the role played by the artistic and intellectual vanguards in shaping the aesthetic, socio-political, and national identities that were at stake in Spain during those crucial years" (1). Her examination of the connections among the avant-garde, cultural production, and identity builds the foundation of *Madrid's Forgotten Avant-Garde*, laying the groundwork for her discussion of "the dialogue that the Madrilenian vanguards maintained between modernity and essentialism" (4). Significantly, Gesser uses the binary 'essentialism'/'essentialist'/'modernity'/'modern' throughout the book's introduction, seven chapters, and conclusion as a tool to unpack the fundamental contradictions of the Madrilenian vanguard. In an important sense, this choice remains an apt one, given the felt need among the Spanish avant-gardes, during the period from the 1920s to the outbreak of civil war in 1936, to negotiate between the traditional and popular, on the one hand, and the 'foreign' (or cosmopolitan) and the new, on the other hand. Yet the connotations of the term 'essentialist' has the potential to distract from Gesser's legitimate purpose since, as she recognizes, the whole idea of that which is somehow 'essential' depends on perspective and may even be considered as an invention. As Gesser rightly demonstrates, each wing of the Madrilenian avant-garde, whether to the right or left, at times found it advantageous to imagine Spanish culture as neatly defined along national, regional, local, ethnic, or religious bounds, and at other times, useful to mix the cosmopolitan and modern with the traditional and quintessential.

Chapters 1 and 2 chart the Madrilenian avant-garde's temporal and spatial strata, beginning in Chapter 1 with the Generation of 1898's *regeneracionismo* and the vanguard's two major predecessors as identified by Gesser: Unamuno and Ortega. Gesser excavates Spain's "national identity narratives" and investigates how these narratives, in certain regenerationist quarters, intersected with cultural nationalism and the "search for a racial mystique," recognizing at the same time the balance struck by Unamuno between cosmopolitanism and the essential Spanish (25). As a counterweight to this intervention, she emphasizes Ortega's imperative for Europeanization, and the tension in his work between liberalism and authoritarianism

as a means for achieving the goal of modernization. In Chapter 2, Gesser delves into the often–precarious equilibrium among the national, regional, and local throughout Spanish history, as well as how striking such a difficult balance has affected culture and aesthetics. So as to exemplify the way in which the constant interplay between center and periphery impacted the avant–garde, Gesser shows how, in Catalonia, cultural nationalism coexisted with wider European and Mediterranean identities. Teasing apart the layers comprising Catalan identity, she takes apart key movements — *Modernisme*, the *Renaixença*, *Noucentisme* — and figures — Enric Prat de la Riba, Gabriel Alomar i Villalonga, Eugenio D’Ors. With a similar purpose in mind, Gesser places traditionalist *Bizkaitarrismo* in opposition to the more moderate articulation of Basque cultural identity — one that remained open to Spain and Europe — in the influential journal *Hermes*, before taking up the back–and–forth between Basque nationalism, *casticismo*, and cosmopolitanism in the Bilbao–born Unamuno.

Chapter 3, “*Primorriverismo: An Authoritarian Undertaking*,” serves as a bridge between the first two chapters and the rest of the book, which deals specifically with the emergence and development of the Madrilenian avant–garde. Here Gesser unravels the political circumstances leading up to Miguel Primo de Rivera’s September 1923 *pronunciamiento* and attendant establishment of his authoritarian regime, before conceptualizing the mutual impact among dictatorship, aesthetics, and cultural production; as she argues, Primo de Rivera used the aesthetic in hitherto unprecedented ways to establish propaganda structures designed to reshape Spanish society. According to Gesser, the Madrilenian avant–garde blossomed in spite of Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship: as she explains in Chapter 4, cultural cross–fertilization, a consequence of foreign artists and literati fleeing World War I to neutral Spain, as well as the importation of Krausist philosophy and establishment of the Krausism–inspired *Institución de Libre Enseñanza*, made Madrid’s cultural renaissance possible. Likewise, as she points out, the Moroccan War forced Spain’s creative and intellectual classes to take stock of their country’s status as a colonial power on the wane, as well as of its problems of economic and social inequality.

The avant–garde sought to counterbalance influence from abroad with the uniquely and traditionally Spanish: the celebration of Luis de Góngora’s tercentenary; conceptualization of the *romanceros* and *cantares de gesta* as expressions of an authentic national consciousness (according to Ramón Menéndez Pidal); Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s “radical *Madrileñismo*” (98); and the neopopularism of Rafael Alberti and Federico García Lorca. In Chapter 5, Gesser traces the political radicalization of Madrid’s “urban intelligentsia” (124), comparing “discourses of national renewal” (121–127) as articulated in the periodicals *La Gaceta Literaria* (an initially pluralistic journal which later became sympathetic to Italian Fascism) and the left–wing *Post–Guerra* and *Nueva España*. Chapters 6 and 7 then take two polar opposites as examples of the growing tendency towards radical politics as the Civil War approached: Alberti, the socially conscious poet turned Communist; and Ernesto Giménez Caballero, the editor of *La Gaceta Literaria* who became an apologist for a peculiarly Hispanic Fascism and a defender of orthodox Catholicism as the cornerstone of Spanish cultural identity.

All told, *Madrid’s Forgotten Avant–Garde: Between Essentialism and Modernity* makes a fine contribution to the fields of Spanish intellectual and cultural history.

Gesser's arguments are generally effective, although she might have anticipated and dealt with the possible pitfalls associated with the essentialism/essentialist/modernity/modern binary. The book is solidly conceived and researched, yet it could have done with more careful copy-editing. Certainly, *Madrid's Forgotten Avant-Garde* imparts crucial knowledge about culture and identity in Spain before the Civil War — knowledge that would benefit advanced undergraduates and graduate students, as well as being useful for specialists — and provides for interesting and enlightening reading.

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