

Mario J. Valdés. *The Hermeneutics of Poetic Sense: Critical Studies of Literature, Cinema, and Cultural History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998, xi + 169 pp.

Readers already acquainted with earlier publications by Mario Valdés, especially his *Shadows in the Cave* (Toronto, 1983) and *Phenomenological Hermeneutics and the Study of Literature* (Toronto, 1987), will find themselves on familiar terrain when they broach the most recent product of an endeavour he has been pursuing for at least the last two decades. At the heart of this undertaking is an enquiry into how meaning is generated by the literary text and how the practices engaged by communities of scholars and readers in their search for interpretations contribute to a shared understanding of the world. As in previous volumes, with respect to both the cultures addressed and the texts chosen for commentary, Valdés maintains his focus on Spain and Latin America, but he also continues to locate his discussion in a comparative context and to draw on the traditions of phenomenology as the philosophical underpinning of his work.

The Hermeneutics of Poetic Sense contains four sections, each of which includes two or three essays. The five essays combined in the two central sections are all grounded in textual commentary and all deal with issues in the forefront of current critical attention. The section titled “Text and Self: Memory, the Other, the Community” addresses the text as a semi-autonomous phenomenon. In his discussion of memory, Valdés takes positions elaborated by Wittgenstein and Ricoeur as his points of departure in order to consider the historical context of recollection through life writings, such as Anne Frank’s diary and Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony, as a prelude to discussion of memory in fiction, which takes him from Proust to García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* and the character of the latter as an expression of collective memory. Discussion of the Other moves us from prose writing to cinema and a close reading of the forms of character creation in the Hollywood classic *Casablanca* (1942) and in the Paul Leduc’s *Frida* (1984). From here, Valdés turns to verse, to Octavio Paz’s *Piedra de sol*, a text he had already discussed in 1987 in *Phenomenological Hermeneutics and the Study of Literature* (91-103), although here he takes up a different fragment of the poem and offers a reading intended to document the interpretation of literature as an expression of cultural identity. There is, then, an implied connection between poetic representations of the community and the expression of memory, with which this section of the book begins, given that both are concerned with literature as the representation of a collective identity.

In the two essays included in “Text and Co-Text: Parody and the Game of Fiction,” Valdés’s enquiry takes a different, but parallel tack, as he turns his attention to texts which derive their meaning in part from relationships established with other texts. His commentary in the first essay is broadly focused, but leads to a more extended discussion of Unamuno’s *Amor y pedagogía* and Updike’s *S*, both in terms of a comparison of the textual practices they engage and in light of the co-texts against which they are read. In the second essay, however, Valdés’s perspective is widened appreciably as he takes on the issue of “world-making” and the fundamental textual relationship underlying every work of literature, namely the relation between fact and fiction. Beginning with Husserl, Dilthey and Heidegger he develops an argument that leads to Ricoeur and culminates in a re-visit to Unamuno’s *Niebla* and the conflict presented in the novel between the author and his character, Augusto Pérez. Both here and in other parts of his book, where he refers to “as if” conditions or situations posited by the literary text, Valdés ventures into territory also mapped by theories of possible worlds. It would undoubtedly be fruitful to confront the two approaches and to bring into the picture discussions of the concept of fictionality undertaken in writings such as Ruth Ronen’s *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (Cambridge, 1994), which have also sought to chart a course for theory in a deconstructed, post-structuralist world.

In effect, a preoccupation with this new world indirectly frames the discussions in *The Hermeneutics of Poetic Sense* already referred to, given that the first and the last sections of the book explicitly invoke the Postmodern in essays which both identify and come to terms with the epistemological shifts that have come to characterize the late twentieth century. Beginning with an analysis of the relation between semiotics and hermeneutics, through a brief review of the history of the problem of meaning, exemplified through detailed commentary on a text by Paz, the first section, "Hermeneutics in a Postmodern Context," then takes up the questions of indeterminacy and serendipity, borrowing these terms from science in order to focus on the concepts of randomness and discovery in the generation of literary meaning. The two essays centred on these terms are welcome excursions into questions of theory which have largely been displaced in the rush to theorize and apply a sociology of meaning as an antidote to the reductive hierarchies of a universe ordered in accordance with a rationalist narrative. The connection with science therefore serves as a reminder of the breadth of the axis across which the shift in epistemology has occurred, at the same time as it illustrates that the flight from scientific certainty is itself a product of science. It also re-emphasizes the concept of continuity in the advancement of knowledge: that new theories and practices do not always entirely supplant those they replace, but build upon them, in the sense that new theories are often made possible by testing the limits of those which precede them. By placing scientific and poetic understanding under the same lens, Valdés effectively participates in a discussion intent on describing recent transitions in criticism without sacrificing the traditions on which they are based, at the same time as he contributes to what must undoubtedly become the last chapter in the history of the understanding of meaning in the twentieth century, a chapter which still largely remains to be written, however, if only because the most recent changes have yet to run their course and become more fully contextualized.

The problem of context is especially relevant to the last section of *The Hermeneutics of Poetic Sense* titled "Postmodernity and the Literary Historical Process." In the first of its two essays, Valdés locates Postmodernism historically and then situates the work of several Hispanic writers and a filmmaker within this trajectory and its aesthetics: novels by Unamuno, Fuentes (*La muerte de Artemio Cruz*), and Roa Bastos (*Yo el Supremo*), among others, a poem by José Emilio Pacheco, and Carlos Saura's *Carmen*. His argument is that in these works may be seen the germs of what would eventually become the postmodernist aesthetic of the end of the century. He makes a compelling case, but one that will likely be resisted by some, who may nonetheless prefer to read Unamuno within the contexts of his time and the Spanish American novel of twenty-five years and more ago within the contexts of the aesthetics of its day and the societies that produced it, rather than seeing them, with the benefit of hindsight, as precursors of the postmodern. His essay is simply too short to admit a counter argument, yet in the pages that follow it, the final essay of the book, titled "The Literary Historical Process," the problem it poses for literary history is fully recognized. For here, what Valdés proposes is nothing less than a "hermeneutic re-writing of history" (140), which would take such variables, and many others, into account through a positioning of literary history so that it would not just narrate the past, but narrate it with a postmodern awareness of what the past means in and to the present. This, too, however, is a task on which Mario Valdés has been engaged for some time. Not only has he speculated about it before and put his theory into practice in his current project to produce a comprehensive comparative literary history of Latin America, but it is the goal towards which his earlier publications seem to have inexorably led.

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