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Abstract

Review of Jobst Welge. *Genealogical Fictions: Cultural Periphery and Historical Change*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015.

Keywords

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Academic analysis based in the conceptual imaginary of center and periphery has had mixed fortunes over the last few decades. While spatial categories and concerns have come to the fore of multiple academic disciplines since the 1980s and 1990s, the center/periphery opposition has often attracted criticism for its deterministic implications and has required substantial qualification and revision over time. Those scholars like Jobst Welge who continue to employ it fruitfully tend now toward a more "relational and mobile sense" of center and periphery, as he puts it (6), one that understands location more as process than as place.

Welge's ambitious and learned study takes up what he loosely identifies as a transnational subgenre of "genealogical novels." These are works which foreground familial conflicts of succession, survival, and decline, usually within contexts of significant ongoing social, economic, and political change. Welge's main interest lies on Europe's geographic and cultural periphery; most of the novels he analyzes arise from and represent the more ostensibly marginal, outlying regions of the continent and construct familial descent (and decline) narratives that evoke larger processes of historical transformation unfolding within their time. His overarching aim is to demonstrate how these novels, and the locations to which they are closely tethered, in fact became privileged sites of negotiation over the terms of modernity, from modern time/space imagining to the genesis of the modern nation state and bourgeois social order. The study ranges far along and even beyond the outer arc of European modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, chronologically encompassing works written in English, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. While the texts chosen have most commonly been critically situated within national and/or stylistic literary traditions, Welge instead brings them into comparative dialogue to tease out their "family resemblance" (2) as narratives differently dramatizing experiences of interwoven familial and historical discontinuity.

Thus in Romantic-era works by Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott, Welge sees comparable narrations of private/family genealogy, which discursively domesticate Irish and Scottish Celtic cultural difference within the new time-space imaginary introduced by British Union. Two representative examples of Sicilian *verismo* (an offshoot of naturalism) by Giovanni Verga and Federico De Roberto depict familial crises evocative of the enduring ambivalence attaching to Italian mythologies of the Risorgimento. The Spanish authors Benito Pérez Galdós and Emilia Pardo Bazán, closely associated with the imported metropolitan styles of realism and naturalism, respectively, likewise portray overlapping familial and national crisis in novels that both reflect, and provide reflection upon, Spain's conflicted reckoning with European modernity during the country's Restoration period.

Turning to literature written in Portuguese, Welge reads the familial crisis in Eça de Queirós' *Os Maias* (*The Maias* 1888) as a coded commentary upon Portuguese national decadence, though also upon the eclipsing of realism and naturalism as privileged modern modes of literary representation. Chapters on the Brazilian authors Machado de Assis and José Lins do Rego extend Welge's analysis beyond the confines of Europe, to further underscore the ambivalence of the modernist inheritance when regarded from self-consciously marginal positions. Finally, Welge considers G. Tomasi di Lampedusa's epic 1958 profile of familial decline, *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard)* as the culmination of the genealogical novel. While the work's ironic portrayal of the Sicilian aristocratic scion Don Fabrizio clearly evokes the thematic preoccupations and historicism of previous genealogical texts, the subjectivism of its narrative ultimately calls into question "the pastness of the past" (193) and the (by then fully) consensual narratives of Italian nationhood and modernity. Continuing in this vein, the book's epilogue considers briefly how the "genealogical legacy of the nineteenth century" (196) has continued to inform more recent European writing by the likes of Claude Simon, Jean Benet, António Lobo Antunes, and Thomas Bernhard, albeit with far more temporal and perspectival confusion and more attunement to the conflicted workings of memory.

Pursuing a single narrative problematic across such a range of texts, critical conversations, and historical situations carries certain perils, but Welge's analysis remains tightly focused and suggestive throughout. He is hardly the first to pursue "connection(s) between novel and nation" (62) and he builds partly from foundational insights of Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhaba on the narrative and temporal bases of nation-state formation and legitimation. Recent work in literary geography informs the book's spatial analysis, as perhaps (implicitly) does Arjun Appadurai's original recognition of the *localizing* dimension of modernity, its dependence upon the production of local difference, and discourses of differentiation. But the analysis provided in *Genealogical Fictions* of the "[i]magining [of] national history in a private mode" (62) goes further, in revealing the pivotal role of ostensibly "peripheral" texts and locations in negotiating the main spatial and temporal coordinates of modernity.

Positioned as they were at the margins of a larger field of European literary production—with its privileged nodes and styles and its uneven distribution of cultural capital—the authors of these genealogical novels couldn't help but manifest ambivalence in their simultaneous narrations of familial and historical change. Welge resists too allegorical a reading of the texts, though, in favor of exploring how they differently map out time and space through their narrative strategies and thereby manifest the spatial and temporal asymmetries that define modern consciousness. Some, he shows, reinforce an emergent modern developmental, or linear/historical time, by actualizing a "past" to which specific places, people, and traditions could be symbolically consigned. In others, the narrative structuring allows for the coexistence of multiple temporalities, using devices such as double narrators to disrupt the objective third-person narration normally seen as consonant with the realist or naturalist novel's legitimation of linear/historical time. Indeed, the book's comparative optic reveals significant variations in how the family story could be made to reflect and refract the national one. Though all of the texts considered are written from an (embattled) periphery, none ultimately adopts a posture that is merely melancholic, nostalgic, or politically reactionary. In Welge's hands, and considered as a corpus, they are shown instead to speak back in complicating ways to nineteenth century master narratives of modernity, the nation-state, and the bourgeoisie.

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