

Review: Andrew Ginger, *Instead of Modernity: The Western Canon and the Incorporation of the Hispanic (c.1850-75)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020) 302pp. ISBN-978-1-5261-4784-4, £85.00.

DANIEL JENKIN-SMITH

IN HIS *TALES of the Alhambra* (1832), Washington Irving portrays Spain as a fantastical landscape of barren plains and treacherous mountains, with an isolated population of herdsmen and muleteers for whom even 'the most petty journey is undertaken with the preparation of a warlike enterprise.'¹ To escort him through this exotic setting, Irving hires a suitably rustic guide: 'a faithful, cheery, kind-hearted creature, full of saws and proverbs as that miracle of squires the renowned Sancho himself, whose name we bestowed upon him'.² Nineteenth-century Spain is, in Irving's eyes, a Quixotic world: a medieval throwback on the fringes of European, and indeed American, modernity.

This kind of sensibility is not exclusive to Irving, but rather permeated conceptions of the Spanish-speaking world throughout the nineteenth century and thereafter, Andrew Ginger writes in the introduction to *Instead of Modernity*. Even today, Ginger continues, critics and historians frame Northern Europe and the United States as the home of cultural modernity – its ostensible wellspring being the 'Parisian patriarchy' of Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, and Édouard Manet.³ All of the heavyweights of modern criticism, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and so on, he writes, frame this trio as having fundamentally broken with the past – as having turned 'all experiences of being human [into] constructs of representations, accumulations of signs without any secure, fixed meaning'.⁴ But through this reading, he continues,

¹ Washington Irving, *Tales from the Alhambra* (Granada, Spain: Miguel Sanchez, 2007), p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³ Andrew Ginger, *Instead of Modernity: The Western Canon and the Incorporation of the Hispanic (c.1850-75)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

these critics ended up producing a 'narrow and exclusionary' conception of modernity.⁵

It is against this grain that Ginger begins *Instead of Modernity*, which is driven by two chief aims. First, to refigure Hispanic culture as a *subject* of nineteenth-century cultural discourse (rather than simply its object), and second, to demonstrate that reintegrating the Hispanic offers a far broader and more all-encompassing conceptualisation of modernity itself. Ginger approaches these aims virtually simultaneously, as suggested by the ambiguous meaning of his book's title. Redressing a perception of the Hispanic world in terms of simple alterity (as existing 'instead of modernity'), Ginger also contests his critical predecessors on their home turf, employing the material of the mid-nineteenth-century cultural moment itself to showcase a new cultural terminology, one to be used 'instead of "modernity"'. As Ginger states in the introduction, 'the notion of a new cultural era founded on a radical set of principles flounders as we incorporate diverse, compelling visions of culture from the mid-century into the core narrative'.⁶

Seeking to rectify simplistic conceptions of temporal rupture, the alternative Ginger finds is rather one of 'energetic commonality, stretching out across place and time'.⁷ Indeed, 'energetic commonality' is also embedded in the character of the book, with Ginger writing on the first page that *Instead of Modernity* approaches its subject 'in an open and flexible spirit, not foreclosing on narrow distinctions between sameness, similarity and commonality, but rather exploring possibilities for realising intimate connections through all these variously'.⁸ Accordingly, following the introduction, the book's four main chapters are to be considered 'more akin to the evocation of four moods and practices than they are to four arguments in the manner of academic critique'.⁹ Recalling comparable presentations by the likes of Caroline Levine in *Forms* (2015), and Maurice S. Lee in *Overwhelmed* (2019), rather than each chapter building upon the previous one,

⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

⁸ Ibid., p. 1.

⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

they together function as parallel categories for understanding the various cultural relationships that typify 'energetic commonality'.

The first of these 'moods' is 'Meeting', which Ginger employs to evoke various forms of cultural, aesthetic, or personal convergence. The second, 'Departure', refers to differentiation that tends toward parallelism or comparison. 'Sacrifice' implies instances of violence, or processes that lead to death, but also therefore fragmentation, dissemination, and, ultimately, new convergences. And finally, 'Repose' – what Ginger subheads with 'forms of shared distraction' – comes to suggest the free-floating and ephemeral interconnection of motifs and ideas.¹⁰ These 'moods' in part function as different critical models for the configuration of artworks and ideas, but it soon becomes apparent in practice that they also share a number of what Ludwig Wittgenstein (a key thinker in Ginger's presentation) famously called 'family resemblances.'¹¹ That is, works, figures, and themes covered in one chapter recur in new configurations in the others, and Ginger employs these interconnections between chapters to weave together a kaleidoscopic totality (or, rather, 'commonality') that, altogether, reproduces his new vision of the mid-nineteenth-century cultural moment.

Indeed, given this premise, a better impression of *Instead of Modernity* is perhaps to be gained from gauging the sheer range of allusions and connections made between its pages than from trying to grasp its overarching form. Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Manet are very quickly engulfed by a multitude of Hispanic writers and visual artists: ranging from the familiar (Benito Perez Galdós, Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, and Francisco Goya), to the more obscure – including Argentinian novelist, Juana Manuela Gorriti, Puerto Rican poet, Eugenio María de Hostos, and Mexican painter, Hermenegildo Bustos (whose 1874 *Still Life with Frog, Watermelon, and Scorpion*, very nicely reproduced along with other artworks covered in the book, is a highlight). But Ginger's extra-Hispanic readings are not exclusive to the 'Parisian patriarchy'. Rather, a whole slew of mid-century Transatlantic writers and artists – including Walt Whitman, Friedrich Nietzsche, Rosa Bonheur, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Charles Darwin – find themselves in

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 205.

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd edn (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), pp. 31-32.

all manner of unlikely conjunctions with their Hispanic coevals: Estanislao del Campo, Marià Fortuny, Matilde Diez, José Martínez Sánchez and so on. James McNeill Whistler paints the bombardment of Valparaiso, gauchos misremember the Faust myth; theoretical physics, engineering, brain surgery, *taxidermy* even, also crop up in the book – not to mention all of the many ancient and contemporary concepts and figures that Ginger employs to give critical shape to his primary sources' convergence (thereby further defetishising the cultural autonomy of the mid-century moment).

This superabundance of different allusions and conjunctions serves an important purpose – to model the 'energetic commonality' described in Ginger's introductory chapter – and the resulting synthesis regularly produces startling and provocative insights which will no doubt enter the critical arsenal of comparative literature. By way of a reading of del Campo's satire of transcultural confusion, *Fausto* (1866), Ginger argues that mannerism, thanks to its focus on the *parts* of its subject of portrayal over the full sum, serves to bring artistic representation around to its ostensible opposite, abstraction – a dynamic that in turn indicates the counterintuitive analogues to be found between commonality and difference more broadly. When comparing the performances of the actor, Diez, her photographic portrayal by Juan Laurent, and Martínez Sánchez's photographs of buildings and landmarks, Ginger employs geometry as a descriptive language that exhibits its own temporality and creative character, and which allows for allusions between different labour processes, landforms, and aesthetics in turn. Finally, by way of Lewis Carroll and Julia Margaret Cameron we read that Marxian capital is less a socio-economic process than a 'living allegory', the imposition of a 'vast, global, *sui generis* poetic epic, evincing a violent poetics.'¹² Indeed, I often felt that Ginger could have slowed down with these readings – there are probably enough ideas here for several books – but, of course, the effect of their quick succession and unlikely conjunction serves to illustrate the overall 'energetic commonality' conceit.

In its promise to unearth the forgotten Hispanosphere in modern culture, the book initially appears related to that particular brand of postcolonial criticism, arguably beginning with Edward Said's 'Jane Austen and Empire' (1993), that

¹² Ginger, p. 187.

highlights the obscured international relationships that underpin the art of the metropole. With particular regard to the Hispanic, this school encompasses the likes of David Howarth's *The Invention of Spain* (2008), or Jessie Reeder's *The Forms of Informal Empire* (2020). However, it should by now be apparent that *Instead of Modernity* very quickly shifts toward a more abstract tenor: one by which the Transatlantic culture of the mid-century figures more as a vehicle for the book's body of hypothesised cultural relationships than as a flashpoint of socio-historical and aesthetic coalescence.

It is in this same vein that *Instead of Modernity* contrasts most with a work with which it otherwise compares well: Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1982). Despite Ginger's repudiation of the kind of historical rupture suggested in Berman's book, he writes approvingly of his predecessor's global perspective (Berman's neglect of the Hispanic notwithstanding). In this light, 'energetic commonality' can certainly be construed as a wide-ranging and ambitious reconceptualisation of 'modernity' as the cultural phenomenon explored by Berman; but the content of Ginger's book, and the synthesis that this content comes to model, is ultimately less preoccupied with the cumulative socio-economic process of (uneven) *modernisation* that Berman takes care to differentiate from cultural modernity proper. Boggling down Ginger's network of cultural relationships in such material factors would no doubt undermine the sense of energy that his succession of readings gives – and, after all, *Instead of Modernity* is primarily a work of cultural theory – but I would be interested to see a further study that situated 'energetic commonality' in the emergent world economy of which it appears to have been a product. Despite these reservations, *Instead of Modernity* certainly performs an important service by reincorporating the Hispanosphere into modern culture, and by upending simplistic understandings of modernity in turn. The world it portrays is certainly Quixotic, but in the manner stressed by Borges's 'Pierre Menard': as something more fragmentary, more subtle, more incongruous than previously imagined – and 'infinitely richer' for it.¹³



¹³ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', *Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 33-44 (p. 40).

BIOGRAPHY: Daniel Jenkin-Smith recently completed his PhD at Aston University in Birmingham. His research is focused on the portrayal of office work and bureaucracy in nineteenth-century French and English literature.

CONTACT: jenkind3@aston.ac.uk