

Juan Jesús Payán, *Los conjuros del asombro. Expresión fantástica e identidad nacional en la España del siglo XIX*, Juan de la Cuesta, Newark, 2022. ISBN 978-1-58871-389-6.

In the Acknowledgements to *Los conjuros del asombro*, Juan Jesús Payán describes the book's genesis. While designing an American university course on the Spanish fantastic, Payán found himself struggling to recall celebrated, never mind canonical, Spanish examples dating to the period in which fantastic storytelling began to flourish throughout Europe and the United States. Thus, research for *Los conjuros del asombro* commenced with the aim of answering what seemed to be a simple question: «¿dónde se hallaban las firmas y textos del XIX español capaz de medirse con figuras, por ejemplo, como las de Edgar Allan Poe o Guy de Maupassant?» (p. 7). The answer, of course, was far from simple, and Payán's finished work brings to light years of archival research on Spain's homegrown fantastic tradition. Notably, this corpus is read and understood through frameworks of historical and contemporary cultural theory that concern not only the fantastic, but also the processes of cultural colonialism that have marginalized Spanish variants. As a result, *Los conjuros del asombro* serves two ends. Most obviously, it introduces readers interested in the fantastic to a body of innovative Spanish literature (with some attention to the visual arts)

that has been woefully undervalued, if not outright ignored, both domestically and internationally. In addition, Payán's work lays bare the power dynamics that consecrate certain national literatures as hegemonic models, and relegate literary production from other countries to the periphery of literary history.

This broader argument is unequivocally articulated in the book's first chapter, where Payán seemingly substantiates a claim made by Joan Estruch Tobeña in *Literatura fantástica y de terror española del siglo XVII* (1982): «No es que tengamos una literatura fantástica pobre, sino más bien una visión pobre de nuestra literatura fantástica» (p. 24). As Payán specifies, the error lies in judging Spanish fantastic literature to be deficient using foreign, primarily French, criteria that were often formulated in the twentieth century. To deconstruct this bias, Payán invites readers to consider how the models of fantastic narrative that came to dominate discussions of the literary mode have originated in those same nations (France, England, what would become Germany, and the United States) that rose to prominence during the time when Spain's political influence was waning on the world stage. These newly powerful states enjo-

yed the privilege of defining literary modernity, «siempre con la indisimulada intención de autolegitimarse como valedoras de un nuevo orden» (p. 13). The canonization of exogenous originals subsequently disincentivized Spanish authors from developing their own autochthonous fantastic tradition. They were reduced to either 1) imitating popular foreign examples in order to be accepted by transnational audiences (albeit as inferior, secondhand producers of the fantastic), or 2) persisting in the creation of wholly original fantastic works that were condemned to obscurity from their inception. *Los conjuros del asombro* recuperates Spanish works from the latter group, recalling that the fantastic is «una categoría cultural artificial y no un concepto derivado de la observación empírica» (p. 16). As such, it necessarily varies in expression from country to country and culture to culture; and, as Payán reminds readers, any hierarchies of value attached to different national traditions are largely a factor of geopolitics. Ultimately, then, *Los conjuros del asombro* views fantastic works by Spanish authors not as marginal to, but as situated squarely within a larger context of European fantastic cultural production that was shaped by «una matriz de deudas transnacionales y ansiedades nacionalistas» (p. 25) across the board.

The parameters of Payán's pioneering study are outlined in the book's Introduction. Intentionally moving away from Tzvetan Todorov's model, which has (problematically, as Payán argues)

dominated discussions of the fantastic since its publication in 1970, Payán conceives of the fantastic more loosely, as «un tratamiento realista de fenómenos sobrenaturales e inexplicables en un mundo como el nuestro» (p. 20). This broader conception is logical for the volume, given its focus on Spanish fantastic production from the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, when the fantastic had not yet undergone what the author deems «decantación genérica» (p. 18): the increasingly restrictive definition of a genre's boundaries. Payán's interest lies in Spanish works from an earlier period in which «no cabría (...) hablar de una única expresión fantástica, sino de una multitud de manifestaciones» (p. 18). This fantastic multiplicity is mirrored by the diversity of authors represented in his study, ranging from the exiled liberal intellectual José María Blanco White to the staunchly Catholic and socially conservative Cecilia Böhl de Faber (pseudonym *Fernán Caballero*). Yet, with the obvious exception of Spanish national poet José Zorrilla, all included authors have been systematically understudied to varying degrees. Payán seeks to rectify this oversight, showcasing the selected authors' fantastic praxis in conjunction with their own theorizations of fantastic writing, thus avoiding the «anacronismo galocéntrico» (p. 48) that is all too common in criticism on the fantastic.

To meet its dual objectives, *Los conjuros del asombro* is divided into two parts. The first, comprised of chapters one

through three, delves into the theoretical and geopolitical developments that have shaped transnational reception of the Spanish fantastic. Chapter One, «La magia postergada», begins by addressing the prejudices against fantastic writing that emerged within Spain in the nineteenth century, observing the creation of a literary canon that led to the association of Spanish writing, and in fact of the Spanish character, with an aesthetics of realism. Payán describes this institutional erasure of fantastic writing as jointly motivated by the fear of importing foreign, particularly French, models in the wake of the French occupation of 1808-1814, and by resistance to the transnational tendency to exoticize Spain as a pre-modern backwater still rife with magic and superstition. At the same time, Payán details how the French concept of fantastic writing, which became the hegemonic model within Spain, was itself defined in response to British theorizations articulated to describe the stories of German author E.T.A. Hoffmann. Clearly, the anxiety of (foreign) influence was not exclusive to Spanish engagement with the fantastic mode. At the same time, glossing Harold Bloom and Homi Bhabha, Payán explains how anxieties of influence generate strategies of resistance, and in the case of the Spanish fantastic, produced a distinctive national tradition rich with allusions to Spain's medieval and baroque literary roots.

Chapter Two, «Forjas de la diferencia», traces an incipient Spanish «nacionalismo fantástico» (p. 71) in the first

third of the nineteenth century, prior to an awareness of Hoffmann's stories within Spain. Examples of experiments with an autochthonous fantastic aesthetic include: Francisco Goya's artwork, which inspired French fantastic authors with its anticipation of modernist aesthetics; José María Blanco White's 1824 essay «Sobre el placer de imaginaciones inverosímiles», the first to theorize fantastic writing in Spain (though not yet employing the term «fantastic») and link Spanish fantastic expression to the nation's medieval Muslim heritage; and Juan de Grimaldi's «comedias de magia», which presented the supernatural with didactic and moralizing tones, simultaneously escaping censorship and proving Spanish interest in the fantastic.

Chapter Three, «Reflejos y refracciones», turns to the reception of Hoffmann within Spain. It explores how, rather than form the basis for servile imitation, a foreign import might stimulate «diversas formas de reformulación» (p. 107). Payán begins by meticulously tracking Hoffmann's publication in Spain, noting its role in inspiring Spanish works that sought to terrify the reader by inserting the supernatural within an empirically verifiable reality. He then moves to a discussion of Hoffmann's first Spanish critics, Salvador Bermúdez y Castro—who viewed Hoffmann's work as wholly foreign to a Spanish imagination conditioned by the aesthetics and metaphysics of Golden Age playwright Calderón de la Barca—and Enrique Gil y Carrasco,

who was more apt to appreciate the modernity of Hoffmann's linkage of philosophy to poetics via the fantastic. The chapter ends with a closer look at the works of two authors who drew upon elements of a Hoffmannian fantastic to produce highly innovative creations: Antonio Ros de Olano's «El escribano Martín Peláez, su parienta y el mozo Caínez» (1841) and José Zorrilla's «La Pasionaria» (1841).

Whereas the first three chapters are interested in dissecting questions of cultural colonialism surrounding the fantastic, the book's second half illuminates specifically Spanish strategies of fantastic writing, focusing on three main avenues of experimentation that draw upon the national past to inspire unmistakably Spanish fantastic works. Chapter Four, «Volver a al-Ándalus», examines the «constante retorno al pasado hispanomusulmán y morisco como fuente de inspiración de una veta nacional» (p. 27), analyzing as emblematic examples «El alcázar de Sevilla» (1825) by Blanco White, «El serrano de las Alpujarras» (1829) by Jorge Montgomery, «El tesoro de la Alhambra» (1831-32) by Serafín Estebánez Calderón, and «Los gnomos de la Alhambra» (1886) by José Zorrilla. Although the specifics vary across these texts, each one engages the trope of the Muslim or *morisco* ghost lingering in Spanish borders as tethered to a buried and thus inaccessible treasure. As Payán convincingly demonstrates, both the ghost and the treasure within these works function as «sinónimos de imposibilidad» (p. 159) that require Spain's rec-

oning with a Muslim past and legacy that, in their astounding modernity, challenge narratives of European progress.

The authors featured in Chapter Five, «Desde el espejo cóncavo», similarly look to Spanish history to infuse fantastic writing with a national essence, but they do so via engagement with the Baroque aesthetic of the grotesque, which Payán describes as «una expresión disolvente de absurdo» that can elicit laughter and/or fear (p. 213). Payán delves specifically into the particularities of two highly original «anti-novels» of the mid-nineteenth century: Antonio Ros de Olano's *El doctor Lañuela* (1863) and Rosalía de Castro's *El caballero de botas azules* (1868). Untangling a hodgepodge of Golden Age influences across these texts—from Cervantes to Quevedo to the picaresque—, Payán argues that the fantastic writing of Ros and Castro exemplify Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity as a form of resistance to hegemonic cultural models. Payán posits that, as hybrid narratives, both «anti-novels» echo Hoffmann's own resistance to the rigidity of fictional genres, while anticipating postmodern literary techniques in their ironic and metafictional playfulness.

Last but not least, Chapter Six, «El mundo en sueño» closely reads three tales that marry fantastic storytelling to the Catholic metaphysics most closely associated with Calderón de la Barca. Böhl de Faber's «La hija del sol» (1849)—which Payán establishes as the first original fantastic story published by a woman in Spain (p. 286)—, Pedro Antonio de Alar-

cón's «El Amigo de la Muerte» (1852), and Gaspar Núñez de Arce's «Las aventuras de un muerto» (1856) all employ the trope of «life as a dream» to inspire personal redemption in the Christian sense. The brush with death narrated in each story not only throws into disarray any sense of «la solidez del mundo empírico», but additionally serves to interrogate an imported vision of modernity as driven by «un impulso extranjero laico y materialista» (p. 333). More specifically, the stories by Böhl de Faber, Alarcón, and Núñez de Arce employ a supernatural blurring of the lines between life and death to criticize the French model of material progress, proposing in its place an alternative modernity rooted in the Spanish Baroque tradition of Catholic spirituality.

While the entirety of *Los conjuros del asombro* is filled with displays of erudition, astute observations linking disparate authors, and innovative readings of overlooked texts, it ends on a particularly

strong note. The book's Coda is required reading for anyone interested in the dynamics of cultural colonialism. Breaking down Mariano Baquero Goyanes's oft-cited statements regarding the paucity and poverty of fantastic short stories from nineteenth-century Spain, Payán reiterates that «lo fantástico ha sido blandido como argumento de modernidad y superioridad cultural de unas naciones sobre otras» (p. 336), noting that Spain's supposed lack of a fantastic tradition has consequently aided narratives of Spain's backwardness. Payán's work refutes this misconception to great success, uncovering an abundance of Spanish fantastic writing that remains relevant to twenty-first-century discussions of politics and poetics.

WAN SONYA TANG
Boston College
wantang@bc.edu

