

Reviews



NICOLÁS FERNÁNDEZ-MEDINA. *Life Embodied: The Promise of Vital Force in Spanish Modernity*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2018, 416 pp.

While reading medical essays from Benito Jerónimo Feijoo's *Teatro Crítico Universal* for the project that became *Embodying Enlightenment* (1998), I was amazed to find that Feijoo explored epistemological questions around language's imperfect claims to representation of bodily experience. Feijoo's exploration of the body's interior invisibility to and through language positions his writings on medicine well within a larger historical struggle traced by Foucault, in *Birth of the Clinic*, as the modern medical gaze's search for truth through "the dogmatic stage of a name." Yet Feijoo's inquiry into embodiment had been scarcely remarked, despite his being a foundational Enlightenment figure. As Nicolás Fernández-Medina points out in this beautifully written volume, investigations such as Feijoo's into the knowability of the body were a Spanish "reality whose complexity and character" were long denied within European historiographies of science and medicine (xxviii-xxix). Countering that denial through a tour de force of scholarship, *Life Embodied* argues for the importance, in modernity, of Spanish writing around the "new and imaginative relations between knowledge and body that vital force forged across disciplines" (xxiii).

The book's premise is that debates around the concept of vital force are "at the heart of the modern" (xvi). Toward the close of the seventeenth century, the emergence of modern subjectivity entailed an "irrevocable power shift" away from institutions (the church, the Crown) and toward "the silent, invisible depths" of the thinking, feeling individual (xviii). In Spain, inquiry into relations between body and soul, mind and body, and body and world has for centuries challenged dominant epistemologies, regulations, and institutions. From Juan de Cabriada's 1687 *Philosophical Medico-Chemical Letter* envisioning the body as "a dynamic system of vital movement and change" (64), to Martín Martínez's 1730 *Philosophia sceptica* (which takes up "the subject of embodiment [and] the strange fact of existence and the nature of human life" [97]), and through Miguel de Unamuno's 1912 *Tragic Sense of Life*, in which the philosopher argued that "individuals, if they ever aspired to recognize their own self-deception and embrace the authentic truth about life, had to come to terms with their vital flesh-and-bloodness" (261), Fernández-Medina offers a chronology of the distinctively modern fascination with vital force by placing a wide range of Spanish texts within European and ancient scientific, medical, and philosophical contexts.

Life Embodied has a preface, an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, and twenty illustrations, along with an extensive bibliography and an excellent index. The study is divided into three sections: part I, "Blood, Circulation, and the Soul,"

discusses late seventeenth-century Novatores and early eighteenth-century writings by Torres Villarroel, Martínez, and Boix y Moliner; part II, “Political Reform and the Order of Nature,” takes readers through late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thinking about nature, the body, and the self; and part III, “From Neo-Hippocratism to the Avant-Garde,” covers texts by Mata y Fontanet, Sanz del Río, Unamuno, Baroja, and Gómez de la Serna. Along the way, numerous theories and concepts are probed, including Cartesianism, vitalism, the sublime, Romanticism, materialism, positivism, Krausism, and Nietzsche’s “will to power.” The overall argument is couched chronologically, in part because the author wants to persuade the reader of the persistent importance of “vital force” within Spanish intellectual and scientific cultures. But, as Fernández-Medina points out, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical and chemical discoveries advanced an “epistemological enterprise” that undergirded, yet proved insufficient to satisfy, early twentieth-century writers’, artists’, and philosophers’ searches for “a solution to the problem of modern existence,” which seemed to require “a profound, intuitive understanding of how the lived body (and not just the mind) served as the medium through which the world was known” (302). The reader comes to understand connections defying boundaries of periodization: challenges to “established distinctions between pathology and environment, body and soul, self and society, individual and nature, and life and death” (151) build, are reworked, and diverge across centuries, as eighteenth-century theories of life force shape nineteenth-century spiritualist notions, which in turn feed into twentieth-century thought on embodiment and the meaning of life.

One of this monograph’s best features is rhetorical: Fernández-Medina’s voice is full of energy, and his discussion keenly sensitive and probing; his argumentation is enhanced by clear, jargon-free writing that is a pleasure to read. There are gaps and exclusions, particularly as concern women’s contributions to the debates under discussion; Fernández-Medina does acknowledge “the underrepresentation of women in this book” (xx). Taking that into account, this book should nonetheless be required reading for anyone who wants to understand the importance of ideas about bodies, nature, and life in Spanish modernity.

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RICHARD L. KAGAN. *The Spanish Craze: America’s Fascination with the Hispanic World, 1779–1939*. U of Nebraska P, 2019, 640 pp.

Richard Kagan has contributed a lifetime of scholarship on Spain and its cultural and institutional ties with the United States. In this impressive volume, Kagan shows that the influence of Spain on American history and culture was recognized by Walt Whitman when he authored his 1883 essay on “The Spanish Element in our Nationality.” Spain had become far more than an “element” in the United States: it had become a “craze” permeating all aspects of culture, from literature and art, to architecture and life-styles. Although at times this “craze” had the characteristics of a “fever,” it was not the kind that kills people. It was rather more of an urgency to explore the commonalities between Spain and the