

Alberto Acereda. South Atlantic Review 66 (2001): 168-69

The Ethics of Autobiography. Replacing the Subject in Modern Spain. By Angel G. Loureiro. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000. 276 pp.

An important number of autobiographical works have been published in the Spanish language from the very beginning of its long literary history. It is not hard to recall the adventures in the *Libro de Buen Amor*, or the anonymous recounts of Lázaro de Tormes. From Diego de Torres Villarroel's *Vida* to the very recent Antonio Gala's *Ahora hablaré de mí*, Spain has carefully defined a variety of autobiographies and autobiographers. However, only a small number of them veer from a safe memoristic pattern, and it is in this particular area where Angel G. Loureiro's book offers a real contribution to autobiographical studies. The author believes that the scarcity of compelling personal writings in Spain cannot be attributed simply, as Ortega y Gasset and others have done, to some sort of Spanish "character" that is not inclined to confess. Loureiro disagrees with the argument that justifies the deficiencies of modern Spanish autobiography in the fact that Spaniards are reserved about matters of private life, or are people of absolutes who lack psychological nuances. Although these explanations may contain some truth, Loureiro believes these attitudes are just effects whose causes have to be found in the peculiar history of Spain. After questioning the history that produced those subjectivities, Loureiro finds that the most searching autobiographies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spain have been written by exiles. In fact, the author argues that the dramatic events of modern Spanish history must have forced many individuals to reassess their identities and should have motivated them to produce compelling personal writings.

To address his ideas, Loureiro proposes an ethics of autobiography that gives emphasis on the writings of Emmanuel Levinas's conception of ethics. Levinas formulates several issues that help articulate the idea of autobiography, and he defines ethics as the domain of the other. For Levinas the self is not an autonomous, self-positing entity, but it originates as a response to, and thus as a responsibility toward, the other. On this basis, Loureiro opens the first chapter of his book with a theoretical background where he traces the complex connections between the political, discursive, rhetorical, and ethical dimensions of autobiography.

The practical and textual study of this book is included in chapters one through five, and it examines from a philosophical and literary perspective, the interactions between the ethical and the political in self-writing. It also explores the complex interconnections among political conditions, cognitive strategies, rhetorical procedures, and ethical manifestations in four autobiographies written in modern and contemporary Spain. Loureiro studies *The Life of the Rev. Joseph Blanco White* (1845), by José M. Blanco White, *Memoria de la melancolía* (1970) by María Teresa León, *Coto vedado* (1985), and *En los reinos de taifa* (1986) by Juan Goytisolo, and finally *L'écriture ou la vie* (1994) by Jorge Semprún. The four autobiographers studied view their lives as stories of self replacement. Loureiro perceives their stories as narratives of self reparation. In the case of Blanco White and Goytisolo it is a reparation as restoration and renewal of the self, a consequence of a view of their own lives as stories of insufficiency. In León and Semprún's works, it is more a reparation of the self as compensation for a loss and fall.

Loureiro's book is undoubtedly a pathbreaking study in the field of autobiographical criticism. The reader can clearly feel the author's *catharsis* while writing this book because of his own self-exilic condition, as he honestly states in the preface. Loureiro's negative perception of Spain's history and his view in the conclusion of today's Spain as a "village-nation" (p. 186) calls for a dialogue between himself and contemporary Spaniards leaving also in exile, and some of which are also teaching literature in American universities. Most importantly, Loureiro should not feel tongue-tied to offer this great piece of scholarship in Spanish language. Perhaps he would be comforted to find out there is a very broad audience in Spain waiting for this kind of study.

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