INTRODUCTION

A Renaissance for the ‘Spanish Renaissance’?

Hilaire Kallendorf

The title of this book is a misnomer. There is no one reified, essential Spanish Renaissance. ‘Renaissance’ means different things to different people. When they hear that word, classical tradition folks see a rebirth of the classics. Historians, for their part, delineate Renaissance against Reformation and think of it as a time period earlier than ‘Early Modern.’ Literary and cultural studies types see it as an era of great flowering for art, literature, etc. and extend it much later, even to 1700. So which Renaissance are we covering in this volume?

The answer is … all of the above. In overseeing this project, I have preferred the empirical method of studying what patterns emerge for temporal parameters instead of imposing a uniform time frame. The linguistic equivalent would be going out in the field to listen, for example, to the ‘Spanglish’ actually spoken in Texas instead of beating my students over the head with the Real Academia Española dictionary. This approach reflects a willingness to be guided by usage instead of making prescriptive pronouncements—to celebrate the messiness.

A model for this strategy, borrowed from a related field, might be Bernard F. Reilly’s The Medieval Spains, whose very title recognizes that said Spains were various. However, keeping in mind Paul Ricoeur’s reminder in Time and Narrative that “the fantasy of an origin is itself an origin,”2 I have decided to retain the singular ‘Renaissance’ in the book’s title as it was commissioned by the Renaissance Society of America, all the while acknowledging its problematic nature and in fact calling attention to its inadequacy. Let us explore some reasons why this term is indeed inadequate.

Before we do, though, it is worth remembering an axiom pronounced by John O’Malley about the ways in which labels become filters:

I came to see, moreover, that such terms [he refers here to Reformation, Counter Reformation, and Catholic Reformation], even when accompanied by disclaimers, were not simple labels, for they acted as implicit

questions and implicit categories of interpretation. They thus subtly directed attention to some issues and away from others, highlighted certain phenomena and cast others into the shadows, admitted some evidence but filtered out the rest. I thought I had indications to show that historians see things one way when they wear the hermeneutical spectacles, for instance of “Counter-Reformation Rome,” and very differently when they wear those of “early modern Rome.” The traditional terms sometimes blind us to incongruities staring us in the face.\(^3\)

In the words of exiled Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo, “El lenguaje nunca es inocente” (language is never innocent).\(^4\) Or as semiotician Algirdas Greimas would have it, historical discourse is an “ideological machine.”\(^5\) O’Malley admits that he himself used to adopt a much more nonchalant attitude about terminology (hence the tongue-in-cheek title *Trent and All That*) until he began to think about its implications. Marshall Brown, in an essay titled “Periods and Resistances,” in *Periodization: Cutting Up the Past*—a special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* which appeared in 2001—puts it this way:

> Periods are entities we love to hate. Yet we cannot do without them ... If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. A collection such as ours is designed to confront the arrogance of the one critic and the timidity of the other, to help us think about why we need chapters of time, how we can make use of them, and how we can resist their seductions.\(^6\)

Further on in his essay, he cites David Perkins’ axiom that periods are “necessary fictions ... We require the concept of a unified period in order to deny it.”\(^7\) He concludes, “Chronology is also a psychology.”\(^8\) Similarly, Reinhart Koselleck in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* asserts,

---

7 David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: 1992), 64.
8 Brown, “Periods and Resistances,” 313.