

# Book Review

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**Simon, Robert.** *Blanca Andreu, Galicia, and the New Iberian Mysticism: From Post-Mortem to Post-Mystic.* Lexington, 2019.

The poetry of Galician-born Spanish-language author Blanca Andreu has garnered increasing critical attention as of late, particularly from a postmodernist perspective that concentrates on issues such as linguistic choice, nationalism, and her role as a female poet. This 2019 study by Georgia's Kennesaw State University professor Robert Simon takes a markedly different approach to Andreu's work by focusing on the mystical elements present in her poetry and inscribing her within the wider framework of a so-called New Iberian Mysticism. Such mysticism was revived in the post-Civil War period but has roots that hark back to the nineteenth century and even before.

As José A. Losada Montero rightly points out in the foreword, this volume “not only studies Blanca Andreu's works within an Iberian continuum, it also helps the reader to frame an effective and thoughtful debate regarding the influence the Transnational has had on the current articulation of Iberian and Galician Studies” (xiii). In this context, Simon proves to be well equipped theoretically to undertake a study that, with the help of Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift theory, among other approaches, sheds new light on Andreu's poetry, particularly on her collections *De una niña de provincias que se vino a vivir en un Chagall* (1981) and *La tierra transparente* (2002). Yet before concentrating on these two books, Simon wisely sets the stage for his study by identifying and characterizing this new Iberian mysticism that reemerged in the 1960s in Spain and Portugal, at a time when both countries were under dictatorial regimes. This mystical poetry is present in the texts of poets such as José Ángel Valente, Clara Janés, Joaquim Pessoa, and Fíama Hasse País de Brandão, to name but a few, and as Simon notes, its ramifications lead us as far back as the twelfth-century writings of Ibn Árabí, as well as the widely recognized works of Santa Teresa de Jesús and San Juan de la Cruz.

In the specific case of Galician letters, renowned forebears of this type of mystical poetry can be found in writers of the nineteenth-century Rexurdimento, particularly in the poetry composed by Rosalía de Castro in Galician and Spanish, but also in twentieth-century authors such as Luis Pimentel, Castelao, and Álvaro Cunqueiro. In more recent times (starting around 1975) this mysticism has been entwined with a nationalist discourse that is mainly interested in the mythical dimension of Galician culture, the idea of Galician nationhood, and the central role of the Galician language as the primary vehicle for the construction and transmission of that culture. In some ways, this would seem to contradict the very nature of the poetry of Valente and also of Andreu herself, inasmuch as her collections are written entirely in Spanish. However, as Simon consistently argues in different parts of his study, despite her linguistic choice, the thematic content of her verses inscribes her within this long-standing, multilingual Iberian mystical tradition: “her confluence of past and present in an atemporal space, . . . the variety of symbols from the natural pantheon throughout her poetic expression . . . [and] a process of recognition of the binary forces of the physical and divine worlds” are just some of the features that Simon considers as he analyzes two of Andreu’s most enduring works, originally published some twenty years apart (33).

In order to illustrate these and other related points, Simon devotes two entire chapters of his book to a detailed analysis of these two titles by Andreu, and this in-depth, text-based reading is arguably one of the strongest points of the volume. Drawing on notions outlined in his own prior scholarship and acknowledging earlier contributions by Wilcox, Mudrovic, and others, Simon succeeds in bringing to the fore the mystical elements that provide a linking thread between *De una niña* and *La tierra transparente*, both of which represent distinct steps in Andreu’s self-affirmation as a mystical poet. Despite her heavy use of Galician symbols and her unmistakable delineation of a mystical sensibility in the former work, the surrealist elements that it contains still take precedence, and as Simon observes, “[a]lthough a mystical process presents itself in these poems, the poetic subject seems not to feel apt to follow it” (63). By the time she publishes *La tierra transparente*, however, things have changed substantially, and the mysticism of the poetic voice has finally succeeded in affirming itself, to such an extent that a confluence of the mystical and the surrealist is enacted in the latter collection. *La tierra transparente* can be read, then, as a reworking of the same

themes already present in *De una niña* but seen from a perspective that more fully emphasizes their mystical nuances. In Simon's words, these poems evidence "a greater imagining of the poetic subject's transcultural and transtemporal identity as both a contemporary Spanish mystic, a self-asserted human being, and a traditional, Galician soul" (87).

The thought-provoking way this study illuminates Andreu's mystical poetic sensibility constitutes Simon's most valuable scholarly contribution in this new book. Furthermore, the volume explicitly elicits and attempts to address the question of whether a national literary canon—in this case, the Galician one—should be determined solely by the language in which a given work is written. In other words, is language an integral part of national identity (and, as such, of a national literature) or rather is it merely a human-made technology for communication and artistic creation?

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