



Evil, Madness, and the Occult in Argentine Poetry

Melanie Nicholson

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"Nicholson's grasp of gnosticism, occultism, madness, and the literature of evil is eloquent and fascinating."-
-Jacob Sefamí, University of California, Irvine

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Melanie Nicholson brings to light three of Argentina's most respected twentieth-century poets within a literary and cultural tradition that traces its roots to German Romanticism. She examines each poet's work under the broadly defined rubric of literary esotericism—the rhetorics of the occult (Olga Orozco), of evil (Alejandra Pizarnik), and of madness (Jacobo Fijman). In doing so, she connects these authors to the European esoteric tradition while illuminating how this tradition is reformulated in a twentieth-century Spanish American context. Nicholson argues that while these poets draw heavily on certain principles of literary esotericism, their work also reveals the contradictions inherent in such an approach for twentieth-century poetry.

Although several studies published in recent years point to the esoteric tradition in European literature as a subject of ongoing critical interest, the role of esoteric thought in Latin American literature has yet to be fully developed. Nicholson contributes to the contemporary discourse on the legacy of the avant-garde in Spanish-speaking countries. She traces esotericism from a historical perspective, emphasizing the Modern period, from German Romanticism to French Symbolism and Surrealism in particular. Each chapter focuses on various forms of the esoteric: Gnosticism and hermeticism; alchemy, divination and magic; madness and mysticism; and the literature of evil.

Recent scholarship on these poets in particular has also neglected esotericism as a fundamental aspect of their vision and aesthetic attitudes. Building upon the work of such critical thinkers as Paz, Bataille, Foucault, and Felman, Nicholson argues that they maintain an ironic and critical stance with regard to the very precepts that inform their work. The tension created by their strong belief in the magical power of language and the acknowledgment that the logos ultimately fails to change the world is emblematic of their modern re-imagining of esotericism.

As an extensive treatment of the esoteric tradition in its broader relation to Spanish poetry, Nicholson's study will be relevant to scholars of Latin American literature, comparative literature, and poetry. It will also appeal to those interested in literary manifestations of the esoteric and the legacy of the European literary avant-garde.

Melanie Nicholson is associate professor of Spanish at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

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