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TITLE: *Life Embodied: The Promise of Vital Force in Spanish Modernity*

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Life Embodied fits a “type” in the interdisciplinary study of culture: it is, most basically, a series of studies in the life of an idea, here the medical-philosophical idea of “vital force,” each taken (in the case of the present book) at a different historical moment, and illustrating a different aspect of where that idea went, what it did, and how it changed over time, the chronological window here stretching from the 1680s to the First World War. But admirably, as with the best of this type, Fernández-Medina uses his central theme as the core of a broader discussion of Spanish intellectual history, both in terms of its ideas and their development over time, as well as in terms of how those ideas were institutionalized (or not), embodied (or not), empowered (or not). In his introduction, the author sets out succinctly the overarching question asked by *Life Embodied*: “to what extent can the question of vital force in Spain beginning in the seventeenth century shed light on the practices of self-constitution that were part and parcel of modernity?” (34). His argument, developed over six chapters and six moments in the life of the “narratives of vital force,” is strong: “I contend that [these narratives] served as formidable vehicles for reimagining the linkages between body and world, and thus proved to be very effective mediums through which to mount critiques of authority in Spain and its claims of religious, scientific, philosophical, and literary legitimacy” (xiv).

Fernández-Medina’s six chapters in this exemplary work of scholarship are very much in dialogue with one another, but can also usefully be read as independent studies. Grouped into three parts, the first (chapters 1 and 2) traces by way of Juan de Cabriada’s *Philosophical Medico-Chemical Letter* the emergence of Spanish medical discourse from the Galenic heritage of the past into “modern,” empirical-anatomical science, as well as the influence of Descartes (and the resistance to and negotiation with it) in the early eighteenth century, by a study of the medical writers Boix y Moliner and Martín Martínez alongside the traditionalist critic Torres de Villaroel. The second part (chapters 3 and 4) examines the move from Enlightenment to early Romantic values, both in terms of broader European influences in the 18th century, and in the role of institutions like Madrid’s Royal Academy of Medicine and Seville’s Royal Society of Medicine and Other Sciences alongside individual medical theorists like Ignacio María Ruiz de Luzuriaga and Sebastián Miguel Guerrero Herreros. The second part continues by examining the often-overlooked *belles-lettres* literary work of Spanish Enlightenment icon Gaspar Melchor del Jovellanos as a way in to the broader question of how European conceptions of nature evolved from the 18th to the 19th centuries. Fernández-Medina’s third part interrogates the period from the

Napoleonic conflict through the beginning of World War I, again examining foreign influences, especially on ideas of the body (the French naturally predominating in the world of the *afrancesados*, German thinkers like Krause as “revitalizer” and Nietzsche as “diagnostician of ills” later in the 19th century). He demonstrates that vitalist discourses were key in the cultural conflicts of the Peninsular War and its consequent unrest (Fernando VII’s repression, the earlier threats from Carlism), especially in the work of the scientist-poet Pedro Mata y Fontanet. The book closes with a study of Spain’s early 20th century through early works of Unamuno, Baroja and Gómez de la Serna, showing that the vitalist-inspired, optimistic cultural strain often called *regeneracionismo* was crippled, if not destroyed, by the cultural impact of modern industrialized warfare

and its horrific indifference to the fragility of the human body.

In terms of sheer scholarship, superlatives fail this reviewer in describing Fernández-Medina’s achievement. Each chapter synthesizes an enormous secondary literature with new positive arguments around how the study of vitalism sheds light on the broader Spanish and European cultural context, along with useful and convincing discussion of texts not traditionally considered “literary” in literary terms, paying attention both to the big ideas and to the details of how texts are made and how they work as expressions of language. *Life Embodied* will be valuable to a very broad audience across many disciplines, especially philosophy and cultural studies, but also any historian interested in the history of ideas in modern Europe, and scholars of literature in Spain in the time periods represented here.