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The Exile's Dilemma: Writing the Civil War from Elsewhere

A significant portion of the novels, short stories, poems, plays, and essays by Spanish authors about their civil war were written from exile. These texts were therefore most likely composed in circumstances of financial hardship, legal insecurity, and existential crisis; were probably written with a specific political agenda in mind, in response to other versions of the war by either the victors or fellow vanquished; were meant for a Spanish audience yet printed in small runs that hardly ever reached the peninsula (if they were printed at all); and even now, a quarter century after the transition to democracy, are barely known among the Spanish reading public and only marginally present in most Spanish cultural histories. There are exceptions, to be sure, such as the works of Francisco Ayala and of Ramón Sender; but these only serve to prove the sad general rule. Paulino Masip's outstanding civil war novel *El diario de Hamlet García* ("The Diary of Hamlet García"), for instance, was first printed in Mexico in 1944 but hardly distributed and not published in Spain until 1987. Arturo Barea's celebrated trilogy *La forja de un rebelde* (*The Forging of a Rebel*) was first brought out in English (1941–46) and then in Spanish in Buenos Aires (1951), while the first peninsular edition appeared twenty-six years later. Many other civil war works written in exile, such as Virgilio Botella

Pastor's *Porque callaron las campanas* (1953; "Because the Bells Were Silent"), Manuel Benavides's *Los nuevos profetas* (1942; "The New Prophets"), or Isabel de Palencia's *En mi hambre mando yo* (1959; "In My Hunger I Reign Supreme"), were never reissued at all. The war, in sum, caused an enormous cultural hemorrhage that will never be wholly remedied.

The bleeding started soon after July 1936; on 1 April 1939, when Franco declared victory, Spain had already lost most of its scholars, writers, teachers, and artists. Some had died, others had been imprisoned, but a great number had decided to leave their homeland, together with the almost five hundred thousand other refugees who had been crossing the Pyrenees since the outbreak of the war. In the years following, about half these refugees returned to Spain. The rest would settle in many different countries—most in France, Mexico, Argentina, and the Soviet Union.

From the moment these intellectual exiles left Spain, they found that they had an irresistible urge to write about their experiences. For intellectuals and nonintellectuals alike, writing became a way to deal with their multiple loss—losing the war, losing friends and families, but also losing a sense of identity and purpose in life. At the same time, it soon became clear that discourse—whether memoir or fiction—was, as Michael Ugarte puts it, a "shifting ground," far from the solid foundation they had hoped it to be (*Shifting Ground* 26). After all, how do you write about a life that has lost its coherence, having been radically split by exile? How do you describe a war that, while it lasted, drew the attention of the entire Western world but that was quickly forgotten and immediately distorted by the victors? What use is writing about Spain and the war, trying to make sense of it and especially to set the record straight, if you cannot ever hope to reach your readers? In other words, if leaving Spain provided a measure of intellectual and physical freedom unavailable to those who remained, that freedom was bought at an enormous price. "Exile," Edward Said rightly notes, "is one of the saddest fates" (*Representations* 47).

The problems facing writers in exile can be said to *constitute* their writing. If texts can never be seen separate from the social and political circumstances of their production and reception, this interconnection is even more obvious in the case of texts written in political exile. Spanish Civil War exile literature was largely driven by politics and the dilemmas of displacement but was also tragically thwarted, even crippled, by both. I suggest that a fruitful way to teach representations of the Spanish Civil War written from elsewhere is precisely to focus on these problems—to focus,

that is, on the problems of life in exile; of writing from exile; and, more directly, of teaching exile literature, because if it is clear that exile has an impact on writing, it is not at all clear that it does so in any uniform or generalizable way. In this essay I briefly touch on these three aspects, where possible giving concrete references to texts that can be used in the classroom. For purposes of practicality I limit my examples to a small number of exile authors whose work is relatively accessible if not always well known.

Life in Exile

Apart from its many concrete, daily difficulties—finding a hospitable host country, making a living, sometimes learning a foreign language and customs or acquiring a new nationality—exile gives rise to loyalty conflicts of both a personal and political nature. For one, the act of leaving one's country is susceptible to radically opposing interpretations. It can be constructed as the supreme act of allegiance to one's nation—giving up what one loves most for the sake of its defense—or as a cowardly betrayal, an act of abandonment or desertion. Naturally, the Franco regime was eager to portray the Republican exiles in the latter fashion—they were, after all, the anti-Spain—while the exiles, turning the tables, represented the Francoists as traitors to the nation and themselves as absolute examples of national loyalty.

As Judith Shklar points out, for political exiles to continue to believe in their own patriotic loyalty—many times the raison d'être of their life abroad and, in the end, the only thing that keeps them going—they need to make a clear distinction between their legal obligations to the state that betrayed them and their loyalty to its people, who did not (40–41, 48). Masip, whose *Cartas a un español emigrado* (1939; "Letters to a Spanish Emigré") is largely concerned with fighting defeatism among his fellow exiles while boosting unity and morale, understood this well: for him, the Francoists were nothing but a bunch of isolated insurgents, "traitors twice over, for rebelling against a legitimate government and for selling themselves to foreign nations" (54).[1] If, however, a certain section of the larger population is classifiable as the exiles' enemy—as was evident for the German victims of the Nazis but also, despite Masip's assurances to the contrary, for the Spanish Republicans—the object of exiles' patriotic love becomes precarious. Shklar mentions the example of Willy Brandt, who, although persecuted by his own state and people, said on returning to

Germany after World War II that he had "kept faith with the real Germany, the true Germany." Shklar adds that "he cannot have meant the majority of his people, only their better possibilities, to which he remained loyal" (50). Similarly, Luis Cernuda saw himself compelled to distinguish between a Spain he loved, and that loved him, and another Spain defined by hate: "The hate and destruction that always live on / Dully, in the entrails, / Filled with eternal bile, of the terrible Spaniard" (*Poesía* 254). In the end, Cernuda's only lasting solution to the exile's dilemma of national loyalty was the conscious construction of an imaginary Spain, which he called "Sansueña." For Cernuda this "impossible fatherland, which is not of this world," was partly based on a nostalgic reading of Spain's heroic past (506; Faber, "Norte" 736–38).

The exile's allegiance to the host country is another potential source of problems. Political exiles are given refuge by foreign governments that tend to demand a certain loyalty in return for their hospitality; and this loyalty is not always wholly compatible with the exiles' existing allegiances (Shain 83; Shklar 51). For those Spaniards who ended up in the Dominican Republic ruled by Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, for example, it was all but impossible to square their own political position with that of their conservative, authoritarian host. But even for the more than ten thousand exiles who moved to the revolutionary Mexico of Lázaro Cárdenas, integration into the former colony was not easy. Cernuda, to be sure, fell in love with the country; after several years of cultural alienation in Great Britain and the United States, moving to Mexico in 1952 felt like coming home. But in reality Cernuda's Mexico was as idealized as his Sansueña. He himself realized that his postcolonial love for it was probably bound to remain unrequited: "what attracts you to it might not be more than a subtle, retrospective form of national pride," he remarks at the closing of *Variaciones sobre tema mexicano* ("Variations on a Mexican Theme"). "But this land is not one with yours anymore, nor are these people. Don't you realize that, for them, you can only be a stranger? More than a stranger: someone from a country that they perhaps still look upon with anger?" (657–58).

Indeed, even in Mexico the Spanish exiles ran into cultural and linguistic obstacles. The common colonial history proved to be a catalyst for integration as much as a source of friction, as Max Aub masterfully shows in his "La verdadera historia de la muerte de Francisco Franco" ("The True Story of the Death of Francisco Franco") (*Enero* 413). Politically, too, the Spaniards' position in Mexico was awkward. The regime of the Mexican ruling party claimed to be heir to the Mexican Revolution; but the Republicans arrived at the moment when Cárdenas's leftist populism was being abandoned in favor of capitalist development, later accompanied by anti-Communism and increasing corruption. The exiles, moreover, were constitutionally barred from participation in Mexican politics.

Initially, few refugees showed much interest in their host countries. They were too obsessed with Spain and the war (in fact the exiles' essayistic production on "the problem of Spain" rivals that of the turn of the century). The first years of exile were dominated by hopes of an imminent return, since it was generally expected that Franco would not survive the defeat of the Axis. By the late 1940s, when the perverse logic of the cold war compelled the West to leave Franco alone and even actively support him, for many exiles it was too late to start over and commit themselves fully to their new lives abroad. By then, too, a fatal anachronism had slipped into their patriotic love of Spain, however intensely and genuinely that love was felt. Like distant lovers, exiles and their homelands inevitably grow apart. While Spain continued to evolve after 1939, the exiles, in their isolation, were barred from witnessing that change, let alone from participating in it. Consequently, their image of Spain, already skewed by nostalgia, drifted further and further away from peninsular reality. When Aub returned to visit in 1969, he was shattered to realize that the Spain to which he believed he had been loyal for thirty years seemed to have disappeared into thin air (*Gallina* 413). He was also shocked to find out that, after three decades of Francoism, virtually all memory of his intellectual generation had been erased. As one of his characters puts it, "They have wiped us off the map" (*Enero* 466).

During the first years of displacement, the exiles' obsession with Spain, the frustration of defeat, and perhaps a certain degree of survivor's guilt gave rise to a feverish textual production and a strangely bombastic rhetoric with strong moralistic and nationalistic overtones. Such rhetoric is especially clear in early exile journals like *España Peregrina* (1940–41), the direct precursor of *Cuadernos Americanos*. Its founder and director, Juan Larrea, claimed among other things that the exiles represented the "seed of a deeper and more complex form of human organization launched by Spain, as a synthesis of the Western experience, to these fertile lands of Spanish America" ("Por un orden" 149). For him, the civil war had been tragic but necessary because it cleansed the popular spirit of Spain of all its hereditary defects and impurities, leaving the country in a state of pure spirituality that would eventually propel humanity into a higher form of existence. Ayala, in *Razón del mundo* (1944), similarly argued that the

spiritual dimension of the Spanish national character could provide the basis for a new, universally valid way of life (113).

Later on, the exiles' discourse became more disenchanted and therefore more nuanced, low-key, and self-critical. Compared with the fiction and historiography on the Spanish Civil War published in Franco's Spain, especially, the exiles' production is notably less Manichaean and triumphalist (G. Thomas 121–22, 149, 227). Germán Gullón has argued that exile novels such as Masip's *Diario de Hamlet García* and Sender's *Réquiem por un campesino español* (*Requiem for a Spanish Peasant*) stand out for their dialogic qualities and their "lack of fear of the proliferation of meanings"—a consequence, very likely, of defeat and disillusionment but also of the exile experience itself, which tends to foster introspection, irony, and narrative self-awareness (230; Ugarte, *Shifting Ground* 19–20). At the same time, exile can lead to a certain quiet desperation brought about by a sense of aporia: the realization that there are no easy solutions to the Spanish problem, perhaps no solution at all. The anarchist, Republican, socialist, and Communist characters of Aub's civil war novels spend much of their time discussing politics and the war, but their differences of opinion almost always prove irreconcilable.

This kind of ideological polyphony is more characteristic of literary discourse than of the essay and pamphlet. As Yossi Shain points out, political exile also tends to breed ideological rigidity and infighting (43–44). Indeed, Spanish Civil War exiles spent much discursive energy on mutual accusations and petty personal conflicts. These were especially pronounced among different factions of the Socialist Party, which was split by the rivalry between Indalecio Prieto and Juan Negrín and between the Communists and the rest. The exiles' failure to present a united front also made it much harder to garner international support after 1945. Meanwhile, many major and minor players in the war filled the empty hours of exile writing memoirs to defend their past decisions and actions or to settle accounts with former brothers in arms. As Paul Preston writes, the republic's surviving political leaders spent much of their life in exile "locked in sterile polemic about the responsibility of their defeat" (*Spanish Civil War* 147). If the Trotskyist Víctor Alba used his novel *La vida provisional* (1950; "Provisional Life") to blame the defeat on the Communists, the Communist commander Enrique Líster wrote *Nuestra guerra* (1966; "Our War") to defend his party's role in the war. Sender, in turn, wrote in his prologue to *Los cinco libros de Ariadna* (1957; "The Five Books of Ariadna"), "We are all to blame for what happened in Spain. Some because of their stupidity and others because of their wickedness. The fact that we (the better side) were the stupid ones does not redeem us before history or before ourselves" (xii-xiii).

Writing from Exile

In 1949, Ayala, exiled in Argentina, published an essay in *Cuadernos Americanos* in which he reflected on the crucial question for the writer in exile: About what do I write and, more important, for whom? The civil war and the "problem of Spain," he argued, had obsessed the exiles for the past ten years; but now these topics were exhausted. "Our lives during this period," he wrote, "have been pure expectation, an absurd existence in parenthesis" (*Razón* 158). It was time to move on and start focusing on the host environment and the present. Ayala's advice was not generally heeded, however, and perhaps with good reason. Many exiles were not ready to put the war behind them. His friend Aub, for instance, would doggedly continue working on his *Laberinto mágico* ("Magic Labyrinth")—a collection of five novels, a film script, and some forty short stories about the war—publishing the last novel of his series, *Campo de los almendros* ("Field of Almond Trees"), as late as 1968. For Aub, not to write about the war was unthinkable. For one, it was the defining moment of his life and generation. But he also believed that, as long as Franco was in power, it was essential that there be a counterhegemonic voice to tell the true story of the struggle. "[W]hat matters," he wrote in *Campo de los almendros*, "is that what happened remain [recorded], even if it is for only one person in each generation" (363). It was a similar sense of obligation that motivated Aub's commitment to literary realism as an indispensable form of historical testimony: "For us novelists or playwrights the only thing left to do is to report on the times in more or less truthful chronicles" (*Hablo* 40).

But what use are truthful chronicles if there is no one to read them? "What matters to us is Spain, what we write about is Spain, and we write for Spaniards," Aub said in 1967. "The trouble is that we don't have Spanish readers" (qtd. in Embeita 1, 12). The problem of audience—that is, of Francoist censorship, which prohibited the circulation of any exile text until 1967 and even after that blocked most from entering Spain—was hard to overcome and constituted a major frustration for exile writers. Censorship had economic and emotional consequences. It forced them to take on jobs as translators, teachers, or scriptwriters to make a living (and

to pay for publishing their books), and it sometimes led to depression and writer's block. Cernuda, with characteristic pessimism, resigned himself to being a readerless poet; his only hope was posthumous glory. In "A un poeta futuro" (1941; "To a Future Poet"), he writes the poetic equivalent of a message in a bottle, directing himself explicitly to a virtual future colleague:

> I won't be able to tell you how much I've been struggling
> To make sure that my words don't die,
> Silent, with me, and that they go, like an echo,
> To you . . .
>
> When, in future times, man will be free
> . . . let fate lead
> Your hand to the volume that holds
> My forgotten verses. . . . (*Poesía* 342)

The protagonist of Aub's play *La vuelta: 1964* ("The Return: 1964"), a writer who goes back to Spain in 1964, meets a younger Spanish colleague who admits that he has not had a chance to read any of the writer's work published in exile but assures him he will do so as soon as he can. The writer, disheartened, answers that the young man can spare himself the trouble: "Books have their moment, like everything else: after that, they go to waste" (109). Another of Aub's returning exile writers points out in despair that his name is not mentioned in any history of literature, either Latin American or Spanish (*Enero* 470).

Exile literature, then, is not only readerless but stateless as well. It is not hard to see why exile writers would be overcome by a sense of alienation and futility. In 1964, Segundo Serrano Poncela writes that he is going through a "moment of strong depression and discouragement; thinking precisely how stupid it is to take literature seriously" (Montiel Rayo 196). Even where the Republicans were relatively well received, as in Mexico, they were never really able to participate fully in the host society. At the same time, they were well aware of their increasing estrangement from their homeland and of their lack of influence on the younger generations. Realizing that their memories became less and less reliable as they became colored by nostalgia and idealization, they also knew that those memories were, to a large extent, the only weapon against the oblivion and much more serious historical distortions imposed on Spain by Francoism.

There are two recurring concepts in the thousands of books, articles, and pamphlets on the civil war: tragedy and truth. The first is self-evident, the second maddeningly elusive. One can wonder whether the exiled intellectuals—fiction writers, poets, historians—succeeded in giving a more truthful representation of the war than their colleagues in Spain, who were writing either to please the regime or under the constrictions of censorship. On the other hand, it might be preferable to argue that the question, Who represents the truth?, is itself invalid because there is no truth about the Spanish Civil War. This notion, held by some civil war scholars, was one that the exiles were not ready to accept. They simply had too much invested in the notion that as victims of the Spanish tragedy they had access to that truth. This belief also helps explain the relative lack of sophistication of the theories of representation informing their literary practice. Despite the self-consciousness and aporetic nature of many of the exiles' representations of the civil war, the exiles were driven by the simple desire to write the war, in Leopold von Ranke's phrase, "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (vii; "how it really was"). Thus, for example, Aub's conscious commitment to a kind of nineteenth-century realism in effect sacrifices literary complexity for political expediency.

Teaching Exile Literature

Aub's *Laberinto mágico*, Sender's *Réquiem*, Barea's *La llama* ("The Flame"), or Mercè Rodoreda's *La plaça del Diamante* (*The Time of the Doves*) can be simply taught as representations of the civil war, but it also makes sense to teach them as exile literature. This approach, however, conjures up a series of problems of its own. Both exile and exile literature are slippery notions. As Shklar notes, "the more one thinks about them, the more numerous the forms of exile turn out to be" (38). It is one thing to state that exile affects writing, quite another to speak of exile literature as if it were a well-defined category, clearly distinguishable from nonexilic texts. Do exile texts have anything in common beyond the circumstances of their production?

Many critics have tried to answer this question in the affirmative. Paul Ilie speaks of an "exilic sensibility," which he defines as a "mental condition" determined by a "set of feelings or beliefs" that isolate an individual or group from the rest of society (2). Gareth Thomas perceives in the civil war novels written in exile certain "exilic symptoms," such as characters' "feeling cut off from others, failing to communicate with others, . . . not knowing where to go or what to do" (156). Ugarte argues that the experience of exile "leads the writer . . . into a dialogue with him or herself on the

very nature of writing and on the problems that arise from an attempt to record reality" (*Shifting Ground* 19–20). I have argued that, for someone like Aub, the exile experience is manifested in a "realism of aporia"—that is, in an inability to move from the chaotic, all-inclusive war chronicle to a neatly composed historical novel (Faber, *Exile* 237–44). For Gullón, the civil war novel written in exile is characterized by a semantic and ideological openness or polyphony that the peninsular war novel generally lacks.

Still, these traits do not appear in all exile literature; more important, they are not exclusive to it. Ilie argues precisely that the "exilic sensibility" is more important than the actual geographic separation from the homeland and that this sensibility is in fact manifested in much of the literature written in Spain itself, by writers suffering a form of "inner exile" (2–4). While the notion of inner exile has proved quite useful, the fact that it turns exile, through metaphor, into a psychological or existential category is also confusing. From there it is a small step to concluding, as Ayala does, that "all writers live in exile" ("Para quién" 49). And why stop there—who isn't an exile of sorts? Said has stated that all true intellectuals, even if they are not exiles, should behave as if they were (52–53). On the one hand, all these notions are compelling, and they are useful insofar as they prevent us from establishing a too clear-cut separation between exile and nonexile writing. On the other hand, they can also be used as a subtle way of neutralizing the political nature of exile and thus trivializing the exiles' very real experience of geographic displacement. In the Spanish context, the concept of inner exile has been rejected by some critics as a euphemism for Francoist repression or, conversely, as a way for the conformist or collaborationist intelligentsia to acquire a form of undeserved heroic patina (Naharro-Calderón, "Des-lindes" 33).

Even though Spanish Civil War exile officially ended in 1977, its tragedy did not stop there. The particular dynamics of Spain's transition to democracy, which was based on a so-called pact of oblivion, prevented any genuine vindication of the exiles' forty-year legacy (Naharro-Calderón, "Y para qué" 63). There was, so to speak, no closure; accordingly, the recuperation of the Republican legacy is still scandalously unfinished. The Socialist Party (PSOE), whose history forms an important part of civil war exile, did hardly anything during its fourteen-year rule (1982–96) to recognize or recuperate Republican exile culture (Naharro-Calderón, "Des-lindes" 16). Only very recently have the socialists turned to the exilic past that is partly their own, when former Vice Prime Minister Alfonso Guerra, now president of the Fundación Pablo Iglesias, helped produce the documentary *El exilio republicano español* ("The Spanish Republican Exile") that was aired in 2002 on Spanish national television.

This broadcast, coordinated with an extremely well visited exhibit on the same topic in Madrid, can be seen as a belated response from the socialists to a renewed interest in the civil war and exile by the Spanish general public. This trend began some five years ago and has been salient since 2001. Civil war exile has even turned into something of a fashion, spurred by centenary celebrations of such prominent Republican intellectuals as Federico García Lorca (1998), Luis Buñuel (2000), Sender (2001), Rafael Alberti (2002), Cernuda (2002), Juan Rejano and Aub (2003), and María Zambrano (2004). Ironically, this fashion was enthusiastically backed by Spain's formerly ruling Partido Popular, a center-right party that has its roots in Francoism and that also stubbornly refused even to condemn the military rising that started the war. Not surprisingly, the party's appropriation of the exile legacy has not always been free of self-interest or, for that matter, respectful of historical and political reality (Naharro-Calderón, "Cuando" 25; Faber, *Exile* 270–73). Equally doubtful have been attempts by the left-wing critical establishment, notably the *El país* critic Miguel García-Posada, to normalize exile writers, minimizing the contingency of four decades of displacement and reinserting them into the Spanish literary canon as if nothing had happened.

Teaching representations of the Spanish Civil War as exile literature is a wonderful opportunity to discuss the politics of memory, particularly the conflicts between official history and the largely silenced—or only partially recuperated—memories of the marginalized.

Note

1. All translations are mine.

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