

R E S E Ñ A S

CRÍTICA Y ENSAYO

Ferrán, Ofelia. *Working Through Memory; Writing and Remembrance in Contemporary Spanish Narrative*. Lewisburg PA: Bucknell UP, 2007. 370 pp.

Few issues have become more urgent in contemporary Spanish society than memory. Memory, not so much as the unique experience of an individual past than as the history of a people marked by a trauma that has never been adequately addressed and that therefore haunts the present like a specter that becomes all the more troublesome the more one tries to ignore it. Memory, then, of the Civil War, beginning with the brutal assassinations of thousands of persons on all sides of the political spectrum during the early days and weeks of the conflict in 1936. Memory of the summary executions of many thousands of Republicans in the years following the conservative victory in 1939. And memory of the almost forty years of oppression accompanying a Franco regime that perpetuated the war by excoriating an enemy whose partisans responded with equal ferocity. And still further, memory as the forbidden part of the transition to democracy after 1975, when a «pact of silence» led the nation to avoid discussing the troubled legacy of the War in order to focus on a future of progress and prosperity. And now, perhaps most difficult of all, memory as a late, desperate attempt to recall the horrors of an increasingly distant past as a way of finally forging a future based on truth.

Strongly sympathetic to these and similar issues, Ofelia Ferrán's *Working Through Memory* chooses five writers of the postwar and later who each in different ways has explored some aspect of memory in order to understand its effect on the present. The writers are Jorge Semprún, Juan Benet, María Teresa León, Montserrat Roig and Antonio Muñoz Molina. The fact that none is a professional historian shows that Ferrán's route into the past is through imagination and intuition. This means using specific cases to pursue «a meta-narrative reflection of the very process of memory production» (14-15). The goal is to understand how memory, understood as a collective process affecting all members

of society, deals with the unresolved contradictions, obscurities and struggles of a traumatic past that is deeply feared but that must be addressed in order to achieve balance and harmony.

Ferrán centers her discussion around one major work of each author, often with extremely illuminating cross-references to other works by these same and different authors. Not all of these cases deal with the Civil War and its legacy, and the exploration of the past frequently involves the path of «countermemory», a remembering that opposes the dominant discourse of social progress because this latter has too often been built upon a denial of the past. And in the end, working through memory leads to a recognition that a full understanding of the past is impossible, although the effort at least begins to hear a few of those who were denied a voice and thereby helps «do justice to the dead» by giving them a burial, that modicum of closure they were once denied.

The first writer, Jorge Semprún, does not even deal with the Spanish past. *Le Grand Voyage* is a fictional memoir of the author's 1944 internment in the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald. The work presents a narrator who remembers himself remembering during the several days he spent traveling in a boxcar to the camp. This split between two levels of remembering sets the groundwork for the obsessive recall of a traumatic experience that cannot be organized rationally and over which the narrator cannot gain control. The resulting tale depicts the narrator's loss of self and the appearance of the important concept of the «lieu de mémoire» or place of memory—in this case, Buchenwald—as a symbolic location whose function is to prevent forgetting.

In certain ways, the chaos of Semprún's text anticipates the enigmatic memory of *Volverás a Región*, except that its author, Juan Benet, is even more deeply opposed to rational discourse and focuses centrally on a recent Spanish past that is dominated by trauma and ruin. Nowhere do we see the Civil War directly, but a postwar ravaged by the inability to overcome the failures of the past prevails everywhere, especially in the mysterious figure of Numa, the hidden killer threatening any individual who would live by passion or instinct. Ferrán's analysis of Benet is intellectually solid and reminds us of how important this author is both for his vision of Spanish history and his contribution to our understanding of memory.

María Teresa León's autobiography *Memoria de la melancolía* also sees ruin and loss in the past, but it prefers what Ferrán calls «disidentification», a remembering that destabilizes personal identity and explores ways in which a narrative of self-remembering «always comprises a full chorus of other people's voices» (155). León's insistence on theatre and performance reinforces her tendency to remember herself in the third person and contributes to making her book a peculiar «place of memory»

similar to a cemetery that records the names of exiled Spaniards who survive as ghosts haunting her past. Ferrán also shows how León's concept of melancholy is different from mourning because it refuses to accept the disappearance of objects or persons, and retains their memory like an open wound that expresses her continuing belief in the ideals of the Second Spanish Republic.

The interaction between past and present is shown at perhaps its most complex in the subject of Ferrán's fourth chapter, Montserrat Roig's *L'hora violeta*. Set during the transition to democracy in 1979, the novel depicts two women's attempts to uncover a past of repression and silence so as to understand a trauma at the center of a family. The process leads to a «story within the story» that reveals a void of frustration marked by fear, suicide, and eventually a kind of fetishism that compensates for the failure of the Franco years. But as Ferrán shows, the sequence also reveals how an act of love can eventually work through memory in order to overcome the past and recover one's ability to face the future. As in so many of the works discussed in the volume, such a reconciliation requires accepting uncertainty as the final consequence of living fully with the past. In many ways, Ferrán's discussion of *L'hora violeta* exemplifies the full complexity of the idea of «working through» memory while also showing its reward, learning to look toward the future.

Such issues are no less fully presented in the final novel, Antonio Muñoz Molina's *El jinete polaco*. The story of Manuel and Nadia emerges as a brilliant example of «postmemory», a term initially used for the children of Holocaust survivors but equally valid for those Spaniards whose parents were likewise devastated by the Civil War and its after-effects. Such children cannot avoid the obligation to remember what they themselves did not live directly but that is present in the fear that surrounds their lives. In Muñoz Molina's novel, the characters try to reconstruct the past through photos and other media that, as in so many other works studied in this volume, «give voice to the dead». As always, the goal is to work through the past so as to overcome its trauma and face a viable future. Ferrán's analysis expertly shows how Muñoz Molina's blending of memory and desire, past and future, is essentially an ethical vision seeking to vindicate the less fortunate of history.

Working Through Memory offers important lessons about the literary struggle to recover the past and face the trauma of modern Spanish history. Ferrán's analyses are thorough, balanced, and though perhaps not always original, very helpful to the reader. The volume is an excellent contribution to the growing bibliography on the importance of memory in twentieth century Spanish literature.