FLARR Pages #56: How Sweet It is to See the Homeland at Night

Mary Thrond
“How sweet it is to see the homeland at night”
Mary Thrond

María Teresa León’s poetic depiction of the anguish of exile has earned her recognition as a vibrant voice of twentieth century Spanish literature. She was a writer at the forefront of political and intellectual activity during her beloved Spain’s civil war (1936-1939). Compelled by the struggle for justice, she portrayed the suffering of the oppressed and disempowered, specifically women, children and workers. After the Fascist forces defeated the Republican government, she was forced into exile and lived most of the rest of her life in France, Argentina and Italy. *Memoria de la melancolía* “Memory of melancholy” (1977), her highly acclaimed memoirs, is considered to be her masterpiece. It lyrically portrays the fallen Spanish Republic, the nightmarish agony of exile and the dream of a restored free republic in the future. The themes of war and memory dominate León’s work. Luis García Montero suggests that she was motivated by her passion to tell the truth, the truth about the war she remembered and the wars of her memory (18). Naturally, there is a rich intratextuality built around those themes in León’s novels, short stories, essays and plays written prior to *Memoria*. Her short story, *Por aquí, por allí*, “Around here and around there,” is a moving precursor to her memoirs and exemplifies the literature of exile. It was published in her collection, *Fábulas del tiempo amargo* “Fables from a bitter time,” in Mexico in 1962 while she was in exile in Argentina. Later *Fábulas* was published with two other collections in *La Estrella Roja*.

The experience of exile creates a compelling “personal and moral necessity” to write (Mangini 159). The exiled writers’ work not only serves to record the past, but also allows the writers to preserve their own identity. León expressed her personal identity crisis and desire to be remembered by her fellow Spaniards in *Memoria*, “I don’t know if those who stayed behind or who were born afterward realize that we are Spain’s exiled. We are who they will become once the truth of liberty is reestablished. We are the dawn they are awaiting […], we are Spain’s banished, those who seek the shadows, the silhouette, the sound of silent steps, the lost voices” (31). The story, “Around here and around there,” is a surreal account of an exile’s dreamlike return to Madrid to hide in the shadows of the night in order to seek out the silhouettes of the past.

Exile affected both the content and style of León’s writing. She wrote in multifaceted discourse, creating a polyphony of voices, alternating between first and third person. Her chronology was seemingly haphazard, alternating between past and present. María Carmen Riddel notes that her literary techniques “contribute to clearly mark the various stages of life: before and over there, here and now, everyday life and political activity” (43). Multiple voices narrate the sojourn through the dark, yet familiar, streets of the forbidden city of Madrid in “Around here and around there.” The reader is drawn into the dense fog of nostalgia and the quest for a reaffirmation of identity, “Twirling around, I said to the wind, “I have come to look for myself and to look for you” (131). Reuniting the soul with the homeland brings tears of disbelief and amazement, “I have returned to search for my tears” (182) and “My tears fall but I do not linger” (187). The juxtaposition of joy and torment create a catharsis. The need to belong and to be remembered is in direct conflict with the need to triumph over the oppression that holds the homeland captive.

León personifies Madrid and interacts with the inanimate. Walls, windows, doors and towers call out to the protagonist entering the city. Cowbells ring out their recognition. The chimneys exhale smoke like the vapor of dreams (187). The Manzanares River greets her, “Give me your hand. It has been a long time since you saw yourself reflected in me” (189). She responds sadly, “Time has played with us giving us an unhappy past. It made you into a mere thread of water and me into an old woman” (189). She embraces every corner of her city. The city reaches out to her, “The neighborhood
receives me with its arms made of streets” (189). Her need to remember prompts her to respond, “How can I tell you how I could weave you, stitch by stitch into my memory?” (189). She drinks in every mundane detail and seeks out the feminine realm. She peers through windows, sees clothes on the clotheslines on patios, smells the incense of home, and notices that a gas pilot light is lit. Desperately she asks, “And who looks after my house and my dog and my loom and my distaff?” (185). She finds herself alone and invisible, an exiled woman. Memories of the war hauntingly flood the protagonist’s consciousness. Susana Rodríguez Moreno aptly forewarns that “to delve into the literature that María Teresa León wrote during exile is to embark on a dense and profound journey, rich in discourse, yet torturous” (349). León spares no sentiment as she recounts the horrors of war in her city. Nothing touches the human chord quite as deeply as a parent’s irreparable sorrow over the loss of a child. The protagonist of “Around here and around there” passes by a blacksmith who offers her a horse for the journey and a tale about his son. “Ride this horse to shorten the road to wherever you are going. You seem to have come from far away. You smell like my son, the one that I lost. When my son raised his hammer he sang a little song...Learn that song. They made him rest against the wall forever. I give you a horse and song. His name was Juan...” (184). War’s atrocities are recalled as the protagonist continues on through the streets, crossing plazas, remembering the bombing raids “...the blood flowed; the horror confused...The slabs tumbled, the stones jumped...A shoe and a foot, a child without a head, a man knocked down...My heart is in mourning” (186). Torture is witnessed along the way, reminding the reader that the atrocities did not stop with the war. The tyrannical regime continues to inflict pain and devastation. The protagonist observes “A hand has been left between the bars...nobody leaves and nobody enters without dearly paying the toll of desolation...The pain and the hand that clamors, “The right to bread! The right to lead a decent life!” have succumbed. The center of the hand has been brusquely pierced by a bayonet. I kneel and drink blood from the hand” (188).

The banished soul has returned to see, smell, hear, and touch the homeland. It is as beautiful as the soul remembered it to be. “How sweet it is to see the homeland at night. I breathe and I walk. I walk around and through the aroma of before; I tie it up in my handkerchief; I bring it, tugging at it, all of the perfume of the afternoons spent at the bullfights” (185). Like a national anthem, the refrains of praise for the homeland continue, “The homeland’s night is abundant with tile rooftops, all lit up” (185). Upon departure the protagonist calls out “How great and wide is the fresh earth of the homeland!...How sweet to see its expanse...Memory tastes like raspberries (191-192).

León’s lyrical prose opens and closes the nocturnal odyssey like a dream, “I laid my head down in the lap of the wind and the dream ended” (182, 192). It is a dream of hope for the future as well as a nightmare of the past. It is an odyssey with all of an odyssey’s challenges. Upon re-entering Madrid, the protagonist states, “I found before me the sacred door of my own blood and I stamped it with the docility of Ulysses” (182). The voyage into exile and the return are described as an odyssey, “I left in the ship of pain and in it I have returned...This is our total adventure: the return... the bow of our boat never stopped singing its return” (183). When the time came to leave Madrid at dawn, optimism reigned, “the bow sang out. The return welcomed us. We hoisted our hope” (192). After all, a phantom sleepwalker encountered on the walk around Madrid had offered solace, “I don’t know if you realize that we won and we lost and that we lost and we won” (186). León leaves us with her indefatigable spirit of resistance and triumph.

The Republicans lost the war but democracy returned to Spain after the fascist dictator, Franco’s death. León and other exiled intellectuals returned to their homeland but not without recounting their own odysseys of exile. Ironically, María Teresa returned to Madrid on April 28, 1977 with her memory barely intact, afflicted by Alzheimer’s disease (Torres Nebrera, 59). Sadly, she had returned to the Ithaca she had dreamed about without much memory or melancholy (Torres Nebrera, 59). Yet, “it is reported that as soon as her feet touched the ground, her first request was to visit her old neighborhood, the one whose destruction she had eulogized every chance she got (Torres Nebrera, 59). Neither exile nor disease had robbed her of her homecoming; her writing was her legacy to clarify the truth of what had happened in the streets of Madrid, the streets she loved so well. Will those sent into exile in our tumultuous world today have the same opportunity to return to their homeland? If not, may they find solidarity and solace by reading the work of María Teresa León.
Works Cited


Riddell, María Carmen. Última Etapa del Exilio de María Teresa León: La Escritura Reparadora. Donaire 14, 38-46.
