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La batalla de la educación: Historical Memory in Josefina Aldecoa's Trilogy

by

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Abstract

Josefina Aldecoa intertwines history, collective memory and individual testimony in her historical memory trilogy: Historia de una maestra, Mujeres de negro and La fuerza del destino. In the series, Gabriela and her daughter Juana navigate through the Second Republic, the Spanish Civil War, the Spanish postwar and exile, and Spain after the death of Franco. Through the central theme of education, Aldecoa is able to express her own personal experiences of contemporary Spain alongside a generation's collective experiences. In this way, individual testimony and collective memory are fused through representations of education in Aldecoa's trilogy.

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On July 18th, 1936, as civil war erupted across Spain, ten-year-old Josefina Aldecoa's Republican schoolteacher was killed for teaching the works of Federico García Lorca. This event imprinted itself in Aldecoa's memory for the rest of her life.

On this same date, July 18th, 1936, Ezequiel, a rural Republican schoolteacher, is killed for his political involvement in Aldecoa's novel Historia de una maestra.

Josefina Aldecoa has said that while writing this first volume of her historical memory trilogy, which was published in 1989, she felt a dissatisfaction with the course of Spain's transition from the Franco dictatorship to democracy. The decision of the Socialists then in power to support private and religious schools drew Aldecoa to her memories of the educational reforms of Spain's Second Republic, when her mother was a left-leaning primary school teacher in rural León. The Republic sent Pedagogical Missions to forgotten Spanish towns with plays, libraries and music; they removed the crucifixes from one-room schoolhouses; boys and girls occupied the same classrooms. To Aldecoa, the Socialists in power in the 1980s were ignoring the rich tradition of public schools during the Second Republic, instead favoring schools that more closely echoed Franco's repressive and strictly religious educational doctrine. In

Aldecoa's opinion, "nunca se ha vuelto a conseguir la valoración de los maestros, el entusiasmo y la eficacia de la escuela de la República" (Dupl a 19).

Education is central to Historia de una maestra, set between 1923 and 1936. Gabriela, a schoolteacher in small Spanish towns, marries Ezequiel, also a primary school teacher. The Spanish Republic arrives along with the birth of their daughter Juana, and Ezequiel and Gabriela welcome the country's innovative educational reforms, including coeducation, secular education, and the Pedagogical Missions. The utopia is short-lived, however, as, while teaching in a mining town in Northern Spain, Ezequiel becomes politically involved with the left and Spain struggles to maintain peace. Teachers, as heralds of the newly democratic Spain and the most visible of the Republic's reforms, are at the center of political debate. As civil war breaks in Spain, Ezequiel is killed, and Gabriela faces an uncertain future.

In an essay on the reclamation of the past since the Spanish transition to democracy, Joan Ramon Resina states that "even under the best of political circumstances, the past is not available in its totality and whatever we remember of it at a given time and place depends on the nature of the institutions that organize social life" (85). Aldecoa's trilogy remembers the past by focusing on education, and more specifically, the schools and teachers who constitute the social institution of education. These three texts are novels of memory, as defined by David Herzberger: texts which mediate on history with a "voice of a subject in the present who is positioned both within history and within discourse" (68). Education, as a "corroborating text" (Herzberger's term), first provides evidence that links history with a fictional evocation of history and second functions as a method for interpreting and extracting the meanings or truth behind the discourse of history. In the case of Aldecoa, education allows the author and narrator – Gabriela or her

daughter Juana – to meditate on the course of Spain’s history through both their own individual experiences as well as through the collective experience of those who passed through social institutions – schools – that were as dramatically transformed as Spain itself in the last century. Additionally, Aldecoa, writing from the perspective of modern-day Spain, makes an implicit comparison between education in Spain from 1923 to 1982 and its reverberations in the Spain of today.

This thematic thread of education runs throughout Aldecoa’s trilogy: Historia de una maestra, Mujeres de negro and La fuerza del destino. The similarities between Aldecoa’s personal experiences and her fictional constructions are striking, as we will see. Education is a touchstone in Aldecoa’s trilogy, merging a woman’s individual testimony with a generation’s collective memory through a defining period in Spanish history. The result is a fusion of individual and generational memory and testimony that lends a unique voice to the study of representations of Spanish identity, the meanings contained in Spanish history and the echoes of both in Spain’s present-day society.

One issue that is central to my argument is the debate on the connections – or divisions – between history and fiction. In the interests of brevity and clarity, I will be operating under the theoretical assumption that both narrative and historical discourse are closely tied, subjective fields. Herzberger says that “the representational underpinnings of the real (history) and the imaginary often share the same points of reference” (4), which, I will show, allows us to examine the close ties between the fictional story of Gabriela and Juana and the actual experiences of Josefina Aldecoa and her generation. Fiction and history commingle in Aldecoa’s trilogy to such

an extent that an independent examination of either, especially in terms of education, would provide neither a complete analysis of text nor of *context*.

Education is prominent in Josefina Aldecoa's personal life. Her mother, like Gabriela in Historia de una maestra, was a Republican teaching in a rural town when the educational reforms of the Second Republic arrived in 1931 and transformed her professional life. Josefina saw these transformations firsthand as a rural primary school student during the Second Republic and then at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, when her favorite schoolteacher was killed.

By 1939, education in Spain became a controlling tool of the state – a way of limiting the dissemination of information to the “official” history, one which, for the most part, excluded any of Spain's 19th century revolutionary and intellectual tendencies, focusing rather on its triumphs over infidels and communists throughout history. In Mujeres de negro, the second of Aldecoa's trilogy, Gabriela – on the wrong side of the official history, since she was an overtly Republican teacher – cannot resume teaching in Nationalist schools. She eventually emigrates to Mexico, where she establishes a school for the children of Mexican laborers while Juana attends a school for the children of persecuted exiles, taught by exiled Spanish Republicans.

Josefina Aldecoa did not go into exile through the oppressive 1940s and 1950s, instead, she decided to major in Pedagogy at what she labeled the “terriblemente mediocre” (Dupl  a 16) University of Madrid. She also coalesced with a group of literary-minded students opposed to the Franco dictatorship, including her husband Ignacio, who would go on to become one of the preeminent social realism authors in Spain. In the mid-1950s, when their daughter was of school age, Aldecoa faced the grim state of education in Spain: public and private schools were dominated by Franco's conservative political ideology and the Catholic church's dogma.

Drawing on her fond memories of the Republic's primary schools and her research of schools in the United States and England, Aldecoa established her own primary school in Madrid, dedicated to free thought, dialogue and unbiased learning. At a time when very few schools had a liberal orientation, Aldecoa's school drew the children of artists, intellectuals, jailed political officials and teachers purged from the profession by Franco's conservative standards. Gabriela's innovative school for Mexican children and Juana's independent school for exiles in Mujeres de negro mirror Aldecoa's Colegio Estilo in Madrid: a school for the inner-exiled determined to provide its students with the "unofficial" history.

In Mujeres de negro, Juana decides to return to Spain, attending the University of Madrid during the 1950s, as university students began to protest against Franco's policies while politics remained unspoken in University classes. Much like Aldecoa, Juana finds a group of activist students, meeting her future husband, who will go on to become one of the framers of Spain's new constitution in the last volume of Aldecoa's trilogy.

These interwoven stories – the course of Aldecoa's life and that of her characters – map the history of contemporary Spain. The schools and teachers that make up Aldecoa's novels tell the stories not only of these three individuals – Josefina, Gabriela and Juana – but of a generation of Spaniards. Aldecoa calls her generation of writers "los niños de la guerra:" children who were between 8 and 10 years old when the Spanish Civil War broke out. Whether they were writers or not, education is a point of reference for this generation: they all experienced the educational reforms of the Second Republic; they all saw these reforms abruptly removed at the end of the war; those who remained in Spain sat in the conservative, religious and repressive classrooms of Franco's dictatorship; those who were exiled lived Spain's postwar turmoil from afar, educated

in liberal settings abroad; they saw the seeds of protest and rebellion planted in the University of Madrid uprisings in the 1950s; many lived to hear of Franco's death and see Spain's rapid transition to democracy.

Aldecoa's trilogy is an alternative, opposing force to the Regime's official history, as are most of Spain's postwar novels of memory. Aldecoa and her characters enthusiastically welcomed the Second Republic's innovative but brief educational reforms; they taught the history of Spain that Franco disavowed in alternative, liberal schools; their university experiences were fraught with opposition and a desire to change Spain that was eventually realized. Aldecoa's interpretation of the state of Spain's and Spaniard's education through individual and collective voices illustrates the institutional nature of history. Contemporary Spain, and our analysis of its political and social influences, has been created through these social institutions. The stories of schools, teachers and students illustrate a human perspective of history that an examination of the state or the nation, of policies and politics, or of sociological data cannot. History and fiction are intricately fused – not only in Aldecoa's trilogy, but in so many of Spain's contemporary literature – because an examination of facts and data in order to understand the country's past is incomplete. Without the input of people, of individuals and of groups, history remains contextualized but not specific. How did teachers react to their role as political harbingers during the Second Republic? What effect did the Second Republic's educational reforms have on those in exile, who *could* still teach and learn independent thinking? How did those who remained in Spain after the war express their opposition to Franco's official rhetoric? These are questions that cannot be answered without personal, human discourse, and this is what historically-based, testimonial fiction provides us.

In 1997, as Aldecoa's final installment in her historical memory trilogy, La fuerza del destino, was published, Spain's Minister of Education under José María Aznár, Esperanza Aguirre, released a Humanities Decree, designed to coordinate the teaching of history throughout Spain. History classes in Franco's schools studied a one-sided view of the Second Republic, the Republican struggle in the Spanish Civil War, and the ongoing protests in postwar Spain. The decree aimed to end Spain's tradition of forgetting in favor of a more balanced and unified view of history across the country. In an editorial in support of the decree, Antonio Muñoz Molina wrote: "la historia, igual que la ciencia, y a diferencia del dogma, está hecha de incertidumbres, de tentativas de aproximación. [...] [P]ara entender el curso del tiempo, nos hace falta una noción clara de la sucesión de los hechos históricos, [...] la historia general se hace de muchas historias parciales." As Historia de un maestra opens, with Gabriela recounting her life to Juana, this notion of fragmented history necessitating interpretation is clear:

Contar mi vida... No sé por dónde empezar. Una vida la recuerdas a saltos, a golpes. De repente te viene a la memoria un pasaje y se te ilumina la escena del recuerdo. Lo ves todo transparente, clarísimo y hasta parece que lo entiendes. Entiendes lo que está pasando allí aunque no lo entiendieras cuando sucedió... [...] Si tú te encargas de buscar explicaciones a tantas cosas que para mí están muy oscuras, entonces lo intentamos. (13)

For Gabriela and Juana, an understanding of both the personal and the collective provides a complete individual and generational story. The resulting narrative is an approximation of history, a partial story that melds historical fact – for example, Historia de una maestra includes an actual text from one of the performances of the Pedagogical Missions – with a fictional creation, based on reality, of history. Carmen Martín Gaité, writing on Historia de una maestra

points out that “como en todos los relatos buenos, la historia con minúsculas es una pieza de relojería situada con precisión y esmero en el acontecer de la Historia [con mayúscula]” (Martín Gaité 236).

The title of my paper includes a phrase Aldecoa used to describe Spain’s struggles with primary education through the last century: the battle of education. Educational reform has been a goal of each successive government in Spain: the Second Republic built and secularized schools; Franco’s regime also built schools and reinforced Catholic dogma in education; since the advent of democracy, the Socialists and the Partido Popular in Spain have sought to reintroduce a centralized curriculum in schools. Still, Aldecoa asserts, despite these efforts, Spain “no logró ganar del todo la batalla de la educación en las escuelas primarias. Son muchos los factores que han contribuido, sin duda, a este fallo: situaciones heredadas, presiones sociales, etc.” (Duplàa 19). Through Aldecoa’s historical memory trilogy, however, we are able to track the course of education for a generation of Spaniards – inside and outside of Spain – as well as for Josefina Aldecoa herself, not only allowing us to see the present-day ramifications of educational transformations in the Partido Popular’s Humanities Decree, for instance, but also to gain a greater understanding of personal and social impacts on the course of Spain’s history. In this way, Gabriela and Juana’s life *historias* (which in English can be translated as both “stories” and “histories”) fit into and illuminate our understanding of Spain’s upper-case History.

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