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A Flower in Bloom: Reading Trauma and Sexuality in Juan Eduardo Zúñiga's "Rosa de Madrid"

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Abstract: Juan Eduardo Zúñiga's three collections of short stories, *Largo noviembre de Madrid*, *La tierra será un paraíso*, and *Capital de la gloria*, occupy a unique place within contemporary peninsular literature centered on the Spanish Civil War. Zúñiga populates his narrations with a wide gamut of characters that range from members of the International Brigades to ordinary civilians, all the while emphasizing the individual experience of being affected, either directly or indirectly, by the Iberian conflict. Within *Capital de la gloria*, "Rosa de Madrid" stands out due to its exclusive emphasis of a young, female protagonist in the age of budding sexuality, caught up in an age of war and destruction. Through his foregrounding of the principal female protagonist, Zúñiga explores the complex issue of the expression of sexuality in a Madrid eroded by the relentless siege of the Nationalist forces. A study of "Rosa de Madrid" helps to elucidate some of the complex nuances of character psychology and sexuality while, at the same time, permitting the reader to reflect upon the construction and representation of female characters in contemporary peninsular fiction dealing with the Spanish Civil War.

Keywords: Juan Eduardo Zúñiga, Madrid, narrative/narrativa, sexuality/sexualidad, Spanish Civil War/Guerra Civil Española, trauma

"He escrito para salvarme del frío de la guerra."
—Juan Eduardo Zúñiga

In the first chapter of her book *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Kalí Tal discusses the myth-like quality of many literary reconstructions of traumatic events. In her opinion, the intensity of such accounts runs the risk of being diminished as they become codified into "a set of standardized narratives" (6). The effect of such repeated "retellings" severely reduces the emotional and psychological impact of the event, which is transmitted through narration, "turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative" (6). Tal continues to emphasize how events dealing with trauma suffer a process of constant revision, as they are reworked and reedited, to the point that the form of the narrative ends up supplanting the content. Though Tal uses the Holocaust¹ and the Vietnam war as her primary examples in this first chapter, it is easy to see how many other historical

1 Tal states: "For example, the Holocaust has become a metonym, *not* for the actual series of events that took place in Germany and the occupied territories before and during World War II, but for the set of symbols that reflect the formal codification of that experience. There is a recognizable set of literary and filmic conventions that comprise the 'Holocaust' text. These conventions are so well-defined that they may be reproduced in endless recombination to provide us with a steady stream of additions to the genre" (6).

landmarks of the twentieth century, also dealing with war, can follow the same process of “cultural codification” (6), including the Spanish Civil War (1936–39).²

Narrative (re)constructions of the Spanish Civil War commonly bifurcate into two distinct, albeit not wholly unrelated, directions. As a primary focus, traditional studies of the Iberian conflict have frequently examined the collective element which permeated Spain at the time. Primary factors such as economic, ideological, international, political, and social aspects of the war have been examined holistically in a concerted effort to seek meaning in the political factors that led to the repeated changes in government, the decisive international involvement which proved to be crucial towards the outcome of the war, and the major battles that were waged between the forces of the Popular Front and the Nationalist armies.

This aspect of Spanish Civil War studies coexists alongside those works which instead privilege the social aspect of the conflict, bringing to the forefront the individuals who lived their lives away from the war front, and most likely never even made it to or witnessed a single battle, but whose lives were nevertheless affected in just as severe a fashion as those who actively took up arms. Michael Seidman concentrates on these individual experiences and states: “The goal is to take history from below to a subterranean level where one’s own welfare, family, and closest friends, or what may be termed the personal or intimate realm, were more important than organizations, social classes, and the future society” (6). The interpretive parameters of the Spanish Civil War are thus broadened in an effort to include those who have hitherto been categorized as “unknown and anonymous individuals” (6),³ but whose histories and stories form a crucial component to contemporary knowledge of the Spanish conflict.

The individual experience thus becomes the focal forefront, and one can then examine the behind-the-scenes, daily existence of those men, women, and children whose quotidian interactions with the violent reality around them become individualized and personified as singular drives of necessity. However, these necessities, both corporeal (for example, the desire to satiate sexual urges) as well as mental (the need to alleviate psychological duress), acquire a much more complex characterization when the individual seeking to assuage them finds his/her psyche besieged by the effects of war. Provided that the foundations of the civilization they once knew (traditions, acceptable rules of engagement, appropriate forms of interaction, etc.) have crumbled, such individuals now

2 Since the start of the twenty-first century, there have been many valuable contributions made to the field of Spanish memory, trauma, and identity construction in the Franco and post-Franco periods. Specific examples include Txetxu Aguado’s *La tarea política: Narrativa y ética en la España posmoderna*; Antonio López-Quñones’s *La guerra persistente. Memoria, violencia y utopía: Representaciones contemporáneas de la Guerra Civil española*; and Jo Labanyi’s collection of essays, *Constructing Identity in Contemporary Spain: Theoretical Debates and Cultural Practice*.

3 George Esenwein also employs similar terminology by using the words “‘forgotten’ women” (181) in his book, *The Spanish Civil War: A Modern Tragedy*.

come face to face with a new, alternate reality forcibly imposed on them. This requires novel and unfamiliar protocols of individual and personal interaction, and it is here where the individual can only hope to find open expressions of his/her drives and desires through inadequate and distorted means, befitting this new reality.

It is this world with which the Madrilenian author Juan Eduardo Zúñiga (b. 1929) engages in his volume of short stories *Largo noviembre de Madrid* (three separate collections published as a trilogy in 2007),⁴ all of which are set within the immediate limits of the titular Spanish capital. These brief, fictional narratives are primarily populated by the historically nameless members of that community who witnessed their personal ambitions, desires, and wishes truncated by the siege of the capital. In an interview with Zúñiga published in the Spanish newspaper *El País*, Amelia Castilla writes: “A Zúñiga no le interesaron los combates ni las trincheras sino el heroísmo cotidiano de las personas que permanecieron en la capital sitiada, bombardeada, acosadas por el hambre, la inseguridad, el frío y el contacto con la muerte. ‘En esas circunstancias se imponía el hambre, el miedo y el amor, el amor era incontenible, la gente estaba deseando amarse como fieras.’” Expressions of love and, by extension, of sexuality, are perhaps often overlooked, but are nonetheless crucial given both the physical as well as psychological influence they exert.

Zúñiga, who was born in Madrid and who has lived in the capital city throughout his entire life, writes from an autobiographical standpoint. He is someone who has witnessed the terrors of war firsthand and who, in turn, infuses the narrative snapshots of the lives of his characters with instances of his personal experiences. In a different interview for *El País*, this time with Juan Cruz, Zúñiga states that writing “era como una forma de salvarme yo mismo, porque en estos personajes quién sabe si también había astillas de mi madera.” Through Zúñiga’s short stories about the Spanish Civil War, the reader becomes a witness of the importance of writing, as well as the impact that the bombing of Madrid and the fratricidal war that engulfed Spain had on the author.

At the same time, Zúñiga’s writing is not just an effort to recount what occurred during those three years. It is also an effort to heal, and to tap into a range of collective memories that remained buried during the postwar “pacto del silencio” and that have only recently surfaced due to the passing of the 2007 “Ley de Memoria Histórica,” which seeks to formally recognize the victims of the Franco dictatorship. Zúñiga tells Cruz that the war constituted “una experiencia tan terrible e inesperada. . . . Pasados muchos años percibí que necesitaba reelaborar literariamente aquel pasado.” Likewise, prize-winning novelist Clara Sánchez reinforces this intricate tie between Zúñiga’s work and the Spanish historical

4 *Largo noviembre de Madrid* is divided into three separate collections under the titles of *Largo noviembre de Madrid* (1980), *La tierra será un paraíso* (1989), and *La capital de la gloria* (2003).

reality when she writes: "Zúñiga lucha desde la página contra el olvido como si su compromiso social tuviese que ir a la par con su compromiso literario."

Though Zúñiga's literary production has achieved acclaim and success,⁵ it has remained severely understudied in the academic world. Few critical studies have concerned themselves with his Civil War trilogy, despite the degree of narrative complexity inherent in its thirty-three stories.⁶ Specifically, in the third and final collection, *Capital de la gloria*, the reader quickly comes to appreciate the text's psychological profundity. Israel Prados recognizes that the stories in *Capital* "acentúan mucho más el proceso de desgaste psicológico de la ciudadanía asediada" (64). Indeed, each of the stories of *Capital* depicts a desperate civilian population which has, amidst defeat and surrender, freed itself of inhibitions which had previously subjugated their individual passions and desires.

With this in mind, this study examines one of the short stories of *Capital de la gloria*, "Rosa de Madrid," in a concerted effort to explore Zúñiga's narrative through his foregrounding of the female protagonist, thus underscoring the expression of sexuality in a Madrid eroded by the relentless siege of the Nationalist armies. Through an examination of Rosa and of the corporeal experience of trauma, this study elucidates some of the complicated nuances of character psychology and sexuality while, at the same time, analyzing just one case of the representation of women characters in contemporary peninsular fiction dealing with the Spanish Civil War. Special emphasis will be given to Zúñiga's unique focus on a working-class girl, Rosa, and to her body as a narrative focal point. Such an approach fills a gap in the literary scholarship of the period, but depends upon the writings of Laura Di Prete and Kalí Tal to more adequately illustrate the relationship between body, text, and trauma.

Zúñiga's *Largo noviembre de Madrid* trilogy is a pastiche of the experiences of individual characters, ranging from teenagers to internationally known figures of the time (such as the photographer Robert Capa and the journalist Gerda Taro), and from Spanish soldiers to members of the International Brigades during the Civil War. What sets "Rosa de Madrid" apart from all of the other stories is the exclusive and unwavering focus on a Spanish female protagonist and her physical and psychological development throughout the siege of Madrid. In *Foreign Bodies: Trauma, Corporeality, and Textuality in Contemporary American Culture*,

5 Israel Prados takes stock of those prizes awarded to Zúñiga in his introduction to the *Largo noviembre de Madrid* trilogy which include: "el Premio Nacional de Traducción por las *Poesías y prosas selectas* de Antero de Quental, el Ramón Gómez de la Serna por *Flores de plomo*, el Premio de la Crítica, el Salambó y el NH Hoteles de Relatos por *Capital de la gloria*, y la Medalla de Oro del Círculo de Bellas Artes a toda su obra" (26–27).

6 Two of the most valuable academic studies focused exclusively on *Capital de la gloria* are Fernando Valls's "Capital de la gloria, capital del dolor" (2003) and Ángeles Encinar's "*Capital de la gloria: la guerra civil española en la narrativa de Juan Eduardo Zúñiga*" (2008).

Di Prete emphasizes the importance of the body in trauma narratives. Di Prete notes that “the body rises to a central figure within narratives of trauma. While the voice circles the subject and weaves the known and the unknown in a complicated knot, the text focuses on the body” (10–11). When the subject fails to articulate the experience of trauma, or the reader fails to connect with this experience in the text, the body, in its physical dimension, remains a constant, accessible representational symbol of trauma.

In “Rosa de Madrid,” Zúñiga swiftly propels his female protagonist, Rosa,⁷ to the foreground of the narration by situating her name within the primary position of the title. The use of the preposition *de* singularly equates Rosa with the Spanish capital, denoting not only her origin and place of belonging within the text, but also the organic and symbiotic nature of the relationship between the beleaguered city and the characters which Zúñiga fashions to populate it. In this manner, the significance of the city is dramatized, thus becoming a “Madrid transcendental . . . que no sólo traduce el estado de ánimo de los personajes sino que interacciona” (Prados 71). As the story develops, Rosa’s physical and psychical constitution will become progressively degraded, paralleling the city’s own increasing state of devastation and ruin. In this manner, both city and inhabitant are not immune to the bombing in isolation of each other, but instead suffer comparable fates.⁸

Rosa is first individualized through the presentation of her body and budding sexuality. The innocence, indeed naivety, of her “ingenuos propósitos de seducción” is contrasted by her position as a seamstress’s apprentice, one of “las muchas . . . que hubo en ciertos barrios por los años veinte y treinta” (Zúñiga 406), laboring in a large workshop alongside many other women. Incidentally, it is also in this workshop where Rosa’s views on love and relationships begin to take shape as “las conversaciones en el taller, que se alzaban no bien la encargada se ausentaba, le informaron . . . de cuantos secretos del amor se ocultan . . . y luego se saborean y sorprenden y desilusionan” (407). Though Rosa is positioned as part of a collective within one of the traditional female labor sectors of the time, what really distinguishes her as a protagonist is the author’s careful construction and development of her individual sexuality.

Rosa’s blossoming sexuality is first established in connection with her clothing: “[E]l cuerpo de Rosa se había moldeado con las proporciones de mujer completa, floreciente, bajo el vestido azul oscuro cuyos brillos revelaban

7 Though not explicitly referenced, it can be argued that Rosa’s name carries many implicit intertextual and historical references associated to it, such as, for instance, the “trece rosas” (thirteen Spanish girls summarily executed during the postwar Francoist repression).

8 It is also worth noting that the first short story in Zúñiga’s *Largo noviembre de Madrid* is titled “Noviembre, la madre, 1936,” equating the capital city with a maternal figure, “La madre Madrid” and, by extension, “La Madre Patria” of Spain which suffered brutalization at the hands of an invading force of Foreign Legionaries and Moorish *regulares*, fighting on the side of the Nationalists, which perpetuated terror by means of rape and torture.

al andar la curva de las caderas y las piernas” (407). This image of Rosa is sexually charged, presenting a girl who has reached an age and state of sexual development: “Y poco a poco se convirtió en Rosa, de confiadas miradas y sonrisas, sugestivos movimientos de los brazos al alzarlos para arreglarse el moño” (407). This description is further accentuated as it shifts from Rosa’s dress to her shoes: “Y cuando usó por primera vez tacones, los hizo resonar en el empedrado de la Puerta de Toledo” (407). Rosa’s physical appearance exerts a powerful influence over her environment, dominating her spatial surroundings, establishing her individual figure as the central focal point of the narrative, and attracting the gaze of young men on the street.

Rosa’s incipient awareness of her own sexuality traverses the microcosms in which she participates (the family, the workplace, etc.), culminating one afternoon when Rosa reveals that she has a date: “[T]enía una cita con un joven en un baile . . . y la entonación de sus palabras revelaba que sería el descubrimiento del amor” (408). However, it is impossible to determine with any certainty what exactly happened at the dance, for the text provides the reader with no explicit clues. The entire scene is shrouded in textual ambiguity and eludes specific interpretation, and the reader, much like Rosa’s mother and sister at home, is only allowed a glimpse of Rosa before and after the dance, when she comes home with her cheeks “arboladas, los ojos vibrantes” (408). The only indication provided by the narrator is the elusive phrase: “Rosa había conocido intensidades” (408), though the speculation that she might have lost her virginity at some point that evening is out of the question as later on in the story there is a description of her deflowering by a much older man, a coworker in a munitions factory (413).

Given the story’s focus on its fictional characters (as few as there are) as opposed to historical realities, the war makes its appearance in an indirect manner, and yet remains a constant presence in the text given its effect on Rosa and the people around her. Rosa learns very little about the war, and receives this information indirectly, which leaves her scared and confused as she hears of “inesperadas noticias de lejanos combates no bien entendidos” (408–09). This shock-reaction to the events around her culminates when “un día oyó que la madre contaba que habían bombardeado Getafe [30 octubre 1936] y entre las víctimas había diez niños pequeños que dejaron de existir mientras jugaban y su sangre fue a verterse y a mezclarse con la de sus madres” (411). This distortion of Rosa’s daily life experiences leaves her feeling “perpleja y sobrecogida” (409), an indication of the onset of trauma developing within her psyche. Rosa fits Tal’s definition of the traumatized individual, one who suffers “a life-threatening event that displaces his or her preconceived notions about the world” and who is thus left “radically ungrounded” (15). Rosa’s view of the world, based in activities such as dances with boys, relationship gossip at work,

and daily baths, has been brought to a standstill, paralyzed by the coming of war, something which she does not fully comprehend.

From this point forward, Rosa will be haunted by an interior and inexplicable feeling of dread and anxiety: “Lo que sentía constantemente fue perdiendo contornos que al principio tuvo: una tensión angustiosa” (412). She is desperate to come to grips with this new reality, and in the face of danger and the threat of death, “se le ocurrió que acaso sería el amor lo que la protegiese y la devolviera el ser feliz como antes fue. . . . Con toda claridad entró en su mente que una relación amorosa . . . pondría tranquilidad en su ánimo” (412). Rosa is desperate for love and believes it is her sole chance, not only for happiness, but also for the possibility of alleviating these feelings of inner anguish which she later refers to as her “mordedura” (412). She begins to take note of her immediate surroundings and the men that occupy those surroundings, looking for a suitable “candidate.” The romantic idylls of the past are replaced by the more immediate, pragmatic affective needs of the present.

Rosa subsequently substitutes the young boyfriend figure for a mature, more paternal man, “un hombre ya de cierta edad, alto con andar pesado por su corpulencia, bien afeitado, con manchas canosas en un pelo casi al rape” (413). Rosa’s affective needs have adapted while her figure simultaneously “wilts.” Her clothing and general physical appearance drastically change from the “vestido de azul oscuro,” “los tacones,” and her ebony hair of “rizos naturales de un negro intenso” (407)⁹ to this description: “[L]os vestidos se quedaban holgados, descuidó lavarse, olvidó el carmín . . . y el pelo creció sin el orden de las ondas y peinecillas que eran su capricho” (415). Rosa’s transformation, exemplified by the abandonment of the ritual of washing and bathing herself, parallels the similar degradation of Madrid, “que de ser hermosa y limpia, con jardines y avenidas, iba arruinándose, bombardeada, hambrienta, sucia y fantasmal” (416).

Rosa’s brief and tumultuous romance with the aforementioned, unnamed coworker serves to temporarily ease her inner “mordedura,” but ends just as swiftly as it began, partly because of the war, partly because Rosa’s immediate affective needs have been fulfilled and she has rapidly become unsatisfied with her lover. Their first encounter also serves to textually represent her deflowering, as she had previously been a virgin: “[P]asó a una habitación donde ardía una estufa de petróleo que dio templanza a los cuerpos según fueron, plácidamente . . . desnudándose . . . lo que había previsto y temido desde adolescente, una sacudida violenta o un dolor, pasó como una intimidad” (413). In their two subsequent sexual encounters, their relationship becomes increasingly more aggressive, yet what once excited Rosa now leaves her with feelings of dissatisfaction. For Rosa, “le fue evidente que el éxtasis, el nublarse la

9 This depiction of Rosa is reminiscent of similar images of the Second Republic as a woman with dark, curly hair.

vista y clavar las uñas en los hombros del que se movía sobre ella, eso no se produjo" (414).

This growing aggressiveness in the sexual act which Rosa seeks parallels the self-degradation she experiences. The ideal of romance and "love-making" are replaced by brutal, almost animalistic encounters. Feeling disdain for the man to whom she lost her virginity, Rosa "[c]alculó que otro hombre más audaz, que la dominara, e incluso la tratara con dureza, podría ayudarla a superar lo que creía era una debilidad mantenida por el miedo. Un hombre fuerte, sin consideraciones hacia su cuerpo" (415). Rosa's search for a man who can show little regard and care for her own body is now placed directly within the textual spotlight.

Rosa finds no other likely solution to alleviate her "mordedura" than through a violent, sexual experience with someone capable of displaying only scorn and contempt through his physical superiority and dominance over her. One day, Rosa makes the decision to skip work and meanders through the outlying, barren plots of land that surround the city. She comes across a man who appears to be a soldier and who has his way with her on the ground between two small and dilapidated houses. The brutal and animalistic sexuality evinced by the men with whom Rosa comes into contact is their own outlet and possible means of coping with the circumstances of living amidst a war-torn city. Rosa "fue solicitada por traperos . . . u hombres que parecían desertores y que no contenían su ansia brutal. . . . Sufrió vejaciones, una vez le arrebataron el abrigo, otra, el bolso, fue abofeteada y hasta le pareció que había peligro de que la estrangulasen" (415). These men are confronted with their own sense of powerlessness, and this feeling of impotence is then turned inward and released, finding its own expression as sadistic sexual energy directed toward Rosa.

"Rosa de Madrid" is profoundly bleak and tragic in nature. As the narration progresses towards its conclusion, Rosa will find no salvation and no sense of security within the fragmented urban environment in which she lives. The traumatic violence exerted upon her psyche only increases, accentuating her "mordedura" to vertiginous limits: "[F]ue por entonces cuando se le hizo inminente la proximidad de la amenaza invisible de la que no sabía cómo protegerse" (416). Rosa finds herself persecuted by an invisible terror which she cannot adequately articulate into logical terms, and this inability to properly confront what is happening to her only augments her own feelings of anxiety and fear.

Rosa's attempt to escape from the confines of the city to go see her sister (who has moved to Cuenca) comes to naught, and the last image that the reader has of Rosa only enhances the distortion and instability of the situation of which she is an integral part. Rosa walks to the Atocha train station but finds herself forced to take refuge from the rain under an outcropping roof. While she waits out the rain, a man shows up, likewise seeking refuge. Rosa voices her fear of the war and that an ominous "they" will come to get her: "Vienen por mí—exclamó con voz desfallecida" (418). The man, supposedly a postal worker (although his

identification as such leaves the reader suspect of him as he hesitates before giving his answer), attempts to embrace her and comfort her. At this moment, Rosa's "mordedura" reaches its climax and assaults her senses as she perceives:

un ruido de tambores, sordo, pausado, que se acercaba; como un único tambor enorme, o muchos que venían con la noche, en una multitud silenciosa y malvada, dispuesta a destruir todo, y avanzaban hacia la estación, y al figurarse esto, lo que tanto temía, dio un chillido, se tapó los oídos . . . se acurrucó en el suelo y gritó, porque gritando alguien podía venir y salvarla; así aulló durante horas. (418–19)

Here it is possible to establish a connection between the sound of the drums in the text and the Moorish *regulares* whose regiments were commonly comprised of infantry, cavalry, and a corps of drums. Rosa's primal scream (highly reminiscent of Mercè Rodoreda's female protagonist, Natalia, in the concluding pages of *La Plaza del Diamante*) is yet another futile attempt on Rosa's part to banish the fear and anxiety that have set upon her. Zúñiga need not add any form of conclusive textual closure on the part of the narrator to Rosa's singular narrative, for the effect has already been successfully established throughout the story.

At this juncture, it is worth returning to Tal's thoughts, included at the outset of this study. Tal warns the reader of the danger of "retelling" an event to the point that its impact, in the mind of the reader, becomes underwhelming. The way the story is told and retold, over and over, thus removes from the spotlight what the story is actually about. On the contrary, by incorporating a young Spanish girl and her body as the central focal point, the content of "Rosa de Madrid" carries the weight of the narration.

Juan Eduardo Zúñiga thus incisively exposes the distortion and fragmentation of the individual experience, focusing on the sexuality of his female protagonist. By placing Rosa at the forefront of the narration, with the war in the background (though never fully offstage), Zúñiga exemplifies the complexity and nuanced nature of the psychic framework, and the degradation that can occur in times of extreme anxiety and trauma. Much like current social narratives of the Spanish Civil War, which trace the lives of nameless individuals within their daily experiences, "Rosa de Madrid" serves as an *exposé* of the dissatisfaction and duress of a young girl blossoming into the age of romantic inclinations and sexual discovery, but within a context of annihilation and devastation.

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