

## INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.** Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA  
800-521-0600

UMI<sup>®</sup>

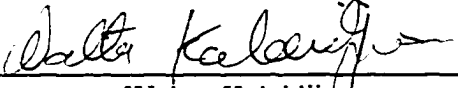


The Autobiographical Witness:  
American Women Writers and the Spanish Civil War


By

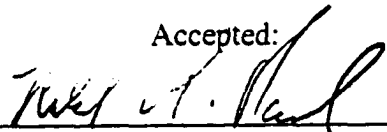
Patricia Grace King  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Walter Kalaidjian  
Adviser

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Deepika Petraglia-Bahri  
Committee Member

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Mark Sanders  
Committee Member

Accepted:  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of the Graduate School

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The Autobiographical Witness:  
American Women Writers and the Spanish Civil War

By

Patricia Grace King  
B.A., Eastern Mennonite University, 1989  
M.A., James Madison University, 1992

Adviser: Walter Kalaidjian, Ph.D.

An Abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

2000

This dissertation recovers literary works by American women witnesses of the Spanish Civil War. Central to this discussion are poems by Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Muriel Rukeyser, as well as memoirs by Josephine Herbst and Lini DeVries. This dissertation contextualizes these works as “autobiographies of witness”—metonymically voiced, politically engaged self-writing.

Chapter One shows how metonymic self-writing challenges conventional definitions of autobiography. Because the metonymic self-writing considered here emanates from the experience of war trauma, this chapter provides an overview of trauma theory and literature. It further addresses the crisis of witnessing which American participants in the Spanish Civil War faced upon returning home. In such a crisis, autobiographies of witness play a crucial role in giving voice and political clout to those whose testimonies contradict dominant national agendas.

Chapter Two recovers and valorizes the political poetry of Davidman, Taggard, and Millay. Because these women tended to write outside the dominant camps of literary production of their day, their poetry has been marginalized. Yet the Spanish Civil War poems of Davidman, Taggard, and Millay give us particular insight into the way these insider-outsider poets shaped their own unique poetic tradition, marked by a metonymic stance in their self-representations vis-à-vis Spain.

Chapter Three examines Rukeyser’s Spanish Civil War poems in the light of her traumatic experience of the war. This chapter shows how the metonymic

stance is linked to the bearing of traumatic testimony, as the bearer of such testimony must speak both confessionally and personally and as part of larger body of fellow sufferers.

Chapter Four considers the differences between secondary and primary witnessing. Taking the memoirs of Herbst and DeVries as examples, this chapter demonstrates how secondary witnesses may be so scarred by the act of bearing witness for another that they become primary witnesses themselves.

This dissertation concludes with an overview of other Spanish Civil War writing by American women which does not fit the definition of the autobiography of witness. It further considers how later generations of politicized American women writers has been influenced by the literary work of those who earlier bore witness to the war in Spain.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the members of my Dissertation Committee for their attentive and thoughtful oversight of this project. I especially thank Professor Walter Kalaidjian for having introduced me to the literature of the Old Left in America and to Spanish Civil War writing by Americans. In addition I thank Dr. Kalaidjian for his ongoing support and encouragement in helping me to develop my ideas for this dissertation in various papers and presentations throughout the course of my graduate work at Emory. Professors Deepika Petraglia-Bahri and Mark Sanders also contributed greatly to this project, carefully reading and conscientiously responding to various lengthy drafts. I am sincerely grateful to all three for the ways in which they model for me academic careers which are deeply ethically committed.

I am indebted to the administration of Eastern Mennonite University and to the faculty members of EMU's Department of Language and Literature, for having faith in me and my ability to finish this dissertation. I am particularly grateful to these individuals for giving me an extra semester at Emory to work on my dissertation before beginning full-time teaching at EMU.

I thank the prompt and ever-helpful staff of Emory University's Interlibrary Loan. I also thank Betsy Dintamin, of Eastern Mennonite University's Interlibrary Loan, whose services were invaluable to me during my summer of revision work.

I owe many thanks to the community of friends and relatives who have sustained me spiritually and emotionally throughout the production of this

dissertation. I am endlessly grateful to my best friend, Diana Miles, for having walked through this entire process almost literally by my side. To Diana and to Anna Engle I am indebted for the circle of solidarity which they provided me during the writing stage. Anna was a meticulous and insightful reader of my earliest drafts. Profound appreciation to Karen Brown-Wheeler for doing my final legwork in Atlanta.

To Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship I also offer thanks for praying me through this work. In addition, I thank Steve Worth for his patience and kindness and for the use of his laptop computer. Finally, I thank my family—Mom, Dad, Linda, Keith, Cameron, Peyton, Wally, Kristin, Cindy, and Sandy—for your many prayers and encouraging phone calls, and for all the family vacations and holidays when you had to put up with my dragging along a computer and a suitcase full of books.



The Autobiographical Witness:  
American Women Writers and the Spanish Civil War

By

Patricia Grace King  
B.A., Eastern Mennonite University, 1989  
M.A., James Madison University, 1992

Adviser: Walter Kalaidjian, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

2000

UMI Number: 9993467

Copyright 2001 by  
King, Patricia Grace

All rights reserved.

UMI<sup>®</sup>

---

UMI Microform 9993467

Copyright 2001 by Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company.  
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against  
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

---

Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

## Table of Contents

Introduction. . . . .	1
Chapter One. Theorizing the Autobiographical Witness: Metonymic Self-Representation as Psychological and Political Resistance. . . . .	15
Chapter Two. Poetry and the Intellectual Witness: Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, and Edna St. Vincent Millay Confront the War in Spain. . . . .	69
Chapter Three. “The World is a Field of the Spanish Civil War”: Traumatic Memory in Muriel Rukeyser’s Spanish Civil War Poetry. . . . .	140
Chapter Four. From Secondary to Primary Witness: The War Memoirs of Josephine Herbst and Lini DeVries. . . . .	201
Conclusion. . . . .	279
Works Cited. . . . .	300

## Introduction

Literary production flourished both at the front and behind the lines, throughout the Spanish Civil War. “There were few writers. . . of any stature, in any language or medium, who did not find their sympathies and talents engaged in the struggle which went on in Spain from 1936 to 1939,” Alvah Bessie affirms in his preface to The Heart of Spain (v). The body of testimonial literature produced by Americans involved in the Spanish Civil War--both those who experienced the war physically, and those at home who trained their intellectual energies upon it--is one of the most impassioned yet consistently overlooked bodies of literature in American history. If we think of American writers involved in the Spanish war at all, we usually mention such well-known males as Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. Although American women did bear witness to this conflict and bear witness to it as well, their accounts of the war have nearly vanished from our cultural memory. Among these overlooked and under-appreciated writers of the Spanish Civil War are poets Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Muriel Rukeyser; joining them are memoirists Josephine Herbst and Lini DeVries.<sup>1</sup> This dissertation seeks to rediscover the Spanish Civil War writing of these six women, and to read it as some of the most powerful and prolific testimony on that war produced by Americans.

### *The Spanish Civil War and American Participation*

Civil war broke out in Spain in July of 1936, as Fascist military general Francisco Franco led his troops in a bloody revolt against their country’s legally elected, Socialist-Republican government. The insurgent Spanish military was immediately lauded and supported by the Catholic Church and the ruling classes of Spain--a minority of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Other American women writers--such as Martha Gellhorn, Dorothy Parker, and Lillian Hellman--also spent time in Spain during the war and documented it in journalistic essays. While this dissertation briefly examines their literary efforts as well (see my Conclusion), I will keep my focus on those American women who wrote about the war *outside* the boundaries of journalism.

country's population, but eminently wealthier and more powerful than the masses who had earlier that year voted the Republicans into power. As Franco and his troops began to storm the country in the summer of 1936, working-class Spain rallied to a hasty and ardent defense of their government.<sup>2</sup>

What began that summer as a military revolt and ensuing civil war became, in fact, a three-year-long struggle of international proportions. Joining forces with the rebelling Spanish faction were Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, who saw in Franco's fascism the sparks of their own deadly dreams. Thus the Spanish Civil War, in contemporary historical assessment, became the first battlefield of World War II. The infamous fire-bombing and destruction of the Spanish town of Guernica were, after all, the work of Hitler's own Condor Legion. For the forces of 1930s Fascism, the embattled nation of Spain became a kind of expansive testing ground, where newly invented military technology could be tried with impunity upon civilians.

From July 1936 until April 1939--when Franco's troops took the final Republican stronghold of Madrid, thereby terminating the Spanish Republic and installing a dictatorship that would in effect cut Spain off, politically and economically, from the rest of the world for the next 36 years--Spain became the locus of ideological fervor for fascists and socialists the planet over. It is true that the conflict of ideologies from which the war initially sprang was demarcated along the lines of socialists and anarchists (represented by Spain's peasantry and working classes, along with its intellectuals and

---

<sup>2</sup> The tension-filled year immediately preceding the outbreak of civil war in Spain were also marked by this stark opposition of political right versus political left. The first Socialist-Republican government, elected in 1931, had begun to lessen the power of the Catholic Church and to take over aristocratic estates for land redistribution. The first Republic was defeated by the conservative alliance CEDA (Confederation of Autonomous Spanish Right Parties) in 1933. CEDA's authority was drastically weakened, however, when a group of autonomy-seeking Catalans and other socialists led a 1934 uprising against the government. In quelling this uprising, government forces killed approximately 1,000 people; the CEDA then began to lose control of the country. President Nicolo Alcala dissolved the Parliament in February 1936; new parliamentary elections that same month ushered in the Popular Front, a coalition government composed of republicans and socialists. It was against this Popular Front that Franco led his revolt, never anticipating the tens of thousands of Spaniards--many of them acting through their unions--who would stage a counter-revolution in the cities of the north, thus transforming the expected quick coup into a lengthy civil war (Kaplan, Red 168, 171).

artists) versus a wide range of conservatives (represented by the Catholic Church, landowners, and the upper ranks of the Spanish military). Within the first month of the war, however, when Hitler and Mussolini both began supplying Franco with troops and equipment, the so-called civil war quickly took on international dimensions. The Fascists were not the only side to receive aid from outside Spain. By late October 1936, the poorly armed and often nearly starving Republicans would welcome the material and administrative aid of Russia's Comintern (Communist Party International).<sup>3</sup> While the rest of the world took a noninterventionist stance regarding the Spanish Civil War, Russia became Republican Spain's only official ally, thus in many ways strengthening the bias of the United States and her World War I allies against the Republic.

America in the 1930s was a nation that in some ways seemed to be dividing itself into a political binary almost as marked as that seen in Spain's civil struggle. As the American intellectual and political communities of the time moved almost *en masse* to the left, many during this decade embracing the Communist Party, the 1930s also "produced a new era of nationalism" (Sussman 189). Warren Sussman notes that, in the shadow of the Great Depression, America was strenuously engaged in "a complex effort to seek and define [itself] as a culture and thus to create the patterns of a way of life worth understanding" (189). Thus, while one half of the country sought to conserve existing structures and thus to enforce national conformity, the remainder rallied around leftist ideologies and organizations, celebrating the rights of workers and strikers. American response to the Spanish Civil War, then, fell into two diametrically opposed and impassioned camps. Conservatives clung to the Non-Intervention policy originating in England and followed by all the other Western democracies. American socialists, communists, and left-leaning democrats, on the other hand, responded to the Comintern's call, in the fall of 1936, for volunteers to the Spanish Republican Army.

---

<sup>3</sup> Mexico, the only other country besides Russia to respond to the Spanish Republic's shortage of arms and other resources, did send the Republican forces several shipments of rifles.

By the end of the war, the defense of the Spanish Republic would bring to the war-wracked Iberian peninsula some 40,000 volunteers, representing more than a dozen countries and at least as many brands of left-wing idealism.<sup>4</sup> Among these foreigners who saw in Spain what Cary Nelson has deemed “perhaps the only time in living memory when the world confronted--in fascism and Nazism--something like unqualified evil,” were 2,800 Americans (Madrid 1-2). As early in the war as January 1937, progressive-minded Americans were arriving in Spain, to serve as doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, and soldiers in the newly formed International Brigades. Thousands more supported their efforts through money-raising campaigns at home and by explaining and defending the Spanish Republic to American audiences in political journals and newspapers.

### *Spanish Civil War Writing by Americans*

Spanish Civil War literature by Americans was by no means limited to the field of journalism, however. Soldiers and medical personnel at the front lines were copious letter writers; Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks have recently compiled several hundred of these letters in Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion from the Spanish Civil War (1996). Joining ranks with American journalists and members of the Lincoln Battalion were members of America’s professional literary community, many of whom composed poems and essays explicitly addressing the war and calling for support of the Republic. Anthologies such as Bessie’s The Heart of Spain (1952), Valentine Cunningham’s Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War (1986), and Alun Kenwood’s The Spanish Civil War: A Cultural and Historical Reader (1993)<sup>5</sup> document

---

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Rolfe estimates in his Spanish Civil War memoir, *The Lincoln Battalion* (1939), that at no point in the history of the war were there ever more than 18,000 foreign volunteers at once in Spain. He makes note of this data in order to set right the frequent misconception of “the world outside” that the entire Republican army was composed of foreign volunteers.

<sup>5</sup> Cunningham’s anthology contains literature by both American and British writers, while Kenwood’s includes literature representing a variety of European countries as well as the United States.

the outpouring of such literary and testimonial effort among American writers. The four women poets--Davidman, Taggard, Millay, and Rukeyser--whose Spanish Civil War work this dissertation explores were significant contributors to this effort. Still other Americans who produced testimonial writing on this war did so through memoirs and journals, reflecting on their unique vantage point among the civilian populations of Spain. The four memoirs which this dissertation examines--by Herbst, DeVries, Woolsey and Riesenfeld--are probably the four most extensive and illuminating insights into Spanish life behind the frontlines which Americans produced. Like so much of American writing on the Spanish Civil War, however, these literary works have been largely forgotten. Indeed, the intensity with which politically committed American writers responded to this war is proportional to the great degree to which those literary responses have been excluded from the canon.

Even an abbreviated list of the canonical American writers who gave literary testimony to the war in Spain is staggering in its scope and brilliance. Among those who, at one point or another between 1936 and 1939, turned their writing skills to political testimony on behalf of the Spanish Republic were: Maxwell Anderson, Sherwood Anderson, W. H. Auden, Malcolm Cowley, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, William Faulkner, Martha Gellhorn, Lillian Hellman, Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Sinclair Lewis, Archibald MacLeish, Mary McCarthy, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dorothy Parker, Carl Sandberg, Upton Sinclair, Lionel Trilling, and Thornton Wilder.

Stunningly, of all these well-known American authors, Hemingway is the only one who is widely known today as having written about the Spanish Civil War; of all the literary works on that war produced by these writers, only For Whom the Bell Tolls is a title still recognizable to the general populace. In the years during and following the demise of the Spanish Republic, even the testimonial works of such well-known writers as MacLeish (Air Raid 1938), Sinclair (No Pasaran!, 1937), and Dos Passos (Adventures of a Young Man, 1938) languished among the indifferent American readership and soon



disappeared from print.<sup>6</sup> Mighty Hemingway himself, despite his success with For Whom the Bell Tolls, could not guarantee that his play, The Fifth Column (1938), nor the film which he helped to produce, The Spanish Earth (1937), would make any sort of lasting impression upon American audiences. As we might anticipate, then, lesser-known and noncanonical writers fared even more poorly in maintaining the American reading public's interest. Edwin Rolfe, although he was certainly America's most prolific poet of the Spanish Civil War, could find no market for his poems on Spain when he returned home. He did publish his prose memoir, The Lincoln Battalion, in 1939; it went swiftly out of print, however. It was reissued once in 1974 and is now out of print once again.

### *Recent Recovery Efforts*

Edwin Rolfe provides an interesting example, however, of how American men's writing on the Spanish Civil War has lately come into the public recognition which it was generally denied in the decades following that war. Cary Nelson has recently edited and republished all of Rolfe's poetry,<sup>7</sup> opening the way for other important American testimonials from the Spanish Civil War. Some of these, such as Harry Fisher's Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War and Hank Rubin's Spain's Cause Was Mine, both published in 1997, have been made public for the first time only very recently. These texts join ranks with other literary works, published from the 1960s onward, whose aim is to collect testimonies from American survivors of the Spanish Civil War and thus to recall that war to the American populace's ever-forgetful mind.

Nearly all of the recovery work that has been done regarding these American testimonies, however, deals with experiences of the men who went to Spain. Rewriting the Good Fight, a 1989 collection of critical essays on the literature of the Spanish Civil

---

<sup>6</sup> Adventures of a Young Man was republished in 1952, as the first part of Dos Passos' trilogy, District of Columbia.

<sup>7</sup> See Rolfe's Trees Became Torches (1995) and Collected Poems (1993), both edited by Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks.

War, gives us a preponderance of men's writing, with only one essay in seventeen dealing with a (British) woman, Sylvia Townsend Warner. Stanley Weintraub's The Last Great Cause (1968) is one of the most thorough examinations of both American and British writing on that war. Although Weintraub does mention Muriel Rukeyser, Josephine Herbst, Martha Gellhorn, Dorothy Parker, and Lillian Hellman--all confined to one chapter, "The American Visitors"--he provides little literary analysis of their works and tends rather to focus on these women's relationships or interaction with their more famous male counterparts in Spain.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, he overlooks entirely such almost completely forgotten poets as Taggard and Davidman, as well as the memoirists Riesenfeld and Woolsey.

Other important anthologies of Spanish Civil War writing that have emerged since the 1960s also tend to treat lightly--or to disregard entirely--the contributions which American women writers made to the Republican cause. While Marilyn Rosenthal limits the literary scope of her discussion to poetry, she remarks in her Poetry of the Spanish Civil War (1975) that Muriel Rukeyser was the only woman writing in English about that war who "made a significant poetic contribution" (102), thus apparently dismissing Millay, Davidman, and Taggard, to say nothing of those women poets of other English-speaking nations such as Warner. Testimonies from four different women who drove trucks or staffed hospitals at the Spanish front lines appear in Alvah Bessie and Albert Prago's Our Fight: Writings by Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (1987).<sup>9</sup>; while they give us stimulating glimpses of the war from an American woman's perspective, each is limited to a few brief pages. Janet Perez and Wendell Aycock's the Spanish Civil

---

<sup>8</sup> In Weintraub's account, Josephine Herbst is noteworthy mainly for the insights which her memoir provides into the characters of Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. Similarly, he evaluates Martha Gellhorn only by comparison to the male writers who surrounded her, calling her work on the Spanish Civil War "a Hemingwayish performance" (283).

<sup>9</sup> For other anthologies of recovered Spanish Civil War writing from a strictly British perspective, see Valentine Cunningham's The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse (1980), as well as Hugh D. Ford's A Poet's War: British Poets and the Spanish Civil War (1965).

War in Literature (1990) provide a wide-ranging discussion of writers from Europe as well as the United States; within this discussion, however, the only women represented are French and Spanish.

While some very recent recovery work on Spanish Civil War writing does focus on women's participation, most of this work deals with Spanish women in particular. Mary Nash's Defying Male Civilization (1995) and Martha Ackelsberg's Free Women of Spain (1991) offer valuable historical background to the dramatically changed role of women in Spain just before and during the war. Meanwhile, Shirley Mangini, in Memories of Resistance: Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War (1995) looks specifically at women's "memory texts" (her term for an informal, collective autobiography) emanating from the war.

The focus of this dissertation--that is, writing produced by American women witnessing the Spanish Civil War--will, I hope, provide equally valuable insight into the international nature of the Spanish struggle and the role which women writers took in it. Much remains to be done in the area of recovering this particular body of American literary testimony. The most extensive work which I have found in this area is Lolly Ockerstrom's yet unpublished dissertation, "The Other Narratives: British and American Women Writers and the Spanish Civil War" (Northeastern University, 1997). In her work, Ockerstrom focuses upon ways in which British and American women witnesses disrupted and reconstructed established gender codes in writing about the Spanish Civil War from a female perspective. In addition, Jim Fyrth and Sally Alexander's Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War (1991) brings a comprehensive and thoughtful review of many shorter pieces of writing (brief essays, poems, and letters) to the discussion of American women's testimonies from the war in Spain. I will add to this growing body of recovered literature by situating my analysis of these testimonies within the particular historical and political context of America at the time of the war and in the decades immediately thereafter, and by asking what it meant to act as witnesses for Spain within

that context. I hope that my work will further enrich this new field of study in that I will take into consideration both the political and the psychological dimensions of witnessing reflected in these literary testimonies.

### *American Women Writers' Particular Contribution*

Why pay special attention to American women writers who bore witness to the Spanish Civil War? What unique contributions does their work bring to the study of autobiographical writing, particularly within the context of writing about the experience of war? In this dissertation I contend that the Spanish Civil War writings of these six women constitute a kind of self-writing which is simultaneously autobiographical *and* inclusive of testimony on behalf of others. I call this unique kind of self-writing the “autobiography of witness.” In theorizing around these texts which speak both for self and for other, I employ extensively the linguistic concept of metonymy. Employing this concept, wherein one subject signifies or represents another based on an established relationship between the two, enables us to read these testimonials as representative both of the war experiences of both the narrating self and her community.

Because the women whose testimonials I read here faced the danger of a double silencing--through their experience of war trauma and then through their experience of political repression--metonymy becomes an especially powerful means of self-representation. To envision oneself as part of a web of other selves who share important experiences with her is also to resist psychological repression and political silencing of one's story, as I will show. Understanding the particular psychological and political forces against which the metonymic voice works in these texts will, I hope, shed new light on our understanding of American participation in the Spanish Civil War and on American writing in the postwar years. Such understanding will also illuminate the role of American women in the context of experiencing and writing about war in the twentieth century.

In discussing the Americans who witnessed the war in Spain and then attempted, within the context of their native land, to speak *for* the effectively silenced Spaniards, we must delineate among the various kinds of trauma witnesses--all of whom are implicated by the traumatic event, but on significantly different levels. This dissertation takes into consideration three different kinds of witnesses: the kind which Geoffrey Hartman calls the "intellectual witness," as well as the secondary and primary witnesses. Briefly stated, the intellectual witness may be understood as one who does *not* experience the trauma herself, but who becomes a witness to the event "by adoption," by *deciding* to take interest in that event and in calling and re-calling it to public attention (39). As such, the intellectual witness is essential to the formation and keeping of a public memory of that particular trauma. I will begin by showing that poets such as Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, and Edna St. Vincent Millay took up the role of intellectual witness vis-a-vis their writing on the Spanish Civil War. A still more deeply involved position is that of the secondary witness, she who "bears witness for the witness." Being a secondary--or "exterior" or "outside"--witness involves the experiencing of trauma at one important remove from the traumatic event itself. The secondary or exterior witness's experience of trauma comes from listening to a survivor's story and from seeing the effects of the trauma upon the survivor. Those American women who actually ventured into Spain during the time of the war and who returned home to publicize the atrocities taking place there serve as secondary witnesses to the Spanish Civil War. I will examine the poet Muriel Rukeyser, as well as the memoirists Josephine Herbst and Lini DeVries, in this light. Finally, the primary or "interior" witness is she whose experiences the trauma *without* mediation: that is, from the inside of the traumatic event itself. In the last two texts which I read in this dissertation, the war testimonies of Gamel Woolsey and Janet Riesenfeld, the writers speak as primary witnesses. By dividing the subjects of this dissertation into these categories, and by moving from the vantage point of those who were least involved physically to those who were most involved, this dissertation

explores the various positions which these women occupied as witnesses, and asks how those positions shaped their respective testimonies.

Chapter One lays out the theoretical framework for the rest of this dissertation, examining closely the concept of metonymy and the ways in which the metonymic voice shapes autobiographical writing. Metonymically voiced self-writing, as I will show, challenges and helps to open up the conventional definition of autobiography, making room for those texts which speak on behalf of others as well as for the narrator herself. Because the metonymic self-writing which I examine here emanates specifically from the experience of war trauma, I also provide an overview of trauma theory and of trauma literature, and I contextualize the autobiography of witness within those fields. In addition, Chapter One addresses the crisis of witnessing which American participants in the Spanish Civil War faced upon their return home, and the ways in the postwar political climate operated to shut down Spanish war testimonies--and often the testifying writers themselves. Under these particular circumstances, I contend, the autobiography of witness plays an important role in giving both voice and political clout to those testimonies which run counter to the dominant national agenda.

Chapter Two recovers and valorizes three American women poets whose writing-- particularly their political poetry--has mostly been erased from the literary canon. In bringing poets Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, and Edna St. Vincent Millay more fully into the public light, I examine the reasons for their relative obscurity in literary studies today. It is my thesis that their poetry has been marginalized not only because of the conservative canon-building of the New Critics, but also because, even during the more liberal 1930s, when these women were writing most prolifically, they wrote *outside* the two dominant camps of literary production in that decade--High Modernism and Proletarianism. Although they borrowed from both Modernism and Proletarianism, as well as from the genteel tradition, Davidman, Taggard, and Millay were at best insider-outsider figures vis-a-vis these established schools of literary practice.

The Spanish Civil War poems of Davidman, Taggard, and Millay give us particular insight into the way these three women shaped their own unique poetic tradition, one which Carolyn Forché would later term “the poetry of witness.” This is an apt term for Davidman, Taggard, and Millay, in that all three take up the stance of intellectual witness in their poetry on Spain. As politically active leftists in the 1930s, their sympathies were closely attuned to the plight of the Spanish Republic; although they wrote about the war from a physical distance, their poetry helps to focus public attention on that specific political crisis. I read the metonymic voice in these works as a response to the intense marginalization they suffered as women poets, and overtly political ones at that, in early twentieth century America. I also see a metonymic stance in their self-representation vis-a-vis Spain, wherein they strongly identify--in politics and in ideology--with the Spanish Republic and thus envision themselves as part of it. Because these Spanish Civil War poems give us an important new perspective on the place of the American woman poet and political activist in the first half of the twentieth century, they are worthy of our renewed attention.

Also worthy of our renewed attention are those poems by Muriel Rukeyser which bear testimony to the Spanish Civil War. In Chapter Three, I read Rukeyser’s many Spanish Civil War poems--written throughout her life, in memory of the five days she spent in Barcelona at the outbreak of the war--in the light of her traumatic experience of that war. Because she witnessed the fighting of that first week at dangerously close range, and because she lost a lover in the fighting, her poetic reflections on the trauma of the war encompass both the political and the personal dimensions of suffering. By plumbing her own pain and traumatic memory in order to write, Rukeyser made of her personal experiences an ongoing public statement about the evils of war. This simultaneously inward and outward gesture, in which she speaks for both her own very private loss and for the loss of the whole fallen Spanish Republic, is profoundly metonymic. As I show in this chapter, to bear traumatic testimony also means to take up

the metonymic stance, in which one speaks confessionally and personally but at the same time seeks to connect that personal story to a larger one, thus acknowledging and joining with fellow sufferers of the traumatic event.

Chapter Four continues this discussion of the relationship between the self and other in bearing traumatic testimony. In this chapter, I examine the intrinsic differences between secondary witnessing—that is, bearing witness to another’s story of trauma—and primary witnessing—confronting one’s own experience of trauma. I take as my context for this study two memoirs from the Spanish Civil War, Josephine Herbst’s “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain” and Lini DeVries’s Up from the Cellar. Both women went to Spain intending to act as secondary witnesses there but eventually, by listening too long and too intensely to others’ stories of war, as well as by experiencing the war firsthand themselves, slid into the role of primary witness. By recording her own gradual psychological scarring, Herbst’s memoir demonstrates the dangers inherent in bearing secondary witness. DeVries’s memoir, on the other hand, provides insight into how a continued posturing as secondary witness may serve to screen out or deflect the speaking subject’s own experience as primary witness. Ultimately, however, both texts operate as testimony of the stories of those who shared Herbst’s and DeVries’s war experiences, as well as of the stories of Herbst’s and DeVries’s own war-induced suffering.

In short, this dissertation will show that these six American women writers and their literary testimonies of the Spanish Civil War contribute to the building of what Caren Kaplan has termed an “outlaw genre”: that is, a genre wherein the writer negotiates her relationship between personal identity and the broader community, between individual and social history. These works defy conventional autobiographical standards



in that the personal narrative deliberately acquiesces to the communal one. The individual as she appears in these narratives is actively engaged in a redefinition of the self--and of her position as speaking subject--within the context of a collective project and struggle. The metonymic testimonial poem and memoir find a powerful common ground in their mutual refusal of traditional autobiography's individualistic "I" in favor of the moral or political community as subject. The testimonials which I will examine in this dissertation summon such community specifically against the dark background of twentieth-century war.

## Chapter One

### Theorizing the Autobiographical Witness:

#### Metonymic Self-Representation as Psychological and Political Resistance

*"If we had not seen the fighting / if we had not looked there / the plane flew low /  
the plaster ripped by shot / the peasant's house / if we had stayed in our world /  
between the table and the desk / between the town and the suburb / slow  
disintegration / male and female."*

*--Muriel Rukeyser, "Mediterranean," 1938*

The closing years of the Spanish Civil War saw a marked shift in military structure among the Republican, or Loyalist, ranks. Moving away from the early militias, which had been sponsored by a variety of political parties and trade unions and often included female participants, the Republic sought to establish a more organized, centralized army. This army called for increasingly greater numbers of men. Consequently, by midwar, most of the early female combatants had been summoned home again, to take up the posts newly vacated by men in the farms and factories of Republican Spain.<sup>1</sup> A political poster distributed by the Republican forces in late 1938 speaks to this period of transition and attempts to define the Republican woman's role within this period. An exultant young woman stretches her arms skyward; beyond her, the clear parallel lines of smokestacks and industrial towers echo the upward thrust of her

---

<sup>1</sup>The dissolving of the militias in favor of a centralized army was one of the results of Russia's increasing influence in--some historians say, co-optation of--the organization and control of Republican Spain. Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls provides a somewhat ironic depiction of the militias' perception of the Comintern and their Popular Front army; George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia also portrays this organizational shift, but from a much grimmer perspective. Ken Loach's recent film, Land and Freedom (1996), also sees the increasing power of the Popular Front as "a return to a hierarchical army and capitalist relations of production"--in other words, precisely what the revolutionary (often anarchist) militias had stood *against* (Porton 30). Whatever one believes regarding this shift in structure, the building of a centralized army in early 1937 did signify a turning point in Republican Spain's strategy and composition, as well as an ideological break from the people's revolution of 1936.

arms. In the foreground, a long, hunched line of men marches to battle. The caption of this poster declares, “*Nuestros Brazos Sean Vuestros*” (“Let Our Arms Be Your Arms”).<sup>2</sup> This poster, then, supports this new role for women by showing their work “at home” as an extension or component of the work done by their male compatriots at the front lines.

### *Metonymy and Self-Writing*

Although I will be speaking of the role of *American* women witnesses in the Spanish Civil War, I find this poster representing Spanish women a fitting introduction to my subject. One important common characteristic among the literary testimonies which this dissertation examines is their employment of a metonymic voice. As I will show, use of this voice is rare in autobiographical writings. Because traditional or canonical autobiography assumes a metaphoric speaking subject rather than a metonymic one, these particular self-writings challenge the parameters of the autobiographical genre. Furthermore, as autobiographies which attest to both the narrator’s experience and to the experiences of significant others around her, these texts ask us to reconsider the various ways in which the autobiographical self may be presented in relationship to her community.

What exactly is metonymy, and how does it differ from other rhetorical figures? Metonymy belongs to “the West’s traditional . . . rhetorical division of *elocutio* and *poesis*” into four literary tropes, the other three of which are metaphor, synecdoche, and irony (Krupat 175). These names for various linguistic relations, as Arnold Krupat affirms, “can be usefully applied to relations we experience in life, in particular the relation of the individual. . . to other individuals. . . and to collectively constituted groups” (177). In the following discussion, I will delineate the important differences

---

<sup>2</sup>This poster is reproduced in *The Palette and the Flame: Posters of the Spanish Civil War*, by John Tisa (1979).

between metonymy and the other three central tropes, particularly within the context of their use in self-writing.

Broadly defined, metonymy is a literary trope which relates one object to another based on a pre-existing, contiguous relationship between those two objects. Harry Shaw in the Dictionary of Literary Terms defines it as “a figure of speech in which the name of one object or idea is used for another to which it is related” (238). In A Glossary of Literary Terms, M. H. Abrams explains that “[i]n metonymy, the literal term for one thing is applied to another with which it has become closely associated because of a recurrent relationship in common experience” (98). Probably the most famous study of metonymy and the ways in which it distinguishes itself from metaphor, a still more common literary trope, was made by Roman Jakobson in his psychological-linguistic study, “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles” (1956).<sup>3</sup> Therein, Jakobson established that metaphor depends upon a process of substitution, while metonymy is the result of “combination and contexture” between or among signifiers (1041). Thus meaning is created in metaphor by letting one signifier virtually *replace* or stand in for another, as in the such common Christian depictions of Christ as “shepherd” or of God as “king.” Because signifiers are related to each other in metaphor through semantic rather than positional similarity, their relationship is commonly understood as hierarchical--or, as Jakobson puts it, “vertical.” Metonymy, on the other hand, joins two signifiers through a *lateral* relationship: that is, through a relationship based on positional or contiguous similarity. Common examples are “smoke” for “fire,” or “Hollywood” for the “film industry.”

Jakobson’s two “poles,” Carolyn Hult comments, provide writers and literary critics with “a foundational principle for metaphor and metonymy as two prototypical figures within the system of tropes. Metaphors are explained as substitutions by

---

<sup>3</sup> This essay was originally published as Chapter 5 in Jakobson’s Fundamentals of Language, co-authored with Morris Halle (The Hague: Mouton, 1956).

similarity, metonymies as substitutions by contiguity” (57). This distinction is important in that metonymy insists on the individuality of the two objects being compared: They are not so similar that the meaning of one may actually subsume the other, as in metaphor. Rather, metonymy asks us to *compare* two objects, to acknowledge the relationship between them. In understanding metonymy, we draw meaning from the very relationship which it posits. In other words, in order to draw meaning from the metonymic use of “smoke” for the referent “fire,” we must first understand the relationship of cause and effect which connects “smoke” to “fire.” In order to understand “Hollywood” as a metonymic representation of the film industry, we must first acknowledge the geographical relationship between these two. As Hult points out, “[t]he possible associations” suggested by metonymy can take many forms, so long as they indicate contiguous relationship: “object and purpose, tangible and intangible,” as well as “cause and effect, and place of origin and original object” (60). This contiguity in relationship between signifier and signified, however it is expressed, is the essence of metonymy.

How, then, does this understanding of the fundamental differences between metaphor and metonymy shape our understanding of autobiographical texts? What constitutes the metaphoric and metonymic autobiographical texts? These two distinct tropes, when employed as means of self-representation in writing, “lead to understanding by way of two different processes” (Hult 62). Visualizing these two processes, Hult designates that, with metaphor, “one [looks] over the yonder hill at an image that reflects the object” (62). This idea of reflecting or mirroring is important to traditional autobiography, wherein the narrator takes up the stance of “an essential and inviolable self,” who relates his life experiences as a model or pattern which the reader should then try to emulate (Brodzki and Schenck 5). The undergirding assumption, then, is that the writer of traditional autobiography has lived--or, at least, will present in his self-writing--an exemplary life. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck indicate Henry Adams and his autobiography as a primary example of this understanding of the traditional

autobiographer as a “representative of the time, a mirror of his era” (2). Similarly, the “I” of traditional Western autobiography often stands in for an ideal, as Benjamin Franklin saw himself standing in for the American ideal in his famous autobiography. Doris Sommer also draws attention to the metaphorical function of the narrator in traditional autobiography. In such autobiography, “the ‘I’ of the writer inevitably spills over to stand in for the reader, who, paradoxically, achieves a kind of specialness by identifying with the heroic autobiographer” (“Not Just” 108). As we have seen, the function of metaphor is to establish a relationship between two subjects based on an assumed similarity. In the case of canonical autobiography, that assumed similarity lies between the autobiographer and his reader.

A metonymic autobiography, however, defies such an assumption. Carolyn Hult, following through with her visualization of the differences between metaphor and metonymy, specifies that “with metonymy, one looks around for a fuller view of the object” (62). As we have seen, this “fuller view” emanates from the web of lateral relationships which metonymy suggests. Doris Sommer clarifies that, as readers of metonymic autobiographies, we are actually part of that web ourselves; “we are invited to be *with* the speaker, rather than to replace her” (“Resisting” 420). This “lateral move of identification through relationship” between autobiographer and reader, and between autobiographer and the larger community whom she represents in her text, resists traditional autobiography’s pretense of “a universal or essential human experience” (420). Metonymic self-representation acknowledges the individuality of the autobiographer, as well as the individuality of those who participate in her story with her, both as readers and as other subjects in the story.

At the same time, however, the metonymic speaking subject valorizes and continually points to these others with whom she shares the story. She is not the single, essentialized author. As such, metonymic autobiographers identify themselves as a “we” rather than as an “I.” Sometimes this identification is overt, as in Rigoberta Menchu’s

collective gesture at the beginning of her famous autobiography<sup>4</sup>: “This is my testimony. . . . I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that it’s not only *my* life, it’s also the testimony of my people. . . . The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people, too” (1). Some of the women represented in this dissertation do take this forthright stance. Others imply their metonymic self-understanding by refusing to give their own story precedence or power over the stories of others with whom they shared their war experience. Even as they tell their own story, they continually and deliberately make room for and refer to a network of other voices, other lives, who participated in that experience with them, and on whose behalf they speak.

In delineating the unique stance of the metonymic autobiographer, it is important also to frame out the ways in which metonymic self-writing is both similar to and distinct from synecdochic writing. As we have seen, synecdoche shares with metonymy and metaphor the status of being one of four principal literary tropes. (Irony, the fourth of these tropes, is largely irrelevant to this particular discussion.) Most literary scholars and linguists agree that locating the dividing line between metonymy and synecdoche “is a matter of some variance” (Hult 61). Some, in fact, affirm that synecdoche is actually a part of metonymy, or “a specific kind of metonymy, in which the relationship is that of a part named for the whole” (Hult 61).<sup>5</sup> Regardless of whether one classifies synecdoche as a separate entity or, rather, as a subcategory of metonymy, its defining characteristic is this substitution of part for whole, or, less commonly, whole for part. (Common examples of synecdoche are “strings” for stringed instruments and “work hands” for “workmen.”) In speaking of nontraditional, non-Western autobiographies, this becomes

---

<sup>4</sup> See *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, by Rigoberta Menchu. Ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. London: Verso, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Jakobson himself seems to blur the line between metonymy and synecdoche. In his “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles,” he emphasizes that a metonymic text is created through the use of “synecdochic details” (1042).

an important distinction, for indeed, the synecdochic self performs a different function than does the metonymic one.

Although both the metonymic and the synecdochic autobiographer are unlike the traditional autobiographer in that they speak from a communal rather than an individualized stance, the synecdochic text is “marked by the [author’s] sense of himself in relation to collective social units or groupings” (Krupat 176). As Arnold Krupat elucidates, this sense of relation to the collective is so direct that the autobiographical speaker sees herself as almost indistinguishable from it. Contrariwise, the metonymic writer, as we have seen, maintains a “sense of the specific uniqueness of otherwise comparable individuals” (176). She does not, in other words, become completely subsumed by the collective; she never blurs her own identity so much into that of her larger community that her self-understanding is constituted simply by the belief that “she is what she does to sustain her community,” as in synecdochic self-understanding (185). Critics of non-canonical autobiography tend to choose between the two terms, then, in specifying what makes their particular subject of study unique. While critics of Native American literature such as Krupat find in that literature an inherently synecdochic stance--wherein the narrator “conceives of individual identity only in functional relation to the tribe” (185)--those scholars who work primarily with Latin American self-writing tend to see it as metonymic. As such, I will take the Latin American prototype of the metonymic autobiography (commonly referred to as *testimonio*) as a reference point in my discussion of American women’s autobiographical writings on the Spanish Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

In essence, metonymy implies a greater separation or sense of distinction between the two entities--the signifier and the signified, or, in the case of autobiography, the

---

<sup>6</sup> Although these two sets of autobiographical writings obviously stem from very different cultural contexts, I will show later in this chapter that they are linked to each other not only through their use of metonymic voice but also through the political strategies that compel such a voice.



speaker and her community--than does synecdoche. Indeed, the synecdoche, as Paul de Man puts it, operates as a "closed system," a signifier which *is one with* an idealized "referent outside language" (Adams 46). De Man distinguishes metonymy from synecdoche in that metonymy "makes no such claim and accepts the reality of difference, in which sign and referent never coincide" (46).<sup>7</sup> Again, the synecdochic self tends toward almost total identification with that other entity which it represents, while metonymy, although highlighting important lateral relationships between sign and referent, continues to insist on a degree of difference between the two. In the context of American women writing about the Spanish Civil War, this metonymic stance is particularly apt. As Americans witnessing this conflict, they never achieved the status of complete and unquestionable "insider" with the group--that is, the people of the Spanish Republic--whom they represent in their writing. They are not, after all, completely identifiable with the community which they represent. Metonymic self-representation allows them to indicate to their readers that they are not simply telling their own story, but rather a story which they share with others, while at the same time presenting themselves as individuals vis-a-vis those others.

Kali Tal warns against the "flattening" of stories of war and trauma which may happen when their individuality or uniqueness is subsumed into a single signifier. She indicates the way in which the Jewish Holocaust, in reality an enormous and complex story made up of millions of individuals' stories, has become vulnerable to "appropriation and codification" within American culture (7). What remains, in the contemporary American concept of that massive traumatic event, is "a distilled and reified set of images for which 'Holocaust'" has become an essentialized signifier (7), a kind of "casual shorthand, as we speak of the Enlightenment, or the Renaissance" (8). Again, such assertions point to the ways in which it was imperative for the American

---

<sup>7</sup> This analysis of synecdoche and metaphor, from de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1983), is critiqued in Hazard Adams's essay, "Synecdoche and Method" (1987).

women witnesses of the Spanish Civil War to tell the story of the Spanish Republicans as a shared or collective story *but* to speak simultaneously as individuals, with their own individual experience of the war. Even as their testimonies points to experiences shared with others throughout that war, they deliberately speak from an American's--and thus, a relative outsider's--point of view. By doing so, they give their testimonies a specificity which resists flattening and appropriation.

Never potentially *replaced* by any other subject, as in metaphorical autobiography, nor *subsumed* by the collective she represents, as in synecdoche, the metonymic autobiographer acknowledges that her story is not hers alone, but rather constituted of a web of relationships. She is like the Spanish woman of the poster, whose arms are, after all, still *her* arms, even as she proposes to use them in direct collaboration with the arms of her larger community, the Spanish Republic. While the men of the Republic will use their arms in carrying and firing artillery, the Republican women will use *theirs* to manage farms and to operate factories. This work--signified by the parallel lines of the women's upstretched arms and the vertically jutting smokestacks--is distinct from the men's work, yet related to it contiguously. Both forms of work, after all, directly serve the Republic. The assertion that "our arms can be your arms," then, does not obliterate the uniqueness of the work that the women's arms have to do. Rather, it points to the women's position as a joined yet distinguishable part of her community.

### ***Metonymy and the Question of Gender***

For more than one reason, this particular Spanish Civil War poster is a rich and complex icon with which to begin my discussion of American women's autobiographies from that war. It is illustrative not only at the semantic level, as we have seen, but also within the context of gender studies and literature. Although this poster emphasizes the mutual cause served by Spanish Republican men and women alike, it does clearly delineate between men's and women's work. Thus, while the poster posits both genders

as members of the same cause, it more troublingly suggests that men are inherently suited for one kind of work (in this case, warfare), and women for another (work behind the lines).

This assertion of gender-based differences in work capability is especially troubling given that, as I indicated earlier in this chapter, such a gendered division of work was *not* intrinsic to the early Spanish Republic. Not until the militias were dissolved and the Comintern given administrative authority over the Republican Army did these gendered roles emerge. That women were capable of the same kind of work within the domain of warfare was a common assumption among Republicans throughout the initial months of the war. In this dissertation I suggest a parallel assumption: that women autobiographers are capable of the same kind of work within the domain of writing as are men. This assumption, however, has been long in finding legitimacy within the sphere of autobiographical studies, just as the Spanish Republic's original assumption vis-a-vis women's ability to do the same work as men was silenced for decades after the first years of the war.

Why, then, do questions regarding the relationship between gender and the collective, or metonymic, stance permeate the field of autobiographical studies? For generations literary scholars have contended that women's writing is almost *necessarily* communally voiced, while men's writing is characterized--again, apparently *necessarily*--toward the individualized or heroicized voice. Such gender-based delineations in men's and women's writing styles make style not a choice but a biological imperative. They thereby erase the possibility of understanding both men's and women's autobiographies within an historical context. It is my contention here that, if women's self-writing tends to be more communal than men's, that communality is politically and historically occasioned. Likewise, the metonymic stance uniting the war testimonies of the eight women this dissertation examines is a stance emanating from the particular political and historical circumstances of the Spanish Civil War and postwar America.

What theories of reading might the metonymic voice indicate for us as we approach women's autobiographical writing from the Spanish Civil War? What precisely does such a voice tell us about the women who wrote these testimonies and the contexts, both psychological and political, in which they wrote them? Ultimately, these autobiographical writings by American women in Spain make us question the canonical definition of autobiography.

### *The Place of the Metonymic Voice Within Traditional Autobiography*

In exploring the ramifications which these testimonies have upon the traditional meaning of autobiography, it is essential first to understand that definition. As recently as 1956, literary theorists such as George Gusdorf were declaring that the establishment of autobiography as a genre depended upon humanity's "having emerged from the mythic framework of traditional teachings" and entrance into "the perilous domain of history" (30). The distinctly Western, imperialistic assumptions implicit in this statement both devalue communal modes of being and speaking and insist upon an individual's participating in "history" in order to be a worthy autobiographer. Indeed, Gusdorf himself bluntly insists that the function of autobiography is to build empire and make history: "[Autobiography] has been of good use in [Western man's (*sic*)] systematic conquest of the universe" (29). Gusdorf's ideas, among the first to be published as autobiographical criticism, remained unchallenged and intact for several decades, as is evidenced in Warner Berthoff's 1971 definition of the genre as a personal testament of "some ruler or statesman [who] sets down for the particular benefit of his people a summary of his own experience and wisdom" (319).<sup>8</sup> What Berthoff implies here is that

---

<sup>8</sup>Dating the moment in which literary critics began to give serious attention to autobiography is a matter of some discrepancy. James Olney points out that Gusdorf's 1956 article, not translated into English until 1980, remained little-known and largely inaccessible to the academic world during that interim (10). Domna Stanton marks the beginning of serious critical interest in autobiography at 1968; she points to Stephen Shapiro's efforts to "validate what he termed 'the dark continent of literature'" in a groundbreaking article published that year (3). (See Shapiro's article in *Comparative Literature Studies* 5 [1968]: 421-54.) For further discussion of the origins of autobiographical criticism, see Olney's

the value of an autobiographical text is directly proportional to the historical significance of what its author accomplished in his life<sup>9</sup>.

These two statements--that the autobiographical self must be a primary participant in the "making of history" and that the value of an autobiographical text depends entirely on the quality of life or level of fame achieved by the individual autobiographer--delineate what Elizabeth Bruss calls "classical autobiography" (297). Janet Varner Gunn tells us that "the genre-assumptions of classical autobiography. . . have largely to do with the self's position vis-a-vis itself and the world" (6). As such, "the self is the best, indeed, the *only*, source of self-knowledge. . . . In a word, the self's position itself is a privileged one" (7, emphasis mine).

Such a definition, of course allows very little room for the metonymic autobiographical texts which I discuss here. I do not seek to wedge American women's testimonies from the Spanish Civil War into the tight parameters drawn in the name of classical autobiography. Rather, I hope to challenge and expand the parameters of that definition and thereby assert that autobiography is not only the story of "great men," but that it is also the story of relationship between a writer and her community. In the case of the American women who wrote about the Spanish Civil War, autobiography is the story of communities forged in the face of dire crisis; it is the recording of lives that would otherwise have disappeared in midst of that crisis.

### ***Autobiography and Feminist Theory***

In what ways, specifically, are the parameters of conventional autobiography too narrowly drawn to contain such testimonial writing? Why must communal autobiography spill over the edges, challenge those borders? Sidonie Smith and Julia

---

"Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. 3-27.

<sup>9</sup>I use the masculine pronoun on purpose here; the guiding assumption in definitions of "classical autobiography" is that, generally speaking, only male lives are worthy of such note.

Watson see traditional autobiography not only as too narrow in its definitions but also as downright hegemonic. They implicate traditional autobiography as a tool of American imperialism. “[A]utobiographical storytelling” in this nation, they claim, “has functioned as a means to assert identification with the idea of ‘America’ and what it means to be an ‘American’ subject” (5). In so doing, American autobiographies expose a set of telling differences between the “American” character and “all its self-constituting others,” thus inscribing the new “American” subject as normative and simultaneously sublimating or erasing the stories of those designated “other” (5). As Smith and Watson point out, traditional American autobiography has long participated in this “cultural erasure of . . . the African slave, the Native American, the white woman, the white man of no property, [and] the child” (5). Traditional autobiography then, in which a (white, propertied, male) subject delineates himself as exemplary representative of a nation, runs the risk of proposing a hegemonic story of what it means to be a member of that nation.<sup>10</sup> As such works are accepted into the literary canon and identified as the “best” or “most American” (6), conventional autobiography does participate in the nation’s imperialistic impulse.

Any student of autobiography who is concerned that her work resist such an impulse, is ethically bound to enlarge the old understanding of autobiography. Happily, the last two decades have seen the emergence of a new trend in academic treatment of autobiographical texts; literary critics and theorists have begun to point out the hegemonic limitations and exclusions of the traditional definition and to suggest new ways of reading. Chief among these recent arrivals to the discussion of autobiography are feminist critics such as Estelle Jelinek, Domna Stanton, Bella Brodzki, and Celeste Schenck. Jelinek’s Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism (1980) and Stanton’s

---

<sup>10</sup>In this discussion of autobiography’s participation in the formation of essentialized national identities, it is important to remember that the definition of traditional or “classical” autobiography has long been limited to European or North American self-writing. As Karl Weintraub insists in his canonically-informed The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography (1978), autobiography rests on the “historicism” and the “individuality” obtained by *Western man* (379, emphasis mine).

The Female Autograph (1984) were among the first full-length scholarly texts on autobiography to challenge the “lives of great men” tradition.

Even as the recent foment of critical activity around the definition of autobiography has opened the genre up to include noncanonical, nontraditional autobiographical texts, a strange phenomenon has appeared in critical assessment of those noncanonical texts--most specifically, those texts written by women. While feminist autobiographical critics have achieved significant and laudable success in insisting that women’s self-writing be included as part of the genre, they have simultaneously appeared unable to push past the old, facile tendency to define by categorizing, and to categorize by essentializing. While women’s writing may now find a place within the genre, too often that place is a prescribed one, narrowly and rigidly defined by--indeed, according to some critics, even determined by--the writer’s gender. As Domna Stanton points out, women’s autobiographies are commonly defined or categorized as relational: most critics trace “this relatedness. . . to the dependence imposed on women by the patriarchal system” (12). The tendency to define self through relationship with others, then, is commonly “upheld as a fundamental female quality” (12). More bluntly stated, women’s writing must be defined by women’s lives--which are, of course, understood as incomparable to men’s.

Estelle Jelinek suggests that “different criteria are needed to evaluate women’s autobiographies, which may constitute, if not a subgenre, then an autobiographical tradition different from the male tradition” (6). She finds female autobiographies to be marked by “irregularity rather than orderliness;” she explains this apparent unevenness in women’s self-portraits by assuming that “the multidimensionality of women’s socially conditioned roles. . . [has] established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write” (17). Jelinek’s theory makes women writers little more than hostages of their gender; unlike men, whose “unidirectional” lives compel them to produce more

“harmonious” texts, women must resign themselves to the “disconnected, fragmentary” writing which their lives apparently dictate (17).

Such arguments as Jelinek’s and Stanton’s work to essentialize gender roles and to render the collective voice of much autobiography by women as inevitable: indeed, not a conscious choice on the part of the writer, but rather a mode of expression to which they are *limited*. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck present a more theoretical approach to women’s autobiographies but also ultimately fall prey to this essentializing tendency. They begin their Introduction to Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography (1988) by presenting the powerful and important argument that the “classic stance of the male autobiographer. . . , summed up by a famous characterization of Henry Adams as a ‘representative of his time, a mirror of his era’” is an inadequate model for a theory of women’s autobiography (2). After all, women traditionally have *not* been in the position to be “a mirror of their era”; female autobiographers, Brodzki and Schenck claim, take for granted that “selfhood is mediated. . .” (1).<sup>11</sup> Female autobiographers, in other words, have often turned to those closest to them to reflect back to them an image of the self, thus automatically incorporating a community of “others” into the narratives of their lives. Because of her “lack of tradition [and] her marginality in male-dominated culture. . . the female autobiographer has lacked the sense of radical individuality, duplicitous but useful, that empowered Augustine and Henry Adams to write their representative lives large” (1).

The general assumption among autobiographical critics, then, is that we may differentiate male autobiography from female autobiography by distinguishing whether the narrator uses an individualized (singular) voice or a relational (plural) one. To recognize this distinction in men’s and women’s methods of self-identification is also to

---

<sup>11</sup>That is, no one—neither male nor female—can articulate a self-identity radically separate from the identities of others; one’s identity is not, of course, simply self-generated. However, traditional or canonical autobiographers (usually male) have tended to assume otherwise, regularly embracing the idea of an inviolable, monolithic self. Perhaps nowhere else is this idea so concisely encompassed as in the title of Karl Weintraub’s book of autobiographical criticism, The Value of the Individual (1978).



acknowledge the cultural and historical paradigms which undergird that distinction, making female autobiography “a model of nonrepresentative, dispersed, displaced subjectivity” (Brodzki and Schenck 6). It is also, as Brodzki and Schenck contend, to lay one’s finger on the very pulse of current feminist agenda. Hence the project of their book is to “propose instead a theoretical. . . approach to women’s autobiographical writing which aims both at modifying inherited critical definitions and at enlarging the canon” (2).

Although Brodzki and Schenck argue for recognition of women’s self-writing as legitimate autobiography and deserving of canonical status, the traditionally “feminine” voice which they locate in women’s autobiographies elicits ambiguous response in them. They propose that this relational, “dramatically female” mode of self-representation is also “a mode of resisting reification and essentialism” (11); at the same time, however, they undermine the female autobiographer’s potential for self-realization by deeming it “unfeminine” for her to assume “authorial power or voice” (10). They cannot, apparently, imagine a “feminine” power--nor that such power might be expressed precisely through that collective voice which they pinpoint in women’s life-writing.

This dispersive voice which the woman autobiographer often employs, then, appears to be deeply unsettling even for those literary scholars who would like to see it more fully incorporated into the canon. I find it troubling that Brodzki and Schenck, even while introducing this voice to the canon under the banner of feminism, do not take a more triumphant stance vis-a-vis the “feminine” voice; their stance, rather, is largely apologetic. Pointing to the shame and injustice behind the pluralized voice, Brodzki and Schenck suggest that the only way for female autobiographers to resist further domination or exclusion is to take up the exact mode of self-representation that male

autobiographers typically use.<sup>12</sup> While Brodzki and Schenck do point to the fallaciousness of the masculine voice's assumption of a monolithic identity, they fail to privilege or even to see as equal the pluralized voice. This oversight is evident in their applauding Roland Barthes for his autobiography<sup>13</sup>, probably the first such work in which a male narrator acknowledged the diffuse, always mediated nature of the self. Brodzki and Schenck deem Barthes's work "arguably. . . a model" for feminist autobiographical studies, thus dismissing the fact that women autobiographers have employed such a voice for centuries and thereby already have many such models among their own sex.

### *Strategies of Empowerment in Metonymic Self-Representation*

I have discussed at length these initial feminist attempts at redefining autobiography--seen in the work of Jelinek, Stanton, Brodzki and Schenck--because their attention to the decentralized voice in many women's autobiographies is essential to my own argument. While I, too, locate this voice in the women's testimonies which this dissertation examines, I believe that this voice is empowering and deliberate. Part of my undertaking in this dissertation is to argue for the valorizing of the collective, decentralized voice in autobiography--most specifically, within American women's autobiographical writings from the Spanish Civil War. I see such a voice as an instrument of power, wherein the individual is strengthened, but never subsumed by, the collective. Divergent as this autobiographical stance may be from the typical, masculinized stance or from canonical expectations, it is shaped by a powerful political agenda and a radically, deliberately renegotiated notion of self and community. This is the stance that the metonymic writer takes up in the war testimonies which are the focus

---

<sup>12</sup>The two models of female "resistance," for example, which Brodzki and Schenck provide, are the autobiographies of Margaret Cavendish (1624?-1674) and Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), both of whom slipped the apparent bonds of the diffuse female voice by co-opting masculine forms of self-representation.

<sup>13</sup>See *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 1977.

of my dissertation. As such, the metonymic autobiographer is worthy of our respect and our understanding.

As I narrow my discussion to self-representation in Spanish Civil War testimonies, it is important to clarify *how* the metonymic writer in these texts differs from the collectively speaking writer that Brodzki and Schenck identify. For Brodzki and Schenck, a pluralized autobiographical voice seems to mean one thing: that the writer knows how to define herself only by alterity. Self-articulation by alterity is predicated upon the subject's being so elided or even obliterated by her surrounding community that she can delineate herself only by seeking the breaks, or ontological differences, between self and other. This was seventeenth-century autobiographer Margaret Cavendish's project in contrasting her husband's power-filled writing to her own humble scribblings (Brodzki and Schenck 8). However, knowing oneself--writing oneself--in metonymic relationship to one's community is not the same as knowing and writing oneself in a relationship based on alterity. Alterity depends on negativity: on what is *not* held in common, what is *not* similar between the self and the others who surround her. It is to define oneself in purely negative terms. Metonymy, on the other hand, depends on *shared* meaning between one subject and another. In a metonymic relationship, the speaking subject knows herself to be in association with an other, and she speaks that relationship deliberately, both distinguishing herself as a separate entity and at the same time acknowledging the association.

I do not believe, then, that the American women witnesses of the Spanish Civil War adopt a pluralized speaking voice simply because they are women and, as such, know no other way to write the self. Nor do they, like the prototypically "feminine" autobiographer defined by Jelinek, Stanton, Brodzki and Schenck, know themselves by means of alterity. Their methods of self-identification, and of identification with the group to which they belong and which they represent, are not employed as a means of defining themselves *against* some other entity. Rather, those methods of identification

work to include and to embrace other entities as part of a valued community. To speak metonymically, then, is to allow other voices to speak along with one's own, and to be empowered by them as their representative.

American women's testimonies from the Spanish Civil War further challenge and, indeed, destroy assumptions about the limiting effect of one's gender on one's writing in regards to choice of subject matter. Not only have early feminist critics of women's autobiography focused on the relational voice as a means of distinguishing women's writing, but they have also tended to link that plural voice to private or domestic subject matter. Estelle Jelinek, for example, claims that even those female writers whose careers led them into the public sphere tended in their autobiographies to downplay any references to those careers and to soften their political convictions. Such maneuvers, according to Jelinek, point to the "inherent" difference between female and male writers and female and male lives: that is, women's traditionally more private lives compel them to write mostly about things private, while men's autobiographies generally highlight public achievements. The women's autobiographies that I consider in this dissertation, however, challenge such assumptions. American women's autobiographies from the Spanish Civil War do engage the collective, decentralized voice that critics such as Jelinek see as a unifying trait among all women autobiographers; for Jelinek and others, this is unifying trait prompts the limited categorization of women's self-writing versus men's. American women's Spanish Civil War testimonies shatter such categorizations, however, for they employ the collective voice to speak *not* about private matters, but rather to document and to address crises in the very public sphere of international relations and civil war.

Throughout this dissertation, I contend that to delineate an inherently "feminine" voice and to mark out "women's subject matter" as inviolably distinct from men's is to run the risk of hegemony. The testimonial writing by American women in the Spanish war offers an alternative way of reading female autobiographies. In these testimonial

writings, the subject's metonymic voice has less to do with gender than it does with psychological and political resistance. As I indicate in the following discussion, both forms of resistance are encoded in the life-writing of these women, who came into contact with the traumatic experience of the Spanish Civil War, and who then positioned themselves against their nation's political current in giving public testimony about that experience. The collective voice in these women's testimonies, as I will show, is on one hand a method of survival, of preservation of the self and her story even in the midst of mind-numbing trauma. On the other hand, within the context of bearing testimony, the metonymic voice is deliberately chosen for reasons intensely public and openly resistant.

### *The Spanish Civil War as Trauma*

How do we define a literature of trauma? How does trauma both complicate and compel the trauma survivor (the witness of war)'s testimony? And what role does trauma play in the metonymic self-writings of the American women who witnessed the Spanish Civil War?

First of all, it is important to establish ways in which the Spanish Civil War can be considered a traumatic event for anyone who experienced it. In the scope of destruction done during this war alone, the statistics are numbing. In less than three years, in a country smaller than the state of Texas, "nearly 300,000 people were dead. About 120,000 Spaniards and 25,500 foreigners died in combat; there were 15,000 civilian deaths and 108,000 murders and executions" (Mangini 70). The Spanish war, as the direct precursor to World War II, introduced to the world the horrific concept of "total war," wherein fighting is done not by armies but by populations. The earliest instances of this within the context of the Spanish war, of course, were the civilian groups--labor unions, student alliances, and the like--which rose up, spontaneously and *en masse*, to beat back the invading fascist forces. As the fighting dragged on, the entire population--military and civilian alike, man as well as woman as well as child--was still more deeply

involved and affected. The regular carpet bombing of towns and cities within the Spanish Republic, as well as the daily “tit for tat” assassinations between civilians on both sides of the conflict, made the Spanish Civil War the first war which left virtually no one in the country outside the realm of warfare. Total war, Susan Schweik points out, renders “meaningless the abstract concept of the ‘front line’” (4). Thus we may see the Spanish Civil War as an event without precedent; this concept is fundamental to our understanding of the nature of trauma. Trauma, after all, is the event which disrupts human history; because the traumatic event does not fit into any existing historical frame of reference, survivors of the traumatic event perceive of that event as one which happened *outside* history.

### ***History of the Spanish Republic***

It may seem paradoxical, then, to attempt to explain in part the trauma experienced by American leftists involved in the Spanish Civil as a trauma *induced by* history. Yet the political and historical changes taking place in Spain during the formation and eventual demise of the Second Republic did constitute, in themselves, an almost unfathomable shock for many who witnessed this unprecedented period in Spanish history. So unforeseeable and far-reaching were these changes that those eyewitnesses who had come to Spain believing that it embodied their cherished vision of a triumphant proletariat, a successful socialist society, went home traumatized by the utter decimation of this belief. This particular experience of trauma vis-à-vis the Spanish Civil War stands out most clearly in the war memoir of Josephine Herbst, which I will discuss in Chapter Four.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Certainly, we read a similar experience of trauma in the memoirs of other foreign witnesses to the who came to Spain ready to give their lives for the Republican cause and left deeply embittered and permanently

A broad historical understanding of this troubled time in Spain is fundamental to any reading of Spanish Civil War testimonial literature. Although many testimonies of this war tend to paint it in stark contrasts, with the aggressor fascists on one side and democratic socialists on the other, the Spanish Republic was actually a conflicted, ever-shifting, and extremely politically complex entity throughout the years of the war. As we shall see, the degree to which American women witnesses were able to grasp this complexity varies considerably, ranging from more idealistic representations by those who did not physically travel to Spain to more cynical ones by those who spent several months there.

Regardless of the degree to which outside witnesses understood these subtler political nuances, however, no serious observer of this war was left untouched by the sweeping changes taking place within the Republic. Eventually, the Republic's political machinations called into serious question the beliefs on which these witnesses had staked their ideologies and, often, their very lives. Although it is, of course, impossible to calculate the precise effect of the Republic's self-disintegration on individuals who participated in or espoused its cause, we cannot ignore the marks of trauma which it left upon many of the more prominent literary witnesses. The very fact that originally left-leaning witnesses such as John Dos Passos and George Orwell swung sharply to the right in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, or that once-politicized writers such as Josephine Herbst emerged from that war suddenly despairing of political activity altogether, speaks of the traumatization inherent in watching one's whole belief system shatter.

---

scarred by the disintegration of that cause. See John Dos Passos's *Adventures of a Young Man* or George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and *Inside the Whale*.

In retrospect, it seems astonishing that a body so united as the Spanish Republic initially appeared to be could have fragmented so violently after one year of war. Indeed, throughout the first weeks of the fighting, unions and political parties across Eastern Spain--from a political spectrum stretching from center to far left--organized and armed themselves in the Republic's defense almost immediately. How, then, did the Spanish Republic come to embody divisions within its own ranks so sharp that it nearly destroyed itself, and the stories of many of its members along with it? Along what fault lines in its structure did these ideological differences open, nearly splitting the government apart? One of the fundamental and deeply problematic characteristics of the Republic's Popular Front government was, after all, its having been formed of a strange amalgamation of disparate and not necessarily compatible political parties and workers' unions.<sup>15</sup> Communists, socialists, and anarchists, members of the bourgeoisie and of the working class, came together in uneasy union under the banner of the Popular Front. Each group believing that they alone could not defeat fascism, these highly diverse entities were in effect compelled to join forces in confronting Franco. This, at least, was the theory guiding the Popular Front government.

The beginnings of the war, however, saw a starkly different political configuration of the Republican side. At the outbreak of hostilities in Spain, defenders of the Republic were hastily organized militias comprised of individual trade unions or political groups, many of them anarchist or socialist, not Communist, in nature. The

---

<sup>15</sup> Popular Front governments, widespread throughout Europe and Latin America in the decade of the 1930s, were the brainchild of the Communist Party International. Under Popular Front policy, political parties ranging from center to left joined together in order to present a united and powerful front against right-wing parties. As Nelson observes, such policy "involved abandoning the Communist Party's earlier revolutionary stance" (*Madrid* 502). Spain's Popular Front brought together a formerly divided Left and was elected to government in February 1936.



agenda driving these earlier militias tended to be frankly revolutionary; they were fighting Franco in the name of massive land reform and workers' control of industry. Of those early days of the war, George Orwell recalls: "Land was seized by the peasants; many factories and most of the transport were seized by the trade unions; churches were wrecked and the priests driven out or killed" (190). During the opening weeks of the war, according to Orwell, three thousand people, chiefly members of the working class, died each day fighting for the Republic in "the various centres of revolt" throughout Eastern Spain (191).

It was the kind of effort that could probably only be made by people who were fighting with a revolutionary intention--i.e. believed that they were fighting for something better than the *status quo*. . . . [I]t would be hard to believe that the Anarchists and Socialists who were the backbone of the resistance were doing this kind of thing for the preservation of capitalist democracy. . . . (191)

Preservation of capitalist democracy, however, did come to be a significant part of Republican agenda, as the Popular Front government--under the expanding influence of the Soviet-backed Communist Party of Spain<sup>16</sup>--began to emphasize that the war against fascism must be won, first and foremost, before the Republic could initiate any sweeping reforms. This emphasis on ending the war rather than on upholding the revolution helped to create a broad base of support in Spain, among the bourgeoisie and much of the working class, for Communist policy throughout the war. Indeed, the Communist Party grew in representation and power in the Popular Front government as the war ground

---

<sup>16</sup> The Communist Party of Spain (the P.C.E., or *Partido Comunista de Espana*) was the Comintern's affiliate in Spain. The Comintern, or Communist International, was "controlled by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; . . . [it] reflected the foreign policy of the Soviet Union and became primary organizer of the International Brigades" (Nelson 491).

on.<sup>17</sup> As the Soviet Union became more involved in the support and administration of the Republic,<sup>18</sup> the militias were required to join the centralized army, and the diverse political groups of the early Republic were ostensibly united under the Popular Front government.

Such an agenda did not sit well, however, with the anarchist and dissident (or anti-Stalinist) Communist groups who had risen to the defense of the Republic with more openly revolutionary hopes and goals for the country. Tensions between these groups and the Communist Party were early made evident. Many of the syndicalist- and anarchist-based militias--especially those operating out of Barcelona--were resistant to integration and slow to incorporate themselves into the Popular Front army. For Barcelona's numerous workers' unions, as Cary Nelson reminds us, to espouse anarchism was also to be "philosophically and viscerally opposed to centralized authority," such as that which the Communist Party advocated (Madrid 417). This dichotomy of interests between the anarchists and the anti-Stalinists on one hand and the party-line Communists on the other affected the political as well as the military scene in the Republic; as early as February 1937, the P.O.U.M. and the F.A.I. (*Federacion Anarquista Iberica*, or the

---

<sup>17</sup> George Orwell documents how the constant "reshuffling" of the central government moved Popular Front politics steadily toward the right and away from revolution. Francisco Largo Caballero, President of Spain's Socialist Party and head of the Spanish government from September 1936 to May 1937, "was replaced by the right-wing socialist [Juan] Negrin" (195). Shortly thereafter, the Government also eliminated the C.N.T. [*Confederacion Nacional de Trabajo*, or the National Confederation of Workers] and the U.G.T. [*Union General de Trabajadores*, or General Workers' Union] from among its ranks. These were the two most powerful labor groups in Spain; both sympathized with the revolutionary tactics of the Spanish anarchists and anti-Stalinists. One year after the war's outbreak, Orwell remarks, "there remained a Government composed entirely of right-wing socialists, liberals, and Communists" (195). In effect, no anarchists, anti-Stalinists, or anyone representing the revolutionary stance was left in the central government. Orwell attributes this "general swing to the right" to the increasing power of the USSR over the Spanish Republic, as the Soviet Union began to supply the Republic with arms and thus to occupy "a position [from which] to dictate terms" (195).

<sup>18</sup> Although the Comintern, under the guidance of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, volunteered its aid to the Spanish Republic as early as July 26, 1936 (just nine days into the war), the first shipment of Soviet arms did not arrive in the Republic until October 12 of that year (Kenwood xii).

Anarchist Federation of Iberia) demonstrated in Barcelona “in favor of social revolution before victory in the war” (Kenwood xii).<sup>19</sup> Such a conflict of ideologies foreshadowed the “civil war within a civil war” of May 1937, when these two components of the Republican side opened fire on each other for three days.

Meanwhile, Popular Front policy steadfastly maintained that unity among the diverse political groups of the Republic was a necessary difficulty, if Franco were to be defeated. As Frederick Benson notes, the Popular Front government continued to assert “that interparty quarreling encouraged the fascist nations to increase their aggressive actions and that only a truly ‘united front’ could effectively contain fascism” (14). Thus ran the argument for smoothing over the political and ideological differences among various factions of the left and bringing everyone under central command. This was a task that proved increasingly difficult as those defenders of the Republic who had believed that this war was about a people’s revolution became disillusioned with the Popular Front’s increasingly conservative or anti-revolutionary stance.<sup>20</sup> On the other side of the ideological schism in the Republic were the party-line Communists, who began to see those who continued to openly espouse anarchism, or to criticize Stalinism, as threats to the stability of the Republican government.

To George Orwell, the Popular Front was a tenuous and “temporary alliance” at best (198). Any Popular Front government, according to Orwell, is essentially “an

---

<sup>19</sup> Along with the P.O.U.M. and the F.A.I., the C.N.T. also “advocated a revolutionary strategy for winning the war and the revolution” (Nelson, *Madrid* 491).

<sup>20</sup> Orwell sums up the growing ideological differences between anarchists and Communists within the Republic as “the antagonism between those who wished the revolution to go forward and those who wished to check or prevent it” (97). He goes on to explain that: “In particular the Communist Party, with Soviet Russia behind it, had thrown its whole weight against revolution. It was the Communist thesis that revolution at this stage would be fatal and that what was to be aimed at in Spain was not workers’ control but bourgeois democracy” (193). Both Orwell and Franz Borkenau (*The Spanish Cockpit*) give extensive

alliance of enemies, and it seems probable that it must always end by one partner swallowing the other” (198). Indeed, by the ninth month of the war, differences between the Communists and the anarchists within the Front had escalated to the level of open hostility. Internecine animosity sprang to life in the barricades that either side erected in Barcelona and in the bullets that they fired at each other for three disturbing days. Later that same spring, Republican troops under Communist command attacked P.O.U.M. headquarters in Barcelona, where they arrested the party’s forty-member central committee. The Republican government then outlawed the existence of the P.O.U.M. altogether and executed various of its leaders, among them Andres Nin.<sup>21</sup>

“For those stirred by the remarkable anarchist romance,” observes Nelson, May 1937 “. . . was the point when the Spanish Revolution was suppressed” (418) in favor of the Comintern’s protecting their larger political interests. Spain in the spring of 1937, allows Nelson, was a vastly “complex political world” (418). Although the initial defense of the Spanish Republic by its own workers was indeed a full-fledged people’s revolution, by the end of the first year of the war the Spanish Communist Party had effectively squelched “the efforts of truly radical parties to effect a social revolution. . . .” (Benson 17). For those left-leaning American idealists who had laid their reputations and often their very lives on the line for this supposedly “people’s” Republic, witnessing these dramatic changes in that political entity were nothing short of traumatic. Thus we

---

eyewitness reports and analyses of the Communist Party’s anti-revolutionary agenda in the Spanish Civil War.

<sup>21</sup> Nin was particularly suspect in the eyes of the Communist Party, as he had formerly worked as Leon Trotsky’s secretary. The P.O.U.M. was inspired by Trotsky’s brand of anti-Stalinist, pro-revolutionary Communism—one of the reasons for which they were regarded as dangerous by the Soviet-supported Popular Front government.

begin to understand the literature which these particular witnesses produced, reflecting on their experiences of the Spanish Civil War, as a literature of trauma.

### *Trauma Literature*

A traumatic event is one which happens outside the range of usual human experience.<sup>22</sup> Judith Herman, Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of Trauma and Recovery, expands this definition, asserting that traumatic events are extraordinary “because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe” (33). While trauma stems from physical threats, it manifests itself psychologically. Cathy Caruth tells us that, within recent medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle, “‘trauma’ is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. . . . [T]his wound of the mind is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not [immediately] available to consciousness” (Unclaimed 4). Traumatic events cannot readily be incorporated into human consciousness or language because of their very nature.

The wounding of the mind of which Caruth speaks was a common experience among those who witnessed the Spanish Civil War firsthand; John Muste illuminates this truth when he states, “The violence of the war [in Spain] proved a shock to almost all of the volunteers. Few were old enough to have seen the first world war, and whatever education they had at home in the horrors of war could hardly have prepared them for a struggle in which tanks, bombing planes, and other ‘improved’ weapons. . . made their appearance” (27). The Spanish Civil War was thus in many ways an event which

---

<sup>22</sup> This definition of trauma was given by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980.

provided no recognizable frame of reference--and thus no easy way of speaking of it--for all who were a part of that war.

Given the massive trauma constituted by the Spanish Civil War, testimonial writing emanating from that war may be classified as “a distinct ‘literature of trauma’” (Tal 17). Literature of trauma, as Tal defines it, is comprised of “the writings of trauma survivors. . . . Literature of trauma holds at its center the reconstruction and reconstitution of the traumatic experience. . .” (17). The production of this particular kind of literature, as Herman indicates, involves a special kind of struggle, for trauma is marked by a “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). Thus literature of trauma demands the immense effort “to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen” (2). Traumatic texts, Caruth adds, “both speak about and through the profound story of traumatic experience” and engage “the central problems of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of crisis” (4-5). Yet another important student of trauma, Robert Jay Lifton, draws our attention to the fundamentally ethical imperative in writing trauma literature. Lifton speaks of an “animating guilt” or “debt to the dead” which propels many testimonies of trauma. This kind of guilt or debt, he writes, “is the anxiety of responsibility. . . , the feeling that one must, should, and can act against the wrong and toward an alternative” (139). By making public a traumatic testimony, then, the writer acknowledges others who suffered with her but did *not* survive. By reminding her readers of this loss, the writer likewise asks that we remember it and that we refuse to let such loss happen again.

Although the application of trauma theory to literature has become a much-employed hermeneutic in the past decade--thanks largely to the work of the scholars cited above--testimony from two of the “big wars” in recent American history has remained the primary subject of such theorizing. Herman and Lifton, for example, are fundamentally concerned with trauma as it evinces itself in testimonies from Vietnam

War veterans.<sup>23</sup> Other scholars of trauma literature tend to focus on the Jewish Holocaust. Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, in Trauma and Testimony, train our gaze on literary testimonies emanating from well-known writer-survivors of World War II such Paul Celan and Albert Camus; they also pay close attention to Jewish Holocaust survivor stories from that war gathered from personal interviews, as well as to Claude Lanzmann's film, Shoah.<sup>24</sup> . Kali Tal's work in Worlds of Hurt<sup>25</sup> also begins with the Jewish Holocaust, but then shifts the focus to post-World War II experiences of trauma, such as that of the Vietnam War veterans and contemporary survivors of sexual abuse. As most critical and theoretical attention to the problem of reading traumatic narratives begins in the 1940s and moves forward in time, my contribution brings to this body of knowledge by bringing testimonies from the 1930s to this discussion. Much remains to be said, then, about the effects of trauma on Americans who witnessed the brutalities of the Spanish Civil War and who then returned home, wanting to speak for the silenced in Spain but finding that they were silenced themselves.

While Dori Laub has called the Jewish Holocaust "the event without a witness" (Testimony 80), I would suggest that, for the leftist writers who returned from Spain to an America frozen under McCarthyism, the Spanish Civil War likewise became an event without a witness. Certainly, for those Americans who had watched Franco's obliteration of the Spanish Republic and who then returned home only to confront a puissant political conservatism which reached its startling apex with Senator Joseph McCarthy's "witch-hunts," there was no *outside* or exterior witness. As both Laub and Caruth have suggested, a trauma survivor cannot find a voice--cannot find her own "interior witness," her own ability to speak or to testify to what she has experienced--unless she is first

---

<sup>23</sup> The scope of both Herman and Lifton's work also includes studies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors (Lifton) and survivors of rape and domestic abuse (Herman).

<sup>24</sup> Shoah (1985) documents the testimonies of concentration camp survivors.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Tal's choice of cover illustration for Worlds of Hurt points away from her own post-World War II studies and back, specifically, to the trauma of the Spanish Civil War. She chooses Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*.

assured of an “exterior witness,” a listening Other who can enter the experience with the trauma survivor and be a witness to her and to her story. “The absence of an empathic listener,” says Laub, “or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (68). Laub indicates that, when exterior witnesses fail, the potential witnesses from the inside (the Americans who had been to Spain during the war) find that their experiences are “no longer communicable even to themselves. . . . This loss of capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well” (*Testimony* 82). Put another way, self-knowledge is possible only when “I” know myself as a “you” to someone else. The obliteration of the possibility of an exterior witness often means the obliteration, too, of an interior one.

### ***Metonymy as Psychological Resistance***

How, then, with no outside witness to receive her story, does the inside witness begin to speak of her experience? How is testimony possible within this context? What enables testimonial literature from the Spanish Civil War, given that its writers could find no ready audience for that literature, for decades afterward? The answer lies in the process whereby a trauma survivor may actually *create* her own interior witness, who stands in for the lost or missing exterior witness. As we have seen, a trauma survivor depends on the existence of other selves around her in order for her to give testimony of her experience; in the absence of such listening selves, however, the survivor may summon an *imagined--or remembered, or created--witness*. As an example of this kind of created witness, Laub relates the story of a young Polish-Jewish boy who survived the Holocaust by escaping a concentration camp with nothing but a shawl and a passport photo of his mother. Eventually taken in and hidden by various gentile families



throughout the duration of the war, the boy evoked an interior witness to his trauma by speaking regularly to the photograph of his mother. Laub attests that

what this young. . . [boy] was doing with the photograph. . . was, precisely, creating his first witness, and the creation of that witness was what enabled him to survive. . . . This story exemplifies the process whereby survival takes place through the creative act of establishing and maintaining an internal witness who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life. (87)<sup>26</sup>

Creating one's own internal witness, then, means proposing to oneself that someone else *is* listening to the story, even when all appearances seem to indicate otherwise. It is a desperate measure, shaped by equally desperate situations.

Yet the result of such a measure is positive and long-lasting; as Laub points out, this envisioning of an internal witness augments the survivor's "ability to create a cohesive, integrated narrative of the event" (87). This very process of narrating one's experience of trauma--whether it be to witness who is physically present, or to a witness who is recalled or evoked--is "the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as witness: reconstitutes the internal 'thou,' and thus the possibility of a listener inside himself" (85). In American women bearing testimony to the Spanish Civil War, the use of metonymic voice creates this possibility. The metonymic voice, because it insists that the speaker is not a solitary, isolated figure but rather is part of an interrelated web of *others*, is instrumental in narrating a story of war trauma. As we have seen in Lifton's study of the "anxiety of responsibility," survivors are compelled to narrate their trauma not only for their own healing, but also for the sake of others who were part of that experience, too, but can no longer speak of it themselves.

---

<sup>26</sup> Judith Herman cites a similar case, in which a young man survived attempted murder through clinging to "a very powerful image of my father" throughout the ordeal (60). Herman asserts that the survival of traumatized individuals often depends on an "*image of a connection* that they managed to preserve, even in extremity, though they are well aware that this connection was fragile. . ." (60, emphasis mine).

The story which cannot be heard, the testimony that cannot be witnessed, becomes the deathblow for the person bearing the unheard narrative (Laub 68). So the writers who choose a pluralized or metonymic voice when speaking of their traumatic experience do so in part to guard themselves against this terrible possibility. They are already creating a “you” within the “I,” an object within the subject, a listener within the teller. To conceive of the self as plural is thus to protect that self from the dangers of telling an unheard story. It likewise ensures that the self will always find its own internal witness. Thus the metonymic voice in trauma testimonies from the Spanish Civil War works for both the survival of the witness herself and for the survival of a story *beyond* the witness--in this case, that of the fallen Spanish Republic--a story otherwise lost to or silenced by mainstream history.

### *A Crisis of Witnessing in America*

Such a strategy was essential for the American writers of Spanish War testimonials at the close of the 1930s. Cary Nelson describes the “special vulnerability” felt by these Americans as they attempted to engage audiences at home (Madrid 15). Having ventured to Spain “because of their political convictions. . . , they were also thereby isolated from most other Americans, the majority of whom. . . did not recognize the reality” of the threat of fascism’s spread to the rest of the world (15). They were further regarded as politically and ideologically dangerous--and were even more alienated from the American public--in that, by traveling to Spain during the war in the first place, they had directly violated U.S. law (15). For survivors of a trauma such as war, Judith Herman emphasizes, their testimony must be met with a communal reception in order for the survivors to achieve healing. “To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance. . . . The systematic study of trauma therefore depends on the support of a political movement” (9). For American witnesses of the Spanish Civil War, such a

supportive social and political context was sadly lacking during the postwar period. Identifying themselves as a collective, then, and to include as many others in that group as possible, was one means of resisting complete marginalization and silencing by mainstream American society.

How can we explain the increasingly oppressive political climate in which American citizens who had dared to side openly with the Spanish Republic were harassed and silenced by their own government? What powers contrived to create what Dori Laub calls a “crisis of witnessing”—that is, the total absence of empathic listeners to the traumatic story—which American writers faced after the war? This crisis of witnessing is particularly surprising and disturbing given the vitality of the American Left in the years immediately preceding the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, as late as 1938, leftist causes in the United States still garnered extensive support, at least from the intellectual community of the day. In its survey, Writers Take Sides, the League of American Writers asked hundreds of fellow writers two simple questions: “Are you for, or are you against Franco and fascism? Are you for, or are you against the legal government and the people of Republican Spain?”<sup>27</sup> Out of approximately 400 replies, 98% opposed Franco and supported the Republic; 1.75% were neutral, and .25% (one vote) were pro-Franco. In fact, most of the responses began with almost indignant statements such as “Of course I am for the Republic. . .” or “It insults my intelligence that there could be any other answer. . .” Why, then, the difficulty that intellectuals and writers of the period encountered in spreading these convictions more widely throughout the American public? Ring Lardner, Jr. explains that, even though many artists and intellectuals of the 1930s were aware of and supportive of the Spanish Republic’s struggle, “most of the public either did not know or did not care enough about who stood for what in Spain for that to count among the issues that shaped their voting decisions” (18). While this general

---

<sup>27</sup>In orchestrating and publishing this 1938 survey, The League of American writers followed the example of The Left Review, a London periodical, which performed a similar survey among British writers in 1937.

ignorance and apathy made possible the United States's noninterventionism,<sup>28</sup> "a determined Catholic minority. . . , specifically taught by the church hierarchy that the loyalist government in Madrid was the agent of the Antichrist" (18) bolstered that stance.

Certain intellectual and political powers stood behind that determined pro-fascist minority in America. Indeed, the Southern Agrarian movement, with its open support of monarchist Catholicism and Italian fascism, operated as a kind of counter-force to Proletarianism throughout the 1930s. Walter Kalaidjian points out that the controlling agenda of the Southern Agrarians was not only literary--in that they sought to shape a canon based on high modernism and the "squirearchy" of genteel tradition--but also political: "[A]grarianism aimed to turn the tide of the emergent socialist culture that was gaining considerable momentum in America between the wars" ("Marketing" 302). In the American Review, proponents of this new conservatism "espoused international fascism" frequently and unashamedly. Kalaidjian cites several articles from that journal praising Mussolini and contrasting Karl Marx-- "that Jew, Mordecai"--to Hitler, who "restored 'courage and hope' through 'the resurrection of the German National spirit'" (303).<sup>29</sup> Thus the so-called culture wars of the 1930s took form, as pro-fascist writers and academics of the Southern Agrarian stream pitted themselves against the burgeoning class of artists and intellectuals who identified with socialism, and thus with the Spanish Republicans.

America in the 1930s was thus a diverse populace, bounded as it was on one side by extreme conservatives, on the other by ardent leftists, and constituted largely by those unaffected by and uninterested in the Spanish war. Pro-Republican Americans, however,

---

<sup>28</sup>Following the example set by France in August 1937 and taken up by all the rest of western Europe, the United States in October 1937 declared its noninterventionist stance vis-a-vis the war in Spain. Reasons for doing so were complex and largely misguided; Western democracies assumed this stance, as Cary Nelson explains: ". . . partly on the deluded hope that such a stance would discourage German and Italian participation and partly because soome in the West were more comfortable with a fascist government in Spain than with an elected government whose policies were disturbingly progressive" (Trees 17).

<sup>29</sup> Kalaidjian quotes from Hoffman Nickerson's "Property and Taxes," American Review 5 (April-October 1935): 568-569.

were still a vocal minority throughout the decade. United by a leftist ideology as yet unthreatened by the Hitler-Stalin pact and other indications of Communism's darker side, they saw in Republican Spain the icon of all the ideological and political revolution for which they struggled. It became The Cause around which most of the left-leaning intelligentsia of the era quickly rallied.

Franco's eventual victory in Spain, however, was in many ways a deathblow to the American Left. This stunningly disappointing outcome heralded a new and shattering set of changes which the Left underwent as the 1930s staggered to an end. As Joseph North notes: "A series of outward historical events--like the Stalin purge trials of the 1930s and the suppression of the anarcho-syndicalists [by the Comintern] in the closing trauma of the Spanish Civil War--had disheartened" many of the prewar leftists (21). But perhaps the single most devastating event to the American Left was the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of 1939. After 1939, growing disillusionment and frustration with the Communist Party among many formerly enthusiastic American members diminished the ranks of the Party in the United States and fractured the Leftist movement which had flourished in the 1930s. By the end of the war, then, the American Left was rapidly losing its unity, its voice, and, in the defeat of the Spanish Republic, the fulcrum through which it had poured much of its conjoined energy and passion.

Hank Rubin, whose 1997 *Spain's Cause Was Mine* details the two years he spent as a medic for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, remembers the decidedly transformed political atmosphere into which he returned in 1939:

We landed in New York, where grim-faced FBI agents looked us over, memorizing our faces, for we had been labeled "premature anti-fascists" . . . . To the [U.S.] government, we were fighters who threatened the peace of the nation. The passports of those of us who had them were confiscated and never returned. Those who hadn't gotten theirs back in Spain had trouble establishing that they were really U.S. citizens and had the right to enter their own country. (150)

Rubin's story of his re-entrance into America is emblematic of the experience of any American who had supported the Spanish Republic, or other causes identified with Communist or leftist ideals, as the 1930s disappeared into the 1940s and 1950s. As America considered how best to protect her own interests in the impending onslaught of World War II, leftists were suddenly perceived as dangerous to national stability. Yet it was not until the close of World War II--during which, as Cary Nelson wryly observes, the United States conveniently set aside its anti-Communism to become allies with the Russia--that America truly resembled "an occupied country" to former or current leftists. Anti-Communism, Nelson writes, "returned to function much more effectively and persuasively than it had before. A vast confederation of repressive forces--from national, state, and local government to the media, business leaders, and political organizations--collected around economic and political interests that had much to gain from instituting and maintaining the cold war" (25, Trees). In America, the business world at large embraced anti-communism as a means of breaking labor unions and of continuing to reap the profits of a burgeoning war industry.

Opportunist politicians. . . found theatrically staged anti-Communist hearings an easy way to build reputations. A group of reactionary political organizations whose members actually believed the well-publicized stories of Communist subversion--from the American Legion to the Daughters of the American Revolution--offered enthusiastic support. In the end, some people on the Left went to jail and many thousands lost their jobs. (25)

Anyone once identified with the Communist Party or active in support of Leftist causes was summarily swept from public and private employment during the "nationwide purge" of the McCarthy era (25).

Indicative of the fear-laced political climate of 1950s America is Alvah Bessie's Introduction to The Heart of Spain, a 1951 collection of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry by Americans who had gone to Spain in support of the Republic government. Bessie spends

exactly half of this Introduction defending Communism and decrying the Red Scare. “. . . [S]ome writers who supported the cause of the Spanish people when it was fashionable. . . to be anti-fascist. . . are today fearful and silent. . .,” Bessie accuses (vii). “It is therefore important at the time,” he asserts, “when the ideals of human progress, decency, and even peace are under official attack as ‘Red,’ ‘subversive,’ and even ‘treasonable,’ to present such a volume as this. . .” (viii). As the Cold War commenced in America, past connections to the Spanish Republic had come to be regarded as completely, and even dangerously, counter-cultural.

The rich, complicated story of the American thirties, Joseph North attests, was recoded into a simpler, smoother myth, dominated by easy “us-and-them” binaries: “The indictment says that we [on the Left] cared nothing for literature, for truth, for beauty; we were guided by a bleakly fanatic loyalty to an alien philosophy: Marxism, Communism. . . We were infiltrators. We were the unamericans” (20). Maxwell Geismar reflects on the radicalism of the 1930s and the sustained efforts, throughout subsequent decades, to erase or bury their legacy. Writing in 1969, Geismar was among the first wave of cultural critics who, after thirty years of silence, began to articulate the necessity of unearthing what he called the “buried history” of prewar American ideology and literature. “The social atmosphere was so heavy, dense, oppressive,” Geismar remembers of the postwar years (5). “The aesthetic air was so thin, pure and abstract.<sup>30</sup> . . . As a historian of American literature I wondered why all the major figures whom I admired-- from Howells and Mark Twain to Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Ellen Glasgow and Thomas Wolfe--were in such eclipse. I wondered why Melville, a great American radical and social reformer, was being made into such a conservative. . . . I wondered why Scott Fitzgerald, an attractive novelist of manners at best, was being revived so heavily. . .” (5). Geismar’s point, of course, is that political ideology is not formed of thin air; its

---

<sup>30</sup>These two lines Geismar quotes from an earlier text, *American Moderns*, wherein he recognized and condemned, “as early as 1958,” the state of oppression that had befallen American culture and politics (5).

undergirding structures are built of public opinion and taste, which are in turn directly informed by whatever literature the nation most widely consumes. Thus the suppression of left-leaning authors and their texts throughout the 1940s and 1950s was also the silencing of any political testimony emanating from the Left. Testimonies from the Spanish Civil War that supported the Republic, then, were imminently dangerous to the status quo. From the close of the Spanish Civil War until the close of the McCarthy-Eisenhower era, America made no room at all for such resistant voices.

American witnesses of the Spanish war confronted a double silencing at home. The psychological wounding caused by the war itself and then the lack of an audience in America worked in tandem with the political project of McCarthy, who wanted to erase or banish all traces of radicalism from America in the 1950s. As Edwin Rolfe has written, American life during the 1940s and 1950s was “like living in the peaks of the Andes--the air is thin and tense and [those who had been openly leftist in the 1930s] must develop new adaptations to survive” (Nelson, *Trees* 34). American testimony from the Spanish Civil War, then, was all but impossible. Indeed, the only way that primary witnesses could speak their story and be assured of a listener was by evoking a community of other interior witnesses. The metonymic text invokes and relies upon such a community.

### ***Metonymy as Political Resistance***

Muriel Rukeyser’s poem, “Mediterranean,” from which I quoted as introduction to this chapter, lends us a striking example of the collective voice’s political intentions and capabilities. Rukeyser’s use of the first person plural immediately notifies us that she experiences the action described in this poem--as well as the ramifications of that action--not as an isolated individual but rather as member of a larger group. The action of this poem, the intense *seeing* of the air battles and the destroyed homes, is intimately involved in political work--more specifically, in the work of political witnessing. Moreover, the



results of that witnessing are political, too, for the witnesses have left behind the numbing safety of the world of people who do *not* choose to see the war, who lock themselves into the dull routine of middle-class America. Rukeyser's condemnation of those who mindlessly follow the groove "between the table and the desk / between the town and the suburb" distinguishes the community of witnesses as a separate entity: an entity now possessed of the responsibility to give public testimony of what they have seen of the war, and to thus prevent the "slow disintegration" she notes and fears in her ignorant compatriots at home. Thus, both the seeing of the war and the denunciation of those who do not see it are highly politicized acts; they involve Rukeyser and her community directly in the public sphere. That she will not raise her voice of protest alone, but will rather join her voice to that of her fellow witnesses, gives greater political power to her testimony. In other words, the collective voice of Rukeyser's poem is immediately empowering and enabling. Rukeyser also shatters any pretensions of difference between men and women witnesses and the effects that such witnessing has upon them. She insists that the subject of her poem, the war in Spain, has potent and equal ramifications on both "male and female."

Muriel Rukeyser's poem provides us with a beginning glimpse into the ways in which the collective autobiographical voice can do political work. In the following discussion, I will consider more precisely the means by which the collective voice enables a radically political agenda. I will also show how metonymic autobiography, in addressing political concerns, simultaneously takes into account the more individualized concerns of its narrator and the narrator's community. As a way of approaching these issues, I will first establish the theoretical definitions and delineations of what I am calling the "autobiography of witness": one that is metonymically voiced and politically engaged.

Not until the mid-1980s have such texts--and the questions they engender--caught the attention of literary theorists and critics.<sup>31</sup> Most critics today point to the 1984 publication of the English edition of Rigoberta Menchu's literary testimony, as the foundation of recent interest in collectively voiced, politicized autobiographies.<sup>32</sup> Since then, literary critics have wrangled over the terms and the boundary lines by which to define such nontraditional autobiographies. John Beverley, whose critical work focuses on testimonial literature from Latin America, distinguishes between testimonial literature and other kinds of autobiography. He goes so far, in fact, as to suggest that the testimonial as such (what he refers to as "*testimonio*") constitutes its own separate genre. Although Beverley insists on its uniqueness, his definitions of the *testimonio*'s structure and function seem to be precisely those by which I identify the collectively voiced, political autobiographies of the American women in Spain. Beverley writes, "By *testimonio* I mean a . . . narrative . . . told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts. . ." (92); he specifies that this narrative must be concerned "with a problematic collective social situation in which the narrator lives. The situation of the narrator is one that must be representative" of a larger group to which she belongs (94). While such a description would fit equally well the American narratives of witness which I examine here, Beverley argues that the *testimonio*

---

<sup>31</sup> Doris Sommer dates the rise of the testimonial text from the 1960s, explaining that "the mandate to rewrite . . . history from the 'people's' perspective was renewed with a greater sense of cultural independence after the Cuban Revolution" (113). English-speaking literary critics, however, did not take much interest in these texts until the appearance of I, Rigoberta Menchu (1983, translated from Spanish to English in 1984). Every article that I have found on testimonial literature was written after publication of Menchu's autobiography; all of them use her text as a reference point. Why Menchu's work in particular has incited so much interest is a question I am unable to fully address here. I would submit the incipient theories that hers was one of the first such testimonial works to be translated into English, that her richly detailed portrayal of Mayan culture is intriguing and appealing to Western readers, and that many Western (particularly American) readers are directly implicated by her story--which describes and decries the United States's unjust involvement in Guatemala's civil war.

<sup>32</sup> Other examples of recently published, overtly political metonymic autobiographies are Domitila Barrios' Let Me Speak (1978), Raymonda Tawil's My Home, My Prison (1980), Nawal al-Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero (1983), Omar Cabeza's Fire From the Mountain (1985), and Ruth First's 117 Days (1988), to name only a few. None, however, has been as rapidly and solidly admitted into the literary canon as has Menchu's.

is defined not only by structure and political agenda, but also by geography. *Testimonio*, in his view, can only be produced in Latin America.

Although I admire Beverley's work at bringing more fully into public light the history and political importance of Latin American *testimonios*, I believe that his determination of what constitutes testimonial literature is rather limiting. The limits which he imposes on *testimonio* are particularly problematic in that he positions *testimonio* in direct opposition to autobiography; in doing so, he falls back upon the old, conventional definition of autobiography. As we have already seen, that definition has been challenged and opened up over the past several decades; hence, I believe Beverley errs when he assumes that autobiography must follow "an ideology of individualism. . . built on the notion of a coherent, self-evident, self-conscious, commanding subject who appropriates literature precisely as a means of 'self-expression'. . ." (102-103).

According to Beverley, "autobiography" can never be written from a communal perspective, nor can it involve itself directly in political work. While *testimonio* regularly employs the metonymic voice, "autobiography," as Beverley understands it, is the work of "a unique, 'free,' autonomous ego" (103). To insist that the "uniqueness" and autobiography of the speaking "I" is essential to a definition of autobiography is to reinstate a definition which we have already seen as outdated, rigid, and potentially hegemonic. The limitations which Beverley imposes on the political agenda of autobiography are equally troubling. "Autobiography," in his view,

produces in the reader--who, generally speaking, is already either middle- or upper-class or expecting to be a part of those classes--the specular effect of confirming and authorizing his or (less so) her situation of relative social privilege. *Testimonio*, by contrast. . . always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability of the reader's world must be brought into question. (103)

By clinging to such narrow and outdated definitions of autobiography, Beverley is able to carve out a “unique” niche for *testimonio*, utterly separate from--and indeed, juxtaposed against-- “autobiography.” I would argue, however, that American women’s testimonial literature from the Spanish Civil War shatters the barrier between conventional autobiography and other forms of testimonial literature. Indeed, in none of the texts which this dissertation considers do I see the affirmation of middle-class status quo which Beverley locates in “autobiography.” These texts, in fact, do exactly the opposite; they seek to threaten and crack open the complacency and ignorance which they saw in all those Americans who turned their faces from the war in Spain. When Beverley claims that the *testimonio*’s goal is to engage its readers’ “sense of ethics and justice,” thereby involving them “with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience” (99), he may just as well be speaking about American testimonies from the Spanish Civil War, written with the express purpose of stirring the apathetic public in America, and in the rest of Europe, to the defense of Spain’s Republic.

Doris Sommer, who studies women’s testimonial literature, also focuses on the Latin American *testimonio*; like Beverley, she sees a fundamental difference between *testimonios* and other forms of autobiography. “By understating the difference,” she claims, “we may miss the potential in what I am calling the testimonial’s collective self: the possibility to get beyond the gap between public and private spheres. . .” (110). Sommer further echoes Beverley in that she locates the power of the collective self in its ability to use private stories--testimonials--as a way of bringing a group’s struggle for justice into public light. As Beverley says, testimonial literature “has been important in maintaining and developing the practice of international human rights and solidarity movements” (99). So, too, for Sommer, “testimonial” indicates a largely public endeavor, to be distinguished from what she sees as autobiography’s more introspective gesture.

Here again we see an assumption on the part of the critic that an autobiography narrated by a collective or metonymic self can no longer truly be autobiography. Both Beverley and Sommer problematize this assumption by claiming that, furthermore, no literature is truly testimonial unless it emanates from Latin America. In Beverley's and Sommer's minds, the "phenomenon of a collective subject" operates as a kind of resistance to the hegemonic pose of what they call "Western autobiography" (Sommer 111). Thus the collective autobiographer reminds us "that life continues at the margins of Western discourse" (111). Such a belief, however, implies that all Western writing is hegemonic, or that everyone who lives in a Western culture participates in or condones hegemony. This was clearly *not* the case with Americans who left their country voluntarily to fight fascism in Spain, and who were then openly persecuted by their own government upon returning home. After all, it seems appropriate to think of the international volunteers who flocked to Spain as volunteer soldiers and medical personnel, or who campaigned and raised funds at home for the Spanish anti-fascists, as an early solidarity movement.

How, then, do we open up space for metonymic self-representation in *Western* self-writing? Barbara Harlow's study of what she terms "resistance literature" proves helpful here. Harlow does not define autobiography as rigidly as do Sommer and Beverley. She asserts that ". . .the strictly generic classification collapses" as she examines nontraditional autobiographical texts, and that ". . . social and political issues emerge in such a way as to redefine the formal criteria and codifications" (xix). As I do, Harlow identifies nontraditional autobiography as self-writing in which the narrator is ". . . actively engaged in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise and struggle" (120). The term "resistance," for Harlow, "presupposes. . . an 'occupying power' which has either exiled or subjugated. . . a given population and has in addition significantly intervened in the literary and cultural development of the people it has dispossessed. . . . Literature, in other words. . . [becomes] an arena of *struggle*" (2).

She turns to Kenyan activist and writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who has maintained that "in literature there have been two opposing aesthetics: the aesthetic of oppression and exploitation and of acquiescence with imperialism; and that of human struggle for total liberation" (8).<sup>33</sup> Within this framework, which focuses on a narrative's form and function, Harlow (through Ngugi) shifts away from Beverley's and Sommer's emphasis on geography. She thus opens up space for inclusion of resistant texts written under oppressive regimes both Third World *and* Western.<sup>34</sup> I would contend that both Spain under Franco and the United States under McCarthyism constituted oppressive regimes; indeed, they were regimes which the writers of American testimonials of the Spanish Civil War knew all too well.

Caren Kaplan, who also sees the metonymically voiced, testifying autobiography as politically resistant, asserts that such texts belong to what she calls an "outlaw genre." Arguing that Western literary structures are fundamentally limited, always operating to exclude or to hold back the cultural margins, Kaplan explains that "counterlaw, or *out-law*. . . productions often break most obvious rules of genre. Locating out-law genres enables a deconstruction of the 'master' genres. . ." (119). Her "out-law" texts, then, are doubly resistant in that they challenge the laws of the canon and the laws of the state in which the narrator lives. Among those texts which Kaplan includes in the "out-law genres" are the prison memoir, the testimonial, and various other nontraditional forms of autobiographical writing. Kaplan, too, pushes beyond geographical barriers by asserting that both Third and First World women are capable of writing such "out-law" texts.

Out-law texts, resistance literature, *testimonio*: This recent explosion of terms demonstrates the slippery, troubled nature of any critical work which attempts to define

---

<sup>33</sup>See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Literature in Schools." *Writers in Politics*. London: Heineman, 1981.

<sup>34</sup>Harlow does specify that resistance literature emerges from conflicts between a Western and an indigenous culture, or between a colonizing and a colonized people; as Shirley Mangini proposes, however, there are various forms of colonization. We might, for example, see those Republican Spaniards who survived the war only to live under Franco's harsh forty-year dictatorship as colonized subjects. See my discussion of Mangini's theory later in this chapter.

or to draw boundaries around collectively voiced, politically engaged self-writing. I would here assert the belief, along with cultural and literary critic Kali Tal, that “[u]nlike the most playful of the deconstructionists, we do not seek to prove that there is, finally, no solid place to stand” (5). Nonetheless, I also believe (again, echoing Tal) that the critic’s responsibility is “to present a continuous challenge to the assumptions upon which any communal consensus is based—to insist that nothing goes without saying” (5). Part of the process of redefining and opening up the genre of autobiography must inevitably include some haggling over the new boundary lines. Yet this process, arduous as it may appear, is essential to the inclusion and recognition of more politicized, testimonial works such as the ones I examine here. Regardless of theoretical differences of opinion among autobiographical critics regarding how to re-draw the boundaries, I see in all of this recent criticism a fervent effort to make room within academic discourse for many voices, especially those voices speaking from the margins. This effort in itself demonstrates a protest against the forces of patriarchy, colonialism, or any other institution that works to maintain inequality of power between the “center” and the “margins.”

### *The Autobiography of Witness*

The American women who dared to go to Spain during the war and who then dared still further to make public their war experience by writing about it are a worthy subject for such politically resistant scholarly work. These women, both by moving to Spain and then deciding to speak for the silenced Spaniards, demonstrate a deliberate and powerful effort to listen and call attention to voices that would otherwise have gone unheard in most of the world. By attempting to find a space within critical discussion for their autobiographies, I hope to do through my criticism what those women did through their lives and their self-writing. As Caren Kaplan says, “. . . [R]esistance is a mode of

historical necessity; . . . the critical practice of out-law genres challenges the hierarchical structures” of canonical and colonial discourse (135).

Seen through *this* lens, an autobiographical text may work in diametrical opposition to the colonizing impulse that Georges Gusdorf located--and, indeed, upheld--in traditional autobiography. As we contemplate the amplifications and permutations lately wrought in critical understanding of autobiography as a genre, the more progressive among us might be tempted to cry, “You’ve come a long way, baby!” I do not wish to ignore, however, the potential for utter amorphousness into which autobiography might slide, should literary critics not be painstaking and deliberate in setting forth our criteria for including a work in this genre. Shirley Mangini’s term, “memory text,” sheds light on the particular nature of politically engaged, metonymic autobiographies such as the ones on which I focus in this dissertation.

More expansive than either Beverley or Sommer in her definition of testimonial writing, Mangini joins Harlow and Kaplan in blurring the boundary between testimonial and other politicized autobiographical writings. In Mangini’s definition, a memory text is autobiographical writing that refuses traditional autobiography’s assumption of the individual “I” as subject and center of the narrative. Furthermore, Mangini stipulates, memory texts must be written out of a site of catastrophe or oppression (such as war, prison, exile, or colonialism). “Almost invariably,” Mangini states, the authors of memory texts “display a need to denounce the injustice perpetrated not only against them, but also against many other people, especially women. Herein lies the power and the empowerment of the memory texts: the political exigency of protest, a unified, primordial scream of solidarity ” (57). For Mangini, then, the role of the narrator as political witness is more important than the ethnicity or nationality of that narrator.

While Mangini seems to be pointing to precisely the same kind of metonymic, politically engaged autobiography that critics such as Beverley, Sommer, Harlow and Kaplan delineate, the writers of her memory texts are specifically non-Third World



women. The focus of her study, *Memories of Resistance* (1995), is, indeed, those Spanish women who participated in the Republic's defense against fascism. Mangini argues that early twentieth-century Spanish women share with their Latin American counterparts the position of colonized subject because of their twofold subjugation to the strident Catholicism and deeply instituted patriarchy that defined Spanish culture in the time of the civil war.<sup>35</sup>

Mangini, like all of the critics who find a distinctly political agenda in the metonymic text, emphasizes that thinking of oneself and one's life experience in collective terms is not uncommon among a colonized or subjugated people. She acknowledges that ". . . the notion of colonial subject is useful, if thorny" within the context of her study of Spanish women (55). After all, she reminds us, "[w]e are listening to white European women who were colonized, economically and politically, by their own white European countrymen" (55). While she is careful to acknowledge the differences between one form of colonialism and another, she nonetheless sees close parallels between the autobiographical texts of politically active, twentieth-century Third World women and those of Spanish women working and writing in resistance to Franco during the Spanish Civil War. "We are dealing with an exceptional period in Spain," she contends (57). Those Spanish women who wrote memory texts during or immediately after the war "broke the rules of silence by writing or speaking. These Spanish women are 'outlaws'<sup>36</sup> both in their lives and in their memory texts" (57). Geographically and culturally removed from the Third World narrators cited by most critics of collective autobiographies, the Spanish women of Mangini's study share with their Third World sisters a deliberate, consciously chosen stance. They are all resisting the law of genre (which specifies that autobiography must have a central "I") as well as the law of gender

---

<sup>35</sup>These were, of course, two oppressive elements of Spanish culture which the Republic of 1936 sought to eliminate; such efforts were curtailed in 1939 with Franco's victory.

<sup>36</sup>She refers explicitly here to Kaplan's term, "out-law genres."

(which insists that women's voices defer to men's); these women writers thereby articulate a new form of resistance which is both literary and political.

As we have seen, Mangini indicates that, in order to write such a text, one must be colonized or in some way living under a politically repressive regime. How, then, do the six more or less privileged American women of this dissertation fall within those parameters? Certainly we must open this discussion by pointing to the relative privilege which they as early twentieth-century writers did wield: They were white, middle class, and did—at least throughout the pre-McCarthy era of their lives—enjoy significant physical mobility and literary license. As such, then, it would be impossible to argue that the subject position of these six women is exactly parallel to that of the Third World writers of testimonial literature whom I have earlier cited. I would argue, however, that it is still possible to draw comparisons between the two groups and thus to enrich our understanding of the ways in which the metonymic voice challenges various kinds of oppressive political contexts.

The American government's harassment and censoring, throughout the postwar period, of those who had openly supported the Spanish Republic certainly constitutes a kind of colonization--in this case, startlingly, of its own citizens. As Mangini suggests, the term "colonization" may denote *more* than those power structures utilized by the British Raj or by the Spanish *conquistadores* and viceroys of the New World. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out: "There has been more colonizing going on in the world than that which took place under the obvious colonial authorities. . ." (xvi). "[C]olonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression--often violent--of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question" (xvi). Given this conceptualization, it is not difficult to see how pro-Spanish Republic Americans found themselves in the role of colonized subject during the Cold War years, in which "there was increasingly only one public culture in the country, a kind of bland conformity enforced at any human cost," in Nelson's words ("Lyric" 34). As Abraham

Lincoln Battalion veteran Edwin Rolfe put it, Americans who had been openly leftist in the 1930s had to write, under McCarthyism, “as though [they] lived in an occupied country” (34). Thus, while most academic studies of the metonymic, political autobiography stipulate that they must be written by a colonized subject, I would suggest, along with Smith and Watson, that the universalizing or undifferentiated use of terms like “colonization” actually “erases the subject’s heterogeneity” and “empties the subject” of all its potential diversity (xiv, xv). Thinking of American women’s testimonies from the Spanish Civil War as a kind of colonial discourse--which “talks back” to the dominant political powers--helps us to understand more fully how these testimonies employ the metonymic voice towards a politically resistant end.

I have focused on these scholars of testimonial literature--such as Harlow, Kaplan, and especially Mangini--because their understanding of the relationship between the collective voice and the politically resistant position most closely parallels my own. However, in maintaining an awareness of the individuality of all the various kinds of stories of resistance, it is important that I find a term for the specific subjects of my own study. In considering the American women writers who bore witness to the war in Spain, the “autobiography of witness” is a fitting term. I choose this term because it reflects both the individual and the collective experience which are knit together in metonymic self-writing. The word “autobiography” keeps an emphasis on the individual narrator’s point of view, while the word “witness” draws our attention to that narrator’s stance: a stance which is directed outward, to take into consideration the stories of others. Being a witness, even as one is also an autobiographer, implies that the writer is intimately involved with those others for whom she gives testimony. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the concept of witnessing is also important within the psychological context, as the survivor of trauma--in this case, the Spanish Civil War--works toward her own healing by externalizing that story.

The metonymic voice of these “autobiographies of witness,” then, is constructed out of a need to establish fellow witnesses--witnesses who share with the speaker the burden of the traumatic story--so that the trauma survivor will be enabled to begin to tell that story. The writers of these texts do share with authors of Third World testimonials a recognition that community is power, and that political resistance can be done by writing and publishing one’s testimony.

### *Women Witnessing War: The Struggle to Be Heard*

“Telling it like it is” is the project of the autobiography of witness--often in direct opposition to official, sanitized versions of “how it was.” As Kali Tal reminds us, whenever “telling it like it is”

threatens the status quo, powerful political, economic, and social forces will pressure survivors either to keep their silence or to revise their stories. If the survivor community is a marginal one, their voices will be drowned out by those with the influence and resources to silence them, and to trumpet a revised version of their trauma. (7).

Who among the American survivors of the Spanish Civil War was more marginal a group than the few exceptional women whose testimonies this dissertation examines? Although we have already established that all those Americans who participated in the Spanish Republic were marginalized by their government upon their return home, *women* within this context experienced a double marginalization, based not only on their politics but also on their gender.

As Tal indicates, “Less marginal trauma survivors can sometimes band together as a community and retain a measure of control over the representation of their experience” (7). We see this position in the American male survivors of the Spanish Civil War, for, throughout the Cold War years, they were numerous enough--and unified enough--to maintain some control over the dissemination of their war testimonies.

Anthologies of American writing from the Spanish Civil War, such as Alvah Bessie's The Heart of Spain and Bessie and Albert Prago's Our Fight--to say nothing of the anthologies edited by British veterans of the war--all demonstrate a sustained effort on the part of male survivors of the war to present themselves to the public as a united front. National organizations such as the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and its regular periodical, The Volunteer (both still in existence today), further attest to the relative unity and size of the male contingent of American witnesses to Spain's civil war.<sup>37</sup>

The story of the female American witness, on the other hand, is one of almost complete isolation and silencing. The women whose testimonies I discuss here went to Spain, lived there, returned home, and wrote of their experiences as separate entities, unattached to a larger, unifying group such as the Lincoln Battalion. Separated from fellow witnesses in the aftermath of the war, they seek a community of witnesses through their writing. In the metonymic voice, which constantly asks us to consider the greater community whom the speaker represents, these American women witnesses evoke the Spaniards among whom they once lived.<sup>38</sup> In so doing, they likewise confront the need for witnesses to *themselves*, to *their own* unheard stories. The metonymic representation of self answers that need by ensuring, in the absence of exterior witnesses, a community of interior ones.

Elizabeth Foxwell, addressing the virtual silence around women's stories of war in the first half of the twentieth century, notes that "women lacked the community of

---

<sup>37</sup> Lini DeVries, a nurse for the Medical Bureau to Save Spanish Democracy, did participate for several years in the Los Angeles chapter of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. However, in her memoir, Up from the Cellar (discussed in Chapter Five), she is careful to distinguish herself from the veterans: "I was not a veteran in the sense of being a soldier on the Madrid front," she points out (278). As such, she participated in these meetings as a special invitee: "I was honored to have any veteran, from any country, who had fought in Spain against Franco, invite me to be with him" (278).

<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note that, in most women's testimonies of the war, it is the Spanish people who are seen as community; men's testimonies, counterwise, focus on their fellow comrades-in-arms. Because the International Brigades were organized according to nationality, the community of most American male testimonies of the war tends to consist of other American soldiers.

comrades that ex-servicemen possessed and experienced a 'feeling of inferiority. . . when they set their war experience beside that of husbands, brothers, or lovers. . .' (182). She concludes that, "[f]rom the difficulty of the task, and from diffidence, most of them kept silent"<sup>39</sup> (182). Indeed, we cannot deny that, during the early decades of the twentieth century, women's position within the context of war was different from men's. Women were still essentially members of the civilian population; they experienced war by living in cities wracked by starvation and bombing, rather than by engaging in combat on the front lines. In many ways, the gender lines drawn by war in the 1930s contrived to isolate and thereby silence women's experience of war, while maintaining a public focus on men's experience only. Front line service, with all its various individual awards, honors and medals, trains the public gaze upon the single admirable man. To be a civilian in time of war, however, is to see oneself reflected in the language of the military and of the press as an anonymous member of an amorphous group: "the civilian *population*."

### ***Metonymy and the Resistance to Silencing***

Thus we see in the language and in demographic configurations of wartime a gendered binary which many critics also locate in autobiography. Does gender--as it decides who will be in the trenches, where individual acts of bravery are lauded, and who will stay at home, where survival depends on sharing resources with one's neighbors--also decide who will write the individually voiced, heroic autobiography, and who will write the collectively voiced, metonymic autobiography? As I study American women's autobiographies from the Spanish Civil War, I find that the explanation is not, after all, as simple as that. Indeed, if the only two positions which we consider are that of the soldier and that of the civilian, than many of these women cannot be categorized at all. Many of

---

<sup>39</sup>Foxwell here quotes from Storm Jameson's 1933 review of Vera Britain's World War I testimony, Testament of Youth (1933).

these women did, indeed, spend considerable time at the front lines; although they did not participate in armed combat, they spent weeks in the direct line of fire. Others moved back and forth regularly between the embattled cities of the Republic and the trenches. Even those who spent the majority of their time in Spain among civilians maintained a distinctive role in that they were Americans and as such were in Spain, in the midst of the war, by their own volition--a rather different stance than most civilians in time of war.

Thus I would argue (again) that it is not gender which determines an autobiographer's voice. Rather, I believe that one arrives at the decision to tell one's history metonymically through complex set of circumstances. Chief among these circumstances, as I see it, is the understanding that to represent oneself as part of a larger community is also to empower oneself. In times of political crisis and repression, the united group has more clout, has a stronger voice, than the isolated individual. Also essential to the circumstances which shape the metonymic voice--and which create the autobiography of witness--is a writer's desire to resist the obliteration of her story; speaking as "we" rather than as "I," she calls upon fellow witnesses to the story and thus prevents its silencing.

## Chapter Two

## Poetry and the Intellectual Witness:

Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, and Edna St. Vincent Millay

## Confront the War in Spain

*We have the sweet noise of the sea at our back  
and before us the bitter shouting of the gun;  
and the brass wing of aeroplanes and the sun  
that walks above us burning. Here we wound  
our feet on metal fragments of the bomb,  
the sword unburied and the poisoned ground.  
Here we stand; here we lie; here we must see  
what we can find potent and good to set  
between the fascist and the deep blue sea.*

*If we had bricks that could make a wall we would use them,  
but bricks will break under a cannonball;  
if we had iron we would make a wall,  
but iron rings and splinters at the bomb  
and wings go across the sky and over a wall,  
and if we made a barrier with our earth  
they would murder the earth with fascist poison,  
and no one will give us iron for the wall.  
We have only the bodies of men to put together,  
the wincing flesh, the peeled white forking stick,  
easily broken, easily made sick,  
frightened of pain and spoiled by evil weather;  
we have only the most brittle of all things the man  
and the heart the most iron admirable thing of all,  
and putting these together we make a wall.*

--Joy Davidman, "Near Catalonia"

In this chapter, I hope to restore to public view that political work, particularly concerning the Spanish Civil War, which the American writers Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, and Edna St. Vincent Millay accomplished through their poetry. In opening this discussion, it is important to define in what way this poetry operates as autobiography. The case for autobiographical writing is fairly simple with Genevieve Taggard, who spent a year in Spain in the early 1930s and in her poetry obviously draws



from her memories of specific people, voices, and places. It is less immediately clear how writers such as Davidman and Millay, who never physically visited Spain, might be writing autobiographically when they write about the Spanish Civil War. I would argue, however, that in their poetry on Spain, Davidman and Millay are asserting personal creeds or mottoes for how they specifically see and engage the world. Always, theirs is a seeing and engaging which runs counter to the dominant beliefs of their day; thus, the depictions which these poets give us of life as *they* see it demonstrate their particular, personalized hope for effecting change in the world.<sup>1</sup>

As poets speaking to their American audiences--which, in the 1930s, were sizeable-- Davidman and Millay could not have helped but to be aware that their political poems would be read as their own personal statements on contemporary crises. Poetry provided a unique space for the publicizing of such personal statements. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have indicated, in no other literary form is the author so closely identified with the content of her writing. The lyric poem,<sup>2</sup> they assert, "is in some sense the utterance of a strong and assertive 'I'. . . . [T]he central self that speaks or sings a poem must be forcefully defined. . ." (xxii). All three women poets whom this chapter considers operated as metonymic witnesses for the people of Republican Spain, understanding themselves as powerful, speaking individuals, although never losing sight of the silenced masses for whom their political beliefs compelled them to speak. Within this framework, I will discuss Joy Davidman's Spanish Civil War poems from Letter to a

---

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Williams, writing at the height of World War II, also assumed that the poet who acted as intellectual witness in world crises would engage an autobiographical element in her work. "In wartime," Williams asserts, "it is not the function of the poet to go into uniform, but to resolve and state. . . the emotional experience of being alive and suffering before, during, and after the eruption. Though he [*sic*] never go near a military camp he [*sic*] receives the wounds, and gives warning long before the first bomb wails" (vi-vii).

<sup>2</sup> As I will show in this chapter, Davidman, Taggard and Millay generally wrote poetry which was lyric in form, although much of their poetry embraced subject matter more typical of Modernism and Proletarianism.

Comrade (1938),<sup>3</sup> as well as Genevieve Taggard's "Silence in Mallorca" (1938), "To the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade" (1942), and "Andalucia" (1946), and Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Say that We Saw Spain Die" (1938).

This chapter asks how such shining examples of committed 1930s writing has vanished from our literary history. While the answer lies partly in the aesthetically and politically conservative atmosphere in which the New Critics shaped the canon during the 1940s and 50s, I focus on the ways in which the literary and political circles of the so-called radical decade of the 1930s were shaped by issues of gender. Women's voices were excluded and marginalized by both High Modernism and Proletarianism, the two dominant camps of aesthetic and literary thought in the 1930s. This chapter examines ways in which male practitioners of both High Modernism and Proletarianism effectively silenced their female counterparts. By depicting contemporary female poets as unfit for any poetry other than sentimental verse, male high Modernists and Proletarians willfully ignored such politicized and confrontational poetry as Davidman's, Taggard's and Millay's Spanish Civil War poems, and thus set the stage for these women poets' erasure from intellectual and literary history.

In this chapter, I seek to rediscover Davidman's, Taggard's and Millay's politically informed poetry and to bring it back into public light. This poetry is especially worthy of our rediscovering, for through it we come to understand the role of the intellectual witness vis-a-vis war. Moreover, these poems, speaking with a voice simultaneously personal *and* political, lead us to a deeper and more complex understanding of the conditions under which the metonymic testifying voice is formed.

The metonymic voice allows the speaker to envision herself as part of a larger group; she is not a lone, isolated figure, speaking to the masses from on high; rather, she

---

<sup>3</sup> The Spanish Civil War is one of many subthemes in Letter to a Comrade. Of approximately 50 poems, six deal specifically with the war or allude to it: "Near Catalonia," "Snow in Madrid," "In Praise of fascists," "End of a Revolutionary," "Apology for Liberals," and "Prayer Against Indifference."

is *among* the masses, speaking *for* them. This is the position which the intellectual witness must occupy as well, in calling to public attention--or recalling to public memory--a traumatic event otherwise in danger of going unheard. As such, the role of the intellectual witness and the metonymic speaker are inextricably linked. We may account for the use of metonymic voice in these poems, then, partly because of the writer's stance as intellectual witness. Also partly responsible for this stance is these women poets' understanding of themselves as insider-outsiders both to Spain and to the American poetic community. As we have seen, it is from this border-dwelling position that the metonymic voice most often emerges, as a means of establishing collectivity and belonging even under the most isolating or marginalizing circumstances.

### *The Intellectual Witness*

By the fall of 1937, the Republican forces were beginning to lose ground against Francisco Franco's onslaught. The fascists, who had been pushing steadily northward from Spanish Morocco, site of the original military revolt, gained complete control of Northern Spain that October. The Republican capital, already relocated once from Madrid to Valencia<sup>4</sup>, moved still deeper into Spain's easternmost fringe, retreating to the Catalan city of Barcelona. That same autumn, a twenty-two-year-old New York schoolteacher named Joy Davidman wrote the poem "Near Catalonia."<sup>5</sup> Although she was never physically in Catalonia herself, in this poem, Davidman so wholly identifies with the struggle taking place on that distant battlefield that she speaks not about, but *for*, the soldiers engaged in that struggle. What is most striking about this poem is the way in which a young American woman, never having ventured outside her own country, so vividly envisions herself as a part of the war in Spain. Indeed, Davidman paints the

---

<sup>4</sup> The Republican government left Madrid for Valencia in November 1936.

<sup>5</sup> Catalonia (also known as Cataluna or Catalunya, to Spanish and Catalan speakers respectively) is the easternmost province of Spain and home to Barcelona, a Republican stronghold throughout the Spanish Civil War.

landscape of this war with language so graphically precise as to make the reader cringe; beyond the achingly clear images is an equally stark profession of faith and commitment. In this poem, her identification with the Republican soldiers is forged not through shared experience, but rather through mutual, deeply held political commitments. Although she writes about the war at a tremendous physical remove, Davidman is nonetheless so engaged in and supportive of the ideology for which these soldiers are dying that her poem serves as political testimony for them.<sup>6</sup>

How is it possible that an individual can bear witness for someone *else's* experience of trauma? Geoffrey Hartman explores the "possibility of an intellectual witness" in reference to the ability of those who experience a traumatic event--such as the Jewish Holocaust, or the Spanish Civil War--at a physical and thus an emotional remove from that event. The term "witness," Hartman points out, "is usually limited to eyewitness testimony. But then we would not ordinarily qualify it by 'intellectual,' since it is the immediacy, the sheer, wounding weight of experience that counts" ("Shoah," 37). Here Hartman points to the unique position of the intellectual witness; distinct from the eyewitness because she does *not* bear that "wounding weight" of firsthand knowledge, she is a witness not to the traumatic event, nor directly to the eyewitnesses themselves (as in the case of bearing secondary witness), but rather to the particular *history* of the traumatic event. Hartman calls this a "voluntary witnessing," a witnessing that "comes later," after the trauma has happened, and sometimes even after the eyewitnesses themselves have died (40). "The passing of the survivor," Hartman insists, "does not mean the passing of witness. Many have become witness by adoption" and by active investigation of the traumatic event already past (39). The act of intellectual witnessing is marked by a "consuming effort to 'see' [and] to find a way of telling others--even themselves--what

---

<sup>6</sup> "Near Catalonia" is one of several poems reflecting on the Spanish Civil War in Davidman's Letter to a Comrade (1938).

happened” (40). In the case of “Near Catalonia,” Davidman acts as intellectual witness to the wounded, frightened soldiers of the Spanish Republic.

Hartman gives credence to the intellectual (or secondary) witness, despite her lack of direct or “eye-” witnessing. “The intellectual. . .,” says Hartman, “plays a role similar to that of a bystander *after the event* who observes it from an ambiguous position. On the one hand, detached or belated, he has no obligation to take account of the [traumatic event]. On the other hand, once he learns what happened and does nothing. . . he is not unlike an observer of the event who failed to react” (39). Thus the intellectual witness, once she comes in contact with knowledge of the trauma, is accountable for choosing whether to receive or to refuse that knowledge. As Hartman implies, the potential intellectual witness who shuts out the traumatic story, once it presents itself, is as complicitous in the perpetuation of evil as the German citizens who walked past the gates of Dachau without asking what was going on inside. Intellectual witnessing, then, plays a substantial role in allowing stories of political and psychological oppression to be told, acknowledged, and gradually woven into the history of humankind.

Thus the intellectual witness is essential to the formation and keeping of a public memory; in this way her task involves the telling of someone else’s life story as well as the telling of her own. Her role is to actively remember--and to call to her public’s attention--that traumatic event which may seem forgettable in that it happened to other people, in another place, but in which she, the intellectual witness and writer, nonetheless feels implicated.

Davidman’s “Near Catalonia” exemplifies the work of intellectual witnessing. On one hand, the poem forces its American readership to hear the voices of those whose stories are obscured by distance and by the politics of noninterventionism. By listening to the horrific story of the Republican soldier caught between “the sea at our back” and “the bitter shouting of the gun,” the reader is forced to confront the brutal realities of a war that most Americans ignored. Moreover, Davidman’s poem operates as testimony in

that it names the perpetrators of all this violence and seeks to hold them publicly accountable. Davidman skewers Franco's fascist armies as poisoners of the earth; she is subtler, but just as unstinting, in her fingering of the Western democracies that will not come to the aid of the embattled Republic. Her cry that "no one will give us iron for the wall" is a protest against the embargo against Spain imposed by noninterventionist countries. She deepens that protest by showing the repercussions of the embargo; without iron or other supplies from the outside, Republican Spain must shield itself only with the frail and spindly "bodies of men."

Naming specific wrongs and wrongdoers is an essential part of political testimony, particularly when that testimony revolves around a traumatic event, such as war or genocide. In the wake of such historic truth commissions as South Africa's and Guatemala's, both in 1996, we are surely enabled to understand the necessity of such explicit and public remembering.<sup>7</sup> Part of the ethical impetus in giving testimony, after all, is to ensure that the traumatic event will never recur. When a trauma survivor speaks out about the acts of injustice that she has suffered, and especially when she names those who authored that injustice, she entrusts the story to public memory. She likewise bequeaths to the public a sense of collective responsibility for ensuring that such horrors do not happen again, and that the perpetrator is not allowed to repeat such acts. This is the important political and ethical work which Joy Davidman accomplishes in "Near Catalonia." She as well as her compatriots Genevieve Taggard and Edna St. Vincent Millay turn their gaze--and ours--toward Spain, describing the torment of the starving, dying Republican soldiers and decrying the powers of fascist which spread across Europe

---

<sup>7</sup> Truth commissions, nongovernmental and usually international bodies of fact-finders who investigate and make public those human rights abuses suffered in civil war or under a dictatorship, are largely a phenomenon of the 1990s. In the work that they do and the purpose behind that work, however, I see a parallel to the work and purpose of the literature of intellectual witnessing--such as that written by Davidman, Taggard, and Millay. According to "The Year in Review 1996," truth commissions are used in "identifying and documenting human rights violations and helping to bring perpetrators of abuses to justice. Although. . . [truth commissions have] no authority to prosecute crimes, they [are] designed to obtain and publicize information about past atrocities as a first step toward acknowledging responsibility. . ." (n.p.).

like a long night falling. Sometimes lyrical, sometimes written in freer, less measured form, their poems about Spain and the fascist threat always insist on our seeing what we do not want to see, hearing what we do not want to hear, for the sake of our own grueling salvation.

*The Intellectual Witness and the Question of Pain*

In their Spanish Civil War poetry, Davidman, Taggard, and Millay all tend to emphasize the physical and emotional frailty of the human body. While they do not fail to praise the valor and the worthiness of the Republic's cause, they rarely undermine or overlook the very real price which the Republic paid for that cause. How do we account for this apparent desire, cropping up repeatedly in these poems, to consider and reflect on the *pain* and the *fear* inherent to the soldier's experience? One explanation lies in Josephine Herbst's account of a visit she made to Republican Spain in 1937. Moving back and forth between the self-important frenzy of international reporters in Madrid and the grim tension of the front lines near Jarama, Herbst recognized a marked difference in the way soldiers and civilian onlookers talked about their own experiences of the war.

. . . [A]s I was to find out, talk at the front was different from talk that might come from the same soldier, once he was on leave in Madrid. At the front, he was pulled together as if for a spring. He couldn't play around with his fears but had to keep them down, like the folded blades of a knife, deep in the pocket. So you also never heard much talk about military tactics, as you did among the noncombatants at the Hotel Florida, where there was a certain amount of vainglory in knowledge of the how and when. Nor did you get ghoulis accounts of the dead. (147)

Thus it may be more possible for the individual who has never physically stood in the line of fire, and who knows that she will never have to do so, to address the latent terror and constant possibility of violent death which are part of the soldier's life. The soldier

himself, however--the one who must repeatedly return to that site of imminent danger--does not have so direct an access to his own experience of terror. To dwell upon the fact of his own terror, or to speak in detail of the maimed bodies of his fallen companions, may mean his inability to continue in the role of soldier. This relationship of sympathizing, pain-focused civilian to stalwart, pain-denying soldier tells us something about the relationship of the intellectual witness to the primary witness as well. While the primary witness is often too close to the actual site of her trauma to be able to articulate it spontaneously and on her own, her full testimony can be called out by the intellectual witness, who watches the traumatic event at a physical distance but whose sympathies are engaged with those who suffer from that event, and who wants to hear their stories.

### *Spanish Civil War Poetry by American Men*

This portrayal of the human at war, however, stands in stark contrast to most of the Spanish Civil War poetry written by men. A common, although not universal theme, among male poets of this war is the glory and bravery of the soldiers of the Republic and of the International Brigades. The soldier's experience of the Spanish Civil War, if we are to believe the majority of male-authored poems on this subject, was almost entirely free of despair and terror. The rare glimpses that we do catch of physical suffering or brokenness, we are asked to see in the light of noble heroism.

Edwin Rolfe, the most prolific poet on the war in Spain, exemplifies this refusal to dwell for very long on fear or pain, in "Elegia." "There was never enough food, but always poetry. / Ah the flood of song that gushed with your blood / into the world during your three years of glory!" This stanza is interesting not because the poet mentions hunger and blood--both seemingly requisite subjects in any poem on war--but because of the way the poet *treats* these subjects. In "Elegia," a poem honoring wartorn Madrid, blood and hunger are mere annoyances or afterthoughts, almost completely elided by the



beauty and triumph that permeates the scene Rolfe describes. The Madrid of 1937, although its citizens were the frequent victims of bombing raids and starvation, appears in Rolfe's poem shrouded in a golden haze of nostalgia and pride; it is a city populated not by the dying or the sick but by tranquil old watchmakers dreaming "of tiny, intricate minutes" and girls who "stroll by, . . . / conscious of their womanhood" through streets lined with "bookshops, the windows always crowded / with new editions of the Gypsy Ballads." The blood of Madrid is simply a vehicle for its "song" of "glory;" hunger, on the other hand, is easily overcome by poetry.

Langston Hughes's "Hero--International Brigade," also speaks of death in this glorified manner. Hughes' narrator, the ghost of a soldier killed in battle, begins by asking: "Blood, / Or a flag, / Or a flame / Or life itself / Are they the same: / Our Dream?" By the end of this poem, the narrator has answered his own question; asserting that "had I lived four score and ten, / Life could not've had / a better end," he goes on to cry: "They're all the same / Our dream! / My death! / Your life! / Our blood! / One flame!" While these triumphant lines illuminate the spirit of internationalism which compelled much leftist activism during the 1930s, the triumph comes at a high cost (the narrator's life) which the poem dismisses out of hand. If blood and "life itself" signify nothing more than "a flag," the value of human life is reduced to the value of the merely inanimate. Loss of human blood or human life is thus rendered inconsequential in pursuit of the revolutionary flame and "our dream."

Theodore R. Cogswell, in his "International Brigade Song," further privileges the cause of war over the human lives involved in it. Writing in ballad-like form, Cogswell insists that his poem is a song and that "You've got to sing it sad / And you've got to sing it slow." Because the ballad often operates as a form of oral history passed from one community to another and from one generation to the next, Cogswell asserts, both through his choice of the ballad form and his command that his readers *sing* it, that the story he tells has much to teach us and is thus eminently repeatable. The focus of

Cogswell's poem is "Bill," the lone soldier in all his division who refused to retreat from a hill that the fascists eventually conquered. The poem never states directly that Bill dies because of his foolhardy yet apparently valiant choice, although it is impossible to imagine otherwise. Thus the memory of war which we are to learn from and preserve for future generations is, again, not a story of death or of violence--neither are described here--but of "a gunner name of Bill" who "just laughed / When we started in to run." In this poem, then, the war experience is encoded once again with noble urges and brave deeds, not with suffering or loss.

"City of Anguish," another of Edwin Rolfe's poems written in memory of Madrid, does expend greater detail on emotional and physical weakness of the human in wartime, as its title suggests. Yet even here, the poet spends at least as much time depicting himself, and his brothers in arms, as being able to exert some measure of control over their environment. Recounting a night in which he and a fellow soldier watched a bombing raid from their rooftop, Rolfe writes: "We counted the flashes, divided the horizon, / 90 degrees for Enrico, 90 for me. / 'Four?' 'No, five!' We spotted the big guns when / the sounds came crashing, split-seconds after light." The men's mathematical, pragmatic approach to keeping accounts or tallies of the falling bombs gives them at least an illusion of their own sense of agency and self-sufficiency.

Although Rolfe in his poetry focuses on the capability and nobility of the soldier at war, he does pause at the beginning of his prose account of the war, The Lincoln Battalion, to remember the vulnerability and ill-preparedness that marked the experiences of many volunteers (3-4). Interestingly, the other male-authored accounts of the Spanish Civil War which do focus on human weakness and terror are also written in prose. The best-known of these are Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls and George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia; Harry Fisher's Comrades and Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks' Madrid 1937 also contains ample documentation of this grimmer and more normative experience of war. Certainly, scenes of brutality and humiliating fear are more

common to the experience of warfare than scenes dominated by a sense of personal control, glorious nobility, or aesthetic delight. Yet it is those poems expressing such impossibly high-minded ideas about war, almost always by male veterans, which fill the anthologies of Spanish Civil War poetry. Indeed, it is just such poems which have caused many critics and historians to refer to the war in Spain as “the poets’ war.”<sup>8</sup>

Why is poetry apparently the chosen vessel for these idealized visions of war? With its ability to capture the immediacy of an experience, to document concisely a moment almost as soon as it passes, poetry does serve a special function in representing war. Frederick Benson points out that “[t]he span between observation and creation” for the poet is comparatively brief; indeed, war poets frequently write in the heat of battle, before the outcome is even known (129). In contrast, the length of time necessary for writing longer, more complex literary works such as a novel or memoir places the author at a greater chronological remove from the experience. Thus the war poem is a particularly valuable literary instrument, for it conveys like no other genre the heightened emotions and convictions that spring from the lived moment of battle itself.

Cary Nelson offers further insight into this matter; the political and cultural environment surrounding the Spanish Republic, he suggests, was such that supporters and citizens of that Republic were “moved by poems written in trenches, tacked to trees, passed hand-to-hand amongst crowds, sung under fire” (*Trees* 33). Soldier-poets such as Edwin Rolfe, Nelson reminds us, “had known people to live and die in part by way of the meaning they gleaned from reading poems” (33). In fact, the farewell march of the International Brigades from Barcelona on October 29, 1938 was commemorated throughout the Republic with inspiring political poems, printed on cards and handed out among the crowds. This seems “an improbable gesture by our contemporary poetic and political standards,” Nelson admits, yet this gesture also reminds us of the power that a

---

<sup>8</sup> This phrase is often used in reference to the participation of British volunteers such as John Cornford, Tom Wintringham, and Julian Bell (nephew of Virginia Woolf).

people under siege invested in poetry. Poetry which ennobled and upheld the Republican cause provided, in a concisely and appealingly, a version of the war's history around which the Republic could rally. It is no surprise, then, that American men who fought in Spain and documented that fighting in poetry would choose a similar route in their writing.

It is striking that, in contrast, so many of the men who wrote poetry on World War I *do* depict scenes of human wretchedness and grave suffering. (Britons Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon come most immediately to mind.) While I do not have space here to examine at length the reasons for this difference, I would suggest that the Spanish Civil War poets were driven by a necessity to uphold publicly their cause, even in the face of desperation and imminent failure. The war in Spain, after all, was not nearly so well known, nor were its causes so widely regarded with sympathy, as with World War I. In addition, American volunteers were berated and punished by many of their peers and often by their own government for their participation in the Spanish Civil War. Ennobling their actions through poetry may have been one way of continually reassuring themselves--and their reading public--of the rightness of those actions. War poetry, regardless of the times and context, will always at some level operate politically. As Susan Schweik notes, the war poem distinguishes itself "by definition from. . . 'pure poetry.' [T]he war poem categorically admits at least traces of the impurities of ideology and of history" (12). Poetry written specifically about the war experience cannot avoid supporting a particular political agenda, whether it be to point out that war's horrors and thus to call for ceasefire, or to ennoble that war's agenda and thus inspire a nation's further involvement. Certainly the majority of American male poets who addressed the Spanish Civil War were interested in serving the particular political goal of calling upon other potential comrades in arms. If accomplishing this goal meant reducing "life itself" into "a flag," "a flame," as in Hughes's poem, then so it had to be.

### *Literary Biography of Joy Davidman*

Partly because they were not standing in the direct line of fire themselves, American women poets who watched the Spanish Civil War and wrote about it at a physical remove were not afraid to face the horrors of war head-on in their poetry. Most graphic of all the American women poets addressing this war was Joy Davidman. In "Near Catalonia," she does not shrink from depicting the Republican soldier's "wincing flesh. . . easily broken, easily made sick, frightened of pain and spoiled by evil weather." Nor, in "Apology for Liberals," does she turn her eyes from worms "gnawing the eyeholes of a skull / lost on the battlefield," and the bombing victims "struck into fragments. . . perishing / under a scream of air and falling steel."

Who, then, was Joy Davidman, this unflinching poet? The answer is complicated and often startling. The answer may also, in fact, shed light on the situation of many of the politically empowered women writers of the 1930s who are now all but lost to history and to the canon. The causes which captured Davidman's imagination and the convictions which fired her writing throughout the "Red Decade," were, after all, causes and convictions which she shared with many progressive-minded women of her generation. What happened to Davidman--and to her writing--afterwards, as World War II engulfed the globe and then smoldered into the Cold War, is also a common story for these women. The biography of Joy Davidman's early life is a veritable litany of accomplishment after gleaming accomplishment. Recipient of an M.A. with honors from Columbia at age twenty, she went on to publish several poems in the acclaimed "little magazine," *Poetry*, by age twenty-one. Winning the respect and friendship of such literary lights as *Poetry*'s then-editor, Harriet Monroe,<sup>9</sup> and novelist-poet Stephen Benet, Davidman was just twenty-three when, in 1938, her collection of poems, *Letter to a*

---

<sup>9</sup> Davidman's biographer, Lyle Dorsett, notes that Monroe was so impressed with Davidman's poetic abilities that she employed the young writer to help with the reading and selecting of submissions to *Poetry* in 1935 and 1936 (24). Thus Davidman began at age twenty the work of editor and critic which she would continue throughout the 1940s under the auspices of *The New Masses*.

Comrade, was published by the Yale Younger Poet Series. Benet, who edited that series and chose Davidman's work out of dozens of submissions for the Yale award, saw in her poems a "richness of imagery. . . , a lively social conscience, a varied command of forms and a bold power," as he stated in his Foreword to Davidman's collection (9). Lauded by critics and the general reading public alike, Letter to a Comrade received glowing reviews in The New York Times (her book "is distinguished. . . for its plasticity of technique, clarity of image, affirmative strength, and flexibility of thought," according to Dorothy Ulrich) and in Books (where Ruth Lechlitner called Davidman's poems "important" and showing "genuine ability")<sup>10</sup>. The first printing of Letter to a Comrade sold out immediately; a second printing in early 1939 sold equally well. Half a century later, the book was still in print. As Davidman's biographer, Lyle Dorsett, has pointed out, "Such a happy fate is experienced by few modern poets" (28).

Joy Davidman's literary successes did not end there, however. In 1939 Letter to a Comrade won a thousand-dollar award given by the National Institute of Arts and Letters; Davidman was named co-recipient of this award along with Robert Frost. That same year, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer chose Davidman, as one of several promising new American writers, to participate in an experimental young screenwriters' program. In 1940 Macmillan published her novel Anya; critics were even more enthusiastic about this work than they had been about Letter to a Comrade. At the age of twenty-five, Davidman was hearing members of the literati compare her work to that of D.H. Lawrence and Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer (Dorsett 31).<sup>11</sup> As a member of the League of American Writers, she then collected and edited three hundred poems by 150 poets of twenty different countries for her War Poems of the United Nations, published in

---

<sup>10</sup> New York Times, August 6, 1939, p. 4; Books, December 25, 1938, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> Anya follows the life of a Jewish woman living in nineteenth-century Ukraine from adolescence to middle age. Based on the experiences of Davidman's own mother, the novel celebrates human sensuality and intellect; it also recaptures and highlights details of the past century's Jewish and Ukrainian peasant traditions.

1943; Davidman herself did much of the translation work for this volume. She also edited, introduced, and published a volume of poetry, entitled They Looked Like Men, written by her friend Alexander Bergman. In 1944, Davidman was one of an elite group of writers chosen as the focus of Joseph Yoseloff's book, Seven Poets in Search of an Answer; in this volume, she shared billing with Langston Hughes and Maxwell Bodenheim. Hired by New Masses in 1941 to work full-time as book and movie critic, as well as poetry editor, Davidman helped to shape leftist aesthetic taste and thought throughout the years of World War II. By the age of thirty, Joy Davidman had moved in, and been embraced by, the most prestigious literary circles of her time; her work as poet, novelist, editor, critic, and activist was brilliantly accomplished and widely celebrated.

But how do we know Joy Davidman now? Fewer than sixty years past her thirtieth birthday--the age when she was at or barely past the height of her considerable fame--she is known today, if she is known at all, as the wife of C.S. Lewis (or, more obscurely yet, as the character played by Debra Winger in the 1994 film, Shadowlands--a recounting of the Lewis-Davidman romance, seen from Lewis's perspective).<sup>12</sup> Clearly, however, this was a role she came to rather late in life, and one that by no means fully defines her. Davidman had lived whole worlds of experience and had published dozens of literate, politically compelled poems and essays, as well as two novels, before marrying Lewis.<sup>13</sup> Yet what little contemporary criticism and biography we have about Davidman and her work would have us believe otherwise. Not forty years after her death in 1960, Davidman's political and writerly life, prior to her 1956 marriage to Lewis, is virtually erased from history.

---

<sup>12</sup> Davidman's relationship with Lewis is also the focus of A Grief Observed (1961), Lewis's brief memoir of his own psychological and spiritual recovery after Davidman's death from cancer in 1960.

<sup>13</sup> Macmillan published Davidman's second novel, Weeping Bay, in 1950. Following her conversion from atheism to Christianity and her meeting of Lewis, Davidman also published a collection of essays on the Ten Commandments, entitled Smoke on the Mountain (Westminster Press, 1954).

In Cary Nelson's study of political literature from the first half of this century, aptly titled Repression and Recovery (1989), he devotes several paragraphs to Joy Davidman and her early work. Nelson credits Davidman with demonstrating "the diversity of styles, topics, and vantage points at work in. . . 1930s political poetry. . ." (113). Yet Nelson's recognition of Davidman as a representative of her times appears to be the last mention, to date, that a literary critic has made of her. Indeed, it is the only piece of contemporary literary criticism that I have found on Davidman which actually focuses on her literary contributions rather than on her biography. As might be expected, the meager critical work which we do have on Davidman tends to overemphasize the ways in which her biography links or provides new insight into that of her famous husband.

Lyle Dorsett makes the poet's Christian conversion and relationship to Lewis the centerpiece of his 1983 biography on Davidman, And God Came In. Although Dorsett does provide some extensive comments on Davidman's writing, more than half of his book is dedicated to telling the story of the last six or seven years of Davidman's life. (She lived to be forty-five.) The only other critical material on Davidman which I have been able to uncover consists of a transcribed speech which Dorsett gave to the New York C.S. Lewis Society in 1983 and an article, published that same year, by Paul Leopold in The Bulletin of the New York C.S. Lewis Society. Both Dorsett and Leopold refer at length to Davidman's first husband, William Gresham, as well as to Lewis, explaining that their respective research on Davidman led them continually back to the work of her two husbands, as both Gresham's and Lewis's writing has been archived, critiqued, and documented far more thoroughly than has Davidman's.<sup>14</sup> These two scholarly essays into Davidman's life and writing in fact work to erase her name, even as they attempt to bring it more fully to public attention. Leopold opens his article on

---

<sup>14</sup> William Gresham, husband of Joy Davidman from 1942 to 1953, was the author of two successful novels, Nightmare Alley (1946) and Limbo Tower (1949).



Davidman by calling her “C.S. Lewis’s wife.” And even the title of Dorsett’s transcribed speech, “The Search for Joy Davidman,” implies how very lost she has become to public view. The most patronizing and effacing gesture of all, however, is Lyle Dorsett’s entertaining at length the question of whether or not Davidman and Lewis ever consummated their relationship; he spends at least as much time debating this subject as he does discussing the merits of Davidman’s literary work.

Thus are Joy Davidman’s significant contributions to 1930s literature washed away in the enormous tide of scholarly interest which continues to surround Lewis. However, as we reflect on the range of her contacts within the literary world and of her influence on leftist writing and thinking (sustained throughout a decade), Davidman’s now almost total submersion in the larger, better-known stories of the men who surrounded her still startles. How has such a stellar example of committed 1930s writing disappeared from the canon and from our cultural heritage? Asking this question compels us to take into consideration other, similar stories from the same period: stories whose first chapters are punctuated with great bursts of intellectual and political activity, but which are ultimately stories of erasure. Indeed, Joy Davidman’s story is in many ways a microcosmic example of what happened to many women writers of the Depression decade.

### *Why the Disappearance?*

The pattern we see in Davidman’s career, flourishing in the 1930s but then rapidly fading from view, is a common enough one in writers of the period. One reason for this slide into disappearance, according to Cary Nelson, is that “critics aiming to marginalize the history of political poetry” often critique the slackening of political activity and commitment of American writers after World War II, as proof of the temporality of the causes which they espoused in the 1930s (Repression 112). As such critics would have it, then, the specific political and social concerns which lie at the heart of Depression era

literature became irrelevant almost as soon as the decade ended; most literature emanating from that period is now impossibly outdated. Nelson's project in Repression and Recovery is to disprove such assumptions, demonstrating that the disappearance of many leftist texts should be blamed not on any particular shortcomings in those texts themselves, but rather on the builders and defenders of the literary canon in postwar America.

Insightful as Nelson's explanation is, I would add, however, that the answer is somewhat more complex. Indeed, even before the canon-makers and New Critics emerged in the 1940s and 50s to promote what Alicia Ostriker calls a "socially and politically conservative, nostalgic, stylistically formalist" climate in American literature (56), forces of erasure and silencing were already exerting themselves, particularly around the literary work of women. We cannot speak of women's ardent participation in the literary and political circles of the American 1930s without speaking also of the ways in which those very circles drew themselves around issues of gender, thus excluding or marginalizing the voices of women. In making these claims, I by no means wish to refute my earlier argument about the relationship of gender to writing: that it is *not* gender per se which determines a writer's voice. What I do wish to make clear, however, is that the two dominant camps of aesthetic and literary thought in the 1930s, Modernism and Proletarianism, were monolithically masculine spheres. To be a women writer--and, still more specifically, to be a woman poet--in the 1930s was to spend an entire decade hovering at thresholds, pushing against doors which, even in this era of heightened liberal attitude, still mostly opened for men alone.

### ***High Modernism and the Place of the Woman Poet***

Celeste Schenck suggests that poetry in this era was an especially gendered literary genre. Practitioners of High Modernism excluded women poets from, or saw them as inapt for, both Modernist *and* formalist styles of writing. Broadly defined,

“Modernist” style was more experimental and freer in form, thus apparently breaking from past poetic traditions, while “formalist” poetry held to those traditions, continuing to rely on rhyme and meter.<sup>15</sup> As these were the two major recognized forms which poetry took in the 1930s, such pronouncements about female limitations effectively rendered women incapable of poetry altogether.

Early articulations of Modernist aesthetics sought to establish Modernism as an entirely and radically new sphere of poetry, one that broke sharply from any poetic form that had come before. As Ezra Pound famously put it, the mandate of Modernist writers was to “make it new”--to make language reflect the chaotic, anarchic, broken world which the Great War left behind. Those who wished to advocate Modernism as a radical new direction in poetry defined Modernism specifically *against* the genteel tradition of nineteenth-century formalist poetry. In separating themselves from this tradition, practitioners and advocates of Modernism often found themselves denigrating formalism and separating themselves from it by suggesting that Modernism and formalism were binary opposites. Some went a step further yet, implying that the division between these two poetic codes found its parallel in the supposed binary of male and female writing. Modernism, then, became enscribed as a primarily masculine domain,<sup>16</sup> while those who persisted in writing formalist poetry after 1915 were consigned to the category of “lady poetesses.”

As I begin this discussion of the woman writer’s place in American poetry between the world wars, it is important to note that the schools of aesthetic practice dominating early twentieth century poetry--such as formalism, Modernism and

---

<sup>15</sup> Proletarian poetry, for the most part, employed the formalist style. Mike Gold, one of the preeminent spokespersons for the Proletarian literary movement, publicly denounced Modernism as being unfit for the revolutionary writer’s purposes: “We are not interested in the verbal acrobats--this is only another form for bourgeois idleness” (“Proletarian Realism,” reprinted in Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology [1972], p. 207).

<sup>16</sup> While the Modernist poetic canon has traditionally admitted a few “significant” women to its membership--such as Gertrude Stein and Hilda Doolittle--the very fact that academic debates still rage over whether the Modernist period is more rightfully dubbed “the age of Pound” or “the age of Stevens” (Kalaidjian, American 1) points to the ongoing (constructed) masculinization of the period.

Proletarianism--were not as clearly demarcated as the canon has indicated. Cary Nelson points to the power politics at work in such facile delineations:

[P]oets themselves often simplify the work of their contemporaries and their predecessors and categorize them as enemies or allies so as to gain an energizing sense of opposition and collaboration. . . Schematic, two-part contest models are a recurrent feature of the way we write literary history. . . . Such melodramatic oppositions facilitate writing literary history. . . . (22)

Such facilitation, however, often comes at the expense of our grasping the interactions, adoptions, and overlappings which actually transpire between various “camps” in any given literary period. Walter Kalaidjian continues this argument, attacking in particular the “sanitized canon of High Modernism” which was institutionalized by the “academy, museum culture, gallery market, and publishing industry” of the conservative postwar years (American 4). Kalaidjian’s project, in both “Marketing Modern Poetry and the Southern Public Sphere” and American Culture Between the Wars, is to interrogate and ultimately debunk canonical interpretations of Modernism. These canonical definitions, he argues, mythologize Modernism as the domain of “high culture. . . founded on the subordination of gender, race, and class differences” and “idealized as the ‘universal mind of Europe’” (American 4). Thus has the immense *diversity* which actually marked Modernist practice been repressed and written out of American literary history.<sup>17</sup>

As I speak here of formalism, Modernism, and Proletarianism, I do not wish to imply that any of these schools of thought are monolithic, unassailable entities. On the other hand, precisely *because* canon makers and literary scholars until very recently have tended to regard them as such, those writers who simultaneously engaged various poetic codes--thus never identifying themselves completely with one code only--have tended to

---

<sup>17</sup> Other literary scholars, in addition to Nelson and Kalaidjian, whose recent work on Modernism has helped to unveil its *plurality* of cultural visions and practices are Barbara Foley (Radical Representations, 1993) and Paul Lauter (Canons and Contexts, 1991).

be overlooked and excluded from our literary canon. Poets such as Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose writing weaves back and forth among the various established literary camps, are not easily contained by any one of them. Davidman's poems in Letter to a Comrade, for example, are alternately lyrical and revolutionary--and sometimes both at once. Taggard's poetry on the Spanish Civil War is notable for its engagement of Proletarian themes within a Modernist poetic code. Finally, although Millay's reputation was chiefly built on her sentimental or formalist poetry, she also powerfully used her writing as a platform for her political concerns. These three women are among those whose poetry fell *outside* the dominant, canonically defined schools of literary practice, and thus, in a sense, "fell between the cracks."

It is my contention in this chapter that the woman poet of the early twentieth century was particularly susceptible to this plight. The history of women's virtual homelessness within the world of American poetry has been, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, both long and bitter. The gaping cultural silence surrounding the life and work of the woman poet in America, Gilbert and Gubar assert, is due largely to "the ways in which representative male readers and critics have reacted to poetry by representative women. . ." (xvii). One of the more acute example of this negative representation of the female poet by the male critic is Maxwell Bodenheim's 1914 essay for The Little Review, wherein he peremptorily banished the woman poet from Modernism's hallowed--and, in his view, inherently masculine--domain. Attacking formalism as Modernism's pale, effeminate Other, Bodenheim decries that "decorative straight-jacket, rhymed verse," and envisions himself as an avant-garde Bluebeard who siezes the tools of much-despised formalism--that is, rhyme and meter--and turns them against a "young girl" (22). He hacks to pieces this young woman with "the little knife of rhyme" and "finishes" her by "clawing out a generous handful of her shimmering, myriad-tinted hair, with the hands of meter" (22). Celeste Schenck responds: "Although the butchered victim of this fantasy is [formalist or genteel] poetry, the hostility generated

by rhymed verse extends metonymically to her largely female practitioners” (226). Summarily excluded from Modernism by virtue of their gender and criticized--indeed, as Bodenheim would have it, condemned--for their writing in the formalist vein, the woman poet of the early twentieth century was, indeed, apparently homeless.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps most telling of the hostile climate in which American women poets have struggled to be heard is John Crowe Ransom’s essay on Edna St. Vincent Millay.<sup>19</sup> Entitled “The Poet as Woman,” Ransom’s remarks on women’s suitability for poetry-writing are startlingly vituperative. Equally startling is the fact that Ransom was publishing this piece, wondering publicly if Millay were really a poet at all, at approximately the same time that Millay had just published her seventeenth full volume of poetry. Ransom’s “The Poet as Woman” first appeared in 1937 in The Southern Review. As Cary Nelson wryly notes, Ransom apparently “felt sufficiently committed to the piece to reprint it the next year in The World’s Body (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons)” (Repression 308, n. 214).

While Ransom begins his remarks by admitting that Millay is “an artist,” he makes apparent his own extreme unease with his subject in the following sentences: “She is also a woman. No poet ever registered herself more deliberately in that light. She therefore fascinates the male reviewer but at the same time horrifies him a little too” (76-77). Having confessed his horror, Ransom then proceeds to distance himself and all of his gender from the object of his fear; he cleaves apart “male” and “female” intellectual capabilities in a single sweeping blow: “The minds of man and woman grow apart, and how shall we express their differentiation? In this way, I think: man, at best, is

---

<sup>18</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar agree with Schenck that the woman poet has traditionally been even more marginalized than women writers of other genres. They claim that, throughout modern history, the obstacles faced by women poets “were even more formidable than those faced by female novelists” (xvi). Gilbert and Gubar go on to cite Emily Dickinson’s implied recognition, in “They shut me up in prose” (#613), that “poetry by women was in some sense inappropriate, unladylike, and immodest” and Virginia Woolf’s complaint that “Judith Shakespeare” dies because “poetry. . . is still a denied outlet” (xvii).

<sup>19</sup> For excellent detail on the reactionary politics of New Critics such as Ransom, see Kalaidjian’s “Marketing Modern Poetry and the Southern Public Sphere.”

an intellectualized woman. Or, man distinguishes himself from woman by intellect. . .” (77).

The male writer, Ransom suggests, “would much prefer if it is possible to find poetry in his study, or even in his office, and not have to sit under the syringa bush” (78). The world of “simple sensitivity,” which he believes is inhabited by women in general, and by Edna St. Vincent Millay in particular, he dismisses: “Less pliant, safer as a biological organism, she remains fixed in her famous attitudes, and is indifferent to intellectuality. . . . Miss Millay is rarely and barely very intellectual, and I think everybody knows it” (78). Endeavoring to prove his point about Millay’s lesser intellectual powers, Ransom goes on to accuse her of “foolish ejaculations” and “vulgar” turns of phrase (82). He finds her poetry riddled with “ridiculous difficulties”; at one point in his polemic, after a strikingly clumsy attempt at explicating one of Millay’s sonnets, he all but throws up his hands in frustration before Millay’s ostensible foolishness: “. . . This is so absurd that I prefer to say it seems impossible to know what Miss Millay meant” (85). “. . . [T]he limitation of Miss Millay,” he summarizes, “. . . is her lack of intellectual interest. It is that which the male reader misses in her poetry. . . .” (98).

Intellectual poetry, for Ransom, is that poetry which engages the public sphere rather than the realm of Nature. He is sure that men alone inhabit that public space, while women are consigned to drowsing “under the syringa bush.” Ransom insists that only men, and never frivolous women, are capable of writing poetry dealing with those worldly events that a man might engage “in his study, or even in his office.” Given these arguments, it is highly ironic that Millay was writing “Say that We Saw Spain Die”—a poem which looks far beyond the back yard, a political poem if ever there was one—the same year that Ransom published his scornful essay in The World’s Body.

The powers of exclusiveness and deliberate ignorance at work in Modernist critiques of women’s poetry, such as we see in Ransom’s essay, laid the groundwork for

future generations of male critics responding to women's poetry. Even as he introduced The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson, James Reeves in 1959 insisted that "'woman poet' is a contradiction in terms" (xvii). Furthermore, Theodore Roethke, in the midst of a 1965 review of Louise Bogan's poetry, listed several "aesthetic and moral shortcomings" of the female poet (xviii). Among these were: "a concern with the mere surfaces of life--that special province of the feminine talent in prose--hiding from the real agonies of the spirit; refusing to face up to what existence is. . ." <sup>20</sup> (xviii). These claims, like those of Ransom before them, run absolutely contrary to the work which women writers such as Davidman, Taggard, and Millay do in their political poetry. In that poetry they are directly engaged in seeing and showing "what existence is;" indeed, they train their eyes and their minds upon the fields of modern warfare, the place in which such confrontation is at its starkest and rawest. There is no shrinking away from agony here, no mere gliding along pretty surfaces. Yet, only a decade or two after Davidman, Taggard and Millay reached the heights of their careers, acclaimed male writers and critics such as Reeves and Roethke were willfully undermining and even ignoring the poetry which such women had produced. The history of women's poetry in America, as Alicia Ostriker has suggested, is "a tale of confinements" (15).

Throughout the Modernist period, this position of outsider or Other extended not only to women writers but also to the female subjects of much of the era's male-authored writing. Gambrell points out, ". . . [E]ven within interwar avant-garde formations that were explicitly engaged in exploding familial-erotic mythologies, women nonetheless found their places to be circumscribed in strangely familiar, wifely or daughterly ways. . ." (24). She focuses her critique upon adherents to Modernism, wherein women typically were seen as "the object of investigation, the eroticized source of inspiration, the respondent in--though rarely the initiator of--an interlocutory exchange" (1). Alicia

---

<sup>20</sup> Gilbert and Gubar here quote from Theodore Roethke, "The Poetry of Louise Bogan," Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1965), pp. 133-34.



Ostriker adds, “As Simone de Beauvoir definitively puts it, the female in a man’s writing is always Other than the self, the stuff of dream and nightmare” (15).<sup>21</sup> Edward Said also points to this seemingly uniform attitude towards women among canonical writers of the period: “In the works of Eliot, Conrad, Mann, Proust, Woolf, Pound, Lawrence, Joyce, Forster, alterity and difference are systematically associated with strangers, who, whether women, natives, or sexual eccentrics, erupt into vision, there to challenge and resist settled metropolitan histories, forms, modes of thought” (222). Relative to Modernism, one of the major literary movements of the decade, then, women for the most part remained confined to the role of perennial outsider.

### ***Proletarianism and the Place of the Woman Poet***

Did the woman poet fare any better within the realm of Proletarian writing?<sup>22</sup> Given the political radicalism embraced by the Proletarian movement at large, we might initially hope to find more room for women’s voices within this school of thought. Again, however, the only space which a Proletarian woman poet could expect to carve out for herself was on the very margins of the movement. In her introduction to Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz’s Writing Red, Toni Morrison points out that “literary histories of a singularly radical period in the United States, the 1930s, have, until now, rested on the work of men” (ix). Although radical women joined their male counterparts in demonstrating, in striking, in writing leftist polemic for the little magazines and Marxist presses of the day, as well as in campaigning for the Spanish Republic, the very organizations for which they worked and the periodicals for which they wrote continued

---

<sup>21</sup>Ostriker here quotes from Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953), chap. 9, “Dreams, Fears, Idols,” chap. 10, “The Myth of Women in Five Authors.”

<sup>22</sup>It is important to repeat here that, although I distinguish between Modernist and Proletarian poetry, such distinctions are not necessarily self-evident. Cary Nelson contends that these two schools of thought may not have been as diametrically opposed as some writers in either group liked to believe. Resistant as many Proletarian poets were “to experimental Modernism. . . , these poems are themselves *part of the effort*, promoted by Williams and Frost and others, to bring American speech rhythms into poetry” (Repression 104). Nelson points out the debt that the Proletarian poets in fact owed the Modernists: “It would not have seemed *possible* to adapt their understated rhetoric to poetry without the Modernist revolution” (104).

to operate, legislate, and speak as though women were invisible--or, at best, secondary citizens. To be a woman activist in the 1930s meant to shift one's energies away from the suffragette work of the 1910s and 1920s, in favor of championing the working-class struggle at large, and thus to depart from an agenda which had emphasized women's right to a public voice.

Not only were women relegated to the sidelines by political entities like the CPUSA, but they were also veritably erased from most of the political images and rhetoric generated by the 1930s press, as well as by activists themselves. Paula Rabinowitz notes that "the misery of the 1930s is often shrouded in a masculine cloak: the landscape is crowded by millions of men in the breadlines, at the plant gates, or, defiantly, sitting on the plant floor" (2). Indeed, according to Robert S. Baker, the 1930s was masculinized not only by these images from the mainstream media, but also by imagery propagated by the Proletarian writers themselves. Baker points to the predominance of the strapping, virile hero in leftist literature of the day: "the Big Jims, Big Jocks, and Big Toms of working-class fiction" (101). Repeatedly--almost ritualistically-- throughout the 1930s, leftist male writers emphasized a correlation between moral heroism and its *physical manifestation* in the bodies of hearty, powerfully built men. "The stress throughout the period on the physiology of heroism," writes Baker, "shaped and informed so much of the thirties idiom. . ." (101). Even a quick glance at the decade's political posters, or the bookjackets emanating from leftist presses, proves this point. The myriad posters calling for support of the Spanish Republic, for example, are dominated by masculine iconography. Wide-shouldered soldiers of the International Brigades bestraddle the globe; brawny peasants heft enormous, brimming baskets from the fields; and massive, red-clad Communist men stride across Spain in a single bound. Similarly, the physically impressive man on the covers of countless books,

booklets, and periodicals symbolized the health and vitality of the Left throughout the 1930s.<sup>23</sup>

The literature produced and sanctioned by the Communist Party, commonly known as Proletarian literature<sup>24</sup>, likewise privileged images of virility. Joseph North makes this eminently clear in his description of 1930s radical literature; it dealt, he remarks, “with turbines, looms, trucks, cranes, the paraphernalia of the industrial age. . . . [I]t spoke of the soul of those who worked the machinery, their simple aspiration for freedom” (21). Even in this brief description we see Proletarianism’s emphasis on the machine as an icon of raw, rough-hewn strength--a strength commonly identified, at least in that era, with the masculine body alone. The forms into which Proletarian writers poured these images were also gendered. “The aesthetics of revolutionary poetry,” Charlotte Nekola affirms, “called for works on a large and searching scale, with the kind of ‘scope’ that Whitman assumed. . .” (131).

Leftist poet Sol Funaroff’s “Dusk of the Gods” echoes in language the very images which the poster artists and book illustrators of the day created in the graphic arts. “My hands like hammers, / my mouth like iron, / I crushed mountains, / I consumed fear, / ate darkness.” In his “What the Thunder Said: A Fire Sermon,” Funaroff shouts, “We are the riders of steel storms! We are the fire-bearers!” The images embedded in his cry for action bespeak male prowess and domination: “Write in flame / . . . steel statements of steel deeds: / armored trains of revolution, / dynamic steel drilling through black rock, / dynamiting tunnels / mining blackgold ores!” Women are obviously not a part of *this*

---

<sup>23</sup> For further examples, see Cary Nelson’s Repression and Recovery. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989. Particularly striking are the bookjackets for the IWW’s Little Red Songbook and for Robert Gessner’s Upsurge, a volume of poetry, as well as various covers of the magazine The Anvil. In each of these illustrations, the viewer’s gaze is trained upon the finely detailed, almost impossibly brawny *musculature* of a male figure. In fact, we do not even see the man’s face in most of these drawings; more frequently, we are presented with a bare, muscle-bulged back or pair of shoulders--all of them distinctly male.

picture. Not only were these forms of work largely or entirely off-limits to women in the 1930s, but the particular acts which the workers engage in here--train-driving, drilling, exploding and mining--are distinctly phallic; it is difficult to imagine women participating in this scene of revolutionary action as Funaroff describes it.

The Depression landscape which Robert Gessner charts in "Upsurge" is similarly populated almost entirely by males:

Look! We are the depression bastards!  
 You of America, our fathers, look at us!  
 We're grammar school kids with smudgy knees,  
 High school boys in long pants,  
 And college graduates with whole alphabets of sweaters. . .  
 Well, Sirs (and Ladies, if you're so damned nose):  
 We are the youngest old men in the world.

To be a rebel child of the Depression, apparently--or, at any rate, a rebel who speaks--one must be male. Gessner's parenthetical inclusion of "ladies" in his address is distinctly condescending and operates to show that women are, after all, not welcomed in this discussion: either as speakers or as listeners.

It is, of course, impossible to read 1930s literature without seeing it through lenses of the late twentieth century, shaped by a feminist understanding not immediately available to writers of the Depression. Yet it seems equally impossible that readers of that era would not have heard at least a degree of the scorn--and the fear--which many male Proletarian poets expressed towards women. Funaroff's "Uprooted," for example, speaks to the despair of a young unemployed man, who disparages the reassurances of "his girl," who tells him, "You make me happy. . . / That's all I care about, dear." Of no use herself, the "girl" here stands for nothing more than insular self-absorption; in this poem, she is simply something to react *against*, to reject for "something to do, to work machines, / to be joyful among fellow workers, / to write beautiful songs and stories /

---

<sup>24</sup> Most critics loosely define Proletarian literature as that literature which was written in the 1930s by, for, or about the proletariat. The proletariat, in Marx's description, are "those who, owning no means of production, have to sell their labor power in order to live" (Foley viii).

they will understand and remember.” Because the woman of this poem is lethargic and easily satisfied, the man’s burning energy and desire for work are thrown into stark relief. Here again we see the inwardly focused, passive woman acting as a foil for the outwardly focused, active man. In a decade that saw more American women than ever before joining men in the work place and in the picket line, this proposed binary rings false.

Mike Gold was in many ways one of the prominent spokesmen of the leftist movement in 1930s America; not only a prolific poet, he was also editor of the Communist periodical The New Masses. Thus, whatever position he expressed regarding the relationship of women to men was not to be taken lightly; Gold’s name carried substantial political and literary heft. Yet it is in his poetry that we come closest to observing outright misogyny within the ranks of the American Left. In “Ode to Walt Whitman,” Gold claims that Whitman is his father, but his *mother* is unfortunately rat-infested Manhattan, “the bitch.” Later he sardonically describes his “subway crush”: “O sweet unfortunate Baby / Phoney in five and dime jade and rayon / Constipated under the woolworth roses and lilies / You smelled bad, poor girl / . . . My chest touched your little breasts.” In both of the male-female relationships which Gold describes--that of his mythical parents, and the one in which he briefly engages while riding the subway--the male occupies a position of such superiority as to render the female in either couple virtually expendable.

This gendering of the American Left seems to have unfolded along with the rise of the Left itself. As the 1930s opened, Mike Gold seized upon the culturally laden metaphor of the American West in describing the new Proletarian movement. Issuing the cry of “Go Left, young man!” to the writers of his generation, Gold inscribed the burgeoning Left as imminently masculine, both in his direct entreaty to young *men* and,

more subtly, through the images of the American West which his cry elicited.<sup>25</sup> To evoke the West was also to evoke the nation's most nostalgic and prized myth of itself, a sweepingly heroic story of conquest and brawny independence. Linking this idea, then, with an idea of the Left, was a canny and advantageous means of appealing to the American populace for their support of leftist causes. V. F. Calverton also highlighted this metaphor when he enjoined young writers and intellectuals to move "Leftward Ho!"<sup>26</sup> While Proletarian spokesmen enjoyed increasing support for their movement throughout the 1930s by repeatedly calling upon such heroic masculine metaphors, their use of these images simultaneously proscribed any acknowledgement of women's participant in the movement. Connecting "the Proletarian aesthetic and popular American imagery," Paula Rabinowitz suggests, ". . . also suggested that the Left, like the West, was a wild place--brutal, rugged, and certainly no place for a lady" (3). This lack of a place within the Left, then, was precisely what politically engaged writers such as Davidman, Taggard, and Millay had to face throughout the 1930s.

### *American Radicalism and the Place of Woman Activist*

Despite their exclusion from most of the artistic and literary representations of the radical movement in 1930s America, women were, after all, a powerful component in that movement. Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz set out to disprove the common assumption that, between the women's suffrage movement of the 1910s and the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, women's political activity ground to a forty-year halt. Contrary to this cultural myth, Nekola and Rabinowitz show, women during the Great Depression contributed prolifically to the political work of the American Left. As activists and as writers--or, often, as both--they joined their energies and passions to the Proletarian

---

<sup>25</sup> In his Prologue to *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties*, Joseph North writes: "We thrilled to [Gold's] "Go Left, Young Man," perhaps as multitudes did several generations before to Horace Greeley when he advised the young to "Go West" (21).

<sup>26</sup> See Calverton's "Leftward Ho!" in *Modern Quarterly* 6 (Summer 1932): 26-32.

movement which swept the country in that decade. The “feminist void” (Morrison ix) which many historians have perceived between 1920 and the 1963,<sup>27</sup> then, is not a void at all, but rather a space teeming with women’s fervent political activity. American women who bore literary testimony to the war in Spain account for much of that abundant political activity.

Because the testimonies which I examine in this dissertation spring from political events and cultural movements which reached their culmination in the 1930s, I want to situate these texts--and their authors--within the specific political and literary frame of America at the time of the Spanish Civil War. Josephine Herbst’s essay, “A Year of Disgrace,” reflects the newly awakened sense of responsibility and desire to participate in national and world events that undergirded the 1930s for many young, progressively minded Americans. “The thirties,” Herbst remembers, “had come in like a hurricane. An entire young generation had been swept up in violent protest against the realities of events” (135). For Herbst, the execution of the Italian-American anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti marked the beginning of that decade and the political commitment that it would entail for her, as well as for many other idealistic young writers. On August 23, 1927, the night of the execution, Herbst recalls how she and her then-husband, John Hermann, responded to the news of Sacco and Vanzetti’s deaths with almost numbing anger, grief, and shock.<sup>28</sup> “All I knew was that a conclusive event had happened,” Herbst writes.

. . . . Without saying a word, we both felt it and knew that we felt it: a kind of shuddering premonition of a world to come. But what it was to be we could never have foreseen. . . . So far as I am concerned, the twenties ended that night. . . .

---

<sup>27</sup> Many historians cite 1963, the year in which Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* was published, as the beginning of the modern feminist movement.

<sup>28</sup> Significantly, the plight of Sacco and Vanzetti marked the beginning of political awareness--and, indeed, activism--in many other young women poets in America. Both Edna St. Vincent Millay and Lola Ridge were arrested earlier in 1927 for picketing the Massachusetts State House on behalf of the anarchists. Thus Herbst’s suggestion, that Sacco and Vanzetti’s execution in many ways ushered in the spirit of the 1930s, seems to hold true.

[W]e took down a volume of Kunstgeschichte from our shelves, to be replaced by a thin narrow book in red entitled What Is to Be Done?, by V. I. Lenin. (98)

An earlier exchange between Herbst and Hermann, recounted in the same essay, further heralds the “world to come” that Herbst in 1927 already intuits. “ ‘There’s never any place to sit down in America,’ I complained. [Hermann replied,] ‘You aren’t supposed to sit. You’re supposed to be up and doing’ ” (96). Here Hermann apparently foresees the immense outpouring of energy which writers and intellectuals would give to the ideas of political reform and revolution throughout the 1930s. In his historical account of that decade, Warren E. Sussman, acknowledges: “It is not possible to come away from wide reading in the literature of the period without some sense of the excitement--even the enthusiasm and optimism shared by many. They *were* ‘fervent years’ ” (206)<sup>29</sup>.

Bounded at one end with the stock market crash of October 1929, and on the other with fascist’s triumph in Spain in April 1939 and Hitler’s invasion of Poland six months later, the thirties were a decade which seemed almost to *demand* civic and political activism. Many Americans were compelled toward such activism in the dark days following the Wall Street crash. Joy Davidman’s own political sensibilities were first stirred that year; in “The Longest Way Round,” she recalls gazing out the window of her college classroom only to see a deeply depressed young schoolmate, whose father’s business had just been ruined in the crash, leap from a nearby rooftop to her death (15). Years later, Davidman would reflect on the outrage, and the desire to put her energies towards effecting positive change in her society, which she experienced upon witnessing this suicide.

. . . [T]hough I myself was prosperous and secure, my friends were not. To live entirely for my own pleasures, with hungry men selling apples on every street corner, demanded a callousness of which I seemed incapable. Maybe no rational

---

<sup>29</sup>Here Sussman refers to Harold Clurman’s memoir of the 1930s, The Fervent Years (1945).



person would worry about the rest of the world; I found myself worrying, all the same. And I wanted to *do* something, so I joined the Communist Party. (19)

According to Davidman, “an honest anger at injustice and misery brought many able and just” individuals into the Communist Party during the years of the Great Depression (22).<sup>30</sup> “The war in Spain,” she adds, also “had much to do with it” (19).

The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) enjoyed considerable growth during the 1930s. For many American intellectuals and artistic figures, Communism was a viable answer to the ominously swelling tide of fascist in Europe; the CPUSA thus became a rallying point for many of the decade’s writers. Because the Great Depression signaled a low watermark in national self-image and self-pride, the American Left--who offered an alternative, newly empowered vision of America--retained greater power and a more extensive public voice during the 1930s than it has before or since. Throughout this period, women in many ways were as politically active as men. Paula Rabinowitz notes that, during the Depression era, “many women headed the unemployed councils in their neighborhoods and organized support for the ‘mothers of Spain;’” women’s membership in the CPUSA rose throughout the thirties to almost 40 percent (8). Given this intense political engagement on the part of women activists throughout the 1930s, it is all the more imperative that their particular history be restored to our understanding of this period. Women activist-writers such as Davidman, Taggard, and Millay contributed to this history by taking on the role of intellectual witness and thus calling to public view the political crisis in Spain.

### ***Metonymy in the Poetry of Autobiographical Witness***

---

<sup>30</sup> George Orwell provides a somewhat embittered but nonetheless humorous take on the political attitudes and literary poses inspired by the Communist Party of the 1930s. “. . . [Q]uite suddenly, in the years 1930-5, something happens. The literary climate changes. . . . Suddenly we have got out of the twilight of the gods into a sort of Boy Scout atmosphere of bare knees and community singing. . . . If the keynote of the writers of the twenties is ‘tragic sense of life,’ the keynote of the new writers is ‘serious purpose’” (*Inside* 30).

How did their outsider's stance affect women's voices in the 1930s, when it came to writing poetry? Indeed, how did a woman of this era even begin to join her voice to the public endeavor of producing and publishing poetry when her entry into that endeavor was all but barred? I propose that leftist women poets of the 1930s, as they refused Modernism's introspective angst and aestheticism and simultaneously struggled to join their voices to the Proletarian literary movement of their day, were caught between two predominantly masculine discourses. I suggest that the women poets whom I read in this dissertation negotiate a difficult balance between these two discourses; they blur the boundaries between Modernism's privileging of the individual and revolutionary literature's sweeping aside of the individual in favor of the masses. Thus they give their literary testimony on the Spanish Civil War in a communal, metonymic voice, speaking for both the individual and the community in a way which most male poets of the day did not achieve.

For the politicized woman poet of the 1930s, the metonymic voice was a method of resistance and survival. Metonymy, with its implications of a group standing behind and speaking through the individual, was perhaps a bare necessity for the woman poet in this era. She was, after all, twice marginalized by the almost entirely masculine enterprises of Modernist and Proletarian literary production. Because she occupied this unique and especially marginal place within the realm of 1930s poetic production, the American woman writer I describe in this chapter resembles the colonized subject of metonymic testimonial writing. As we have seen, many students of the collective autobiography, or the testimonial, believe that the metonymic stance can be employed only by Third World or politically subjugated writers. I do agree with Shirley Mangini's assertion that attempting to designate non-Third World citizens as colonized subjects is a sticky business. Yet, given the often antagonistic and sometimes downright misogynistic climate in which American women poets worked throughout the 1930s, it is difficult to

see them--relative to the sphere of literary production--as full citizens, with open access to their rights to free speech and to participation within that sphere.

Drawing comparisons “between women’s position in a male-dominated society and that of underprivileged ethnic groups. . . in a society ruled by whites” has been common feminist practice since the time of Mary Wollstonecraft, as Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi points out (269). “For an almost equally long time,” she adds, economic theorists have recognized that women in an industrial society have, economically speaking, much the same function as colonies in that they provide the underpaid workforce and the completely unpaid domestic labor which serve as the system’s working base. . . . The parallels between the situations of colonials, of underprivileged ethnic groups, and of women, create parallel consequences. (269)

Chief among those parallel consequences is the need to see oneself as part of a larger community when speaking to those in power. When a colonized or otherwise politically oppressed subject speaks or writes publicly of her experience, she knows that her testimony is a transgressive and even potentially dangerous act. Her story is transgressive in that it emanates from the otherwise-hidden margins of a society, or nation, and thus shatters whatever dominant cultural myths that society cherishes of itself. Rigoberta Menchu’s famous testimony, for instance, posed a crucial challenge to the image which the Guatemalan military government was presenting to the rest of the world in the early 1980s;<sup>31</sup> simultaneously, Menchu’s testimonial work magnetized global attention to the plight of the long-suffering--but, until that moment, largely unseen and unheard--Mayan Indians. While Menchu won a brilliant victory for human rights, and particularly for the

---

<sup>31</sup> During their now infamous “scorched earth campaign” (1980-1985), the Guatemalan military wiped from the face of the earth 440 Guatemalan towns and villages. Although the military proclaimed to the rest of the world that it was ridding the nation of Communist guerrillas, most of the inhabitants of these towns were guilty of nothing more than being poor, rural, and indigenous: the most marginalized and voiceless members of their country.

rights of her own Mayan people, we cannot overlook the fact that, in the decade following the publication of her book, she forced to live in political exile.

We see an analogous situation in the testimonial writing of American women poets who chose to take a public stand for the Spanish Republic. By powerfully identifying with the Republic and by using their poetry to insist that the struggle in Spain was actually the precursor to world war, and not a mere civil skirmish, they tore apart the Western democracies' "official" and painfully optimistic view. Into the deep void of their government's silence and apathy regarding Spain, leftist women poets such as Davidman, Taggard and Millay shouted for action. Their political activism, however, like Menchu's,<sup>32</sup> won them mixed rewards, ranging from public arrest to exclusion from the literary canon, which throughout its existence has tended to privilege apolitical above overtly activist works, and hence the decline of their careers. Because of the latent danger involved in bearing political testimony, then, the writer of such testimony almost universally adopts a metonymic voice. Through metonymy, the writer stabilizes her position; no longer a vulnerable, lone individual, she is a member of a group who have shared in and acknowledge her experience. Political resistance--whether one speaks out against colonialism, ethnic oppression, or sexism--demands community and expressions of solidarity within that community. Both are embedded in the metonymic stance.

### *Joy Davidman's Spanish Civil War Poetry*

How, specifically, do the poets Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, and Edna St. Vincent Millay employ that stance in their literary testimonies of the Spanish Civil War? We have already observed Davidman's positioning of herself on the *inside* of the political and social struggles of her day, and her simultaneous scorn for those who choose

---

<sup>32</sup> By Menchu's activism I mean both her direct involvement in political organizations (for example, her leadership position in the CUC, the Committee for Campesino Unity) and, of course, the publication of her testimony, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. In the lives of the women whom this chapter discusses, direct political engagement (Davidman's membership in the CPUSA, Millay's protesting of Sacco and Vanzetti's death sentence) and politically inflected writing were likewise often linked.

to remain on the outside of those larger struggles. In “Near Catalonia,” her deep identification with the suffering Republic forces her to take into account the grisly details of their lives. Unlike those noninterventionists who believed that Spain was best left to solve its problems on its own, Davidman does not attempt to turn her eyes from the soldier’s broken bodies: “the wincing flesh, the peeled white forking stick, / easily broken, easily made sick.” At the same time, however, she alludes to those others who do focus their gaze on more self-centered concerns, and she condemns them as contributors to Spain’s agony.

She takes this same stance, on one hand seeing herself as directly implicated in the world’s sorrows, and on the other meting out harsh sentences to those who do not, in many of the poems in Letter to a Comrade. Given Davidman’s passionate interest in the beleaguered Spanish Republic, it is not surprising that war is often the context for this double gesture of identification and condemnation. In the opening lines of “Prayer Against Indifference,” for example, Davidman knows herself already to be implicated in the world’s suffering: “When wars and ruined men shall cease / To vex my body’s house of peace / . . . Break roof and let the bomb come in.” Here Davidman evinces that she understands herself to be responsible for speaking out against inhumanity, whenever she is made aware of it. Furthermore, as one who allows herself to be “vexed” rather than numbed by the world’s suffering, she takes up the role of intellectual witness. Indeed, she is so focused on the violent repercussions of war in “Prayer Against Indifference” that she envisions herself as a potential bombing victim.

In the case of this defiant poem, however, Davidman asserts that she would *deserve* such a tragic end, should she ever “shut out the gun, the scream,” or “lie blind within a dream.” Her intimation, of course, is that anyone who is not moved by “bloody children lying dead,” or who is content to merely “save [her] skin,” is likewise deserving of such a fate. The difference which Davidman indicates between those who choose, despite great agony, to see the world’s suffering, and those who refuse to see, preferring

to save their own skins or their own sanity, is in effect also the difference between those bystanders of a traumatic event who choose to be intellectual witnesses and those who do not. The supplication with which she closes this poem, "Let me have eyes I need not shut; / Let me have truth at my tongue's root," demonstrate her profound belief in the act of *choosing* to acknowledge and speak out against the world's evils--that is, the choice to be an intellectual witness.

Thus Davidman upholds the idea and duty of the intellectual witness to the Spanish Civil War, even as she lives out that very role. As member of and advocate for that loose affiliation of leftist Americans who chose to join in her in bearing intellectual witness to the war, Davidman is often speaking metonymically in her political poetry. In poems such as "Apology for Liberals," she advocates not only her own position but also that of others like her. She opens this poem with the question, "Whether the greater or the little death / be more to fear." The binary which she sets up here operates on at least two levels. On one hand, the "greater death" is that death which ends cataclysmically, tragically, with the "iron murder of bombs, the broken forehead, / the limbs left bloody in broken stone, the murder, / the sudden bursting of flesh asunder / in a red scream." The "little death," meanwhile, is not so physically traumatic, but unfolds like a slow, tedious suffocation: "the spirit / stiff and encrusted with lying, the flinching eyes / . . . the pride resolved in filth." Yet, for Davidman, "greater" and "little" signify more than degrees of bodily suffering. The "little" death is the death of those afraid to be involved in any concerns beyond themselves; their deaths, in fact, are cause for condescension. Davidman makes this eminently clear, asking that we pity "these cowards / for the weak dream; forgive them tremulous, / forgive them broken. Let them come upon / some easy corner of death." Her tone here is ironic, almost scornful. Those who refuse to engage in the world's struggles, preserving their own safety, do not undergo the graphic pain which Davidman details in the "greater deaths," but they are nonetheless to be pitied by those who see and suffer and who, in Davidman's eyes, are ennobled by such actions.

“Fighters [should] pity cowards,” she asserts, for it is the blind and self-centered coward whose death is in fact “a worse worm to bear.” Forgiving those too morally weak to bear intellectual witness actually condemns them; they provide a foil for the morally strong, among whom Davidman positions herself.

While the two contexts for Davidman’s poem are the battlefield and the homefront, Davidman means for us to understand these contexts both literally and metaphorically. She upholds the role of the soldiers “struck into fragments by the bombs,” but the title of her poem, with its emphasis on the broader category “liberals,” also honors all who are willing to engage their energies on moral and ethical battlefields. Davidman praises those who turn their gazes and their concerns outward, rather than conserving their own privileged lives, who are open to the possibility of “fall[ing] in battle,” whether that battle be waged with guns or with language. Davidman, like many of her leftist readers during the thirties, never trod Spanish soil; yet her vision and her energies were trained there throughout the war. She fought fascism (and faced potential defeat) by taking up the position of intellectual witness, by speaking for those in Spain who have no public voice in the world beyond their own borders. By praising and drawing public attention to the “liberal” American faction who joined her in that effort, Davidman positions herself as metonymic representative of that particular community.

In other openly political poems such as “In Praise of fascists,” “End of a Revolutionary,” and “Snow in Madrid,” Davidman breaks new poetic ground by drawing from all three of the dominant poetic codes of her day, without completely adhering to any one of them. Political content merges with figurative language inflected both by Modernism and by formalism. Her “In Praise of fascists,” although it makes no direction mention of Spain, invokes that country through a series of powerful images:

What flowers come again  
 In the track of guns  
 Spring out of buried men  
 Whose lost blood runs

Thick and bitter in the root,  
 Sweet and thin in the stem;  
 The flowers underfoot  
 Give thanks to them

Whose numerous gift of death  
 Feeds liberally  
 Sweet purple to the heath  
 And honey to the bee.

And murder's hyacinths  
 Weave him a crown  
 By whose beneficence  
 The bombs come down.

We are obviously in the trenches and cities of Republican Spain here. Davidman sarcastically “praises” the fascists for their “numerous gift of death” and “beneficent” bombing. The only fascists who were dropping bombs in the late 1930s were those who, under the direction of Franco, Mussolini and Hitler, gradually destroyed the Republic’s capacity to endure.

“In Praise of fascists” exemplifies Davidman’s refusal to embrace completely neither Modernism nor Proletarianism. At times Davidman’s language is almost imagistic; lines such as “murder’s hyacinths / weave him a crown” exemplify the hard, clear, concentrated kind of sensory description that is central to imagist poetry. In this sense, she approaches the domain of High Modernism. She defies High Modernism, however, both in her adherence to rhyme and meter and in her unapologetic interest in contemporary political situations. Stephen Vincent Benet, writing the Foreword to Letter to a Comrade, recognized in Davidman this divergence from the introspection and withdrawal from the present world which marked High Modernism. “It will be obvious enough,” Benet claims, to anyone who reads this book, “that the heroes of the Twenties are not Miss Davidman’s heroes, nor their demons her demons” (7). Yet Davidman never allied herself completely with Proletarianism, either. Although many Proletarian writers of the day would have shared with Davidman the view that poetry was a means of



speaking publicly to the war in Spain or to the rise of fascism, few of them would have deigned to use such pastoral language, associated as it was with the genteel tradition. Her lilting, lyrical meter, as well as her pastoral images such as “Sweet purple to the heath / And honey to the bee,” seem in keeping with the formalist or genteel tradition; however, she steps outside the boundaries which contemporary critics such as Ransom defined for formalist verse. Certainly Davidman reaches far beyond a loll under the syringa tree in her choice of subject matter. In fact, her use of idyllic imagery and a comforting, almost nursery-rhyme-like meter jar rudely against the poem’s bitter content. Thus Davidman finds her own poetic space, separate from but sharing boundaries with the major movements of her period.

Even in the brief, tightly condensed stanzas of “In Praise of fascists,” Davidman communicates both the deepening cynicism and the stubbornly resistant spirit experienced by Spain’s intellectual witnesses at the close of the war. While her exultant tone and her accolades for the fascists are obviously, angrily ironic, she also undergirds this poem with an insistence on seeing that, even in the midst of such catastrophic loss and suffering as the Republic has incurred, there are possibilities of regeneration. Interestingly, this theme of new life springing from the bodies of fallen anti-fascist soldiers also appears in Langston Hughes’s “Tomorrow’s Seed” and Edwin Rolfe’s “Epitaph.” Davidman’s poem predates either of these, however, suggesting her appreciable grasp of the poetic and political currents which most influenced her generation.

An important counterpiece for “In Praise of fascists,” Davidman’s “End of a Revolutionary” also focuses upon the theme of new life emerging from destruction; it likewise underscores the power of the metonymic voice:

When I am born again  
 I shall come like the grass-blade;  
 I shall be fertile and small  
 As the seed of grasses.

.....  
 The strength of birdwing  
 Grows out of my seed;  
 Out of my leaf and my stem  
 I nourish warm cattle,  
 And I scatter pollen  
 For the bees to make bread.

.....  
 I shall come whispering  
 Together, and breathing  
 Together, and wordless  
 Speaking of peace,  
 And die in winter  
 And rise in summer  
 And conquer the earth  
 In the shape of grass.

Davidman's opening line, "When I am born again," repeats the note of resistant hope of "In Praise of fascists," but here without the cynicism. "I shall come like the grass-blade; / I shall be fertile and small / As the seed of grasses," the poet asserts, thus asserting too her belief that the revolutionary spirit cannot, after all, be killed. Working with the double image of the revolutionary reborn and the grass-seed taking root and spreading, Davidman describes the many other lives which her own life feeds and enables: "Worms gnaw the rootstock; / The strength of birdwing / Grows out of my seed; / Out of my leaf and my stem / I nourish warm cattle, / And I scatter pollen / For the bees to make bread." Filled with images of abundance and fecundity, even in death, this poem asserts the power of individuals who, seeming small and innocuous by themselves, are a force to be reckoned with when they unite as one. As we have seen, this is a force contained in the metonymic voice, which constantly reminds us, "This story I am telling is larger than alone."

In particular, Davidman's final stanza captures the idea of metonymy and its resistant power: "I shall come whispering / Together, and breathing / Together. . . / And conquer the earth / In the shape of the grass." Her repeated use of "together" in reference to *herself* clearly demonstrates the idea of the collective, metonymic self; moreover, this

positing of the self as collective implies a subversive and unexpected power. No one expects the tiny grassblade to be capable of effecting any sort of change; when the idea of “grass” expands to include thousands of blades growing together, however, then entire environments can be changed. In “End of a Revolutionary,” then, Davidman most clearly articulates an understanding of herself as incapable of ideological or political defeat, so long as she is part of larger and active community.

Although Davidman borrows heavily from Proletarian lexicon and ideology in poems such as “End of a Revolutionary,” she carves out her own unique poetic space by focusing on the physical pain and terror implicit in the war experience--an emphasis which was mostly lacking in Spanish Civil War poetry by better-known Proletarian writers of the day:

Softly, so casual,  
 Lovely, so light,  
 The cruel sky lets fall  
 Something one does not fight.  
 How tenderly to crown  
 The brutal year  
 The clouds send something down  
 That one need not fear.  
 Men before perishing  
 See with unwounded eye  
 For once a gentle thing  
 Fall from the sky.

Here again we see Davidman’s blending of the various poetic traditions available to her. Her language is so simple and clean that it is almost stark, once more recalling imagist practice. Davidman’s tone, as well, moves toward Modernism, with its ironic, almost numbed or traumatized detachment. On the other hand, the openly political content and moral message of this poem keeps it squarely outside those boundaries and, in this respect, aligns the poem more closely with Proletarianism.

“Snow In Madrid” employs a lighthanded yet effective irony in each of its three brief stanzas. In each stanza, Davidman juxtaposes a light and comforting word with a

heavy, more violent one: “lovely” against “cruel”; “tenderly” against “brutal”; and “gentle” against “perishing.” This contrast in each stanza repeatedly disrupts the reader’s expectations. The controlling idea throughout the poem is, of course, highly and sadly ironic in itself; to compare snow to bombs is to admit that the world has so spun out of control that Nature herself is suspect. This poem makes it impossible for us to ignore the horror of the Republican soldiers’ situation. They have come to the point, on the other side of massive trauma, where they have abandoned all former expectations and understandings of the way the world should operate. Indeed, to expect the sky itself to be cruel--to no longer be able to imagine that anything good can come from the sky--is to have experienced devastation so extreme that no one outside their particular context can imagine it.

Davidman’s status as insider-outsider to the scene she depicts here is evident. Insofar as she is able to identify and bring to light the vulnerability and plain *humanness* of the Republican soldier, she positions herself as an insider. As anyone who took on the role of intellectual witness to Spain would have known in 1938, Hitler’s Condor Legion began bombing both the frontlines and the cities of Republican Spain just months after the outbreak of war. By deliberately focusing her attention on the men at the frontlines and their plight, Davidman proclaims herself in ethical and ideological alliance with them. Writing about these soldiers from the other side of the Atlantic, however, obviously situates her as outsider to the event as well. Davidman’s awareness of their situation can take form only in her imagining of the aftermath, not of the actual experience, of those bombing raids. Indeed, rather than describing the traumatic events themselves which these soldiers have suffered, Davidman is able only to provide a snapshot of what happens *afterwards*. This insider-outsider stance, in which Davidman tries to “know” with her intellect what she has not known experientially, is that of the intellectual witness.

Witnesses such as Davidman, who are both insider and outsider to a massive traumatic event such as war, are perhaps the most effective bridge-builders we have between the particular “community who feels close to the event and the public at large”-- the public, that is, who receives knowledge of the traumatic event once it has already been inscribed into historical narrative (Hartman 37). The ways in which these two groups receive the story of the traumatic event are, inevitably, radically different. On one hand are those who have experienced the trauma so directly that they are marked permanently by it; on the other are those who stand at such a physical or chronological remove from the event that they are unable to understand it in anything but a historicized or overdetermined way. The intellectual witness, as it were, stands in the gap between these two. “It is a deeply uncomfortable place to be in,” as Geoffrey Hartman writes (42). Trying to “see” the traumatic event by engaging “the intellectual part of consciousness always keeps [the intellectual witness] in the position of spectator or bystander” (42). All those who choose to bear intellectual witness, then, “are exposed, at one and the same time, to trauma *and* the anxiety of not empathizing enough” (42). Those of us who still choose to be intellectual witnesses of the Spanish Civil War, sixty-odd years after its end, owe a particular debt to predecessors such as Joy Davidman, one of the very first to engage publicly her intellect, imagination, and political conscience in that struggle.

### ***Literary Biography of Genevieve Taggard***

Like Davidman, Genevieve Taggard enjoyed a significant literary reputation in her day. She was one of the “Four Younger Women Poets” whom Llewellyn Jones cited in his review of contemporaneous writers, First Impressions: Essays on Poetry, Criticism, and Prosody. In this review, Taggard shared billing with Edna St. Vincent Millay. While Jones credited Millay with “a number of sonnets that are as high in value as any written in our day” (113), he went on to praise Taggard even more effusively:

The work of Genevieve Taggard. . . gives us an impression of even greater intensity. Miss Taggard spent her early years in Hawaii, and while she has never exploited the islands for their mere picturesqueness, tropical imagery has entered largely into her work, and this aspect of it, counterpointed, as it were, on a native bent of mind which is disciplined rather than tropical, clean-cut, almost stoic in its insistence upon an inner clarity, gives us a poetry at once luxuriant and disciplined, passionate and reserved. (114-115)

Written in 1925, Jones's sensitive attention to Taggard's ethical and poetic commitments contrasts sharply with such dismissive and vitriolic reviews as John Crowe Ransom's remarks on "the woman as poet." In Jones's comments we also see an early recognition of the way Taggard positioned herself as insider-outsider to mainstream America, a position which would later enable her stance as intellectual witness to Spain. Her Spanish Civil War poetry, written with one eye toward her audience in America and the other toward those for whom she is speaking in Spain, is enabled by her understanding of herself as both insider and outsider.

Certainly Genevieve Taggard had powerful reasons for desiring to act as intellectual witness for Spain. In 1931 she had gone to the Spanish island of Mallorca on a one-year Guggenheim Fellowship. In a 1939 article, entitled "Mallorcan Memory," which she wrote for the New Masses, Taggard remembers her Spanish experience with considerable nostalgia and unabashed passion. "I was in love with Spain," she writes. "It seemed a country charged with power as yet latent" (7). Throughout her article, Taggard continuously alludes to that latent power, the power that would erupt in July 1936 when Republican Spain held back Francisco Franco's military coup with pitchforks, barricades, and raw resistance. Foreshadowing that resistance, she remembers "the faces I had seen in Barcelona, and the way people hunched together over the tables of cafes in Madrid, and the bookstores displaying pictures of Karl Marx" (7). The growing anarchism and socialism which she alludes to here, as Taggard reminds us, met with the heightened

suspicion and hostility of those in power: “The landlords feared the infringement of their old absolute power, based as it was on authority and superstition. Even in 1931 it was possible to see that the rich landed class would organize in some way against the young democracy” (7).<sup>33</sup>

Not only was Taggard in 1931 already attentive to the increasingly polarized political climate of Spain, but she was also catching the first inklings of still greater and more portentous political extremes taking shape elsewhere. She recalls the German expatriates whom she met in Mallorca, “driven from home by what seemed to us then an unfounded fear of a little Munich demagogue. Famous German intellectuals came, and rented the cheapest rooms and read newspapers from home with agonized faces, and went for long agonized walks by themselves, looking as if the end of the world had come” (7). Indeed, as Taggard’s readers in 1939 were already beginning to intuit, the end of the world, or at least the world as they had known it, *had* arrived. The Spain of Taggard’s article is a world on the very cusp of catastrophic tragedy; Taggard acknowledges this herself: “I know now that I saw the inscrutable edge of something that has become history” (7).

Taggard’s once-intimate knowledge of Spain and Spain’s people enables her stance as an intellectual witness. Her “Mallorcan Memory” is a tender retrospective interrupted repeatedly by Taggard’s awareness and acknowledgement of the present’s bitter possibilities. Fondly recalling the energetic young boy who sold bread from a donkey-cart every morning outside her Spanish home, Taggard reflects upon what that boy might be doing eight years later, in 1939: “I hope [he] does not wear a blue shirt and beat anti-fascist fisherman with the butt of his gun” (7). As she demonstrates here, Taggard remained emotionally and intellectually engaged in Spain’s struggles throughout

---

<sup>33</sup> Taggard alludes here to Spain’s First Republic, established in 1931 with the election of leading liberal Niceto Alcalá Zamora to the Presidency. This Republic fell in 1933, as parliamentary elections saw the newly formed conservative party, *Confederación Española de Derechos Autónomos* (CEDA), become the most powerful political force in Spain.

the rest of her life, although she never returned there after her fellowship ran out in late 1931. This intimacy with Spain, as well as her understanding of herself as one who both belonged and yet not quite belonged there, makes itself clear in the poetry which Taggard wrote about that country's civil war.

Taggard's own sense of herself as both insider and outsider was one which she experienced frequently in her lifetime. Having grown up the daughter of missionary parents in Hawaii, Taggard remembered a childhood populated with "the Portuguese, the Filipinos, the Puerto Ricans, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Hawaiian-Chinese, the hap-a-haoles [whites]" ("Hawaii" xv). It was, she claimed in an autobiographical sketch introducing her Calling Western Union (1936), "delightful, unusual, and hybrid life" (xv). When her parents, forced by Taggard's father's illness, returned with their family to the tiny farming town in eastern Washington where Taggard was born, Taggard experienced her insider-outsider status in a far more negative light than she ever had in Hawaii. Although she was by birth American, Taggard at sixteen saw herself as inherently an outsider to mainstream America: "We had seen a great many American tourists [in Hawaii] and we did not think much of them" (xiv). After fourteen years in the Hawaiian islands, Taggard recalls, "[W]e children were to see our America with the eyes of outsiders. . . . Everything had conspired to make the return painful. Island life had changed my parents' minds and their tastes. They had lived with dark people; they had got out of the fatal chain of self-interest" (xiv). It was this poisonous self-interest, coupled with a complete, benumbed disinterest in anything beyond themselves, that most struck Taggard's conscience and indeed, occasioned her unapologetic loathing of small-town America:

These people, these white people, were barbarians! They thought it was a lark to go down to see the noon train come in! They waited with great tension in a room full of tobacco spit for the mail that consisted of a mail-order catalog. They screamed out the news if a neighbor had a haircut. They told each other how



many overalls they had in their washtubs last Monday. They didn't know how to live at all (xvi).

Taggard's teenaged experience of the close-minded American town was to shape her lifelong ideology and politics. Robert Drake suggests that Taggard responded to "the ugly spirit of a white America whose people preyed on one another" by idealizing her memories of Hawaii and thus becoming "unwavering in her vision of races mingling in harmony, of respect for personal freedom, of generosity and enjoyment of life" (173).<sup>34</sup> Taggard herself acknowledged openly the lingering influence of those teenage years spent stifling in a small, self-centered town: "[S]omehow everything I have done since I escaped it has remembered its existence. It seems to be the active source of many convictions. It told me what to work against and what to work for" ("Hawaii" xxv).

Her writing was one avenue through which Taggard worked against, and worked for, those causes which meshed with her progressive-minded ambitions. Graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 1919, Taggard moved the following year to Greenwich Village and immediately became involved in the bohemian literary world taking root there. Employed by the avante-garde publisher B. W. Huebsch, she went on to join Padraic Colum and Maxwell Anderson in founding Measure: A Magazine of Verse in 1921. By the time she began to write as an intellectual witness for Spain, Taggard had already published a volume of collected works (Collected Poems 1918-1938), suggesting both the scope and popularity which her poetry had achieved by the late 1930s. Taggard also published a "carefully researched" biography, The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson (1930), in that decade; Richard Drake credits this study as one "that was not superseded for a number of years" (182).

---

<sup>34</sup> For further detail on Taggard's early life, see "Hawaii, Washington, Vermont: A Frame for the Verse," in Taggard's Calling Western Union (Harper and Brothers, 1936) and "Poet Out of Pioneer" in Elaine Showalter's These Modern Women (The Feminist Press, 1978.)

Although Taggard's publisher in those years was the mainstream Harper and Row, she also contributed frequently to radical journals such as the New Masses and Max Eastman's Liberator. Elaine Showalter deems Taggard a "lifelong socialist" (These 63), although, as Drake notes, "Taggard's poems of social protest. . . show that her main intent was not to promote any particular political ideology. . . but to express passionate outrage and deeply felt sympathy with human suffering" (184). In an unpublished letter, written March 25, 1940, to Fred B. Millet (Beinecke Library, Yale University), Taggard herself ventured a description of her political stance. "I am a radical," she wrote, "--that is, I believe in the future of American life; I hope to live to see it achieve economic democracy and by this means lay a foundation for a great culture" (Drake 184). As with many of her peers, Taggard's radicalism became increasingly pronounced in the 1930s. Although Calling Western Union (1936) was her first--and her only--full volume of Proletarian protest poetry, she continued to write protest poems on behalf of the fallen Spanish Republic almost until the time of her death.

When Taggard died in 1948, her once sparkling reputation as poet had begun to fade already. Indeed, fifty years later, she is almost invisible within the realm of literary studies. The only published trace of her documented by the Modern Language Association in the last 35 years is one scholarly article.<sup>35</sup> Biographical detail about Taggard is as scanty as is contemporary critical response to her work. Cary Nelson, whose several pages on Taggard, scattered throughout his 1989 Repression and Recovery, constitute the most in-depth critical attention which Taggard's work has received in the last several decades, names only three sources for further information on Taggard (Repression 286, *n.* 125).<sup>36</sup> "It is curious," writes Robert Drake, that a poet such

---

<sup>35</sup> The fact that Taggard also figures in two recent doctoral dissertations indicates that critical and cultural space may have opened in the last decade for the consideration, or re-consideration, of radical American women writers.

<sup>36</sup> These are: Taggard's preface to Calling Western Union; Taggard's autobiographical essay, "Poet Out of Pioneer," reprinted in Elaine Showalter's These Modern Women, and the chapter which she shares with Lola Ridge in William Drake's The First Wave: Women Poets in America, 1915-1945 (Nelson, Repression

as Genevieve Taggard “should be among the most neglected and undervalued of all the women poets of [her] time. . .” (170). Drake partly blames Taggard’s “stubborn partisanship of the Soviet Union through the late 1930s and the war years and her active participation in Communist-front organizations” for her gradual exclusion, beginning in the increasingly conservative 1940s, from anthologies and critical histories of poetry (170). Taggard’s refusal to fit herself and her poetry to any one of the dominant poetic modes of her day may also have had something to do with her ultimately complete dismissal by mainstream America.

Certainly Taggard wanted nothing to do with High Modernism, nor with its better-known proponents, and she made no bones about this stance. She pokes almost malicious fun at T.S. Eliot in “Funeral in May,” from her volume Calling Western Union. Indeed, the funeral which she celebrates here is Eliot’s own.<sup>37</sup> Although she never names him outright, Eliot is obviously the subject of her attack; throughout the poem, Taggard berates the “poor poet” for his spiritualism, his love of metaphor, his preference for eternal or universal subjects over those contemporaneous, and his horror of literalism. Taggard finds greatest fault with Eliot for his refusal to address the concerns of his own day. She sees this refusal as mere elitist escapism; in her poem, the timorous poet whines: “Still my taste is of the best / no one could be better equipped. . . / Somehow we must stand for the eternal / the august / in the midst of crude wars.” Parodying Eliot, Taggard cries that there is nothing “so wrong as this / to be literal literal Alas / Lovely metaphor redeem me from sin / and deliver us from meaning.” She thus condemns High Modernism for its deliberate retreat from politics and modern life, which, according to Taggard, meant also a refusal to see “meaning” in the world around them. The apparent *lack* of meaning which Modernists detected--and spent much time mourning--in the

---

286, n. 125). As two of these three sources are written by Taggard herself, we further note the lack of critical interest which has dogged her reputation since her death.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Drake also reads “Funeral in May” as an attack on Eliot (182).

circumstances of their day was to Taggard an excuse for not having to be involved in or concerned about contemporary crises. It is probably no accident that Taggard, invested as she was in 1930s socialism, chose May, the month of the international worker, as the setting for Eliot's funeral in this poem.

Even more directly, Taggard insisted in the introduction to her own Collected Poems 1918-1938 that the poet's responsibility was to call to public attention the struggles and concerns of her era:

I have refused to write out of a decorative impulse, because I conceive it to be the dead end of much feminine talent. A kind of literary needlework. I think the later poems and some of the early poems hold a wider consciousness than that colored by the feminine half of the race. I hope they are not written by a poetess, but by a poet.<sup>38</sup> I think, I hope, I have written poetry that relates to general experience and the realities of the time. (n.p.)

Taggard demands that she, a woman and a writer, be acknowledged as something more than the spinner of mere frivolous descriptions, which was all that critics such as John Crowe Ransom believed the woman poet was fit for. In claiming that her poetry engaged the "experience and realities of the time," Taggard expressed the belief that her poetry served far-reaching causes. In this respect, she eschewed the lyrical or formal poetry to which women poets were generally consigned; she also reiterated her distaste for High Modernism's retreat from the world of meaning. Thus it would seem that Taggard had, by 1938, definitively joined ranks with her age's other dominant school of aesthetics, Proletarianism. Yet Taggard's poetry is, in essence, unclassifiable; she claimed no one particular camp as her own. In designating a space for herself within the poetic practice of the day, Taggard walks a line thin as a knifeblade. Never one to toe the Communist line (or any Party line, for that matter), she instead shaped her political persuasions

---

<sup>38</sup> Many critics of the early twentieth century assigned the rather dismissive term "poetess" to Taggard, as well as to her contemporaries Sara Teasdale and Edna St. Vincent Millay (Showalter, These 63).

according to her own childhood and adolescent experiences of narrow-mindedness and her always-fervent compassion for suffering people. Her metonymically voiced poetry on Spain is enabled by such longstanding compassion.

*Genevieve Taggard's Spanish Civil War Poetry*

In her 1942 "To the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade,"<sup>39</sup> not only is Taggard's compassion fully engaged in the scenes she describes, but she demands the reader's involvement as well. Throughout this grim tribute to the young American men who offered their lives for the Spanish Republic, Taggard repeatedly insists that her audience join her in bearing witness to the both the physical and emotional suffering of these men. The opening lines thrust the reader immediately into this painful acknowledgement :

Say of them  
 They knew no Spanish  
 At first, and nothing of the arts of war  
 At first,  
           how to shoot, how to attack, how to retreat  
 How to kill, how to meet killing,  
 At first.

By calling directly upon the reader to "say" along with her this litany of distress experienced by the Lincolns, Taggard calls the reader into accountability for these men. She repeats this gesture throughout the poem: "Say they kept the air blue / Grousing and griping. . . . Say / They were young. . . . Say of them they were young, there was much they did not know, / They were human. Say it all. . . ." This gesture--this opening up of the testimonial story to include those who *hear* it as well as those who have *experienced* it--"makes possible a . . . kind of complicity" between the narrator and the reader

---

<sup>39</sup> The Abraham Lincoln Brigade (or Battalion, as it was alternately called) was the American unit within the International Brigades. Other brigades were organized based on the nationalities of their volunteers as well; for example, the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion was comprised of Canadians, and the Italian volunteers called themselves the Garibaldi Battalion.

(Beverley 97). John Beverley suggests that testimonial literature establishes this complicity with its readers “by engaging their sense of ethics and justice--with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience” (99). Certainly Taggard, as an intellectual witness for these forgotten and abused soldiers, is interested in accomplishing this through her poetry.

In bearing intellectual witness, Taggard speaks as both insider and outsider; the role which she plays in this particular poem is that of one who has watched these men closely, although she is not one of them; although she keeps her gaze fixed on them, she turns outward, to the rest of the world, to call others to come and “see” these soldiers, too. To read this poem, then, is to come to acknowledge and appreciate the men of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as she has. With her repetition of “at first. . . at first” in the opening lines, Taggard drives the reader into deeper awareness of the utter *lack--of* knowledge, of experience, of preparation--with which the young international volunteers came to Spain. This refrain also points to the haste with which those volunteers had to learn those skills; the implication, of course, is that those who could not learn fast enough would ultimately become the first casualties of their battalion. Moreover, Taggard’s insistent repetition of this phrase provides a frame for the deceptively simple litany of skills which a soldier must learn in order to survive. This litany actually forces the reader to confront the bloody and inglorious nature of those skills. Taggard asks the reader to wonder: By what numbing and inevitably transformative process does the callow young volunteer, who arrives at the battlefield knowing nothing of killing or meeting killing, acquire such knowledge?

While the first lines of “To the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade” are shot through with a sense of panic and imminent danger, Taggard’s poem moves quickly from fear to frustration, thus tracing a common pattern in the lives of those long at the front. “Say they kept the air blue / Grousing and Griping, / Arid words and harsh faces. . .,” Taggard writes. Once past the first dangers, the volunteers curse the boredom, or the

hunger, or the long dull tension, of trench warfare. Taggard here reminds us of that part of a soldier's life usually overlooked in war poetry or other typically aggrandizing accounts of battle: the tedium of waiting for further action, the irritation of sharing such cramped quarters, and for so long, with other bored and anxious young men.<sup>40</sup>

Taggard, shifting swiftly from one phase of a soldier's experience to the next, will not let us linger here, either; the poem next slips from human frustration and forced bravado into inhuman suffering and death: "The haggard in the trench, the dead on the olive slope / All young. And the thin, the ill, and the shattered, / Sightless, in hospitals, all young." Again, like Davidman, Taggard's emphasis lies on the battered, bruised human body, destroyed either in death or in the lingering afflictions of disease and disfigurement. Even in the closing lines of her poem, wherein she looks ahead to the final days of the surviving Lincolns, Taggard cannot ignore their human vulnerability: ". . . [I]f they did not die, came home to peace / That is not peace. / Say of them / They are no longer young. . . ." Through every stage of the volunteer soldier's experience, the poet's gaze remains fixed on the breakable body, and breakable spirit, of the volunteer soldier. She demands that we, the readers, also look and mourn.

In her other two poems on the Spanish Civil War, Taggard turns her gaze from the soldiers to the civilian population. It is here, as she speaks for the terror-struck Spaniards, that Taggard most closely identifies with her subject. In "Silence in Mallorca" (1938) particularly, her identification with the people for whom she speaks is almost jarring in its intensity. In this poem, Taggard almost slides from metonymy into synecdoche in her method of self-representation. The first ten stanzas make this startlingly clear:

---

<sup>40</sup> In her own account of the war, "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain," Josephine Herbst also acknowledges this aspect of life on the front lines. She sympathizes with the young soldiers who refuse to be immunized against typhoid while they are still in the trenches: ". . . [T]he reason was that they were due to get out of the line. If they took the shot, they didn't know when they'd get out. They had already been in sixty days" (145).

Our stony island, Spain's laconic child  
 Quiet. *Nada*. Cover the glowing spark.  
 Hush all the hotas and hush hush the wild

Arabian cries. Now in Europe's dark  
 Whisper weep secretly plot but never sing.  
 On cliffs against the sky moves the new mark

Shape of the plane, the loathed imperial thing  
 The hawk from Italy. the spy of black.  
 Ground where we labor darkens with its wing.

A few shot first. Then nothing. Then the attack.  
 Terror of the invader. Puff of shells.  
 And Juan our best man ambushed in the back.

Hide hide in the caves; listen in dry wells. . . .  
 Clang--the obedient treachery of church bells.

They shot the mayor of Inca. They jailed  
 The poor the free the poor the free the brave.  
 Out of the puerto when the felucca sailed

Planes roared and swooped and shot them on the wave.  
 Our people serve the invader and his gun.  
 Our people. Spain. Slow tempo of the slave.

We are cut off. Africa's blazing sun  
 Knew these same hawks that now around us prey.  
 And Barcelona suffers. Is there no one

To save us but ourselves? From far away  
 After victorious battle. . . . Cry, we cry  
 Brothers, Comrades help us. Where are they?

Our island lying open to the sky.  
 Mallorca, the first to fall, the last to die.

Mallorca, the part of Spain which Taggard knew best--indeed, the place she had called home for one important year of her life--had fallen to fascist control in the opening days of the war. As one who cared deeply about that part of Spain and who paid attention to the developments of the war, Taggard knew this and grieved. Her grief, as we see in this poem, was heightened by her remembrance of various friends and



neighbors from that island who she knew were suffering and even dying under this new regime. Many of the details of this suffering and death which Taggard gives here are historically accurate. Frederick Benson points out, for example, that a mayor of one of the Mallorcan villages--a man openly supportive of the Republic--had been hiding in a cistern when fascist sympathizers found him, dragged him out, tortured and shot him. Since Mallorca had never been under Republican control at any point in the war, Benson emphasizes, "the murder and cruelty accompanying it cannot be ascribed to retaliation for earlier crimes committed against" those sympathetic to the invaders (226).<sup>41</sup> Taggard's lines, "They shot the mayor of Inca" and "Hide hide in the caves; listen in the dry wells," allude to this treacherous event.

Taggard positions herself immediately within the harsh context which she describes in this poem. She establishes her membership in this scene with the opening invocation of "*Our stony island.*" The details with which she delineates the political climate of wartime Mallorca prove her intimate knowledge of this island and its people. She mourns for "Juan our best man ambushed in the back," as well as for the murdered Republican mayor and "the poor the free the brave" who are shot down by Italian aircraft when they try to escape out of the *puerto* (port). More importantly, however, Taggard's voice in this poem is joined clearly and urgently with the other voices of this community. Her shouts of warning--"Cover the glowing spark. / Hush all the hotas and hush hush the wild / Arabian cries"--are straightforward interactions with and entreaties for the other members of this besieged island. She gives the defiant instructions which all of her neighbors would likewise be giving each other, in the face of fascist attack. Her allusions to the "wild Arabian cry" also point to her understanding of this particular people. In her article "Mallorcan Memory," written the following year, Taggard would refer nostalgically to this "Arab cry," the "street songs and work songs" which the people of

---

<sup>41</sup> Georges Bernanos also describes this particular incident in his novel, *Les grandes cimetières sous la lune* (1938).

Mallorca sang daily, going about their various tasks (7). Her knowledge of the tactics which Mallorcans would have to undertake in order to survive, as well as of the nature of their ritual music, would seem to make complete Taggard's own inclusion in the scene she describes.

Indeed, in later lines such as we "We are cut off. . . . Is there no one / To save us but ourselves?", Taggard continues to position herself on the inside of the situation, along with the isolated and terrified Republicans still trapped on this fascist-held island. The repetition of the phrase "Our people" also underscores both her sense of belonging to this particular community and her active--in this case, desperate--involvement in it. The poet's continuous use of the first-person plural underscores her directly lateral relationship to those whom she represents here.

Yet, ultimately, Taggard's voice does not quite slip into such complete identification with this community that it becomes synecdochic. With her bilingual description, "Quiet. *Nada*," she alludes to her double stance as one who belongs neither entirely inside, nor completely outside, that scene. Two-tongued, she is also a representative of two different countries. Furthermore, in the closing stanzas of this poem, Taggard does step back outside this community with which she has so ardently identified. She distances herself sufficiently to envision the "Battalions, clouds of planes by workers flown" which she (as one living *outside* Mallorca, after all) knows do exist, and are fighting for the Republic, back on mainland Spain. Standing on the very brink of this island, gazing inward and outward at the same time, Taggard in "Silence in Mallorca" powerfully takes up the metonymic stance.

Although the Republic had long fallen by 1946, when Taggard penned her last poem on Spain, simply titled "Andalucia," we see in this poem too her identification with the suffering of that land and her desire to draw public attention to that suffering:

Silence like a light intense,  
Silence the deaf ear of noise. . .

The hid guerrillas wishing to commence  
 The big war, the war of the full voice,  
 In rocks, knives, guns, and dynamite,  
 . . . Or the scratch of scorpions ticking in the night;  
 And at the church door near the altar boys  
 One in black frowns with a boy in white. . .

Andalucia, land of naked faces,  
 Country of silver and green sky; lonely country, country throngs.  
 Arabia and Africa in gardens and arid places.  
 Country of essential dances and the song of songs.  
 Andalucia, place of the wine yellow light;  
 Place of wind too lucid for hissing in small tones.  
 Andalucia, wherever our dead comrades are young bones,  
 The color of old rock mountains, bone yellow and white.

In Andalucia it is  
 Now a country of silences  
 Since the war; a hiss  
 Is the way of the wind,  
 And what a man says  
 Is also in his silences,  
 In the glance he gives behind  
 In Andalucia, land of naked silences.

Andalucia, you too will feel  
 The wide wind that unlocks systems:  
 Franco to skid his heels and reel,  
 Men to shudder on the cluttered Thames.  
 A great rushing across the planet drives  
 Breath into bodies. Shouts and arms awake.  
 Andalucia, country of silver and green, shake  
 Like a reclaimed cloak, hum like a city of hives.

*In Andalucia it is  
 Now a country of silences  
 Since the war; a hiss  
 Is the way of the wind,  
 And what a man says  
 Is also in his silences,  
 In the glance he gives behind,  
 In Andalucia, land of naked silences.*

Like all of Taggard's writing on Spain, "Andalucia" confronts the reader with images of human oppression and vulnerability; here, however, her intellectual witnessing calls us to

consider life in *postwar* Spain, also a horrific experience for those supporters of the Republic who had survived the war only to face assassination, imprisonment, or slow starvation under Franco's dictatorship. Her opening lines, "Silence like light intense, / Silence the deaf ear of noise," draw us immediately into a land almost *roaring* with its own stillness. Silence in this poem is signifier of trauma; like the person who goes literally deaf after being exposed to *too much* noise, the Andalucians--the people, and their country along with them--have literally shut down after having been subjected to *too much* stimulus.

In the first stanza of "Andalucia," everything hangs in a state of utter, overwhelmed suspension. The guerrillas hiding in the hills long for "the war of the full voice;" there is no answer, no relief, no outlet for such longing, however. The only response is the "scratch of scorpions ticking in the night." Stanza two echoes this ringing silence and despair: "Andalucia, land of naked faces / . . . lonely country. . . / Andalucia, where our dead comrades are young bones." Stanzas one and two both counter and parallel one another. In content, they are strikingly different; stanza one describes the people who have survived, who wait in strained anxiety for relief, for a change, while stanza two focuses on the lonely land itself. Both depictions, however, underline the ominous quality of the poem and of life in this southernmost Spanish province, seven years after Franco's victory.

In a stance reminiscent of her "To the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade," Taggard positions herself as both insider and outsider relative to the agonized people of Andalucia. Again, she demonstrates intimate understanding of, and affinity for, the country she describes, recalling this Spanish province as a "[c]ountry of essential dances and the song of songs. / Andalucia, place of the wine yellow light." Her reference to "*our* comrades" buried among the rocks of Andalucia indicates her sense of inclusion in this scene. Furthermore, her sorrowful reflection on what Andalucia "is / Now," in the wake of the fall of the Republic, marks her as one on the inside of that situation: "[W]hat

a man says is also in his silences, / In the glance he gives behind. . . .” In this stanza, Taggard exposes the bitter reality of living under a dictatorship; the silence and the suspicious backward glances of the Spanish people indicate their state of paranoia, their sense of being constantly watched, their fear of speaking. A nightmarish, almost Orwellian tone dominates here. The repetition of this stanza, word for word, at the close of the poem drives home this ominous mood. Finally, the words “hiss” and “naked,” both appearing three times, fairly leap out of this poem, insisting that we take notice of the Andalucians’ precarious lives-- so precarious that one must whisper in a hiss, and feel dangerously exposed.

By showing us, her audience, these aspects of postwar Spanish life, Taggard on one hand speaks from an insider’s position. Yet she also clearly steps back from Spain, seeing it as an entity outside or beyond herself, when she addresses Andalucia in the fourth stanza: “[Y]ou too will feel / The wide wind that unlocks systems,” she claims, pointing toward a future hope for Franco’s vanquishment and a return to democracy. Her ability to address Andalucia as an other, a “you,” indicates that she is not so much a part of that place that she cannot move outside it and see herself as separate from it. As we have seen, this metonymic stance is instrumental in the relationship of the intellectual witness to her subject. Taggard as intellectual witness is keenly attuned to her subject’s suffering, yet she is not so immersed in it that she cannot turn her face outward to the rest of the world and speak of that suffering.

Taggard not only mastered the task of navigating between the roles of insider and outsider, but she also managed a precarious and courageous negotiation among warring poetic codes. Nowhere else in her poetry is this so apparent as in “Andalucia.” Here, she draws from the lyrical, the Modernist, and the Proletarian traditions at once. Stanzas one, two, and four are rhymed and lyrical in form; stanza two especially makes use of the aesthetically pleasing, pastoral languages typifying lyrical or formalist poetry (“Country of silver and green sky. . . / Arabia and Africa in gardens and in arid places”). The oddly

repetitive stanzas three and five, however, follow Modernist codes almost perfectly; their meter is broken, their rhymes are sprung or slanted or nonexistent. Furthermore, as we have seen above, these stanzas evoke the paranoia and traumatic inability to speak which mark such paragons of Modernism as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The overtly political content, on the other hand, is more typical of Proletarianism than it is of either formalism or of High Modernism. As did Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard also occupies a nameless but compelling poetic space at the juncture of these three schools of aesthetic thought.

Alicia Ostriker singles out Genevieve Taggard as well as Edna St. Vincent Millay in her review of women’s literature written during the Modernist period, yet she is unable, as am I, to assign them to a single category. Ostriker classifies both Taggard and Millay as “lyricists” of the period, rather than as members of the “avante-garde” group (her term for High Modernism). Yet she is not satisfied with this canon-based binary, and goes on to name a third category in twentieth-century women’s poetry: “. . . [L]ess well known than the . . . lyricist and the Modernist innovator” is the writer of political poetry (55). Political poetry, which Ostriker also refers to as “the poetry of social conscience,” is that which focuses on “humanitarian issues” (55). She cites the American folk tradition, rich in stories of women’s experiences of work and of labor organizing, as an important point of origin for twentieth-century “political poetry” by American women. To this category Ostriker names Taggard and “the later” Millay.<sup>42</sup> Taggard and Millay thus overlap two categories--lyrical and political--proving that poetry need not follow the Proletarian line in terms of style in order to do political work and be recognized for it.

### *Edna St. Vincent Millay as Activist-Poet*

---

<sup>42</sup> Not surprisingly, Muriel Rukeyser, the subject of Chapter Three, also appears in this category.

Perhaps even more than Genevieve Taggard, Edna St. Vincent Millay typifies the woman poet who is both insider and outsider to 1930s political poetry.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, as we have already observed, Millay was the subject of bombastic and well-publicized attacks early in her career, directed specifically at her ostensible frivolity and lack of intellect. Even today, such mistaken generalizations about her poetry still persist. Suzanne Clark suggests that, by “[w]riting sonnets in the era of High Modernism, popular though she was, Edna St. Vincent Millay courted oblivion” (3). While Millay was well-known for this sort of poetry, she was, however, no mere writer of romantic sonnets and light verse. As early as the 1920s, she was also an ardent political activist, both in word and deed. In 1927 she wrote “Justice Denied in Massachusetts” in protest of the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti. She also put her significant fame to political service by participating twice in protests of that trial; she was, in fact, twice imprisoned for these efforts. In 1929 Millay ran for the position of Democratic committeewoman from her hometown of Austerlitz, New York. By the 1930s, Millay had joined the tide of American writers opening themselves to the possibilities of socialism; the core conversation of her 1937 Conversation at Midnight, a dramatic poem, involves seven men of varying class backgrounds arguing over contemporary politics.

Millay continued to put her writing into the employ of anti-fascist political causes throughout the following decade as well. As Cary Nelson notes, Millay’s 1940 poem against isolationism, There Are No Islands Any More, was published as a separate book with the motto “Lines written in passion and in deep concern for England, France, and my own country”; her “Poem and Prayer for an Invading

---

<sup>43</sup> Although Millay is still marginalized by the canon, she remains a far more widely recognized literary figure than either Davidman or Taggard. Because critical and biographical information on Millay is relatively plentiful, I will not examine the details of her life and work at the same lengths as I did in my discussions of Davidman and Taggard. For further information on Millay, see William Thesing’s Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York: G. K. Hall, 1993); Judith Newman’s Edna St. Vincent Millay: A Reference Guide (Boston: Hall, 1977); and Jean Gould’s The Poet and Her Book: A Biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1969). James Gray and Norman A. Brittin have also written literary biographies of Millay; both are titled Edna St. Vincent Millay (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1967; New York: Twayne, 1967).

Army” was actually read over the radio as the Allied armies were landing in Normandy and then published as a separate pamphlet. (Repression 42)

Perhaps most famous of all her political poetry, however, is Millay’s long dramatic poem, The Murder of Lidice (1941).<sup>44</sup> By the time of the outbreak of World War II, Millay’s political sympathies had shifted from the Left towards the mainstream. The Murder of Lidice was commissioned by the Writers’ War Board, a group of American writers who offered their talents to the government for the duration of the war. Published two months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the poem was meant to stir the American public out of its noninterventionist stance. Millay narrates the plight of the Czech village of Lidice, destroyed in June 1941 by the Nazis; she ends this tragic story with an overt plea: “The whole world holds in its arms today / The murdered village of Lidice / . . . The maniac killer still runs wild / . . . Oh catch him! (Stop him before there’s a Lidice, Illinois!)” Her point, of course, was that the forces of fascist and Nazism had as yet met with no insurmountable barricades; sweeping across the stunned face of Europe, those forces might well spread further still. America might be in greater danger than America had thus far imagined.

This was a point which many advocates for the Spanish Republic had made some five years earlier, when Hitler and Mussolini first joined ranks with Franco. Millay could not have been unaware of this irony, writing as she had on behalf of that Republic in 1938. “Say That We Saw Spain Die,” her only poem of intellectual witness to the Spanish Civil War, already acknowledges the terrible power of fascist and grimly foresees fascist’s first victory:

Say that we saw Spain die. O splendid bull, how well you fought!  
 Lost from the first.  
     . . . the tossed, the replaced, the watchful *torero* with gesture elegant and  
 s pry,  
 Before the dark, the tiring but unglazed eye deploying the bright cape,

---

<sup>44</sup> For detailed discussion of this poem, see Cary Nelson’s Repression and Recovery, pp. 42-43.



Which hid for once not air, but the enemy indeed, the authentic shape,  
 A thousand of him, interminably into the ring released. . .  
     the turning beast at length between converging colours caught.

Save for the weapons of its skull, a bull  
 Unarmed, considering, weighing, charging  
 Almost a world, itself without ally.

Say that we saw the shoulders more than the mind confused, so profusely  
 Bleeding from so many more than the accustomed barbs, the game gone vulgar,  
 the rules abused.  
 Say that we saw Spain die from loss of blood, a rustic reason, in a reinforced  
 And proud punctilious land, no *espada*--  
 A hundred men unhorsed,  
 A hundred horses gored, and the afternoon aging, and the crowd growing restless  
 (all, all so much later than planned),  
 And the big head heavy, sliding forward in the sand, and the tongue dry with  
 sand,--no *espada*  
 Toward that hot neck, for the delicate and final thrust, having dared thrust forth  
     his hand.

The setting for Millay's poem is a bullring; the Spanish Republic itself is the "splendid bull. . . [l]ost from the first."<sup>45</sup> Although she obviously admires this valiant creature, the dominant tone throughout the poem is of regret and even despair. Writing in the fall of 1938, six months before the Republic's official demise, the poet already knows this bitter outcome. Despite its valor, the Republic's situation is like that of even the boldest bull unleashed before the matador; death may be delayed, but it is inevitable. The only resource with which the bull/the Republic can fight back is the "weapon of its skull"--that is, its ideology. Millay credits this ideology with being powerful in itself, but admits that ideology without efficient leadership and sufficient physical strength will not be enough to ensure survival. The "mind" of this bull, she asserts, is not confused, but its "shoulders" are. Here again, the "mind" represents the Republic's principles, while the

---

<sup>45</sup> An odd counterpoint to Millay's poem is Sol Funaroff's "The Bull in the Olive Field" (1943). In Funaroff's poem, the bull signifies not the Republic but rather its binary opposite; the bull is the Catholic Church, the Spanish land owners, the wealthy, and the German and Italian fascists, all rolled into one. Given the Spanish affinity for the bull as symbol of national identity, Funaroff's decision to make such a metaphor of this animal seems jarring and ill-informed.

weaker “shoulders” are those who have taken on or “shouldered” the primary weight of responsibility in the struggle--in this case, the beleaguered Republican government

The horror of this bullring, unfolding throughout the poem, works as a microcosm of the larger nightmare enveloping the whole of the Spanish Republic. The doom of this slowly dying bull is that he is “between converging colours caught”--or ensnared in the flags of fascist Spain, Italy, and Germany. Franco and his allies in this poem become the maniacal, sadistic matadors who tear unannounced and unexpectedly into the arena; they are the “enemy indeed. . . / A thousand of him, interminably into the ring released.” Because of them, the bull is “[b]leeding from so many more than the accustomed barbs, the game gone vulgar, the rules abused.” Suddenly, the event which the spectators have come prepared to watch has dissolved into chaotic nightmare. Millay alludes to the fact that the supposed “easy killing” (or quick coup) which the fascists had hoped for when they first attacked Republican Spain has dragged into a surprisingly long struggle: “[A]ll, all, so much later than planned.” But now, after too many hours of fighting, the “afternoon [is] aging,” and the stubborn Republic will die slowly, agonizingly, “from loss of blood, / a rustic reason.” The lines, “A hundred men unhorsed, / A hundred horses gored” work both thematically and stylistically to underscore this nightmare quality. Not only do these lines create a scene of unthinkable chaos and violence, but the repeated syllable “or”-- “unhorsed / horses gored”--also evokes the word *horror*.

Throughout this poem, Millay positions herself on the boundary between those who are trapped inside the bullring, helplessly watching the slaughter, and those who are able to escape and shout to the rest of the world the news of what is going on inside. The poet’s insider-outsider stance here is reminiscent of Taggard’s in “Andalucia;” it is, of course, the stance commonly taken by the intellectual witness. While her main goal is to expose the atrocities committed by the attacking fascist nations, Millay does not expend all of her anger on those countries; she turns a condemning eye upon the noninterventionist democracies as well when she notes that the bull is “unarmed . . . /

itself without an ally.” Her own noninterventionist nation is clearly Millay’s audience in this poem. The title, which becomes a refrain throughout the poem, takes the form of a direct address: “*Say that we saw Spain die.*” The entity whom Millay is addressing is clearly someone on the outside, not present at the scene of death. Millay, on the other hand, does claim the role of spectator or bystander here; she includes herself in that “we” who watches Spain’s final agony. Her political concerns and persuasions compel her to pay attention to this agony, despite her nation’s apathetic stance. Yet, precisely because she is simply a spectator, neither is Millay directly involved in this last bloody struggle. As we have seen in Spanish Civil War poetry by Davidman and Taggard as well, Millay inhabits the role of intellectual witness to the Republic, crying to the rest of the world, “This is what I have heard; this is what I know. Hear this and know this with me.” While it may be too late to save the Spanish Republicans, theirs is a tragedy which the poet wants to inscribe upon her public’s consciousness.

Like Davidman and Taggard, Millay outlived her own fame. As Diane Freedman indicates, the “It-girl” popularity which Millay enjoyed throughout the 1920s “started to wane in the late 1930s, when her critical reputation. . . declined under the reign of High Modernism and its critics” (xii-xiii). Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, who points to Millay’s successful early forays into Modernism,<sup>46</sup> asserts that, by the late 1920s, Millay was “quite conscious of the anti-Modernist direction in which her work was moving. . .”

Millay was discovering that the Modernist representation of the crisis of modernity<sup>47</sup> was not one she shared. Whereas the Modernists had little faith in the political present. . . and in the general public’s ability to recognize and reform

---

<sup>46</sup> Kaiser points to such early poems as “Spring” to demonstrate Millay’s facility at following Modernist poetic codes.

<sup>47</sup> Here we may understand the “crisis of modernity” as the lack of unified meaning in the world which most artists came to acknowledge in the wake of the Great War, and which disrupted those assumptions about a rational universe which Westerners had cherished since the Enlightenment. Modernist writers in particular tried to represent this apparently radical break in humanity’s perception of itself and its world through radically experimental—often chaotic or broken—language and imagery.

its world, Millay increasingly turned to the public and to local politics to enact immediate change. (39)

If one could not remain relatively disengaged and quiet regarding the political issues of one's time, then one had better give up any aspirations to being recognized as a practitioner of High Modernism. This was indubitably the message which Millay received from the literary critics and canon-makers of 1930s America. Because she could not conscientiously fit herself to such stipulations, Millay deliberately moved away from Modernism.

### ***Breaking New Ground: The Poetry of Witness***

By the end of her life, Millay "herself confessed that she and her poetry suffered in the service of public causes" (Freedman xiii). Millay was, as Freedman notes, "condemned both for her politicizing and her political poetry" (xiii). Despite the popular and critical praise which she enjoyed in the first stages of her career, even Edna St. Vincent Millay found herself caught in the same double-bind which ensnared any woman in early twentieth-century America who dared to write poetry both lyrical and political. Barred on one side by the male canon-makers who believed that women poets were fit only for extolling the gentle pleasures of moonlight and roses, and obstructed on the other by the masculine rhetoric and imagery of Proletarian poetry, Davidman, Taggard, and Millay wrote poems which pushed against the controlling poetic paradigms of their day. It is for this reason more than any other, I believe, that we find the metonymic voice at work in their political poetry.

As I have shown, the position of the woman poet in this era is not unlike the position of the colonized subject, whose self-writing is typically metonymic. According to E. K. Brown, a colony "applies to what it has standards which are imported, and therefore artificial and distorting. It sets the great good place not in its present, nor in its past nor in its future, but somewhere outside its own borders, somewhere beyond its own

possibilities” (183). Indeed, those American women poets who addressed political crises such as the war in Spain inhabited a colony-like space in a poetic landscape which, during the 1930s, was dominated by such imperial powers as Proletarianism and High Modernism. Political poetry such as Davidman’s, Taggard’s, and Millay’s--marked, as it was, with an emphasis on the individual as well as on the mass, with an acknowledgement of suffering rather than glory--found no ready affirmation or analogue in that broader context of American poetry which it inhabited. Thus their poetry, like much of women’s poetry has suffered, as Barbara Gelpi puts it, “from the sense that great poems were written ‘somewhere outside its own borders’--that is, by men. . .” (272).

That women writers of political poetry must be consigned to such a dim borderland was still a commonly held assumption when Millay, the longest-lived of the three women I discuss in this chapter, died in 1950. Yet her efforts, and Davidman’s and Taggard’s as well, do not go unmarked or unappreciated, some fifty years later. Indeed, contemporary poets like Carolyn Forché have shown us that poetry is a powerful and fitting container for political protest, and women activists are powerful and fitting writers of such protest. Forché, who has reflected in poetry on her experience of El Salvador’s civil war (1979-1992)<sup>48</sup>, defined and legitimized a space for poetry like that in which Davidman, Taggard, and Millay were writing decades earlier. In her essay, “The Poetry of Witness,” Forché writes: “We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between ‘personal’ and ‘political’ poems” (141). Forché, however, calls into question such facile dichotomies. “If we give up the dimension of the personal,” she explains, “we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality” (141). By claiming both the personal and the political as the domain of the poet, and by

---

<sup>48</sup>See Forché’s The Country Between Us (1981).

doing so in a woman's voice, Forche calls into being a poetic category which politicized American women poets sought, but could not find, in the 1930s. Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, Edna St. Vincent Millay: As intellectual witnesses to the Spanish Civil War, both their political and their poetic efforts ended in an echoing silence. Sixty years after the end of that war, however, we know that, in their visions as poets and as activists, they were far ahead of their time.

## Chapter Three

## "The World Is a Field of the Spanish War":

## Traumatic Memory in Muriel Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War Poetry

*. . . whether you lie fallen / Among those sunlight fields, or by miracle somewhere stand, / Your words of war and love, death and another promise / Survive as a lifetime sound.*

*"Long Past Moncada," 1944*

*Rites of initiation, if the whirlpool eye / see fire see buildings deformed and flowing to the ground / in a derangement of explosion falling / see the distorted face run through an olive grove / the rattle of hens scream of a cliff-face and the pylons filing / in an icing of sweat enter these tropics: war, / where initiation is a rite of passage. . . .*

*"Otherworld," 1939*

From the moment when, at age twenty-two, she was an eyewitness to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, until her death in 1980, American poet Muriel Rukeyser did not stop bearing witness for the lost and the fallen of the Spanish Republic. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that she *could* not stop. The five days which she spent in Spain at the end of July 1936 were also the first five days of the war; in that brief but intense span of time, Rukeyser bore witness to the opening of what would be the most violent and

inhuman destruction that the world had yet seen.<sup>1</sup> Years later, Rukeyser would recall her Spanish sojourn as catastrophic: “We had seen. . . the sniper whose gun would speak, as the bullet broke the wall beside you. . . [T]he cars burned and the blood streamed over the walls of houses and the horses shrieked. . .” (*Life* 1). By the time she left Spain, Rukeyser had seen the fighting and experienced the bombing at close hand; she had also lost to the war the only man she ever publicly spoke of having loved, a young German exile named Otto Boch. These two events constituted for Rukeyser the psychological trauma to which she would return repeatedly, in poem after poem throughout the remaining years of her life. She would never be able to forget Spain, nor to stanch the tide of poetic testimony which flowed out of that trauma like blood from a vital wound.

### *Trauma and Testimony*

The traumatic event actually compels its own testimony; it penetrates every facet of the survivor’s life, so that the survivor must eventually find a way of releasing the story of that trauma. “Trauma survivors,” writes Dori Laub, “live not with memories of the past, but with an event that . . . had no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as the survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect” (69). The story of such an all-encompassing, unshakeable event cannot be released arbitrarily, however; it demands a listening Other who will share the burden of the story with the speaker-survivor. For Muriel Rukeyser, poetry became the vehicle through which she bore ongoing testimony to what she had seen and heard in Spain.

---

<sup>1</sup> As I discussed in Chapter One, the Spanish Civil War is now widely recognized as the first battle of World War II. Spain was the country where fascism and Nazism originally tested their strength against a democracy; it was also the place where fascist and Nazi war technology was first implemented, with civilians as the primary target.



Poetry, for Rukeyser, constituted a space of dialogue, a space in which she was assured of the deep listening her traumatic testimony needed. In a craft interview with The New York Quarterly, she insisted that “[t]he poem seems to be a meeting place, just as a person’s life is a meeting place” (Fortunato 35). In The Life of Poetry, Rukeyser’s manifesto on the importance of poetry, she expands on this idea; the poem, she asserts, is a “confession to oneself *made available to all*. This is confession as a means to understanding, as testimony to the truths of experience as they become form and ourselves” (212, emphasis mine). For Rukeyser, poetry meant profound human communication; because it assured her of a listener, poetry was also the means by which Rukeyser unleashed her own traumatic testimony.

### *Evoking the Listener: Poetry as Testimonial Space*

The creation of a poem, according to Rukeyser, depends not only upon the writer, but on the reader as well; the poem is the poet’s testimony, calling forth a radical listening empathy on the part of the reader. “The giving and taking of a poem,” writes Rukeyser, is “. . . a triadic relation” (Life 174). This relation is comprised of the poem itself, the poet, and the audience. “Audience” proves an inadequate term for Rukeyser’s meaning, however. “I should like to propose another word. . . . I suggest the old word ‘witness,’ which includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence” (175). She chooses the word “witness” in particular for its “overtone of responsibility”; the reader-witness’s sharing of responsibility for the poem’s testimony “announces with the poem that we are about to change, that work is being done on the self” (175). Thus the poem is an instrument of transformation--both for the

poet and for her audience, or witness. In poetic testimony, the poet draws the reader into her story, asking the reader to stand with her in listening to the story and sharing its weight. The reader is made a fellow witness, side by side with the writer.

Human exchange, the exchange of ideas and experience between at least two people, is fundamental to this poetry of witness. Paul Celan, another poet of witness from this past century of war, also recognized and articulated poetry's ability to call out fellow witnesses. In a public speech which he gave concerning the nature of poetry, Celan claimed: "The poem intends an Other, needs this Other, needs an opposite. It goes towards it, bespeaks it" ("Meridian" 49). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe remarks that, for Celan, "the possibility of poetry" was precisely the "possibility of going beyond oneself" (50). Muriel Rukeyser, a predecessor of Celan, knew this, too. "Exchange is creation," she maintains. "In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader" (*Life* 173).

Both Rukeyser's and Celan's understanding of the relationship between poet and reader in the production of poetry closely mirrors the relationship formed by a trauma survivor and her listener in the giving of traumatic testimony. In the relationship which Rukeyser outlines, reader as well as writer is implicated by and held accountable for the truths which the poetic testimony reveals. Similarly, as Dori Laub explains, "the listener to a trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience the trauma himself" (57). The listener to traumatic testimony "is a party to the creation of knowledge. . . . The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is. . . the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed. . . ." (57). Only through the reassurance that her story will be *received*, will

truly be heard by someone outside herself, is a trauma survivor able to release that story. In Laub's work, the one who listens and enables the release of the testimony is the psychotherapist. Rukeyser's testimony to her own traumatic experience in Spain is unconventional in that it happens through literature, and not through psychoanalysis. She is able to bear testimony to her trauma through the medium of poetry, however, because of her powerful faith in poetry's ability to include and implicate the reader in its meaning.

This choosing of literature to do the work generally ascribed to psychoanalysis is in many ways apt and appropriate. As Shoshana Felman indicates, both literature and psychoanalysis produce testimonies which operate as "a mode of truth's realization *beyond* what is available as statement" (15). The language of modern poetry is, after all, a uniquely elliptical and metaphorical language, in which meaning is not directly stated but is rather hinted at, or offered in semi-obscured glimpses, or derived from the gaps and breaks and rhythms in the language rather than in the language itself.<sup>2</sup> As such it is well-suited for the telling of traumatic stories, in that these stories cannot, by their very nature, be encompassed completely in language or held entirely in the human imagination.

Traumatic testimony, whether spoken, as in psychoanalysis, or written, as in poetry, may thus be understood "not as a mode of statement of, but rather as a mode of *access to*" the story of the trauma (Felman 16). Poetry works as a mode of traumatic testimony in that both the writer and the reader of poetry know that poetry never says all

---

<sup>2</sup> Felman, in her discussion of poetry and testimony, sees the Symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme as one of the first to recognize the French poetic revolution of the 1890s--which introduced free verse and a general loosening of traditional poetic rules, and ushered in the Modernist era in Europe--as a response to "the ground-shaking [cultural and political] processes unleashed by the French Revolution" (19). Implicit in the new, freer poetic forms, as Mallarme saw it, was a "violence" corresponding to the political upheaval of

that it can and simultaneously says *more* than it can. Or, as Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, the work of the poem is to "clear a way between silence and discourse, between mutism's saying nothing and the saying too much of eloquence. [This work] is the poem's narrow path" (141-42). The whole story of a trauma will never be captured in words; after all, to believe that trauma can be articulated completely, in any form of language, is fallacious. The language of a poem, however, may bring us closer to the truth of a traumatic story than any attempt at direct statement or "factual" narrative. Poetry may give us glimpses and glimmers of the story which would otherwise remain entirely buried in the subterranean recesses of the subconscious.

Muriel Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War poetry is a poetry of witness in the specifically psychoanalytic sense which trauma theorists indicate when they speak of "bearing witness." To be a witness in this way, according to Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, is to live within the parameters of experience designated by Terrence Des Pres in The Survivor:

Where men and women are forced to endure terrible things at the hand of others--whenever, that is, extremity involves moral issues--the need to remember becomes a general response. Spontaneously, they make it their business to record the evil forced upon them. . . . Here--and in similar situations--survival and bearing witness become reciprocal acts. (n.p.)<sup>3</sup>

Witnessing in this case refers to the act of having survived a trauma and, through that very survival, continuously acting on a compulsion--part psychological, part ethical--to remember that trauma and to re-incorporate it into language, and thus eventually into

---

the Modernist period (18). In the past one hundred years, then, poetic form has become increasingly broken, difficult, and "violent" as it attempts to reflect an increasingly violent century.

public understanding and recognition. Integration of the traumatic story, into language and then into the public sphere, is the primary goal of *telling* that story. “Testimony,” Judith Herman reminds us, “has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual, and a public aspect, which is political and judicial” (181). Through the act of telling what has happened, the trauma survivor creates a testimony which is inherently healing, both for the survivor and her community.

### *Testimony as Both Personal and Public*

In giving testimony, a trauma survivor takes up a position profoundly singular and inward-focused, yet also inherently, necessarily communal and outward-looking. On the one hand, testimony of a trauma “cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another witness” (Felman 3). Trauma, after all, is the event without precedent; it is an event which is absolutely singular, unsymbolized, unintegrated, and isolated. Thus the story of trauma which a survivor bears is, as Shoshana Felman insists, “a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden” (3). Felman cites Paul Celan, who famously wrote that “No one bears witness for the witness.” In this statement, Felman locates “the *solitude* of a responsibility” thrust upon the survivor of (and witness to) a trauma (3). In this sense, bearing traumatic testimony is the most personal of all forms of communication.

Paradoxically, however, the story of trauma is one which cannot be told, cannot be communicated, in isolation. While the content of the testimony itself--the experience of the trauma survivor--is absolutely individual and personal, the actual process of *articulating* that testimony, of bearing witness to a trauma, in fact demands the presence

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Felman and Laub’s *Testimony*, one page before their Foreword.

of a compassionate, listening Other. Felman points to Freud's work in Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis, wherein Freud discovers that "it takes two to witness the unconscious" (15). Similarly, Laub affirms that "[b]earing witness to a trauma is. . . a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an Other--in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues. . ." (70-71). The work of giving testimony necessitates the trauma survivor's reaching out to address and engage others, beyond herself. To bear witness to a trauma, Felman maintains, is "to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* and *to* others. . ." (3). Testimony, then, is a communal action which emanates from the individual experience; although it is initially an extremely private experience, it is transformed into an openly, necessarily public one.

The testifying stance that the trauma survivor takes up is a dual one. The survivor turns inward, entering into her own story of trauma, even as she turns outward, bringing that story out into the public light. This dual stance is one which Muriel Rukeyser assumed in all of her Spanish Civil War poetry. For her, Spain was both "the core of all our lives" (Bernikow 18), the dark and potent center of herself which she would plumb again and again in poetry, and the reason for which she engaged in political activity throughout her life. Her poetry about Spain, then, at once intensely personal and openly public, mirrors the simultaneous inward-outward movement of the traumatic testimony.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Carolyn Forché locates a similar dual stance in the poetry of witness; in Forché's definition, poetry of witness takes into account the institutional and governmental structures under which we all live, while never losing

sight of the individual's responses and resistances to such structures. In this way, Forche's more overtly political definition of the poetry of witness and Felman and Laub's specifically psychoanalytic one run parallel to each other. Both involve a simultaneous inward and outward turn. In both, the testimony--the poem which bears witness to a trauma--depends on this constant interplay. Rukeyser's poetry on the Spanish Civil War is marked by this very interplay; we can observe this already, even in the brief excerpts from two poems which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. In these lines from "Long Past Moncada" and "Otherworld," we see Rukeyser's movement between the interior, personal dimensions of her Spanish Civil War experience and the exterior, political ones. In "Long Past Moncada," an elegy to Otto Boch, Rukeyser invokes the Spanish Civil War by addressing her dead lover. On the first day of the war, Rukeyser met and fell in love with Otto Boch, a young German athlete who had intended to compete in Barcelona's Anti-Fascist Olympics. With the eruption of the war, those Games were cancelled, but Boch stayed in Spain to fight for the Republic. He eventually died there, killed in the Segre River battle, where the Republic lost six hundred of its nine hundred men fighting there that day (Rukeyser, "We Came" 370). The impassioned commitment which marks Rukeyser's poetry on Spain springs in part from her love and her loss in this very private, individual sense.

A harsh counterpoint to the privately themed, romantically nuanced "Long Past Moncada," "Otherworld" explodes upon us in a flurry of horrific images from the war itself and asserts that witnessing the Spanish Civil War was the single greatest epiphany of the poet's life, "a rite of initiation" into the world of political witnessing. In 1979, the year before her death, Rukeyser reflected on the mandate she received in Spain: "We

were told, ‘Your responsibility is to go home and tell your people what you’ve seen in Spain.’” (Bernikow 18). Amazingly, despite Rukeyser’s significant body of poetry on that theme, she concluded, “I think I’ve never done that adequately. . .” (18). She would, however, she vowed, “go on all my life trying” (18). This unquenchable drive to tell what she had witnessed in Spain was borne both of personal need--the need to uncover and work through her own experience of trauma--and of ethical conviction. Robert Jay Lifton explains that survivors of trauma almost universally experience a “sense of debt to the dead” and a “profound inclination to bear witness to those deaths” (144). Lifton calls this sense of indebtedness “the anxiety of responsibility”; those survivors who experience most nearly complete healing from their trauma are those who are “able to connect [their] anxiety and responsibility to larger principles and meanings” (145). This particular effort at connection undergirds Rukeyser’s poetry on the Spanish Civil War. Like many politically conscious survivors of trauma, Muriel Rukeyser believed that the publicizing of her own traumatic experience of war would raise concern and horror in others, thus preventing the re-enactment of such trauma. Thus Rukeyser’s testimonial poems about Spain are both a path inward, plumbing the chasms of the poet’s own personal loss and pain, and a path *outward*, out of herself, toward her readers. In this way she sought to awaken and implicate the political consciousness of her readers, as she herself had been awakened and implicated in Spain.<sup>4</sup>

Rukeyser’s poetry was, indeed, fed by long-standing political convictions; in an interview which she gave shortly before her death, she still saw Spain as the exhilarating

---

<sup>4</sup> Tellingly, many of Rukeyser’s Spanish Civil War poems speak of that experience as a kind of waking up or arousing. For example, Poem IV, “Sestina,” from her 1944 poetic sequence, “Letter to the Front,” speaks of the spirit’s awakening in Spain; similarly, “The Return” (1968), wherein Rukeyser recounts her second, much later visit to Spain, ends with tropes of waking and rousing.



culmination of “everything we had ever been told about what revolution was: everybody all together, anarchists and gypsies, a united front” (Bernikow 18). Thus the political and the personal are inseparable in Rukeyser’s convictions and her poetry. As she herself declared, part of her life’s undertaking was to resist easy categorizations, to “[n]ot to let our lives be shredded: sports away from politics, poetry away from anything. Anything from anything” (370). Both the ardent politics which she saw lived out in Barcelona at the war’s beginning, and her own personal experience of romantic love in that same city, were permanently fused in her and in her poetry bearing witness to the Spanish Civil War.

### *Literary and Political Biography of Muriel Rukeyser*

Although Muriel Rukeyser virtually stumbled into the Spanish Civil War, she was in many ways already politicized, and thus open to the transformation which her experience of the war’s outbreak would work in her. In July 1936, she crossed the Pyrenees into Spain with the intention not of witnessing a war but rather of reporting on the Anti-Fascist Olympic Games (or, as they were alternately called, the Workers’ Olympiad), which had been organized in Barcelona that summer in protest of the traditional Olympics, held concurrently that year in Hitler’s Germany. Despite the fact that her being thrust into a scene of civil war was utterly unexpected, Rukeyser did come to this experience with her politics already firmly left of center; indeed, she arrived in Spain under the employ of the British Communist magazine, Life and Letters Today. Young though she was, Rukeyser had engaged in other overtly political activities previous to her work as a reporter for Life and Letters Today. Among her earlier forays

into activism was an attempt to report on the Scottsboro trials for the leftist Student Review, where she was arrested for talking to African-American reporters, outside the courthouse. Sent to an Alabama jail for this transgression of racial boundaries, she contracted typhoid there before she was eventually released and returned to her home in New York.

Undoubtedly her most important and long-lasting contribution as an activist, prior to her Spanish experience, was Rukeyser's investigative journey to Gauley, West Virginia, where some two thousand men had been killed in a mining operation in the early 1930s. After interviewing the families of the deceased and poring over Congressional documents reporting on this incident, Rukeyser wrote the documentary poem "Book of the Dead." This poem was not published until several years after her trip to West Virginia--and after her witnessing of the Spanish Civil War--in U.S. 1 (1938), the same book in which her first poem on Spain also appeared.<sup>5</sup> When the "Book of the Dead" finally did reach the public, it was recognized as an entirely new and radically innovative form of poetry, wherein the poet went directly to the source of political strife to see it for herself, and to report on it. In Rukeyser's hands, poetry would become a form of witnessing to the rest of the world, as autobiographical as it was political. As Rukeyser's literary biographer, Louise Kertesz, notes: "There had not been anything in American literature like U.S. 1" (98). Even before her transformative journey to Spain, Rukeyser was already approaching a kind of poetry that broke all the former rules, a poetry in which she explored intensely "what it means and feels like to be the kind of person she [was]," against and interacting with a "background of a world of increasing

---

<sup>5</sup> I will discuss this poem, "Mediterranean," in greater detail later in this chapter.

terror and inhumanity. . .” (49). While Spain would clarify and permanently shape the ethical motives for Rukeyser’s poetry of witness, many of her experiences previous to Spain were preparing her for that moment.

Such an inclination towards political and poetic activism, however, was not to be taken for granted in the young Rukeyser. Certainly her roots, in a prosperous but emotionally distant New York family, where the “maids and nurses and chauffeurs” were the members of the household who most interacted with her (Life 191), might have predicted an entirely different life course. Some of Rukeyser’s earliest memories, recounted in The Life of Poetry, were of her father, a powerful man “in the building business;” in the financial boom of the 1920s, the first decade that Rukeyser could remember, “the skyscrapers were going up” partly by the force of her father (191). Her father’s heroes, the young Rukeyser knew, were “the Yankee baseball team, the Republican party, and the men who build New York City” (195). Early on, however, Rukeyser began to conscientiously distinguish herself from this All-American, privilege-loving parental figure.<sup>6</sup> As an adult, the poet would remember that, in childhood, she had read and been moved by the story of Joan of Arc; the message from that story which imprinted itself in Rukeyser’s mind was that “as a little girl, she [Joan of Arc] knew what she had to do” (195). So, too, the young Rukeyser, who began to want a life different from--larger than--the “protected, blindfolded” life her parents had carefully designed for her (205).

---

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Rukeyser would eventually part so completely from her father’s ideology that he disinherited her for her political views and for “disobedience” (Kertesz 90). Much later in life, Rukeyser recalled how her parents had seen the publication of Rukeyser’s first volume of poetry as a kind of transgression against them: “Their answer. . . was to put a pack of cigarettes on the dining-room table. That meant they were treating me as a grownup. I was asking for it. One had to be disobedient because they were so frightened” (Bernikow 15).

In The Life of Poetry, Rukeyser recounts that morning in her childhood when she made her first real ideological break out of her parents' world. One morning, too late to ride with her father downtown, the girl Rukeyser attempted to find her way alone and on foot. Losing herself in the alleyways and backstreets of New York, Rukeyser discovered that, rather than being frightened by this strange new predicament, she was in fact entranced by her new surroundings:

. . .[Y]ou are half-afraid, half caught up in the excitement at a city where you never had walked. Here are the broken pavings of a wild, noisy other world. Wide doors with welders' forges burning inside; the black caves of industrial garages; the autumn-colored trains bearing down the center of the street, clanging in red and brown and black, firing clouds up and behind; the barley-smelling tenements, shackled with fire escapes; the hard children running past you; and the harshness and clarity of this new city, the bitter marvelous struggle of a dream. (195).

Here more than perhaps anywhere in her poetry Rukeyser overtly celebrates the Proletarian spirit of the working-class; the glimpses which she catches of this way of life are liberating, are a doorway into another, fuller, more vibrant world. When young Rukeyser finally arrived at her father's office downtown, she knew that now, after the revelations of the morning, she was "a different child" (195). She was newly awakened to the possibilities of life beyond the narrow parameters which her parents have drawn for her. For Rukeyser, those possibilities would always be bound up with political struggle, with work among and on behalf of the underrepresented and abused of her society.

In the 1930s, the decade in which Rukeyser reached young womanhood, such commitments clearly led to work on behalf of the proletariat, to involvement with Communist or socialist organizations. In "Poem Out of Childhood," published in 1936 as part of her first volume, Theory of Flight,<sup>7</sup> Rukeyser made manifest that her political consciousness was powerfully molded by those political movements. At twenty-one, Rukeyser was already claiming, "Not Sappho, [but] Sacco" as the cornerstone of her ideological development. In early 1936, however, as Kertesz points out, "the poet's moral engagement, like that of most adolescents, is as yet undirected, and there are many paths she might follow, to many unknown destinations" (5). Spain, which Rukeyser would enter later that year, proved to be both path and destination for the young poet.

### *Close Readings of Three Spanish Civil War Poems*

Three of Rukeyser's earliest poems on Spain-- "Long Past Moncada," "Otherworld," and "Mediterranean"<sup>8</sup>--operate as signposts, marks of the poet's progression, along the path which she took into, and then out of, Spain. "Long Past Moncada," describes Rukeyser's passage into that country, on the first day of war. "Otherworld" takes us more deeply into that site of war, situating us along with the poet in the very vortex of destruction and horror which Rukeyser witnessed in Barcelona, in the days immediately following her entry. "Mediterranean," on the other hand, takes us back out of Spain, reflecting with the poet on the cataclysmic experience which is just closing, receding from her as she journeys back to France. As a means of tracing out in

---

<sup>7</sup> Theory of Flight was well-received for a first volume of poetry; it won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award in 1936 (the same award that Joy Davidman was to win for Letter to a Comrade, two years later).

<sup>8</sup> "Long Past Moncada" appears in Rukeyser's 1944 volume, Beast in View; "Otherworld," in her 1939 A Turning Wind. "Mediterranean," as I previously noted, is from her 1938 U.S. 1.

some detail Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War experience and her responses to that experience, I want to read closely these three poems. Taken together, they operate as a complex testimony to the poet's trauma.

"Long Past Moncada" tells in poetry the story which Rukeyser told, more expansively and in prose, in a much later article, "We Came for the Games," written in 1974 for *Esquire*. It is the story of Rukeyser's almost-simultaneous entry into Spain and her meeting of her one great love, Otto Boch. While "We Came for the Games" provides greater chronology and more lucid detail concerning this story, the poem "Long Past Moncada" is highly instructive in showing us how trauma is still powerfully operating in Rukeyser's earlier testimony. Her poetic version of this event asks us to work a bit harder at grasping this story; indeed, one of the only clues that Rukeyser gives us concerning the exact time frame of the events her poem describes is the poem's title itself.

The act of reading this poem, "Long Past Moncada," alongside Rukeyser's prose version of the same story seems to beg the question: What, then, are some of the essential differences between poetry and prose? What can poetry accomplish in telling a traumatic story that prose cannot? Why, in other words, would Rukeyser choose to speak of this seminal event in her life within two different genres? In comparing these two works, the fact that the poem came long before the prose narrative—indeed, 30 years before it—is telling. As Barbara Harlow indicates, the first literature to arise from a specific political struggle is usually poetry. Within a resistant political context, Harlow writes, "[t]he role of poetry. . . has been a crucial one, both as a force for mobilizing a collective response to occupation and domination and as a repository for popular memory

and consciousness” (34). Poems, rather than longer narratives, are the kind of literature which emerges from a site of raw immediacy. Often written on the battlefield itself, or as a means of mourning, shortly afterwards, comrades lost there, such poems are themselves “part of the struggle. It is one of the arenas in which that struggle is waged” (39).

Although political poetry is uniquely capable of capturing the emotional and ideological heat of a given moment, it is at the same time more evasive or opaque—less direct—than prose accounts which may come later, describing that same given moment. Political poems, Harlow argues, “significant as they are to the ‘popular memory’ of peoples struggling for . . . liberation and important as they might be in mobilizing collective resistance, are not always easy to get hold of” (35). Because politically themed poems spring directly from a very specific political context, they often “remain singularly unavailable” to larger literary institutions not immediately involved in or aware of that context (35). Politically inspired poetry is particularly difficult to grasp outside of the context in which it was written because poetry, after all, tends to rely on “extrahistorical language, a language far removed from the . . . rounds of everyday life” (qtd. in Harlow 81).<sup>9</sup> But perhaps this is precisely the kind of language which a poetry of traumatic testimony demands. Employing an “extrahistorical” language may, indeed, be the only way to speak the otherwise unspeakable, to attempt to document in writing an event which, precisely because it is traumatic, exists *outside of* history.

Prose narratives reflecting on political struggle and trauma, on the other hand, tend to situate the story within a larger historicized framework. Because the writer can only be aware of this framework after gaining some chronological distance from the event she is describing, such prose accounts are almost necessarily written

retrospectively. Narrative, after all, as Harlow asserts, “requires both historical referencing and a politicized interpretation and reading. It furthermore expands the formal criteria of closure and continuity which characterize the ideology” of plot and subject (81).<sup>10</sup> Thus it is unsurprising that Rukeyser, in recalling and recording that day when she crossed into Spain and witnessed the first day of that country’s civil war, turned first to poetry, and waited three decades before rewriting it in prose. Poetry, that genre which would allow her to speak beyond and outside of history, even as she addressed an event which later come to be understood as “historical,” provided her an emotional and aesthetic space shaped by imminence, in a way that prose narrative could not. Even though, in the following analysis, I will draw from both Rukeyser’s poetic and prose accounts of her passage into Moncada, this distinction remains important.

Moncada, a small Catalan town between the French border and Barcelona, was the site of the railway station where Rukeyser’s train from France stopped for good, as news of the fighting in the city reached the outlying towns. Moncada was also the place where Rukeyser first made Otto Boch’s acquaintance. In “We Came for the Games,” Rukeyser remembered the “complex immediate closeness” which sprang up between her and this German athlete, headed, as she was, to Barcelona for the Anti-Fascist Olympics (194). Sitting side-by-side in the permanently stalled train, Rukeyser and Boch struggled to communicate around their language barriers, passing a Guide to Twenty-five Languages of Europe back and forth between them. “I have never wanted language so much,” Rukeyser recalled (194). Twenty-four hours later, a truck from Barcelona carried them both into the city, where they lived together amongst the fighting four more

---

<sup>9</sup> Here, Harlow quotes Mikhail Bakhtin’s essay, “Discourse in the Novel.”



days. Rukeyser, who had experience in neither nursing or childcare, the two professions which would have made her useful to the Spanish Republic, was asked to leave, “to take the burden of thousands. . . of foreigners off the government at this crucial and bloody moment” (368-69). Boch, however, remained to fight against the fascists, and was eventually killed in these efforts.

The poem, “Long Past Moncada,” tells us little of this, however. What it does give us--in fleeting glimpses, in fragments of sentences--are the barest truths: The poet is in love with the person to whom she addresses the poem, her “darling;” together with this individual, she has witnessed a catastrophe, the beginning of war, amidst the hills of Spain; this loved one has gone to the war and is dead; the events of the poet’s having loved him and lost him in the chaos of war have transformed her and will not leave her. Spare as these details are about this phase of Rukeyser’s Spanish Civil War experience, the poem holds true to the shape of traumatic testimony. Traumatic speech, Felman reminds us, as it tries to find a relationship between language and the traumatic event, is “composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in access of our frame of reference” (5). As such, poetry may be a first step towards articulating traumatic experience; poetic form such as Rukeyser employs often takes us beyond our own frames of reference, troubling and perplexing us, demanding a second and a third attentive reading. In reading Rukeyser’s poetic testimony, we must sift through line after line of

---

<sup>10</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the historicizing impulse contained in narrative accounts of war, see Chapter Four.

broken syntax, jarring punctuation and surprising vocabulary. We wait for meaning to float up to us, partially, eventually.

The difficulty of Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War poetry notwithstanding, one theme remains constant and clear throughout this body of work. Rukeyser's pain at having left Otto Boch, and her pain at having left Spain in the midst of this moment of extreme hope and extreme danger, seem almost inextricable. "Long Past Moncada" is no exception. Addressed to Otto Boch, as are approximately half of all Rukeyser's poems on Spain, "Long Past Moncada" expands from meditating on private concerns into larger, more public ones. Boch becomes a figure in whom Rukeyser is able to see both the personal and political ramifications of the war. Indeed, in her opening address to him, Rukeyser's gaze telescopes from the enormous and all-encompassing, to the infinitesimal and individual, and then back again:

Nothing was less than it seemed, my darling:  
The danger was greater, the love greater, the suffering  
Grows daily great.

These first lines announce that everything in this poem--the themes and the emotions which it recalls--will be writ large. The poet writes from a retrospective position, sure now that all which she experienced in Spain was actually even more portentous than she could have guessed at the time ("Nothing was less than it seemed"). Even as Rukeyser makes this rather general declaration regarding the ongoing horrors of war, however, she almost simultaneously focuses her attentions on one unique individual, the one she names "my darling." Yet her vision cannot remain so minutely focused; once again she turns back to her sweeping, larger-than-life memories: "The danger was greater, the love was greater, the suffering / Grows daily great." In the first three lines of this opening stanza,

Rukeyser has already melded the private and the public, the personal and the political. She does not specify *whose* suffering it is that daily increases; the implication, however, is that this suffering is both her own, as she mourns the loss of Boch, as well as the suffering of the multitudes in Spain who are starving, imprisoned, tortured, or exiled, under Franco's dictatorship--the bitter end result of the war whose opening she and Boch saw together.

This interaction of the personal and the political is enabled by the metonymic stance, a stance which Rukeyser turned to readily, almost instinctively, in much of her writing on Spain.<sup>11</sup> The positing of oneself as part of a collective--as part of a listening, witnessing community--which we observe in the testimonial poem, is a mode of resistance against the speaker's own obliteration. In the case of traumatic testimony, the potential obliteration is psychic. The testimonial story is, after all, inherently a dangerous one; it exposes to the light events which have been consigned to the darkest regions of the mind. Thus the witness must fortify herself by calling on others to stand with her as she speaks the hazardous memories. To call upon witnesses in one's testimony, or to understand oneself as part of a larger testifying body for whom one speaks, negates the possibility of psychic obliteration. In traumatic testimony, metonymy is one of the most powerful sites of psychological resistance which a witness can summon.

---

<sup>11</sup> Although I am addressing only Rukeyser's poetry in this chapter, her prose works of testimony on Spain also employ this metonymic stance. She opens *Life of Poetry* with a detailed account of her departure from Spain. Remembering that time, she muses: "In times of crises of the spirit, we are aware of all our need, our need for each other, and our need for ourselves" (1). Rukeyser's call, to both herself and to her community, to summon their mutual strength and to then "turn. . . and act" (1), is the essence of metonymy. At the beginning of "We Came for the Games," she clarifies that, although "I had been sent down from London by myself," she sees herself, throughout her whole journey through Spain, as part of a larger whole; in narrating that journey, she affirms, "I say 'we' . . ." (192, emphasis mine).

Rukeyser more openly acknowledges her metonymic stance--avowing that her personal agony is only one small part of a far-reaching agony, both born of the war--in the following stanza:

And the fear we saw gathering into that Spanish valley  
Is rank in all countries, a garden of growing death;  
Your death, my darling, the threat to our lifetime  
And to all we love.

Reflecting on Spain's civil war from the vantage point of 1944, Rukeyser is all too well aware of how that war led directly into World War II, with its mind-numbing and widespread atrocities that would forever change the way that humanity understood its own nature. The gathering tension and gearing for battle which she and Boch witnessed, in "that Spanish valley" on the outskirts of Barcelona, the first day of the war, was only the first and faintest inkling of all the horror that was to come, and spread to "all countries" in World War II's poisonous "garden of growing death." Linking the Spanish Civil War to the second world war, Rukeyser also sees the deep connections between Boch's single, individual death at the hands of fascism and the threat or potential death "to all we love" embodied in the powers of fascism in the world at large.

Perhaps nowhere else in the poem are the personal and the political so fused as in Rukeyser's acknowledgement that: "I know how you recognized our war, and ran / To it as a runner to his eager wedding / Or our immediate love." Rukeyser affirms Boch's choice, and even the fact of his death, knowing that his enlistment in the International Brigades was the culmination of his political dreams. As Rukeyser later wrote of Boch, "He had found his chance to fight fascism, and a profound quiet, amounting to joy, was there; it was the human chance, in or out of Germany" ("We Came" 369). Coming as it does on the heels of her painful speculation on how and where Boch has died, "at Huesca,

during the lack of guns, / Or later, at Barcelona, as the city fell,"<sup>12</sup> the poet's affirmation of Boch is especially powerful, strikingly selfless. In a particularly radical gesture, Rukeyser equates Boch's participation in the Spanish Republic with the joyful importance of their own (hypothetical, but hoped-for) wedding, their own "immediate love." Boch's entry into war, and Rukeyser's concomitant entry into her role of witness for that war, unite them as powerfully as a marriage. Rukeyser is able to embrace Boch's decision, and his death, because she sees the cause he died for as "*our* war," a cause she joined him in, in spirit and in her lifelong poetic testimony.

In the concluding stanza of "Long Past Moncada," Rukeyser reflects on her own present moment, and the ways in which the trauma of the war, and of having lost Boch to it, continue to penetrate even this present.

Other loves, other children, other gifts, as you said,  
 "Of the revolution," arrive--but, darling, where  
                                   You entered, life  
 Entered my hours. . . .  
 . . . . .  
 Your words of war and love, death and another promise  
                                   Survive as a lifetime sound.

These lines, along with Rukeyser's assertion, several stanzas earlier, that "You reach my days," even among "the heckling of clocks, the incessant failures," insist on the permanence of the poet's memories of Boch, and of his influence on her. The "long past" of the title of this poem is merely chronological; trauma, after all, exceeds and spills past the boundaries of chronological time. In these last lines, Rukeyser makes clear that

---

<sup>12</sup> For years after Rukeyser and Boch parted ways, Rukeyser suspected that Boch had died in the war (his letters reached her for awhile from Spain, and then stopped abruptly); for several years, she was haunted by the terrible fear that a telegram which she had sent him, the day before Barcelona's fall, had led fascist forces to Boch's military headquarters, and that they had killed him there. The fourth stanza of "Long Past Moncada" alludes to this horrible possibility: "If I indeed killed you, my darling, if my cable killed / . . . No

Moncada and the memories emanating from that site will never truly be “past” her. Even as she acknowledges the flow of time, moving her forever forward and continuously farther away from her experiences in Spain, Rukeyser admits that, in her mind, Spain and Boch are never far from her. Tellingly, she is unable to list the “other” people and events that have filled her days since leaving Spain without returning again, momentarily, to a memory specifically from the war. The gifts “[o]f the revolution” is a direct reference to Boch, who once used this phrase to name the five days he and Rukeyser spent together in Barcelona (“We Came” 370). Boch’s political commitments, which took him out of Rukeyser’s life but implanted him powerfully in her memory and in her own politics, do “survive as a lifetime sound,” ringing throughout Rukeyser’s Spanish Civil War poetry.

“Otherworld” begins by retracing some of the moments alluded to in “Long Past Moncada;” the first several stanzas track the poet’s progression from England through France and into Spain. These stanzas create a gradually mounting tension, as the cities Rukeyser mentions along her path southward--Dover, Calais, Paris--mark her growing proximity to Spain, the destination and culmination of the journey. While these English and French cities are lightly, fleetingly sketched, it is Spain which explodes into the poem, momentous and all-consuming from the first; the moment of the poet’s entry into this country is marked by her breathing in “new air,” by her “wake[ning]” in a land of “cave-drawn mutilated hands / of water painted with the color of light.” This wild and mysterious country is also the place “where the world ends as the wheels stop turning” and “people begin to live by their beliefs.” The wheels that stop turning, of course, are

---

further guilt / Could more irrevocably drive my days. . . .” Not until the late 1940s did Rukeyser receive official word that Boch had died at the Segre River battle, before the fall of Barcelona.



much, too soon, and is thus unable to comprehend or articulate completely the experience. As Dori Laub assures us, trauma survivors are compelled “to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus *to come to know one’s story*. . .” (78, emphasis mine). Thus Rukeyser, in bearing poetic witness to what she has experienced in Spain, attempts not only to make that experience comprehensible to her readers, but also to *herself*.

The psychic burden of trauma, Laub points out, is rooted in the traumatic event’s occurrence “outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during, and no after” (69). The traumatic event, then, takes on “a quality of ‘otherness,’ . . . a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension” (69). The witness who desires to testify to such experience must also search for an adequate frame of reference in which to fit this unspeakable experience. Trauma, as we have seen, is an “absolute” or “singular” experience; it is the event which happens in complete isolation from all preceding history and experience. In the same way, an “absolute” or “singular” story cannot be intelligible, since such a narration would preclude any known language or frame of reference in which to situate and thus understand it. Hence, a story of traumatic experience presents a special conundrum. Traumatic testimony must not to betray the singularity of the experience, but at the same time it must in some way be communicable to the listener. This is the problem in all testimonies of trauma.

Yet poetry, while not fully able to answer this problem, does address it in some important ways. The difficulty of framing a testimonial experience in language often



results in the rupturing or reshaping of language itself. Poetry, because it does provide a space in which the writer may fragment and restructure language, is perhaps the one kind of language through which the witness may most closely approach her testimony. “. . . [T]he breaking of the verse,” Felman suggests, “becomes itself a symptom and an emblem of the historical breaking of political and cultural grounds” in the upheaval of war (20). In poetry of witness such as “Otherworld,” we see the poet’s struggle to put into language that experience which by its very nature *defies* language. The disjointed, unassociated shards of description, the tatters of wounded memory and shocked senses, all point us toward the poet’s experience of massive trauma.

In the poetic testimony, however, we also see the witness’s grasping reach outward, out of herself, in an attempt to push out of the paralyzing singularity of her traumatic experience. In trying to speak of her trauma--to address a listening Other through her poetic testimony--Rukeyser breaks the deathly silence which envelops a traumatic memory. Part of the work of bearing testimony involves re-externalizing the traumatic event: putting that event back into the frame of chronological time and sequence. Testimony reinserts and settles the traumatic event within the larger historical record. Testimony through poetry--the language of metaphor and suggestion--in particular helps to put the traumatic event into a frame of reference, into a language, that will not entirely betray its nonreferential, unrepresentable nature. In “Otherworld,” Rukeyser seems already quietly, intuitively aware of the healing power latent in her testimonial efforts. Her allusion to the self-regenerating phoenix,<sup>13</sup> “that fabulous bird” whose burning breast illuminates and “identifies armies” moving across the earth below

---

<sup>13</sup> A following phrase, “the black-crowned night heron,” is also a reference to the phoenix. The *bennu*, a heron, was ancient Egypt’s version of the phoenix, seen as symbol of the rising sun and of life after death.

it, hints at the hope for transformation, for new life, which comes after and out of the agonizing act of traumatic testimony.

Rukeyser equates the burning phoenix with the “love” that sprang from the “end of [her] voyage” through Spain; as we have seen, “love” in Rukeyser’s Spanish experience encompasses both her personal love for Otto Boch and her broader, politically compelled love for the Spanish Republic and its cause. Both these loves were, as we know, immolated on the pyre of civil war; yet in their very immolation lies the possibility of new life born out of the ashes. It is this love which throws its light across the marching armies, which guides “the initiate” into the realization that all “the world is a field of the Spanish Civil War.” Driven by her passion both for the Republic at large and for one particular soldier who died in its defense, Rukeyser herself is the initiate, roughly awakened to the world’s potential both for heroism and for horror. This was a potential which she first witnessed in Barcelona; for the rest of her existence, she would testify to this potential. Seeing Spain in every other war of her lifetime, Rukeyser would go on asking, through her poetry and her deeds, that the world choose heroism over horror, peace over destruction. Rukeyser’s poetic activism was her lifelong act of regenerating that love which died in Spain.

“Otherworld” does not end with such a hopeful speculation, however. This is, after all, a poem which offers only the barest sliver of hope; 1939, the year in which Rukeyser wrote “Otherworld,” was also the year in which Spain fell to Franco and Hitler invaded Poland. In this context of utter despair, we may note that the phoenix as it appears in Rukeyser’s poem is, after all, seen only in mid-burning, the most tragic and hopeless moment of the phoenix’s life story. In this moment, life as the bird has known it

is vanishing; there is yet no sign of new life beginning. It is only from our later perspective that we are able to divine the acts of regeneration that would evolve, slowly and painfully, out of Rukeyser's efforts at testimony to the Spanish Civil War.

Indeed, "Otherworld" ends on a note of despair. The closing lines of this poem evoke an historical moment of transition as pure and horrifying as that moment of the phoenix's destruction. Rukeyser recalls those days at the beginning of the war "when the bricks of the last street are / up in a tall wave breaking / when cartwheels are targets are words are eyes / the bullring wheels in flame / the circles fire at the bleeding trees." This is a nightmare scene, where inanimate objects become animate; streets rear up in a rolling waves, the bullrings spin, and trees bleed. The phrase which most clearly tells us that we are in the presence of traumatic testimony, however, is Rukeyser's insistence that "words are eyes." The horror that she has taken into herself through her eyes can only be released through language; here again, with her emphasis on the power of the human eye to record and be part of the testimonial act, Rukeyser emphasizes the primacy of *seeing*, of having been an eyewitness.

As an eyewitness to trauma, she is captive to that trauma's story; the story for her is still present, still open-ended, still on-going. The two final lines of "Otherworld" leave us no doubt regarding this. ". . . [T]he world slips away under the footbeat of the living / everybody knows who lost the war," Rukeyser writes. She does not give either line a closing punctuation mark; thus the poem opens out into the present, incomplete and unended. The story of Spain's trauma is fully present, penetrates the poem and disturbs every subsequent reading of the poem. By deliberately refusing to "close" the poem, Rukeyser implies that no one knows where all this will end: the powers of violence which

the Spanish Civil War has unleashed, the trauma which she herself must bear and testify to ceaselessly. “The world slips under the footbeat of the living,” disappearing even as we watch it slip away; the knowledge of Spain’s loss--indeed, of Spain’s slipping away, into the darkness and silence of a military dictatorship--permeates the knowledge of those who still live and watch. “Otherworld” leaves us with no hope that these events will ever reach their closure.

“Mediterranean,” one of Rukeyser’s better known poems and certainly her most widely recognized work on Spain, accentuates the ongoing, open-ended nature of the poet’s Spanish Civil War memories and her lifelong compulsion to bear testimony to them. This poem narrates Rukeyser’s experience of leaving Barcelona--the most tormenting departure of her life--and her growing awareness of the testimonial burden which Spain would be for her. Rukeyser opens “Mediterranean” with a spare, factual paragraph of prose, meant to ground the reader in this poem’s historical moment:

On the evening of July 25, 1936, five days after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Americans with the Anti-Fascist Olympic Games were evacuated from Barcelona at the order of the Catalonian government. In a small Spanish boat, the Ciudad de Ibiza. . . they and a group of five hundred, including the Hungarian and Belgian teams as well as the American, sailed overnight to Sete, the first port in France. The only men who remained were those who had volunteered in the Loyalist forces: the core of the future International Column.

This allusion to the men who stayed behind, the international athletes who remained to fight, is not, of course, to be taken lightly. Because Otto Boch stayed in Spain while Rukeyser was forced to go, her sense of exile was especially potent. Indeed, Rukeyser

made repeated attempts, while still in Barcelona and then for months afterward, to return to the Spanish Republic and to Boch.<sup>14</sup> None of these efforts bore fruit, however, and Rukeyser realized that she might be consigned to the role of exile from Spain for life. This realization must have been doubly painful, given that her exile barred her not only from the site of her most profound political awakening, but also from the man whom she would always credit with her most profound romantic awakening. From this point onward, the overtly political and the deeply personal would interact continuously in Rukeyser's commitment to bearing witness for the Spanish Republic.

Exile from Spain was a theme which Rukeyser returned to repeatedly, like a person obsessed--or, like one almost unable to forgive herself, unable to explain to herself why she had not returned to that land where she most wanted to be. As we saw earlier, the Catalonian government asked all those foreigners who, like Rukeyser, had come to Barcelona for the Anti-Fascist Olympics, to leave and thus alleviate the government's responsibility of feeding and tending to several extra thousand people. Rukeyser left with the greatest reluctance, hoping desperately to return as a war journalist--a hope that was to be thwarted by her unwilling editors at home. Thus "Mediterranean," her best-known work on Spain, is as much a poem about exile as it is about war itself. This poem begins not with the event of the eruption of war but rather plunges us into the moment in which she, a foreigner without skills useful to the Republic, was bidden to leave that place. It is this forced departure--coupled with a simultaneous separation from her fellow anti-fascists who stayed to fight (especially, of

---

<sup>14</sup> "I could not get back. . .," Rukeyser writes despairingly in "We Came for the Games; "nobody would send me. You had to belong to a party or an organization or something, or have a press card. Nobody would give me a press card" (370). She recalls imploring her publisher for a press pass, but these

course, Boch)--which constitute the kernel of Rukeyser's trauma. She opens her poem with the statement:

At the end of July, exile. We watched the gangplank go  
cutting the boat away, indicating: sea.  
Barcelona, the sun, the fire-bright harbor, war.  
Five days.

Immediately the reader is situated in that precise context of crisis to which Rukeyser would return again and again in her poetry. These first lines take us directly into the harbor of the besieged city of Barcelona, and into the first stage of Rukeyser's journey out of Spain. "Mediterranean" is actually a poetic sequence comprised of six shorter, numbered poems; arranged chronologically, each of the poems depicts a different phase of Rukeyser's exodus from Spain and into refuge in France. These six poems link into each other not only by narrative, but also by Rukeyser's continued use of the metonymic voice throughout this entire sequence. From the very beginning, Rukeyser speaks not as "I" but as "we," implying through her collective voice a collective way of seeing. Five days after the outburst of war, the poet finds herself, along with the other foreigners sent into refuge, in a voluntarily passive position, literally forced to leave. She includes them all in the category of "exile." The finality of the gangplank's drop, "cutting" the boat from the shoreline, emphasizes this sense of being cast out.

The first five lines of this poem, then, constitute a single, painful backward glance. All of the poet's emphasis here is on what lies *behind* her, on what she is leaving. In the midst of these lines of stark, unadorned phrases, the only noun which Rukeyser lingers over, gracing it with a compound adjective, is the "fire-bright harbor," the place where she most wants to be, the place where Boch stands waving farewell. Enclosed at

---

negotiations were blocked by an editor, Whittaker Chambers, whose politics had swung from the political

either end by the words "sun" and "war," the harbor may be bright with the fire of the setting sun, or with the fire of bombs, or both. Juxtaposing "sun" against "war" here allows Rukeyser to play the idea of constancy, signified by the sun, against the suddenness and unexpectedness signified by the eruption of war. Both ideas are reflected and conjoined in the harbor where Otto Boch stands, and which Rukeyser watches retreat behind her ship. What are we to make of this joining of two such jarring concepts? Rukeyser's relationship with Boch, founded upon so brief a period as "five days"--a fragment of time which Rukeyser must emphasize, early in the poem, as if in awe that so much could happen in so brief a period--is surely such a cataclysmic moment in the midst of a far longer, calmer life. More abstractly but of equal importance, this juxtaposition of an unaltered state versus a moment of extreme transformation and surprise also stands for the meeting of the shock of traumatic repetition--the return of the traumatic memory--within the ongoing constant of life. Speaking to the nature of traumatic repetition, Laub attests that survivors of trauma will experience all following tragic events in their lives not as mere tragedies, but rather as a reliving or re-experiencing of that original trauma (65). The traumatic memory is thus an event which interrupts the "real time" of a survivor's life not just once, in its initial occurrence, but repeatedly and at random in successive, "reiterated loss[es]" (Laub 66).<sup>15</sup> As the body of Rukeyser's poetry on the Spanish Civil War attests, all of her life after that war was marked by this repeated return to the site of her original trauma. The poem "Mediterranean," as are all of Rukeyser's

---

left to the right during the early crucial years of the war (370).

<sup>15</sup> Laub's work, which focuses on survivors of the Jewish Holocaust, takes into account concentration camp survivor Martin Gray, who built a fortune and a new family for himself in the years following World War II. When the castle which he had built for himself and this new family went up in flames, taking the lives of his wife and children, Gray experienced that tragedy as a reliving of the Holocaust. "Their death

Spanish Civil War poems, is a fragment of voice emerging from the point of trauma; it is a voice which must go on speaking indefinitely of what it once experienced and never quite recovered from.

In working through her traumatic experience of witnessing the outbreak of war and then being exiled from Spain, Rukeyser repeatedly refers to the memories of her five days in Barcelona as "shapes and images" which haunt her long after her departure. This recurring trope is particularly important in the light of Robert Jay Lifton's definition of the traumatic syndrome. To have suffered trauma, according to Lifton, is also to be "haunted by images that can neither be enacted nor cast aside. Suffering is associated with being 'stuck.' Hence the indelible image is always associated with guilt"--guilt stemming from having survived the horrors that others have not (172). Lifton goes on to assert, however, that "there is also the possibility of finding something like *alternative enactment* for the image that haunts one, of undergoing personal transformation around that image" (172). A survivor of trauma, in other words, can begin to heal herself by using the images that haunt her as a moral springboard for action in the world. As Lifton suggests, "The capacity for guilt was given us so that we might imbue all behavior, perhaps especially pain, with an ethical dimension" (172).<sup>16</sup> When Rukeyser insists that her experience of the war gave her images "tideless for memory," she evokes these powerful memories that do not change--are not influenced by the tides of time--and which will spur her into bearing political testimony for the rest of her life. As a way of

---

has reopened all the graves," he wrote. ". . . [M]y people, my family, died in them a second death" (Laub 66, quote from Martin Gray's *Der Schrei nach Leben*, Der Goldman Verlag, Munich: 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Lifton, who has worked extensively with survivors of the Hiroshima bombing, explains that some of those survivors "could reanimate their lives around peace-movement activities, which offered a sense of immediate activity in like-minded groups and ultimate significance within which their otherwise unassimilable experience could be understood" (177).



opening her readers' eyes to the experience of civil war, Rukeyser takes us on a fast, bumping ride through the landscape of those five days of turbulence, elation, and fear:

. . . Here at the rail, foreign and refugee,  
 we saw the city, remembered that zero of attack,  
 alarm in the groves, snares through the olive hills,  
 rebel defeat. . .  
 The truckride to the city, barricades,  
 bricks pried at corners, rifle-shot in the street,  
 car-burning, bombs, blank warnings, fists up, guns. . . .

Again, with her identification of herself and all those who stand at the ship rail with her as "foreign, refugee," we hear Rukeyser's sense of being forced into a role she does not want. She would rather turn to the raw, bright immediacy of the war, the emergency-inflected responses to the rebellion which she witnessed: the "bricks pried at corners" from buildings, to be used as weapons in an abrupt battle.<sup>17</sup> Looking at the city as she departs, she recalls the numbing dangers she has just experienced there: being at Ground Zero of the bombing raids on Barcelona, and, earlier, seeing those earliest manifestations of war in the country as she came into Catalonia by train and saw the armed men running through the "groves" and "olive hills."

These recent and very real scrapes with death notwithstanding, Rukeyser remains focused on her desire to continue to live in that violent yet passionately charged milieu. In the next stanza of "Mediterranean," she reels in her vision, which has just ranged

---

<sup>17</sup> When Franco and his generals struck against the army-less Spanish government on July 19, the Republic responded with drastic measures, unloading arms from the Ministry of War at the headquarters of Socialist trade unions. "The waiting masses," writes Stanley Weintraub, "received the weapons with enthusiastic shouts of '*No pasaran!*' and '*Salud!*'" (6). Other citizens of Spain's northern cities rallied to the Republic's cause with still more primitive forms of defense; they built barricades in the streets, and fought back the invading army with pitchforks, bricks, and clubs. Rukeyser recalled that, upon entering Barcelona one day after the fighting broke out, "The road ha[d] fortifications, thrown-up bales of hay, later. . . barricades of paving stones flying the red flag for unity" ("We Came" 368). "Of all the battles fought that day," Weintraub asserts, "the bloodiest had been in Barcelona. . . [A]rmed workers. . . advanced on rebelled troops with such disregard for personal safety that many of the panicky soldiers turned on their officers and surrendered" (7).

across the warring Spanish countryside, and trains it again upon the Barcelona harbor, still receding from her as she speaks. Narrating again from the vantage point of the ship's railing, Rukeyser gives the first clear hint of what it is about this departure which most deeply distresses her.

I saw the city. . . the personal lighting found  
 eyes on the dock, sunset-lit faces of singers,  
 eyes, goodbyes into exile. . . .

.....  
 I saw the first of the faces going home into war  
 the brave man Otto Boch, the German exile, knowing  
 he quieted tourists during the machine gun battle,  
 he kept his life straight as a single issue--  
 left at that dock we left, his gazing Brueghel face,  
 square forehead and eyes, strong square breast fading,  
 the narrow runner's hips diminishing dark.  
 I see this man, dock, war, a latent image.

Not only does Muriel Rukeyser grieve being thrust from this scene of action before she has had time to assimilate it completely, but she also struggles with a desire to stay and complete this action: to stay and to fight, as do some of the international athletes.

We hear her mingled admiration and envy for "the brave man Otto Boch, the German exile. . . left at that dock" as the Ciudad de Ibiza pulls away, out into the open water. Her depiction of Boch, albeit brief, lends us insight into at least three significant factors in Rukeyser's relationship to this man. Perhaps most importantly, she acknowledges, in the line "going *home* into war" (emphasis mine), that participation in defense of the Republic is Boch's rightful place, politically and intellectually. On a far more personal level, we see evidence of her intimate knowledge not only of this athlete's politics and intellect, but also of his body, in Rukeyser's careful, appreciative descriptions of his face, chest, and hips. Finally, as Rukeyser repeats the word "left" in a line recalling her final view of Boch--emphasizing the tragedy of having left not only Barcelona, but

also and in particular of having left this man--and as she sees Boch's figure "fading" and "diminishing" from her sight, we see that, for Rukeyser, leaving Spain was a twofold tragedy. In that exile, she lost both her greatest love and the possibility of hands-on participation in the most meaningful cause of her life. Denied that direct participation, she turned to her poetry writing as an alternative means of working for and actively remembering the Spanish Republic.

"I see this man," Rukeyser insists, "dock, war, a latent image." She drives home the importance of this line by giving it twice in its entirety, once in Poem I from this sequence, and again in Poem V. For Rukeyser, it is this "latent image" which compels her writing, which demands the poem. A latent image is one that is not yet manifest, but which is nonetheless present, a potential force. The image of Otto Boch, risking and eventually losing his life in that war Rukeyser had experienced with him, is latent in that Rukeyser can never externalize it so completely that she will rid herself of it forever; always, this image will be imprinted in her psyche. Here again we see evidence of the "indelible image" or "death imprint" which Robert Jay Lifton has noted in trauma survivors. Rukeyser also makes us aware of the potential force "latent" in this image, for it is precisely this image which compels her to write the poem. "Whenever we think of these," she asserts, meaning Boch and the other lost soldiers like him, "*the poem is*" (emphasis mine).

Woven into these early stanzas of "Mediterranean," especially in Poem II from this sequence, is the question which Rukeyser would be answering all the rest of her life: "Where's its place now, where is poetry?"<sup>18</sup> The beginning of that answer is here, too;

---

<sup>18</sup> This is a recurring question in Rukeyser's work on the Spanish Civil War. In "We Came for the Games," she remembers a fellow refugee from Spain asking her this as they pulled out of the Barcelona

Rukeyser recalls a Spaniard she met on the Barcelona streets who told her simply, "Your job is: / go tell your countries what you saw in Spain." How seriously Rukeyser took this mandate is manifest in her declaration, "If we had lived in our city / sixty years might not prove / the power this week / the overthrown past. . .". To have not been in Spain at the outbreak of war, to have not witnessed the Republic's dramatic ideological and political counterrevolution, Rukeyser asserts, would have meant missing her own powerful calling as poet-activist.

Yet even here, in this statement of serious vocational undertaking, Rukeyser's commitments are a blend of the political and the personal; she closes this stanza with a respectful, longing look backward over her shoulder at Otto Boch: "The face on the dock that turned to find the war." Rukeyser continues to show us how such images of the war haunt her eyes:

That week, the beginning, exile,  
remembered in continual poetry. . . .  
.....  
The poem is the fact, memory fails  
under and seething lifts and will not pass.

The phrase "will not pass" echoes the early Republican battle cry from Madrid--La Pasionara's slogan, "*No pasarán!*" ("They will not pass!")--and demonstrates Rukeyser's political sympathies and her familiarity with not only the images but also the rhetoric of this particular war. What is most fascinating about these lines, however, is Rukeyser's acknowledgement that it is not memory on which she depends for holding onto these stories, but rather *poetry*. Ordinary memory, Rukeyser perceives, cannot pass through the barricade of trauma. In her description, memory tries to assert itself, to be a sufficient

---

port (370). Twice in *The Life of Poetry* she returns to this same question (3, 159). Answering this question became Rukeyser's life work.

container for the story of this terrible moment, but ultimately memory fails and "will not pass." Indeed, as Cathy Caruth explains, the human mind is fundamentally unable to comprehend fully the traumatic event as it happens. ". . . [T]raumatic experience," writes Caruth, ". . . is an experience that is not fully assimilated when it occurs" (5). A text emanating from trauma, then, must

ask what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. Such a question . . . can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding. (5)

"Continual poetry" for Rukeyser, then, means continual testimony to her trauma. Her poetry, which she always understood as a meeting place--as a site of exchange between herself and others--constitutes the recalling and re-externalizing of her trauma, always in the complex, literary language of which Caruth speaks. In "Mediterranean" as in most of her poems on Spain, Rukeyser stands in the role of trauma survivor, the one who must go on "remembering" even though, paradoxically, simple "memory fails."

Yet it is not her trauma alone to which Rukeyser testifies. She operates throughout this poem as a metonymic speaker, as representative of but not replacement for that larger body constituted by all of the witnesses to and exiles from the war. In Poem V of this sequence, Rukeyser issues a command both to herself and to her also-traumatized companions of her ship of refuge:

Cover away the fighting cities  
but still your death-afflicted eyes  
must hold the print of flowering guns,  
bombs whose insanity craves size,

the lethal breath, the iron prize.

These lines comprise the poet's warning to her fellow witnesses and to her own self.

Rukeyser here forbids them all to repress memory or to deny the horrors they have just witnessed. She speaks this warning, fittingly, just as the refugees enter their harbor of safety in France--the place where, for these recent refugees, it will begin to be easy to forget or to become cavalier about their experiences in Spain, to relegate them to a different country, to the past. "Cover away the fighting cities," Rukeyser writes, almost tauntingly, admonishing herself and her shipmates. The insinuation here is clear: "Go ahead and put those embattled Spanish towns out of your mind if you think you can; believe, if you will, that this is as easy to do as it was to watch Barcelona slip from the skyline. But," Rukeyser implicitly warns, "you will not be able to hold this pose; you cannot truly forget this." The eyes of these fellow passengers are, after all, "death-afflicted," and therein lies an apparent double scourge. The exiles' eyes have been afflicted, of course, by the destruction they have witnessed in Spain, but they are also marked now--by having come so close to death and yet having escaped it--with knowledge of their own deaths. Rukeyser pushes this point ruthlessly. These death-afflicted eyes, she claims, "must hold the print" of the images they have taken in. These eyes, hers and those of her fellow survivors, are indeed permanently marked with trauma. Judith Herman suggests that, when a survivor "has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people" and been spared herself, "in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience" (54). Like Lifton, Herman finds that this burden of conscience manifests itself in a particular set of vivid images which "crystallizes the [traumatic] experience" in the survivor's mind (38).

Rukeyser herself, apparently, cannot let go of this idea of surviving and being unable to forget, or to stop "seeing," those who have not survived; the whole central passage of "Mediterranean"--particularly Poems III, V, and VI--works and reworks it. As the ship turns toward land again, Rukeyser asserts:

. . . [T]he shapes endure,  
 rise up into our eyes, to bind  
 us back; an accident of time  
 set it upon us, exile burns it in.

Metaphor slides into conceit here in Poem V, as Rukeyser continues with the theme of the "print" which the images of trauma impress upon the passengers' eyes. The "shapes" of those images "endure," constantly presenting themselves to the survivors in recurring visions-- "rise up into our eyes," says the poet--and, indeed, constantly pull the trauma survivor back into the moment of the traumatic event ("bind us back"), even as her physical surroundings change radically. Rukeyser knows already that she will live and re-live that disastrous moment; that she will never entirely shake free of it. In this stanza, too, Rukeyser begins to look for an explanation, for the source of this troubling series of events. But no one is responsible. "[A]n accident of time set it upon us," she concludes. The people on the boat, in other words, did not plan to witness the outbreak of war; they are, rather, victims of pure coincidence, of the never-expectedness of trauma. The ambiguous "it" which time's accident sets upon the witnesses, and which "exile burns in," is the catastrophe (the war) from which these indelible shapes originate. Now, as she has already implied, Rukeyser more directly states that it is her exile--and the fact that she has gotten away, that she has survived, when so many others have not--that makes those shapes even more unavoidable and shocking, more burning, in her mind's eye.

Rukeyser's linking of her own survival to the lives of those she loves who are still in Spain, and whose lives are not nearly so secure, is evident in the closing stanzas of Poem VI. Even as the boat comes into dock at the French port of Sete and she acknowledges her physical presence in France, Rukeyser's mind is still possessed by images of Spain, its war, and the people whose lives are still in jeopardy there:

Barcelona.  
 Slow-motion splash. Anchor. . . .  
 .....  
 Now gangplank falls to deck.  
 Barcelona  
 everywhere, Spain everywhere, the cry of Planes for Spain.  
 The picture at our eyes, past memory, poem,  
 to carry and spread and daily justify.  
 The single issue, the live man standing tall,  
 . . . the city, all the war.

The dropping of the gangplank here in the safety of France echoes and recodes the raising of that gangplank in Barcelona, which Rukeyser noted at the very beginning of "Mediterranean." While that earlier mention of the gangplank signified the poet's physical separation from the site of her trauma, this second reference to the gangplank, as it falls now in new land, in effect opens a new phase of Rukeyser's life. The falling gangplank stimulates afresh her memories of Barcelona and the trauma she witnessed there. Indeed, her repeated insertion of the name "Barcelona" into a narration of arrival elsewhere--and her privileging of that name, so that twice the single word "Barcelona" occupies a full line in the poem--indicate her inability to separate herself from those memories. Those memories so permeate her mind that, even in a different country, Spain for her is "everywhere." Yet, as she has insisted earlier, Spain and its war cannot be contained entirely by memory alone. "The picture at our eyes"--the constellation of traumatic images of the Spanish Civil War which she and her shipmates carry with them-



-is, after all, "past memory," or beyond it. Not simply memory then, but "poem," the picture at Rukeyser's eyes is one that she will "carry and spread and daily justify" to the world beyond Spain by means of her own collectively voiced poetry of witness.

"Mediterranean" ends with a fiercely willed, resolutely voiced declaration:

Exile and refugee, we land, we take  
 Nothing negotiable out of the new world;  
 we believe, we remember, we saw.

Nothing--no memory, no conviction, no political or ethical persuasion--which Rukeyser took out of Spain, which was for her the "new world," the world which changed her life, would ever be negotiable. As early as 1938, the year in which she penned "Mediterranean," Rukeyser knew that Spain had fixed for her the course of her life's poetic and political activism. In these concluding affirmations, she is already aware of this. The task which lies before her now, that of bearing witness for Spain, will be bearable because Rukeyser is already sure that, as witness, she is not as an isolated individual but is, rather, part of a larger body of witnesses. That body together has seen, and together now will "believe" and "remember," the Spanish Civil War.

### *Ongoing Testimonial Work in Rukeyser's Later Poetry*

For Rukeyser, poetry and politics would always be inextricably wedded; in poetry she would repeatedly bring together the personal act of seeing and the public or political act of speaking. Having been witness to the some of the world's most terrible sites of injustice and of trauma, she turned outward--to the rest of the world, to her audiences--by using her poetry to bear witness for those who were suffering. By drawing her readers into the stories of injustice and trauma which her poetry narrated, Rukeyser made of her

audience fellow witnesses, including them in the "we" which saw and recorded. Her use of the metonymic voice thus ensured secondary or outsider witnesses for her stories of insider's trauma. Thus Rukeyser's poetry on Spain is very like the testimonial literature which John Beverley describes. Testimonial works, Beverley claims, establish a sense of complicity between the text and its readers, asking them to engage both their imaginations and their sense of justice in coming to know and care about political struggles taking place "somewhere else" (99). In this way, Rukeyser's testimonies of the Spanish Civil War ask her readers to enter into the story and become ethically interested in it, and thus responsible for the story's outcome.

Rukeyser's faith in the ability of poetry to address and resist political injustices--and to awaken her readers to these--went undiminished until the time of her death. After Spain, she continued to put both her body and her writing on the front line of various political causes.<sup>19</sup> Writing in 1980, the year of Rukeyser's death, Kenneth Rexroth reflected: "Muriel Rukeyser. . . seems to enjoy placing herself as an obstacle in the way of evil. Book after book has involved action--from personal investigation of the fate of miners doomed to die of silicosis in U.S. 1 to her fairly recent personal confrontation of a South Korean dictatorship in the case of a Catholic radical poet, Kim Chi-Ha, who had been condemned to death" (xiii). The title poem of Rukeyser's 1976 volume of poetry, The Gates, refers to the imprisoned Chi-Ha, for whom Rukeyser traveled to Korea, to stand vigil outside his cell in nonviolent protest. Nonviolent resistance, both through

---

<sup>19</sup> Rukeyser flung herself into political activity on behalf of the Spanish Republic shortly after her return to the United States from Spain. She "worked with groups such as the Theater Committee for the Defense of the Spanish Republic, which produced a radical play on the Spanish Civil War. She did other work to help tell Spain's story to the world such as translating for the anthology of antifascist Spanish poems, And Spain Sings (1937)" (Kertesz 171). In addition, Rukeyser translated the works of radical Spanish poet Octavio Paz.

direct political action and through poetry, became Rukeyser's response in all of the political events which she addressed in her post-Spain years. As Kertesz affirms, "Spain was the beginning of [Rukeyser's] working out and saying what she believed about the role of the poet in the twentieth century. . . . She has since acknowledged the complex need to resist violence and repression and still be nonviolent" (123). Seeing Spain in every other war of her lifetime, Rukeyser continued to link that memory to more contemporary sites of political resistance. Her 1973 volume, Breaking Open, privileges as its central theme the resistance to authoritarianism in general and to the Vietnam War in particular. Joining with protesters of the war in Vietnam, Rukeyser felt, was "something like the breaking open of my youth"--clearly, her experience in Spain (Breaking 132).<sup>20</sup>

Such deeply ingrained, passionately lived resistance did not come to Rukeyser without a price, however. Decades after her Spanish sojourn, Rukeyser told an interviewer that what she had witnessed in Barcelona "was that extraordinary sight of something that then did *not* take place. . . . It was a curious vision of a Twentieth Century world which would not take place. It may still, but it has been beaten down in place after place, from Spain to Vietnam and many many places inbetween" (Fortunato 35, emphasis mine). Never one to shrink from reality, Rukeyser knew that her hope for peace and justice in the world had all but been jeered into oblivion by the brutal century into which she had been born. A world in which peace and justice prevailed, for Rukeyser, meant a "society in motion, with many overlapping groups, in their dance. And above all, a society in which peace is not [merely] lack of war, but a drive toward unity" (Life 211).

---

<sup>20</sup> Rukeyser's resistance to the Vietnam War was impassioned; among her political activities in protest of this war, she traveled to Hanoi, along with fellow poet Denise Levertov, and was arrested for nonviolent

Almost all the events of her life to which she had been a political witness grossly contradicted such a vision. As a consequence, deep depression haunted Rukeyser throughout various periods of her life; she struggled against suicidal tendencies throughout her twenties and thirties (Bernikow 18). These were, of course, the years immediately after Rukeyser witnessed the outbreak of Spain's civil war, and then the ensuing worldwide holocaust.

A poem from 1941, written when Rukeyser was twenty-six years old, indicates that despair came close to overwhelming the poet during these decades of her life. "Who in One Lifetime," from the volume Beast in View, tells us that the poet, "[W]ho in one lifetime sees all causes lost, / Herself dismayed and helpless, cities down. . . / Has sickness, sickness. . . / She knows how several madnesses are born." That Rukeyser, at the tender age of twenty-six, believed herself to have lived a whole lifetime already, is perhaps evidence enough of the way in which the world's sorrows weighed upon her. Her despair and madness are compounded by her understanding of herself as inextricably bound up in the world's suffering. She links her own personal losses--the "[l]ove made monotonous fear"--to the world's; the "sad-faced / Inexorable armies and the falling plane" are all a part of the sickness which enshrouds her.

In a poem such as "Who in One Lifetime," Rukeyser's trademark poetic gesture of simultaneously reaching into herself and out of herself, toward others, seems at first glance more self-defeating than self-strengthening. Yet even here, in this bleakest testimony to the poet's exhaustion of her own hope, lie the fragile seeds of that hope's rejuvenation. Bitter as this poem is, Rukeyser rallies at the very end with the tired yet determined claim: "She holds belief in the world, she. . . / . . . stands, though her whole

---

civil disobedience in Washington, D.C.

world burn, / A childless goddess of fertility.” Seeing herself as childless, devoid of any new life to offer the world, she is also, at the same time, able to understand herself as the bearer of fertility; in her, however, that fertility is yet latent. New life is slow in coming; hope is slow in its rebirth. Yet the very fact that Rukeyser sees herself as a source of fertility--no matter how barren she currently is--contradicts and resists utter despair and the end of all life.

One of the most terrible symptoms of her depressions, Rukeyser once said, was a temporary inability to write (Fortunato 19). In those extreme moments, the silencing of her writing was the silencing of her very testimony--the story of her own trauma which she had to speak in order to keep on surviving. Without poetry, she was also without a witness, without that site of deep communication which traumatic testimony demands. Returning to poetry, then, for Rukeyser, was a path out of the “frightful pit” of silence and depression (19), a path back into the possibility of testimony and thus, the possibility of life. “If you dive deep enough” into yourself, Rukeyser asserted, “. . . you come to a place where experience can be shared. . .” (21). Sharing that experience gleaned from the darkest depths of the self meant re-externalizing the trauma and thus continuing to heal. For Rukeyser, writing poetry that tried to look at those darkest moments, and which asked others to look with her, was a means of such healing.

### *Later Poems Remembering Spain*

“I lived in the first century of world wars,” Rukeyser wrote in 1968.<sup>21</sup> “Most mornings I would be more or less insane. . . / Slowly I would get out pen and paper, /

---

<sup>21</sup> See “Poem,” from The Speed of Darkness.

Make my poems for others unseen and unborn.” To trace Rukeyser’s efforts at self-healing, at resistance through poetry against the world’s madness, is to trace the theme of the Spanish Civil War in Rukeyser’s lifelong opus. Many of Rukeyser’s poems, although they do not take Spain as their central focus or context, allude to that experience in some way. In “Nuns in the Wind” (1939), the poet is troubled by a bevy of nuns who flock into the New York City Public Library; as Kertesz points out, “The nuns remind her of the Catholic Church’s support of Franco; that those on the side of darkness and repression are heading for the science textbooks is sharply ironic to the poet” (144). Her elegy, “The Fear of Form,” from the 1939 A Turning Wind, remembers the war for a few lines: “But the car full of Communists put out their hands and guns / blew 1-2-3 on the horn before the / surrealist house, a spiral in Cataluna.” Another poem from this volume, “Fourth Elegy: The Refugees,” dwells more deliberately on Spain, suggesting both in its content and in its form how the poet’s traumatic memories of that war compel her to speak, despite her own weariness of speaking to this subject. “We have spoken of guilt to you too long,” she says to her audience. “The blame grows on us who carry the news.” She compares herself, as a witness for Spain’s tragedy to the rest of the world, to “the man bringing the story of suicide” who, implicated and burdened by the news he must bear, “feels murder in himself.” Suddenly, however, this line of thought breaks in mid-sentence and gives us an abrupt new series of images. In this way, the poem enacts the way a traumatic memory interrupts a witness’s life, even as she may resist her role as witness:

. . . we bear their--

a child crying shrill in a white street

“Aviacion!”<sup>22</sup> among the dust of geysers,  
the curling rust of Spanish tile.

The witness’s burden to testify never lifts, Rukeyser implies here; traumatic memories, and the testimony they compel, are not hers to banish.

While some of her Spanish Civil War poems speak only to the war or to the country of Spain in general, most of them address such subjects through the individual figure of Otto Boch. In “Sixth Elegy: River Elegy” (1944) she cries, “My love! / Did I in that country build you villages? / Great joy, my love, even there, until they fell / And green betrayal climbed over the wall. / . . . My love, reach me again.” “One Soldier” (1944) is clearly Boch: “When I think of him,” Rukeyser writes, “midnight / Opens about me, and I am more alone; / But then the poems flower from the bone. / . . . Your wish was strong, the first day of the war / . . . we knew / All that I had to be, you had to do.” Again, the cause of the Spanish Republic unites Boch and Rukeyser; while he gives his life to it in the one brief, ultimate moment of dying, she will also, in a different but equally powerful way, give her life to its memory. In this poem too we see how Rukeyser suffers from the survivor’s guilt that both Lifton and Herman cite in their studies of trauma survivors. Reflecting on how Otto Boch once brought to her “truth in your two hands,” Rukeyser studies her own hands, surprised to find that she continues to exist corporeally while Boch no longer does: “I sit and look down at my hand like an astonished / Fortune-teller, seeing the mortal flesh.” Rukeyser’s 1968 “Segre Song,” from The Speed of Darkness, also directly addresses Boch, reassuring his ghost that all that he has died for still lives in her and in her testimony: “Your song where you lie long dead on the shore of a Spanish river-- / your song moves underneath the earth and through

---

<sup>22</sup> “Planes!” (In this case, specifically, bombers.)

time, through air. . . ." Although Boch's life is long extinguished, the poet asserts that in death he has become larger than life, his cause made universal.

Three other poems from The Speed of Darkness also speak to Boch. "Endless" affirms that Boch's life, though "gone down, broken into endless earth," is "no longer a world away but under my feet and everywhere," again proclaiming the power of testimony to find in the personal story a public responsibility, to take the particular experience and make it universal. Rukesyer ends this poem by proclaiming that:

I look down at the one earth under me,  
through to you and all the fallen  
the broken and their children born and unborn  
of the endless war.

Here again we see the inward-outward movement of her witnessing stance; the war for her is "endless" both in the psychological, personal sense--in that she will never be rid of its memory or the demand to testify about it--and in the broader, historical sense, as the Spanish Civil War gave wretched birth to war to after war throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.

Thirty-three years after Rukeyser first crossed the French border into Spain, she went back to that border. She narrates this return, backwards from Sete to the brink of Cataluna, in "The Return" (1968). She writes: "Along my life and death backward toward that morning / when all things fell open and I went into Spain. / One man. Sardana music. This frontier. / . . . I need this country of love and death. . . ." The stanzas of "Word of Mouth" are bound together by a refrain in Catalan, the language of Barcelona: "*Amor, pena, desig, somni, dolor*": "Love, pain, desire, dream, grief." These are the essential feelings which Spain still evokes in her, a "lifetime after and still alive." Her awareness of herself as still living only heightens the pain of the truth that many--as



well as the one particular beloved--are not. Her duty will always be to remember them, to call forth "Something out of Spain, into the general light!"

Even in the midst of Rukeyser's contemplation of Vietnam, a war one half of the world and some thirty years distant from Spain, the poet's thoughts return to Otto Boch and the war he died fighting. In "Delta Poems" (The Speed of Darkness, 1968), Rukeyser's gaze pivots back and forth between the bodies of a young Vietnamese couple, who "die with their heads close together," and the two remembered bodies of herself, long ago, and Otto Boch, walking close to death in Spain: "I remember you. We walked near the harbor. / You were a young man believing in the future of summer." For Rukeyser, the destruction of youth and hope and life in 1960s Vietnam are an echo from the past; the young lovers who die by bombing in the Vietnamese delta country are Rukeyser and Boch alive again, suffering again: "They are walking *again* at the edge of the waters. / They are killed *again* near the lives, near the waves" (emphasis mine). The final line of "Delta Poems" is deliberately nonspecific, open: "A girl and a young man walk near the water." Thus the two human beings may be the lovers separated by the Spanish Civil War, or the lovers, a whole generation later, destroyed by the war in Vietnam, or possibly both. While the dates and geographies and names of armies may shift and reshape themselves over the years, war in itself is a constant, unalterable evil. The pattern of war--its incredible violence, the unspeakable suffering it engenders--Rukeyser implies, is never-changing. Likewise in her 1968 poetic sequence "Letter to the Front," where Rukeyser addresses a contemporary soldier in the Vietnam War, but returns at length to scenes from the Spanish Civil War. Moving back and forth between contemporary wars and older, remembered ones, Rukeyser concludes that:

Among all the waste there are intense stories  
 And tellers of stories. One saw a peasant die.  
 One guarded a soldier through disease. And one  
 Saw all the women look at each other in hope,  
 And came back saying, "All things must be known."

This, too, was Rukeyser's credo. Better to face the horror around her, better to keep on acknowledging the loss and the destruction she had witnessed, the hopes she had seen obliterated on the battlefields of the twentieth century--and, through facing these things, begin to *speak* of them, to remember them and resist them publicly--than to fall into silence and despair.

Perhaps more than any other politically active poet of her day, Rukeyser modeled herself after the story-teller she cited in "Letter to the Front." Unafraid to go out into the world of conflict and injustice and to "come back" to her audience, bringing stories and insisting that "all things must be known," Rukeyser fused activism and art, often traveling to the site of a political conflict in order to participate in it and document it firsthand. Her poems became her documentation, privately made but publicly shared, of these experiences. Of her poetry Rukeyser once commented, "I have never had to make anything up" (Bernikow 16).

### ***Rukeyser's Place in the Traditional Canon***

Yet the boldness of Rukeyser's poetic vision, in which poetry was a platform for testimony, for the intermingling of private and public, alienated her from many of the critics of her day. Her poetry did enjoy some success in the politically active 1930s, but it was to fade quickly from acclaim with the onset of the forties and fifties. Because she supported many of the causes upheld by the Left of the 1930s, and participated in various

leftist activities, Rukeyser was summarily categorized with the Proletarians by most critics of the time. She took part in the Communist-sponsored American Writers Congress of 1935, and she was anthologized, along with Kenneth Fearing, Mike Gold, Langston Hughes, Kenneth Patchen, Genevieve Taggard, Isidor Schneider, and Richard Wright, in Granville Hicks's Proletarian Literature in the United States (1935), one of several such anthologies to appear in that decade. Rukeyser also reviewed literature for the New Masses throughout the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> Very early in her career, the Federal Bureau of Investigation had already identified her as one whose political activities were worthy of their attention. Rukeyser's 118-page dossier, released to her in the late 1970s, shows that, beginning "in the forties, if not sooner, her phone was tapped and both letters she wrote and letters she received were opened or acquired and examined. The FBI knew, for instance, the contents of a letter she wrote in the early forties inquiring if Otto Boch was still alive" (Kertesz 273).

Even as she interacted and was identified with the American Left, however, Rukeyser "never paid much, if any, attention to the corkscrew twists of the party line. So the critics of the Left alternately embraced and damned her," as Rexroth points out (xii). Rukeyser herself made clear the distance which she put between the kind of poetry which she wrote and the poetry of the Proletarians at large. Reflecting in 1949 on that earlier movement, she decided: "A good deal of the repugnance to the social poetry of the 1930s was caused, I think, because there were so many degrees of blood-savagery in it, ranging all the way from self-pity. . . to actual bloodlust and display of wounds" (Life 211). This instinctive recoiling from the violence and even hatred which she discerned in much of

---

<sup>23</sup> Louise Kertesz points out, however, that even as Rukeyser wrote for the distinctly Communist New Masses, her reviews were marked by a "modest, temperate voice. . . especially rare in the New Masses,

the Proletarian protest poetry is obvious in Rukeyser's poetry, with its emphasis on communication and community. Clearly, although her political affinities often rested in the same camp as that of the Communist Party of the United States, her poetry found an uneasy place at best within Proletarian literature.<sup>24</sup>

Despite her objections to much of the literature produced by the prewar American Left, Rukeyser was "invariably grouped" with the Proletarian poets "in the thirties and . . . berated [with them] in the disillusioned forties" and increasingly conservative fifties (Kertesz 48). As World War II ended and McCarthyism took hold of American politics while New Criticism engulfed American literature, poetry of social concern--as well as those who wrote it--fell from fashion into a state approaching disgrace.<sup>25</sup> Rukeyser herself alludes to the government heckling and harassment which she and many other left-leaning American writers suffered during the 1950s. Her "Letter to the Front" sympathizes with those political activists who

. . . come home to the rat-faced investigator  
Who sneers and asks, "Who is your favorite poet?" . . .  
How did you ever happen to be against fascism?

Muriel Rukeyser, whose early reputation was founded on her activist poetry, fell for throughout the late 1940s and 50s into relative oblivion. Just how far she fell is apparent in literary critic Randall Jarrell's comment: "One feels about most of [Rukeyser's] poems almost as one feels about the girl on last year's calendar" (Review, 512). In 1949,

---

where reviewers roasted books and authors who erred politically" (63).

<sup>24</sup> Rukeyser also departed from Proletarianism in her free use of such modern theories as "Freudianism, the exploration of the subconscious and its symbols," all of which the Proletarians regarded as "the science of the bourgeois" (Kertesz 59)..

<sup>25</sup> Cary Nelson cautions us, however, against believing that "radical poetry as a whole came to an end in America in 1939. . ." (Repression 166). Nelson reminds us that politically committed poets such as Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, Edwin Rolfe, and Genevieve Taggard published entire books during the 1940s and 50s. Interestingly, all of these poets had been to Spain in the 1930s and, during the civil war,

a year after Jarrell passed such disparaging judgment on Rukeyser's poetic stance, Rukeyser herself was boldly insisting--very much against the grain of contemporary literary opinion--that the essence of American poetry was resistance. American poetry, according to Rukeyser, was born out of different sites of the American counter-culture. "On work gangs, prison gangs, in the nightclubs, on the ships and docks, our songs arise. From the Negroes of this country issue a wealth of poetry. . ." (Life 90). With such a statement, Rukeyser was taking poetry approximately as far away from the hallowed halls of academe as one could get. This was a radical and even dangerous stance to assume in the late 1940s, when poetry was increasingly becoming the isolated domain of university scholars and New Critics (which were often one and the same).

In her own gentle and tolerant but nonetheless forthright way, Rukeyser publicly scorned the project of the New Critics; she saw them laboring under the misguided belief that "poetry is words" (Life 166). "I have a high regard for some of the poets who are setting up these structures: dissecting poetry into ideas and things, and letting the life escape; or counting words as they might count the cells of a body. . . . But I cannot accept what they say. . . . [T]hey are thinking in terms of static mechanics" (166). Far removed from such a concept, Rukeyser believed that poetry "involves so much sense of arrival, so much selection, so much of the desire that makes choice" that poetry is necessarily "living in time, "neither stagnant or static (169).

Such opinions, however, carried little weight in the forties and fifties; although Rukeyser went on producing and publishing poetry throughout those decades, she was

---

had been passionately devoted to the Republican cause. Perhaps what they had seen and heard in Spain continued to compel them toward ethical poetic productions even after that initial cause was lost.

largely scorned by critics--who saw her "as that terrible thing, a public figure"<sup>26</sup>--and excluded from the literary canon. The repercussions of the general inattention paid to Rukeyser's work throughout this period were far-reaching. As recently as 1974, Virginia R. Terris pondered, in reference to Rukeyser: "When a serious poet who is prolific does not elicit a body of critical comment, you wonder why" (10). In her article, "Muriel Rukeyser: A Retrospective," Terris explains this dearth of critical attention as the result of Rukeyser's "literary-historical reputation rest[ing] almost entirely on her poems of social protest" (10). In an attempt to recover Rukeyser's work, Terris ignores Rukeyser's more politically nuanced poetry and reframes Rukeyser as a poet "deeply rooted in the Whitman-Transcendental tradition" (10). Although Terris's early attempt at recuperating Rukeyser's work is an important one, the shadow of the New Critics still hangs over these efforts, as Terris must resort to identifying Rukeyser with long-dead, canonical, male authors in order to do so.

Even as a "woman Whitman," however, Rukeyser has won a slow and difficult acceptance into the canon. Although her work has been experiencing something of a renaissance since the 1980s,<sup>27</sup> Kertesz notes that Rukeyser's critics by and large have not known what to do with a woman poet whose work reminded them, in its scope and vitality, of Walt Whitman's (43). Simply put, such critics have believed that Rukeyser "did not, as a woman, write the right kind of poetry" (42). Muriel Rukeyser, as Kertesz says,

---

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Terris quotes Randall Jarrell in her article, "Muriel Rukeyser: A Retrospective" (*American Poetry Review*, May/June 1974), p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Louise Kertesz broke important new ground with the publication of her literary biography, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (1980). Other recent significant efforts at recovering Rukeyser's work include Ox Bow Press's reissuing of *Willard Gibbs* in 1988 and the publication of *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, poems and prose edited by Jan Heller Levi, with an introduction by Adrienne Rich, and *Out of Silence*, poems edited by Kate Daniels. Rukeyser's *Life of Poetry* and *The Orgy* were both reissued by Paris Press, in 1996 and 1997, respectively.

"didn't fit. She didn't fit into critics' notions of what poetry should be, what poetry by a woman should be" (43).<sup>28</sup> Rukeyser has constantly perplexed and challenged those who look for binaries, for easy means of categorizations, in their understanding of poetry. Like Davidman, Taggard, and Millay, whose poetry, as we have seen, was also roundly condemned for freely interweaving the private and the public, Rukeyser writes poetry which is both lyrical *and* politically oriented; Kertesz remarks the way in which she merges "themes of . . . sensibility and social awareness" (72). Rukeyser's lyricism, she concludes, was at the forefront of a new movement in women's poetry which did not come to fruition until the 1960s, in the "new kind of feminine lyricism. . . which Denise Levertov and Adrienne Rich have also caused to flourish" (Kertesz 80). Previous to the late 1960s, however, American culture, both within the main stream and within the narrower confines of literary tradition, understood itself by means of binaries. In a culture which sharply divided the private from the public, there was little room for poetry such as Rukeyser's to flourish.

### *The Changing Role of the Woman Poet in Twentieth Century America*

In the middle of her life, in the middle of her career as writer, Muriel Rukeyser witnessed the most extreme cultural and political shift of this century. If she had been a "poster girl" for the politically active, openly leftist 1930s<sup>29</sup>, in the two successive decades she left barely an imprint on the consciousness of the general American public.

---

<sup>28</sup> For an extensive discussion of Rukeyser's critical detractors, see Kate Daniel's well-researched article, "Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics" (*Gendered Modernisms*, ed. Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> This term was actually used to describe Rukeyser disparagingly, in a three-part review of her work published in *Partisan Review*, "Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl" (September-October 1942).

Ostriker explores the effects of such a radical shift in a nation's literary and political attitudes on the woman poet. She traces a pattern throughout American history, wherein women poets living in a period of widespread revolution

became interesting poets in part because revolution acted on social custom as a shifting of continental plates acts on the earth's surface, making rifts and mountains. There was a time of political upheaval, when women who would otherwise have led protected lives were thrown, or threw themselves, into the public sphere, as . . . notions of liberty and resistance to tyranny were able temporarily to override the claims of female modesty. . . . (23)

Although Ostriker uses the Revolution of late eighteenth century America as her example, her description of the woman writer's changing position in times of political upheaval and renewal also applies to the era of the 1930s, the era in which Muriel Rukeyser first brought her passions to bear upon the public sphere. The 1930s saw her first published poems, her first political activity.

The forties and fifties, the decades in which Rukeyser should have been attaining her prime as a writer, were an era altogether different. As Ostriker notes, however, periods of intense change in history are usually followed by an era of conservatism, swinging a nation recently tending once toward the left sharply back to the right. Such sea changes, of course, threaten the woman poet's already tenuous position as participants--as public voices--in the world of politics. In the eighteenth-century American women whom she uses as her example, Ostriker observes that the poetry which they wrote during the revolutionary period "represents a degree of freedom and intelligence which was killed in the next century by the advancing doctrine of 'separate



spheres,' the triumph of genteel poetry, and the ghettoization of women's writing" (23). Again, Ostriker traces a pattern which is not particular to any one century of American history, but which is, rather, a recurring one.

Indeed, the shift in American politics and poetry which occurred from the 1930s to the 1950s may be the most cataclysmic we have yet witnessed, at least as far as the lives of women writers has been concerned. "In the late 1950s and early 1960s," Ostriker reminds us, "every woman's magazine in the country preached the joy of wifedom and the creativity of domesticity for women, much as a century before every woman's magazine had preached the sacredness of woman's separate sphere and the beauty of female selflessness" (58). In 1959, the number of women enrolled in colleges and employed professionally was lower than it had been in 1929. Despite their relative freedom during the 1920s to act and speak out politically, a woman's place in America had shifted from the picket lines to behind the picket fence again, just a few years after the end of World War II. Women who wrote, and especially those whose writing continued to address political concerns, were suddenly regarded as transgressors of the boundaries of gender and propriety. During this bleak period for women writers, many female poets "believed they were going mad. Others were coming to the conclusion that they were invisible, inaudible" (58).

One graphic and haunting example of the "ghettoization" of women's writing, and of women's *lives* as well, which emanated from America's repressive 1950s is Sylvia Plath's famous depiction of herself sitting in the crotch of the fig tree, paralyzed by her fear that to pick one fruit means to relinquish forever all others:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree. . . . From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor. . . . I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest. . . . (62-63)

In this horrifying scene from Plath's The Bell Jar (1963), there is no possibility for a young American woman--no matter how bright, no matter how artistically gifted or politically astute--to claim for herself a life both private and public, much less a writing career that could address both the inner and outer worlds in which she engaged.

Ironically, Plath's own text plays out this numbing belief. After mentioning the execution of the Rosenbergs at the beginning of The Bell Jar, Plath then falls silent on all other public events, on any events at all outside of her increasingly shrinking, suffocating inner world in which she feels trapped. In the increasingly polarized world of the American forties and fifties, a woman chose either the public sphere--and, consequently, a renegade, marginal life--or the private one, and a life of silence.

### ***Rukeyser as Iconoclast***

Muriel Rukeyser, who never stopped bearing political witness to Spain, and who constantly insisted on the need for the personal and private in the midst of such witnessing, was the iconoclast of her age. Simultaneously recalling the glories of a fallen Republic and the glories of a lost romance, she burst through the wall between private

and public spheres with every poem of testimony that she wrote. In The Life of Poetry, Rukeyser asserted: "I cannot say what poetry is; I know that our sufferings and our concentrated joy, our states of plunging far and dark and turning to come back to the world--so that the moment of intense turning seems still and universal--all are here. . . ." (172). Poetry for Rukeyser was a live thing, a work composed of living itself; because her own life encompassed so much passion both personal and political, her poems were also, necessarily, a constant exchange between these two hemispheres. Rukeyser knew well how to "plunge far and dark" into herself, dredging up the traumatic memories that Spain had lodged in her; she was equally familiar, however, with the healing task of "turning to come back to the world," bringing those memories with her--out into speech, out into poetry. "There is an exchange here," Rukeyser insists, "in which our lives are met, and created" (172). In this exchange, the poet spoke both for herself and for the others she loved who could not speak. In her introduction to Life of Poetry, Rukeyser turns again to that question which became a refrain in her life and in her poetry, a question put to her by one of her fellow refugees from Spain: "And poetry--among all this--where is there a place for poetry?" (3). Reflecting on the life she has just left behind in Barcelona, a life that means both political commitment and personal love, forever and inextricably intertwined, gives her the answer. She knows already that she has been called to be a witness, both for the sake of those she has left behind in Spain and for herself. "Then," Rukeyser assures us, "I began to say what I believe" (3).

## Chapter Four

### From Secondary to Primary Witness:

#### The War Memoirs of Josephine Herbst and Lini DeVries

*. . . [I]t came to me in the most real sense that my most vital life did indeed end with Spain. Nothing so vital, either in my personal life or in the life of the world, has ever come again.*

*Josephine Herbst, personal letter (1966)<sup>1</sup>*

*We who left part of our hearts in Spain, who left a job unfinished, will never forget. . . . A part of me died with every [soldier] who fell.*

*Lini DeVries, Up from the Cellar (1979)*

On January 16, 1937, Lini DeVries, a volunteer nurse with the Medical Bureau to Save Spanish Democracy, set sail from New York's harbor. The Spanish Civil War was just six months old, and DeVries was a member of the first American medical brigade sent to Spain in aid of the Republic. They were a small and diverse group, as DeVries recalls: "We were six doctors, six nurses, one druggist, one bacteriologist, two ambulance drivers, and one interpreter" (176). On the boat with them went an equally diverse assemblage of eighty young American men, all of whom were volunteering with the International Brigades. "Some were college youths, others, longshoremen, butchers,

---

<sup>1</sup>Letter from JH to Mary and Neal Daniels, February 17, 1966. Excerpted in Elinor Langer's Josephine Herbst (ix-x).

bakers, poets, writers, painters,” DeVries remembers (190). These would be the core of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. One month to the day later, Charles Edwards would be the first Lincoln casualty--the first of some 1,000 American men who died in Spain between 1937 and 1938. DeVries, who veritably did not leave the frontline hospitals for the first four months of 1937, was eyewitness to much of this tragedy.

Josephine Herbst, another young American woman, arrived in Spain one month after DeVries; like DeVries, she departed in May of 1937. Herbst was, at the time, an up-and-coming journalist who was beginning to gain recognition in leftist literary circles for her investigative reportage on political subjects ranging from the Scottsboro trials<sup>2</sup> to the agrarian problems of the American Midwest. Sent to Spain by her editor, Max Perkins, she would compose there a handful of articles for magazines as diverse as the Nation and Woman’s Day. During her three months in Spain, Herbst made various lengthy visits to the front, where she befriended and lived alongside the men of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. While such extended stays at the front were highly unusual for a woman writer in the Spanish Civil War, her prolonged presence in Madrid was in fact an equally impressive act of fortitude. As Herbst’s primary biographer, Elinor Langer, points out, Madrid at the time of Herbst’s residence there “was under constant bombardment from the encircling Fascists; being confined to it was like suddenly becoming a trapped animal, continuously stalked. Every day people were being killed just in the normal course of things: buying a newspaper, standing in food queues, crossing the street” (213). Like DeVries, Herbst bore witness at close and life-threatening range to some of the most mind-numbing atrocities of the Spanish Civil War.

### *Autobiographies of Witness*

How, in literary terms, are we to define Herbst's "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain" and DeVries's Up from the Cellar? Using the broadest of terms, both texts are obviously forms of self-writing. The traditional distinction between autobiography and memoir generally takes memoir to mean written memories of specific events or reminiscences about other people, while autobiography tends to be the writing of an entire life; this distinction, however, is somewhat irrelevant in the case of Herbst's and DeVries's texts. Both women's Spanish Civil War narratives are contained within longer works. "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain" is a lengthy autobiographical essay, focusing on her three months in Madrid, which was part of an intended full-length, comprehensive autobiography which Herbst was still working on at the time of her death and never completed. Originally published in The Noble Savage in 1960, "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain" won Herbst the Longview Foundation Award for Nonfiction in 1961. In 1991, HarperCollins republished this essay in an eponymous, book-length collection, comprised of four of Herbst's autobiographical essays from the 1960s--most of which had originally appeared in American little magazines of that decade.<sup>3</sup> While "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain" is the centerpiece of the 1991 collection, the other three essays build toward that event in her life, sketching out the author's political and literary development prior to the

---

<sup>2</sup> Partly as a response to the Scottsboro Trials, Herbst in 1931 joined Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson and John Dos Passos in becoming a member of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners (Bevilacqua 7).

<sup>3</sup> The other three essays collected in The Starched Blue Sky of Spain are: "The Magicians and Their Apprentices," "A Year of Disgrace" (originally published in The Noble Savage, 1961), "Yesterday's Road" (originally published in New American Review, 1968), and "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain" (originally published in The Noble Savage, 1960).

war.<sup>4</sup> DeVries's Up from the Cellar, on the other hand, is an exhaustive and hefty tome, spanning the years from her birth in 1907 to the publication of her memoir in 1979. While her experiences in Spain are mostly confined to Chapter Five of the memoir, DeVries frequently alludes to those memories throughout the following chapters and ties them to the political events and convictions of her later years. Because, in the case of Herbst's and DeVries's texts, it seems at best marginally meaningful to distinguish between autobiography and memoir, I will use the two terms interchangeably in this chapter.

What is important, however, in considering genre and its repercussions on testimonial literature, is the difference between narrative and poetry. Within the context of politically engaged, resistant literature, Barbara Harlow attests, narrative seeks to open space for political change by analyzing and reflecting specifically on the past (82). Resistance poetry, on the other hand, "struggles to preserve and even to redefine *for the given historical moment* the cultural images which underwrite collective action. . . of a people seeking to liberate themselves from the forces of oppression. . ." (82, emphasis mine). Harlow further insists that poetry, because it is so dependent on images and symbols, stops short of "disclosing the context" in which political literature is implicated (83). Such images and symbols "require their historicizing dimension in order to expose fully the parameters of the resistance struggle" (83). Resistance *narratives* do provide this dimension; meanwhile, directly displaying "the historical and social context which produced such symbols or images" (85).

---

<sup>4</sup> Although most of the material from The Starched Blue Sky of Spain which I examine here will come from Herbst's essay by that name, I will also draw occasionally from the other three essays.

Although Harlow seems actually to privilege prose over poetry within the context of politically engaged literature, I would argue that these two forms of resistance writing serve equally important, although not identical, purposes. Poetry which speaks to oppressive political regimes, as we have seen, works to call a reading public to action, drawing that public into unity around a shared, immediate political concern. Such poetry usually is produced within the lived moment of a given political struggle. Resistant works of prose, on the other hand, are almost necessarily written *outside* that moment, after that particular struggle has ended. As such, they contribute to the building of a public memory around a politically resistant event which might otherwise be written out of “official,” mainstream history.

Because they re-gather and recollect the scattered, hidden fragments of a resistant political movement, shaping them into a story to be told and remembered publicly, these resistance narratives are inherently testimonial. As Judith Herman reminds us, a narrative becomes testimony when it links the personal to the political, “giving a new and larger dimension to the [survivor’s] individual experience” (181). Testimony is political because, by bringing to light a story of oppression and trauma, it demands change, forcing the hearers of such a story to confront and be implicated by a terrible moment in political history. Testimony, operating at the political level, asks that we remember the horror in our pasts in order to never let it happen again. The private dimension of testimony, on the other hand, is more “confessional and spiritual” (181). Bearing testimony to a trauma is as important to the healing of the individual as it is to the healing of her larger society.



In their respective narratives, “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain” (1960), and Up from the Cellar (1979), Herbst and DeVries bear witness to the trauma of war as they experienced it in Spain. What is particularly striking in both is the movement from secondary witness to primary witness, and finally into the act of creating an internal witness, which Herbst and DeVries trace in these narratives. While they add to the body of American literature on the Spanish Civil War important information about the nature of that war--seen from the trenches, front-line villages, and besieged cities of the Republic--the particular value of these two war memoirs lies in their unusual twofold approach to witnessing. In both memoirs, the writer demonstrates two different strategies of witnessing: that of the secondary witness, wherein she receives and helps to bring to public view the traumatic stories of *others*, as well as that of the primary witness, wherein the writer bears testimony to herself and to her own experience of trauma. As I will show, this is the process of creating one’s own internal witness.

This chapter will pay particular attention to this movement between exterior and interior (or, secondary and primary) witness in which Herbst and DeVries found themselves. Theirs was indeed an unusual predicament. Because they were relatively well informed regarding the war and certainly passionately engaged in its politics, prior to their arrival in Spain, both women departed America already primed for the role of secondary or exterior witness to Spain’s struggle--indeed, *expecting* to take on that role. Given their particular responsibilities in this war--as a journalist receiving and transcribing the oral testimonies of men in the trenches, and as a nurse interacting daily with those wounded at the front—it was natural that Herbst and DeVries began their war experiences in the position of secondary witnesses. Indeed, one of the functions of their

war memoirs is to perform this secondary witnessing; both texts are peopled with physically devastated and psychologically scarred soldiers, whose stories Herbst and DeVries carried with them out of Spain. Yet both women eventually entered too deeply into the site of trauma to be outsiders to it any longer. In Spain, these potential secondary witnesses became in effect primary witnesses, along with the people of Spain whom they had gone to accompany. By the time they returned home, both women had become trauma survivors themselves. Thus their memoirs also act as a form of *primary* witnessing for these two women—as a means of Herbst’s and DeVries’s bearing witness to themselves. Because their writing on the war works as testimony of both their own experiences and the experiences of those with whom they closely lived in Spain, both texts fall within that category which I have named the autobiography of witness.

### *Why They Went*

On the surface, Herbst’s “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain” and Lini DeVries’s Up from the Cellar are conspicuously disparate texts. The most obvious difference between the two, as I have noted already, is that of structure. In style and in tone, these two memoirs diverge further. Herbst’s text, on one hand, is distinguished by a spare, lyrical prose. Not surprisingly—given that Herbst was a professional writer and DeVries was not—DeVries’s writing style is somewhat less graceful and less lucid than is Herbst’s. Herbst, moreover, casts a somewhat cynical eye on the inner workings of the Spanish Republic. Meanwhile, DeVries tends to speak more romantically and melodramatically of the Spanish Republic; her political analysis of the war is considerably less nuanced and less ambiguous than is Herbst’s. We may attribute this difference in viewpoint to Herbst’s and DeVries’s distinctive positions within the Spanish

Republic. While Herbst rubbed elbows repeatedly—indeed, far more than she liked—with the somewhat jaded international press corps and various representatives of the ever-changing Republican government, DeVries dealt very little, if at all, with governmental entities or representatives during her time in Spain. Nor, during her four months at the front, did she speak with reporters or have a very clear sense of what was happening in the cities of the Republic. DeVries’s life at the frontline hospitals was indeed far removed from the atmosphere of political back-stabbing and gathering suspicion that was beginning to infect Popular Front politics, and with which Herbst was eventually forced to contend.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these differences in form, style, and tone, “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain” and Up from the Cellar find significant common ground in the reasons which Herbst and DeVries present for deciding to go to Spain in the first place. Interestingly, both women emphasize, at the beginning of their narratives of the Spanish Civil War, that they never really wanted to go to Spain in the first place. Rather, according to both Herbst and DeVries, they were *ethically compelled* to go. Both texts frame the decision to witness the war firsthand not as a question of thrill-seeking self-indulgence, but rather as one of moral imperative. As Herbst explains, early in her war memoir, “[B]ecause is the soundest answer you can give to an imperative. I didn’t even want to go to Spain. I had to” (132). Similarly, DeVries insists that, prior to leaving for Spain, “I had always taken the position that we had enough to do to help make a better United States of America” (172). Nonetheless, by late 1936, she is “doing the very thing I had denounced, worrying about Spain” (172). She explains her concern by linking the

---

<sup>5</sup> As I will show later in this chapter, Herbst’s simultaneously more mediated and more isolated experience of the war, versus DeVries’s more direct and communal experience of it, did affect the degree to which

struggle in Spain to the worldwide threat which fascism and Nazism posed: “I had come to feel that if the Republic were victorious, world fascism and a world war might be averted” (172). Thus, at the brink of their war experiences, both women position themselves as deliberate, self-conscious secondary witnesses.

Even within this context of deliberate engagement—wherein both women envision themselves as outsider or secondary witnesses to the sufferings of the Spanish Republic—Herbst and DeVries acknowledge that they are simultaneously inviting the possibility of being changed *themselves* by the act of witnessing. As Dori Laub points out, secondary witnesses necessarily open themselves to the “vicissitudes of listening”—that is, to the fact that, through the very act of bearing witness to another’s trauma, they will “come to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through [the secondary witness’s] very listening, [she] comes to partially experience the trauma in [herself]. . . . The listener, therefore, by definition partakes of the struggle of the victim” (57-58). Personal transformation within the broader context of political witnessing inspires most of the events which Herbst recalls in her memoirs. Nowhere is this dual movement, in which Herbst turns her focus simultaneously inward and outward, clearer than in her recollections of Spain. Two anecdotes which bookend her longer war narrative prove Herbst’s belief in the interconnectedness between personal struggle and larger political struggle—an interconnectedness which she, as both secondary and primary witness of war trauma, reconstructs in “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain.”

At the beginning of her narrative of the war, Herbst frames Spain as a kind of individual testing ground for the ethics she had been molding all her life. She conjectures that perhaps she went to Spain to redeem a haunting childhood memory. As a young girl,

---

each was traumatized and the ways in which each worked through and integrated that trauma.

Herbst was struck by the story of the burning of the Chicago Iroquois Theatre, in which grown men had trampled women and children in their effort to escape. My mother had been horrified by that fact, and almost only that fact: 'better to sit quietly in your seat and perish than to have to live the rest of you life with such a memory.' For years I could never go to a theater without a secret rehearsal of how I hoped to behave. Nobly, of course. But could anyone be sure? (134)

In Spain, Herbst believed, she would at last find a site in which to try her own nobility and bravery in the face of grave crisis. Traveling to Spain at the peak of fascist hostilities and living for months at the frontlines of the war would be the ultimate testing of personal strength and character.

While Herbst emphasizes her own individual struggle in this early story from the war, her stance and her depiction of bravery are decidedly more communal by the end of her war narrative. In the final anecdote of The Starched Blue Sky of Spain, she understands herself and her efforts towards deeper courage as part of the larger social fabric of the Spanish Republic. As Herbst is leaving Spain after three turbulent months, a Spanish Republican openly praises her as being "*muy valiente*" (very brave); she is thus acknowledged by and inscribed into the community of the people whose own bravery she most admires. Indeed, this affirmation seems to provide a space for Herbst to stop and dwell on the pleasure of having finally achieved the level of courage which she had hoped, since childhood, she would be able to evince in time of great duress. Rather than reflecting on her own achievement, however, Herbst turns her gaze outward. "*Muy valiente,*" she reflects. "As for being *valiente*, who wasn't?" (178). In this exchange, we see how Herbst's attitude toward bravery has shifted over the course of her war

experience. After having lived in Spain and experienced the war at such close range, Herbst no longer perceives bravery as some distant ideal. Rather, it has become a function of living--one which she now accepts and takes for granted, as do the Spanish peasants and international soldiers with whom she has lived. Over the course of her three months in Spain, Herbst's sense of subjectivity vis-à-vis the war has shifted dramatically. She no longer sees herself as outsider to the war, as one who observes from afar, maintaining a certain distance from its trauma and thus remaining untainted by it. Rather, she has become one of the sufferers herself now; at the end of her narrative, she sees herself as almost indistinguishable from the mass. Her matter-of-fact question, "Who wasn't [brave]?" reinforces this idea of Herbst's inclusion in a much larger group. She has, in effect, moved from the position of secondary witness to that of primary or eyewitness.

DeVries begins her war narrative with a backward glance similar to Herbst's; she, too, attaches her reasons for going to Spain to a personal code of ethics instilled in her since childhood. Identifying with her Dutch ancestors who had rebelled against imperial Spain some 300 years earlier, DeVries as she embarks for Spain conjectures that she is especially attracted to the Republic's cause "because Ome [Uncle] David had briefed me on the long struggle of the Hollanders for their freedom against the same Spaniards that Franco and the Duke of Alva represented. . ." (173). DeVries's joining of Franco's name with that of the Duke of Alva points to her own sense of personal involvement in the Spanish Civil War. During her childhood visits to her family in Amsterdam, DeVries had learned, as all Dutch schoolchildren did, about the ties that once bound the Netherlands to imperial Spain. The Spanish Duke of Alva, who in the sixteenth century acted as viceroy

of the Netherlands under the reign of King Felipe II, is an infamous figure in Dutch history. While the Dutch waged an eighty-year-long rebellion against Spanish rule, the Duke of Alva responded by installing a repressive tribunal and condemning to death some 10,000 Netherlanders.

DeVries recalls in particular one brave story from this dark period in Dutch history, setting the stage for the metonymic stance which she will take in her own story of the Spanish Civil War. “What was it that Till Eulenspiegel’s wife had said . . . as she took the blackened heart of her husband out of the fire where he had been burned at the stake by Spaniards?” (173). Undaunted by the evil done her husband, she had taken “the ashes of her husband’s heart and placed them in little bags which she tied over the hearts of her children;” as she did so, she told them, “I place these ashes over the hearts of all the sons and daughters of the Netherlands. As long as there is an injustice in the world, you must rise to fight it. You must defend those who are persecuted” (173). This is a story which DeVries throughout her life has been unable to shake; it comes back to her with especial poignance as she prepares to leave for Spain. “The ashes of Till Eulenspiegel lay heavy on me,” she remembers (173). The gesture of Till Eulenspiegel’s wife is itself profoundly metonymic, for she claims that anyone who remembers the death of her husband--by carrying his ashes over one’s heart, literally or figuratively--is also fighting for justice anywhere in the world. DeVries repeats the metonymic gesture, asserting that, in working for the Spanish Republic, she will also be fulfilling the mandate of the Dutch martyr’s brave wife. Her comparison of the embattled Netherlands of the sixteenth century to the twentieth-century Spanish Republic posits these two struggles for justice in lateral relationship to one another. Her own ethical investment in and

identification with the groups of people involved in both struggles posits DeVries as secondary witness to them both. While she does not fully belong to either group, she has made a conscious choice to hear their stories and to learn from them—indeed, to be personally marked by them.

Just how profoundly her Spanish Civil War experience marked her is evident in DeVries's description of the first several months she spent back in the United States, after returning from Spain. Sent on a speaking tour on behalf of the Medical Unit to Aid Spanish Democracy, DeVries is so consumed with her Spanish memories that she envisions herself as a veritable conduit for the Republic:

I tossed the written notes aside, forgot myself, and let the work of the nurses, the doctors, and the people of Spain speak through me. . . . I let the heart of Spain pour through me. . . . Nothing mattered except the chance to *talk Spain* through the eyes of a nurse who had been there. I have never again been able to hold an audience in my hands as I did then. It was not me; it was the right of Spain to be a republic. (235)

No longer a secondary witness, negotiating a stance both inside and outside the traumatic event, DeVries, like Herbst, has become an eyewitness herself by the end of her time in Spain. Her very admission that “it was not me” who spoke during those months of intense testimony, but rather some other entity which in effect occupied her body and spoke through her, points to DeVries's having moved so completely into the position of primary witness that she is, for the moment at least, no longer able to take a metonymic stance. The traumatic event has nearly obliterated her own sense of subjectivity; it has



made her unable to distinguish or separate herself from the group of people with whom she experienced that trauma.

As we shall see, the recording of their war experiences by way of memoir writing would eventually afford both Herbst and DeVries a space in which to move back toward secondary witnessing. Strikingly, however, both women waited for several decades before writing their memoirs of the Spanish Civil War. (Herbst's memoir of the war appeared 23 years after her return from Spain; DeVries's, 42 years later.) Both were relatively young women in their thirties when they went to Spain; both were senior citizens, living in the last years of their lives, when they finally wrote about it. How can we account for these long gaps between Herbst and DeVries's experiencing of the war and their bearing literary witness to it? I propose that, because Herbst and DeVries, by the time they returned home from Spain, had moved so deeply into the roles of primary witness, that they were in need of secondary witnesses for themselves. They were, in effect, in need of a listening Other who would be to them what they had initially hoped to be to the people of the Spanish Republic: someone to draw out the testimony and to create a safe, receptive space for that testimony's expression.

### *Herbst as Secondary Witness*

Later in this chapter I will take into consideration the "historical gap" existing between Herbst's and DeVries's Spanish Civil War experiences and their literary testimonies of those experiences. I will examine particularly the ways in which Herbst and DeVries, as primary witnesses, were silenced in the first several decades following the Spanish war. But first let us consider the ways in which Herbst and DeVries, at the

beginning of their war experiences, position themselves as secondary witnesses in “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain” and Up from the Cellar.

Laub defines secondary witnessing as the act of “being a witness to the testimonies of others” (75). As we have seen, both Herbst and DeVries left for Spain with the conscious intention of bearing witness to the stories of others involved in the war. Certainly for Josephine Herbst, the role of secondary witness was one to which she was already well accustomed. A seasoned journalist at the time of her departure for Spain, Herbst had made a career out of listening to and documenting the life stories of marginalized people. Already she had observed and reported on the “Farmers Holiday” strike movement as well as the Farmers Second National Conference in Chicago. Along with her then-husband, John Hermann, she had traveled in to the Soviet Union. Urged by Mike Gold, Herbst and her then-husband, John Herrmann, had participated in and reported on the 1930 International Congress of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkov, just outside Moscow.<sup>6</sup> In 1935 she traveled “to Cuba to investigate revolutionary unrest for New Masses. . . [S]he was [then] given assignments by the New York Post and the Nation for a series of articles on the Nazi regime. . . [I]n December 1936 she went to Flint, Michigan, to observe the ‘sit-down strike’ at General Motors. . .” (Bevilacqua 7). Armed with a press pass, a “sprinkling of Spanish,” and a belief that her “own fate” was compelling her towards Spain, Herbst departed for Madrid in January 1937 (133).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed treatise on Herbst’s impressions of this literary conference, in which the Proletarian model of writing was introduced and celebrated—somewhat to Herbst’s dismay—see Herbst’s “Yesterday’s Road.”

<sup>7</sup> Herbst’s interest in the literary shaped many of the major decisions of her life. She left her parents’ home in rural Iowa for Berkeley, where she “published a handful of poems in The Occident, the student literary magazine” and graduated with a B.A. in English (Bevilacqua 2). From there she went on to New York, working “as an editorial reader for the Smart Set, a national magazine then edited by H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan. Her first short stories. . . were to appear in this magazine. . .” (2). In 1922 she left for

Arriving in Spain, Herbst was entering the political space which would test more stringently than ever before or afterward the leftist political ideologies which had shaped her life and career up until that point. She was simultaneously entering the phase of her life that would fix her reputation as daring reporter and incisive memoirist. At her death in 1969, the laudatory obituaries published in both the New York Times and the New York Review of Books helped to seal that particular reputation.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the Times praised Herbst as “one of the few women correspondents allowed to report from the frontline villages” in Spain (qtd. in Langer 7). To read Herbst’s eyewitness account of that war is also to realize how much that exceptional and rather solitary stance shaped her role as witness and the complex literary testimony that she would, in her old age, produce out of that witnessing.

### *Herbst as Secondary Witness for the International Brigades*

Herbst’s deep respect for the Republic’s unsung heroes, met in the caves and fields and impoverished villages, comes through most powerfully in her accounts of the International Brigade soldiers whom she comes to know at the Guadarrama front, just outside Madrid. Herbst gets to the front, initially, by luck and her own spontaneity. When Sid Franklin invites her to accompany him to Murata, “the village nearest the front lines at Jarama” and also the site where Ernest Hemingway and crew were shooting the film The Spanish Earth, Herbst recalls, “I jumped in[to Franklin’s car] just as I was” (140). Her first encounter with soldiers of the International Brigade, who are stationed all

---

Europe; there, she lived and worked in Germany for two years, and met and eventually married John Hermann, before returning to New York in late 1924.

along the Jarama front, is also shaped by Herbst's gameness. Entering a farmhouse which is now mess hall for the Brigades, Herbst offers to help two young soldiers peel potatoes, "and they gave me a knife" (141). The instant camaraderie which she establishes with these young men at the front continues throughout her stay in Murata, where she sleeps on a table at the village cafe. At the front line trenches, Herbst realizes delightedly that: "It is wonderful to have people glad to see you. These boys had been in the line for sixty days. . . . To have a newcomer, not a soldier but a woman, suddenly pounce down in the dugout was a refinement of warfare they hadn't expected" (143). This mutual delight, however, is quickly clouded by the desperation of their larger circumstances; these soldiers, Herbst soon realizes, are but a remnant of a brigade which launched an attack--and failed miserably--just weeks before. In the February 22 attack on Pingarron Hill in the Jarama Valley,

every available mixed brigade with international troops had been rushed to the line. To have lost the battle would have been to seal the doom of Madrid, and there was no time to spare any man who could be thrown in. There were over four hundred Americans in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, who had barely had time to learn to shoot a rifle or to handle a machine gun. . . . (140)

Ordered to take Pingarron Hill, the Lincolns had been terribly outmanned and overpowered; the attack ended in tragedy for the Republican side. "[O]f the four hundred

---

<sup>8</sup> In addition to being an accomplished journalist, Herbst was also a prolific writer of novels. These include: Nothing is Sacred (1928), Money for Love (1929), Pity Is Not Enough (1933), The Executioner Waits (1934), Rope of Gold (1939), Satan's Sergeants (1941), and Somewhere the Tempest Fell (1947).

Americans” who had attacked the Hill, recounts Herbst, “one hundred and eight were left” (140-41).<sup>9</sup>

It is here, in her documentation of the danger and terror experienced by these young, inexperienced soldiers, that Herbst most powerfully operates as secondary witness. Her accounts of these soldiers at the Republican front are among the most detailed and empathic of all those recorded by Spanish Civil War witnesses. In her portrayal of these young men, Herbst gives us both their extreme vulnerability and their complex humanity. Indeed, so closely does she listen to, and identify with, the traumatic testimonies which the soldiers relate to her that she absorbs some of their terror herself. While Laub stipulates that the task of the secondary witness is to be “a companion on the eerie journey of the testimony,” to “become part of the struggle to go beyond the [traumatic] event and [at the same time] not be submerged and lost in it” (76), Herbst seems almost in danger, in these passages from her memoir, of becoming submerged and lost in the horror of the stories she receives. We may account for this blurring of the boundaries between her role as secondary witness and the soldiers’ as primary witnesses in that, at the moment when Herbst receives the testimonies, there is very little chronological or historical distance from the events which the testimonies recall. Although she did not publish them for more than twenty years, Herbst did instantaneously document these received testimonies in notebooks which she carried to the front; much of her text in “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain”—particularly the passages of secondary witnessing—are lifted almost verbatim from those notebooks. Thus her accounts of the frightened survivors of Pingarron Hill are sharp with the

---

<sup>9</sup> As Nelson notes, Pingarron Hill as since come to be referred to as “Suicide Hill” within the lexicon of the Spanish Civil War (Madrid 24).

immediacy and urgency of the lived moment. Indeed, both Herbst and the traumatized soldiers are still standing upon the ground where so much blood was recently shed, where bullets still whistle through the air around them.

Throughout Herbst's descriptions of her time at the front, we see how her sensitivity to the soldiers' vulnerability merges with her own awareness of danger, thus rendering *their* terror and *her* terror nearly indistinguishable at times. Remembering the "little plateau" where she speaks with various soldiers about their recently slaughtered comrades, she remarks, "It seemed to me an exposed position; you could hear the whine of the bullets through the olive trees" (144). Indeed, Herbst's recollection of the hilltop from which the Brigades at Murata were fighting is fragmented and impressionistic at best, indicating that her normally keen powers of observation were blunted by the more immediate need to concentrate on minute-by-minute survival. "I never saw this hilltop as a whole scene," she admits, "but saw only its parts as they met the hurrying eye, because it took all of one's . . . energy to get across this emptied space. The birds had deserted it. You could hear distinctly the rattle of a machine gun, then the olive tree near you shivered in a gust of wind. A bullet had passed by" (143). Herbst is finely attuned to the possibility of suffering and death that permeates the atmosphere of the front. Transferring the images of torn human bodies which she has received through listening to the soldier-survivors, Herbst notes that "many of the olive trees looked as if they had been split open with an ax. The inside pulp was pinkish and blue, with the look of quivering flesh" (143). Inscribing images of violence onto the landscape itself, Herbst indicates her heightened awareness of the frailty of all life at the front. The bullet-ravaged

trees seem to her a bitter reminder of the broken human bodies that recently littered these surrounding fields.

Not only does she emphasize the dangerous lengths to which the soldiers will go--and indeed, have gone already--in defending the Republic, but Herbst also hones in on the terrors and anxieties which they must overcome in order to keep fighting. She recounts, for example, the fear-driven strike which many of the soldiers are staging at the time of her arrival. Although a recent typhoid epidemic is jeopardizing the front-line troops, many are refusing vaccination. Their resistance is twofold; on one hand, these men have already been at the front for sixty days running, and they are due a time of leave. Taking the shot might delay their leave indefinitely. On the other hand, the possible after-effects of the vaccination strike these young soldiers as deeply ominous; “they had the notion that the shot would cripple their arms badly. Suppose you got a surprise attack? Suppose it was the Moors coming at you? Would you have a chance, hand to hand, with a bad arm? You always kept a bullet for yourself if it was the Moors” (145).<sup>10</sup> Herbst is sensitive to their fears; after all, the recent, wretched memory of the failed attack still hangs thick in the air. In this tense atmosphere, neither the soldiers nor Herbst herself is able to escape the knowledge of their own physical fragility.

Turning her gaze to the bodies of the surviving soldiers, Herbst constantly perceives an extreme frailty only partially masked by bravery. Her observations of the young men’s bodies are shadowed by knowledge of how breakable they all are. Lining up for the typhoid vaccination, “[t]he men were ordered to strip to the waist” for a typhoid vaccination, “and the pale cage of their ribs looked pathetically vulnerable”

---

<sup>10</sup> Franco, who had been based in Spanish Morocco just before attempting his military coup, employed [the Moors, infamous for their --] in his fascist troops.

(144). Talking individually with a soldier who explains why many of the soldiers are resisting vaccination, Herbst can see him only as a “boy”; “I couldn’t help but look at the pale bluish skin of his body, where the veins shone. It seemed to me that his clothes were a masquerade and that he wore them as Indians might wear war paint” (145). Here, Herbst’s description of the young soldier’s “pale bluish skin” directly echoes her earlier depiction of the bullet-riddled olive trees, “pinkish and blue, with the look of quivering flesh” (143). Her personification of the damaged trees points to her fear, later on, that this fragile human body will soon be likewise shot to pulp. Herbst creates the impression of inadequacy; the boy’s pale body and thin uniform are pathetically incommensurate to the challenge of surviving the onslaughts of war. This impression is grounded in what Herbst regards as the particular tragedy of the troops at Murata. Hastily assembled and poorly trained, many of these volunteer soldiers had never fought at all, before the recent attempted offensive at Pingarron Hill.

Boys who could not bear to shoot a rabbit back home had ancient guns that didn’t work thrust into their hands on the night of the big offensive. Others tore the pins from grenades too soon, wounding themselves. Some went in with nothing but stones. . . . A wounded man might call only to the dead, who lay like shipwrecked sailors on the spurting earth. (144)

Such horrific memories, related to her by the survivors, color Herbst’s responses to life at this front line and render her almost incapable of relating these secondary testimonies without being scarred by them herself.

That Herbst was swiftly welcomed into this makeshift, fear-struck community is indisputable. She was, of course, a respite from the tense tedium of the post-offensive



stalemate. Yet she also felt, immediately and instinctively, that she had much to learn from the soldiers themselves. In her memoir she relates, “If I had come [to the front] like news of an outside world in which they still had a place because they were not forgotten, they reminded me of some inner necessity out of which I was struggling for some kind of answer” (149). Her need of them, it seems, grew out of her desire to find in the war a way of living out political and ethical commitments without becoming mired in internecine debate and duplicity. This need of each other, coupled with mutual admiration, cemented Herbst’s place among the troops of the International Brigades throughout the winter and spring of 1937. William Pike, doctor of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, would later vividly recall Herbst, as well as the contributions she made to his men’s morale. “[H]er intercession with his troops,” he reported in a 19?? interview with Elinor Langer, “came at a crucial juncture [and] was vital to their acceptance of the inoculations which shortly prevented the whole battery from being wiped away by typhoid. . .” (219). Langer goes on to note, “I have a whole fileful of unsolicited tributes reiterating this sense of the importance of her presence to others” (219). A fellow reporter claimed: “She risked her life in the Spanish war much more than I did--or any other war correspondent” (qtd. in Langer 219). A soldier who had known Herbst at the Murata front wrote, “One recollection that will never fade from my memory is the respect and affection held for JH by the anti-fascist volunteers who got to know her” (qtd. in Langer 219).<sup>11</sup>

More than acting as friend and encourager to members of the International Brigade, however, Herbst’s most important role among these men was as a secondary

---

<sup>11</sup> “She risked her life. . .”: Helen Seldes to Elinor Langer, September 1, 1976. “One recollection. . .”: John Tisa to EL, October 29, 1974.

witness to their recent losses. Everywhere at the front lines, she recalls, “The dead were present by their absence” (146). The very fact that Herbst recognizes these lost men *by their absence* points to the traumatic nature of experience. It is this lacunae, this gap, which indicates that opacity—that quality of not being able to *fully* know or register—which is at the core of every traumatic event. As Herbst perceives, this opacity is a source of address in itself. As secondary witness, she must position herself in relation to that nonpresence which marks the soldier-survivors’ testimonies. As Laub notes, the secondary witness faces the unique situation of having “to look for something that is in fact nonexistent; a record that has yet to be made. . . . The victim’s narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence” (57).

Yet, in order to begin to respond to this kind of a break in meaning, the loss which we address in traumatic testimony must first be marked as loss. The impulse to respond to an absence always depends on pre-knowledge and pre-recognition of the thing that is truly absent. The surviving comrades of these recently fallen men provide that knowledge with an almost desperate outpouring of names. In Herbst’s depiction of these survivors, they can hardly refrain from recalling their dead, calling them back into reality through memory and spoken testimony. “What the Cuban [soldiers] wanted to tell me,” Herbst writes in her memoir, “was that once there had been sixty-four of them. Now there were twelve. Please to remember them. . .” (146). In deference to the surviving soldiers, who beg Herbst to take back with her the names of the dead, she does list some of their names in her memoir: “Remember Pablo Torriente Brau, a good newsman from Havana. . . . Please remember Douglas Seacord. Remember Tomlinson. . . . Please

remember” (147). While Herbst in 1937 acted as immediate secondary witness to these losses, her memoir takes up the role of testimony once again, more than twenty years later and into the future, recording for all posterity the names of these lost ones.

One of the “tasks of testimonial discourse,” as Linda Craft notes, “is to name names and create new myths of fallen heroes--names ordinarily forgotten in official history for being associated with the losing side” (30). In this sense, Herbst is both witness to the remaining soldiers, who must unburden themselves of their stories of loss, and to those stories of loss themselves. Her memoir re-tells and re-inscribes--this time, into the public realm--the stories of men otherwise erased from Spanish Civil War history. Such a task, according to Herbst, came to her almost naturally, for “[t]he dead often seemed as real to me as the man who might be talking of his friend. . .” (146). So intensely does Herbst identify with the soldiers at Murata and their recent tragedy, that their loss in some sense becomes hers as well, and she is thus able to carry it with her out of Spain and into the larger world.<sup>12</sup>

### *Herbst as Secondary Witness for John Dos Passos*

A subplot which Herbst develops in her war narrative presages her own growing doubt regarding the integrity of the political powers taking shape within the Republic, and further indicates the ways in which she would return from Spain veritably weighted with the traumatic stories of others who had been close to her there. By the spring of 1937, the Comintern was gaining a stronghold in the administration of the Republic and was methodically beginning to remove all revolutionaries and left-of-center socialists

---

<sup>12</sup> According to Langer, when Herbst “left Europe at the end of June, 1937. . . she did not really leave Spain behind her. . . . She was in frequent contact by mail with some of the soldiers and correspondents she had met in Madrid. Anxiously she followed the news” (226).

from the Popular Front government. In the midst of this political purging, a more sinister and secretive purging had begun to unfold; the increasingly Communist-centered government began to imprison and execute former anarchist and anti-Stalinist leaders. Jose Robles, a Spaniard who had taught for many years at Johns Hopkins University but who in 1936 returned to Spain to serve as a lieutenant-colonel for the Republic, was one of the Popular Front's early suspects and eventual victims. Executed as a spy in early 1937, he had long been the friend of American novelist John Dos Passos.<sup>13</sup> Dos Passos was living in Madrid that spring, where his path often crossed that of fellow writers Ernest Hemingway and Josephine Herbst. Dos Passos' increasing concern over his missing friend, coupled with Hemingway's growing annoyance at Dos Passos for being (as Hemingway then believed) openly paranoid, resulted in a test of their individual ideologies. With Dos Passos taking up the role of doubter and dissenter,<sup>14</sup> Hemingway became still more firmly entrenched in his defense of the Republic. Herbst was their witness, caught somewhere inbetween their two poles of thought but eventually empathizing with Dos Passos. In contrast to her ready assumption of the role of secondary witness with the soldiers of the International Brigade, Herbst found herself involuntarily thrust into that role yet again as she watched, and grieved, the growing tension between these two men, as well as Dos Passos's escalating distress. In the end,

---

<sup>13</sup> In his 1939 article for the New Republic, "The Death of Jose Robles," Dos Passos repeats the information which he gathered "from the then chief of the Republican counterespionage service" (308): Robles was "executed by a 'special section' (which I gathered was under the control of the Communist Party);" ostensibly Robles's execution was to serve "as an example to other officials because he had been overheard indiscreetly discussing military plans in a cafe" (308). Dos Passos goes on to speculate that "Russian secret agents felt that Robles knew too much about the relations between the Spanish war ministry and the Kremlin and was not. . . politically reliable" (309).

<sup>14</sup> Dos Passos, who identified himself as "a campfollower rather than a joiner" of the Communist Party throughout the early and mid 1930s, expressed his concern with "the economic crisis and with the role of Communism" in his major work, the three novels published collectively in 1937 as USA (Hicks 88). By

Herbst's witnessing of Dos Passos's particular trauma sealed her own nascent despair over the ominous changes in the Republican government.

Herbst also found herself in the unique--and uncomfortable--position of knowing already that Robles had been killed. "I had been told in Valencia before coming to Madrid," she remarks, rather obliquely, "and there had been told, in strictest confidence, and for the reason that Dos Passos was an old friend of mine, that the man was dead" (154).<sup>15</sup> Herbst remembers Hemingway's concern that, "because Dos was conspicuously making inquiries. . . , [he] might get everybody in trouble if he persisted" (150). Although she sees Hemingway's blind faith in the Republican government as overly idealistic, Herbst also acknowledges that he has been correct in fearing Dos Passos' outspokenness. "Some of the Spanish were beginning to be worried about Dos Passos' zeal, and. . . hoped to keep him from finding out . . . about [Robles's execution] while he was in Spain" (154). Thus Herbst has sworn herself to secrecy. Watching Dos Passos' crescent distress, however, she is pained.

This discomfort reaches a decisive peak when Hemingway summons her to his room at the Florida to insist that she "tell [Dos Passos] to lay off making inquiries about Robles. It was going to throw suspicion on all of us and get us in trouble. . . . Quintanilla, the head of the Department of Justice, had assured Dos that Robles would get a fair trial.

---

the end of the decade, however, "his disillusionment [with the Communist Party] was complete" (89). The execution of Jose Robles by the Comintern-backed Republican government decided the matter for him.

<sup>15</sup> Elinor Langer asserts that, on her way into Madrid through Valencia in early 1937, Herbst was taken into confidence by "some forever-unidentified official somewhere in the offices of the Republic," who informed Herbst of Robles's death (221). We can only speculate, however, as to why Herbst was the recipient of this particular information. Langer lists the following possible explanations: because of her writing on Cuba, Herbst was perceived as more politically sympathetic to the Republic than was Dos Passos; Herbst was not involved in the film, *The Spanish Earth*, as were both Dos Passos and Hemingway, so the repercussions of her knowing about Robles (rather than either of the two men) would have less effect on its production; and finally, Herbst had not been a personal friend of Robles's and thus "would be unlikely to care as much" (221).

Others in authority had told him the same. He should lay off. Quintanilla was a swell guy; I ought to get to know him” (154). Herbst sees great naivete in Hemingway’s assumption that he understands the inner workings of the Republican government, while Dos Passos does not. Herbst instinctively holds herself apart from Hemingway’s stance, thus separating herself ideologically from the powers behind the Popular Front as well. “[Hemingway’s] request was terribly disturbing,” she recalls. “I could not believe Quintanilla so good a guy if he could let Dos Passos remain in anguished ignorance. . . . I felt that Dos should be told. . .” (154). Accordingly, Herbst breaks the terrible news to Hemingway, with the request that he in turn relay it to Dos Passos. Although Hemingway reacts with initial surprise, Herbst is troubled by his quickly smoothed over acceptance of the news: “I don’t think he doubted for a minute that Robles was guilty if Quintanilla said so. But I did” (155). Already, Herbst is willing--certainly, more willing than Hemingway--to accept the increasing ambiguity of Popular Front politics.

The whole account of the Robles affair is marked by Herbst’s compassion for Dos Passos; by the end of the story, she has aligned herself with him and his skepticism, over and against Hemingway’s apparent ingenuousness. Thus Herbst moves from unwilling bystander in the Hemingway-Dos Passos fiasco to deliberate secondary witness to Dos Passos, a role she again assumes in writing this story into her memoir. Privileging the man for whom she is bearing secondary witness, Herbst skewers Hemingway, remarking that he “was entering into some areas that were better known to people like Dos Passos or even myself. [Hemingway] seemed to be naively embracing on the simpler levels the current ideologies at the very moment when Dos Passos was urgently questioning them. .

.” (151). As Herbst’s time in Spain draws to a close, she is increasingly aware that urgent questioning is precisely what is needed in this ever more embattled Republic.

Witnessing the way in which the government’s subterfuge has split Dos Passos and Hemingway, once great friends sharing a passion for leftism in general and for the Republic in particular, into two divergent camps, Herbst feels within herself an emerging consciousness, and even fear, of the Republic’s shifting political stance. The government is not, after all, blameless; the war is not quite so simple a matter as the “good against evil” binary she has once believed in. On the day that she crosses the border out of Spain, Herbst can only confess, “I was far from understanding everything. About the most important questions, I felt sickeningly at sea” (178). At this particular stage in the unfolding story of Josephine Herbst and the Spanish Civil War, Herbst has lost her ability to tell that story to herself. She has moved from secondary to primary witness of that war’s trauma, and in this new, overwhelming position, she is temporarily unable to articulate, to make meaning of, her war experience.

### *DeVries as Secondary Witness*

Like Josephine Herbst, Lini DeVries also came to Spain primed by many of her previous life experiences to be a secondary witness. Also like Herbst, the bulk of DeVries’s secondary witnessing would take place among the people of the International Brigades. In many ways, the Spanish Civil War chapter of DeVries’s Up from the Cellar reads like a slightly more prosaic, slightly less graceful echo of Herbst’s “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain”; it does, indeed, perform the same metonymic function we see in Herbst’s memoir. Both Herbst and DeVries emphasize *others*’ stories of the war at least as much as they do their own. This complexity of stories, in both memoirs, points to the

larger story of the Republic—a story which, indeed, exceeds any individual account of the war—and shows how it was *not*, after all, one unified, monolithic story.

Taken together, however, Herbst's and DeVries's memoirs demonstrate how two eyewitnesses of the same war, experiencing it at the same time, could nonetheless experience that war from rather disparate vantage points and thus carry away equally disparate ideological readings of it. Unlike Herbst's, DeVries's narrative of the Spanish Civil War tends to idealize and romanticize her experience as secondary witness. Her narrative is punctuated by somewhat breathless assertions such as, "Now I saw the truth all around me—the people of Spain behind their government, and we, the foreigners. . . [having] the opportunity to work for democracy and humanity. . ." (200). Certainly, as I have remarked previously, DeVries's relatively positive reading of the Spanish Republic results from her having lived at a far remove from the centers of administrative power, and having had no contact at all during her four months in Spain with either reporters or governmental authorities. The Republic, for DeVries, was embodied in the peasants who gave up their schoolhouses so that the American medical unit could convert them into frontline hospitals, and in the volunteer doctors and nurses of that unit, along with the soldiers whom they tended. As such, an ideologically "pure" understanding of the Republic, untainted and uncomplicated by reports of the internecine fighting in Barcelona that spring or of the dramatic changes in command within the government, was possible for DeVries in a way that it never was for Herbst.

Idealism, political activism, and a belief in her own agency to effect change—all essential qualities for one who is preparing to be secondary witness to another's trauma—shaped DeVries's life from childhood forward. The daughter of impoverished Dutch



immigrants, she began working full-time in a Paterson, New Jersey silk mill at the age of twelve; soon thereafter, she joined with fellow workers in asking for an eight-hour, rather than a ten-hour, workday. “When the workers walked out,” DeVries recalls proudly, “I walked right out with them. Pigtales flying in the breeze, I picketed. We picketed the mill for eight days” (15). The strike ends in victory for the workers, and DeVries has her first taste of political activism. At age fourteen, she and other girls from her working-class neighborhood organized their own Girl Scout troop, thus inscribing themselves into a national institution, despite their lowly status as mill workers and daughters of immigrants. Later, as a young public health worker attending a 1933 international nursing conference, DeVries “signed with pleasure” a petition against war and fascism (139). Declaring that, as a public health nurse who “actively worked” at preventing death and disease, she would resist anything that destroyed such work, DeVries early in her career linked fascism with the destruction of life (139).<sup>16</sup> Shortly thereafter, as a student at the Teacher’s College of Columbia University, she began attending meetings of the League against War and Fascism. When DeVries became a member of the Communist Party in 1935, she did so because, as she writes in her memoir, “at the time. . . , it met the needs of idealism, or humanism, and met my personal need as an idealist. . .” (157). Also during the mid 1930s, DeVries allied herself with and worked extensively for birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, asserting that, “I was interested in saving lives. . . . Reality was *life versus death in 1935*” (164-165, italics hers). In the years just prior to her departure for Spain, then, DeVries’s political activism leaves her with a lasting

---

<sup>16</sup> This idea sharpened and became still more urgent for her when, that same year, she visited her Tante Sara and Orme David, both practicing Jews, in Amsterdam. 1933 was also the year that Hitler began his Third Reich; DeVries’s relatives warned her against the rise of fascism and Nazism in Germany and

understanding of her position as an individual vis-à-vis her broader social environment: “[I]nstead of worrying about me, I was worrying about the world” (154). It was this understanding which would lead DeVries to Spain in early 1937.

Despite this continued emphasis on DeVries’s concerns for others, Up from the Cellar reads in some ways like traditional autobiography. She proceeds chronologically from earliest childhood memories to the present moment of her writing; the life events which she narrates all seem to build on each other, propelling DeVries forward in her intellectual and political development. Indeed, like many of the prototypical male autobiographers, DeVries depicts herself as one who has pulled herself up by the proverbial bootstraps. Hers is clearly and unquestionably a success story; she begins her narrative by emphasizing her extreme marginalization: as an illegitimate child, as a Jew, as a mill dolly, as a Dutch-speaking child of Dutch immigrants, as one who did not receive a high school degree until late in life. As the title of her memoir--with its emphasis on climbing from the depths to the heights--would indicate, DeVries also emphasizes her rise from these lowly beginnings, as one by one she achieves various marks of material success. She gets a nurse’s degree; she graduates high school; she earns a degree in public health from Columbia University; she befriends and works for Sanger; she goes to Spain with the first American medical brigade; she organizes rural public health workers in Mexico and eventually becomes a professor anthropology and

---

informed her that every member of her extended family was already harboring a Jewish refugee from Germany in his house.

public health at the University of Veracruz. As one reviewer puts it, the story of DeVries's life trajectory is nothing short of "miraculous" (Morehouse 702).<sup>17</sup>

How, then, is this a metonymic autobiography? It is in the sense that DeVries's interest in telling this story is not simply to glorify or aggrandize herself and her accomplishments, but to speak for those who have no public voices. At the very beginning of her memoir, as she professes her humble origins, DeVries is already speaking metonymically. "We mill dollies, first generation," she recalls, "had this feeling of shame. We tried to avoid admitting that our parents spoke no English. . . . We were nothing; we were foreigners, mill-workers" (27). Although the child DeVries is aware that she wants more out of life--she admits that "I wanted to be and live like the Eastsiders," who are economically privileged and send their children to high school--she cannot separate herself and her identity from those fellow sufferers among whom she lives: ". . . [Y]et my loyalty went to my co-workers" (27). The telling of DeVries's life story, then, is not simply to show *her* life, but to show the lives of less powerful others who lived lives similar to hers.

This impulse to represent the lives of voiceless others underscores her Spanish Civil War account in particular. Here, her focus lies upon the people of Republican Spain and those Americans who, like DeVries herself, had helped the Spanish Republic and were later castigated for it. At the age of seventy-four, writing from a position of

---

<sup>17</sup> Albeit that Val Morehouse of Booklist celebrated DeVries's memoir, calling it "a guts-and-grits adventure. . . told in forceful, honest prose," and "highly recommended" it (702), Up From the Cellar was not reviewed again, nor was it re-issued after its original 1979 publication by the alternative Vanilla Press. Aside from the Booklist review, I have found no critical writing on DeVries's memoir. Although an excerpt from her memoir is included in Alvah Bessie's (?) Heart of Spain (?) (NO: THE OTHER ONE), and one of her letters from Spain is published in Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks's Madrid 1937, DeVries's writing on Spain is not widely circulated or, to this date, well known.

relative power,<sup>18</sup> DeVries in Up from the Cellar is at last able to bear unhindered public testimony to the marginalized or altogether silenced histories in which she, along with many others, had played a role. Always, her attention is turned toward the lives of those other who have shared her life experiences with her. Doctors and other nurses from DeVries's medical battalion in Spain, who endured the same sufferings as DeVries both in Spain and then home in America, figure prominently in her war memoir. As testimony to the lingering and powerful effect of this particular community on DeVries's conscience, she names her second daughter, born after the war, for Toby Jensky, one of her nursing companions in Spain.

*DeVries as Secondary Witness Within the Context of the Spanish Civil War*

During her four months in Spain, DeVries worked at three different medical units set up along the fronts outside Madrid at Jarama and Tarancón; the stories of secondary witnessing which she brings back from this context are those of the soldiers or medical staff with whom she closely related. One instance in which DeVries is fully able to serve the mandate of secondary witness—that is, to look on a horror not her own, and to respect and transmit that story without attempting to ameliorate it—is in her interaction with Peter, a young Dutchman gravely injured in the Battle of Jarama. In her recounting of Peter's story, DeVries is most conscious of her status as secondary witness; she understands that, by receiving and then passing on this story, she is serving a cause larger

---

<sup>18</sup> At the time of her memoir's publication, DeVries was not only a professor at the University of Veracruz, but she had also lately helped Ivan Illich to reorganize the Centro Intercultural de Documentacion to include Latin American Studies. She also helped to set up Cemenahuac, an educational community for those interested in studying Mexican culture.

than either Peter or herself. By representing Peter and the mandate which he gives her, DeVries is at her most metonymic.

Asked to translate between Peter and an English-speaking doctor, DeVries arrives at the boy's bedside as surgery begins, thus opening herself to the role of *his* witness. Peter begs her to stay with him during the operation; exhausted but compassionate, DeVries agrees. "Softly I spoke in Dutch to Peter about the streets of Amsterdam, about the beach at Scheveningen, as I watched his abdomen being opened, exposing a shattered spleen. I . . .knew it was hopeless now," she recalls (209). Peter, who also understands the gravity of his situation, insists to DeVries: "Promise me before I die that you will keep on fighting for Spain and for what is right" (209). DeVries does so, and Peter makes a final request. "'Sing me the cradle songs. Sing me the folk songs. Sing to me,' he begged. With a pinched heart and unshed tears, I sang to Peter as softly as I could. I thought again of Till Eulenspiegel's wife as she placed the ashes on the hearts of her sons and daughters" (209). As DeVries sings Dutch folk melodies as well as the Internationale, she instinctively associates these songs with Peter's penultimate request, that she promise to "keep on fighting" for "what is right." His request echoes that of Till Eulenspiegel's wife: "'As long as there is injustice in this world, you must fight against it.' Peter had heard these words; he had heard them in school. I was hearing them through the din of the bombers overhead trying to locate our hospital" (209). The old Dutch story operates metonymically here; although DeVries is the one who tells (or re-tells) it in her memoir, she is operating as representative for a much larger collective. The story and its mandate belong also to the dying soldier, as well as to a group much larger than DeVries and he--that is, anyone who resists injustice. One lateral relationship begets another and

another, for DeVries implies in her memoir that all who hear this story are implicated by it; her memoir, then, extends the story out to her readers and hopes that they, too, will feel these “ashes [lying] heavy on [their] hearts.” DeVries holds Peter in her memory much as she holds Till Eulspiegel’s wife; both constitute a mandate to keep on fighting, for their memories and for the lives of others like them.

Recalling the incident of Peter’s death in a letter she wrote home from Spain, DeVries celebrated Peter as a member of an extraordinary group of people whom she was coming to know at the front lines: “These are not ordinary soldiers dying for the imperialists--but going out in the struggle against fascism for you and me, for the Spanish people, and the whole world. . .” (qtd. in Nelson, Madrid 243).<sup>19</sup> In the case of DeVries’s depiction of Peter, as well as in other accounts she gives of the individuals with whom she worked in Spain, we see her tendency to glorify or romanticize many of her memories of the war. Indeed, although DeVries pointedly emphasizes her role as witness—as one who has *seen* this war and its people—throughout her war narrative, what she tends to “see” is positive. After a detailed portrayal of a newly formed peasant cooperative, for example, she claims, “I saw democracy aborning among the cave dwellers, former servants of the royalty” (226). Or, when she realizes that the building which her medical unit has been using will soon revert to its former status as village school house, she remarks, “I was glad to see the bright-faced schoolchildren getting their school back instead of its being filled with the wounded” (213). She waxes eloquent on the subject of Republican commitment to education, filling a whole page with statistics proving the recent drop in Spain’s illiteracy rate and again underlining that she has “seen

---

<sup>19</sup> DeVries appears as “Lini Fuhr” in Nelson and Hendricks’ Madrid 1937. She had resumed using her maiden name by the time she wrote her memoir.

[much] evidence of such attempts at learning” (231). She fills still other pages with almost awestruck descriptions of the new egalitarianism and mutual commitment she observes between doctors and nurses in her unit, or between her nursing staff and the convalescing soldiers whom they tend.<sup>20</sup> DeVries’s deliberate positing of herself as witness to these cheering or inspiring moments in Republican history indicates her desire to interpret as positively as possible all those events in her war experience which occurred *outside* the realm of trauma. It is an almost starkly compensatory gesture.

Indeed, DeVries’s longest and most eloquent descriptions of her war experience involve noble deeds and heroic people; the more horrific events which of course were part of that experience are only alluded to, or lightly sketched. As I will show later in this chapter, those horror-ridden events constitute the core of DeVries’s war trauma, the trauma she experienced not as secondary but as eyewitness. As secondary witness, however, she is still able to exercise a degree of control over the stories she tells and the light in which she casts them for her readers. “There are dangers inherent,” Linda Craft warns us, in the relationship between the individual who interprets to the rest of the world the life experiences of another, particularly when the one who interprets has greater access to public voice and power than does the one who is represented (20). In the case of Lini DeVries, who wrote Up from the Cellar from a position of relative authority (she was, in 1979, a respected university professor of public health and anthropology), DeVries is clearly operating at the brink of these dangers which Craft indicates.<sup>21</sup> Not the

---

<sup>20</sup> She writes, for example, of American doctors who “pushed and hauled like anyone else” in the intense manual labor, usually reserved for nurses, of setting up the first frontline hospital (206), or of the men of the Lincoln Brigade who help DeVries with laundry, challenging their more sexist comrades: “Don’t you believe what you preach—the right of women to develop?” (223).

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that Craft is specifically addressing the relationship which is created when a First World writer and an illiterate Third World subject work together to produce testimonial literature about the Third World subject’s life. I would argue, however, that the potentially asymmetrical relationship which is

least of these dangers, Craft continues, “is the trap of portraying a caricature of a nostalgic evocation of an Other who never really existed or of forcing the portrayal into a mold to serve the literary or political purposes of the intellectual” (20). To the extent that DeVries does render many of her Spanish Civil War memories in a nostalgic light, I would argue that she does so as a means of at least partially screening out her own trauma from that war and the war’s aftermath.

### *Primary Trauma in Herbst’s Memoir*

At one level, both Josephine Herbst and Lini DeVries were traumatized from the very act of their having absorbed and borne the traumatic stories of others. As listeners to “the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma,” Herbst and DeVries faced what Dori Laub deems “a unique situation . . . through [the secondary witness’s] very listening, [she] comes to partially experience the trauma in [herself]” (57). Because the listener does enter into the victim’s struggle with the confrontation and recovery of a traumatic memory, the listener lives within the risk of being traumatized as well by this struggle. Indeed, Dominick LaCapra confirms that secondary witness, by exposing herself “to empathetic understanding and hence to at least muted trauma,” will inevitably suffer “a secondary form of trauma” (qtd. in Hartman 40). In the case of Herbst and DeVries, I would add, the situation was complicated by their receiving the secondary testimonies almost within the very context of the trauma—that is, at a very brief

---

formed through such an endeavor is similar to the one which arises when DeVries, a public figure at the time of her writing, attempts to represent incidents from the lives of her former comrades in war, who were by that time either dead or lost to history. The danger in both cases is that the writer may wield too much power in deciding how someone else’s life will be documented for posterity.



chronological remove from the event. They were themselves witnesses both to the traumatic stories of others, *and* to the context of war from which those stories emanated.

In considering Josephine Herbst as a secondary witness who eventually became so scarred by the stories she received that she became a victim of trauma herself, I find Laub's term, "the vicissitudes of listening," particularly illuminating. While Herbst became a sort of "blank screen" on which the traumatic stories of the International Brigade soldiers, as well as that of John Dos Passos, were "inscribed for the first time" (Laub 57), she could not help but to be psychologically marked, herself, by those stories. This psychological marking or scarring had direct repercussions on the position she staked out for herself in relation to the other international reporters gathered in Spain at the time. Despite Herbst's status as an American journalist of considerable experience and esteem, she instinctively separated herself from these other international reporters. For Herbst, this separation was a gesture of solidarity with the young soldiers with whom she had so intensely lived. It was also an indication of alliance with those individuals who, like Dos Passos, had become so deeply involved in the political workings of the Republic that they could no longer offer up the neat, pat analyses that most American journalists were expected to deliver. Finally, Herbst's deliberate self-isolation was also an indication that she understood herself already as "marked" by the trauma of these others—in such a way that she could not participate in the more detached, blasé attitude toward the war that most of her fellow journalists were exhibiting.

Bored and frustrated with the self-centeredness and self-indulgence which she observed among her fellow journalists in Madrid, Herbst could only see them in striking contrast to the passion and desperation of men like Dos Passos and the soldiers whom she

had encountered at the Jarama front. Indeed, Herbst seems to have found the Madrid scene nearly suffocating. Almost all of the international press corps stationed in Madrid, as Langer notes, “lived together at the Hotel Florida . . ., ate together at a communal table in the basement of a Gran Via restaurant, observed the same incidents together, repeated the same anecdotes together. . . and they all studied one another like crows” (213). The central preoccupations of what Langer calls these journalists’ “tight little nest” rest not so much on the war itself and the sufferings of the Spanish, but rather on far more private, inward-looking questions: “Who was flirting with whom? Who was sleeping with whom? . . . Who was respected by whom? Who was trusted by whom? Who was last seen with whom?” (213). In the midst of this cloying, claustrophobic atmosphere, Herbst felt herself far removed from the actual concerns of the war. Although Madrid itself was actually a front, as Herbst recalls in her memoir,

it often seemed utterly remote from the more meaningful scenes you might witness in the villages. For in Madrid, no matter what you might see or where you might go, you were obliged to rotate around the axis of the Florida and the Gran Via, and with characters coming and going, even to a movie actor from Hollywood, the atmosphere began to feel. . . more and more like Bloomsbury. (159)

Indeed, to read “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain” is to be thrust into a startling milieu, populated by some of the brightest literary lights of the American thirties and painted in the dark, smoky colors of personal intrigue, deception, and illicit romance. Although the maneuverings of the international press corps are far from Herbst’s primary focus in her memoir, her descriptions of that particular scene provide a striking foil for the brave but

lonely stance which Herbst eventually carves out of her Spanish experience. She explains her eagerness for seeing the war from a separate, more independent vantage point: “The people I wanted to know were the Spanish, but [in Madrid] it seemed to me that I was out on a rim where the atmosphere often struck me as frivolous” (139). By physically removing herself from the demi-monde of international reporters and living instead among the villages and trenches of the front lines, Herbst lives out in a practical sense the ethical difference—a difference born of her secondary witnessing—which she has detected between herself and other reporters. To truly experience and be able to write about this war, she decides, she must live among the people of Spain who are truly confronting the war, with its multitude of discomforts and miseries, and spend as little time as possible at the Hotel Florida.<sup>22</sup>

In her portrayal of the reporters’ scene in Madrid, Herbst focuses on clothing and food as tropes of difference, juxtaposing the luxury in which the international press corps rather unthinkingly indulges to her own heightened sensitivity in these matters. We see this marking of difference almost immediately in her war narrative; as Herbst for the first time enters the Hotel Florida, she encounters Ernest Hemingway, her friend of the past ten years. Herbst’s description of Hemingway, however, does not encode him as long-standing chum. Instantly she hones in on his attention to his own appearance, even in the midst of this scene of destruction. Hemingway is wearing “a kind of khaki uniform with high polished boots”; Herbst, meanwhile, is anything but polished in appearance (136). “I was dragging my knapsack,” she recalls; “a white dust from the shells exploding in the

---

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Herbst spent the bulk of her time not only at the trenches among soldiers, but also in the cliff dwellings, villages, and abandoned plantations now being run by former serfs, coming to know the humblest citizens of the Spanish Republic who lived there. Her accounts of the brave old women of the

streets had coated my hair and felt gritty on my hands” (136). From the outset of her interactions with Hemingway in Madrid, then, Herbst sets herself up in direct contrast to him and his obvious self-absorption. Nor does Martha Gellhorn, in Spain both to report on the war for Collier’s magazine and also to carry on her budding affair with Hemingway, escape Herbst’s criticism. Gellhorn, Herbst recalls, “sailed in and out in beautiful Saks Fifth Avenue pants, with a green chiffon scarf wound around her head” (151). In these early passages, Herbst sets herself apart from these apparently egocentric writers, mocking their well-groomed appearances in an environment that could so easily wreck one’s clothes and hair. The deeper irony in all this, of course, is that life in this war zone endangered far more than one’s clothing and hair.

Ernest Hemingway continues to figure large in Herbst’s critiques of the international press corps; in her account, he epitomizes the entire press corps’ spirit of egoism, and their focus on their own personal concerns rather than on those of the people about whom they were reporting.<sup>23</sup> Although Herbst concedes that Hemingway, through his project The Spanish Earth, is doing important work--and as such has not come to Spain with “empty hands”--the three months that she spends in continual contact with him in Madrid leave her with an overarching impression of Hemingway as glutton. In the middle of a besieged and starving city, Hemingway employs Sid Franklin, “his devoted friend and a sort of *valet de chambre*,” to “scrounge around” for daily contributions to the massive pantry which Hemingway keeps in his own room (137). “There was a tall wardrobe in Hem’s room,” Herbst recounts, “and it was filled with tasty

---

town of Alcala de Henares, as well as of the “tenants” of a now-defunct plantation who turn it into a cooperative, are particularly moving.

items: ham, bacon, eggs, coffee, and even marmalade” (137).<sup>24</sup> Such gathering and hoarding of expensive food while one’s neighbors writhe in hunger exhibits not only decadence but downright selfishness; these traits also crop up in the blatantly celebratory way Hemingway conducts his love affair with Gellhorn. As Herbst remarks, such a “love affair was not exactly a benign influence in a wartime hotel” (151). No one in the vicinity, after all, could escape the fact that “[t]he corks popping were not for you. . .” (151).

While Hemingway does offer to share his wealth with certain select friends, Herbst feels ethically compromised by such invitations. Some nights at the Florida, Herbst sits “[w]ith a bit of dry bread saved from supper the night before, . . . munching and talking to the boys [soldiers on leave from the front]” (138). Invariably, she recalls, “the odor of ham and coffee would slowly penetrate to our level, and from the fourth floor Hemingway would lean down and call,” inviting the hotel’s writers to dine with him. “It was a terrible temptation,” Herbst remembers. “Everybody was hungry all the time. . . . I would be haunted all day. . . . I hated it that I . . . felt virtuous for not going. For doing the right thing. For you couldn’t run off from your visitors. Tomorrow they might be dead” (138). Throughout her time in Spain, even during those days when she is

---

<sup>23</sup> Elinor Langer acknowledges that Herbst felt particularly competitive with Hemingway. “He even had more reasons for being [in Spain]. . . : deliverer of ambulances, correspondent for NANA, writer for *Esquire*, entrepreneur of the important propaganda film *The Spanish Earth*” (214).

<sup>24</sup> Much of Hemingway’s behavior in Madrid, according to Herbst, grows out of his drive toward self-aggrandizement. About Hemingway Herbst remarks: “He wanted to be *the* war writer of his age, and he knew it and went toward it. . . . What was the deepest reality [in Wyoming or in Key West] was in an extreme form *here*, and to get it he had to be in it, and he knew it” (150). Herbst’s views on Hemingway in Spain are complex; she does concede that Hemingway “was a real friend to the Spanish; he had donated an ambulance and had come as a correspondent. He was promoting the film *The Spanish Earth*, which was to show life in a village and what the war meant to the Spaniards” (150). On the other hand, however, she is not entirely able to excuse him for his liberal and often ostentatious use of highly limited Republican resources. Although the Republic is suffering a severe gasoline shortage, for example, “Hemingway had two cars for his use, with gas allowance. . .” (138).

lodged with other reporters at the Florida, Herbst is so focused upon the plight of the Republic's soldiers and common people that she finds it impossible to indulge in material pleasures which they are denied. In fact, her sensitivity toward the Spaniards' own lack of food results in her losing twenty pounds during her three months in Spain. Hunger and gradual self-starvation mark Herbst's narration of her Spanish Civil War life.<sup>25</sup> Later, during one of her stays at a frontline village, she will worry that "it was outrageous that I should be willing to linger to eat into the villagers' scant supplies. For food was so precious, and it would have been different if I could have come without empty hands" (163). Indeed, one of the fundamental reasons behind her ultimate departure from Spain is that "I was a noncombatant, and as such I was probably due to move on. I even told myself that I was eating too much, though it was very little. . ." (176). Herbst's dramatic weight loss, coupled with her almost constant hunger throughout her three months in Spain—amounting, ultimately, to self-starvation—evinces that, having *physically* absorbed and been affected by the immense suffering of those for whom she had borne secondary witness, she herself became a victim of war trauma.

Herbst's memoir of the war marks her as primary witness in three specific ways. I have already examined how Herbst's experience of trauma, at one level, resulted from her having played secondary witness for too long, too intensely. Other of Herbst's Spanish Civil War experiences, however—those pertaining more closely to her own emotions and physical proximity to danger—further contributed to her trauma, however.

---

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Herbst's recollection of the way she and soldiers at the front exchange stories of dreams they have had since arriving in Spain. ". . . I told him I dreamed of bread" (148). The soldiers "loved this story, and I had to repeat it several times. There may seem to be something childish in all this, but these were not childish men" (148). Stories about food also forge a kind of desperate community back in Madrid; waiting in the food line at the Gran Via restaurant, Herbst would "find myself compulsively

On one hand, the very foundations of Herbst's faith in leftist ideology—the ideology for which she had come to Spain—were shaken and, indeed, split asunder, as she watched the Republican government's machinations and transmogrifications over a three-month period. As the nature of the increasingly troubled--and, finally, oppressive--Republican government dawned more and more completely on Herbst, Herbst was faced with the decimation of her own belief structure. In considering how Herbst's own emotional response to the war, and specifically of the disintegration of the Spanish Republic, led her deeper in to trauma, we need look no further than the nightmare-like imagery with which Herbst conjures her war memories, early in her narrative. Here, Herbst articulates her overarching sense of having lived through great trauma: "I can hardly think back upon Spain now without a shiver of awe," she remarks. "It is like remembering how it was to be in an earthquake where the ground splits to caverns, mountains rise in what was a plain. The survivor finds himself straddling a widening crack; he leaps nimbly to some beyond, where he can stand ruminating upon his fate" (133). In describing the war, she not only paints a traumatic landscape, but she also inserts herself directly into that landscape, naming herself as survivor.

This retrospective glance at the Spanish Civil War points not only to the country-wide destruction wrought by that conflict between Spain's Nationalists and its Republicans, but also to the terrible--and, for most outsiders, surprising--political upheaval within the ranks of the Spanish Republic itself, which Herbst witnessed in part. By the time Herbst departed Spain, late in the spring of 1937, divisions within the Republic's Popular Front government had been worn so deep as to appear unbridgeable.

---

narrating my own exploits" at "broil[ing] trout over a fire in the woods and rais[ing] food in my own garden. . . . Our mouths would water" (151-152).

Indeed, the Republic seemed to be bursting apart that May in the streets of Barcelona, as anarchist and Communist soldiers of the Spanish Republic found themselves no longer waging war against fascism, the enemy they had long held in common, but rather against each other.<sup>26</sup> Many of the leftward-leaning Americans who in 1937 traveled to Spain hoping to witness the unassailable nobility and heroism of the Spanish Republic, much touted in the Communist and socialist presses of the time, found instead a miasma of internecine brawling and growing deadly suspicions within the ranks of the Republic itself. Herbst was among these who returned from Spain troubled and confused by political strife within the Republic. Her 1960 memoir from the war, “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain,” acknowledges both the grief and the confusion with which she struggled in the reporter-filled hotels, bombed villages, and frontline trenches of the Madrid front.

Herbst’s final months in Spain were marked by a gathering awareness of the deepening schisms within the Republic. At the beginning of May 1937, Herbst was in Madrid to hear the awful, extraordinary news trickling in from Barcelona. Recalling those bitterly disappointing days, Herbst writes, “Unite and fight seemed so terribly urgent that no one could believe the news from Barcelona. What? Barricades? With Loyalists fighting their brother Loyalists and not Franco?” (176). Herbst is not alone in her confoundedness. She turns to her friend and fellow correspondent in Spain, H. L. Brailsford. Despite the fact that Brailsford has “more background [on the war] than almost anyone else,” he, too, is “stunned” by the news out of Barcelona (176). From their distant vantage point in Madrid, Herbst and Brailsford try to make sense of the barricade-building; Brailsford points out that the “Spanish anarchists had been

---

<sup>26</sup> For greater detail on the street fighting in Barcelona, see George Orwell’s Homage to Catalonia.



persistently denigrated in the foreign press for some time. . . . The war had come to a point where the anarchists were probably asking questions. Were they fighting for the same old stuff or for a redress of ancient wrongs?" (176). This is the fundamental question dividing anarchists and other anti-Stalinists from party-line Communists; Herbst herself reiterates it, asking, "Was the aim of the war a revolutionary one, a strike at the terrible wrongs that had led to the uprising, or was it a 'war for democracy,' which, to the intransigents, implied no more than a restoration of the status quo?" (136). By the time of the Barcelona brawling, Herbst asserts, "abstractions had taken over on the Loyalist side; on Franco's side, the superiority of weapons was surely winning" (136). Writing some twenty years later, Herbst knows that this was the prescription for the Republic's doom.

"I have never had a heart for party polemics," Herbst states bluntly in her memoir, "and it was not for factionalism that I had come to Spain" (135). Nonetheless, she is sufficiently intrigued and troubled by the developments in Barcelona to journey there herself, not long after the fighting. She remembers seeing the "barricades. . . still in the streets" (135). Although Herbst claims that "I can't say to this day what really happened in Barcelona," she actually proves herself quite lucid on the subject (135). ". . . I do know for certain," she affirms, that the internecine fighting in Barcelona "was no anarchist plot, hatched up in conjunction with Franco. If the enemies of Franco had split into groups and were killing each other, it was not because each group was not equally determined to defeat the common enemy" (136).

Herbst held fast to this belief throughout the years following her return from Spain. Disturbed by the American Left's growing "atmosphere of . . . suspicion and

doubts,” she wrote to Granville Hicks, then editor of the New Masses, to address the ongoing rumor that the street fighting in Barcelona had actually been instigated by the fascists; the POUM, according to this rumor, secretly supported Franco (Langer 227). “I would like to be able to question without having someone accuse me of disloyalty,” Herbst wrote to Hicks in September 1937. “There are many things in Spain that are far from simple. . . . If there was actual connection between POUM and Franco it would clear everything. While I think there were crooks in the leadership of POUM, I know honest men followed too. Why are these things not cleared up?” (qtd. in Langer 227).<sup>27</sup> “These things,” however, remained anything but clear throughout the duration of the war, and in the midst of the murk and gossip-mongering, the Republic slowly disintegrated. Herbst, meanwhile, watched from America and continued to ask the questions which made party-line political activists vastly uncomfortable. If, as Herbst was already suggesting in 1937--and as history belatedly proved--the street-fighting had *not* been a fascist plot but was rather the result of an increasingly divided Republic, American leftists feared increased resistance to their efforts to rally support for said Republic. Hence the hardliners of the American Left, en masse, turned a deaf ear to Herbst’s protests and doubts; as the months after her return from Spain passed, fewer and fewer activists and publishers sought her opinion on the war. The deliberately individualistic stance which Herbst took in Madrid, while the war was yet raging, in many ways presaged the ideological and psychological isolation she would experience throughout the following decades of her life in America.

---

<sup>27</sup> JH to Granville Hicks, September 21, 1937.

While the disintegration of the Republican government as she had known it and believed in it is the primary trauma which most fully permeates her memoir, Herbst was, in addition, further traumatized by her own near-death experiences during the war. On two particular occasions, Herbst's war memories and the way in which she depicts them testify to *her own*, unmediated experience of trauma. We see this in her description of a fascist bombing raid on downtown Madrid which she survived. There is also evidence, in Herbst's portrayal of her own reactions to the battlefields at Jarama, that she was already aware of the potential grave danger she stood in there, and exhibited those responses usually made by individuals facing trauma.

Judith Herman tells us that "[t]raumatic reactions occur when action is of no avail. When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized" (34). While the ordinary human response to danger is, of course, "fight or flight," individuals experiencing trauma undergo such an intense sense of helplessness and loss of control that both the body and the mind are completely overwhelmed. "Trauma," as Herman writes, "tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion. . ." (34). Josephine Herbst, in her account of the night that her hotel was bombed, remembers experiencing this kind of sudden physical and mental collapse. Awakened at dawn by "two terrifying thuds," she finds herself momentarily paralyzed and voiceless. The Hotel Florida is being bombed; Herbst hears shouts and running footsteps in the hallway. Her hands shake too hard for her to be able to dress; stumbling at last into the hall, she sees Hemingway, who calls out to her, "How are you?"—and Herbst can make no reply. "I opened my mouth to say 'fine,'" she writes, "but no sound came" (152). Elinor Langer

suggests that Herbst's primary response to this temporary loss of her voice was embarrassment; Herbst refers to this event so many times in her journal from the war, Langer notes, that "I suspect she carried the shame of it to her grave" (215).

I would put forward, however, that Herbst's repeated reference to her loss of voice during the bombardment has less to do with her own embarrassment than it does with her attempting to integrate into the broader narrative of her life this definitively traumatic experience.

In terms of reading this experience as traumatic, it is Herbst's virtual incorporation of the violence of the bombing into her own psyche that is most telling. In her memoir, she remembers her initial response, awakening that morning to the sounds of bombardment: "A heavy wall of water seemed to be crashing down with an iron force. But the havoc *was in me*, where the flood was swishing and my heart had become no more than a helpless chip" (152, emphasis mine). The violence of these sentences lies not so much in the imagery in itself as it does in the fact that the terrible forces of the outside world—the crashing tidal wave, the "iron force" about to fall upon her—actually become dimensions of Herbst's *inner world*, where her heart has been reduced to a mere "chip" and she knows herself to be utterly helpless. Both this description of her psychic response to the bombing, as well as its physical manifestation—in her momentary paralysis and loss of voice—point to Herbst's own traumatization.

We also read, in Herbst's experience of the battlefield, where she not only received many of her stories of secondary witnessing, but also put herself physically in the line of fire for days on end, further evidence of Herbst's experience of primary trauma. Again, she experiences the most horrific moments of the war by inscribing of the

external, traumatic world onto her own psychic landscape. Lying in her bed back at the Florida, days after her first extended visit to the front, she again visited with terribly vivid, nightmare images. Remembering her view of the battlefield, from within the soldiers' trenches, she writes:

I had looked over the top of the earthen wall, where the land rolled with the inevitability of a sea to that distant port which might disgorge some night the crawling creatures who came on their bellies like monsters of the deep. There was something primeval about my visions of that hilltop where the earth was often streaked with the slime of dead things. Then I would tell myself that this primeval world *was in me*. . . . (149, emphasis mine)

Picturing the unseen but feared fascist troops as sea monsters that might writhe across the battlefield toward her—that might, indeed, writhe within *her*—Herbst is again speaking to her encounter with trauma, of experiencing herself as utterly helpless, overwhelmed by forces completely beyond her ken or control. The sense that the real horror is as much inside herself as it is outside is in keeping with Herman's definition of the traumatic symptom as one which "become[s] disconnected from [its] source and. . . take[s] on a life of its own" (34).

Indeed, traumatic symptoms may do more than even this; they make take *over* a life. In a letter to friends, written three years before her death, Josephine Herbst as much as confessed that her traumatic memories of Spain still had the potential to overwhelm her own life. Describing a documentary film on the Spanish Civil War which she had just watched, she wrote:

I am afraid that I wept most of the time during the picture and couldn't stop. I found it almost unbearable . . . . I wouldn't have wanted anyone I knew to be seated near me, not unless they too had gone through the same experience. I not only felt as if I were dying but that I had died. And afterward, I sat in the lobby for a good while, trying to pull myself together, smoking, and the whole scene outside, and on the street when I got there, seemed completely unreal. I couldn't connect with anything or feel that it meant anything, somewhat in the same way that I had felt when I got down from the plane in Toulouse after I flew out of Barcelona and had expected to enjoy ordering a real lunch for a change and instead sat sobbing over an omelet. . . and looking at people calmly passing by as if I had entered into a nightmare where the 'real' world had suddenly been wiped off with a sponge and had vanished forever. (qtd. in Langer ix-x)

It is all there: the return of the trauma in a flashback as emotionally overwhelming as the traumatic moment itself; the delayed reaction of extreme grief; the loss of control over one's own faculties; the belief that no one else outside of the remembered traumatic experience will ever be able to understand it; the sense that one has died, or should have died, in that experience, and that one is not living, or should not be living, fully now; the sense of total disengagement from the world around one; the experiencing of the traumatic memory as something outside of "real time," or "real life," and in fact more powerful, more vivid, than either. It is trauma. It is Josephine Herbst's frankest and most sobering written realization of the fact that, in Spain, she had survived her own death. As Cathy Caruth writes, "[F]or those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; . . . *survival itself*, in other words, *can*

*be a crisis*" (Trauma 9, emphasis hers). Indelibly marked both with the stories of other survivors and with her own story of traumatic survival, Herbst would be a somewhat tortured witness of the Spanish Civil War for the duration of her life.

### ***Primary Trauma in De Vries's Memoir***

Because Lini DeVries's Spanish Civil War experience consisted of little more than seeing and working with human bodies broken by war, her intended role of secondary witness was one which she could not hold onto for very long. As we have seen, it is true that DeVries in Up from the Cellar appears far more able to dwell on the stories of *others'* experiences of the war. While at one level these "other" stories help to reaffirm a utopian or humanitarian view of what happened at the Republican frontlines, they also serve to screen out the other, deeper, more difficult memories of human terror and weakness which DeVries of course holds as well. How can we explain this attempt towards screening out or glossing over much of the horrific details in DeVries's recollection of her war trauma? It may be helpful here to consider the difference between the eyewitness's eye (that is, the eye which actually experiences the traumatic event without mediation and cannot fully register that knowledge) and the testimonial eye (the eye of the survivor, years after the traumatic event, looking back on that trauma as a somewhat "historicized" and thus at least partially integratable event). As we have seen elsewhere, there must always be a temporal gap between what the eyewitness's eye sees and what the testimonial eye sees. The traumatic knowledge is never completely available to an individual at the moment of its occurrence—that is, at the moment when the individual actually stands in the role of eyewitness—because trauma is the event that "overwhelms the ordinary human adaptations to life" (Herman 33). The survivor, indeed,

can testify to her trauma, but only an historical removal from the event: that is, from the *testimonial*, rather than the eyewitness's, perspective. The testimonial eye sees the traumatic event through an intellectual and experiential distance, and thus to some extent screens out the real force of what is *inside* the trauma. Complicating Theodore Adorno's famous statement, we might assert that to write poetry after Auschwitz, then, is also to write *outside* Auschwitz, because literary testimony depends on the survivor's physical and chronological removal from the traumatic event. Literature of witness, then—such as DeVries's Spanish war narrative in Up from the Cellar—necessarily employs the testimonial eye rather than the eyewitness's eye.

However, despite the testimonial "distance" which DeVries works to maintain in her war memoir, the way she writes about that event ultimately gives her away, providing us with glimpses of how she soon slid into the position of primary witness—witness to the war as *she* experienced it, without mediation. To read the primary trauma in Up from the Cellar is to probe the silences and near-silences, the spaces between DeVries's matter-of-fact words, the experiences alluded to but left largely undescribed. Most of the experience which DeVries describes—most of *her* experience—is not capturable in words. Her words serve only to point to the barest empirical details of her life and work at the front.

There were rumors that we had spies and saboteurs among us, which increased suspicions. When I saw blood oozing through a cast, I reported it. The sutures had been loosely tied. Adding up case after case from the three hospitals [at Tarancon], one particular doctor seemed to be doing deliberate sabotage on humans. It appeared unbelievable, but it was true; he disappeared. All lights



were to be out. Blackout curtains must be on the windows, and fires must be put out in hospital courtyards. One night coming home late from the operating room, I spotted burning coals in the shape of a cross in the hospital courtyard. No worker had set this fire for warming a cup of coffee. I kicked it aside with my feet, but the bombers were already overhead. (216)

This straightforward, unelaborated passage reads almost like a catalog; it is a catalog of psychic and physical discomfort, to be sure, but even a marginally imaginative reader can tell that far more is going on in this paragraph than DeVries's dispassionate, detached narrating voice lets on. Worlds of other experience—the shock and general overwhelmedness which must have been part of DeVries's daily life, where doctors try to kill patients and planes try to bomb hospitals—go unspoken here. DeVries, however, can only enumerate unflinchingly both the material and human losses which she witnessed. Although her act of dredging up and recording her war memories is necessary to her own healing from this trauma, she is not able to say *all* that she knows.

Another tactic of evasion, seen even in the midst of the above litany of danger and suspicion is the way that, after stating ominously that “the bombers were already overhead,” DeVries abruptly changes the subject, going on to talk about how restless her convalescent patients often were. This tactic of interrupting herself in midpoint, of stopping the story just short of the most horrific moment—in this case, the bombing—is one which she repeats throughout her account of the war. In fact, it is DeVries's very real and specific fear of being killed in the almost daily bombardments which she both tries to gloss over and ultimately, almost unwittingly, confesses in her writing. Although she never lingers over it or elaborates upon it, the one refrain that continually disrupts her

account of the war is, *We were in great danger of bombardments, and I lived in constant terror*. Although DeVries is a determinedly stiff-upper-lip narrator, this particular message penetrates and almost takes over her war story.

Apart from admitting, during her first bombing raid, that she was too frightened to move (198), DeVries never describes the raids themselves, only her fear of them. This overarching sense of fear and vulnerability marks all of her returns to the question of the bombs. When she and her medical unit first travel to the front lines, under cover of darkness, they are warned: "If you hear a plane. . . , jump, run, bury your face in the earth. Don't let the white blur of your face be a target for a machine gunner in a plane. . . . Keep moving. Keep moving" (203). DeVries responds, "When I discovered I was riding in the ambulance that contained our highly flammable ether supply, I was more scared than ever. . ." (204). Once she and her unit are stationed at the front, she tries to imagine what action she will take, once the bombardments begin: "[I]f we were bombed, though we could run to the fields, would we? Of course not; we would stay with our helpless wounded. I began worrying about bombings" (207). Suddenly, she understands herself to be as trapped and powerless before the falling bombs as a soldier wedged in his open trench. DeVries's worry only intensifies, once she is moved to her second hospital, near Tarancon; this new hospital, she has heard, "had a history of daily bombardment, since it was the last place where one could get gasoline on the road to Madrid" (211). She describes the location and vulnerability of this hospital in some detail:

In an area of about one square block stood three hospitals, all near the station where ambulances, trucks, and other vehicles got their last gasoline before they arrived at the fronts at Madrid or Jarama. Sometimes 30 or 40 trucks would be

lined up for gasoline. No wonder the town was being bombed. . . . I was to be in charge of Hospital No. 3. Great, I thought, it is diagonally across the street from the gasoline station! . . . . I only hoped that we would have few moonlit nights and that the Germans were poor marksmen with their bombs. (214)

Repeatedly DeVries recalls of this hospital, “[I]ts location was excellent for bombers” (215). All the soldiers who convalesce there are eager to return to the front lines-- “Not that I blamed them much; at least at the front they had trenches to cower in when the bombs fell” (216). Despite her attempts at bravery, DeVries is a living (and writing) example of psychiatrists J.W. Appel and G.W. Beebe’s conclusion that “There is no such thing as ‘getting used to’ [warfare]. . . . [P]sychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot and shrapnel wounds in warfare” (qtd. in Herman 25).

Just once in her narrative of the war does DeVries openly refer to her own psychiatric wounding. As the February 1937 Battle of Jarama draws to a close, DeVries is haunted by the thousands of wounded and dying men whose bodies she has been tending, many of whom come out of anesthesia cowering, “remembering the Moors on foot and horse at the. . . front” (208). The mental and physical collapse which she experiences as the Battle of Jarama draws to a close and work at her hospital finally lightens indicates a nervous breakdown: “For two days I lay delirious with fever and exhaustion. Nightmares of Moors capturing me, of bombs falling on our precious hospital, of death, held me” (210). Typically, DeVries writes only two brief sentences about this scene of her own traumatization. Within this same paragraph, she turns swiftly back to her usual pragmatic, hopeful approach: “But the body is a tough fighter when not completely snuffed out by a bullet or a bomb” (210). Even in this concluding sentence,

however, where DeVries attempts to shift the focus away again from her own experience of trauma, her language says more than she means for it to say. Although the trauma which DeVries has just experienced in this passage is psychic, DeVries emphasizes the “body”’s resilience rather than the mind’s. Indeed, her youthful body does resume its duties—“[w]ithin a few days,” DeVries writes, “I was back on the wards again” (210)—but the healing of her *mind* is far more difficult and thus an almost unspeakable task.

Clearly, within a month of her arrival at the Jarama front, DeVries has moved out of her originally intended position of secondary witness, one who listens to and relates the traumatic stories of others. She has become instead a primary witness, one who experiences the trauma directly and must then *struggle* to relate it herself. Her war memoir marks the moment in which the slippage from one role to the other seems to have occurred for DeVries. It is mid February, just weeks into DeVries’s stay in Spain; the Battle of Jarama is raging; suddenly DeVries is re-encountering, under very different circumstances, the same volunteers for the Abraham Lincoln Battalion whom she had met on her ship ride out of New York.

[T]he wounded were pouring in from the battle. . . . The Lincolns were bearing the brunt. Within four hours after the battle had begun, we had 93 wounded. Our hospital was equipped for fifty. A little later, the same day, we had 200. I was on the first floor, where they came in. Those who had died enroute to us were left in the bitter cold courtyard. . . . The wounded lay on the floor, and two or three lay on each bed. . . . When we had time, we went through clothing matted with blood on cold, stiff, dead men to see if they had letters on them or any identifying information. I cut through clothing of boys I had danced with on our way to

Spain. My eyes were heavy with lack of sleep and unshed tears. . . . We who left part of our hearts in Spain, who left a job unfinished, will never forget. . . . I hated what I saw and the forces responsible for this suffering, anguish and death. I hated the hand grenades, the shrapnel, the dum dum bullets, the machine guns, the mortar shells. I hated seeing the bleeding wounds, the living wounded, and the dead. A part of me died with every one who fell. The wounded became a part of me. I burned my living red cells trying to keep theirs alive. (207-208)

This is, without question, DeVries's longest, most focused gaze upon the trauma of war as she experienced it personally. The details of human suffering—the suffering of the soldiers around her as well as her own—are more explicit than they are anywhere else in her war memoir. DeVries is remembering her first full-on encounter with unmitigated violence and anguish, and the memory of this particular moment seems almost to overwhelm her.

Writing forty years later, DeVries seems to be temporarily thrust back into the moment she describes. Despite the controlled nature of all the other memories of war which follow this one in her narrative, she gives way, in this recollection of her first and most shocking confrontation with massive destruction and her own powerlessness, to traumatic flashback. “Long after the danger is past,” Herman reminds us, “traumatized people relive the event as though it were . . . recurring in the present. . . . The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness. . . as flashbacks during waking states. . .” (37). Indeed, in this passage, DeVries seems to be *reliving* the remembered trauma. She has temporarily lost control of her carefully modulated narrator's voice; the vehemently repeated phrase, “I

hated,” indicates her sudden, intense emotional engagement with this particular memory. Insisting that *she, too* is wounded—that she too is dying (“burning my living red cells”) as she experiences directly the death of so many others—DeVries is suddenly, surprisingly admitting the psychological scarring which she incurred in this early event from her war experience.

In his study of survivors of the Jewish Holocaust and their testimonies of that experience, Dori Laub recounts a similar phenomenon. Laub cites one woman who, like DeVries throughout most of her memoir, was so subdued and matter-of-fact in the recollection and presentation of her story as to be almost self-effacing. There comes one moment in her testimony, however--the moment when she describes the most “unimaginable” event of all that she survived in a Nazi concentration camp--when the woman and her story are suddenly “infused” with “intensity, passion, and color” (59). The woman is actually remembering the day that some of the prisoners at Auschwitz revolted and succeeded in blowing up one of the camp’s chimneys, an “unbelievable” event for all who witnessed it (59). Laub speaks of this surprising moment in the woman’s testimony as a “comet of intensity an aliveness,” an “explosion of vitality and resistance” (59). However, as soon as this portion of the woman’s testimony was over, her sudden passionate engagement with that memory “faded and receded into the distance” (59). Finished with this most startling passage from her story, the woman’s voice again resumes its almost unemotional tone. Laub suggests that, in having relayed this one truly exceptional memory, the woman had come to “the limits of her knowledge”; she was unable to engage emotionally—or, indeed, to recall completely--any further memories of that day (61). Her mostly emotionally detached testimony,

broken by one vivid flashback, indicates “the subtle balance between what the woman *knew* and what she *did not*, or *could not, know*” (61). Lini DeVries, I would argue, negotiates that same delicate balance in her own testimony. Although her account of the war opens with one horrific scene—the recording of a traumatic flashback—and then subsides into a quieter, almost stoic narrative, it is not because that early scene contains the only trauma DeVries experienced. On the contrary, that scene is one quickly opened, quickly shut window into a subterranean world that DeVries can only hint at elsewhere. Her efforts at recoding her memories of that world, either by focusing more on stories of others than on her own or by framing those memories in a calm, detached manner, are proof that she both *wants* to tell the traumatic story of war, and yet cannot possibly tell it all.

### *Writing Across the Historical Gap*

As we have seen, Herbst and DeVries moved from the position of secondary to primary witness, throughout the course of their experiences of the Spanish Civil War. Upon their return from Spain, then, both women were in need of secondary witnesses themselves—willing, listening Others who would help to draw out and bring into public light the stories of trauma which Herbst and DeVries had lived through, firsthand. However, as I will show, both Herbst and DeVries at the time of their return from the war were almost immediately harassed and silenced by the increasingly politically conservative atmosphere in the United States. Not only did their stories of the war run counter to mainstream perception of the Spanish Civil War throughout the 1940s and 50s, but, as politically ambiguous and anti-heroic narratives of war, they also contradicted culturally acceptable renditions of The War Story. Among their American audiences,

there was no frame of reference for the particular narratives of war which Herbst and DeVries brought back from Spain. For decades after their return, there was no longer anyone to play secondary witness to them—no longer a safe space in which to publicize this particular testimony. Thus the tales of war which Herbst and DeVries brought back from Spain went “underground” for more than 20 years.

In discussing the lack of audience which Herbst and DeVries encountered, upon returning from Spain, for their particular war testimonies, the work of trauma theorists such as Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Judith Herman proves illuminating. Laub notes that, during the Jewish Holocaust, all attempts at bearing witness to that massive trauma as it happened, or even shortly after it happened, were “doomed to fail” (84). Laub argues that, because the Holocaust was an event without historical precedent--an event marked by “its radical *otherness* to all known frames of reference”--it was likewise “beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit. . .” (84). Whatever event exists outside our frames of reference, as Felman points out, no matter how “imminent and otherwise conspicuous” that event may be, will remain “historically invisible, unreal, and can only be encountered by a systematic disbelief” (103). Thus, testimonies proceeding immediately out of the Jewish Holocaust met a complete absence of “concurrent ‘knowing’ or assimilation of the history” of this particular traumatic event (Laub 84). Only through the passage of time, and the slow accumulation of more and more publicly spoken survivors’ stories from that event, did the Jewish Holocaust eventually come to be “historically grasped and seen” (84). Laub sees this “historical gap” between the actual occurrence of the traumatic event and its slow integration into



public memory as proof that “these testimonies were not transmittable, and integratable, at the time” in which they actually happened (84).

Herman explains why such traumatic testimonies so often meet with public resistance or even refusal. “The knowledge of horrible events,” she admits, does “periodically intrude. . . into public awareness, but [it] is rarely retained for long. Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level” (2). By way of illustrating how traumatic stories are repressed and denied at the social level, Herman cites psychologist Leo Etinger, whose work focuses on survivors of the Nazi concentration camps:

War and victims are something a community wants to forget; a veil of oblivion is drawn over everything painful and unpleasant. We find the two sides face to face: on one side the victims who perhaps wish to forget but cannot, and on the other all those with strong, often unconscious motives who very intensely both wish to forget and succeed in doing so. (qtd. in Herman 8)

Accordingly, the relationship between the trauma survivor and her potential listeners is often fraught by what Herman calls a “cruel conflict of interest” (8). When the larger social fabric of which a potential listener is a part scoffs at or silences the testimony of a particular traumatic event, such widespread public silence usually renders the potential listener ineffective, too. “Without a supportive social environment, the bystander [or potential listener] usually succumbs to the temptation to look the other way” (8). A prime example, of course, lies in the German citizenry who may have wondered what was happening beyond the gates of Dachau, but who, encouraged by their government, repeatedly averted their gazes and asked no questions publicly. Herman concludes that,

“To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in common alliance” (9). In order to bear full and public testimony to a traumatic event, the survivor depends upon a supportive, receptive political and cultural context.

In considering the Spanish Civil War testimonies of American eyewitnesses such as Herbst and DeVries, I propose that the long delay both women experienced in publicizing their testimonies is attributable to the same lack of a willing audience described by Etinger and Herman. In the conflict between victim and bystander which Etinger depicts, Herbst and DeVries are the victims, while their American audiences of the postwar decades are the bystanders—the potential, but failed, listeners. Because their Spanish Civil War stories proved unintegratable in the America of the 1940s and 50s, neither Herbst nor DeVries could assimilate them, either, into their own consciousness. Herbst herself admits this, early in her 1960 memoir: “Apart from a few news accounts, a few descriptive articles,<sup>28</sup> I have never written anything about Spain. It had got locked up inside of me. . .” (131). Attempting to analyze her reasons for having silenced her own own testimony, Herbst explains that “it seemed to me that what I had brought back was too appallingly diffuse” (131). She compares her memories of the war to the “twigs I used to see the old women in Germany pick up in the forests to tie in little bundles to lug home on their backs. Each twig was precious; it had come from a living tree and would make a living fire” (131-132). Each memory of the war, Herbst claims, is a live and priceless entity because it is made up of the lives of other people whom she has

---

<sup>28</sup> Herbst’s articles on Spain were: “Spanish Village” (*Nation*, 1937), “Housekeeping Under Fire” (*Woman’s Day*, 1937), “Evening in Spain” (*Fight Against War and Fascism*, 1937), and “Night Comes to the Valley” (*Direction*, 1938). “What she says in them is thoroughly consistent with what she was to write in her memoir ‘The Starched Blue Sky of Spain’” (Bevilacqua 107).

known and valued. For a long time, however, Herbst has been unable to view these individual memories as parts of a larger, cohesive whole. As a result, that whole—the graspable or integratable story of her trauma—has remained unknown even to Herbst herself. Only from a distance of more than two decades is she able to draw this analogy between her memories and the German women’s life-giving twigs. In doing so, Herbst appears to be asserting that, at last, in 1960—on the threshold of that decade that would re-open a space for political diversity in America, and for testimonies such as Herbst’s—the time has come to bring together her disparate and diffuse memories of the war, and to see what kind of light they will yield together.

*Alienation and Exile: Herbst and DeVries After the War*

In their respective memoirs, neither Herbst nor DeVries evades the looming questions about the Soviet Union’s increasing power over the Spanish Republic, or the ideological divisions opening up within the Republic; at the same time, however, their memoirs clarify that their reason for going to Spain was an interest in serving a humanitarian cause, and not specifically the love of any one political party or faction. The war is long over, the Republic long since lost, when Herbst and DeVries pen their memoirs. Nonetheless, both women are still praising the Republican cause as they saw it: as a revolutionary movement wherein the common people of Spain, and left-leaning idealists the world over, found for a brief but thrilling time a sense of solidarity and political empowerment—an empowerment that came to them not from the upper echelons of government but rather from their very midst. Because both women saw the ideal of the Republic as humanitarianism and not as Communism per se, neither Herbst nor DeVries ever expressed publicly a sense of regret or disillusionment regarding their

support of the Republic. The Communist Party may not have turned out to be the agent of political utopia, after all; but the bravery and idealism of the people of the Republic themselves were worthy of reverently remembering.

Locating the ideal of the Spanish Republic not in its ever-shifting political structures but rather in the common people who supported it, Herbst and DeVries never saw their ideal as tarnished. As Winifred Bevilacqua indicates, “unlike such former radicals as Max Eastman, Malcolm Cowley, Joseph Freeman, Granville Hicks, and John Dos Passos, each of whom made public their anguished disenchantment and rupture with the revolutionary ideas they had once espoused,” Herbst never apologized for the social activism and leftist ideology which marked her life and her writing throughout the 1930s (101). Nor did Lini DeVries. At the age of seventy-four, she was still declaring that her time in Spain, rather than causing her to despair of all her leftist ideals, taught her instead that, “the important matter was not the label at all. I didn’t even like labels anymore. What counted was what I had seen in Spain at the battlefield, men and women of all races and creeds and political viewpoints working together in order that man [*sic*] could grow and obtain his ultimate stature” (233). For both women, having been to Spain in the midst of civil war and having worked among the people of its Republic remained a point of pride--remained, in fact, the single act of which they were *most* proud--throughout their lives.

Refusing to apologize for their active support of the Spanish Republic, however, came at a high price. For both Herbst and DeVries, their unwillingness to rescind leftist beliefs and connections from the 1930s veritably cost them their careers in America. By the mid 1940s, both had been forcibly isolated from participation in government

structures. In 1942, while Herbst was employed by the United States government's Office of the Coordinator of Information, she was repeatedly interrogated by the FBI and eventually fired from her position there. "I am reported," she wrote for the liberal newspaper PM, shortly thereafter, "to have printed articles in magazines known to the Measuring Stick trade as 'left'. . . . I am reported to have been actively interested in the Loyalist cause in Spain. . ." ("Josephine" n.p.). DeVries suffered similar harassment. In 1946, while she was working with the government-run Workers' Health Association, the FBI charged DeVries with criminal offense under the Hatch Act, which forbids federal employees from political activity. After three separate rounds of interrogation, DeVries was acquitted; harassment by the FBI did not begin nor end there, however. She writes: "Since June, 1937"--the month after she returned from Spain-- "they had checked about me on every job I had held" (275). In 1947, real persecution set in. DeVries was refused a job as a school nurse in the Los Angeles public school system; the superintendent admitted "that which I had suspected: I was considered undesirable, since I had been to Spain. The FBI had supplied lists of those who were considered undesirable, and I was on the list. The blacklist had reached me" (283). In the face of so much antagonistic political pressure, DeVries ultimately left the country of her birth and took up Mexican citizenship.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> As we have seen, her hounding by the FBI and her eventual blacklisting were DeVries's primary reasons for leaving the United States. The final blow, however, came in the person of the infamous Elizabeth Bentley, a United States government informer who had infiltrated CPUSA activity in the mid 1930s. Bentley's sensationalist autobiography, Out of Bondage, chronicles her years with the CPUSA and fingers DeVries as a primary player in her "conversion" to the Party. Her book was serialized in "every Hearst paper" in the United States when DeVries at last decided to emigrate in 1949 (292). Bentley was later paid by the United States government to testify against Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and was instrumental in their conviction. As Stanley Yalkowsky notes in his book on the Rosenberg trial, the "ascendancy to power of Joseph McCarthy. . . and finally--the most decisive act of them all--the murder of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, indeed virtually eliminated the Communist Party in America" (i).

In a sense, both Herbst and DeVries were eventually exiled from their country. DeVries's expatriation to Mexico in 1949 was the more literal of the two.<sup>30</sup> Exile for Herbst, on the other hand, was psychological and economic. The last years of her life, recalls her executor, Hilton Kramer, were almost desperate:

She was ignored, she was unread, she was very poor. . . . More often than not in those days, she was reduced to wearing hand-me-down clothes, and she spent much of her time, especially in winter, since her house in Pennsylvania had neither central heating nor indoor plumbing, residing in one borrowed apartment after another. She was not only broke, she was broken. . . . (2)

Herbst, according to Kramer, was "immobilized" as a writer "once the audience ready to embrace radical certainties evaporated from the literary scene in the Forties" (10). Her biographer, Elinor Langer, regards Herbst as "a victim not only of the patriarchal literary establishment but also of the cultural anti-Comintern pact whose adherents had governed American letters since the end of World War II, and. . . weren't those groups pretty much the same thing?" (8). While the 1940s and 1950s saw many of their former companions of the left abandon old stances and increasingly conform to the reactionary conservatism of McCarthy's America, Herbst and DeVries found themselves pushed to the farthest margins of society. For decades after their sojourns in Spain, they became almost invisible to the eyes of the American public.

Shut out and silenced by an ever more conservative mainstream America, neither could Herbst and DeVries find much room or welcome among those Americans who

---

<sup>30</sup> In 1949, DeVries chose Mexico as her new homeland because, as she wrote, "Mexico has never recognized Franco. They still recognize the Republic of Spain. Maybe one of the Spanish Republican refugees there will give me a hand to get started" (305). Indeed, Constanca de la Mora, a Republican

continued openly to espouse leftism throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Although McCarthy and his followers perceived Herbst and DeVries as former radicals and therefore dangerous, what remained of the American Left during this period regarded them as, if not traitorous, at least untrustworthy. Both women had, after all, come back from Spain refusing to condone completely the role that the Soviet Union was playing there or to continue espousing Communist policy as unequivocally as they had once done.<sup>31</sup> Although Herbst did agree to speak at “the numerous Party-sponsored functions set up to gather assistance for Spain” immediately after her return, “gradually a kind of mutual disenchantment set in” (Langer 227). The Communists, Langer notes, “were uneasy about her refusal of simplifications” (227). Meanwhile DeVries saw Stalin’s rise to power in the Soviet Union as the ultimate demise of the Communist Party, and by the end of Spain’s civil war, she had severed her ties with it. “. . . [F]rom the late thirties and on,” DeVries recalls, “it seemed to me the Party drew the interest of Stalin and became controlled by the Soviet Union. Therefore, later, to me it no longer represented an American political party,” as she had originally believed it could be (157). Harrassed and silenced by their government on one hand, alienated from their former ideological and political communities on the other, deliberately nonaligned Spanish Civil War witnesses like Herbst and DeVries carried with them a story of the war which, because it had no willing audience, they were long unable to tell.

---

refugee and author of *Doble esplendor* (*In Place of Splendor*), provided DeVries with her first house in Mexico.

<sup>31</sup> DeVries’s relationship to the Communist Party is clearly documented; she states in her memoir that she joined the Party in 1935 and left it shortly after her return from Spain. Herbst, meanwhile, was not so definitively connected. While her husband, John Hermann, was a Party member, as were many of Herbst’s close friends during the 1930s, she herself apparently never officially joined.

### *Self Writing and the Internal Witness*

Bearing testimony is a necessary component in a trauma survivor's process toward psychic reintegration and wholeness. Testimony, as Herman asserts, is "a ritual of healing" (181). The survivor's "overall task," according to Robert Jay Lifton, is "that of formulation, evolving new inner forms that include the traumatic event. . . so that the rest of one's life need not be devoid of meaning and significance" (176). Pierre Janet further claims that a traumatic story cannot be

satisfactorily liquidated. . . until we have achieved, not merely an outward reaction through our movements, but also an inward reaction through the words we address to ourselves, through the organization of the recital of the event to others and to ourselves, and through the putting of this recital in its place as one of the chapters in our personal history. (qtd. in Herman 37)

In telling her traumatic story, the survivor re-claims a part of herself, of her life story, which was formerly lost or unincorporated .

Equally important, however, is that the survivor simultaneously stakes a fresh claim in human relationship, entrusting her testimony to someone beyond herself. As we have seen, traumatic testimony cannot take place in a vacuum; testimony demands a relationship between the survivor and at least one other individual. This individual, the secondary witness, is "someone who [can] step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the [traumatic] event. . . [took] place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event [can] be observed" (81). In the absence of this other frame of reference through which to filter the traumatic story, the trauma survivor loses "the hope of being heard, of being recognized as a



subject, of being answered” (81). As Laub points out: “When one cannot turn to a ‘you,’ one cannot say ‘thou’ even to oneself” (81). For those who suffer trauma and find no means of re-externalizing it, the trauma constitutes “a world in which one *could not bear witness to oneself*” (82).

How, then, were Herbst and DeVries, able to call forth the literary testimonies embodied in “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain” and Up from the Cellar? Herbst and DeVries, who wrote their memoirs in an unheated cabin in impoverished rural Pennsylvania and in the backwaters of one of Mexico’s poorest states, respectively, were both writers in political exile. At the time of their memoir writing, they were both physically alone, *without* an obvious community to surround and support them as they brought forth their life stories. The stories which they had brought back with them from Spain had gone largely unheard for decades. To *whom*, then, were they addressing the stories of trauma which their memoirs at last engage? I would argue that they are addressing *themselves*—that is, creating their own internal witnesses. In Chapter One, we saw briefly how, in times of great emotional and physical duress, an individual may find her own survival on the “creative act of establishing and maintaining an internal witness who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life” (87). The act of recording in writing what is happening to oneself, even in the midst of danger and pain, is one way of creating this internal witness. I think it is not coincidental that DeVries began keeping a diary for the first time in her life (231), nor that the journal which Herbst kept throughout her months in Spain contains, according to Elinor Langer, the most emotionally fraught writing to be found in any of Herbst’s papers (211).<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Reflecting on Herbst’s Spanish Civil War journal, Langer reflects: “When I think of [Herbst] in Spain, I see that ominipresent but uncomprehending character, more eyes than flesh, who haunts our images of every

For Josephine Herbst, self-writing clearly held the power of self-preservation. “The Starched Blue Sky of Spain” is her best-known example of bearing testimony to those stories from her life for which she had long had no audience. A far more obscure and perhaps still more compelling example of such writing, however, is found in the journal which she kept during a reporting trip through Cuba in 1935. Elinor Langer notes that, during this expedition, Herbst was enduring a period of the most intense emotional distress of her life. The circumstances of her Cuba trip in themselves put Herbst in an extremely isolated and vulnerable position. As a single woman in Cuba at a time when women did not travel solo, Herbst was automatically vulnerable. Of far greater peril, however, was the nature of her assignment there. She was in Cuba to report for The New Masses on the underground revolutionary movement stirring in “ ‘Realango 18,’ . . . an immense tract of land in the mountains of Oriente Province, not far from where another band of Cuban rebels, twenty-five years later, would work out Batista’s downfall” (172).<sup>33</sup> Because this assignment was inherently dangerous, Herbst was working under the cover of several more mainstream periodicals, from whom she had official letters of accreditation. Her task in Cuba was “to go through the motions of preparing a conventional series of articles. . . while at the same time awaiting the appearance of a contact from the opposition” who would then “introduce her to people in the revolutionary underground. . .” (164). Herbst’s internal world was also strife-ridden. At the time of her Cuba trip, her marriage to John Herrmann was falling apart; as Langer

---

war wandering through the action directionless, almost deranged, looking for a meaning to what was happening that the events as they unfolded would not necessarily yield” (212). It was not until many years later, Langer concludes, that Herbst had gained sufficient distance from her war experience to distill her originally chaotic record of it into her “supple and beautiful memoir” (212).

<sup>33</sup> Herbst’s report for the New Masses, entitled “A Passport to Realango 18” (date??), is one of her best-known journalistic efforts.

documents, Herbst was writing to him desperately, but he was essentially no longer replying.

Langer sees Herbst's position in Cuba as critical: "Faced with both circumstantial and fundamental isolation at a moment when she is also in a political situation far more complicated than any she has faced before, [Herbst] seems to divide herself in two" (165). Langer arrives at this startling conclusion by contrasting the professional documents that Herbst did produce in Cuba to her personal writings from this journey: letters to Herrmann, entries in her journal, her field notes. While Herbst continued to write proficiently for the magazines that had sent her to Cuba, her personal writing from this same time period is fragmented, distraught, and at times almost incoherent. In exploring "the bifurcation of [Herbst's] experience in Cuba," Langer concludes that Herbst was "truly in despair there. . . . A tiny notebook intended only for herself suggests, in a scrawl very nearly a poem how. . . in a situation where there is no chance of companionship, she can keep going only by talking to herself" (165):

O god

Write it down.

Write anything, don't cry, Josy, please don't cry, it  
will be all right, eat your dinner, dry your eyes. . . .

.....

Everything is very hard

Because no one is ever here

& it is almost impossible to

see anyone. (qtd. in Langer 165-66)<sup>34</sup>

For one who is trying to bear witness to a painful story, as Josephine Herbst does in this fragment from her journal, the task “is to regain the power of self-representation. . .” (Handley 64). Self-representation, as we have seen in earlier chapters, depends upon the self’s connection to a listening, empathic Other, someone who can hear the subject’s testimony and reflect it back to her. What happens, however, in those dire situations where no such listening Other is to be had? What enables testimony, then? Elaine Scarry suggests that the act of self-writing is a means of bearing witness to oneself. Self-representation through speech or through writing “becomes the final source of self-extension; so long as one is speaking, the self extends out beyond the boundaries of the body” (qtd. in Handley 64).<sup>35</sup> By addressing herself and attempting to explain the difficulty of her situation to *herself*, Herbst in her journal instinctively finds a space in which she can bear witness, despite her alienation; the journal--her self-writing--becomes itself a kind of interior witness for Herbst.

Lini DeVries likewise turns to self-writing as a means of bearing witness to herself, and thus ensuring her own psychic survival, at the lowest point in her life story. DeVries’s first months of political exile in Mexico mark her nadir. She has just left behind her, in the United States, an emotionally abusive marriage and--as a result of her persecution by the FBI--a foundering career and rising notoriety. In Mexico, her future as yet is uncertain; she does not know the country or its people, nor is she certain of what direction her life and career there will take. During these initial months in Mexico, she is more spiritually and emotionally isolated, more fundamentally alone, than she has ever

---

<sup>34</sup> JH notes, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

been before. For the first time in her adult life, she approaches real despair. “I felt like an outsider peeking through the window at a large, warm, affectionate family,” she remembers of those darkest days. “I wanted inside, but how?” (320).

DeVries at last seizes upon a solution. In the midst of her loneliness, she remembers “the psychiatrist-teacher at Teachers’ College,<sup>36</sup> who had told me, ‘Write, and write your problems out of your system’” (320). She recalls precisely the context in which she received that advice: DeVries had just written a paper in response to this teacher’s request that she “write that part of your life that is unbearable to remember” (320). The ability to do psychiatric work through self-writing--that is, to bear witness to one’s self--which DeVries discovered through this Teacher’s College professor serves her well in her time of deepest alienation. In Mexico she evokes her professor’s advice: “When you feel the need for psychiatric help and can’t get it, try writing it out” (320). In this way, DeVries begins to create her own interior witness.

Late evenings, . . . the house quiet, I would let the memories float to the surface, and as they became clearer I noted them down. Early in the morning. . . I would begin writing from my notes of the night before. Writing, writing, month after month, I covered the period from my earliest recollections down to the time I came to Mexico.<sup>37</sup> Then I would read it over, and it helped me. I understood myself better in relation to the time in which I lived. (320-321)

---

<sup>35</sup> Handley quotes from Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, p. 33.

<sup>36</sup> In 1933 DeVries began studies at the Teacher’s College of Columbia University, where she majored in Nursing Arts. She was still a student there when she left for Spain in early 1937.

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, the only other event in DeVries’s early adult life that propels her toward self-writing is the Spanish Civil War. In her memoir she recalls that her time in Spain constituted “the first time in my life [that] I kept a diary. . .” (231).

Self-writing becomes self-testimony, a means of establishing a listening Other where none existed before. As Dori Laub indicates, “. . . [S]urvival takes place through the creative act of establishing and maintaining an internal witness who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life” (87). Like psychoanalysis, self-writing is a way of “listening” to the most difficult or hidden stories. Narrating one’s own story, then, becomes a form of self-therapy and, as DeVries indicates, self-healing, even in the midst of intense loneliness. Given the alienation which both Josephine Herbst and Lini DeVries suffered after their time in Spain, self-writing was a necessity for their own emotional survival and for the survival of their Spanish Civil War stories.

Shoshana Felman speaks to those testimonial writings which look back, from a significant chronological distance, on a traumatic event such as war. The difficulty of bearing witness to such long-past traumatic events, Felman decides, is that “the scene of witnessing has lost the amplifying resonance of its communality, the guarantee of a community of witnessing. It is no longer a collective, but a solitary scene. It does not carry the historical weight, the self-evident significance of a group limit-experience. . .” (171). For both Herbst and DeVries at the time of their memoir writing, their communities of witnessing are long since lost; the ideologues and volunteers who constituted these communities have disappeared into death or exile. Indeed, Herbst and DeVries are themselves elderly women, each writing within the last decade of her life. In the absence of such a community, how then does the lone witness speak? How does she speak of long-past tragedy which once she lived with others but which now weighs heavily upon her alone? Metonymy, that act of radical self-representation which includes both the story of others in relationship to the speaking subject, as well as the story of the

speaking subject herself, provides an answer. Herbst and DeVries, who came to Republican Spain determined to hear and bear away the stories of others, eventually became such full participants in the story of the Republic's suffering themselves, that to tell the traumatic stories of others ultimately meant telling their own stories of trauma as well. In the end, the war narratives which Herbst and DeVries relate in "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain" and Up from the Cellar cast the writers as parts of a greater whole.

"It was about the relationship between individual experiences and common ones. . . about the fact that within public experiences are private ones which political criticism never really touches," Langer says of Herbst's political and writerly ideologies (210). Indeed, in "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain" we see that simultaneous inward and outward turn, that metonymic stance which enables Herbst to speak both for herself and for the communities she has left behind in Spain but which she still recalls and vividly loves. "I believe that my own deeper feelings about myself and the way those feelings attached themselves to the fact of Spain applied to many more than myself," she writes (134). It is a manifestly metonymic gesture.

This is the gesture which Lini DeVries also performs when she writes of Spain: "Imagine--working and knowing every step one takes is helping these men who are fighting our fight against fascism" (qtd. in Nelson, Madrid 242). DeVries's image of herself as one whose every step means further empowerment to the Republic parallels that image with which this dissertation began. Like the young Spanish woman of the Republican poster--lifting her face skyward, crying "Let our arms be your arms!"-- DeVries understands herself as one small yet powerful thread in an immense web of

human action and heroism. While DeVries inverts that earlier image, designating her stepping feet rather than her reaching arms as an integral part of the Republican effort, she takes the stance of metonymic speaker, at once an individual yet implicated by and in close relationship to her surrounding community. In Up from the Cellar, DeVries recalls that community and draws from them much of her reason for writing, even as she writes in physical isolation--even as the story which she tells is ultimately her own.

By linking their personal stories from the war to the stories of others--the war's victims as well as its survivors--Herbst and DeVries frame a larger and ultimately more meaningful story in which their individual narratives are but one thread. In "The Starched Blue Sky of Spain" and Up from the Cellar, they are not merely writing their memoirs; they are weaving their stories into those of others—specifically, those others who experienced the war with them--and thus tying them to a larger ethical purpose. Connecting their own experiences of war trauma to those of others enables these writers to, in a sense, *write their way out of* the typical "highly vulnerable" state of the trauma survivor (Herman 61). As Judith Herman indicates, this vulnerability results from the survivor's "sense of self [having] been shattered. That sense can be rebuilt only as it was built initially, in connection with others" (61). Herman asserts that those survivors who "recover most successfully [from traumatic experience] are those who discover some meaning in their experience that *transcends the limits of personal tragedy*. Most commonly, [survivors] find this meaning by joining others in social action" (73, emphasis mine). Although Herbst's and DeVries's war memoirs come belatedly, decades after the war's termination, they still embody a kind of social action. Publicly remembering this mostly unremembered war is a way of memorializing those who were killed or wounded



or otherwise silenced by it. Through this act of metonymic self-writing, in which the memoirist gives her own testimony, but always in conjunction with other, overlapping testimonies, Herbst and DeVries contribute to public memory while at the same time enacting the healing of their own psychological wounds from that war.

## Conclusion

*I guess she was lucky. Few people know so clearly what they want. Most people can't even think what to hope for when they throw a penny in a fountain. Almost no one really gets the chance to alter the course of human events on purpose. . . .*

*Barbara Kingsolver, Animal Dreams (1990)*

More than forty years after the fall of the Spanish Republic, another American woman writer who believed in the power of literature to speak to political concerns—even to effect political change—articulated a connection between that past struggle and current ones, ones in which she herself was involved. Barbara Kingsolver is a poet and novelist whose work often reflects her own political and ideological engagements in the Central American revolutions and civil wars of the 1980s. The central character of Kingsolver's 1990 novel, Animal Dreams, opens her story with a reminiscence about her younger sister, recently expatriated to Sandinista Nicaragua. This sister, named Hallie, has gone to aid the new revolutionary government and to work alongside farmers who are being shot down in their fields by the U.S.-aided Contras. Thinking of Hallie and what motivations have driven her to embattled Nicaragua, Kingsolver's heroine muses:

I should have seen it coming. Once she and I had gone to see a documentary on the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which was these Americans who volunteered without our government's blessing to fight against Franco and Hitler in the Spanish Civil War. At that point in U.S. history, fascism was only *maybe* wrong, whereas communism was *definitely*. When we came home from the movie, Hallie

cried. Not because of the people who gave up life and limb only to lose Spain to Franco, and not for the ones who came back and were harassed for the rest of their lives for being Reds. The tragedy for Hallie was that there might never be a cause worth risking everything for in our lifetime. (35-36)

A cause worth risking everything for: This is the Spanish Civil War's legacy for the left-leaning activists and artists living in the United States today. Those Americans who dared, in the late 1930s, to speak and act publicly against their government's stance vis-à-vis Spain and the spread of fascism, stand as a kind of touchstone, a breed of folk heroes, for those of us who still hope to address and change our own government's unjust policies towards the rest of the world.

Indeed, for many politically engaged American writers of recent decades, it is almost impossible to explain why they do what they do without referring to the Spanish Civil War and its legacy. Carolyn Forché, whose writing on El Salvador's civil war is among some of the best-known testimonial literature to come out of late twentieth century America, links El Salvador to Spain in her recollection of how and why her political conscience was awakened. Forché first learned of the Salvadoran war while living on the Spanish island of Mallorca, where she was "translating the poetry of Claribel Alegria, a Salvadorean in voluntary exile" (2). It was, Forché notes, "[t]he year Franco died" (2). Quietly celebrating within the "collective hush of relief" following Franco's death, Forché and Alegria's daughter hiked to the presumed grave of Federico Garcia Lorca, killed by fascists at the opening of the civil war, and "held a book of poems over the silenced poet" (2). In this single gesture, Forché affirms her impulse as a politically awakened writer to tear open those silences imposed by repressive regimes,

“to disallow obscurity and conventions which might prettify that which I wished to document” (7). Remembering Garcia Lorca, long-fallen poet of Spain, she takes a first step. Just beyond lies El Salvador, in whose own civil war Forche will soon find herself to be implicated, both as eyewitness and as writer.

We are no longer faced with the imminent threat of world war, as were the champions of the Spanish Republic. We face, instead, the smaller, more isolated but no less distressing armed conflicts that have torn apart the developing nations of the late twentieth century—conflicts in which the United States government has increasingly played a policing, often imperialistic, role. Despite the changing face of politics and political activism, we still hear and see echoes of those Americans who, in word or deed or both, tried to alert their government and fellow citizens to the crisis in 1930s Spain. Activists of the 1980s formed organizations such as Witness for Peace and Peace Brigades International with the express purpose of bodily accompanying those Central American populations most endangered by their own governments (who were, throughout the Reagan-Bush era, aided by the United States government). Artists of the same time period, such as Kingsolver, Forche, Adrienne Rich, and Jennifer Harbury, to name a few of the better-known American women among them, have contributed-- through their novels, poems, and essays--to this effort to redress American foreign policy in the developing world.<sup>1</sup> Forche, who was herself a literal witness to El Salvador’s civil war, working under the jurisdiction of Amnesty International, came back from that wartorn country claiming, “It is my feeling that the twentieth century human conditions

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kingsolver’s poems on the Nicaraguan civil war in *Another America/Otra America* (1992); Forche’s El Salvador poems in *The Country Between Us* (1981); Adrienne Rich’s political memoir, “Blood, Bread and Poetry” (1986), in which she reflects on her time with Nicaragua’s Sandinistas; and Harbury’s memoir concerning her life among the Guatemalan guerrilla, *Searching for Everardo* (1997).

*demands a poetry of witness*” (“El Salvador” 7). Forche’s claim, made in the waning years of the twentieth century, builds on similar and equally impassioned claims made by similar and equally impassioned women writers who had gone to Spain several generations earlier and who came back, too, bearing poems and stories of desperate witness. In Forche’s insistence on the need for a literature of witness, we hear again Muriel Rukeyser’s avowal that Spain must be remembered, must be addressed, “in continual poetry.”

### ***Contextualizing the Women Writers of this Dissertation***

In reflecting on the women who left behind them this literary and political heritage for future generations of American artists and activists, it is important to consider for a moment the larger circles of which they were part, by dint of their writing about Spain. Certainly the Spanish Civil War brought to the Iberian Peninsula an astonishing array of international writers and reporters; among these were at least a dozen American women, many of whom wrote for both the mainstream and leftist presses. Female literatti of the day who reported on the war included Dorothy Parker, Janet Flanner, Martha Gellhorn, and Lillian Hellman. In addition, lesser-known American writers such as Anna Louise Strong, Frances Davis, Gamel Woolsey, and Janet Riesenfeld penned whole books on their experience of the war. Why, then, choose to focus on the six particular women whose Spanish Civil War writing this dissertation examines? A brief analysis of the texts produced by the *other* American women who wrote about this war will provide interesting points of contrast to the literary works I have considered here at length. It will also, I hope, demonstrate why I have narrowed my discussion to Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Muriel

Rukeyser, Josephine Herbst, and Lini DeVries. It is my contention that, of all the American women who wrote about the Spanish war, these six alone produced autobiographical texts which were both literary and metonymic—texts which we can truly identify as part of a literature of witness. We see this distinction more clearly when we place these six writers within the broader context of all their female compatriots who also experienced and wrote about the Spanish Civil War.

Of the eight “other” women I listed above, Parker, Flanner, and Gellhorn most clearly do not fit within the parameters of this project. These three were in Spain strictly as reporters, and wrote about the war precisely as such. Their writing on the war, in other words, is reportage rather than literature; the brief magazine and newspaper articles which each of these three produced out of their war experiences was intended for direct public consumption and not as a means of self-reflection. Parker, for instance, is so intent on “summing up” the Republican crisis for mainly leftist audiences at home that she resorts to stark binaries and leaves no room for critiquing or questioning the Republic. She relies on simplification and bathos for effect; for example, she attempts to depict the essential nobility of the Republic in the single image of a half-starved Republican soldier’s paying for her drink in a Madrid café.<sup>2</sup> Gellhorn’s presence in wartime Spain, meanwhile, has become a titillating footnote in American literary history. As we have seen in Josephine Herbst’s account, Gellhorn was there not only as a reporter for Collier’s magazine, but also as mistress to Ernest Hemingway, whom she later married. A collection of her journalistic essays, The Face of War (1986) contains several of her Spanish Civil War articles. Most of these are distinguished by the kind of self-

---

<sup>2</sup> See Parker’s “Soldiers of the Republic” (New Masses, November 23, 1937) and Hellman’s “A Day in Spain” (The New Republic, April 13, 1938).

conscious irony we hear when Gellhorn asks, in her article “The Undefeated” (1939), “And how do you like that picture: the child voices inside the prison, singing defiantly in the night?” (437). Flanner, finally, never actually visited Spain during the time of the war; she did, however, comment on that war from the vantage point of Paris, where she wrote a weekly column, “Letter from Paris,” for the New Yorker. In addition, she later visited and reported on several refugee camps on the Spanish-French border, comprised of Spanish Republicans who had fled their homes following Franco’s victory. Some of these articles are included in the collection, Paris Was Yesterday (1972). Throughout the duration of the war itself, however, Flanner remained largely nonchallant about it; her most notorious commentary on the war was the dismissive statement, “The Spanish war isn’t worth the ink wasted on it” (34). In short, Parker, Gellhorn, and Flanner, although they are some of the more recognized names among American women who wrote about Spain, wrote as reporters and therefore not in the autobiographical-testimonial, metonymic vein which distinguishes the principal texts of this dissertation.

The book-length, largely autobiographical works by Anna Louise Strong, Frances Davis, and Lillian Hellman, all of them focusing at least in part on the Spanish Civil War, provide us with further points of contrast. Strong, whose Spain in Arms was published in 1937 following a six-week visit to Spain earlier that year, writes openly and obviously in the role of apologist for Soviet politics. In fact, she came to Spain directly from the Soviet Union, where she had lived for several years, editing The Moscow Daily News and prizing “her own identity as a Communist and the wife of a Soviet Communist” (Strong and Keyssar 170). Her Spain in Arms speaks for the *Soviet* take on the war, not

so much for her own.<sup>3</sup> Strong all but erases herself from her own narrative; if she is present in the story at all, it is merely as reporter or distant observer. In this respect alone, it is difficult to read Spain in Arms as memoir.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the polemical content and the didactic, highly moralistic tone of Strong's writing make her war narrative not so much a work of literature as it is a work of propaganda. As Frederick Benson notes, much of the Spanish Civil War writing produced during the war years tended "in the direction of pure propaganda. . . . Lesser writers committed to the extreme left or extreme right, for the most part, endeavored to make their work entirely orthodox, conforming to the party dogma with regard to ideological questions" (42). Such was clearly the case with Strong, who unswervingly takes the Stalinist stance, embracing the formation of the International Brigades and showing how the reformation of the militias into a centralized army helped to strengthen the moral and military force of the Republic. In short, if there is value to be had today in reading Spain in Arms, it lies in gaining deeper understanding of Soviet literary strategies of self-representation in the late 1930s.<sup>5</sup>

On the far opposite end of the political spectrum is American reporter Frances Davis, whose war memoir, My Shadow in the Sun, appeared in 1940; her much later and fuller autobiography, A Fearful Innocence, published in 1981, also includes a lengthy

---

<sup>3</sup> Strong continued to link the political concerns of the Spanish Republic to those of the Soviet Union in the lecture tour on which she embarked in the United States, immediately following her trip to Spain. That tour featured two subjects, "The New Soviet Democracy" and "Spain in Arms."

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Nekola agrees that Spain in Arms is more journalism than it is memoir. Nekola groups Strong with those American women journalists who, throughout the 1930s, produced "book-length works of reportage and analysis on political subjects" favoring Soviet Russia's current role in the world, such as Ruth Gruber's I Went to the Soviet Arctic and Grace Hutchins's Women and Capitalism (190-91).

<sup>5</sup> For example, in keeping with Popular Front policy, Spain in Arms is void of all reference to the Bolshevik experience and to Russia's direct military assistance to the Spanish Republic. Instead, Strong hones in on heroes of the American Revolution, asking her audiences to see the parallels between their own, earlier struggle for independence and Spain's (Strong and Keyssar 171).



reprisal (and slight revision) of her Spanish Civil War experience.<sup>6</sup> Davis automatically disqualifies herself from my discussion of politically resistant memoirs in that she came to Spain not under the jurisdiction of the Republic but rather under that of the fascists. Entering through Dancharinea, “one of the main entrances to Franco’s Spain” (Fearful 161) and Carlist Pamplona, Davis spent most of her time in Burgos, with the soldiers and reporters supporting the fascist side. She also visited the front at Guadarrama—again, on the fascist side. Surrounded by Spanish and international fascists, she was herself a member of an unapologetically conservative press corps; her journalist companions on this trip represented “the arch-reactionary London Daily Mail. . . , the Chicago Tribune, a paper as reactionary for the United States as the Mail was for England. . . the Paris Soir; . . . [and] the conservative Republican New York Herald Tribune” (135). The London Daily Mail’s chief correspondent, a man whom all refer to as “Major” because of his military bearing, is prone to such pro-fascist outbursts as, “Splendid chap, the Colonel. Cream off the top, these men of the Aristocrats, all of them” (144). It is among this political milieu that Davis is introduced to the Spanish situation. More than forty years later, she confessed that, in “her preoccupation with how to get into Spain, I had not asked myself who was at war. Few of us knew much about recent Spanish history” (138). Clearly, Davis’s project in witnessing and writing about the war has much more to do with self-promotion than it does with metonymy or with testimony.

Indeed, Davis’s is a chronicle of war dominated not by the metonymic stance but instead by a voice distinctly aware of its own, individual power and privilege—and ever

---

<sup>6</sup> During Davis’s final month in Spain, she left the conservative (fascist-supporting) newspaper that had originally employed her for a more mainstream one. Interestingly, Davis asserts in her 1981 account of the war that she made this move wholly for the sake of her own troubled conscience. Her 1940 memoir,

desirous of accruing still more. She recounts rather guilelessly how she smuggled (in her girdle) stories for rightwing American and European newspapers back into France, from whence she transmitted them to the respective fascist-supporting editors. Davis is thrilled when the conservative London Daily News praises her for her work in bringing these stories out of Spain and subsequently offers her a reporting job. Rather than being concerned about the ethics or politics of the paper for which she will now be writing—and the position on this war which she will now be forced to take—she is filled with self-gratification: “I worked for the London Daily Mail. . . . No longer a freelancer doing columns. The Daily Mail’s Only Woman Correspondent With Patriot Armies at the Front!” (Fearful 148-149). In her later memoir, Davis does afford herself a moment of retrospective regret about the position she took on the war: “I had hired myself to punch out the words that would call the rebel-Generals ‘Patriots,’ and the Loyalist people of Spain ‘Reds’” (149). She goes on to admit, however: “. . . I was too full of the privilege of sharing the mechanics of reporting a war to worry too much over what the war was about” (149). This particular confession serves again to distinguish between the writing produced by those who saw the war in Spain from the reporter’s vantage point, and those who saw it from a less market-driven, more socially engaged perspective.

To her credit, Davis does eventually move from the Daily Mail to the less reactionary Chicago Daily News; despite this change, however, she continues to be concerned primarily with her role as derring-do reporter. “It is vital to be close behind the army when the capital falls,” she writes in My Shadow in the Sun (159). Vital, she means, not for the sake of the starving *madrileños*, nor yet for the desperate soldiers who

---

however, emphasizes not her political conscience but rather her frustration with the overbearing censorship exacted by the more conservative paper.

are fighting for them, but vital for Davis's career: "This is the vital time. One must be present to insure one's own interests" (159). In short, although Davis's Spanish war memoirs make for fascinating escapist reading, her obsessive focus on herself and her equally stunning ignorance of the Spanish people all around her constitute the very antithesis of metonymy.

While Frances Davis defies the metonymic stance by writing everyone *but* herself as secondary characters, Anna Louise Strong avoids metonymy by writing herself almost entirely out of her own story. How, then, does Lillian Hellman deviate from the circle of politically resistant, metonymic autobiographers on whom this dissertation focuses? The answer is somewhat complex. It is not so much for Hellman's politics, nor even for her narrating stance, that I largely exclude her from this study. Rather, it is the question of Hellman's own credentials as a reliable witness that should stop the reader short of taking her Spanish Civil War account altogether seriously.

Hellman's chapters on Spain in her 1969 memoir, An Unfinished Woman,<sup>7</sup> are at first glance a simple, autobiographical account of the several weeks she spent in Madrid and Valencia in the autumn of 1937. Numerous significant details of this account, however, have been soundly refuted by other reputable writers of her generation, right down to the question of whether the length of Hellman's stay in Spain was a matter of weeks, as she claimed, or of mere days.<sup>8</sup> In short, Hellman's version of the Spanish Civil War in particular—as well as her credibility in general—have, over the last three decades, become questionable at best. Although literary critic John Simon was, in 1974,

---

<sup>7</sup> An Unfinished Woman, which won the National Book Award for Arts and Letters in 1970, is actually the first installation of a three-volume memoir. Completing this trilogy are Pentimento (1973) and Scoundrel Time (1976).

the first member of the American literary world to publicly question various of Hellman's claims in her memoirs,<sup>9</sup> the real attack on Hellman's trustworthiness as autobiographer began in 1981, with Martha Gellhorn's article, "Guerre de Plume," an eloquent and well-documented deconstruction of Hellman's version of her time in Spain. Gellhorn, a respected and established journalist, argued in the Paris Review with considerable authority, "since she herself had been present at a number of the episodes in An Unfinished Woman that she challenged; plus, she bolstered her firsthand knowledge with painstaking research" (Wright 397). Among other claims in Hellman's Spanish war narrative which Gellhorn disproves are that Hellman witnessed the shelling of Madrid, that she witnessed a street bombing, that Ernest Hemingway brought to her Madrid hotel room the proofs of To Have and Have Not, that Hemingway and Gellhorn begged her to come and watch "the beauty of the shelling" from their balcony (Hellman 102), that the CBS radio station in Madrid was shelled the night Hellman gave a broadcast there, and that Hellman in fact ever made such a broadcast at all. Hellman's "incomprehension of that war," Gellhorn decides, "is near idiocy" (297). Equally offensive to Gellhorn in Hellman's constant positioning of herself as noble hero throughout her war memoir, at the obvious expense of the other characters she mentions. As Gellhorn puts it, everyone in Hellman's account, save Hellman herself, "not to mince words, is a shit" (297). With Hellman, then, we are not only distrustful of the witness, but, given Hellman's staunch self-centeredness, we are a far ways removed from the concept of the *metonymic* witness.

---

<sup>8</sup> Martha Gellhorn, for example, estimates that Hellman was in Spain for ten days at most—and the majority of that time in the relatively peaceful city of Valencia, not in wartorn Madrid (296).

<sup>9</sup> See Simon's "Pentimental Journey," Hudson Review 26:4 (Winter 1973-1974): 743-52. Simon questions Hellman's purported reasons for changing her subjects names in her "Julia story."

Gellhorn's "Guerre de Plume" served as a catalyst for the rapidly growing and widespread interest in deconstructing and disputing Hellman's autobiographical writing throughout the 1980s. William Wright, Hellman's primary biographer, remarks that: "Gellhorn's diatribe against Hellman attracted attention beyond the narrow audience of Paris Review. The New York Times ran an article under a large-type headline: 'Hellman Word Assailed Again'" (399). Within the next several years, "the sport of searching for Hellman lies caught on" in English-speaking literary circles (396).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Hellman's own biographer is himself intensely interested in picking out the internal contradictions and obvious fabrications contained in Hellman's memoirs. He points, for example, to Hellman's claim, in her Spanish Civil War narrative, to having met a young soldier from the International Brigades who tells her that he has been wounded in the penis. Hellman's response, in her memoir, is: "I never thought of anybody being wounded in the penis. How little I knew about any of this" (89). "It is an odd observation," comments Wright, "to come from so literary a woman as Hellman. A wounded penis is the arresting central image in Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, a novel whose publication eleven years earlier had caused a sensation in American literary circles."<sup>11</sup> Hellman was now in the country of the book's setting and was about to have dinner with

---

<sup>10</sup> The ultimate blow to Hellman's reputation came in 1984, with Mary McCarthy's public refutation of another significant political narrative contained in Hellman's memoirs. In the ensuing fracas, Hellman sued McCarthy for libel; while Hellman died before this trial was brought to court, the defense files which McCarthy compiled for the case bulge "with incriminating evidence" against Hellman's claims (Brightman 614). These files have since become an important source for literary critics and commentators who continue to debunk the version of Hellman's life which she presented in her memoirs. Hellman's now infamous "Julia story" to which McCarthy took such powerful exception is found in Pentimento. Hellman "claimed to have gone on a dangerous mission to Berlin for the Nazi resistance, or more specifically, for her friend Julia" in 1937 (Wright 135). This "Julia story" eventually became "the target of many refutations, most particularly and somewhat inadvertently by the publication in 1983 of the memoirs of a woman many feel was the real Julia" (135).

<sup>11</sup> Wright's chronology here is based on Hellman's claim that the Spanish Civil War chapters in An Unfinished Woman were lifted almost straight out of the journal which she kept during her time in Spain.

its author” (239). Littered as her memoirs are with reconstructions of fact and outright prevarication, any account which Hellman claimed to be specifically autobiographical must now be considered vastly unstable ground.

In the end, all one can say with any confidence about Hellman’s stay in Spain is that she was, albeit briefly, in Valencia, and more briefly still in Madrid, in October of 1937. Although she remained active in leftist politics throughout most of her life,<sup>12</sup> Spain itself appeared to have very little impact on her literary production afterwards. Spain’s civil war does not re-emerge in Hellman’s writing or become a moral touchstone for her as it clearly did for the other American women witnesses whom I discuss at length in this dissertation.

A final pair of American women who saw Spain’s civil war and wrote about it, but who do not quite fit within the parameters of this dissertation, are Janet Riesenfeld and Gamel Woolsey. Both spent significant time in Spain during the war; Riesenfeld was in Madrid from July to December 1937; Woolsey, who had lived continuously in Malaga from the early 1930s onward, also left Spain late in the fall of 1937. Both women, in addition, wrote eloquent, impassioned memoirs reflecting on their Spanish Civil War experiences. Riesenfeld published her Dancer in Madrid in 1938; Woolsey’s Death’s Other Kingdom (later republished as Malaga Burning)<sup>13</sup> appeared the following year.

---

Thus Hellman, originally recording these thoughts in her 1937 journal, would have been just eleven years removed from the publication of The Sun Also Rises.

<sup>12</sup> In leftist circles in the United States, Hellman’s name did remain marginally associated with the Republican cause throughout the 1930s. Although she was invited to participate in the production of Ernest Hemingway and Joris Ivens’s 1937 film, The Spanish Earth, she fell ill during the filming and ultimately did not take part in its production; she was, however, eventually “credited with the original story idea” (Wright 140). Hellman was later blacklisted in Hollywood during the McCarthy era as result of her various trips in the 1930s and 1940s to the Soviet Union and because of her close ties to the Communist Party.

<sup>13</sup> Death’s Other Kingdom, published only in England, was reissued in 1998 by Pythia Press. Zalin Grant, editor of this much later, American edition, made the title change.

Although both are noteworthy Spanish Civil War texts by women born in America, I have chosen *not* to privilege either one in this dissertation.

In Riesenfeld's case, I have made this decision on the basis of genre; Dancer in Madrid more closely approximates the novel, both in form and in tenor, than it does autobiography; indeed, a number of critics who reviewed her book in 1938 made the same observation. The Booklist called Riesenfeld's work "a tragic story. . . [which] reads like fiction" (313). Indeed, so closely does Dancer in Madrid adhere to the structure of a work of fiction, with its rising action, building tension between protagonist and antagonist, climax and denouement, that Riesenfeld's narrative trajectory seems deliberately *constructed*. Early in her story, Riesenfeld is already heavily foreshadowing the climactic realization—postponed until her penultimate chapter—that her Spanish lover, Jaime, whom she has followed to Madrid, is actually a fascist operating undercover. Just as she is departing the United States for Spain, one week before Franco's coup, Riesenfeld receives a cable from her lover: "Darling—Delay departure for a few months" (25). Riesenfeld, however, ignores this warning, "feeling sure that this could have nothing to do" with the future she envisions in Spain with Jaime (25-26). Throughout the following 200 pages of her text, Riesenfeld continues to drop rather heavy-handed clues regarding Jaime's true identity. As she herself grows increasingly sympathetic to the Republican cause, her lover becomes more and more intolerant of her political views. His sudden, frequent disappearances during their time together in Madrid, as well as his insistence that Riesenfeld keep in her house a woman who is rather obviously a fascist spy, push Riesenfeld's narrative headlong towards the final, melodramatic discovery of Jaime's true identity. With its focus squarely upon the

gathering conflict between Riesenfeld and her lover, and the emerging problem of how Riesenfeld will “escape” this doomed relationship, Dancer in Madrid exemplifies the “enforced unity of action” and the “convincing. . . central character, set in [a] solid and detailedly realized world” by which we normally define the novel of incident (Abrams 191).

Ultimately, the discerning reader inevitably wonders to what lengths Riesenfeld has taken the so-called writer’s liberties in writing what she claims to be a “autobiography” (1). The New York Times Book Review went so far as to speculate that Riesenfeld had restructured her story so as to *make* it read more like fiction. “Insofar as the story is concerned,” the Times reviewer commented, “it is hard to understand why Miss Riesenfeld could not guess the reasons for Jaime’s mysterious absences, why she did not realize that she was being made use of to cover up a Rebel intrigue, not even reflecting that the plea was ambiguous when she was asked to shelter a woman whose husband and brothers were ‘at the front’” (18). Although Dancer in Madrid is an engaging story, told from the point of view of one who did spend extensive time in wartime Spain and who does speak powerfully of the “responsibility of deciding. . . . to enlist [one’s] sympathies and understanding in the wider [world]” (2), its emphasis on personal romance and high melodrama make it read less like testimonial literature and more like a novel, wherein the reader’s “greater interest is in what the protagonist will do next and on how the story will turn out” (Abrams 191).

Woolsey’s Malaga Burning, on the other hand, much more closely aligns itself with the metonymic, testimonial nature of the principal texts of this dissertation.

Through her memoir, Woolsey interweaves her own experience of the war with those of



her broader community, often reflecting at length on how the conflict affected her servants, her neighbors, and the expatriate community in and around Malaga. Political analysis and observation further enrich her text; indeed, the term “pornography of violence”—which she coined in response to the “dreamy lustful look” and “full enjoyment of horror” that she saw in the faces of her friends and neighbors, whenever they told atrocity stories against the other side (68)—has now become part of our war lexicon. Frederick Benson, in his seminal work on the Spanish Civil War, Writers in Arms, entitles and devotes an entire chapter to “The Pornography of Violence,” crediting Woolsey with the phrase (223). In addition, Woolsey’s incisive description of fascist General Quiapo de Llano, whose enraged and outrageous broadcasts she listened to throughout the early weeks of the war, is so politically astute that her husband, Gerald Brenan—a literary historian who made his name analyzing Spanish politics<sup>14</sup>—apparently felt he could do no better, and plagiarized Woolsey outright. His 1974 Personal Record lifts whole sentences from the depiction of Quiapo de Llano, as well as of various other personages, which Woolsey wrote in Malaga Burning.

Why not, then, include this politically insightful and metonymically voiced memoir in this dissertation? I have chosen not to because Woolsey does not write from the vantage point of an American; rather, she consistently frames herself and her position vis-à-vis the war as British. Although she was born in South Carolina and did not expatriate herself until the age of 30, she never returned to the United States to live. Married to an Englishman, she spent the second half of her life in England and in Spain. By the time she wrote Malaga Burning in 1939, she seems to have come already to regard

---

<sup>14</sup> Brenan’s best-known work is The Spanish Labyrinth (1943), an account of the Spanish politics and history from which the civil war evolved. His other books on Spain include: The Face of Spain (1950), The

herself as British as well. Throughout her account of the war, Woolsey emphasizes the fact that she and Brenan are *both* English; this particular self-conceptualization specifically shapes the way she sees and experiences the war. Walking through the almost deserted streets in the first week of the war, Brenan and Woolsey are stopped by two different patrols; both, however, “when they realized we were English, . . . only saluted and laughed” (43). Woolsey further recalls how this national identity seemed to safeguard her; from the first week of war forward, she and Brenan fly the English flag, alongside the Spanish one, from the roof of their house.

In the final assessment, Malaga Burning is one of the most beautifully written and cogently argued works of testimonial literature to have emerged from the Spanish Civil War. Woolsey’s detailed study of the psychological effects of the war, both on herself and on those around her, results in a strongly anti-war thesis. As such, it is a significant contribution toward our understanding of the civilian population’s experience in times of modern warfare. It is also an important component in the body of Spanish Civil War literature written by outsiders and expatriates. Yet, because Woolsey did not regard herself as American, and because Malaga Burning was not published in America until 1998, she and her text belong more fully to British literature than to American.

### *Writing as Witnesses*

We have seen, now, the literary and political milieu which surrounded Spanish Civil War witnesses and writers Joy Davidman, Genevieve Taggard, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Muriel Rukeyser, Josephine Herbst, and Lini DeVries. We have seen, too, how their particular texts on the Spanish war are unique in that they operate simultaneously as

---

Literature of the Spanish People (1951), and South from Grenada (1957).

autobiography and testimony. In these texts, the narrator does not stand so far outside the story which she relates that she is merely reporting; she is, indeed, personally involved and implicated in that story. It is, in many ways, her own. Yet it is also *more* than her own. Although she stands inside her story, participating in it, bearing witness to herself, she does not take up so much space within that story that she dominates it and controls the narrative as in traditional autobiography. The narrator in these texts is always conscious of the fact that, in bearing witness to her own experience of the trauma of the Spanish Civil War, she is also bearing secondary witness for others. Often painfully aware of the fact that she is still alive, still able to speak, while those whose stories she represents along with her own are completely silenced—by death, by exile, by imprisonment—the narrator is powerfully motivated by her own survivor's guilt. As Robert Jay Lifton suggests, there is always a "moral dimension inherent in all conflict and suffering. . . . If we can speak of an evolutionary purpose, we may say that the capacity for guilt was given us so that we might imbue all behavior. . . with an ethical dimension" (172). By telling their own stories, by speaking publicly of the ways in which they as individuals had experienced and been implicated by the Spanish Civil War, the six women writers of this dissertation worked toward their own, personal healing as well as toward the healing of the battered world in which they lived.

What are the broader ethical dimensions of bearing autobiographical witness to a war? Always, such a literature emerges from the margins of established power structures, from the sites of relative powerlessness and voicelessness. It is written outside the "official" versions of any given war which are produced and promulgated by governmental and military structures. A literary witness of war looks specifically at

those scenes which the public is not *meant* to see. From Joy Davidman's insistent focus on the body in torment, to Muriel Rukeyser's overt pacificism, to Josephine Herbst's confession of having been permanently scarred by what she saw and heard as a witness of war, the literary testimonies which this dissertation examines all depict war as messy and frequently ignoble; characters are not always easily categorized as good or evil, ally or enemy. As such, these testimonies are resistant stories of war, running counter to the dominant paradigm of what Miriam Cooke calls the War Story, "a narrative frame that . . . gives order to wars that are generally experienced as confusion. . ." (15). For those most prominent and powerful tellers of war stories--the military historians, the politicians, the soldiers-turned-writers--the War Story is a narrative wherein the authors "force a grid on the anarchy; they arrange experience and actors into neat pairs: beginning and ending, foe and friend, aggression and defense, war and peace, front and home, combatant and civilian. . . . The War Story reinforces mythic wartime roles" (15).<sup>15</sup> The binaries which the War Story imposes onto a site of confusion always work to privilege one side of each binary over and against the other. Such a strategy of narration serves a clear purpose. The traditional War Story all but demands that its audience embrace one side, one cause, while blindly despising the opposing one. Blind and unquestioning hatred of this nature facilitates the "us and them" mentality which a government must cultivate in its people so that they will support and justify the destruction of their "opposition."

War testimonies which question or challenge the dominant governmental version—indeed, as in the case of the texts I discuss here, testimonies which render the

---

<sup>15</sup> This traditional, order-imposing narrative frame is so deeply ingrained in our cultural understanding of war that, as Cooke points out, when British military historian John Keegan first identified this frame, he established that it had existed-- "and remained essentially the same since Thucydides" (15). See Keegan's The Face of Battle (1978).

perceived enemy, the Spanish Republican, as human—are generally regarded as inherently dangerous and, often, even *unhearable*. In writing literary testimonies of the Spanish Civil War, then, the American women of this dissertation were in a sense writing to an audience which had not yet come into being. Judith Herman reflects on the struggle involved in producing this particular kind of testimonial literature. Telling the story of war trauma, the story we are not meant to hear, Herman indicates, is marked by a “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). Widespread public incredulity or resistance to hearing traumatic testimony is the most significant reason for which these testimonies often go unheard. While the “knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness,” as Herman writes, that knowledge “is rarely retained for long.

Denial. . . operate[s] on a social as well as an individual level. The study of psychological trauma has an ‘underground’ history. Like traumatized people, we have been cut off from the knowledge of our past. Like traumatized people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future.

Therefore, an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history. (2)

Given the forces of silencing at work, both in the wounded human psyches of those who have witnessed warfare and in their more protected audiences at home, who all but scream *I don't want to have to hear this*, it is perhaps amazing that resistant stories of war are ever told at all. On the other side of the silence, however, is the imperative to push past all these repressive forces and to bear witness to the traumatic event which one has experienced—indeed, to reclaim publicly that part of human history otherwise lost to us.

As Herman affirms, the moment in which “the barriers of denial and repression are lifted” and the survivor is able to “speak the unspeakable” is a privileged one (2). In that moment, a tremendous potential for healing and creativity is released (2).

Dumbfounded silence has increasingly become our common response to the brutality of warfare in the past century. Yet the women writers whose work this dissertation studies attempt to break that silence, to dare to communicate those experiences capable of wounding both body and mind. They do so by speaking not as isolated and thus easily overwhelmed individuals, but as communal selves, whose voices are made stronger by the knowledge that they speak not for themselves alone, but also for their fellow witnesses. They are taking up that metonymic, politically resistant, testifying voice which Carolyn Forché would employ, decades later, as another American witness of twentieth-century war: “You will fight / and fighting, you will die. I will live / and living cry out until my voice is gone. . . .” (Country 21).

## Works Cited

### Primary Texts:

- Brand, Millen, et al, ed. Writers Take Sides: Letters about the War in Spain from 418 American Authors. New York: The League of American Writers, 1938.
- Davidman, Joy. "End of a Revolutionary." Letter to a Comrade. New Haven: Yale UP, 1938. 91.
- . Foreword. War Poems of the United Nations. Ed. Joy Davidman. New York: Dial P, 1943. vii-viii.
- . "In Praise of Fascists." Letter. 75.
- . "Near Catalonia." Letter. 67.
- . "Prayer Against Indifference." Letter. 31.
- . "Snow in Madrid." Letter. 40.
- . "The Longest Way Round." These Found the Way. Ed. David Wesley Soper. Philadelphia: Westminster P, 1951. 11-26.
- Davis, Frances. A Fearful Innocence. Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 1981.
- . My Shadow in the Sun. New York: Carrick and Evans, 1940.
- DeVries, Lini. Up from the Cellar. Minneapolis: Vanilla P, 1979.
- Flanner, Janet. Paris Was Yesteday. Ed. Irving Drutman. 1972. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.
- Forche, Carolyn. "El Salvador: An Aide-Memoire." The American Poetry Review July-Aug. 1981: 2-8.
- . Introduction. Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness. Ed. Carolyn Forche. New York: Norton, 1993. 29-47.
- . "The Poetry of Witness." The Writer in Politics. Ed. William Gass and Loric Cuoco. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1996. 135-146.
- Gellhorn, Martha. "Guerre de Plume." Paris Review: 23:79 (Spring 1981): 280-301.

- Hellman, Lillian. "A Day in Spain." The New Republic. April 13, 1938. 5-8.
- . An Unfinished Woman. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1969.
- Hemingway, Ernest. For Whom the Bell Tolls. New York: Macmillan, 1968.
- Herbst, Josephine. "Josephine Herbst Tells Why She Was Fired from the COI." PM.  
June 17, 1942. n.p.
- . The Starched Blue Sky of Spain. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.
- Millay, Edna St. Vincent. "Say that We Saw Spain Die." Harper's Magazine. Oct.  
1938: 449.
- Parker, Dorothy. "Incredible, Fantastic. . . and True." North 173-177.
- . "An Introduction." Bessie i-iv.
- . "Not Enough." New Masses. Mar. 14, 1939: 3-4.
- . "Soldiers of the Republic." Here Lies: The Collected Stories of Dorothy Parker.  
New York: Viking, 1939. 259-266.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet." 1984. Blood,  
Bread and Poetry. New York: Norton, 1986. 167-187.
- Riesefeld, Janet. Dancer in Madrid. New York: Funk and Wagnallis, 1938.
- Rolfe, Edwin. Trees Became Torches: Selected Poems. Ed. Cary Nelson and Jefferson  
Hendricks. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995.
- Rukeyser, Muriel. "Fourth Elegy: The Refugees." A Turning Wind. New York: Viking,  
1939. 29-33.
- . "Letter to the Front." Beast in View. 1944. Reprinted in A Muriel Rukeyser  
Reader. Ed. Jan Heller Levi. New York: Norton, 1994.
- . The Life of Poetry. 1949. Ashfield, MA: Paris P, 1996.
- . "Long Past Moncada." Beast. 230.
- . "Mediterranean." U.S. 1. New York: J. J. Little and Ives Company, 1938. 135-145.
- . "One Soldier." Beast. 207.
- . "Otherworld." Turning. 52-54.



- . "The Return." The Speed of Darkness. 1968. Reprinted in Out of Silence: Selected Poems. Ed. Kate Daniels. Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books, 1992. 254-255.
- . "Segre Song." Speed. 262.
- . "War and Poetry." The War Poets. Ed. Oscar Williams. New York: The John Day Company, 1945. 25-26.
- . "We Came for the Games." Esquire. October 1974: 192-194, 368-370.
- Strong, Anna Louise. Spain in Arms: 1937. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1937.
- Taggard, Genevieve. "Andalucia." Slow Music. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946. 45-46.
- . "Funeral in May." Calling Western Union. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936. 25-27.
- . "Mallorcan Memory." New Masses. May 16, 1939. 7-9.
- . "Silence in Mallorca." Collected Poems 1918-1938. New York: Harper and Row, 1966. 150-151.
- . "To the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade." Long View. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942. 39-40.
- Woolsey, Gamel. Malaga Burning. 1939. Paris: Pythia P, 1998.

**Secondary Texts:**

- Abrams, M. H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 7th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999.
- Adams, Hazard. "Synecdoche and Method." Critical Paths. Ed. Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1987. 41-71.
- Acier, Marcel. Foreword. From Spanish Trenches. Ed. Marcel Acier. 1937. New York: Modern Age Books, 1983. xv-xvi.
- . "Understanding Spain." Acier 186-199.
- Ackelsberg, Martha A. Free Women of Spain. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Alcoff, Linda Martin, and Laura Gray-Rosendale. "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" Getting a Life: Everyday Uses for Autobiography. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. 198-225.
- Alexander, Sally. Introduction. Fyrth and Alexander 13-22.
- Anderson, Mark. "The 'Impossibility of Poetry'." New German Critique 53 (1991): 3-18.
- Aycock, Janet Perez and Wendell Aycock. The Spanish Civil War in Literature. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech UP, 1990.
- Baritz, Loren. "The Culture of the Twenties." Coben and Ratner 150-178.
- Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968.
- Benson, Frederick R. Writers in Arms. New York: New York UP, 1967.
- Benstock, Shari. "Expatriate Modernism: Writing on the Cultural Rim." Women's Writing in Exile. Ed. Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989. 19-39.
- . Women of the Left Bank. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986.
- Bentley, Elizabeth. Out of Bondage. New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1951.
- Bernikow, Louise. "Muriel at 65: Still Ahead of Her Time." Ms. Jan. 1979: 14-18.

- Berkman, Joyce. "Feminism, War, and Peace Politics: The Case of World War I." Women, Militarism, and War. Ed. Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias. Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990. 141-160.
- Bessie, Alvah. Preface. The Heart of Spain: Anthology of Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry. New York: Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, 1952. v-viii.
- and Albert Prago, cd. Our Fight: Writings by Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. New York: Monthly Review P, 1987.
- Bevan, David. Introduction. Literature and War. Ed. David Bevan. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1990. 3-6.
- Beverly, John, and Mark Zimmerman. Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions. Austin: U of Texas P, 1990.
- . "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)." Smith and Watson De/Colonizing 91-114.
- Bevilacqua, Winifred Farrant. Josephine Herbst. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985.
- Bodenheim, Maxwell. "The Decorative Straight-Jacket: Rhymed Verse." Little Review 1 December 1914: 22-23.
- Borkenau, Franz. The Spanish Cockpit. 1937. London: Pluto P, 1986.
- Boyce Davies, Carole. "Collaboration and the Ordering Imperative in Life Story Production." Smith and Watson De/Colonizing 3-17.
- Brenan, Gerald. The Face of Spain. New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1951.
- . Personal Record: 1920-1972. London: Jonathan Cape, 1974.
- Brinnin, John Malcolm. "Muriel Rukeyser: The Social Poet and the Problem of Communication." Poetry Jan. 1943: 554-575.
- Brightman, Carol. Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World. New York: Clarkson Potter, 1992.
- Brodsky, Bella, and Celeste Schenck. Introduction. Life / Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography. Eds. Brodsky and Schenck. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988. 1-15.

- Brothers, Barbara. "Writing Against the Grain." Women's Writing in Exile. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989. 349-367.
- Brown, Frieda S., Malcolm Alan Compitello, Victor M. Howard, and Robert A. Martin, ed. Rewriting the Good Fight: Critical Essays on the Literature of the Spanish Civil War. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1989.
- Caruth, Cathy. Introduction. Trauma: Explorations in Memory. Ed. Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 3-12.
- . Unclaimed Experience. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Celan, Paul. "The Meridian." Paul Celan: Collected Prose. Trans. Rosemarie Waldrop. Manchester: Carcanet P, 1986. 37-56.
- Chaloupka, William. "(For)getting a Life: Testimony, Identity, and Power." Brodsky and Schenck 369-392.
- Ciardi, John. Foreword. Mid-Century American Poets. New York: Twayne, 1952. ix-xxx.
- Clark, Suzanne. "Uncanny Millay." Freedman 3-26.
- Coben, Stanley, and Lorman Ratner. Introduction. The Development of an American Culture. Ed. Coben and Ratner. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970. 1-11.
- Coleman, Linda S. Introduction. Women's Life-Writing: Finding Voice / Building Community. Ed. Linda S. Coleman. Bowling Green: Bowling Green U Popular P, 1997. 1-7.
- Cohn, Carol. "Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War." Cooke and Woollacott 227-246.
- Cooke, Miriam. "Wo-man, Retelling the War Myth." Cooke and Woollacott 177-204.
- . Women and the War Story. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.
- , and Angela Woollacott. Introduction. Gendering War Talk. Ed. Cooke and Woollacott. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. ix-xiii.

- Cooper, Jane. Foreword. The Life of Poetry by Muriel Rukeyser. Ashfield, MA: Paris P, 1996. xii-xxviii.
- Cooper, Helen, Adrienne Munich, and Susan Squier. Introduction. Arms and the Woman. Ed. Cooper, Munich, and Squier. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989. xiii-xx.
- Cott, Jonathan. Visions and Voices. New York: Doubleday, 1987.
- Craft, Linda J. Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1997.
- Cunningham, Valentine. Introduction. Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War. Ed. Valentine Cunningham. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986. xvix-xxxiii.
- Rev. of Dancer in Madrid, by Janet Riesenfeld. Booklist 1 May 1938: 313.
- Daniels, Kate. "Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics." Dickie and Travisano 247-263.
- Delbo, Charlotte. Auschwitz and After. Trans. Rosette C. Lamont. New Haven: Yale UP, 1995.
- de Man, Paul. "The Rhetoric of Temporality." Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983. 185-195.
- Dickie, Margaret, and Thomas Travisano. Introduction. Gendered Modernisms. Ed. Dickie and Travisano. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996. vii-xvi.
- Des Pres, Terrence. The Survivor. New York: Oxford UP, 1980.
- Drake, William. The First Wave: Women Poets in America, 1915-1945. New York: Macmillan, 1987.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich, and Rukeyser." Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979. 280-300.

- Ehrhart, W.D. Foreword. *Van Devanter and Fury*, xvii-xx.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke, and Sheila Tobias. Women, Militarism, and War. Ed. Elshtain and Tobias. Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990. ix-xii.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. Testimony. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Fisher, Harry. Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997.
- Flynn, Richard. " 'The Buried Life and the Body of Waking': Muriel Rukeyser and the Politics of Literary History." *Dickie and Travisano* 264-279.
- Foley, Barbara. Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Ford, Hugh. A Poet's War. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1965.
- Fortunato, Linda. "Craft Interview with Muriel Rukeyser." New York Quarterly January 1972: 15-39.
- Foster, Kevin. " 'Between the Bullet and the Lie': Intellectuals and the War. The Spanish Civil War: A Cultural and Historical Reader. Ed. Alun Kenwood. Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1993. 19-26.
- Foxwell, Elizabeth. "Testament of Youth: Vera Brittain's Literary Quest for Peace." Coleman 169-190.
- Freedman, Diane P. "Editor's Introduction." Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal. Ed. Diane P. Freedman. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995. xii-xviii.
- Fyrth, Jim. Foreword. *Fyrth and Alexander* 23-30.
- , and Sally Alexander, ed. Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991.
- Gambrell, Alice. Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Garrioch, David. "The Historical Background." *Kenwood* 3-18.
- Geismar, Maxwell. Introduction. *North* 5-13.

- Gelpi, Barbara Charlesworth. "A Common Language: The American Woman Poet." Gilbert and Gubar 269-279.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. Introduction. Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets. Ed. Gilbert and Gubar. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979. xv-xxvi.
- Gusdorf, Georges. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." Olney p?-p?
- Gunn, Janet Varner. Towards a Poetics of Experience. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1982.
- Guttman, Allen. The Wound in the Heart. New York: Free P of Glencoe, 1962.
- Handley, George B. "'It's an Unbelievable Story': Testimony and Truth in the Work of Rosario Ferre and Rigoberta Menchu." Lashgari 62-79.
- Harlow, Barbara. Resistance Literature. London: Methuen and Company, 1987.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. Introduction. Holocaust Remembrance. Ed. Geoffrey Hartman. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. 1-22.
- . "Shoah and Intellectual Witness." Partisan Review January 1998: 37-48.
- Herman, Judith. Trauma and Recovery. 1992. New York: Basic Books, 1997.
- Hicks, Granville. "Writers in the Thirties." As We Saw the Thirties. Ed. Rita James Simon. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1967. 76-101.
- Higonnet, Margaret R. "Civil Wars and Sexual Territories." Cooper, Munich, and Squier 80-96.
- . Introduction. Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars. Ed. Margaret Higonnet, et al. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987. 1-17.
- . "Not So Quiet in No-Woman's-Land." Cooke and Woollacott 205-226.
- Hopkins, Kenneth. "Gamel Woolsey: A Poet from Aiken, South Carolina." The South Carolina Review 12:2 (Spring 1980): 31-46.

- Jakobson, Roman. "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles." Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. 1041-1044.
- Jarrell, Randall. Poetry and the Age. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.
- . Rev. of The Green Wave, by Muriel Rukeyser. Nation (May 8, 1948): 512-513.
- Jelinek, Estelle, ed. Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1980.
- . "Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition." Jelinek 1-20.
- Jones, Llewellyn. First Impressions: Essays on Poetry, Criticism, and Prosody. 1925. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries P, 1968.
- "Josephine Herbst, Novelist and Social-Political Reporter, Dead." New York Times January 29, 1969: 21.
- Kadar, Marlene. "Coming to Terms: Life Writing--From Genre to Critical Practice." Essays on Life Writing. Ed. Marlene Kadar. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992. 3-16.
- Kaiser, Jo Ellen Green. "Displaced Modernism: Millay and the Triumph of Sentimentality." Freedman 27-40.
- Kalaidjian, Walter. American Culture Between the Wars. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- . "Marketing Modern Poetry and the Southern Public Sphere." Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading. 1996. Ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999. 297-319.
- Kaplan, Caren. "Resisting Autobiography: Outlaw Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects." Smith and Watson De/Colonizing 115-138.
- Kaplan, Temma. Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.



- Keegan, John. The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme.  
New York: Penguin Books, 1978.
- Kenwood, Alun. Preface. The Spanish Civil War: A Cultural and Historical Reader.  
Alun Kenwood, ed. Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1993. vii-xiv.
- Kertesz, Louise. The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State  
UP, 1980.
- Knibb, James. "Literary Strategies of War, Strategies of Literary War." Bevan 7-24.
- Kramer, Hilton. "Who Was Josephine Herbst?". The New Criterion September 1984:  
1-14.
- Kremer, S. Lillian. "The Holocaust and the Witnessing Imagination." Lashgari 231-246.
- Krupat, Arnold. "Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self." American  
Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect. Madison: U of Wisconsin, 171-194.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. La poesie comme experience. Paris: Christian Bourgois,  
1986.
- Langer, Elinor. Josephine Herbst. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1983.
- Langer, Lawrence. "Remembering Survival." Hartman 70-80.
- Lardner, Ring, Jr. Introduction. Bessie and Prago 15-21.
- Lashgari, Deirdre. Introduction. Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as  
Transgression. Ed. Deirdre Lashgari. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1995.
- Levi, Jan Heller. Editor's Introduction. A Muriel Rukeyser Reader. Ed. Jan Heller Levi.  
New York: Norton, 1994. xvii-xx.
- Lifton, Robert Jay. The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life. 1979.  
Washington, DC: American Psychiatric P, 1996.
- Macdonald, Nancy. Homage to the Spanish Exiles: Voices from the Spanish Civil War.  
New York: Insight Books, 1987.
- MacLeish, Archibald. Air Raid: A Verse Play for Radio. New York: Harcourt, Brace,  
and Company. 1938.

- de Madariaga, Salvador. Foreword. Writers in Arms. By Frederick R. Benson. New York: New York UP, 1967. vii-xiii.
- Mangini, Shirley. Memories of Resistance: Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War. New Haven: Yale UP, 1995.
- Mann, John. "Carolyn Forché: Poetry and Survival." American Poetry 3:3 (1986): 51-69.
- Marcus, Jane. Afterword: "Corpus/Corps/Corpse: Writing the Body in/at War." In Not So Quiet. . . By Helen Zenna Smith. 1930. New York: Feminist P, 1989. 241-300.
- Marcus, Laura. Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice. New York: Manchester UP, 1994.
- Mariani, Gigliola Sacerdoti. "'Barcelona 1936' -- A Moment of Proof for Muriel Rukeyser." Rivista di studi anglo-americani 6:8 (1990): 387-396.
- Moody, Richard. Lillian Hellman, Playwright. New York: Pegasus, 1972.
- Morehouse, Val. Review of Up from the Cellar by Lini DeVries. Booklist January 15, 1980: 702.
- Muste, John. Say that We Saw Spain Die. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1966.
- Nekola, Charlotte, and Paula Rabinowitz, eds. Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940. New York: Feminist P, 1987.
- . "Women and U.S. Literary Radicalism." Nekola and Rabinowitz 1-16.
- . "Worlds Unseen: Political Women Journalists and the 1930s." Nekola and Rabinowitz 189-198.
- Nelson, Cary. "Lyric Politics: The Poetry of Edwin Rolfe." Trees Became Torches: Selected Poems. Ed. Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995. 1-39.
- , and Jefferson Hendricks, eds. Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. New York: Routledge, 1996.

- . Our First Last Poets. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981.
- . Repression and Recovery. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988.
- Nelson, Nancy Owen, ed. Private Voices, Public Lives. Denton, Texas: U of North Texas P, 1995.
- Neuman, Shirley, ed. Autobiography and Questions of Gender. Portland: Frank Cass, 1991.
- North, Joseph. Prologue. New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties. Ed. Joseph North. New York: International Publishers, 1969.
- Ockerstrom, Lolly. "The Other Narratives: British and American Women Writers and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939." Diss. Northeastern U, 1997.
- Olney, James, ed. Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.
- Orwell, George. Homage to Catalonia. 1938. London: Secker and Warburg, 1986.
- O'Sheel, Shaemas. Introduction. Seven Poets in Search of an Answer. New York: Bernard Ackerman, 1944. 7-11.
- Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. Stealing the Language. Boston: Beacon P, 1986.
- Perez, Janet. "Behind the Lines: The Spanish Civil War and Women Writers." Perez and Aycock 161-174.
- , and Wendell Aycock. Introduction. The Spanish Civil War in Literature. Ed. Perez and Aycock. Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 1990. 1-8.
- Plath, Sylvia. The Bell Jar. 1963. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.
- Preston, Paul. "Worlds Unseen: Political Women Journalists and the 1930s." Nekola and Rabinowitz 189-198.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. "Women and U.S. Literary Radicalism." Nekola and Rabinowitz 1-18.
- Ransom, John Crowe. "The Poet as Woman." The World's Body. By John Crowe Ransom. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938. 76-110.

- Rich, Adrienne. Introduction. In A Muriel Rukeyser Reader. New York: Norton, 1994. xi-xvi.
- Roberts, Nora Ruth. Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.
- Roberts, Sheila. Introduction. In Still the Frame Holds: Essays on Women Poets and Writers. Ed. Sheila Roberts. San Bernadino: Borgo P, 1993. 7-13.
- Rolfe, Edwin. The Lincoln Battalion. 1939. New York: Haskell House, 1974.
- Rollyson, Carl. Nothing Ever Happens to the Brave: The Story of Martha Gellhorn. New York: St. Martin's P, 1990.
- Rosenthal, Marilyn. Poetry of the Spanish Civil War. New York: New York UP, 1975.
- Rubin, Hank. Spain's Cause Was Mine. Carbondale: Southern Illinois P, 1997.
- Ruddick, Sara. "Notes Toward a Feminist Peace Politics." Cooke and Woollacott 109-127.
- Said, Edward. "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors." Critical Inquiry Winter 1989: 222-223.
- Salzman, Jack, and Leo Zanderer, ed. Social Poetry of the 1930s. New York: Burt Franklin, 1978.
- Saywell, Shirley. Women in War. Markham (Ontario): Penguin Books, 1985.
- Schweik, Susan. A Gulf So Deeply Cut. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991.
- Shaw, Harry. Dictionary of Literary Terms. New York: McGrawhill, 1972.
- Showalter, Elaine., The New Feminist Criticism: Women, Literature, and Theory. New York: Pantheon, 1985.
- . Introduction. These Modern Women. Ed. Elaine Showalter. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist P, 1978. 3-30.
- Simon, John. "Pentimental Journey." Hudson Review 26:4 (Winter 1973-1974): 743-752.

- Smith, Leonora. "Carolyn Forche: Poet of Witness." Roberts 15-28.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. Introduction. De/Colonizing the Subject. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. xiii-xxxi.
- , and ---. Introduction. Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography. Ed. Smith and Watson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. 1-24.
- Solow, Herbert. "Minutiae of Left-Wing Literary History." Partisan Review March 1938: 59.
- Sommer, Doris. "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's *Testimonios* and the Plural Self." Life / Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography. Ed. Bella Brodsky and Celeste Schenck. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988. 107-130.
- . "Resisting the Heat." Cultures of United States Imperialism. Ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Song, Nam Sun. "Metaphor and Metonymy." Relevance Theory: Applications and Implications. Ed. Robyn Carston and Seiji Uchida. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "Selves in Hiding." Jelinek 112-132.
- Stanton, Domna. "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" The Female Autograph. Ed. Domna Stanton. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984. 3-20.
- Strong, Tracy B., and Helene Keyssar. Right in Her Soul: The Life of Anna Louise Strong. New York: Random House, 1983.
- Susman, Warren I. "The Thirties." Coben and Ratner 179-218.
- Sutton, Constance R., ed. Feminism, Nationalism, and Militarism. Arlington, Virginia: American Anthropological Association, 1995.
- Tal, Kali. Worlds of Hurt. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Terris, Virginia R. "Muriel Rukeyser: A Retrospective." The American Poetry Review May-June 1974: 10-15.
- Tisa, John. The Palette and the Flame. New York: International Publishers, 1979.

- Van Devanter, Lynda, and Joan A. Furey. Preface. Visions of War, Dreams of Peace.  
Ed. Van Devanter and Furey. New York: Warner Books, 1991. xxi-xxiii.
- Watts, Emily Stipes. The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945. Austin: U of  
Texas P, 1977.
- Weidemann, Barbara. Josephine Herbst's Short Fiction. London: Associated UP, 1998.
- Weintraub, Stanley. The Last Great Cause. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968.
- Whalen-Bridge, John. Political Fiction and the American Self. Urbana: U of Illinois P,  
1998.
- Wieviorka, Annette. "On Testimony." Hartman 23-32.
- Williams, Oscar. New Poems. New York: Howell and Soskin, 1943.
- . Introduction. The War Poets. Ed. Oscar Williams. New York: The John Day  
Company, 1945. 3-11.
- Wright, William. Lillian Hellman. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986.
- Yalkowsky, Stanley. The Murder of the Rosenbergs. New York: Stanley Yalkowsky,  
1990.
- "Year in Review 1996: Social Protection." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. <[http://  
search.eb.com/bol/topic?eu=123890&sctn=7&pm=1](http://search.eb.com/bol/topic?eu=123890&sctn=7&pm=1)> [Accessed 16 June 2000].