

Review: *Spectral Spain: Haunted Houses, Silent Spaces and Traumatic Memories in Post-Franco Gothic Fiction*

by Heidi Backes

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Spectral Spain: Haunted Houses, Silent Spaces and Traumatic Memories in Post-Franco Gothic Fiction (2014), by Heidi Backes, maps a compelling route through damning literary ruminations on the rule (and aftermath) of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. Backes's analysis explores trauma and memory in historical Gothic fictions relating to the period, foregrounding women's experiences (and narrative expressions) of the era's military and humanitarian consequences. The chapters of the volume are structured within three thematic sections: 'Part I: Haunted Houses', 'Part II: Silent Spaces', and 'Part III: Traumatic Memories', accompanied by a rich introductory essay and concluding reflections.

Firstly, the introduction places the reader within the journey of Backes' research by questioning the term 'to haunt'. The concept of the "spectral past" reinforces the latency of ideas of haunting in the present, where the 'ghost' continues to evoke traumatic experiences (for example, experiences of war following Franco's dictatorship) while, in a similar fashion, the Gothic aesthetics of Francoism also extend back elsewhere, for example into Spanish historical cinema. However, as Backes damningly illustrates, there has been a lack of critical attention to women's authorship of literary Gothic in this regard, particularly in the case of texts by Mercè Rodoreda, Adelaida García Morales, Ana María Matute, Cristina Fernández Cubas and Espido Freire; alongside novels by male authors like Julio Llamazares and Carlos Ruiz Zafón, whose work provides records of the interaction between (female) voices and the rural spaces of the region. In order to seek out the spectral pieces forming this multilayered puzzle of attestations, Backes determines to trace those female ghostly testimonies (to use Derrida's terminology) which remain haunting as spectres of a past civil

war, now giving face and form to the socio-historical traumas of the Spanish nation through its appearances in contemporary Spanish Gothic literature.

In PART I, 'Haunted Houses' are exposed as the uncanny space that predicts the urge of those ghosts to speak up. Here, the 'Female Gothic'—first coined by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1978)—is explained in terms of gendered, classed and racialised paradigms of womanhood within the Transition era. Defining domesticity within her literary corpus, Backes oscillates between the 'angel' and the 'monster' and between the 'private' and the 'public' spheres, symbolizing the house as being at once a secure space and also a synonym of entrapment, claustrophobia and fear in female experiences of the time. In Chapter 1, the author examines Mercè Rodoreda's novel *A Broken Mirror* (1974), a regional memoir of a Barcelona suffering the anxiety of Franco's death. As Backes illustrates, Rodoreda's memoir illuminates how 'society is able to look upon its own reflection as a whole, undistorted image, projected equally onto the past, present and future' (p. 39). In Chapter 2, Backes explores the transgressive narration of Adelaida García Morales in *Bene* (1985), analysing the treatment of Roma and post-war southern Spain via Julia Kristeva's discussion of abjection and the authority of terror in *Powers of Horror* (1980). In Chapter 3, the 'Angel of the House' and notions of 'the Other' are examined via the male gaze and ideas of Gothic monstrosity as a means to explore the sexuality of women in the Transition Era. Subversion and subordination regarding women's roles are explained by Backes in the light of their madness or death, these representations offering a mechanism with which to question the reality of such women's trauma. In Chapter 4, Backes finally explores the haunted house as a battlefield, drawing an analogy between the Battle of Prague and the Spanish Civil War which highlights the importance of the past and its return to the present. Backes observes how Ana María Matute's novel *Family Demons* (2014) often resembles experiences from the Catalan author's own infancy and youth, using the loss of innocent childhood in order to awaken a social consciousness and witnessing of collective trauma post-war Spain.

In PART II, Backes explores concepts of mourning and the 'Great Trauma'. In Chapter 5, Backes analyses spectrality and mourning on the rural scenarios of the dark post-war era in Asturias and Cantabria. Afterwards in Chapter 6, Backes scrutinizes Julio Llamazares's *The Yellow Rain* (1988) as a restoration of the spectral countryside of Aragón, exhuming a historical wound. In Chapter 7, Backes examines *El Columpio* (1995) as the second of three novels by Cristina Fernández Cubas to expose the Catalan inheritance transcending the barriers of time, showing past times as the maternal ghost embracing the protagonist's fear to heal their trauma, the importance of silence in the process of mourning, and the anxiety of healing that trauma, establishing memoir as a necessary key.

In PART III, the collectiveness of 'Traumatic Memories' are explored through a child's eyes. In Chapters 8 and 9, Backes focuses on the negative experiences of female children as a reiterative force which can render historical traumas articulable in the present. Lastly, in Chapter 10 Backes draws together the conclusions of her exploration of post-Franco Spanish literature. The author emphasizes the bifurcation of political ideology between the left and the right, as well as the consequential social division, drawing links between her literary corpus and the collision of political laws by the progressivism and conservatism of today's political parties. In the rest of the world, these nationalist concepts are extrapolated to feminist, Second Republic, anarchist, communist and LGBTQ+ rights. Here, Backes presents an exhaustive study of Francoism and the faith of Christianity in order to denounce the spectral trauma and marginalization of these identities due to the effects of social terror in a fragmented Spain.

Spectral Spain opens scrutiny to Spaniards' ghosts, as Backes intertwines Derridean notions of the spectre with the connotations of the phantom by Abraham and Torok to deal with trauma in Spanish Gothic literature. The psychological process of healing trauma, the process of mourning, and the melancholia of the historical wound is prismatically approached through Freud, Caruth, Luckhurst and LaCapra in order 'to foster a more inclusive national memory that acknowledges trauma, instead of pushing our ghosts to the margins of society where they will inevitably continue to haunt us' (p. 204). In so doing,

Backes poses a definitive discussion of how these women-centred narratives compromise a democratic, catholic and oppressive Spain, bearing witness to a contemporary nationality worried about the future of a fragile democracy. In doing so, *Spectral Spain: Haunted Houses, Silent Spaces and Traumatic Memories in Post-Franco Gothic Fiction* launches a new pathway into Spanish Gothic literature that enlightens approaches to the hermeneutics of historical and collective trauma experiences of an authoritative dictator, and of civil war. Heidi Backes has established a route along which to chart where the trauma of war and Franco's dictatorship has left vestiges for reconstructing the past of a broken Spain, resurging in contemporary fictions for the healing of national traumas.