

The Fascist Narrative of Concha Espina

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It is well known among Hispanists that Concha Espina (1869-1955) was a fascist for a significant period of her life. Less well known, however, is the process which led her to that way of thinking, and even less familiar are the rhetorical apparatuses and structures of her narratives which undergird that political process. Indeed the language of Concha Espina demonstrates the manners in which politics and poetics converge at times treacherously.¹

Clearly Espina was not the only prominent writer to have sung the praises of insurgent fascism in the Spain of the thirties and forties. Julio Rodríguez Puértolas has offered what amounts to a catalogue of writers who at one or more points in their lives sided publically either with ultra-nationalist (anti-republican) positions or with the man who would become the most powerful symbol and proponent of that nationalism: José Antonio Primo de Rivera. Among those who figure on the Rodríguez Puértolas (black) list are none other than Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, Camilo José Cela, as well as prominent writers of the early twentieth century such as Gregorio Marañón, Manuel Machado, Ortega y Gasset, and countless others—it is a two-volume work—, some of whom are still alive and now embarrassed for having expressed such opinions or having participated in what appears today as (at best) dubious political activity: authoritarian, absolutist, hierarchical, and imperialist.

The appearance of fascist skeletons in the closet has obsessed historians and critics of European literature since the end of World War II,

perhaps more so in countries other than Spain and Portugal, for a variety of reasons, the most obvious being the Allied victory and immediate establishment of democratic institutions in most western European countries as a result of the war. Indeed the Peninsula is “different,” since the skeletons were not exactly in the closet. It took them thirty-six years to get in, and even in 1975, the peaceful Spanish transition from dictatorship to democracy was achieved, as we have been told on numerous occasions, amidst a spirit of reconciliation. While the kind of tortuous moral and political introspection among German intellectuals of the post-war period was never part of Spanish political culture, there is ample evidence in the thirties, as Rodríguez Puértolas’s book shows, of an exuberant right-wing passion, a language that falls under the category of what Walter Benjamin called the aesthetization of politics (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 241-42).² Espina’s civil-war work is an example, and although she became less committed to fascist ideology in the post-civil war period, she never broke with it publically, and as a result she was held in high regard by the Franco regime as is demonstrated by the street in Madrid named after her.

Naturally Concha Espina is in Rodríguez Puértolas’s inventory as she should be (137-39, 398-99), yet women writers are not given a great deal of space. Mercifully, this is one of the few lists of prominent literary figures in which most of us are pleased not to see many women.³ Carmen Icaza, Rosa Aramburu, María Luisa Linares, Mercedes Ortoll, Concha Linares-Becerra, Mercedes Fórmica, along with Espina, all share an inclination toward the sentimental novel which was the appropriate genre for the shaping of young feminine sensibilities as to the morality of the fascist social project (Rodríguez Puértolas 250; 492-93, 507), much within the ideology of Pilar Primo de Rivera, sister of José Antonio, and head of Sección Femenina—the women’s branch of the fascist Falange Española. The predilection for rigid gender roles can be linked to the fact that some women embraced fascism as an affirmation of the constructed truth behind those roles.

Still, how do we deal with women fascist writers in the wake of late twentieth-century feminism? Admittedly, there were few, but these few might shed light on a variety of issues—not only the nature of totalitarian thought and behavior but on a possible relationship between the notion of “feminine difference” and an essentialist world view shared by those who adopted fascism as their political creed in the thirties. Pertinent also are the workings of language in the creation of a right-wing political ideology. As an exploration of these issues, I would like to present the curious case of Concha Espina, not only the most interesting but the

most famous among the few Spanish women fascist writers. Her case is just that, a single case, but it is also connected to the entanglements of assessing and understanding right-wing texts within a post-war political culture in which these writings are no longer viable political statements.

One detects traces of the nationalistic rhetoric in nearly all of Concha Espina's writing. Note, for example, the following words that appeared as a dedicatory postscript to one of her better known novels, *Altar mayor* (1926):

Prócer Asturias, yunque de mi raza, templo de su espíritu, corona de Iberia, solar de sus príncipes cristianos, cuna de la España Mayor; noble tierra de mi padre, donde se hincó mi apellido en el recio cordal del Pirineo, sobre entrañas de cuarzos y de pórfidos; región brava y dulce, muelle y heroica, batida y acicalada por los cierzos del monte y de las espumas de la mar, por el hierro y la hulla, por la niebla y el sol, por la cándida nieve. (218)

The reference to Covadonga—the site of the Reconquest—the melding of a geography to a national essence, and the appeal to a historical sensibility which has more to do with Sacred History than with a desire to figure out what happened, make it at least conceivable that Espina would later embrace Spanish fascism some four years after the publication of *Altar mayor*.⁴

However, while there are nationalistic underpinnings in much of Espina's narratives, and although Espina's embrace of Spanish fascism in the mid-thirties is not altogether inexplicable in the light of her consistent reverence for everything Catholic and Spanish, there are features of her pre-civil war writing that do not conform to those tendencies, at times defying the political ideology she espoused passionately from 1934 through the nineteen forties. Up to 1934 she had written numerous works in the manner of the "sentimental novel." These third-person omniscient narratives often deal with some sort of family or amorous relationship in which women suffer emotional tragedies—death of a mother, unrequited love, the advances of irresponsible or egotistical men: Carmen of *La niña de Luzmela* (1909) is a girl whose mother and father die and as a result is left in the hands of an uncaring and materialistic aunt; Teresina of *Altar mayor* is in love with her cousin, Javier, too weak to free himself from his intransigent and arrogant mother who does not approve of the relationship. In her most highly acclaimed narrative, *La esfinge maragata* (translated into English as *Mariflor* [1914]), the female protagonist must choose

between an arranged marriage that will save her family from financial ruin and a writer too unsure of his love for her to struggle against the forces of conformity that make the love relationship an impossible one. All these novels have a great deal to do with the freedom and equality of women or lack thereof, a theme which, at first glance, hardly lends itself to the representation of the glories of nationhood or of a shared culture to be defended at all costs.⁵

The narratives Espina published in the twenties are marked by the attempt to harmonize a voice which prides itself on its single-mindedness and another which surrenders to love for a national geography and religious identity. In fact Espina expressed guarded enthusiasm for the Republic when it was first proclaimed (Lavergne 393). Before the revolution of the Asturian miners in 1934, she wrote a novel, *El metal de los muertos* (1931), severely critical of working conditions of Asturian miners. Her defense of the rights of women was well known throughout her career as a novelist and contributor to the political journals of her day. One novel in particular, *La virgen prudente* (1929), stands as a testimonial to her espousal of feminism, an ideology which had been part of the political discourse of Spain in the first third of the twentieth century (Scanlon 195-257), along with a loyalty to her community. The narrator tells us early in the novel that the protagonist has three motivations which become the leitmotifs informing the entire novel: “*querer, saber, poder*” (I: 834, Espina’s emphasis). The dilemma is that Spanish society, with Madrid serving as the microcosm, is artificially organized to oppose these goals: “*querer es esencialmente sufrir*” (I: 834, Espina’s emphasis). However, while Aurora is a woman who defies the norms of her day, a “superwoman,” as Mary Lee Bretz calls many of Espina’s protagonists (39), she remains consistent in her love for her land and for the beliefs and customs tied to it. Most admirable about Aurora and many of Espina’s female characters is that, with all their declarations of independence, they never belie their womanhood in all its socially constructed apparatus:

Un alba española quería nacer ... el aire bíblico de *una mano extendida sobre las gentes*. Ya nadie anhelaría la aparición de un seráfico sexo, destinado a cuidar de los niños, las flores y las penas. El Santo Creador que modeló en la mujer la ondulación del talle ... la elegancia de los dedos acariciadores, y el rasgo expectante de los ojos, se valía de Aurora de España para reclamar las prerrogativas del feminismo cristiano en toda su ingénita significación. (I: 853)

Here is Concha Espina in her characteristically transparent narrative voice. She relies on Christianity and on a natural order to state her case, despite the possibility that the defense of the rights of women may stand in opposition, or at least at the margin, of that very Christianity. There is no denying a note of conflict within the force of the above passage: she prophesies, on the one hand, the disappearance of woman's role as the suffering caretaker of children and flowers, yet at the same time, she exalts the Holy Creator's shaping of women's undulating body and the elegance of her caressing fingers. Our author wants to believe in women's divinely inspired sacrifices and criticize them too. It is this unresolved conflict that lies at the root of her subsequent adoption of a fascist ideology in which the criticism of woman's inherent capacities for sacrifice wanes and her equality to man is no longer an important issue.⁶

With the advent of the Second Republic and the subsequent political turmoil, the tensions evinced in her egalitarian feminism no longer manifest themselves as she adopts fascist ideology, a turn which gives rise to other types of problems. Her political trajectory from the "prerogatives of Christian feminism" to what will become in 1934 an unbridled conviction regarding the rectitude of José Antonio Primo de Rivera's movement has its inner logic. Christianity, or more specifically Spanish Catholicism, stands as her eternal pillar, her link among a variety of unlike quantities. Within this panoramic view of Espina's work, we can speculate on the specific historical moment at which Espina took her turn toward the Falange from the proclamation of the Second Republic to the beginning of the civil war. For a woman who had written of her geographic attachment to Asturias, the revolt of the miners in October of 1934 could not have been a greater calamity. Her reaction to it in her fiction might be compared to the response of alarm and horror on the part of some enlightened intellectuals to the French Revolution in the culminating decade of the eighteenth century. The rebellion was an assault on everything decent, on the integrity of Spanish history and culture and on the supposed good faith of those, like herself, who enjoyed social privilege. More important, its anticlerical nature marked the most sinister intentions: to rid the country of sacred traditions and beliefs. Espina's post-1934 writing, as we shall see, makes these ideological positions all too clear. It is very likely that her change of heart developed as she was writing what turned out to be her most lengthy (and incoherent) novel, *Flor de ayer* (1934), in which characters suddenly become fascists without having expressed or demonstrated the slightest interest in politics previous to their conversions.⁷

Equally significant for the understanding of Espina's ideology are the constructed feminine aspects of the Falangist Movement. Pilar Primo

de Rivera, José Antonio's sister, founded the Sección Femenina de Falange—an organization later endorsed by Espina (Díaz Castañón 24; Lavergne 118)—in 1934 shortly after the Falange itself had begun to organize in opposition to the Republic. In her memoirs, Pilar Primo de Rivera relates that her organization was conceived to provide assistance to the men who had been detained for illegal activity (65-72). María Teresa Gallego Méndez corroborates this explanation pointing out that the idea of a fascist women's group was in fact José Antonio's and that Pilar, along with a handful of women connected to the Falange by their relationships with men, founded the group in obedience to her brother who had become the bodily representation of the savior of Spain—the strong and charismatic man on whom the movement must depend. Pilar, in turn, became the head and the model not only of the Sección Femenina but of womanhood itself. According to Gallego Méndez (26), one of the early manifestoes calling Spanish women to the grandiose task that their gender demands of them was written not by Pilar but José Antonio. If the historian's attribution is accurate, the following words from the manifesto reveal a unique case of transvestism, not unlike the gender ambivalence which, as we shall see, unwittingly characterizes the writing of Concha Espina:

Mujeres españolas: Falange Española de las J.O.N.S. [Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista] incorpora nuestra ayuda a su tarea. Reclama nuestro esfuerzo como contribución al duro propósito de hacer una España más grande y más justa.... Nosotras, mujeres españolas, no sólo padecemos los males que a España entera alcanzan, sino que somos heridas directamente por efectos que a nosotras especialmente toca sufrir; asistimos al espectáculo de las angustias internas en las casas, acongojadas por los efectos de una economía injusta y absurda, y el fracaso espiritual de tantos hombres que tenemos cerca: padres, hermanos, maridos, hijos, a los que una época sin fe en Dios ni en España llenó de aridez y desaliento.... ¡Arriba España! (in Gallego Méndez 26, 212)

Similarly, according to Gallego Méndez, the first series of statutes of the Sección Femenina were written under the direction of José Antonio (26-27), and were designed to ensure a woman's role in the movement. Women's work was of the utmost necessity for the fulfillment of the noble goals of the Falange "to fecundate a healthy spirit of love of Spain and the State ... to construct a solid base which only woman can create in all endeavors of life" (in Gallego Méndez 213). Femininity is thus based not on equality but on a "healthy spirit of love" for the nation

(or the motherland or fatherland), and this “fecundity” (akin to the Catholic insistence on sex solely for propagation) is necessary for motherhood as well as for the growth of the movement and the country.⁸

With the outbreak of the civil war, Espina devoted her narratives exclusively to the cause of insurgent and militaristic Spain. Among the best known of her fascist narratives are: *Retaguardia* (1937) in which the main characters are under siege by Republican officials intent on ridding themselves of those working against them; *Alas invencibles* (1938) where a love conflict is resolved by fleeing from Republican to Nationalist territory by way of an airplane, the “invincible wings” of national glory; and *Luna roia* (1938), a collection of short narratives, the majority dealing with the Asturian revolt leading to the war. The most noteworthy story in this collection is the autobiographical narrative, “La carpeta gris,” in which a woman writer living in Republican Torremar risks her own safety by secretly writing a novel attacking the Republic, a reference to Espina’s own *Retaguardia*. Shortly after the war, Espina wrote *Princesas del martirio*, a novel based on a supposedly true story of three nuns who were raped and murdered by Republican foot soldiers.

However, while these narratives are clear in their political content, they do not preclude the persistence of the former feminist Concha Espina, a Concha Espina who seemed to write and live with the tension between equality and difference as elaborated in her creation of Aurora de España. These later works are unique not only because few women writers wrote from the Nationalist side (see Mangini), but also because of a feminine voice that still wants to rise above political ideology. The image of femininity drawn repeatedly in *Retaguardia* is an example. It reveals not only a politics in contrast with her earlier form of feminism but also an unconscious tension in its articulation. The narrator refers, for example, to decadent women who frivolously practice “perverse Malthusian customs” (I: 1025) that are in dire need of correction. These “women for sale” — “mujeres de saldo” (I: 1025)—serve as a contrast to the self-confident female protagonist, Alicia, whose love for Rafael, a fascist prisoner of the Republic, redeems her of any “universal sins” (I: 1025). If it were not for Rafael, Alicia would have succumbed to these “Malthusian” means of protection, something in direct opposition to the task José Antonio had assigned to the mothers of Spain. Later Espina explicitly invokes the name of José Antonio to make certain that her readers understand that his execution for treason was a “calamity” (I: 1027). Thus for women the message is that there is strength both in submission and in reproduction.

While the influence of the Sección Femenina is brazenly transparent here and elsewhere in these novels, one can also hear a muffled and self-subverting voice, since Espina needs the image of the victimized

woman to make her narratives work. Alicia and her fascist bretheren have been stripped of their dignity by the abuses of the Republic. On the one hand, there is a clear tone of denunciation in the images of decadence caused by well-to-do females in the above passage, but at the same time, women will embody the salvation from that very decadence in their "solemn mandate." The representation of femininity vacillates, at times heroic and at others subjugated not only by the greediness of the Republic but by a crude and timeless masculinity unconnected to a specific culture or place.

In these fascist texts, Espina often opposes femininity to hypermasculinity as in the initial commentaries that set the tone for "La carpeta gris." While the men responsible for keeping the protagonist under house arrest speak of atrocities committed by the rebellious fascists, the narrator assures the readers that in fact it was the leftist "communards" who are responsible for rape and pillage. One of the Republican officers "Oyó contar horrores que los 'rebeldes' [the fascists] hacían con las mujeres y los niños, achacándoles, cínica y perversamente los crímenes congénitos a la comuna" (II: 624). Thus the eyewitness testimony goes unheeded by a narrator whose knowledge of the entire situation is not unlike that of a divinity. It must be accepted as a description of natural order: the brutality of the "comuna" is traditional and recurring: "por método y costumbre" (II: 624). Much of the dramatic tension of "La carpeta gris" rests on this very opposition, the fact that the helpless single mother is under the political domination of men with a history of rape. Similarly in *Princesas del martirio* (1940), three nurses who are sexually abused and murdered render the powerlessness of women a necessary factor for the development of the novel.

This unwitting tension in the narrative discourse of Espina's fascist writing manifests itself in the representation of the war itself and the commentaries on wartime violence. In *Retaguardia* we hear a passionate voice decrying the disasters of war, a voice characteristic of *La virgen prudente* in its merging of narrator and protagonist. While in the previous novel, Aurora de España offers a theoretical critique of war in her thesis, the narrator of *Retaguardia* engages in a more bodily criticism: the characters see and sense a horror passed on to the readers, as Mary Lee Bretz has pointed out. This novel has many of the conventions of anti-war literature and art (Goya's *Disasters of War* and Picasso's *Guernika*) in which the celebration of a victory or the lamentation of a defeat are meaningless in a world in which political violence debases all forms of nationalism. In a decisive moment of the narrative, the protagonists desperately search for Rafael in the waters of Torremar's Atlantic and discover the macabre results of a reprisal for a bombing raid. The bodies are barely

visible under the waves (I: 1066, Bretz 110-11). One might compare these graphic descriptions of wartime violence to Max Aub's description of madness during the last months of the war in his *Campo de los almendros*. In both novels the representation of war has the quality of a spiritual and universal mourning in addition to a detailed and specific description. Although the political positions of both authors could not be more opposed to one another, it is the same misery that they describe, a war caused not as much by a faction of human beings as by humanity.

However, there is something unique to Concha Espina's critique of state sponsored violence in her fascist novels. Again a comparison with Aub, the Spanish civil war epic novelist par excellence, is telling. *Campo de los almendros* (1968) lacks *Retaguardia's* inner conflict. In Aub's novel the grotesque images and apparent discursiveness are cohesive structural elements, organized deliberately to achieve the desired effect of chaos. In Espina's writing, on the other hand, the macabre and distorted elements do not compute within the thematic structure, for centered within her universal critique of war stands an undisguised argument for its necessity. In difficult unison with her pacifist voice, throughout *Retaguardia* one hears the dissonant calls for punishment and reprisal for crimes against traditional Spain, cries that were not part of her earlier social critique. In a chapter titled "Satanás," there is a convoluted narrative justification of a bombing raid aimed at civilians. It is unclear in the novel if the Nationalist military objective was to destroy the arms factories of the Republic or to punish its residents, some of whom, like the protagonists, could very well be supporters of Franco. In either case, the citizens of Torremar are caught unaware of the attack, and the raid is successful. That many of the dead or wounded in the bombing were not part of the Republican military is justified by the narrator in an accusing tone that defies the pacifism of her own voice: "Los que pretendieron destruir la industria bélica [the fascist bombers] en los confines de la ciudad pecadora, se encontraron con la indisciplina de un pueblo, *todos los camaradas son jefes*, y, en su virtud, mandan todos; por eso nadie queda para obedecer" (Espina's emphasis, I: 1042). Thus civilians were punished as if by divine intervention for their lack of order and disobedience. Moreover, Espina uses philosophical and literary authorities to argue her case. The epigraph of this chapter is a quote from Aristotle's *Politics* critical of the excesses of liberty and disorder (I: 1041). Later on, Espina will make use of Quevedo's *Política de Dios y gobierno de Cristo* in which the poet justifies a war against heretics in true Augustinian fashion and affirms that peace and war are indeed compatible: "Buscar y colocar la paz con la guerra es de ángeles y serafines..." (I: 1048).

The collection of narratives titled *Luna roja* was published in the same year as *Retaguardia*, yet their subject matter uncovers the historical and ideological underpinnings of the entire body of Espina's fascist work. Most of them deal not with the civil war but with the event that led to her change of politics: the revolt of Asturias in 1934. While the intention of these short narratives is to lambaste those who pushed for some form of social democracy in defiance of land owners and the Church, the formulation of those statements is not nearly as clear. In the opening story, "El Dios de los niños" (II: 576-85) the historical analogies are so convoluted as to render them an unwitting affirmation on the precariousness of the very act of drawing historical parallels. The story deals with the innocent victims of the rebellion, including those who have been duped into supporting it. Typical of Espina's need for marginalization, the Church—both as Institution and as a local place of worship and schooling—is the prime victim. Were it not for the humble Xuaco, "the God of the children," as well as the military suppression of the rebellion (a suppression which was in fact extremely brutal [Brenan 288-89; Jackson 159-60]), a group of children would have been burned along with the school in an act of anticlerical barbarism. The narrator, intent on bringing Spanish history into the depiction of events (not infrequent in Espina's writing) draws an analogy difficult to grasp: those who are burning churches and priests in 1934 are far more vile than those who burned French invaders in 1808 because the latter were thwarted from doing so by the procession of the Holy Sacrament. Not only are the twentieth century communards demonic, they stand in contrast to the burning hoards of yesteryear who represent "gallardía" and "patriotismo" (II: 580). Yet after a close inspection of the comparison, one cannot help surmise that the precise elements of it are superfluous in relation to the rhetorical embellishment of both situations: May of 1808—a reminder of Goya's painting—and October of 1934—a more urgent reminder of anti-Catholic atrocities that are occurring as the collection is published.

This use of unlikely comparisons and situations in Espina's project of purification is characteristic. Throughout her fascist writing Espina constructs situations in which Nature, and women as the primary element of that Nature, collaborate with her narrators in seemingly unnatural ways. It is not unbelievable in Espina's design that a starving wolf abstains from devouring a pet lamb belonging to a little girl living in war-torn Luzmela ("Tragedia Rural" II: 600-01). And that a dog begins to dig a grave for the man he has just killed ("El hombre y el mastín" II: 619) is plausible to the woman narrator. These occurrences are not even uncanny, they have to do with the tripartite alliance of heaven, earth, and

women. Espina appeals not to logic but to belief, a thought process far more pervasive. The suspension of disbelief necessary for many of her novels is in many ways an act of faith. This is not the first time we have heard these right-wing voices from European history of the thirties and forties, yet what makes this case unique is the insistence on women as integral to the sacred world view.

This act of faith—a quasi-mystical feminine urge to achieve an earthly union with the divine—is at first glance specific to the category of Catholic nationalism that was so much a part of the Spanish political scene of the thirties, and later turned into an attempt to do away with history itself. This oceanic and eternal nationalism manifests itself also within the context of fascist discourse in other parts of Europe in the thirties. These issues are the subject of Walter Benjamin's essay about European artistic production in the nineteen thirties ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"), in which the foundation of fascism as a political world view rests on the erasure of the distinction between aesthetics and politics. In an age in which highly technological art, such as film and photography, have rendered obsolete the notion of copy, we no longer have an "aura" of singularity regarding the original; there is no longer a separation between two presents—that of the original and that of the spectator or reader. The copy is the original and vice versa. In the conclusion, Benjamin arrives at his own present in which the totalitarians who are in control of his land are using aesthetics in the technological sense by deliberately (and artistically) blurring the distinction between their specific historical moment and an eternal present. The result is war, and the appeal to war is not unlike Espina's appeal to "ritual values" (Benjamin 241) in her spiritual rallying cry for the revenge of the Catholic State against the Republican anti-Christ, regardless of her contradictory voice decrying the atrocities of her enemies. Benjamin writes:

The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.

All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. War and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system.... [Quoting the Italian futurist, Filippo Marinetti,] '...War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying mega-

phones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony.' ... Through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way.... [Mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. (241-42)

But Benjamin never considered how or why women might participate in the "aesthetization of politics." Clearly, Espina is a long way from Benjamin's (or Marinetti's) characterizations of fascist war-mongering. Nonetheless, in her writing there is more than a trace of the urge to turn politics into a quest for beauty: her pleas to "Save Our Souls" with bombing raids (I: 1043) and her glorification of the Falangist military ethic are a curious manifestation of the German theorist's analysis of the art of his time. What makes Espina's case extremely difficult to categorize is her insistence on the gendered nature of her writing. Again it is revealing to place her fascist femininity within the context of the Europe of the nineteen-thirties. In a penetrating study of the role of women in Hitler's Germany, Claudia Koonz offers a detailed description of the process by which the National Socialists were able to attract the support of millions of women. They relied on the verbal icons of nationhood, motherhood and femininity as the center of domination of the Aryan race. Moreover, Hitler, as opposed to other Nazi ideologues, recognized the importance of women as a vehicle to power. In the following letter to a Nazi comrade cited by Koonz, Hitler suggests the primacy of sexual conquest in his strategy to win over the alliance of women: "Someone who does not understand the intrinsically feminine character of the masses will never be an effective speaker. Ask yourself, what does a woman expect from a man? Clearness, decision, power, and action.... Like a woman, the masses fluctuate between extremes.... The crowd is not only like a woman, but women constitute the most important element in an audience. The women usually lead, then follow the children, at last ... follow the fathers... (66). Koonz continues her discussion with descriptions of speeches by the Führer in which women occupied the first rows of the audience. From the Nazi pulpit, Hitler joined his usual attacks of Jews, communists, Weimar liberals, gypsies, homosexuals, etc. with promises of a future of order and harmony in which woman as mother and perpetuator of the race will have arrived at the pedestal on which she deserves to stand. The Führer also knew how to affect a certain vulnerability as he recalled his own

suffering during the First World War and knowingly paused at crucial moments of the speeches to show his own weariness and sacrifice (67). To his female listeners, he was both a favorite son and a lover. His speeches had all the trappings of seductions as well as the latent sexual attraction of mother to son.⁹

Thus, almost as if by natural inclination, women were asked to take their places not on the front-line of battle but in the front rows of the speeches and glorious demonstrations of fascist strength. The plea for female support was a verbal icon in which women were paradoxically starving for war and willingly absent from it, since their sex dictated that they not be allowed to pack a gun. Motherhood and the fatherland, as much in Germany as in Spain, went hand in hand in the construction of femininity, and Espina, along with Pilar Primo de Rivera and other women of the Sección Femenina, gladly participated in the construction. It was their duty. So much so that the construction seemed to be carried out self-consciously through the use of a rhetoric of exuberance, an energy in which everything is possible: a revolution invoking the end of politics and the dawn of a perpetual aesthetic, a metamorphosis of the soul, and perhaps even a metamorphosis of gender in which the masculine voice of the fatherland could be uttered by a woman. Indeed in this celestial new day, José Antonio could speak as a woman, and Espina as a man.¹⁰

In the light of Espina's articulation of feminine fascist politics, it is illuminating to re-read the entire "Envío" quoted earlier in part from *Altar mayor*:

Prócer Asturias, yunque de mi raza, templo de su espíritu, corona de Iberia, solar de sus príncipes cristianos, cuna de la España Mayor; noble tierra de mi padre, donde se hincó mi apellido en el recio cordal del Pirineo, sobre entrañas de cuarzos y de púrpuras; región brava y dulce, muelle y heroica, batida y acicalada por los cierzos del monte y de las espumas de la mar, por el hierro y la hulla, por la niebla y el sol, por la cándida nieve: a ti va este libro en purísima ofrenda como un exvoto singular, como un tributo de mi linaje cántabro y astur. Recíbelo con el mismo amor con que yo quise, tal vez ambiciosamente, hilar en las ruelas de marfil del arte, el vellón de oro de los sueños, los torzales sutiles de la angustia, las hebras de la sombra y de la luz, el *cadexu* doloroso de las lágrimas, para ofrecértelos a ti, mientras, en horas fervientes, alzaba a Dios mi corazón, como un cáliz lleno de inmensas ternuras, en el Altar Mayor de Covadonga. (218)

The sexual or sexualized nature of the passage is evident. There is a complex process of sexual distancing, self-seduction, incorporation of a changing gender identity (that is, the sex which is not that of the constituted subject), and linguistic masks that engage in the subversion of the author's intended discourse. On the one hand, there is a synthesis of the images of nationhood—"raza," "corona de Iberia," "principios cristianos," "España Mayor"—with those of male sexual power and hardness—"yunque," "cuarzos," "pórfidos," "el Pirineo," "marfil," "hierro," "oro," and the religious "cáliz" which could fall into both categories. On the other, there are abundant appeals to constructed femininity—"región dulce," "espumas de *la mar*" (whose gender could also be masculine), "cuna," and an oxymoron, "entrañas de cuarzos y de pórfidos." Also ringing loudly are the semantics of feminine sacrifice and surrender—"ofrenda," "tributo," and "inmensas ternuras." And the sentence, "Recíbelo con el mismo amor con que yo quise, tal vez ambiciosamente, hilar en las ruecas de marfil del arte, el vellón de oro de los sueños..." is imbued not only with the myth of Jason's fleece but the feminine archetype of Penelope faithfully and patriotically weaving her artistic web. Also, in the phrase, "tal vez ambiciosamente" there is a reminder of the characteristic female voice begging excuses for having spoken, as in Sor Juana's well known letter to Sor Filotea ("How could I write?" 17): all this in a quasi-mystical orgy of national identity, both Spanish and Asturian. Espina plays the role of both seducer and seducee, a woman speaking as a man—José Antonio's gender change in reverse—and a woman speaking as a woman who surrenders knowingly, willingly, and pleasurable.

While the "envío" from *Altar mayor* was written prior to Espina's definitive commitment to fascism and her allegiance to Sección Femenina, its grandiloquence characterizes much of her fascist writing in all its unwitting inconsistencies and paradoxes. Moreover, its celebration of womanhood, however constructed, is in keeping with Espina's own brand of feminism also prior to the conversion. So where does that leave us? Some might want to characterize Espina as a prototypical fascist writer whose ideology changed only on the surface in 1934. Granted, in her writing there has always been a trace of the ultraconservative adherence to tradition, spirit, and nationhood; the feminist leanings are no less indicative of that tendency, since they have more to do with the image of woman than with gender equality. Others might even find in Espina the voice of a latent radical feminist, asserting and reconstructing herself in her own ever-changing image, a voice that can mask its own sex and thereby subvert the very concept of gender identity.

In the final analysis both these views are arguable in the light of the single-mindedness of her writing as well as its multifariousness and (unwitting) self-subversion, a woman who could not have conceived the possible radical consequences of her own project. Equally important is that her writing calls into question the relationship between poetics and politics. Recalling George Orwell's frequently cited essay on "Politics and the English Language," one cannot help concluding, in our post-modern age, that the British socialist ignored a dimension of that relationship which Concha Espina's writing brings to the foreground: the unwieldiness of language in the forging of ideology. If there is a lesson learned from the case of Concha Espina, it is that political rhetoric often precedes politics, that language can be as imprisoning as it is liberating in its capacity to change the speaker in his or her act of articulation, indeed even its capacity to change the sex of the speaker. Espina's change of politics is not due as much to a conscious reflection on the ills of her day as to the "prison house" of language she herself constructed following the models of authoritarian male discourse. Her change had to do with a realignment of the feminine and masculine icons of her culture from one series of linguistic constructions to another. Economic interest, social class, and relations of production, are integral dimensions of those constructions, yet the patterns of poetry, rhetoric, and the prohibitive images of masculinity and femininity that led to the creation of the "envío" from *Altar mayor* are no less a consideration. What makes Espina an exceptional case is her melding of contradictory images and concepts in a glorious reconstruction of her culture and herself.

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Notes

¹Relatively little has been written on Concha Espina, even though she is probably the best contender among women writers to become (officially) a member of the Generation of 1898. Mary Lee Bretz and Gérard Lavergne offer panoramic views of her life and works. Bretz analyzes the fascist works within the chronology of her published novels and Lavergne deals with the political inclinations and plots of these works. The latter's apologetic tone concerning the "sincerity" (396) and the "honorable" intentions (398) of her recreation of the war is contradictory, since he also points out that she was blind to atrocities committed by the Insurgents. See also Díaz Castañón's "Introducción" in her edition of *Esfinge*.

An engaging article by Judith Kirkpatrick also provides insights on the feminine and feminist dimensions of Espina's fiction. I would like to thank Kirkpatrick for pointing out the complexity and quiriness of Espina's writing. She is writing a book on the subject.

²The case of Germany in the aftermath of 1945 is no less problematic in the light of Nazi intellectuals—Martin Heidegger, for example—who have given rise to tortuous moral and political introspection among Germans. And the relatively recent case of Paul De Man, who was able to stay in his U.S. closet until his death, further testifies to the gripping importance of this issue. These revelations beg the question: was there something always latent in the philosophies of these two figures that accounts for their support of the Führer? In Spain there are similar manifestations, although the lesser degree of virulence, especially regarding the extermination of Jews, the publicized atrocities committed on both sides and subsequent weariness of the civil-war bloodshed regardless of its political motivations, as well as the belated nature of the official introspection, make this issue uniquely problematic and “different” (as usual).

³There are several relatively recent books on women's movements and women writers of the far right (Koonz, De Grazia, Jeansonne, and Gattens), all of which question or enter into dialogue with the notion held by some feminists that women are predisposed to pacifist, anti-war, or non-violent tendencies in writing or in behavior, arguments summarized by Jeansonne (180-86). For an engaging book-length discussion of this issue as it manifests itself in both history and literature, see Bethke Elshain. See also Reardon.

⁴Further evidence of a latent fascist tendency in Espina's early works is their appeal to novelist Ricardo León, who, along with conservative Menéndez y Pelayo, were instrumental in launching her career (Lavergne 49, 61). León became one of the most committed Spanish fascist writers of the thirties and forties.

⁵Subsequent references to Espina's *Obras completas* will be designated as *OC*.

⁶Kirkpatrick discusses the feminist dimensions of Espina's writing. Her thoughtful essay explains Espina's double-edged writing as the consequence of the entrapment that nineteenth and early twentieth-century women writers suffer as a result of the conventions of male discourse and the pervasiveness of constructed femininity. Still, it seems to me that Espina in her fascist writing accepts those conventions so passionately that her writing stands as a particularly curious, if not egregious, case. Although it is not my intention to explore the vicissitudes of “difference feminism” as they are manifested in Concha Espina's writing (as does Kirkpatrick), it is clear that Espina creates a variety of women characters who are in conflictive relationships not only with men but with masculinity. I use the terms, the feminine, feminine voice, and feminine writing as do Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray in their highly influential essays which have given rise to various notions of “the social construction of femininity” in the last two decades.

⁷Lavergne is unable to pinpoint the precise date of Espina's rejection of the Republic and adoption of fascism, but he suggests that it occurred with the outbreak of the war (111-22). I believe that the conversion occurred earlier with the uprising of the Asturian coal miners in 1934 and the subsequent rightist reaction, the "Bienio Negro" of 1933-34 (Brenan 284-95). I base this speculation not only on *Flor de ayer* (1933) but also on *Luna roja*, a collection of stories that deal with that rebellion, although it was published later. Clearly the Asturian revolt was a highly influential event in Espina's political formation.

⁸De Grazia offers an informative account of Mussolini's natality policy in her book on women in fascist Italy ("Motherhood" 41-76).

⁹Koonz also mentions Leni Reifenstahl's famous documentary *Triumph of the Will* (67). Indeed Reifenstahl's filmic artistry depended precisely on the same emotive exuberance that characterized Espina's fascist work and was the target of Benjamin's essay. It is also true, however, that *Triumph of the Will* does not place women in the foreground of the nationalist worldview as does Espina.

¹⁰It is interesting to consider Espina's gender vacillation in the light of Luce Irigaray's *The Sex Which Is Not One*. She writes: "It is useless, then, to trap women in the exact definition of what they mean, to make them repeat (themselves) so that it will be clear; they are already elsewhere in that discursive machinery where you expected to surprise them.... And if you ask them insistently what they are thinking about, they can only reply: Nothing. Everything" (29).

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