

Siempre de otro lado: la voz chilena de Marjorie Agosín en los EE.UU.

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Marjorie Agosín's literary career in the United States is a result of a long family tradition linked, as she has often said, to the «vagabond fate of the Jewish people». Marjorie's paternal grandparents were Russian Jews who fled the pogroms of Czar Nicholas and her father, Moisés, was born in Marseilles. In 1926 the family emigrated to the south of Chile. In 1974, one year after the military coup, Marjorie's parents decided to leave Chile, now their country, and go into exile. The familial history of pilgrimage thus was continued, but unlike the Russian Jews who fled religious persecution in czarist Russia, Marjorie's parents sought political freedom as voluntarily exiled socialists (and the irony is not lost) in the United States.

Exile, whether imposed or chosen, is the condition of feeling different, being separate or in the margin of a given society, but not in the same way that minority groups born into a society are systematically marginalized. Exile is the state of always being from somewhere else, it is the loss of belonging rather than the desire to belong.

Like many Latin American intellectuals and writers who emigrated to the United States in the 1970's Marjorie Agosín arrived not knowing English and learning was a painful task. At first she was labeled «Jew», and although she did not take part in Latino movements in the United States she was referred to as «Latina». Nevertheless, Latin American writers had a radically different experience from those born in the U.S. and this difference was reflected in a distinct political ideology. Moreover, Latin American exiles had the air of an elite in the North American context and were not always accepted by Latinos.

According to Agosín «those who wrote in English built alliances and made names for themselves, but those [...] who were in the thrall to the trauma of exile and the unceasing chimera of return could not, nor did not wish to integrate into a multicultural and multifaceted community» (Ashes 32). For many writers the historical context of their departure became the central focus of their work. They lived consumed by their own history and exile became the subject that defined them as a community of writers and as individuals. Some writers were able to write for a mass market relying on faithful translators, but a larger number wrote for themselves or for others in exile.

During the 1970's and 1980's Agosín chose to write almost exclusively about Chile's prisons, about torture and about the mothers of the disappeared from a clearly feminist point of view. She is recognized as one of the most versatile and provocative writers of her generation having published numerous volumes of poetry and short fiction, four volumes of literary and cultural criticism and two political documentary collections, *Círculos de locura* and *Retazos de Vida* which recount the testimonies of Argentine and Chilean women whose family members had been kidnapped, tortured and killed during the repressive military dictatorships of the 1970's and 1980's. Agosín's poetry and fiction often times mirrors her documentary prose to the extent that she depicts a wide range of female protagonists who are the survivors of persecution and loss.

If there is one constant running throughout Agosín's work it is that all of her writing alludes to living on the edge of the historical circumstances in which the writer finds herself. Perhaps this is why her work resonates a tenuous autobiographical thread even when the subject matter is as distant from the writer's real experience as torture and murder. For example, both *Círculos de locura* and *Retazos de Vida* include frequent shifts to Agosín's own childhood memories. Particularly in the case of the Chilean *arpilleras* she recalls her grandmother's house and the landscape near the sea at night. In the end, the family story is always present.

Agosín's frequent shifts in theme and narrative perspective often times results a type of writing in which the conventional categories of self, community and identity are in continual revision. This narrative strategy implies an identity politics that confronts complex issues of representation and resistance in art and has become a hallmark not only of Agosín's work but of contemporary women's writing in general. In its most extreme, the strategy may include a notion of «representation» in which «to represent» means *to speak about*, *to speak for* and *to speak as*.

The promise to speak as the other is perhaps the most problematic aspect of Agosín's work. From her earliest poetry, she has frequently assumed the voice of another, becoming the person about whom she is writing. Her strategy has been to willfully appropriate the voice of the witness as a means of witnessing. Even in her essays and interviews the position of the writer and her subject are re-configured in an on-going strategy of inscribing the experiences of other women in her poetic «I.»

For example, in the collection of poems entitled *Las zonas del dolor* writes about prisoners and about the dead who ask her personally to remember them. In the prologue she writes: «Las desaparecidas se deslizaron entre los sueños. Me vigilaban, a veces me despertaban acariciándome, más que nada me pedían que no las olvide. Así fueron creciendo estas *Zonas del dolor* ...Las zonas del dolor son nuestras, son oscuras, y a veces demasiado olvidadizas» (Agosín 1988, 2).

Agosín has explained in her prose writing that her experiences in exile hel-

ped her to understand the periphery, to look at her country from the sphere of a foreigner. Little by little, she tells her reader, she became accustomed to talking about the disappeared who inhabited her life and spoke to her until finally she was able to speak with and *for* them (1996, 58). Her obsession with their voices and her vocation as a writer led her to the task of witnessing and telling their stories. The exile's privileged view notwithstanding, how does one speak as a testimonial writer without ever having been persecuted or disappeared?

The quintessential problem surrounding the intellectual's or writer's claim to the pain of the less fortunate surfaces not only here, but repeatedly in Agosín's poetry. Agosín herself has spoken elegantly about the polemic in an essay entitled «How to Speak with the Dead». While acknowledging the long history of powerful alliance between the task of the writer and his/her political role in Latin America, she also points out that the relationship has been more difficult to articulate in the twentieth century.

No longer is the writer's praxis based on a former conception of nation or national identity, but rather on the writer's participation in a wider moral discourse. It is a discourse in which the impossibility of representing aesthetically the horror of political life becomes a central theme. Both Vallejo and Neruda had provided powerful models for younger Latin American writers during the Spanish Civil War when they wrote «España, aparta de mí este cáliz» and «España en el corazón», respectively (1996, 54).

Agosín also questions the wider moral fabric of her historical circumstance, but the document that most intimately informs her long and varied trajectory is the humble diary of Anne Frank. In the collection of poems entitled, *Querida Anne Frank* she establishes a tender epistolary relationship with Frank which ultimately will raise questions that have to do with the extremist right dictatorships of Latin America (1996, 39). Agosín described her dialogue with Anne Frank as follows: «I wanted to speak with Anne Frank from an almost obsessive desire to revive her memory and make her return to our daily lives. I needed to ask: What would we have done if Anne Frank came to our door and asked us to hide her, asked us to lodge her for one night or ten years? [. . .]. Anne Frank's diary forces us to re-evaluate our relationship between the everyday present, the past and the concept of nationhood» (1994, 12).

Therefore, Agosín demands that we read Anne Frank's diary both as the testimonial that it is and as an interpretation of our own history. For Agosín, Anne Frank's personal testimony is not only a powerful memorial to the dead, but also a compelling indictment of the present because it contains implicitly the question put forth by the mothers of the disappeared: How can we remember the thousands of people who are without graves, who are without monuments, memorials, or even names (1996, 39).

For many years Agosín was one of the few women in exile who was committed almost exclusively to naming the disappeared and reinventing their memory in her poetry and essays. But writers in exile can go back when democracy returns, and many Chileans have gone home. Marjorie Agosín has not and perhaps cannot.

If her status as a Chilean writer living in the United States was problematic during the 17 years of military dictatorship, it is especially so after the return to democracy in her homeland. Previously she had conceived of her vocation as the necessity to say, from a distance, the unsayable; to speak for the silenced. But after Allwyn's triumphs and the Rettig report on the disappeared, at least a facade of reconciliation was constructed. However, the illusion masked a deeper reality: a still-intact military apparatus operating within the State with General Pinochet head of the armed forces for life.

This was the Chile to which Agosín would not return and like many twentieth century exiles she found that home was neither here (the U.S.) nor there (Chile). She has written: «When I go back to Chile, people call me «la gringa,» or they say you are from there now.» When I am in the United States, they tell me, «it must be so sad to leave your country and be a foreigner.» Such comments are part of my reality, a hybrid, complex reality, a bicultural and bilingual reality caught between two countries, two languages, and two heritages - Christian and Jewish» (1996, 34).

Finally, it is Judaism and the family story which have allowed Agosín to feel comfortable in the ever-changing zones of nations and borders. Not surprisingly, in recent years her writing has turned inward to reflect on the Jewish experience in Latin America. Judaism endlessly confronts issues of exile and immigration and necessarily speaks to the complicity of belonging while at the same time not being part of a country or its history. Agosín strategically has taken the definition of Judaism in Latin America a step further and defines it as part of «the theme of mestizaje», with its confluence of multiple languages and geographies into a single territory (1996, 102).

Agosín claims that during the 1980's and early 1990's, something unprecedented appeared in Latin American literature: the Jewish voice. Although social scientists have written numerous books on the Jewish Diaspora, particularly in places like Argentina and Cuba, little has been said about Latin American Jewish identity in relation to Jewish writers. The fact is, many of the books written in recent years are by and about Jewish women. Most often they choose to write autobiographical texts, memoirs and life stories. This may be part of a broader phenomenon in women's writing that has emerged among underprivileged indigenous women, for example Rigoberta Menchu's testimonial, and the autobiographies and family stories by wealthy women like Victoria Ocampo and Elena Poniatowska (1996, 104). Marjorie Agosín's most recent work might be situated among the most

recent texts that attempt to define Jewish identity from the vantage point of crossings and exiles. A book she first published in 1995, *Una cruz y una estrella, reminiscencias de una niña judía en Chile*, clearly reflects this thematic as well as stylistic departure from her previous work. It is the biography of her mother, Frida, which is retold in the first person singular and includes elements of Agosín's own experience as the supposed reminiscences of her mother.

The text is basically a series of vignettes that recount the key episodes in Frida's life. In telling the story of growing up Jewish in the thirties in Osorno, Chile, Frida is also able to tell the story of other the Russian, Polish and German refugees who lived there among Nazis. Within the first pages she tells her reader, «Cumplí la promesa. Seguí la historia» (Agosín 1995, 81). Her promise is to tell the story and preserve the memory. Nevertheless, the obligation seems to be Marjorie's as her own voice meshes with her mother's and they invent the past together.

Since Agosín situates her own voice in the same margin as the voice assigned to her mother these transitions are seamless. What is at issue here is not the mere interruption of the conventions of biography. The narrative voice in *Una cruz y una estrella* reflects a type of feminist writing which seeks to modify existing notions of self and subject. What it proposes instead is a mode of knowledge in which the subject, properly speaking, is necessarily unfixed, shifting and contradictory.

Agosín had been exploring the possibilities and politics of this type of representation when she wrote about the mothers of the disappeared and about torture in Chile. Her motivation was resistance. In *Una cruz y una estrella* the motivation seems to be recovering her own identity from a perspective of ethnicity and the ancestral circumstance. The result is a highly poetic text in which a daughter writes the memoirs of her mother as an act of introspection and a search for home. It is an act in which a lucid consciousness oscillates between various combinations of «I» and «other.» Agosín's text shows that the contradictions that arise are not a problem to solve, but a goal to reach.

In concluding, exile lent many writers like Agosín the freedom and the insight of distance. Paradoxically, the varying forms of exile and separation frequently have led the exiled writer to a personal search for identity and «home» through self-discovery and introspection (Gurr, 14). With Agosín, as with many writers, the initial distance and freedom of exile only intensified her commitment to recording the cause of her circumstance. In insisting almost obsessively on her view as exiled Chilean in the United States, she also is able to reach the universality of her local experience which confers to her the status of permanent exile. As the permanent foreigner she is committed spiritually to the broader vision of the «margin» where the only possible homeland is found in language, memory and invention.

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