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# The Ravine

Nivaria Tejera

Translated by Carol Maier

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008

*María Hernández-Ojeda*

Fifty years after Cuban author Nivaria Tejera first published *El barranco*, a classic text of the Spanish Civil War literature, Carol Maier's translation masterly recovers this important testimonial narrative for readers in English. In 1954, José Lezama Lima's journal *Orígenes* included chapter IX of *El barranco*; without a doubt, the book had a brilliant start. The novel was first published in 1958 by Maurice Nadeau, in a French translation by Claude Couffon. The following year, *El barranco* finally appeared in the original Spanish, and it became one of the first books to be published in Cuba during the Revolution. Since then, it has been reissued four times in Spanish and translated into other languages: Italian (1960), German (1962), Czech (1964), and also reissued in French (1986).

*The Ravine* tells the story of a young girl who lives through violence and suffering during the Spanish Civil War on the island of Tenerife, in the Canary Islands. Her father is arrested by the forces of General Franco, and the emptiness she experiences will constitute the fundamental thread of the narrative, which relates the dramatic consequences that the Spanish Civil War, and ultimately any war, inflicts upon children. Through the eyes of a child, the reader witnesses arrests and kidnappings, jail and torture during the conflict. Clearly, Tejera's poetic prose was greatly influenced by Nathalie Sarraute's writing. *Nouveau roman* aesthetics animate the text as it searches for movements of consciousness and diverse voices as opposed to a traditional narrative focused on plot and character development.

The novel's account stems from the personal experience of the Cuban-Canarian author, whose father, a journalist and poet of progressive ideals,

was incarcerated from 1936 to 1944. The imprisonment of Saturnino Tejera caused an indelible anguish in his daughter, who was only eight years old at the time. Although he was able to escape as a stowaway to Cuba, the fictional story leads to an open ending as the family receives a telegram: “Exiled to the mainland forty years The Committee period.” The reader will never know if he was really taken as an exile to mainland Spain or if his body was thrown down a ravine.

In her translation, Carol Maier manages to achieve a lyrical environment comparable to the original through the use of short sentences, absence of verbs, anguished images, and alliterative language. The girl in *The Ravine* perceives reality with her five senses. However, the war is, above all, sound: “No more being lulled to sleep by the buzzing of insects burned by the sun as it flushes them from the furrows. There’s wind and rain and the distant sound of canons.” Each word is carefully positioned in the text to express the interior world of the child; but it is through the sensory aspects, the rhythms and sonorities of the prose, that the translation reaches its highest poetic intensity, as in the scenes where father and daughter meet. In this way, *The Ravine* accurately portrays the linguistic modalities of the Spanish text. Maier’s version reveals the complex narrator’s discourse through frequent subject-verb contractions to recreate the speech of a young girl, creatively interpreting local terms from the Canary Islands, particularly those expressions related to the narrator’s grandfather.

Certainly, *The Ravine* is a necessary addition to the field of Spanish and Transatlantic literature and constitutes a timely contribution to the current wave of historical, cultural, and literary production that rewrites the history of the Spanish Civil War.

*María Hernández-Ojeda is an Associate Professor of Spanish literature at Hunter College-CUNY. She is the author of Insularidad Narrativa en la obra de Nivaria Tejera (2009). Her articles have been published in Ínsula, Gaceta de Cuba, Encuentro de la cultura cubana, and Hispamérica.*