

Miriam Waddington's Poetry Enters Spain Stage Left

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Miriam Waddington, much like her poetry, was a pioneer as she was the first Jewish Canadian female poet to be published in English. Her poetry is innovative not only through its colloquial and playful tenor but also through its focused perspective on her experiences as a Jewish female poet and critic. Waddington's engagement with the Spanish Civil War, most notably through her poem "The Exiles: Spain" (1936), while echoing the themes of nature, conflict, and kinship found in the overarching body of her work, is less concerned with discussing conflict as it pertains to Spain directly. Rather she uses the events in Spain merely as a backdrop to comment on the abstract concepts of conflict and war.

Waddington's rather distant engagement with the Spanish Civil War follows Nicola Vulpe's claim in his article "This Issue is not Ended" that, "Spain herself: her peoples, her history, and especially the Republic, was very much an unknown. But Spain was not the question. Rather, Spain was the theatre only" (Vulpe 32). Vulpe's conception of Spain as a theater means that for Canadian poets it was about the abstract notion of conflict. They were interested in conflict, rather than the *Spanish* conflict. His claim that Canadian poets did not engage with Spain but rather only the concept of war is exemplified in Waddington's poetry. Waddington's poem "The Exiles: Spain" echoes Vulpe's claim, as the only inclusion specific to Spain is in the poem's title. The poem alludes to the fear of the defeat of the Republic, but without the mention of Spain in the title, the poem could be understood as a general discussion of defeat. "The Exiles: Spain" engages with the topic of defeat through representations of nature, conflict, and political awareness. Waddington's use of nature imagery is dark and paired with

descriptions of grief and impending doom. This pairing is most notable in the opening stanza:

Come, my friends, let us dance by the shore
Now the cold sun sets with a distant grief,
Though the black waves fret the naked reef
And the evil frets at our hearts yet more. (1-4)

In the stanza above nature is presented as bringing forth this impending conflict onto the shore, more specifically the reference to the “cold sun” (2) setting “with a distant grief” (2). The description of the “black waves” (3) crashing against the reef further supports this assertion of nature as being bearer of conflict and doom as the “black waves” become “the evil” (4) and the “naked reef” becomes “our hearts” (4). The use of “ours” could potentially be referring to those who support the Republican stance against “the evil,” Fascism, and therefore of those who would be exiled should “the evil” win in Spain. The impending doom in the metaphor of the black cold water continually crashing on the shore and against the reef is representative of the tide. It is a force of nature, its power and sense of inevitability metaphorically connected to the impending war, outside the control of the Spanish Republic and will not be stopped. The title bearing Spain’s name is the only piece of information in the poem that allows these political inferences to be made, thus supporting the assertion that Spain was a convenient forum for poetic discussion of conflict.

There is an element of kinship in this poem among the people on the beach that is reinforced by their experience of this collective feeling of imminent doom. Those who are gathered on the shore awaiting their impending exile are continually referred to as “my friends,” and addressed in terms of “we” and “us,” creating a sense that the narrator is

a part of this group. This kinship is also presented in a form of solidarity as “we” and “us” is used when referring to those gathered on the shore who “fought and so bravely failed” together. Despite creating a sense of solidarity through the use of “we” and “us,” the absence of Spain is evident. Waddington does not allude to Spain directly when referring to how they “fought and so bravely failed” (6) and she makes no mention of what in particular they were fighting for, or whom they were fighting against. The absence of Spain in these references illustrates how the Spanish Civil War served solely as a convenient forum for poetic discussions of war for Canadian poets as many of them, Waddington included, did not actually go to Spain. Waddington’s concern with the nature of her narrator’s solidarity in the poem, therefore, does not reside with those who fought specifically in Spain, but rather more generally with the solidarity that arises through fighting alongside others and in experiencing defeat in an abstract sense. This abstract kinship and camaraderie ties back into the idea that Spain herself was not important but that the events there served as a convenient opening to write about kinship during conflict.

Waddington’s playful style is reflected through the reference to dance in the poem. The references to dancing appear playful and accepting of the looming calamity rather than mournful – contrasting the grieving descriptions of nature. The first two stanzas open with the instruction “Come, my friends, let us dance”(1-5). The key difference in these lines is where they are dancing. In the first stanza they are dancing “by the shore” (1) and in the second amongst the ruins. These opening lines are significant, as they demonstrate how the poem is not concerned with the impending conflict specifically in Spain, but rather is concerned with the general sense of camaraderie associated with a shared fear. The sense of the poem’s kinship with Spain is only present in the poem through the reference to Spain in the title and by coming to the poem

already possessing knowledge of the conflict in Spain in 1936. Without possessing this knowledge and the reference to Spain in the title, Waddington's poem could be read merely as a commentary of a shared defeat, or being exiled, in war rather than a commentary on the Spanish Civil War itself, therefore supporting the claim of Spain being a "theatre" (Vulpe 32).

The final stanza of the poem uses nature as the last anchor that holds this group together, as seen in the lines "once, before going our desolate ways, / let us take hands and dance on the shore" (11-12). This is interesting in that nature has been used as a way to set the tone of impending doom earlier in the poem. The same linked inversion of nature occurs in this stanza again in the first line "and whether we know the sun once more" (9), which denotes not necessarily hope, but certainly the wanting for another day, when line three states "the cold sun sets with a distant grief" (2). Her discussion of complex representations and expressions of grief in the face of defeat is ironic because, unlike her other poems, Waddington has no personal experience of this conflict because she never went to Spain at all. This makes her discussion of the complexities of emotion in this situation hollow because she is writing about an experience that is not hers. This is important because her other poetry talks about representations of defeat and loss in a personal way. This can be seen most clearly in her poem "The Bond" which engages with her personal memory of the connection and community of Jewish women and the feeling of oppression and defeat that came from being a woman and being Jewish (Waddington 85-87). She can personally engage with these ideas and events in a way that she cannot with the Spanish War that caused these events for the character she has written, which may account for the lack of ties to Spain itself, and thus made Spain into a theater.

Waddington's is a highly personal and experientially based poetry. When it comes to her experience, or lack thereof, with the Spanish Civil War, her personal narrative and engagement with representations of defeat, social awareness, and loss, specifically in her poem "The Exiles: Spain," divorced the events of the Spanish War and indeed Spain itself from those representational experiences. The end result typifies Canadian poetry on the Spanish Civil War, that Spain was incidental, and that the experiences of the Spanish people of war, death, and revolution, were divorced from their history and examined in a general sense without context.

Works Cited

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