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Did Richard Wright Get it Wrong?: A Spanish Look at *Pagan Spain*

THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF RICHARD WRIGHT'S *PAGAN SPAIN* WAS 2007, yet remarkably the book has never been published in Spain. In fact, the only Spanish-language edition, *La España Pagana*, is the one originally published in 1970 (Editorial La Pleyade), in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and, according to Spanish sociolinguist, Emilio García Gómez, that edition was published "en clandestinidad" ("clandestinely") (35).¹ The question of why this book has been largely ignored in Spain and the rest of the Spanish-speaking world has not been seriously addressed by scholars to date. This paper will consider some possible reasons for this neglect.

In *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, Wright biographer Michel Fabre proposes two reasons for the book's cool reception in the United States: "Spain was not in fashion, and the American public probably did not think that a black man without religion had the right to dissect and judge the decadence of a white Christian nation" (414-15). María DeGuzmán, however, very persuasively argues that Fabre's reasoning is not convincing, as Spain was becoming a popular American tourist destination and that "all through the 1950s U.S. films were being built around figures of Spain, made about Spain, and even produced in Spain" (234-35). Nonetheless, neither of those critics nor more than a few others addresses the fact that a book about Spain by a writer of Wright's stature has essentially been ignored in that country. A Langston Hughes scholar and professor of English at the Universidad Nacional de Madrid, Isabel Soto, states that "*Pagan Spain* is a virtually unknown work here in Spain" (Interview). An examination of the rather limited amount of criticism that does exist, along with responses from Spanish and American expatriate scholars, writers, and artists, reveals that the fact that the text has gone relatively unnoticed in Spain has as much to do with the country and its people as it does with Wright and his book.

¹Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Spanish to English are done by the author.

Given Wright's comments about Spanish politics and religion, it is not surprising that *Pagan Spain* was not published in Spain under the fascist and rabidly Catholic Franco regime, but it is interesting to note that a Spanish edition has not appeared since that time. Perhaps part of the reason is that the book is difficult to categorize. In most bookstores and libraries it is found under "Travel Writing"; it is travel writing, but it is a very special kind of travel writing, and it is also so much more. As John Lowe explains, Wright wears many hats, including those of social anthropologist, historian, tourist, and ethnographer (121), and the jacket blurb of the Harper & Brothers 1957 first edition refers to the book as "a masterful piece of vigorous journalism."

Paul Bowles provides intriguing and pertinent definitions of both "tourist" and "traveler" in his novel *The Sheltering Sky*: "[t]he difference is partly one of time. . . . Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place than to the next, moves slowly over periods of years, from one part of the earth to another" (14). According to Bowles's definitions, Wright is decidedly a tourist in Spain, as he had been living in France for nearly a decade by the time he began his research. Wright did, of course, travel in Spain, but he spent only some three months there on his three separate visits, from August 1954 to April 1955 (Weiss 215), and he did not speak Spanish. As Lowe puts it, Wright's "research for this book was both limited and exhaustive"; it did not simply begin with his first trip in 1954 (135). Hazel Crowley tells us that Wright attended the Second American Writers' Congress in New York City in June of 1937, at which Ernest Hemingway, having just returned as a war correspondent in Spain, attacked Franco and fascism, and that at the time Wright drew the parallels between the oppressed citizens of Spain and the "American Negro" (126). And M. Lynn Weiss discusses in some detail the series of articles on the Spanish Civil War Wright published in 1937 (213-14). At the beginning of *Pagan Spain* Wright talks about his sympathetic reaction to the Spanish Civil War:

During the Spanish Civil War I had published, in no less than the New York *Daily Worker*, some harsh judgments concerning Franco; and the dive bombers and tanks of Hitler and Mussolini had brutally justified those judgments. The fate of Spain had hurt me, had haunted me; I had never been able to stifle a hunger to understand what had happened there and why. . . . An uneasy question kept floating in my mind: How did one live after the death of the hope for freedom? (2)

That the “hope for freedom” eluded Wright as well might account for his understanding of and interest in the lives of those oppressed by Franco’s fascism:

God knows, totalitarian governments and ways of life were no mysteries to me. I had been born under an absolutistic racist regime in Mississippi; I had lived and worked for twelve years under the political dictatorship of the Communist party of the United States; and I had spent a year of my life under the police terror of Perón in Buenos Aires. (1)

Wright is therefore fully armed with the tools of an insightful ethnographer.

According to García Gómez, “Antes de cruzar los Pirineos, sus intenciones apuntaban al lado político de la vida española, pero lo que encontró resultó desconcertante. De poco o nada le sirvieron los libros consultados antes de poner los pies en la Península” (“before crossing the Pyrenees, his [Wright’s] intentions pointed to the political side of Spanish life, but what he found there was puzzling. The books that he consulted before setting foot in the [Iberian] Peninsula were of little or no use to him”) (90). Two of the books were Américo Castro’s *The Structure of Spanish History* (1954) and Salvador de Madariaga y Rojo’s *Spain* (1942), both definitive liberal texts by Spanish scholars in exile criticizing the fascist republic. As a former ambassador to the United States and France and a permanent member of the League of Nations, Madariaga was naturally concerned with Spain’s place in the European and global communities after the end of General Franco’s dictatorship, of which he was a very vocal opponent. However, according to José Luis Martínez-Gómez, Castro was most inspired by the works of José Ortega y Gasset and the Spanish group of intellectuals, The Generation of ’98, at the turn of the twentieth century, and “Américo Castro reaccionó contra la historiografía tradicional, contra el deseo desmesurado de objetividad que las hacía meras narraciones de sucesos, más o menos importantes, dispuestos en cierto orden cronológico” (“Américo Castro reacted against traditional historiography, against the inordinate desire for objectivity that resulted in the mere narration of more or less significant events arranged in chronological order”) (1-A). Martínez-Gómez goes on to explain that “el peligro de este método es que la interpretación así conseguida sea excesivamente personal. Y ello fue la causa de las polémicas que surgieron en torno a la obra de Américo

Castro” (“the danger of this method is that the interpretation becomes excessively personal. And that was the cause of the controversy that arose concerning the work of Américo Castro”) (1-A). I would argue that Wright’s subjectivity was likewise the cause of much of the Spanish aversion to *Pagan Spain*. Dennis F. Evans even claims that this book and all of Wright’s travel writing are “integral parts of the Wright autobiographical canon” and that Wright “goes outside of his homeland, his *own* land, in search of himself” (166). Michel Fabre says of *Pagan Spain*:

The study only concentrated on what interested Wright personally: the relationship between superstition and faith, and instinct and spirituality, in this Catholic universe tyrannized over by a religion whose roots were buried so deep in sexuality and the subconscious that he considered himself justified in speaking of a “pagan” Spain. (414)

Many reviewers, like Harry J. Carman of the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1957, wrote that “Spaniards undoubtedly will hate the book” and that “his point of view is entirely personal”—the same objections raised about Américo Castro’s writing (302).

More recent critics agree. Soto states that “while Wright appears to be nominally sensitive to the prevailing politics of oppression in Spain in the mid-’50s, he never seems to get past the black legend stereotype surrounding Spaniards and their culture” (Interview). American expatriate poet Margie Kanter also finds that the book is more about Wright than about Spain and that Wright’s “lack of insider status, Spanish language skills, and time spent in Spain all account for the book not going deep enough.” Kanter, who refers to herself as “half-Spanish,” adds that such insider status is difficult if not impossible to achieve, as she herself has been married to a Spaniard for almost forty years and has been living in Spain for twenty-three, yet she is still considered an outsider: “My experience has been that outsiders aren’t permitted to criticize Spain. . . . Spaniards close ranks on outsiders and if you aren’t Spanish, you are an outsider” (Interview). Such exclusion is not unique to Spain, however, and Wright’s book is decidedly not written for a Spanish audience.

Wright claims that Castro and Madariaga “had, on the whole . . . refrained delicately from calling things by their right names” (194). Wright’s candor would account for the book’s being banned by Franco’s

fascist government and even for the clandestine publication in Argentina some thirteen years later, but does it explain the absence of the book and the very little attention it receives in Spain today? Its frankness about Franco could certainly contribute to its cool reception, as could the fact that the author is a political outsider, unlike Castro and Madariaga, but several critics maintain that Wright does not go far enough in criticizing the oppressive regime. DeGuzmán points out that “although Wright’s work purported to be about the ‘reality of life under Franco’ . . . the title *Pagan Spain* hardly announced sympathy for the regime. Moreover, it provided no indication that it was about Spain under Franco. The book mentions Franco by name no more than three times” (234). Soto echoes DeGuzmán’s assertion: “other than the passing acknowledgment of the regime, there seems to be little sense of historical context for the reasons behind Wright’s book” (Interview). However, that is not to say that Wright’s book is not political. Even if the Spanish critics are correct in noting that Wright does not do enough to criticize the Franco regime, it is still a political text, and even though he includes five sections in his book—“Life After Death,” “Death and Exaltation,” “The Underground Christ,” “Sex, Flamenco, and Prostitution,” and “The World of Pagan Power”—García Gómez claims that the book “podrían reducirse a dos: ‘Religion y Sexo’” (“can be reduced to just two parts: ‘Religion and Sex’”) (90). These two subjects are very serious matters in most any Western country, perhaps particularly in Spain, and it is impossible to ignore the very political nature of *Pagan Spain*, even as it concerns religion and sex.

Wright’s literal use of the *Formación Política: Lecciones para las Flechas* (“*Political Training: Lessons for the Arrows*”) is fascinating in that he employs these “lessons”—which could be called a political catechism—to examine all aspects of Spanish life and thereby makes all aspects political. When the book was published in 1957, most reviewers agreed that Wright’s use of the Falangist handbook for young women was a brilliant means of exposing the great gap between what Wright refers to as “the official Spain and the human Spain” (66). In 1957, Marjorie B. Jones wrote in her review:

Mr. Wright has wisely chosen to weave the fabric of his narrative together by interspersing excerpts from an official Falangist catechism, which girls aged 9 and upward must know. The dogmatic questions and answers on the origins of the Falange, its leaders, the evils of universal suffrage, etc., ring strangely in our ears, and do more than any analysis to show by what means the present regime holds sway. (291)

Joseph G. Harrison calls Wright's use of the catechism "a shrewd device" (289), and finally an unnamed reviewer says of Wright's use of the catechism that "there are portions of this book which speak so loudly that they cannot be shouted down—and these portions are not the words of Mr. Wright. They are selections, very generous ones throughout the book, from the political catechism for children" (293). Madrid resident Kanter finds "the quotes from the Falangist handbook to be the most interesting part of the book" (Interview). And of the twenty-four contemporary reviews of *Pagan Spain* that John M. Reilly compiled, seven mention the Falangist primer, but only one reviewer, Herbert L. Matthews of the *New York Times Book Review*, sees it as insignificant (294).

Guy Reynolds best captures Wright's use of the *Lecciones para las Flechas*, which he amusingly refers to as "*Lecciones para las Lechas*," (this misprision translates to "*Lessons for Fish Milt*"):

First, it acts as a skein that links together the disparate sections of the text; second, it provides a revelation of the Spanish ideology in that ideology's own words. It is self-revelation, an exposure of pagan Spain by means of its own discourse. . . . Wright searches for a central defining ideological characteristic of the country: the *Formacion Politica* is one way in which that ideology or creed reveals itself. (498)

However, more recent critics seem to side with Matthews. Wright's use of the Falangist handbook has been criticized by Weiss who states that "far fewer than twenty-five pages would have sufficed" and that "Wright's need to document his observations is, in this instance, clearly somewhat obsessive" (216 n. 16). Hazel Crowley likewise calls it "twenty-five pages of dull quotation from the Falangist catechism" (476). However, Wright suggests that this catechism, which does act as a unifying device throughout the book, does not hold "a single practical idea. One thing was certain. . . . If Spain wanted to be great again, what I had read so far was the best guarantee that it would never happen" (50). Wright's use of the preposterous propaganda in the primer as the unifying formal device for his work, and the resulting implication that it formed, also, the unifying strand of Spanish culture, is yet another reason why Spanish readers over the last thirty years or so might have avoided his book.

Although there are three major Falangist parties in Spain today—the Falange Española de las JONS, Falange Española, and Falange Auténtica

—they failed to win a single seat in the last general election of 2004. However, they still campaign in the center of Madrid at the Puerta del Sol on a regular basis, and many older Spaniards remain faithful to Franco and his regime. In a Madrid tapas bar last summer, I noticed an elderly man, who had obviously had much to drink, wistfully, but loudly, chanting, “Viva Franco!” Many younger patrons in the bar laughed nervously, which is often the reaction to such nostalgic outbursts. The Spanish political past is cause for some embarrassment, and Wright repeatedly points to reasons why this is so, from religious persecution to the treatment of women, and even of bulls! Spanish artist and creative consultant Jose Luis Delgado Guitart, when interviewed about the reception of *Pagan Spain* in Spain, replied “People on the right would not like it because it put Franco down and Wright’s focus on Spain is largely negative. Young people wouldn’t be interested because it’s too long ago” (Interview). Kanter trusts that “There is no doubt Spaniards would overall be disinterested” (Interview).

Spanish critics today see Wright’s book as more critical of the oppressed Spaniards than of the oppressive regime in the 1950s. Soto claims that “things Spanish are perceived and represented as backward, irrational, and highly charged emotionally” (Interview). DeGuzmán reinforces Soto’s claim: “Wright’s book represents Spain as a repelling and fascinating enigma south across the border from a more or less civilized north, namely France.” And “the book presents Spain as a self-consuming land of fetish objects and bloody sacrifices . . . a wasteland and a backwater” (225-26, 230-31). The book’s conclusion goes a long way toward proving that these critics’ statements are not unfounded:

Convinced beyond all couterpersuasion that he possesses a metaphysical mandate to chastise all of those whom he considers the “morally moribund,” the “spiritually inept,” the “biologically botched,” the Spaniard would scorn the rich infinities of possibility looming before the eyes of men, he would stifle hearts responding to the call of a high courage, and he would thwart the will’s desire for a new wisdom. . . . He would turn back the clock of history and play the role of God to man. (240-41)

Wright claims that Spain “remained stuck” (240) in the past and was unable to look to the future. It might have seemed that way in the mid-1950s, but Soto writes that “Wright got it wrong, and this is not a book in which Spaniards would recognize themselves” (Interview). She goes on to say that they might not recognize Spain either.

Much has been written about Wright's factual errors in *Pagan Spain*, beginning with his account of his first night's stay in the French border town, Le Perthus. Matthews states that "it is a pity that Mr. Wright did not enlist some expert help to keep his ordinary facts straight. . . . [because] as it happens, Le Perthus is a French village in the Pyrénées Orientales just short of the frontier" (294). This is true; however, Wright does not mistake the town but only its name. French Le Perthus and the Catalán El Pertus (now called Els Limits) straddle the French-Spanish border. Matthews also points out that Wright mistakenly places artist El Greco in the Middle Ages, and many critics, both Spanish and Anglo, point to Wright's glaring error in his description of the bullfight, which aficionado Keneth Kinnamon calls "a real howler": Wright has the banderilleros precede the picadores; anyone who has ever attended a bullfight and every Spaniard would snicker at this mistake (160). Likewise, Soto devotes a large part of her interview to "some situations Wright describes and presumably would have us accept as fact, yet they are downright improbable if not actually apocryphal" (Interview). The one she describes at length is Wright's trip from Barcelona to the orange groves south of Valencia and back in one day, an impossibility on the third-rate, poorly maintained two-lane roads. Like Kanter and DeGuzmán, Soto points to the language barrier that Wright would have faced and which still exists today in Spain, particularly in rural areas where very few speak English. In the 1950s, meeting fluent English speakers would have been difficult even in the major cities: "In Barcelona, wonder of wonders, everyone speaks perfect English!" (Interview). Matthews is right: Wright could have benefitted from an editor with knowledge of Spain and Spanish customs, so these complaints are justified, but minor. As Fabre states, "Wright knew that he was exposing himself to numerous attacks"; however, it is surprising that those attacks seldom originate in Spain, even today.

Pagan Spain today is valuable historically, but perhaps Delgado Guitart is right: "Young people wouldn't be interested because it's too long ago" (Interview). But not necessarily chronologically speaking. Wright's Spain is difficult to recognize in Iberia today. Bullfighting has been replaced by *fútbol*. In the summer, Madrid's bullring at Ventas is populated primarily by foreign tourists, and over the last five years the number of weekly fights has been cut nearly in half. Renwick McLean describes Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's "most ambitious

effort yet to guarantee equality for women in business and politics, demanding that women make up at least 40 percent of the candidates from any political party and 40 percent of the members on corporate boards." It seems to be working because Spain is ranked fifth in the EU in women's representation in politics; thirty-six percent of office-holders in the national parliamentary body now are women ("Women's Representation in Politics"). In 2005, Spain became the third country in Europe to legalize same-sex marriages, much to the dismay of the Catholic church, and in Pope Benedict's strained visit to Spain in the summer of 2006, Socialist Prime Minister Zapatero refused to attend his mass in Valencia. Zapatero also eased laws on abortion and divorce and refused to make religion classes mandatory in schools. According to Keith B. Richburg, the Catholic church in Spain is in trouble and knows it: "Regular church attendance in Spain, like elsewhere in Europe, has steadily fallen, and today only 14 percent of young people describe themselves as religious. . . . The number of priests and monks has been shrinking. Divorce has risen. And despite the Vatican's official ban on contraception, Spain has one of Europe's lowest birthrates." This is not the country that Wright describes, despite the fact that it seems to become more "pagan" every day.

Spain is one of Europe's most progressive nations, yet it appears that it is not yet progressive enough to objectively examine its own regressive history, or simply to examine an outsider's perspective, however flawed it may be. It is doubtful that Wright's vision of Spain could ever obtain the local popular appeal that Hemingway's did, but it remains to be seen if this lack of interest is the result of Wright's error or indeed of his correctness. Is Wright neglected in Spain because he got it wrong or because he got it right?

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