

La casa de enfrente: Ernestina de Champourcin's Contribution to the Genre of Female *Bildungsroman* in Spain

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Ernestina de Champourcin's only published novel *La casa de enfrente* (1936) has received scarce attention from the scholars of literature. One of the reasons behind this critical neglect is the fact that the novel came out less than two months before the beginning of the Civil War. Even though the initial reaction to *La casa de enfrente* seems to have been favorable (Ladeira 32-3), the tragic events of the war, as well as Champourcin's exile, plunged the novel into oblivion. At the same time, we are accustomed of seeing Champourcin as a poet, while her contribution to the novelistic genre remains forgotten. In 1975, during her first interview given after returning to Spain, Champourcin describes *La casa de enfrente* as "error de la juventud" (Villar, "Ernestina de Champourcin," 13). The few critics who discuss *La casa de enfrente* share the author's lack of enthusiasm for the novel. Hanley believes that the novel's only relevance resides in its capacity to clarify some aspects of Champourcin's development as a poet (146-7). Ladeira refers to the work as immature and adolescent (33). Villar concludes that *La casa de enfrente* makes no significant contribution to the development of the novelistic genre (*La poesía* 18). In my opinion, however, the lack of critical interest towards the novel should be attributed not so much to its defects, as to the difficulty of placing it within a certain genre¹. I propose to read *La casa de enfrente* as a *Bildungsroman*. This kind of reading allows for a greater appreciation of the novel. Some of its aspects that might seem confusing at first glance become clearer if we analyze *La casa de enfrente* as part of this genre. At the same time, discussing Champourcin's novel as a female novel of formation will enrich our understanding of the trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* genre in Spain.

Few attempts have been made so far to read *La casa de enfrente* as a novel of formation. The development of the genre of female *Bildungsroman* and its critical reception in Spain were, for a long time, influenced by the profound inequality in the position of women in Spanish society. In literary criticism, female *Bildungsromane* were marginalized for two reasons. On the one hand, works of literature written by women were considered less important than those produced by men (Campal Fernández 264). On the other hand, female authors who ventured into a genre that was traditionally considered masculine exposed themselves to the risk of being marginalized precisely because they explored the genre of *Bildungsroman* (Nichols 262). Until recently, critical studies of *Bildungsroman* were limited to the exploration of male novels of formation (Rodríguez 5).

While most critics are eager to classify many novels written by women in the last few decades of the twentieth century as *Bildungsromane*, this has not always been the case for the earlier female novels of formation. The reason for this lies in the contrast between male and female *Bildung*. This dissimilarity is conditioned by the profound differences between the place that society historically reserved for men and for women: "Heroines who did attempt an identity

of self were generally halted before they could complete the journey to selfhood, thus militating against their designation as *Bildungsroman* heroines” (Labovitz 5). As a novel that provided the model for the future development of the genre, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* establishes a pattern of the protagonist’s search for personhood that was inaccessible for nineteenth-century female characters (Lokke 137). Since traditional female *Bildungsromane* of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries do not conform to the model suggested by Goethe’s novel, critics tend to resist the inclusion of these novels into the genre. Moreover, well into the twentieth century, female authors of *Bildungsromane* ran the risk of being excluded from the literary canon for experimenting with a genre that, by definition, was considered to be exclusively masculine. For example, Nichols points out that this is one of the reasons that initially hindered critical acceptance of Mercè Rodoreda’s *La plaça del Diamant* (262). Today, a growing number of female novels of development are finally gaining inclusion into the genre. Champourcin’s *La casa de enfrente* deserves to be one of them.

Seen as part of the genre of female *Bildungsroman* in Spain, *La casa de enfrente* possesses some of the characteristics of the traditional nineteenth and early twentieth century female novel of formation. The circularity of the narrative structure, the peculiarities of the narrative voice, and the failure of the protagonist’s *Bildung* distinguish these novels. In many ways, *La casa de enfrente* continues the tradition of female *Bildungsroman* established by such works as Biedma’s *La boda de la niña* (1885), Sinués de Marco’s *La vida íntima* (1876), Sánchez Cantos’s *Para ellas* (1896), Espina’s *La rosa de los vientos* (1915), and others.

At the same time, Champourcin’s novel does not simply follow the pattern of the traditional female novel of formation. It introduces some of the themes and narrative techniques that characterize later *Bildungsromane*: fragmented narrative, the resistance to growth, self-castigation, and the desire to obey. These elements appear in recent novels of female development, such as Grandes’s *Las edades de Lulú* (1989), Freire’s *Irlanda* (1998), and Etxebarria’s *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* (1998). In this sense, *La casa de enfrente* represents a transitional point within the history of development of female *Bildungsroman* in Spain.

Circularity of the narrative structure has been one of the defining characteristics of female *Bildungsroman* from the moment of its inception (Ferguson 228, Hirsch 26). Unlike the traditional male novels of formation, female *Bildungsromane* do not develop in a linear fashion. Female protagonists often discover that society expects them to infantilize themselves in order to be accepted. As a result, they frustrate their development and revert to childish modes of behavior. The circular structure of female novels of formation reflects this process of “‘growing down’ rather than ‘growing up’” (Pratt 14). At the beginning of *La casa de enfrente*, the first-person narrator promises to bare her entire soul before the eyes of the male addressee of her story (10). The novel ends with a similar act. In order to prove her love to Arturo, the protagonist offers him her naked body (272-3). Elena does not seem to have grown much between these moments. She still believes that being an object of the male gaze is the highest achievement available to her. Like the protagonists of many traditional female *Bildungsromane*, she conducts and describes her development in a circular fashion.

For Landeira, this resolution of the novel disqualifies *La casa de enfrente* as a *Bildungsroman*: “El esperado aspecto edificador del *bildung* que debe llegar a la madurez del

personaje principal solo implica una maduración sexual sin asegurarnos que haya una maduración completa de la protagonista” (129-30). While this characteristic would, in fact, problematize the novel’s inclusion within the genre of male *Bildungsroman*, it places Champourcin’s novel squarely within the tradition of female novel of formation. Failure of the protagonist’s *Bildungsprozess* has been one of the most salient features of the genre from the moment of its inception. Trilling states that “the history of heroine-ism would seem to be an endlessly reiterated story of failure” (503). Bellamy points out that this characteristic is shared by most female *Bildungsromane*: “Before the 1970s . . . female *Bildungsromane* were not so much stories of struggle and triumph as they were stories of frustration and defeat – paradoxically they were stories of the failure of development” (1). Elena’s story is one more among these narratives of frustrated development and a tragic failure to grow.

Instead of progressing in her development, as a protagonist of a male *Bildungsroman* would be expected to do, Elena regresses. A precocious child with no fear of expressing her opinions transforms into a young woman who prefers neither to know nor to speak: “Ahora estas frases desaparecieron ante el ademán de expectación con que respondo a todas las preguntas y a todos los problemas. Ni quiero saber ni quiero decir nada. ¿Para qué? Mis afirmaciones infantiles ceden el paso a una niebla gris y vacilante” (58). This change in Elena is a result of her fear of growing up different from other women (59). She sees marriage as the only destiny that is acceptable for a person of her gender. Preparing for this eventuality becomes the single task of her development: “Empecé a hablar de mi matrimonio como de algo seguro, que fatalmente tenía que ocurrir. El menor de mis deseos veía postergada su realización para cuando yo me casara, y en torno a este acontecimiento future acumulé todas las posibilidades de mi vida” (57-8). Many of the classic female *Bildungsromane* of the nineteenth century share this view of marriage as the only suitable resolution for female formation².

Elena’s narrative voice is highly lyrical. She concentrates on exploring the emotions that accompany each stage of her development. Unlike a protagonist of a traditional male novel of formation, she focuses on feeling rather than acting. Elena’s attention to the minute details of her emotional growth has led some critics to qualify her story as “el relato rosado y romántico” (Landeira 133). Barbero Reviejo attributes the novel’s highly subjective tone to Champourcin’s poetic vocation (75). We have to remember, however, that this is yet another defining characteristic of the traditional female *Bildungsroman*:

Because the conventional assumptions of the novel as narrative form share in a dominant sexual ideology, they act to limit the possibilities for novels that explore women’s full humanity. Women’s actions are few because when women act they lose novelistic plausibility as women. Women’s plots are nearly always “familial” or “erotic” because our cultural notions of womanhood require a personal context. (Frye 5)

Elena believes that the highest form of achievement available to her belongs to the realm of her emotional development. She experiences profound satisfaction when she realizes that Arturo is incapable of feelings as profound as her own: “Su amor no puede volver a encontrarme, no puede igualar el mío; escalé queriéndole la cumbre más solitaria, y los que llegan a ella nunca logran salvarse” (277). In what concerns emotions, Arturo has become inferior to Elena. Critics tend to place little value on this kind of accomplishment because of the expectations produced by

the readings of male *Bildungsromane*. For the protagonist of Champourcin's novel, however, this is the only area where she can excel without being condemned by society for her achievement.

Villar suggests that *La casa de enfrente* follows all of the conventions of nineteenth-century novels: "Sigue el esquema de la narraciones decimonónicas, sin ningún contagio con los experimentos vanguardistas entonces imperantes. . . Hay que decir que es una buena novela anticuada para su época de publicación" (*La poesía* 18). While it is true that avant-garde experimentation is absent from the novel, it does represent a significant step forward in its capacity as a female *Bildungsroman*. *La casa de enfrente* does not limit itself to exploring the narrative techniques and the thematic interests of the traditional female novel of formation. It introduces some of the topics and narrative mechanisms that will come to dominate contemporary female *Bildungsromane* at the end of the twentieth century. One of these themes is the protagonist's active resistance to growth. If the characters of the traditional female novels of formation fail to progress because of societal pressures, the heroines of more recent *Bildungsromane* make a conscious choice to frustrate their own development. In Espina's *La rosa de los vientos* (1915), for example, Soledad Fontenebro condemns her mother for failing to grow and remaining "una criatura infantil" (260). Later female *Bildungsromane*, however, present us with protagonists whose goal is to retain their childhood as long as possible.

This tendency becomes visible in mid-century *Bildungsromane* and culminates in the female novels of development of the past two decades. In Matute's *Primera memoria* (1960), Matia repeatedly talks of her fear of adulthood: "Yo estaba a punto de crecer y de convertirme en una mujer. O lo era ya, acaso. Sentí las manos frías, en medio del calor. 'No, no, que esperen un poco más . . . un poco más'" (128). The protagonist of Freire's *Irlanda*, published almost forty years after *Primera memoria*, voices a similar attitude to growth: "Yo preferiría no crecer – musité" (44). Grandes's Lulú goes to great lengths to preserve her image as a little girl well into her thirties: "Aquello era demasiado duro, insoportablemente duro para las escasas fuerzas de una niña pequeña, soy una niña pequeña, concluí" (*Las edades de Lulú* 255). In a similar way, the protagonist of Etxebarria's *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* dreams of becoming an eternal adolescent (36).

Champourcin's Elena is as afraid of the inexorable passage of time that will transform her into an adult as are Matute's Matia, Freire's Natalia, Etxebarria's Beatriz, and Grandes's Lulú. Her fear of growth leads Elena to dream of ceasing to exist altogether: "Dejar de ser, no sentirse vivir, no vibrar de impaciencia ante el tiempo que corre, defraudándonos, trayéndonos tan sólo la agonía de la espera" (147). Elena sees blind obedience to the will of others as an only solution to the anxiety of growth: "Mi conducta consistía en no conducirme, en dejarme llevar por el mecanismo fácil del reglamento, entregándome sin resistencia a la presión de una atmósfera sedante donde hasta las emociones se preveían de antemano" (109), "aquel total abandono a una voluntad desconocida me sumía en tal éxtasis que hubiera dado cualquier cosa por no interrumpirlo, por no sentirme libre jamás" (241). In a highly symbolic gesture, Elena ties her own feet in order to demonstrate her obedience to the Church (136). Later on, she submits herself unconditionally to the man she loves (252). Freedom to act and to think is a burden that Champourcin's character is not prepared to accept.

The concept of obedience is equally important to the protagonists of many contemporary female *Bildungsromane*. Matute's Matia conducts her *Bildung* in a way very similar to Elena's. She is as obsessed with the idea of obedience as the protagonist of *La casa de enfrente*: "Algo había que me impedía obrar, pensar por mí misma. Obedecer a Borja, desobedecer a la abuela: ésa era mi única preocupación, por entonces" (51-2). Freire's Natalia also talks about the pleasure of obedience (39). The protagonist of Montero's *Bella y oscura* (1993) echoes Elena's desire to comply with the rules imposed on her by others: "Yo estaba dispuesta a cumplir todas las reglas . . . a ser humilde y obediente" (172). For these characters of contemporary female novels of formation, obedience represents one of the central concepts that organize their *Bildung*. Champourcin's novel is one of the first female *Bildungsromane* that highlights the centrality of obedience as a conscious choice for the process of female formation.

The fear of growth and the emphasis on obedience that characterize the development of the protagonists of female *Bildungsromane* coincide with historical changes in the position of women in society. These characters face a growing number of opportunities in a world where no one has prepared them to act as adults. Fear of growth and the desire to obey manifest themselves during the moments of important transformations in gender roles and expectations. The new Republican Constitution that was accepted on December 9, 1931 guaranteed the women of Spain a right to vote. This important measure, however, did not produce an overnight change in the society's attitude towards women:

La polémica sobre el trabajo asalariado de las mujeres se difunde durante los años de la II República. . . La posición dominante es la de mostrarse contrarios a que las mujeres desempeñen una actividad remunerada fuera del hogar, especialmente si se trataba de mujeres casadas. Políticos, médicos, teólogos coinciden en afirmar que existe una rígida división de tareas entre hombres y mujeres y consideran el trabajo extradoméstico como algo que desnaturaliza la única misión para la que las mujeres están dotadas. (Folguera Crespo 506)

The protagonist of *La casa de enfrente* has to conduct her *Bildungsprozess* in this environment of change and in the midst of polemics as to the woman's place in society. Elena's strict Catholic upbringing comes into conflict with a desire for sexual freedom and her hopes of becoming an artist. She fears that simply talking about art might disqualify her as a woman (161). It is no surprise that Elena searches for support: "Para hacer algo tengo que sentirme apoyada en alguien responsable que sepa más que yo" (185). She needs this kind of guidance because society no longer offers her a clear vision of what it means to be a woman in the changing world.

In many ways, Elena's process of development is similar to that of the protagonist of Grandes's *Bildungsroman Las edades de Lulú*. Like Elena, Lulú grows up in the time of great political upheaval. Born in 1958 into a very traditional family, she receives an education that is wholly in keeping with the ideology of Franco's Spain. The country's transition to democracy brought great changes to the position of women in society. The decade of the 1980s, during which Lulú reaches maturity, witnessed the introduction of an impressive number of new laws aimed at promoting gender equality. Both Lulú and Elena are confused by the new gender roles they have to learn to accept. Obedience and desire to abdicate responsibility for their choices is

one of the ways in which the protagonists of contemporary female novels of formation react to these societal transformations.

This attitude of confusion in the face of changing political and social realities, which is shared by the protagonists of *La casa de enfrente* and *Las edades de Lulú*, finds its reflection in the narrative structure of both novels. Unlike traditional nineteenth-century *Bildungsromane*, these novels do not follow the chronological progression of time. The first-person narrators of both novels analyze their formative experiences by moving from the present to the past. The narrative that they produce as a result is often fragmented and vacillating. Elena begins her reminiscences with “una serie de imágenes sueltas” (21) and later on offers the readers the diary entries she wrote some time ago. In a similar way, Lulú builds her account around memorable events from her past and shifts constantly between past and present experiences. It falls to the reader to organize these images and episodes from Elena’s and Lulú’s lives into a coherent story. The breaks in the narrative flow of these novels and the narrators’ insistence on constantly reevaluating their past experiences mimic the fear of linear progression that characterizes their *Bildungsprozeß*.

The protagonists of contemporary female *Bildungsromane* often experience frustration with having to elaborate entirely new ways of being female in a changing world. They frequently channel their frustrations into violence against themselves or others. Elena’s fantasies of self-mutilation dominate her *Bildungsprozeß* for years: “De noche, entre tinieblas, sentía que las puntas amenazadoras rozaban mis párpados. Un deseo loco de clavarlas en mis pupilas me hizo estremecer, colmándome de voluptuosidad. . . Este apetito de sensaciones dolorosas fue creciendo con tal ímpetu que aún a veces me cuesta trabajo dominarlas” (113-4). The preoccupation with violence is as important to the female *Bildungsromane* of the last two decades. Chelo, one of the characters of *Las edades de Lulú*, draws similar enjoyment from being a victim of violence (83-4). Violence is also central to Freire’s *Irlanda*, whose protagonist directs it at the people around her.

Bildungsroman is a genre that concentrates on depicting the protagonist’s search for maturity and individuation as a member of society. In this capacity, it is especially sensitive to the modifications within accepted gender roles. In the course of the twentieth century, the women of Spain experienced many changes in their position in society. Female novel of formation could not fail to adapt to these transformations. As a result, the genre has gone through several significant stages of development. Contemporary *Bildungsromane* differ greatly from the traditional model suggested by *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and other nineteenth-century novels of development. Frequently, these differences prevent critics from seeing many contemporary novels of formation as *Bildungsromane*. In order to understand what the genre has become today, we need to analyze the female *Bildungsromane* that constituted a transitional stage between the traditional and the contemporary novels of development. A reading of Champourcin’s *La casa de enfrente* as a female *Bildungsroman* allows us an invaluable experience of observing such a moment of transition between early conventions of the genre and its present-day techniques and thematic concerns. Today we know Ernestina de Champourcin as a gifted poet, the only recognized female representative of the Generation of 27. The time has finally come to acknowledge the importance of Champourcin’s only published novel and its contribution to the development of the genre of female *Bildungsroman* in Spain.

Notes

(1) In one of the first reviews of the novel, Otis H. Green refers to *La casa de enfrente* as “a diary and a general confession” (493). Ródenas de Moya characterizes it as “narrativa lírica” (23). Landeira states that “su tema y tono tienden hacia la novela rosa” (123).

(2) Loto, the protagonist of Biedma’s *Bildungsroman La boda de la niña*, sees her future as “consagrada a sus hijos y a su familia, como si esa fuese su única misión en la tierra” (453). Eufemia, the main character of Sinués de Marco’s *La vida íntima*, shares this attitude: “Pasar la vida al lado del hombre a quien se ama . . . debe ser el bello ideal de la felicidad” (69-70). Sánchez Cantos de Escobar voices a similar point of view in *Para ellas*: “Hasta que la mujer se convenza de que su principal misión es la de amar y hacer comprender al hombre los puros goces del hogar doméstico, no será feliz” (32).

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