

(Not) Writing March 11, 2004:  
The Spanish Novel and Luis Mateo Díez's  
*La piedra en el corazón*

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The Spanish novel has had little to say about March 11, 2004. By now dozens of significant literary works have been inspired by the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, including novels by Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Jonathan Safran Foer, John Updike, Ian McEwan, Fredric Beidbeder, and William Gibson. Fiction clearly felt the impact of Al Qaida's initial foray into the West. It is to be expected that subsequent attacks, unless more spectacular than the first, would not have an equal cultural effect. Even so, it is curious that five years after terrorists detonated their bombs on the Atocha-bound commuter trains in March 2004, few Spanish authors—and almost none of any renown—have addressed the subject. While the body of novels of September 11<sup>th</sup> could provide enough raw material and to spare for a semester-length academic seminar, its March 11<sup>th</sup> counterpart hardly exists.

What is to account for this lack? Where is the Spanish equivalent of Foer's popular *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, DeLillo's critically acclaimed *Falling Man*, or Beidbeder's controversial *Windows on the World*? The question points in two different but intertwined directions. It invites, first, consideration of the Spanish novel and its practitioners, while also demanding discussion about the nature of Spain's March 11<sup>th</sup> experience in opposition to September 11<sup>th</sup> in the United States. To be sure, the latter discussion points more towards the expertise of a social scientist than of a trained humanist. However, I hope to show that by addressing the latter point through the prism of the former some useful insights may be gained.

My principal tool for examining both questions will be the best known and most critically acclaimed of the few March 11<sup>th</sup> novels available in Spain today, Luis Mateo Díez's *La piedra en el corazón*. Díez's novel suggests a connection between the lack of March 11<sup>th</sup> narrative and the context of Spanish politics in which March 11<sup>th</sup> was always already embedded. While entirely avoiding historical subject matter, *La piedra* sets up a dynamic of competing traumas which uncannily reflects the tensions between March 11<sup>th</sup> and broader issues of Spanish political history which soon effaced the actual terrorist act and its immediate material consequences. *La piedra* affirms the continuation of a very deep-seated Spanish political crisis that still overshadows all, confirming the suspicion that even such global events as "wars on terror," membership in Europe, or world-wide recessions, once within the borders of the Spanish state, acquire a particularly strong Iberian flavor not likely to disappear anytime soon.

**Going to Market, Going to War, Going Abroad: The Present State of the Spanish Novel**

In his 2003 book, *La realidad inventada. Análisis crítico de la novela española actual*, Fernando Valls argues that contemporary fiction can be understood only by expanding our focus from mere literary history to the workings of the market (27). If aesthetic questions have always been tied, in the final analysis, to economic support for the arts—whether from church, nobility, or bourgeois patrons—that relationship today is much more direct. In Spain as elsewhere, the arts must sell, and the sooner the better. A novelist who cannot attract a reading (i.e. purchasing) public will not long be a novelist. For Valls, “La industria de los bestsellers,” the proliferation of literary prizes, and the basic need for authors to remain in the media spotlight, “lo subvierte todo” (Quiñonero 1). Tony Dorca and Palmar Álvarez-Blanco go so far as to call the current novel in Spain just another cultural product, and the author, “una marca reconocible” (4). The novelist, they lament, must “salir de su torre de marfil para comerciar directamente con sus lectores” (4). Gonzalo Navajas concurs: this loss of privileged cultural position keeps contemporary novelists from aspiring to be the conscience or principal voice of a community (68, 71). Considering the commercially successful “literary-light” delivered in the works of Carlos Ruiz Safón and Arturo Pérez Reverte, Navajas agrees that the novel has become another object of consumption, uninterested in thoughtful, critical analysis (70, 80). While Navajas makes his point with obvious runaway best sellers, many novelists who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s, and who showed so much promise at that time, are increasingly turning from critical history in their works to sentimental nostalgia. Antonio Muñoz Molina and Almudena Grandes, for example, while not as wildly successful in pure market terms as Ruiz Safón or Pérez Reverte, are guaranteed winners in the Spanish literary marketplace. Banking on the veneer of literariness garnered in their earliest works (respectively *Beatus Ille*, *El invierno en Lisboa*, *Beltenbros*, or *Las edades de Lulú*), they write increasingly nostalgic, politically correct tales referring to an ideologically distanced national past (e.g. *El jinete polaco* or *El corazón helado*).

While these popular authors succumb to market pressures and retreat from difficult themes and styles, Spain’s more critically esteemed novelists have been gradually abandoning Spain as a subject. Gonzalo Navajas, considering the recent works of Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas, and Antonio Muñoz Molina (who he apparently would save from the previous paragraph), argues that Spain’s major novelists are now more interested in the conversations of a global culture than in the old local themes of the dying *pueblo perdido* or the colmena-like city. According to Navajas, these authors “se niega[n] a aceptar la superficialidad y la inanidad de la escena cultural española” (76). They criticize the Spanish cultural scene and its tired themes, “como una especie de burda telenovela” (76). They affirm “principios estéticos y humanos que trascienden la banalidad de los grandes media que se han convertido en los dominadores de la palabra colectiva” (76). Navajas concludes, “La nación—como ente administrativo y político—se ve superada en Marías por la super-nación de la cultura, el nuevo ámbito en el que el escritor se aloja por encima de las limitaciones nacionales habituales” (76).

Navajas appears to be describing what Pascale Casanova has referred to as a desire for membership in a world republic of letters. Marías and company, according to Casanova’s definition, work to write themselves into a “transnational realm whose sole imperatives

are those of art and literature” (29). In order to achieve this membership, the presence of Spain need not wholly disappear from their works. Marías, for example, may dedicate a large portion of the second volume of his *Tu rostro mañana* trilogy to a recollection of the betrayal of his father during the early postwar years. But while locally-focused authors still write to figure out “the problem” or meaning of Spain, the causes of its civil war, or the cultural impact of Francoism, Marías’s interests are finally more universal, writing, in the words of Casanova, for “a republic having neither borders nor boundaries, a universal homeland exempt from all professions of patriotism, a kingdom of literature set up in opposition to the ordinary laws of states” (29), a concept embodied appropriately in Marías’s own Kingdom of Redonda with its roundtable of global cultural elite and its decidedly extra-national literary prize.<sup>1</sup>

The novelistic field to which the descriptions of Valls, Dorca, Álvarez-Blanco, and Navajas give shape may prove inhospitable to the production and reception of quick and emotionally cutting March 11<sup>th</sup> novels. The event would most likely be too fresh in memory and the wounds too tender for a Pérez Reverte or Ruiz Safón literary thriller. Muñoz Molina or Grandes might need at least a few years to ease the topic into their preferred nostalgic modes. Navajas’s reading of Marías, Muñoz Molina, and Vila-Matas suggests that these writers and others of their ilk may yet have things to say about the Atocha tragedy. Most likely, however, these events will find themselves embedded in less Spain-specific contexts.

Marías’s personal philosophy of the novel, as expounded in numerous articles over the course of his career, would suggest as much. Marías explains that the novelist’s job is not to recount what happened—March 11<sup>th</sup>, for instance—but to explore its possibilities and probabilities, to imagine all that whirls around it. “El hombre,” he argues, “tiene necesidad de algunas dosis de ficción, esto es, necesita lo imaginario además de lo acaecido y real . . . necesita conocer lo posible además de lo cierto, las conjeturas y las hipótesis y los fracasos además de los hechos, lo descartado y lo que pudo ser además de lo que fue” (112). Life, for Marías, is not just what has happened to us, but what might have happened but did not, what was lost, what was omitted, and what was desired but never realized. “Las personas tal vez consistimos, en suma, tanto en lo que somos como en lo que no hemos sido” (113).

Czech novelist Milan Kundera has described a similar role for the novel. Novels examine, “not reality but existence” which he defines as “not what has occurred” but as “the realm of human possibilities” (42). According to Kundera’s definition, a novel of March 11<sup>th</sup> would not illustrate the historical situation of March 11<sup>th</sup> but explore the “human dimension of human existence” within the conditions that the tragedy presented (36).

In the light of Marías’s and Kundera’s readings, the relation of March 11<sup>th</sup> to the Spanish novel begs the question of what March 11<sup>th</sup> actually meant within the context of Spanish society. What was the existential experience of March 11<sup>th</sup>? A quick answer might begin by hypothesizing that the immediate dearth of March 11<sup>th</sup> novels may signal that March 11<sup>th</sup> figures as a central component of the Spanish *reality* of the last decade

but not of Spanish *existence*. According to such a reading, the realities of September 11<sup>th</sup> in New York City, Washington D.C., and rural Pennsylvania somehow fit more easily into what we might call “American existence.” Such would not appear to be the case in Spain. The task at hand then becomes the discovery of Spanish existence.

Marías and Kundera would look to the novel to explore this particular category. Any cursory overview of the Spanish novel during the past decade understands its renewed task of bearing the tremendous weight of a national political history. This burden is most typically seen in the veritable tidal wave of Spanish civil war novels. The question of a national historical memory has also been evident on television, in the cinema, in theater, and in the social sciences. Moreover, from the early postwar years to the present, the topic has never entirely disappeared. However, the presence of the topic in the recent Spanish novel has been remarkable, and quickly addressed, in a number of excellent scholarly studies such as Antonio Gómez López-Quiñones’s *La guerra persistente* and Ana Luengo’s *La encrucijada de la memoria*. Luengo ties her study directly to what has become a national obsession with recovering Spain’s nearly lost “*memoria colectiva*” of the civil war. Understanding the civil war via its representation is fundamental to the project of Spanish nation-building.

López-Quiñones couches a “malestar en la intelligentsia nacional” regarding Spain’s collective historical amnesia within a context of postmodern culture and global capitalism. According to López-Quiñones, “en el tratamiento de la memoria, de la violencia y de la Segunda República como utopía retrospectiva, hay un claro intento por plantear la relación con la Guerra Civil como una práctica cultural que, desde el periodo democrático, procura trazar antecedentes con los que debiera entroncar una cultura política más intensa y prometedora” (23). The protagonists of the works of Cercas, Ignacio Martínez de Pisón, Antonio Soler, Dulce Chacón, and Manuel Rivas among many others have grown up in Democratic Spain but search the past in order to purify the present (94). They return to the past to “obtener algo que su propio tiempo no les ofrece” (102). In other words, sifting through the almost-lost memories of the Spanish civil war is addressing certain lacks acutely felt by readers living in Spain today. Current Spanish “existence,” to recall Kundera, demands a return to the pains and possibilities of a tragic Spanish past.

While the publication date of the works of López-Quiñones, Luengo, and others preclude consideration of post March 11<sup>th</sup> novels, it is clear that the burden of the civil war continues to weigh upon Spanish novelists. The popular and critical success of Vicente Molina Foix’s *El abrecartas* (2006), Manuel Rivas’s *Los libros arden mal* (2007), and Almudena Grandes’s *El corazón helado* (2007), among others, suggests that more is to come. And while it is not Gómez López-Quiñones’s purpose, his contextualization of these novels within a postmodern, global capitalism returns us to the starting point of Valls, Navajas, and company: the civil war abounds because the civil war sells.

To wrap up this necessarily brief overview, I recognize the reality of many oversights and possible exceptions to the general trends noted above.<sup>2</sup> My intention, and I

believe the only possible strategy here, is to describe the field in broad strokes, taking advantage of the expertise of the work of its current chroniclers. I would argue, furthermore, that this broad overview finds a certain confirmation in the lone March 11<sup>th</sup> novel that we have. In its engagement with March 11<sup>th</sup>, *La piedra en el corazón* not only sheds light on March 11<sup>th</sup> but also on the problem of the novel of March 11<sup>th</sup>.

### **Their Illness, My Illness, Our Illness: March 11th in *La piedra en el corazón***

Luis Mateo Díez is no stranger to the most demanding readers of Spanish fiction. A member of Spain's Royal Academy, he is one of the very few Spanish authors to have been awarded Spain's prestigious Premio de la Crítica and Premio Nacional twice; his novel *La fuente de la edad* is often mentioned on lists of the best Spanish novels of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Díez, with a secure government job and a group of select but devoted readers, stands somewhat beyond the market pressures that dominate Spain's contemporary literary scene. His novels are difficult and decidedly Spanish, almost boasting their disinterest in a global republic of letters or a broad readership.

From this privileged position, Díez turns out to be the only major Spanish author to try his hand at March 11<sup>th</sup>. Even so he confesses that his work is set “en el 11-M” but is not “una novela sobre el 11-M,” the latter being a task that he states—without explanation—would have been “muy difícil” (Manrique 3). Instead, setting his novel on March 11<sup>th</sup>, Díez tells “una historia de intimidación extrema, de la enfermedad de alguien . . . y de como se compaginaría ese sentido del dolor . . . ante la explosión de un dolor colectivo” (Manrique 3).

Subtitled, “Cuaderno de un día de marzo,” *La piedra en el corazón* weighs in at a very brief 216 pages. Its presentation is distinctive. With a large font, generous margins, and an abundance of blank space, it has as much the feel of a poetry collection as of a novel. This is heightened by its organization into ten chapters subdivided by dozens of paragraph-length fragments which read as a sequence of thought poems held together by a loosely life-like sense of time and space.<sup>4</sup> The fragments are, as the novel's subtitle indicates, ostensibly the entries in a diary or notebook that the narrator maintains throughout March 11, 2004, and possibly beyond. The narrator, Liceo, is the father of the story's central figure, Nima. The youthful twenty-something Nima has suffered for several years from an unnamed emotional illness that she drowns in pills and alcohol. Nima's most recent encounter with her father and his subsequent turn to his notebook for reflection arise from the events of March 11, 2004.

Some have argued that *La piedra* cannot in fact be called a March 11<sup>th</sup> novel since its topic is really the relationship between Nima and Liceo, with the Atocha bombings as mere background. José María Pozuelo Yvancos points out that Díez's narration of March 11<sup>th</sup> is as far from a realistic or journalistic style as one could imagine (1). Hence Sonsoles Onega's insistence that her own March 11<sup>th</sup> novel, *Donde Dios no estuvo*—published over a year after Díez's work—was the first novel written on the subject makes more sense (EFE 3). Certainly *La piedra*, though interwoven with the events of March 11<sup>th</sup>, is not a March 11<sup>th</sup> novel in the same way that DeLillo's *Falling Man* or Safron Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* are September 11<sup>th</sup> novels.

Nevertheless, if it is true that March 11<sup>th</sup> is not everywhere in the novel and that its victims, terrorists, or emergency workers are not its protagonists, it is still the case that other than the almost abstract relationship between Liceo and his daughter, the presence of March 11<sup>th</sup> in Madrid is the lone specific space-time of the novel. It is the only major detail grounding a novel that would otherwise take flight into poetic abstraction.

Such grounding notably arrives early in the story. In the novel's very first fragment (the first entry in Liceo's "Cuaderno de un día de marzo"), Liceo mentions a co-worker's comment about a sister-in-law who may have been on one of the Atocha-bound trains. Several other references to this co-worker, always brief and more iterative than informational, dot the novel. Liceo also occasionally notes the presence of televisual images of the Atocha tragedy in a bar where he meets with his daughter, as well as the atypical silence in the space, which we assume is a result of the same images. Probably the most clearly March 11<sup>th</sup> element in the novel is the notebook's third chapter, entitled, "La sima blanca," a kind of prose poem that follows in twenty short paragraphs the trajectory of the Atocha victims from bedroom, to station, to train, and finally to their death. It is the lone chapter of his notebook with no direct connection to Nima.

But if *La piedra en el corazón* is a March 11<sup>th</sup> novel, its particularly indirect approach bears little resemblance to its September 11<sup>th</sup> counterparts. Rather than being a problem, this indirect relationship between Díez's novel and the Atocha tragedy may help explain the paucity of novels on the Atocha bombings. This requires a closer look at the Liceo-Nima-March 11<sup>th</sup> dynamic.

The novel begins with Liceo's arriving home "la noche de aquel once de marzo" to find numerous messages left by Nima on his answering machine. The message of these calls is simple: "Soy tu hija, quiero verte." Her call is for contact—solidarity—which as we know was the most immediate local response to the tragedy. When Spaniards learned of the bombings they immediately took to their cell phones, jamming up lines in their desire to connect to loved ones. Such was the transformation over this period that observers have pointed to this moment as giving birth to a new political subject in Spain, interconnected by computers and cell phones that "se habían enredado" (Sampedro 11, 21). Twenty-four hours later family solidarity became community solidarity, as more than eleven million Spanish citizens took to the streets in support of the victims and in defiance of terrorism, making this the biggest single march the state had ever seen.

As Liceo listens to his daughter's cries, two competing realities begin to play themselves out; the reality of the March 11<sup>th</sup> "irreality" burying what Liceo perceives as normal, everyday activity: "Todas las preocupaciones de Liceo confluían en la desolación de la jornada, todavía el estupor no abría otra alternativa al peso de lo que continuaba pareciendo un suceso irreal que hundía la propia realidad urbana" (9). Nothing feels real to Liceo as he notes, "el vacío de la ciudad, como si ni siquiera sus habitantes logran que la ciudad existiese" (23).

In this unreal setting, the conditions of Liceo's existence change. Nima's phone messages indicate that the March 11<sup>th</sup> events have caused the symptoms of her own sickness to momentarily subside. Nima tells her father, "Estoy peor que nunca, pero hoy es por la misma razón por la que todos estamos pero que nunca" (24, 32). The anomaly of this situation sufficiently strikes Liceo so as to provoke him to record the exact same phrase in his notebook just eight pages later (32). His reality having changed, Liceo can feel solidarity with the family members of the Atocha victims: "Nima muerta, entre los muertos", he thinks (33-34). In the face of Spain's tragedy, all other personal realities can take a back seat. "Todos viajamos en ese tren," the novel seems to reaffirm.

This solidarity, however, proves temporary. As the story progresses, the reader discovers—as Sonsoles Onega might insist—that the real driving force of this story, the novel's plot and character, centers not on March 11<sup>th</sup> but on Nima. Nima takes over, and March 11<sup>th</sup> recedes onto a distant narrative horizon. Liceo devotes the heart of his March 11<sup>th</sup> notebook to a search of his daughter's past, to meditation on his failing marriage, and to obsessive review of the present conditions that he is powerless to change.

While Nima has insisted from her first phone messages that she has become secondary in the face of national events, she also recognizes that in spite of them little has finally changed between Liceo and herself. "Lo más curioso," she remarks, "es que, después de tanto tiempo, estamos hablando de lo mismo, con la misma intención, igual desgana, y el sentimiento de amargura que no nos deja levantar cabeza desde hace años" (79). As if to underline the sad truth of a still dysfunctional relationship, Liceo equates his daughter's condition with that of the Atocha victims to such an extent that the reader is unsure whether it is Nima being swallowed up in March 11<sup>th</sup> or vice versa. "Esta es mi hija," Liceo notes, staring up at the televisual images of Atocha victims, "un cuerpo abatido, el alma en pena" (81). Whether he is actually describing his daughter or the victims in Atocha is impossible to tell. This is not a negative critique; the absolute confusion of victims evokes a sense of what José María Pozuelo Yvancos calls the total "fragilidad humana, lo cerca que estamos del abismo, de la sima, y cómo la vida de muchos seres humanos resulta golpeada tan duramente que resulta difícil expresarlo con el lenguaje" (1). Language fails to distinguish between one kind of victim and the other. Díez's technique is effective. The success of the technique, nonetheless, is based precisely on cutting both ways. Nima dissolves into March 11<sup>th</sup>, but March 11<sup>th</sup> equally dissolves into Nima. Liceo's early discovery of Nima sprawled on a park bench awaiting his arrival initially feels like a symbolic gesture toward the March 11<sup>th</sup> victims: "abatido sobre el respaldo, torcida la cabeza como si el cuello se le hubiese roto, extendidas las manos en el asiento, y alguna vez, el cristal de la botella entre los dedos heridos" (19). But as the novel turns more toward Nima, the christlike connection feels more like a usurpation of the victim's role by the incurable, constantly demanding Nima.

Despite the presence of March 11<sup>th</sup>, Nima's crisis proves too strong and finally dominates the novel. "Todo resultaba extremado en Nima," Liceo writes; "Cualquier cosa adquiriría una dimensión radical, y todo era urgente" (110). There seems no solution for her problems: "Eres un ser misterioso, que fuiste una niña misteriosa y una adolescente misteriosa" (200). March 11<sup>th</sup> finally only adds to Nima's problems: "Esa pena, esa

tristeza del recuerdo, se acumula a otros muchos incidentes, todos pequeños, anodinos y, sin embargo, suficientes para alimentar la culpabilidad” (68). Nima ultimately feels bigger than anything March 11th can bring.

And so, to return to our argument, in the novel of March 11<sup>th</sup>—literally, the only novel by a major novelist to address the event to date—March 11<sup>th</sup> is lost in the discussion of larger issues. For twenty-four, perhaps forty-eight hours, March 11<sup>th</sup> is on the mind of father and daughter. For that same period they seek each other out in an immediate, visceral cry for community. Then just as suddenly, the old problems return, hope dissipates, and the reader is left without a March 11<sup>th</sup> to consider.

The description is meant to sound familiar. As we know, “March 11<sup>th</sup>”—that event that provokes a kind of September 11<sup>th</sup> “feel” driving Spaniards in search of family and community—sadly did last only just as long. A mere forty-eight hours after the detonation of the bombs, the mourning of March 11<sup>th</sup> was drowned out by the din from the returning symptoms of a more profound national illness. On March 13<sup>th</sup> national mourning gave way to national indignation and quickly to division as citizens began to suspect politically motivated conspiracies and cover-up of the attack. The governing Partido Popular controlled information to favor their political ends. Opposition groups protested. The PP responded with accusations of rule-breaking and bombing conspiracies. When the events upset the expectations of the already scheduled March 14<sup>th</sup> general election, four years of “crispación sistemática” ensued (Estefanía 1). The tensions producing such strife were not new. Indeed, the controversy spun so quickly out of control because it tied directly back to Spain’s most intractable problem, that of the two Spains, or, more broadly, the problem of Spain itself. Here in 2004 stood the ghosts of 1814, of 1823, of 1898, and of 1936 among others. The airwaves flooded with apocalyptic talk of national disintegration, politicians renewed allusions to “true” and “anti-“ Spains, and top military brass even suggested the need for old-fashioned coups. March 11<sup>th</sup> became, for so many, yet another excuse to fight hundred-year-old battles.

The similarity to the dissolution of the impact of March 11<sup>th</sup> in the face of Nima’s illness is not meant to suggest that *La piedra en el corazón* is an explicit allegory. The novel is much more subtle in its approach to March 11<sup>th</sup> and is utterly devoid of politics. Still, Nima’s problem does suggest broader connections. These are highlighted in the novel’s fourth chapter and interwoven throughout the rest of the novel. The chapter follows immediately on the heels of the prose poem focused on the victims’ journey from bed to death. Along with the prose poem chapter, it is the only chapter to entirely ignore the present state of Nima and Liceo’s relationship. Instead it recounts a personalized fairytale that Liceo recited to Nima when she was a child. The tale speaks of a “Reino. . . patas arriba, en la decadencia más abyecta” (121). The problem with the kingdom is not a case of actual physical violence, but of the troubled, sick heart of its princess (121). The problems in the kingdom cannot be resolved because the stories that Liceo tells of it “no se acabaron de entender por completo” (122). The problem with the princess, we are told, is not that her heart is hard but that it is impenetrable. The heart is not of “piedra”; rather, there is a “piedra en el corazón.” The story concludes in a later chapter as Liceo informs, “Pero aquella Princesa infeliz jamás supo la razón de su infelicidad, y nosotros tampoco”



(157). That this chapter and its story are significant to the novel is confirmed by Luis Mateo Díez's decision to give it the very title of the novel itself, "La piedra en el corazón." This stone in the heart of the princess and this princess in a perpetually impossible kingdom lie at the heart of this novel, torn itself between Nima's illness and an attempt to say something significant about March 11, 2004.

On a basic diegetic level, Liceo writes the story into his notebook in an attempt to understand his daughter. But the mention of Nima's inhabiting a kingdom "patas arriba" in a novel set on March 11<sup>th</sup> inevitably evokes from the reader consideration of the context in which all forms of victimization in the novel take place. Certainly, in the days that followed March 11<sup>th</sup>, the upside-down, decadent underbelly of modern Spanish democracy, which clearly preexisted the "crisapación sistemática," came to the fore. Voters discovered—or reawakened to—the underlying reality of their own "Reino . . . patas arriba" (121).

Nima's condition, indeed, shares much with the problem of Spain as described by its philosophers over the years. Nima, for example, has become her own problem ("La vida de Nima, la enfermedad que no le gustaba nombrar y que no era otra cosa que su vida" [206]), a situation that recalls Julián Marías's description of Spanish reality as precisely the obsession over the question of that reality: "la preocupación por la condición española parece un ingrediente esencial de la realidad de España" (11). Nima accepts her problem much as Marías seems to accept Spain's: "Lo que me pasa es irremediable y, poco a poco, me voy haciendo a la idea de que no merecería la pena que fuese de otro modo. Es lo que soy, es lo que tengo, casi comienza a ser lo que quiero" (60). Nima insists, on several occasions, that she is, in fact, not sick at all but merely exhausted. Her father confirms that Nima—like Marías's Spain—is her sickness, and that this sickness is perhaps incurable: "porque mi niña vuela en el sueño donde ninguno la puede alcanzar" (65).

In addition, Nima's condition, like Spain's own, is not wholly negative even if plenty of misery may accompany it. Nima's father, for example, recognizes that, despite the terrible trials Nima has inflicted upon their family, there is something "absolutamente extraordinario" about Nima in that condition (200). She lives in "la contradicción del desorden" but is blessed with "inteligencia y lucidez" (128). Liceo, writing to his daughter, tells her that she was only ever as sick as "tu extraordinaria inteligencia te permitía, tan enferma como lúcida y devastadora" (164).

Finally, similar to the case of the "problem" of Spain, the intractable nature of Nima's condition dissuades historical analysis: "no apetece demasiado volver a evaluar lo que en mi vida son débitos y culpas" (169). To uncover the past, to diagnose the causes of the condition, is simply too painful: "es tan triste reconocer lo que hicimos mal o dejamos de hacer, tan difícil determinar lo que hubiera sido posible con algo más de comprensión" (169).

When the novel returns to March 11th in the final three chapters, the connection of the attacks to Nima's situation lends a new sense of hopelessness to efforts at overcoming respective illnesses. Liceo writes:

No tiene ningún sentido que un hombre se pierda en esa noche de marzo, cualquiera de los que vivimos la atrocidad de la jornada en la inmediatez urbana que conformaba el escenario de nuestros días, sabemos de sobra que en la contrapartida de las ausencias no quedaba otra cosa que el mayor desamparo, un vacío extremo en la vigilancia del dolor y en el respeto de la muerte, cuando todavía las señales no administraban todas las desapariciones. (175)

For a third time Liceo describes Nima in his notebook as, "muerta, entre los muertos" (188). Now, however, the focus falls on Nima, that is, on the "muerta" and not on the Atocha "muertos." Her condition raises her to the level of the Atocha victims, whom she will soon supersede. March 11<sup>th</sup>, writes Liceo of Nima, "reducía su enfermedad y su desgracia a esa inmediata soledad que nos reconduce a lo poco que somos, cuando el dolor es de tantos" (211). But this sharing, within the long course of the novel, has in fact dissolved the suffering of March 11th into an exploration of Nima's suffering that existed well before, and will continue long after, notwithstanding the fates of the victims or their loved ones: "porque entre los cadáveres recogidos estaba su propia muerte, del mismo modo que estaba su propia enfermedad y su propia vida" (211).

Unfortunately, as the members of the various associations for the victims of March 11th and other terrorist attacks have discovered, Nima's cadaver, that is, the "Reino . . . patas arriba," or the cadaver of Spanish history itself, lay there among the wreckage from the beginning. *La piedra en el corazón*, while avoiding any explicit discussion of the ugly politics that followed March 11<sup>th</sup>, immerses its readers in a reality that is truly the "suceso irreal que hund[e] la propia realidad urbana", as Liceo writes (9). Spanish reality in March of 2004 should have been March 11<sup>th</sup>. Indeed, to refer back to Kundera, March 11<sup>th</sup> should have profoundly shaped Spanish existence. But instead, Spanish politicians, if not its citizens, enjoyed in its aftermath their own continuation of an "irrealidad" that for so long has successfully subverted and subsumed all others.

### **The Present and Future of March 11<sup>th</sup>**

In this light, the Spanish novel since March 11<sup>th</sup> may be as true to March 11<sup>th</sup> as the North American novel was to September 11<sup>th</sup>. Instead of Spain's major novelists taking stabs at a moment in Spanish reality, March 11<sup>th</sup> has turned them to an even stronger focus on the problematics of Spain's existence. Almudena Grandes's noted novel of civil war memory, *El corazón helado*, provides an excellent case in point. In her 700-plus-page historical adventure, Grandes takes a giant leap away from the historiographic problematics and reconciliatory spirit of civil war novels embodied in Javier Cercas's 2001 work, *Soldados de Salamina*. Instead, as if caught up in the spirit of political "crispación" that followed March 11<sup>th</sup> events, she returns Spanish narrative to the presentation of oppositional politics and politically-driven historical truths. Instead of Cercas's self-questioning exploration of historical and ideological gray areas, Grandes tells a chilling tale of lies, deceit, and intrigue that oozes politically correct and self-

righteous indignation affecting and infecting seemingly every character, however minor, in her novel. No one, the novel suggests, is free from the long shadow of Spain's war. We are all inevitably infected by a "crispación" insidiously replicating itself somewhere deep in a national DNA.

At the same time, the frozen heart at the novel's center is not ultimately located in any character or event but in the novel's own reluctance to address this problem. The star-crossed lovers of Grandes's novel supposedly want nothing more than to overcome Spain's fissured present by revealing the deeper truths of Spain's divided past. But the novel itself returns to a world of binary oppositions, of good and evil, of right and wrong, of true Spain and anti-Spain. The anxiety concerning supposedly past political divisions is perhaps most apparent, curiously, in the absent presence of March 11<sup>th</sup> in the novel. While Grandes's historical work is saturated with dates, times, and places, and is set, moreover, in a very recognizable contemporary Madrid, her characters pass right through the Madrid of March 11-14<sup>th</sup> without displaying any impression whatsoever from its events. Spain is divided as it has always been, Grandes's novel suggests, and little else matters.

It is likely that in the next few years we may see a handful of explicitly March 11<sup>th</sup> novels along the lines of Sonsoles Onega's *Donde Dios no estuvo*. I suspect, however, that the first of the major March 11<sup>th</sup> novels—*La piedra en el corazón*—may offer a better indication of things to come. It seems a safe bet that Spain's major novelists, Marías or Muñoz Molina among others, will work this event into future fictions. I would guess, however, to reiterate Navajas's observation, that March 11<sup>th</sup> will figure as part of a more cosmopolitan and global narrative, a reality weaving its way into an exploration of a more complex existence which is, they would argue, the true province of the novel. And eventually, March 11<sup>th</sup> will be drenched in the gloss of memory. But March 11<sup>th</sup> simply may never be to Spain—because it never was—what September 11<sup>th</sup> was to the United States. This may be perfectly apparent to anyone who would comparatively consider the experiences of invasion, political conflict, and internal social realities particular to the respective nations.

*La piedra en el corazón*, however, helps us to experience the tension between the event and its obscuring context. March 11<sup>th</sup> may end up overshadowed by Nima, but that shadow, when cast upon March 11<sup>th</sup> acquires new shape. If there is a note of hope, a new shape as it were, to feel its way out of the novel, it may be found in the second to last fragment of the novel where Nima, in addition to contacting her father, sends a lost call to her mother, estranged from Liceo as a consequence of stress surrounding their daughter's condition. Nima's call for this second contact reminds her once more of her solitude. Now she sees herself, much as her father has seen her, "en el vagón donde había muerto, entre todos los muertos" (214). At this moment she recognizes in the reflection of the Atocha-bound train, just seconds before its explosion into a thousand fragments, all other faces reflected in hers, the eyes, the feelings, and solitude of the near-future victims burned back into hers. At that instant the shared solitude is inflected with the dream, the voice, a word, and the name of "la persona que más se quiere. . ." (215). In these concluding lines, the reality of March 11<sup>th</sup> throws, at last, a human light onto the shadowy

existence of Nima. Significantly, on the next and final notebook entry of the novel—just four short sentences—the story suddenly finds its way back to specific, detailed space-time. Nima reports that she will call her doctor. She knows only the number and ignores its precise location, but she will call nonetheless. Díez suddenly drops readers into Nima’s conversation en medias res: “La voluntad es el único resorte de la curación,” she reports, “El enfermo es el ciego que para sanar lo primero que tiene que hacer es abrir los ojos” (216).

Perhaps March 11th will ultimately provide the same eye-opening for Spain. Certainly, Al Qaida’s attacks briefly shifted the dynamics of traditional terrorist activity in the country. Its effects on the content and arguments of victims associations have lasted longer still. Finally, Spain’s obsession with its own “problems” or “questions,” with its own social and political composition, can no longer count on working themselves out in the safe insularity of the past. Spanish politics and the Spanish novel are part of a massive global market economy. Interest in both these fields in a national and nationalist past will come increasingly into conflict with a European and global present. But for now, Spanish existence, as represented in its novel, remains mostly insular. In their search to write the reality of March 11<sup>th</sup>, however, Spain’s most important novelists will surely give that existence new form.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Marías details his rise to the power as king of the Caribbean island kingdom of Redonda in *Negra espalda del tiempo* as well as numerous newspaper columns. As King of Redonda, Marías appointed a round table that included directors, authors, architects, professors, and journalists from Spain, the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Mexico, France, and Cuba. Together the round table has awarded literary prizes to writers or directors whose work is *not* in Spanish (Marías, “Fallo” 1).

<sup>2</sup> What of the remnant of the 1990s Generación X? Does their celebrated intellectual irreverence preclude engagement or might they, in their self-mockery, be precisely a group who could negotiate March 11<sup>th</sup> theme? We might also expect treatment of the topic from more intellectually and politically committed writers such as Rafael Chirbes and Belén Gopeguí, or from an older generation of writers such as Felix Azúa and Juan Marsé. And yet, to date, nothing.

<sup>3</sup> See Spanish literary magazine *Quimera*’s 2002 survey of best novels of the twentieth century, for example. On “best of” lists solicited from more than one hundred writers and experts on the subject, *La fuente de la edad* finishes with the most top ten votes of any novel of the last two decades of the century (*Quimera* 214-15 [2002]).

<sup>4</sup> James Wood distinguishes the careful representation of detailed space and time in the modern realist novel from that of “the ancient storytellers” who “seem to feel no pressure to evoke a lifelike passing of ‘real time’” (87). For Ian Watt, the rise of the novel is tied fundamentally to its representation of time and space, specifically its “use of past experience as the cause of present action,” its chronological consistency, and its careful attention to place including depiction of detailed interiors and recognizable, faithful topography (21-26). M.M. Bakhtin’s calls chronotopes, his term for the representation of

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space-time in the novel, the key determination to the “generic variations on the novel in the early stages of its development” (243).

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