

Heroes and lies

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Alberto Méndez

BLIND SUNFLOWERS

Translated by Nick Caistor
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The controlling theme of *Blind Sunflowers* is defeat in the context of the Spanish Civil War, but the novel offers none of the comforts of epic narratives. In this it resembles other recent novels about the period, such as Javier Cercas's *Soldiers of Salamis*, works which have looked for historical meaning in private voices, thereby engaging in a soft version of revisionism. Alberto Méndez's revisionism is darker and more austere. He is not concerned with praising famous men or unsung heroes: "every death, on whichever side it occurred, served only to glorify whoever did the killing", says a character, and the novel goes against any kind of glorification, maintaining that the nationalists' victory entailed defeat for a whole country.

Four interconnected stories – each carrying the word "defeat" in the title – show this to be true. In the opening one, "First defeat: 1939, or, If the heart could think it would cease to beat", Captain Carlos Alegría, a member of Franco's army, surrenders to the enemy when it becomes clear that his side is about to win. Wanting no part in a conflict he considers meaningless, he makes it clear that he is not a simple deserter either: "I'm a prisoner", he insists, and keeps saying it when, later on, he is sentenced to death by firing squad. The third story, "The language of the dead", is a companion piece, told from the other side. In 1941, Juan Sendra, a Republican fighter doing time in gaol, is given a reprieve when the colonel in a charge of the prison asks him if he knew his son Miguel, killed by the Republicans. Sendra did, and discovers that if he feeds the colonel fabrications about his son's heroism he might save his skin. Yet he

cannot bring himself to go on doing it. Miguel, who murdered civilians and operated on the black market, does not deserve to be the protagonist of any heroic stories.

Méndez is careful not to glamorize defeat: the second story, "Manuscript found in oblivion", and the fourth, "Blind sunflowers", are about sacrifices that lead to nothing but personal despair. In "Manuscript", a seventeen-year-old poet and his pregnant girlfriend flee Madrid shortly after end of the war; the couple and their newborn child die in a cabin in the mountains on the border of Asturias and León: the girl in childbirth, and the father and son of starvation and cold. Presented as brief diary entries, the story is the weakest in the collection in terms of narrative technique, but it is grimly moving. "Blind sunflowers", equally dark, is a more vigorous piece of writing, in which the voices of a lecherous priest, a child, and a third-person narrator weave a taut narrative about a Republican in hiding, a grotesque infatuation, an attempted rape, a suicide and an apostasy. The priest is something of a stereotype, but his confession, filled with self-exculpatory religious clichés ("God had used me as the instrument of justice"), is imagined to great effect.

As a storyteller, Méndez is a double agent, an undercover realist moving freely in post-

modernist territory. The narrative in the first tale, for instance, is qualified by phrases such as "We now know" and "We imagine that this sequence", and some of the story is said to be "based on an amalgam of disparate, sometimes contradictory versions, often the product of the hazy memories of witnesses who prefer to forget". The poet's manuscript is introduced by a nameless "editor"; and in the last piece, the different narrators are marked by different typefaces. But the author is not suggesting that his characters are only textual creations. Instead, he is alert to the drama of authentication which was set in motion after the human drama ended: how history came to be written, documents amassed, experience preserved. We are encouraged to remember that under Franco there was every incentive not to arrive at truth. "At school", a character says, "Franco . . . and the Nationalist Movement were things that had appeared as if by magic, or fallen from the sky to bring order out of chaos There were no victims, only heroes; no dead people, only those who had fallen in the name of God and Spain." This is the view that the book opposes.

The writing in *Blind Sunflowers* has an aphoristic crispness which coexists with remarkable metaphors ("Winter clung to the balconies as though trying to climb inside for the warmth and smell of chicory"), and careful observation. There are also passages of Chekhovian everyday mysteriousness:

Juan tried to talk to him about his brother and their life together in Miraflores, but whenever he tried to recall how it had been, the only image that came to mind was of snowstorms.

Although brief, the novel is full of such felicities. The author died shortly after completing it [in 2007?], and it remains his only work of fiction. Readers should be grateful to have it, and English readers doubly grateful for Nick Caistor's impeccable translation.