From “The Origin” to “The Treasure Chest”:
The Short Stories of Soledad Puértolas

Francisca González Arias

Hispania 95.1 (2012): xvii–xxi
The thematic universe and constellation of motifs of Soledad Puértolas’s short stories remain constant, from her first collection, *Una enfermedad moral*, published thirty years ago, to her most recent, *Compañeras de viaje*, five collections comprising seventy-three stories. Apart from Puértolas’s short stories, in the following pages, I will also refer to two of the three loosely connected episodes that compose her second novel, *Burdeos*.

Fortuitous encounters produce meaningful connections that relieve the loneliness of modern urban life, epiphanies ensue upon the dispelling of self-doubt and the reaffirmation of identity, and Michel de Montaigne’s themes of friendship and self-knowledge hover over *Burdeos* and extend to Puértolas’s most recent stories.

A long line of travelers culminates in *Compañeras de viaje*. The astonishing diversity of locations—France, England, California, Venice, Rome, Norway, Spanish North Africa, Tunisia, seventeenth-century Naples, and Central Europe—abates as the author sets more of her stories in an urban Spain; she newly evokes, in *Compañeras de viaje*, the last decade of Franco’s Spain, a context that did not appear in the early stories.

Travel both instigates and parallels the inner journey. In “Gente que vino a mi boda,” from the collection of the same title, the confined space of the narrator’s dwelling only highlights how far she has come in her attainment of self-esteem, embodied in her mastery of a skill that eluded her as a child: “porque ya mi vida se limita a coser, a sentarme en este rincón del cuarto tan bien provisto de todo lo que necesito, tan cerca de este mueble de cajones en el que se contiene mi universo, los hilos, las telas, las agujas, esta butaca en la que me hundo suavemente . . . y la música de la radio llena el cuarto, la música y la voz del locutor” (206). She is self-contained, but not isolated, mindful of the community of women: “[A]l escuchar esa voz, me siento unida, desde mi rincón solitario, a todas las otras personas a quienes la voz del locutor se dirige también. Somos muchas, me digo” (207).

Motifs and descriptions recur. A penchant for the evocation of luminosity: from the sunset reflected on the Pacific in the last episode of *Burdeos* to the sense of well-being infused by the sunlight of the Galician shore in “Regattas” in *Compañeras de viaje*, the author’s works celebrate the enjoyment of life as a value in itself.

Light as inner clarity, the glimpse of change, an affirmation of the self. The narrator of “Camino a Houmt Souk,” from *Adiós a las novias*, revels in the light of the Tunisian landscape: “[M]e invadió una gran alegría, una sensación de plenitud, de saberme capaz de recrearme en cada matiz de la luz, la tibieza, la dulce caída de la tarde” (190), enabling the revelation, like the one that dawns on Lilly in the last episode of *Burdeos*, that she should forge her fate without depending on any man. And so, Enric’s card was lost forever: self-discovery punctuated by the searing light visible from the airplane window on the return trip: “brillante luz blanca, hiriente, entre las nubes” (196).

Though the narrator of “Los sueños no son sueños,” also from *Adiós a las novias*, sought to recreate in her home the light-filled rooms of her childhood, she has yet to shed the insecurities and fears represented by the dark corridor of her nightmares. In a dream, her husband’s rebuke, “Tienes que aprender a vivir sola” (147), motivates her upon waking to place herself in front of the window to receive the sun’s first rays that normally fall upon him, representing her awakening from passivity to action.

The motif of wine, central to *Burdeos*, is highlighted in Pauline’s episode, as she savors the wine sent to her by a woman she barely knew: “Aquel líquido rojo oscuro, lleno de luz,
de sombras y matices, procuraba una sensación de seguridad y peligro. . . . Era el resumen de
todas las emociones y vivencias. Dichas y penas, dolor, felicidad, miedo: todo tenía cabida en
él” (30). It represents not only the celebration of life, but also this solitary woman’s initiation
into the flow of others’ lives, for the wine has been given to her in appreciation for helping a
young woman in danger.

The story “Despacio,” from Compañeras de viaje, is a letter to Elena written by the nar-
rator as soon as she returns home to Mexico. The title recalls Elena’s instructions as to how
wine should be consumed. The writing of the letter is accompanied by the narrator sipping
the wine she brought back from Spain at Elena’s urging, a gift from a wine connoisseur at the
hotel surrounded by vineyards where the narrator, a singer, rested after a European tour, and
where she met Elena. The narrator’s writing is motivated by an effort to recreate and fix emo-
tions tied to her affair with the young French actor Bernard. Despite her initial protest that she
is not a drinker, her appreciation of the wine intensifies and alternates with the listing of her
contradictory emotions about the affair. Is not Elena, a filmmaker, “una mujer muy sabia” (96)
with whom communication came easily, “como si hubiéramos sido amigas desde la infancia”
(100), who encouraged the romance with Bernard, like so many others in Puértolas’s stories, an
image of the artist, the facilitator, the magician, the ideal confidant? The slow and steady sipping
of the wine represents the deepening of the friendship and culminates with the revelation that
this is more precious and durable than the fading memory of a romance: “[E]sto es lo que me
he traído de mi viaje por el viejo continente, lo que me he traído de esa madre patria que nos
causa apego y rechazo a la vez. Tu amistad” (105).

At the origin of all these themes, concerns, and motifs is “the other.” The construction of
identity develops in a process of mutual interaction of which Puértolas’s stories continually
provide examples. “El cofre del tesoro,” a piece from her weekly column in La Vanguardia,
offers insight. It is the gaze of others that impels us to define who we are: “Es la mirada de los
otros la que nos empuja a construir nuestro interior.” Quoting from the Spanish philosopher
José Luis Pardo’s “La intimidad” (1996), Puértolas explains: “La maldición de la intimidad
consiste en que en el mismo momento en que al decir ‘yo’ tranquilizo al otro con mi respuesta,
comienza mi propia inquietud interior” (12). Anxiety ensues because we are unsure of our
difference, leading us to create and guard the secrets that we keep in our “cofre del tesoro.”
Likewise, the other is impelled to construct his own mystery, because of our curious gaze, “la
mirada de intriga y extrañeza que les dirigimos” (12).

The discovery of the other initiates our apprenticeship as observers. In “El origen del
deseo,” an early story with an autobiographical basis, the narrator recalls her discovery of the
other as a young girl, in her all-consuming curiosity to see the Arroyo brothers, the neighbors
whose drunken homecomings were a perennial topic of censure in her grandmother’s household:
“Aquelllos hombres altos y vestidos de oscuro que yo no había llegado a ver jamás, habían
eencarnado para mí, con sus correrías nocturnas, el misterio de la vida. Y cuantas veces los
busqué inútilmente a través de la mirilla de la puerta, sentía vibrar la vida en mi interior. Pero
el descansillo siempre estuvo vacío para mí” (Una enfermedad moral 126). The “deseo” of the
title alludes to an aspiration to create fictional worlds, to incarnate the life pulsing within. That
the narrator never managed to catch sight of the Arroyos suggests that the author’s creativity
was born of the need to capture the other and fill the empty landing.

In the very first essay of “La vida oculta,” Puértolas reveals how her own experience with
the curious gaze of the other initiated her artistic pursuits: “Si las vidas de los demás no me
hubieran parecido extrañas, nunca se me habría ocurrido escribir” (22). Our curiosity leads us
to create our own versions of the other. The narrator of “Espejos,” from Compañeras de viaje,
resists the certainty of others: “[M]e extrañaban las cosas que me decían, las cualidades que me
atribuían, los defectos que me achacaban, no entendía cómo todo el mundo parecía conocerme
tanto” (136). At other times, the self becomes the other. In “Otoño de 1968,” from Compañeras
de viaje, also autobiographically inspired, a young newlywed, far from Spain, lives in a small
Norwegian city, as the dark winter days approach. With nothing to do, while her husband spends the day at the university, she finds herself “deshabitada. . . . Por primera vez en mi vida, yo era una desconocida para mi” (217).

The white hands of the narrator of “Gente que vino a mi boda” provide yet another manifestation of the self as other. Her own hands become alien to her when they recall the white hands of Benita Valle, the sewing teacher who always demanded more of her. But having mastered that art, just as she imposed control over the chaos and loss in her life, she pauses to lovingly contemplate these same hands that now complete her; they touch her face and fall upon her lap, “una encima de la otra . . . formando una unidad, mirándose, reconociéndose, perfectamente unidas, otra vez mías” (247).

If we are not open, our view of the other is distorted. Numerous of these situations involve gender difference. In “La indiferencia de Eva,” from *Una enfermedad moral*, the male narrator’s disapproving glance at the female radio host results from his assumption that the woman is but a mirror designed to duplicate his inflated view of himself, “reflecting the figure of man,” to use Virginia Woolf’s memorable words, “at twice its natural size” (35). Eva’s professional handling of the narrator’s clumsy performance on her show leads him to finally question his view of her: “Era, pues, más inteligente de lo que parecía. A lo mejor, hasta era más inteligente que yo” (34).

In “Macarena,” from *Compañeras de viaje*, the male narrator is an old-school chum of Macarena’s husband who listens to his friend’s account of a trip to Paris, which triggered his decision to leave his wife of thirty years. Pablo’s complaints about Macarena—his resentment of her bouts with depression—are undermined by the portrait that emerges of a woman who attains a measure of contentment, efficiently plans their Parisian outings, and even diffuses one of Pablo’s outbursts in a café, being experienced in managing his temper. Indeed, it is the vain and irritable Pablo who has not grown. In contrast, the narrator, who had once loved Macarena, is truly curious about her, aware that she had always been “llena de secretos” (92).

The observer is often a marginal character, accepting of his or her differences, like Rose Fouquet in the first episode of *Burdeos*, who, shunned by polite society after a failed love affair, found fulfillment in artistic appreciation, discovering that the most comfortable position in society “era la de esa relativa marginación” (25). Or there is the ultimate outsider, the detective, who is embodied for Puértolas in Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe. “[Son] narradores-observadores,” as the author explained in an interview, “Quieren saber, buscan un tipo de verdad” (128). They are surrogates for the fiction writer, maintaining distance in order to observe, collect facts, and unravel the mystery. Distance is tempered by empathy, as in the case of the detective-narrator of “El hombre apoyado en un árbol,” from *Gente que vino a mi boda*, who, at the story’s end, willingly forsakes the tenets of his profession when he steps out from the darkness into the circle of light, shedding his anonymity, as the lonely woman he has been hired to track looks down from her window.

We can reject or recoil from our respective others, or accept them and be enriched, sometimes all at once. In “A la hora en que cierran los bares,” from the author’s second collection, *La corriente del golfo*, the object of the narrator’s fascination is the sad and silent man who always lingered at the bar after the narrator and his friends had left (57). One night, the man unexpectedly turns to the narrator and tells the story of his internment in a psychiatric clinic. After several years, the narrator once again runs into the ill-fated man, who, after recognizing his long-ago drinking companion, relays the startling account of how he learned from the doctor who had pronounced him mad that the diagnosis was erroneous and that it was not he who had been crazy, but his now estranged wife. The narrator admits that if he resisted the urge to leave the bar to accompany the man, it was perhaps because of his fear of befriending “un demente” (73).

The narrator of “Camino a Houmt Souk” relishes the idea of traveling to the Island of Djerba, curious about the people, especially the women of this country. One day, she sees a young Arab woman signaling to her from the side of the road and picks her up. Though unable to understand the girl’s chatter, she delights in her laughter, and is moved by her gift of a string
of beads. When the narrator dines with a group of Tunisians, one of them recounts the myth of the goddess of dusk, whose gaze intoxicates, and who appears to those who have been caught by the island’s magic, adding that many people have disappeared in her pursuit. The next day, her second encounter with the girl has an entirely different cast from the first. Resisting the girl’s insistence to follow her, the Spanish woman pulls away and rushes back to the hotel. On the threshold of deeper self-knowledge, the narrator is afraid of being sidetracked, a fear that is spatially evoked by the sight of the unknown paths that the girl points to: “hacia las arenas cubiertas de matorrales morados, surcadas por senderos que llegaban a la frontera del mar, a las dunas” (195). They represent the fear of getting lost in the other. With similar attention to spatial detail, the author describes in “El cofre del tesoro” what must be done to regain a hold on our secrets if we flounder: “[S]i nos sentimos desorientados, desesperanzados, bastaría con poder descubrirlos de nuevo para recuperar esa brújula que no señala siempre el norte, sino el centro.” We know intuitively that our secrets should be shielded from the eyes of the other. “Si no tenemos ese secreto, no tenemos nada, estamos disueltos, confundidos en la vida de los otros.” If our secrets are breached, we would be in free-fall: “no tenemos ningún punto de apoyo.” Encountering the other’s uncomprehending gaze, “nos avergonzaría y anularía” (12).

When the narrator of “El cuarto secreto,” from *Adiós a las novias*, manages to finally enter the room her partner keeps locked, she finds a jumble of boxes, papers, and bags, and inexplicably falls asleep in their midst. That this is the third time in her life this has happened lends a fairy-tale element to the story—a nod to Ana María Matute’s Princess Tontina, whose breached treasure chest inspired the title of Puértolas’s essay. When Gabriel returns, he is devastated. He had shored up his self-esteem in his secret room and his philosophizing interpretations of scenes encountered on assignments as a TV cameraman, dismissive of his companion’s capacity to understand. Now, he has no option but to look inside: “[O]fendido, humillado, expuesto, desvelado, sigue siendo él” (130). Similarly, the narrator looks inward as she decodes those three strange instances: the first, when she was accused of stealing; the second, because she resisted ringing the bell announcing the end of class; and the third, because she violated another’s secret. Even more, if the contents of Gabriel’s room were incomprehensible to her, she also confronted the possibility that her own existence was meaningless to others. She discovers that the emotions produced by these events define who she is; and, in the face of her insecurities, they reinforce her own identity: “Sólo estos tres momentos me distinguen con toda claridad del resto de las personas” (130).

The narrator of “La extranjera,” from *Adiós a las novias*, a frequent visitor to a coastal town in Galicia, is intrigued by the town’s long-time foreign resident. After expressing her desire to meet the foreign woman, her perplexed hosts reply that no one visits her. The narrator then muses: “Pero es que yo soy también un poco extranjera” (112). The fact that the answer “calms” them recalls how we often “calm” the other when we confirm our differences. The German foreigner named Carla always visited the townspeople when they were ill, or had lost a loved one. The villagers construct the foreigner’s “mystery” by imagining disparate versions of her origins: she is either descended from nobility or a cabaret dancer who settled in the town to atone for her wild ways; she had a Nazi lover or fled Hitler’s Germany. That after so many years she is still “la extranjera” is not born of the villagers’ rejection of her, but rather of their pride; it was them she had chosen to live among and comfort.

On the afternoon the narrator spends with the foreigner, in her house overlooking the sea, Carla explains that life’s problems, “soledad, . . . vacío, . . . miedo” (the same currents that run throughout Puértolas’s narratives), are inevitable: “Eran parte de la vida y la vida estaba para otra cosa, para darla, para conseguir algo todos juntos” (113). Like Julio Torreno, from “La orilla del Danubio” of *Una enfermedad moral*, who settled on a mountain top and dispensed comfort to those who came from far and wide, the “extranjera” embodies yet another version of the artist’s role.
“Los cuentos siempre me han dado fuerzas para seguir escribiendo” (130), the author observed in the interview cited earlier. By this, she meant that they provide relief, reinvigorating the creative flow, after the long and arduous process of novel writing. And, in the concision and the compression they require, they also provide a model for how a novel should be written.

I would add that the short stories of Soledad Puértolas give us strength to keep on going. They offer solace, admonishing the reader, as I wrote in the introduction to my translation of Bordeaux, “not to despair” (xii). Her stories urge us to be open to difference because, in so doing, we will not only learn more about the other, but we will also discover ourselves—we will be completed and consoled.

WORKS CITED