Noël Valis

Civil War Ghosts Entombed: Lessons of the Valley of the Fallen

On 1 April 1959, Generalissimo Francisco Franco ended his speech inaugurating the civil war monument the Valley of the Fallen (El Valle de los Caídos) with these words: "The dead demand of us . . . that we keep alive for all the generations the lessons of History, thus making the blood they so generously spilt fecund, . . . that their blood be the last shed in wars among Spaniards" (qtd. in Sueiro 243).[1] In a similar vein, the chief architect of the monument complex saw it as a "tangible remembrance of a tragedy that must not be repeated. Perennial lesson of our history" (D. Méndez 11). For Franco and his architect, the lessons of history were as clear and bright as the blood image of the civil war dead. But what were those lessons, and does the Valley of the Fallen transmit the same message to us now? Does this monument indeed teach us anything? If what remains of historical events are more often than not merely images, or representations of history, what do we do with more tangible reminders like monuments? How can we infuse the breath of history into dense stone for our students? Is it true that the substance and actions of history vanish when we try to talk about such things? Can history mean so little?

In 1970 when I first went to Spain, I could not make myself enter the Valley of the Fallen.[2] This monument, after all, represented Franco's dead;

the Republican dead were there only as ghosts. By April 2001, however, I had changed my mind. As we passed through the series of antechambers leading to the heart of the underground basilica, where Franco and the Falangist leader José Antonio Primo de Rivera are entombed, my companion and I felt at once appalled and fascinated. The monumental proportions of the complex dwarf the human presence. The nave is bigger than Saint Peter's in Rome and Saint Paul's in London! While many fascist buildings, sculptures, and monuments have disappeared or been transformed into something else, this one perseveres, despite periodic demands for its destruction or conversion. Spanish travel agencies now call it a tourist horror ("espanta-turistas"), claiming it a "politically incorrect" place to visit in these democratic times ("Todavía").

But such sites as the Valley of the Fallen should be preserved, no matter how embarrassing they prove to current governments, to remind us of the terrible cost in human lives, freedom, and dignity that these monuments represent. One of the difficulties in communicating the significance of this monument to students has to do with its physical and ideological impact, the immediacy of seeing it firsthand. Most students won't have that opportunity. So teachers need to find other ways of making this material real. There is an even more fundamental question that monuments like this one pose: how to retrieve the memory of history itself. As James Young remarks, "It is as if once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember" (94).

With the Valley of the Fallen, however, there is more than collective and individual amnesia at stake. History itself has been airbrushed out of the picture. The way that the Franco regime presented the monument to its visitors constitutes in itself a significant part of that history. Appropriately, Young contends that historical inquiry, particularly with regard to commemorative forms, should include "the combined study of both *what happened* and *how it is passed down* to us" (11). To uncover the specific history and significance encased in the Valley of the Fallen gives us insight into the ways the Spanish Civil War continues to haunt history at both the local and international levels.

I see two interconnected approaches as especially useful to students' understanding of the subject. First, the monument complex needs to be contextualized locally, which means our situating it within Franco's obsession with resurrecting Spain's past imperial and Catholic greatness while obliterating modern history, especially the Republican era. Two kinds of

cultural-historical texts can help penetrate the intimidating facade of the Valley of the Fallen. First are speeches by Franco and regime spokesmen and other forms of discourse, such as recorded testimony of those who built the memorial; and architecture itself—namely, the relation between the Escorial of Philip II and Franco's monument. Second, it helps us understand the concrete circumstances and significance of the monument as fascist architecture when we compare it with the aims of contemporary architecture in fascist Germany and Italy. At both levels, the Spanish Civil War turns out to be what distinguishes Franco's monument not only from the Escorial but also from such sites as Hitler's new Reich Chancellery or Mussolini's Sacrarium of the Martyrs.

Before we enter more fully into the differences (and similarities), some background to the creation of the monument complex is necessary. The decree authorizing the Valley of the Fallen was promulgated 1 April 1940, precisely one year after the war's end. From the beginning, this was the generalissimo's personal project. "It drove me crazy with impatience," he said, "trying to identify and locate an image [of the site] that I had been carrying inside my head for quite some time" (Pérez de Urbel 6). The Cuelgamuros Valley, situated only a short distance from Philip II's palace-necropolis, El Escorial, seemed "predestined" as the sacred site for the memorial Franco planned, according to the abbot of the Benedictine monastery that is part of the complex (10). The Valley of the Fallen, which took nearly twenty years to complete, was meant to serve as the final resting place for those who had died fighting for the Nationalist crusade. But it was also a monument to Franco himself and to the power of his regime. Thus the presumed sacredness of the site is irremediably politicized from the start.

To appreciate the dramatic impact of this memorial, imagine a long, winding drive into an extraordinary landscape of craggy masses, reforested pines, oaks, and black poplars. From a distance you see the 410-foot-high cross that dominates the valley (fig. 1). Surrounding the cross are monumental sculptures of the four evangelists and the four cardinal virtues. The first thing you come to are the four "Juanelos," sixteenth-century stone monoliths created by Juanelo Turriano (fig. 2). These massive, cylindrical objects seem oddly modern in their abstract plainness and vaguely menacing. A flight of ten steps (a repeated Decalogue motif of the complex) gains you access to an imposing esplanade; another ten steps take you to the underground basilica built into the rock (fig. 3). An enormous pietà rests on the cornice of the principal facade. You move through a series of

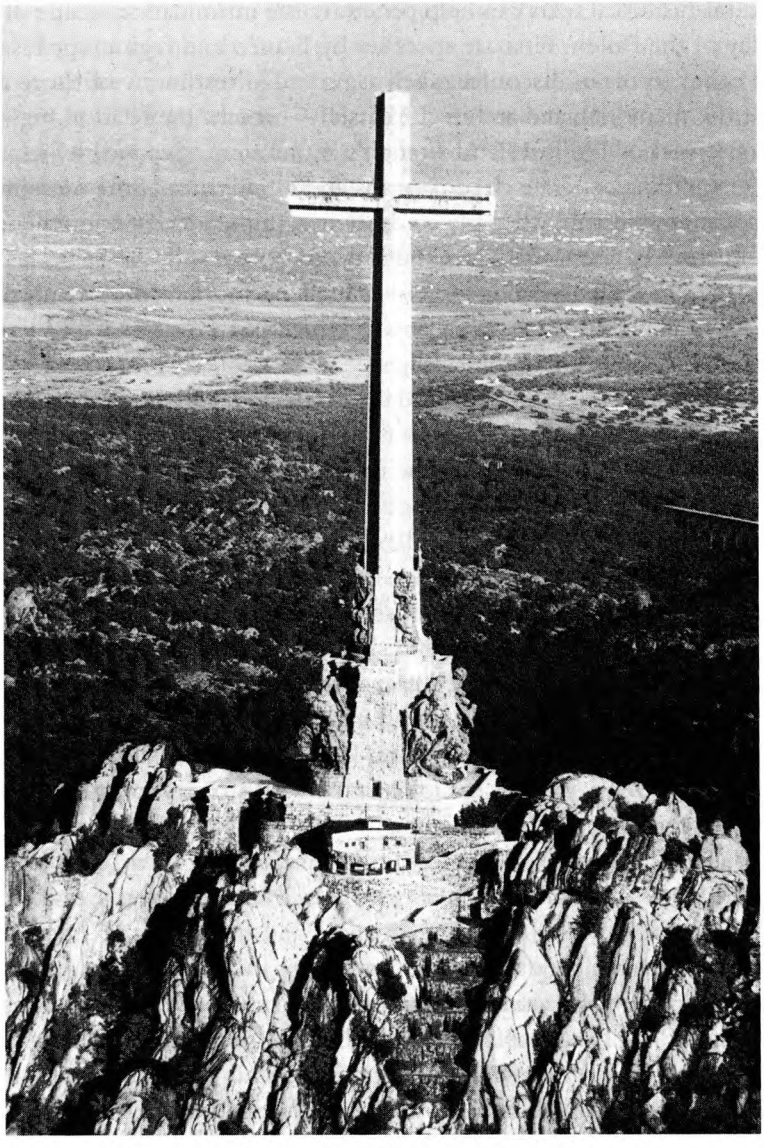

Figure 1. 410-foot-high Cross, Valley of the Fallen. Archivo Fotográfico Oronoz.

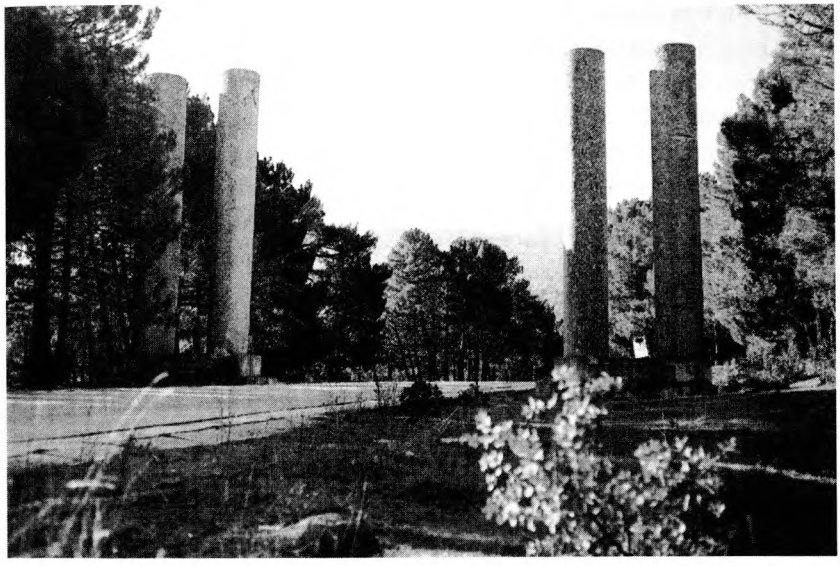

Figure 2. The four "Juanelos," sixteenth-century stone monoliths, Valley of the Fallen. Archivo Fotográfico Oronoz.

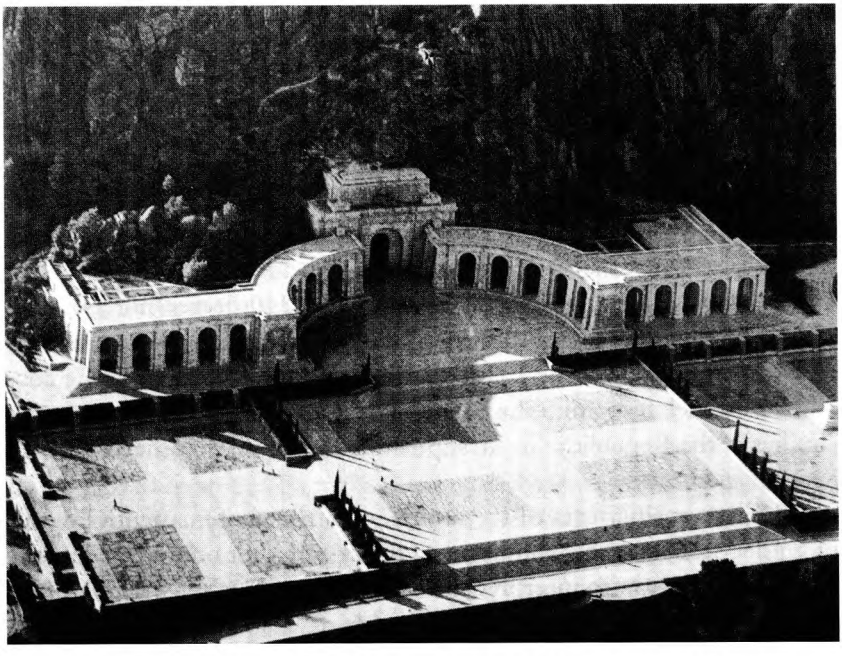

Figure 3. Esplanade, with Decalogue of ten steps, Valley of the Fallen. Archivo Fotográfico Oronoz.

antechambers (a vestibule, an atrium, and an intermediate space) and a traditional iron gate decorated with warriors and martyr saints, before coming to the nave itself. This drawn-out passage into the basilica at once suggests a staged form of spiritual preparation and a depersonalizing message of immense political power. Indirect lighting contributes to the theatrically hushed atmosphere. In the intermediate space, two bronze archangels in niches, Saints Gabriel and Michael, stand guard, striking an attitude that is "meditative and vigilant," in Justo Pérez de Urbel's words (26). It is difficult, however, to see these sculptures as meditative, given their massive size looming over us and their physical stance, hands firmly clasped on long swords. Traditional subjects of religious art, they incorporate both spiritual and secular motifs, seeming more warriors than saints. The wings look artificially attached to soldiers' bodies. Inside the nave, Franco's burial site is situated at the foot of the altar.

Students at this point may be tempted to dismiss the monument as "at once absurdly kitsch and cruelly frightening," as Elizabeth Nash remarks (182). The excessive proportions of the complex, along with the incongruities of spiritual ornamentation subjected to secular aims, certainly induce such a view of hollow grandiosity. More significant, the Valley of the Fallen has been emptied of much of its historical context. This historical void is both intentional and accidental, in the way that the history of the monument has been passed down to us. Tourism has contributed its share toward neutralizing the effect and meaning of the memorial. The 1998 *Michelin Green Guide to Spain* sums up the site as a "striking monument to the dead of the Civil War" (336). A current guidebook says that it "was the express desire of its founder [Franco] to construct a final resting-place for the fallen of both sides during the civil war of 1936–1939" (Tornero 5).[3] But neither the 1940 decree nor Franco's 1959 inaugural speech nor any other official government document suggests that the Valley of the Fallen was intended for both sides of the conflict. Only belatedly did the regime make awkward overtures to the families of the Republican dead, stipulating, however, that they had to be Spanish and Catholic.

By juxtaposing texts of the regime with the content-neutral words of guidebooks, students can begin to understand not only how ideology works but also how to interpret and question what texts cover up: in this case, the exclusion or silencing of one side of a bloody conflict. Roland Barthes's notion of myth as "a type of speech chosen by history," in which

history has been banalized or emptied of its meaning, is a useful tool in this regard (*Mythologies* 110, 142). Take, for example, the preamble to the 1940 decree authorizing the construction of the Valley of the Fallen:

> The dimensions of our Crusade, the heroic sacrifices entailed in victory and the transcendence that this epic has had for the future of Spain, cannot be perpetuated by the simple monuments with which the salient events of our History and the glorious episodes of our people have generally been commemorated in towns and cities. The stones that will be erected must have the grandeur of ancient monuments, they must defy time and forgetting, and they must constitute a place of meditation and repose in which future generations will render admiring tribute to those who bequeathed to them a better Spain. It is to these ends that the choice of a secluded place responds, where the grandiose temple of our dead will be raised that, for all eternity, prays for those fallen on the path of God and Country. A perennial place of pilgrimage, in which the grandeur of nature will make a worthy frame to the land in which the heroes and martyrs of the Crusade repose. (qtd. in D. Méndez 314)

Three images in Franco's rhetoric stand out here: "our Crusade," "the stones that will be erected," and "the grandeur of nature" as "a worthy frame." As many historians have noted, the crusade is a fundamental trope of the regime. The war itself was conceived in similar terms, as an epic struggle for national salvation against the demonized, "red" Spain of the republic. "Spain had been reconquered as sacred space," as Michael Richards remarks (*Time* 71). Such rhetoric reminds us that in many ways the Spanish Civil War was also a religious war, a "struggle between traditional triumphalist Catholicism and liberal-proletarian secularism," in the words of one historian (Payne, Preface xi; see also Vincent in this volume).

The Valley of the Fallen provides a concrete example to students of how the rhetoric of the war, from the Nationalist side, becomes literally materialized in stone. To make those stones speak, however, the teacher needs to return to the words of Franco and those of other apologists of the regime such as Abbot Pérez de Urbel and the architect Diego Méndez. The monument speaks, in effect, of a holy war. Over and over Francoists justified their rebellion against the legitimate Republican government as a holy war and thus a just one. But is a holy war the same as a just war? Is a

holy war possible, or is it a contradiction in terms? The Valley of the Fallen, like the war it invokes, offers students and teachers a platform of discussion on a subject that is equally compelling now, after the events of 9/11. Particularly apposite are Jacques Maritain's eloquent words:

> Just or unjust, war against a foreign power or war against fellow-citizens remains . . . , of necessity, what it really is by its own nature, something profane and secular, not sacred. . . . And if sacred values are in question, defended by one side and attacked by the other, this does not make the profane complex either holy or sacred; on the contrary, the sacred values are secularised by this profane complex and dragged down to its temporal ends. (31; see also J. Sánchez, *Spanish Civil War* 155)

A just war is not a holy war. It can also be argued, as moral theologians have traditionally upheld, that a war that causes greater evils than those it opposes may not be considered a just war.

The second image—"the stones that will be erected"—speaks to us not only of how those stones were raised but what they signify. The language of the decree suggests a passive agency bereft of human contact that will assemble these stones. Moreover, they will "defy time and forgetting." How can students get past such dehistoricizing clichés? By juxtaposing these words with those of some of the men who actually built the Valley of the Fallen, namely Republican prisoners whose numbers were overflowing Franco's jails, detention centers, and concentration camps in the early 1940s. Their testimony, which can be found in Daniel Sueiro's taped interviews (*El Valle*) and in Rafael Torres's *Los esclavos de Franco*, speaks volumes of forced labor conditions, by which Republican prisoners were able to reduce their sentences (see also Juliá). That Franco criminalized those who had supported the Republic was an example of his "politics of revenge" (Preston, *Politics*; see also Richards in this volume). Many political prisoners died building the monument, either through accidents or silicosis; others were maimed for life. We have no reliable statistics for these deaths and accidents, which is another way that history has been passed down to us by omission or silence. Forgetting has, in truth, been built into the Valley of the Fallen, despite the decree's rhetoric (see Aguilar Fernández, *Memoria* 116–30).

The stones of this memorial speak in yet another way. That "grandeur of ancient monuments" alludes to the past splendor of imperial, Catholic Spain and, more pointedly, to the nearby sixteenth-century Escorial of

Philip II, which served as an ideological touchstone for the regime, its Herreran neoclassical style inspiring much Francoist architecture, including the Valley of the Fallen (Coad 224). The Escorial not only stood for the symbolic power of kingship but also served as the burial place for the Hapsburg dynasty, establishing a deep "connection between death and the sacred character of the Spanish monarchy," as Carlos Eire points out (366). It was also the repository of several thousand holy relics, which Philip II obsessively collected. Franco's relics in the Valley of the Fallen are the dead themselves. Like the Escorial, the monument has death at its center. Unlike the Escorial, it was also built on a foundation of death, the deaths of Republican prisoners. These are the ghosts of the Spanish Civil War, forever entombed in the stones of this memorial. Franco's obsession with past imperial greatness led him to emulate Philip II in the building of his own mausoleum as a second Escorial (see Preston, *Politics* 42, 45; Elizabeth Nash 185).

Finally, we come to the third image-cliché in the preamble, nature as a frame for the Valley of the Fallen. The trope of nature performs two functions. It effectively dehistoricizes and thus naturalizes the monument site. But it also sacralizes it. From the very beginning, the Cuelgamuros Valley was conceived as sacred space. The mental image Franco projected of the place already situates it in the realm of the sacred, by making it the singular object of a quest. Both processes of sacralization and naturalization erase the monument's historical specificity. Thus a recent guidebook can continue to say that the giant cross "seems like a prolongation of the rock itself" (Tornero 10) or, as in Diego Méndez's book, that the valley itself was a "great basilica of nature" (173). By comparing official documents like the 1940 decree with guidebooks, students should be able to see how both kinds of texts effect an erasure of history (see Aguilar Fernández 125–26 for more guidebook examples). The 1940 decree is, strictly speaking, historical for us now; in the Barthian sense, it is also myth. By grasping this distinction, students are on the way to understanding as well how the Spanish Civil War has been at once present and absent in the history of Spain since 1939.

Like the civil war, the Valley of the Fallen has an international context. This architecture is, after all, fascist, with its counterparts in Germany and Italy. In both the social and the artistic realms, the Franco regime claimed to have returned to what was authentically Spanish. "The principal potentiality of our Crusade of Liberation," Franco said in his 1959 speech, "resided in having returned us to our essential being, Spain having found

itself once more" (qtd. in Sueiro 241). Pérez de Urbel wrote that "all the work here [in the Valley of the Fallen] is Spanish" (35). For Méndez, the monument had been built "to honor and glorify racial virtues" (12). The Republican prisoners in Cuelgamuros, on the other hand, represented an anti-Spain. This construction of Spanishness bears some resemblance to the cult of Romanness in fascist Italy and of Aryan purity in Hitler's Germany (Coad 223; Affron and Antliff 15–16). Like much Nazi art, the Valley of the Fallen architecturally looks to the past as authenticating its national character. In contrast, Italian fascist art, with its origins in futurism, was more often decidedly modernist in vision.

German fascist architecture and Franco's monument both demonstrate a palpable "loss of any sense of scale" (Adam 227). Everything is excessive. The monumentality of the Valley of the Fallen had the same aims as Nazi architecture: "to impress and to intimidate" as well as "to unite the people" (227). To reach Hitler's inner sanctum in the new Reich Chancellery, one had to walk 720 feet through a series of rooms, recalling the staging of antechambers and long passageway to the basilica nave in the Valley of the Fallen. Monumentality was achieved through stone. And stone, in both Nazi and Francoist architecture, held deep symbolic meaning, as we have seen in Franco's monument (227).

Unsurprisingly, all three regimes drew on the notion of empire and Greco-Roman classicism as symbols of power and authority. But the Valley of the Fallen differs in a fundamental way, for underlying the neoclassical style is catastrophe, the sense of building on ruins, the ruins of civil war. Catholicism also distinguishes Franco's monument from fascist architecture in Germany and Italy, where religion did not play a dominant ideological role. Comparing the Valley of the Fallen with other national forms of fascist architecture should enable students to see more clearly how fundamental the memory of the Spanish Civil War is and how it is inscribed into this contested site in ways that are both visible and invisible. In 1959 Franco wrote that "Anti-Spain has been defeated and crushed, but it isn't dead" (qtd. in Sueiro 241). For Franco, symbol and stone fuse in this monument, and the lesson is obvious—yet, for us today, still invisible, like the civil war ghosts entombed in the walls.

Notes

1. All translations from the Spanish are mine.

2. After I finished this piece, I ran across Carolyn Kizer's poem "The Valley of the Fallen," in which she speaks of a similar reaction to the monument: "My hus-

band and I shudder a bit and smile—/ He's an architect, has seen photographs / Of Franco's grandiose memorial, / The Valley of the Fallen. / At first the thought appalled, but we've decided / It's part of architecture, part of history too, / So we drive the road from the Escorial. / Climb tiers and tiers of stairs, / Take in the view" (252).

3. The only video on the Valley of the Fallen that I know of is presented as an innocuous filmed guidebook, in which practically all history has been eradicated (see *El Valle de los Caídos*). As classical music swells in the background, the narrator describes the monument as a heroic, Franco-inspired enterprise dedicated to "the fallen." Still, pedagogically the film is useful as an ideological exercise. I am grateful to Eva Teba Fernández and Andrés Fuentes for locating this video for me. Newsreels following the progress of construction of the monument were standard movie fare (and propaganda) during the regime (see Lafuente, *Esclavos* 130–31). My thanks go to Michael Ugarte for pointing out this reference.