



## **The Bicephalous Writer: The Commingling of the Creative Writer and the Critic in a Single Body**

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If I use the Platitude Detection Machine, for example on the article “La crítica de mi tiempo”<sup>1</sup> by Javier Marías, several clichés appear (among them: “I am more a reader than a writer,” a statement habitually repeated ever since Borges, one that has been evacuated of significance). The most outstanding platitude is that a critic cannot be an artist: “A mí me parecen incompatibles las dos actividades, aunque sólo sea por elegancia” (It seems to me that the two activities are incompatible, if only because of elegance). The issue of elegance is interesting. If we look up the word in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (an institution of which Marías is a member, thanks to the support of Arturo Pérez Reverte), we see two meanings: “Forma bella de expresar los pensamientos” and “cualidad de elegante” (beautiful form of expressing thought [ . . . ] elegant quality). Of course literary criticism can be beautiful.

If we look up “elegant” we find four meanings with a cloud of labels: refinement, nobility, simplicity, grace, good taste, distinction. “Elegance,” thus, is related to social class; the platitude is tied to an aristocratic position. In fact, Javier Marías is the imaginary king of the Kingdom of Redonda, which could be related to the narrative tone and his journalistic voice. The article, in fact, can be read as a public exercise of affirming impunity intrinsic to the monarchy. After presenting himself as an artist and not a critic, Marías writes that he only offers opinions about the works of others “in private”; he proclaims that “uno escribe novelas y juzga las de los demás públicamente, en ello va implícita la presunción de que las propias son mejores”; he calls “algunos críticos” ignorantes,” “imbéciles” or “idiota de turno”; and states that “la función del crítico sería [ . . . ] afinar lo más posible” (one writes novels and judges another publicly implies the

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presumption that one's own work is better some critics are 'ignorant' 'imbeciles' or 'the idiot of the day' [ . . . ] the role of the critic is to fine tune as much as possible).

At the end of the column, Marías offers his opinion about current Spanish literature and, without citing it, my novel, *Los muertos*: “se ha equivocado de arte y remeda series de televisión o cómics creyendo que con eso inaugura una nueva literatura, cuando no está entregando más que obras deudoras y epigonales” (he has confused his genre and mimics television series or comics believing that it inaugurates a new literature, when he is only handing over more epigonal, indebted works). These lines mix up references to various recent books, without citing them, with the obvious intention of reviling them. According to my code of elegance, which is not aristocratic but democratic, to talk about a book one must cite its title and author, out of respect for the author cited, the reader of the article, and even literary history. Every writer should be precise, flee sophisms, avoid platitudes. In a strict sense, every writer is indebted and every writer is an epigone: “hombre que sigue los pasos de otro” (a man who follows in another's footsteps). The word *epigonal* does not exist, according to the *DRAE*. The construction of this phantom zone where an artist is not a critic thus pursues total impunity to exercise literary criticism without any ethical limits. In the phantom zone, contradiction, fallacy, and insult are possible. Unlike what happens in literary masterpieces (in the form of a novel), which shun commonplaces and construct a space and a tone that seeks out a possible originality, in his articles Marías seems to follow another poetics and another ethics. The principle contradiction of the article I am writing about is its supposed fine-tuning. The initial fallacy is the platitude that confronts two complementary figures: the critic and the writer. What Javier Marías wants to say, in fact, is that he is not a *reviewer*. Because there is no doubt that he makes use of all kinds of textual formats of a public sort in the exercise of literary criticism: opinion columns, letters to the editor, prologues, interviews, personal web page, etc. But even this possible distinction (writer/reviewer) is unsustainable, if we take into account Enrique Vila-Matas, J. M Coetzee, or James Wood, to name very different contemporary creative authors (with different degrees of distance and proximity in terms of the Academia), who all periodically publish reviews—as do many other authors. As is so often true, the platitude has no relation to reality. It's a magic trick; invoking it creates a truth effect that, once reflected upon, shows itself to be a lie. One might say that a novelist traffics in lies; that is true, but behind the mass of them a desire for truth needs to exist.

Perhaps because I work from travel writing, a genre with a very high degree of self-awareness and accustomed (since the eighteenth century) to irony, self-parody, and a tendency to theorization, in my books I do not attempt to obscure any of the facets that constitute me as a writer. Perhaps

because I am an epigone and in debt to *Lazarillo* as well as the *Quijote* (the first *modern* novels according to the current understanding of literary history) in them we find, as in all literature that interests me, a double critical question: towards History (the human) and towards Literature (representation). This split criticism can only lead to the dismantling of the *topoi* that always accompany the literary. And *the literary*, for good or ill, has never been constituted only by texts with an artistic ambition. The rest of production as well, whether textual or oral, in the writer's biography, constitutes part of literature. Because everything human is subject to the mechanisms of social construction, based on specific historical contexts. Like me, here and now, talking to you: Cornell University, 1 May 2010.

I feel that my first solid step, although at that time I had published numerous works (if "step" is an adequate metaphor: there is nothing more faltering and mobile than writing), is titled "The Shout. Strange Days in Neruda Territory." I wrote it at the end of 2003 and it appeared in *La brújula* three years later. In it I hybridized the travel chronicle (that is to say, traditional travel literature), the mystery or horror story (that is, traditional fiction), and the journal of a writer similar to myself who asks about the experience narrated in the text and the form in which this experience can be narrated (therefore, criticism).

I believe in the final unity of the multiplicities that constitute us, because I believe that the writer should aspire to coherence. The poetics and the ethics of the writer are consolidated from text to text, and *a posteriori*, one can read a single pathway, with possible meanings, with revealable coherencies. In our time, the webpage and blog have been converted, for many writers, into the space where this meaning and this coherence are constructed: texts that originally appeared in diverse media and that are perhaps ideologically divergent, notes on readings or travels, fragments of works published on paper, interviews, opinions, dialogues with readers—their multiplicity of proposes, secretly, a final unity related to subjectivity, that is to say, with the historical biography of the author of these texts. The critique of the textuality of the other takes us to one's own work—auto-critique appears. It gives evidence of one's own theory (as a summation of theories) and its range. The blog and other formats will disappear (just as the epistolary form and the diary have already done or are doing), but writers will still return to strategies for ordering lines of force and escape arranged according to a possible meaning that constitutes it.

We might observe, once more, during Juan Marsé's acceptance speech last year when he won the Premio Cervantes, that Spanish literature is essentially (and I am aware that literature should not or cannot possess *essences*) theory-phobic; that is to say, it champions the most difficult of all theories, that which is inserted (of course) in the poetics and ethics of Javier Marías, that which wishes to be represented as outside all of the historical movements of literary theory. Of course, in defending "storytelling" and

rejecting “theory,” Marsé is not just exercising literary criticism, but also arguing for the indefinite survival of two fundamental concepts: history and theory. It seems to me more honest, more fertile, and less retrograde to recognize that all writers are bicephalous, both critics and creators. Without a historical critique and without a critique of language and the forms by which it is organized (grammar, syntax, rhetoric), a literary text cannot aspire to excellence. It goes without saying that some of the novels by Marías and Marsé, authentic masterpieces, support my argument. Fortunately, with time, the work strips away its satellite texts and shows itself as it is: critique, historicity, art, written by a bicephalous author, as all of them have been and will be.

In my books, instead of hiding it, I have tried to launder this duality and I have tried to integrate it at various simultaneous levels of writing that will ideally provoke various simultaneous levels of reading. Literature is a machine to multiply meanings and understandings. This concept of the literary phenomenon, in diverse metaphors, can be traced in a specific tradition of contemporary authors I’ve read (and who constitute a “certain tradition” only for that reason, because they are one in my eyes): Leopoldo Alas “Clarín,” Federico García Lorca, Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan, Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Julio Cortázar, W. G. Sebald, Ricardo Piglia, David Grossman or Roberto Bolaño. I am their epigone and in their debt, because I try to follow in their footsteps, steps that I submit to my own perception, my own world, my own mathematics—criticism permits me to open a pathway among the sum of so many previous paths.

I understand that the author is a privileged reader of his own work, although sometimes months or years have to go by before I am capable of understanding it. Now that I have been invited by this event to reflect on my books, I realize that in them I can find a norm or a schizophrenia. I am not referring just to the persistence of my two names—Jordi or Jorge, Jorge and Jordi, which in some sense is in everything I have written. I find, above all, that in all of my work there is a clear will to exercise a double critique (excuse my insistence): of hHistory and of literature.

In *La brijula* (2006), a collection of travel chronicles and essays-in-motion, I tried to trace a possible, extremely fragmentary and incomplete map of Latin America, insisting (without being entirely aware of it) on what later I would call counter-space (the traveler travels against a certain political conception of space, inherited from his culture of origin), through non-fiction stories that incorporate the traveler’s body, his sexuality, his autobiography, elements that are almost always absent from the literary tradition of travel. This investigation later took me to *La piel de La Boca* (2008), a “tenement chronicle,” which tried to reflect the diversity of cultures that historically coexisted in the Buenos Aires area of La Boca, as symbolically represented in the figure of the tenement house, through the mixture of very diverse textual materials ranging from the interview to the

essay, and including poetry and the personal diary. The goal is, ideally, that each chronicle would checkmate the genre or genres in which it tries to uncomfortably accommodate itself. That it be vibrating, like the lives of the immigrants, the nomads, the passengers, the travelers, and wanderers it synthesizes.

*GR-83* (2007) is an experimental book whose main theme is the Spanish Civil War. It derived from a need to demonstrate that not all discursive strategies—generally those of realistic historical reconstruction, with a self-fictional link in the present, or not—are optimal to represent the conflict. I tried to create various parallel planes, such as the Civil War, the history of Europe in the twentieth century, the work of the conceptual artist Francesc Abad, the world of the German writer W. G. Sebald, and the disappearance of the industrial dimension of Catalunya constituted superimposed spheres, in the heart of a book that subverts the conventions of travel literature and the historical narrative through the inversion of the relation between image and text (the book is the sum total of the footnotes to the photographs), the inclusion of bilingualism (Spanish and Catalan), and the changes of narrator. The relation to *Australia: Un viaje* (2008) is obvious. This is a book fundamentally narrated in second person, such that the narration of the trip to the Antipodes becomes a kind of parenthesis in the suspension of the traveler's identity during almost two months outside his context.

Like the writings that preceded it, in *Australia* I spoke of my emigrant family. There was no book that told the experience of Spanish emigrants to the other side of the world; in those moments I felt the need for reparation, especially because part of my family had moved to Queensland almost forty years ago and remained there. Along those lines, I continued with *Crónica de viaje* (2009), where I attempted to create a narrative about the search for clues about my paternal grandfather, an immigrant in Catalunya, France, and Switzerland, someone I practically did not know (I was a child when he died; we share many photographs but few memories). The imperative of reconstruction is merely personal—that takes away not one jot of its importance. Through photographs, documents, my trips to Andalucía and to a Catalan industrial zone where I spent a period of time, and also the narrative frames provided by multiple Google apps (inventing, where necessary for my interests, fictitious ones), I created an artifact in which each page represented a search screen, headed with a quote from Carson McCullers: “Cualquier forma de arte sólo se puede desarrollar mediante mutaciones singulares que son obra de creadores individuales. Si únicamente se utilizan convenciones tradicionales, el arte que se trate morirá” (any form of art can only be developed through singular mutations that are the work of individual creators. If one only utilizes traditional conventions, that kind of art will die).

For this reason, I suppose (and now, while I think, while I write, while I read) I came to *Los muertos* (2010) as a necessary mutation. If *Crónica de*

*viaje* took literature to the screen, *Los muertos* takes the screen to the word, to the prose, to the page of paper. We read a novel, but really we read television (or vice versa). I continue to speak about emigrants and how to represent the horror of the conflict between Fiction and History, but this time I do it through the invention of a fictional world: heaven, purgatory, or paradise where fictional characters end up once their works die. The work has a double personality that is completely integrated thanks to fictionality—the same fictional spirit tramps through the narrative sections and the essayistic sections. Lubricated gears of the artifact.

One of the questions *Los muertos* does (not) answer is: How much theory can a novel admit?

Another question might (not) be: Up to what point can a literary artifact be self-conscious?

I have no answers.

But I will attempt some possible and precarious ones.

Multiplicity is one of the key concepts of our time. We are used to thinking in discursive or artistic units. My books attempt to problematize these supposed units of meaning, because perhaps we are in a time of quantum fiction.

I repeat: “quantum fiction.” This is a concept I have been working on for a very short time. It is a new concept, like “counter-space” or “theory-phobia” were in their time. I am going to try it out, to conclude my discussion, without using up your patience.

During these days in the United States, during this trip, because trips provoke meetings and, thus, readings, I have been reading *House of Leaves* by Mark Danielewski, a novel that can only take place in the year 2000. At night, in the hotel, I have been looking for its context and thinking about it. Its intention is not just to construct a world based on a dialogue between fictional literature and a possible and apocryphal film titled *The Davidson Record*, between colors and typographies and different languages in the heart of a paper book (not to mention the house and family as strange, disquieting structures) nor to reflect on the possibility of reconstructing misplaced lives and archives. The author’s ambition is to go beyond the limits of this form and content. In the first place, though the insertion into the artifact of film criticism, which questions its nature as fictional or documentary, a joke or a transcendent and disquieting metaphor. The author added an appendix to the second edition, which had previously been published elsewhere. The work includes: trailers and its own sound track (the album *Haunted* by Poe aka Anne Danielewski); a webpage, which is really a discussion platform for the novel in various languages; and several videos that work in the interstices that separate the novel from the film it creates. This formless quantum form had already been formulated within the interior of the novel, which talks about an impossible home, about a multidimensional house.

I repeat: “multidimensional.”

The example from the television series *Fringe* is double: the televisory fiction proposes, in its plot, a problematic relation between our universe and an extremely similar parallel universe, where all bodies have their double, their alternative version (the *other* Walter is *Walternate*). At the same time, externally, it not only incorporates into the general fictional framework frequent elements of promotion and merchandising (like the game *Hidden Elements* or the case file *Fringe Files* or *Fringepedia*), but also creates a webpage, [www.massivedynamic.com](http://www.massivedynamic.com), by which the fictitious business acquires a cybernetic reality. In one of the page sections, you can download all of the press releases from the company. That is to say, Massive Dynamic exists in two fictional universes and in one of them has, at the same time, a double nature. The double fiction feeds upon itself. It doubles. It expands. And it has a kinship with precedents like Star Wars Expanded Universe or like the Buffyverse, the compilation of hundreds of stories generated, in different formats, deriving from possible center called *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, a television series that generated a spin-off called *Angel* and whose eighth season was a comic book. Universes have their own parallel universes, their dark reverse side: apocryphal and unofficial versions where fans generate parodies, new storylines, bastard children, lovers, cousins, grandchildren of the protagonists, and invited anti-stars. A world of fictional living and dead, and of fans and co-creators of truth, which is the background of my novel, *Los muertos*, also mounted between two worlds.

The cross-media narrative of the 1990s developed on three simultaneous levels: technological, commercial, and artistic. Postmodernity was over; the Internet was expanding. Quantum fiction appropriates its nature as marketing without circumlocutions, its technological and integrative ambition, its viral condition, and resemanticizes it. It grafts poetics that make transmediatic existence conceptually possible and revindicates them through the power of distribution and influence (Cervantes, Sterne, Duchamp, Borges, Godard, Moore). It revindicates art as scientifically complex, as social and historical criticism, as a vehicle of knowledge disguised as a vehicle of entertainment.

Quantum fiction retrieves its naturalization certificate between two figures that hark back to signal historical realities: the atomic bomb (the theory of relativity, quantum physics) and the particle accelerator (superstring theory and theory of everything). The first is the symbol of postmodernity, the second, of our age. If the series *Carnivàle* would have had the six seasons that corresponded to its original plan, it would have ended in 1945, with the explosion of the first nuclear bomb in the New Mexico desert.

There are a vast number of novels, comics, films, and television series that have imagined parallel worlds. Science fiction has elaborated, in different languages, the same idea of how to connect them: the

interdimensional portal. There have been decades of treatments of a metaphor—that is to say, of the evanescent dematerialization of an abstract reality—but little by little it has become electrical, physical, real. In *Collective Intelligence*, Pierre Lévy defends a collective space of knowledge, the *cosmomedia*, a dynamic and interactive “espacio de representación multidimensional” (space of multidimensional representation), where the borders that separate languages, formats, and scholarly disciplines are nullified, where all existent semiotic universes converge. Convergence means closeness, connection, concurrence toward a single limit, a single end. In the last chapter of the fifth season of *Lost*, a character reads a book by Flannery O’Conner called *Everything that Rises Must Converge*.

It has been more than sixty years since science fiction novels, films, and comics began talking about parallel universes and interdimensional portals, more than thirty since the metaphor has been taken up by cultural critique, but it is in the twenty-first century when these narrative structures have been popularized (as can be shown by *Matrix*, *House of Leaves*, *Lost* or *Fringe*). That is to say, their arrival in the global public consciousness occurred in the age of Internet. Two parallel universes—that of paper books and that of words—connected thanks to the interdimensional portals opened in the consciousness of each reader.

The writer is more bicephalous than ever. The readers are more simultaneous and multiple than ever. Epigones and critics superimpose layers of meaning.

## Notes

1. *El País semanal*, 18 April 2010.

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