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A WARNING TO READERS:

These are the posts (or entries) that I have published in my academic professional blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* (blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalagre/) between September 2013 ((I started the blog in September 2010) and August 2014. The volume, like the three previous ones, covers, then, a complete academic year. I have not edited the texts. They may show some dissimilarities with the final published posts. The differences are, however, negligible.

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2-IX-2013 MOVING BEYOND THE STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS: ARE WE READY?

I'm writing this post in answer to Sophia McDougall's juicy article for the *New Statesman*, "I hate Strong Female Characters" (15 August, <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/08/i-hate-strong-female-characters>).

Basically she complains that while male characters get pinned on them a variety of adjectives (see her list for Sherlock Holmes), female characters in recent audiovisual fiction "get to be Strong."

McDougall finds the idea of the Strong Female Character patronising, as she is usually an anomaly, a single effective woman in a world of men. Too often, her supposed psychological strength is signalled by abusive behaviour, including physical violence (though she is not that self-reliant and must be frequently rescued). And far from eliminating sexism, she helps condone it, as many men think that to write one SFC "per story" is enough. Instead, McDougall demands more female roles on screens (a "1:1 instead of 3:1" ratio), more variety both in main and secondary roles, more stories in which women interrelate, and female characters that are more complete in their characterisation, including weakness if necessary.

Since my first paper, on *Silence of the Lambs'* hero Clarice Starling, I have been defending the SFC as a solution to the previous all-pervading *weak* female character, the one that screamed but was completely paralysed by fear, which is why she always needed rescuing by the Strong Male Character. The contemporary SFC came about quite by accident, when the wife of one of the producers of *Alien* (1979) suggested that Lieutenant Ripley could be a woman, Ellen. There have been since then many more, for whom I am very grateful, as no one uses any more the silly screaming heroine that reigned on screens until the late 1970s.

I agree, though, with McDougall that she has become a stereotype –or, rather, that all the other changes she demands are by no means on the way of being implemented.

As usual, though, I find she misses the main point in her protest. This is the message I have been preaching in recent years and I'm sure I have already discussed the same issue here several times. The key question here is not when male screenwriters, directors and producers will finally understand the need to change women's representation on screen but when will films and TV be fully open to women.

I truly believe that film and TV are far less sexist than they were thirty-five fifty years ago, when someone came up with Ellen Ripley. Yet this refers mainly to the content of the stories, not to who is making decisions about what is told. The Directors' Guild of America only has 10% female members. A recent study of the Writers Guild of America indicates that since 1999, the presence of women writers in US TV staff increased "from 25 percent to 30.5 percent." At that rate, the study concludes, "it will be another 42 years before women reach proportionate representation." That's 2058... (See <http://www.thewrap.com/tv/article/tv-writing-remains-white-mans-world-writers-guild-study-finds-82556>).

The equality that McDougall demands can only come, then, from young women's efforts to tear down the barriers that hold them back from entering the film and TV industries in full equality and to tell *their* stories. As consumers we women can also affect the film and TV industries by demanding more stories that appeal to us. And by 'teaching' the men around us what we like: your boyfriend asks you to see a film you don't much like? Ok, go and then take him to see one you like. Of course, if that is *Twilight* or *Fifty Shades of Grey*, then I would say we're not on the right track –as, well, we women do have a serious problem with some of the stories we write and enjoy.

Whenever I ask men whether they feel offended by their representation on screen, which includes many Strong Male Characters but also many despicable bastards, they shrug their shoulders: for them, generic representation is easier to separate from real individuality. We women do not have that advantage because, logically, our representation is very much restricted to a handful of stereotypes. What we need to consider, and this is right now not that clear, is whether we can contribute to the screens a significantly richer variety that satisfies our needs as 21st century women. To be blunt: if opening the doors of TV and films to women means a proliferation of Bellas and Anastasias, then I'd rather have men go on producing more SFC.

For the big, big, big question to ask ourselves is why the SFC are not ours.

7-IX-2013 READ YOU LATER, IAIN M. BANKS! (LEARNING THE MEANING OF THE WORD 'COMPLETIST')

Dear Iain,

As I have narrated here, on the very same day you announced your imminent death of cancer, I had sent an abstract for a conference about your twelfth (and last!) SF novel,

The Hydrogen Sonata. The conference is next October, the paper is written, and you were supposed to live until then. Unfortunately, you died much earlier than expected, last June.

I thought then that the best homage I could pay to you was re-reading all your SF novels. It's taken me most of July and August but I'm done –the whole 5,691 pages. The funny thing is that I decided to read them out of sequence, as you explained that, anyway, the internal chronological order is determined by the references to the Idiran-Culture war. And, then, a few of the novels are not even connected with the Culture. So, I left *Surface Detail*, possibly the densest and most demanding, for the end – without recalling that you-know-who turns out to be a major character in your third novel. I have managed thus to put myself into a nice loop. What an excuse to start all over again...

One doesn't lose a favourite writer every day and I was really very sad to see you go. Since then my admiration for you as a writer and as a person has increased, particularly after seeing your last interview. Yes, the one in which you discussed really calmly your reactions to the cancer diagnosis and your impending death; being a non-believer, you simply attributed your fate to bad luck. You also downplayed the mystique around writers, presenting yourself as just a guy who wrote stories and who didn't know the meaning of the expression 'writer's block' (here you are: Ian Banks-Raw Spirit, BBC Scotland Interview, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2vrypvdqWI>). That's how I'll remember you: braving death with a smile, unpretentious to the end. What a lesson.

Reading the books has not been that easy. Your imagination is at points overwhelming to someone who, like me, has very poor skills at visualising space, high-tech gadgets and outlandish aliens –and swallowing up large batches of made-up names. This is exactly why I read SF. I almost gave up on you on page 358 of *The Algebraist*: "Clouders were part of the Cincturia, the collection of beings, species, machine strains and intelligent detritus that existed –generally– between stellar systems and didn't fit into any other neat category (so they weren't the deep-space cometarians called the Eclipta, they weren't drifting examples of the Brown Dwarf Communitals known as the Plena, and they weren't the real exotics, the Non-Baryonic Penumbrae, the thirteen-way-folded Dimensionates of the Flux-dwelling Quantarchs)."

A reader in Amazon wrote in despair that *The Algebraist* is only for 'completists,' readers fanatical enough to put themselves through the task of reading everything a writer has written, no matter the quality. That's me (for you). Your protagonist in this novel, Fassin Taak, claims he gets 'swim' whenever he imagines the galaxy full of civilisations, and all the colossal network of relationships. I get 'swim' at your imagination. Clouders, by the way, turned out to be a real beauty.

I've been dragging my feet for the last 200 pages of *Surface Detail*, thinking simultaneously that it was about time to finish, stop mourning, move on and that I didn't want to close the book. Not really, not yet, not ever. Right now, as I write, I have this very strange feeling that I'd rather be in your universe than in mine (would I

qualify for Special Circumstances?). I'll miss it sorely –the aliens, the drones, the Minds, the avatars, your men and women, pan-human or not. The humour, the wit, the adventure, the awareness that this is just a tiny corner of the galaxy...

I must thank you particularly for the women, and for how you have narrated so touchingly the immense difference that living in a totally egalitarian society like the Culture makes for us. Would make for us. I thank you particularly for Perosteck, Sharrow, Lededje, Vyr, Anaplian and Vossil. And I don't know what the avatars have, but I know I'll miss them (unpredictable Demiesen and cool Berdle, above all).

You must be asking yourself: what about my fifteen mainstream novels? Are you also going to be a completist for them? Yes, I think so. I don't have them all yet but will go for them. You wrote so much... I'll have to wait until next summer, though (Harry Potter is right now waiting for me). A very intelligent girl student has asked me to supervise a BA dissertation on the body in one of your SF novels, we still haven't decided which one. I know then, that I'll have to re-read at least one of the twelve soon (some excuse, huh?). I know you'll probably would say 'but why???' which is what you told me when so many years ago I told you in person that I was teaching your eccentric, singular *The Wasp Factory*. Your fault, for having that wonderful imagination.

What I am grieving today, I realise, is not only your loss but the realisation that the Culture, the utopia you imagined to protest against so much dystopia, is not within our reach. The recipe you imagined to replace our disastrous civilisation, let the computers and machines take over to free us from the slavery of money and property, is so well built in your novels that it's hard to accept it is only a remote possibility. The total freedom with which Culture citizens live their lives is a dream from which I'd rather not wake up –I'm even ready, as I told you, to join SC and do the necessary dirty tricks.

Thank you, there is nothing else to add.

11-IX-2013 SCARY MONSTERS (AND SUPER CREEPS): REVISITING CHILDHOOD TERRORS – THE BETA CLOUD, AN EPISODE OF SPACE 1999

Sorry about the unimaginative allusion in the title to David Bowie's wonderful 1980s record (LP, not CD...). What else could I use to recall one of my main childhood terrors? Yes, I'm writing here today about memory and, particularly, about the childhood terrors that remain with us for decades, in this case consciously. Yet, at the same time, in a fuzzy, hazy way that calls for the need to check up as an adult what exactly scared us so much as children.

So here it is: my childhood memory, not too deceptive I hope. This was 1976, I was ten, and my paternal grandparents were the first in my working-class family to purchase a colour TV set (Wikipedia claims that colour broadcasting started in Spain in 1972, with the Munich Olympic Games). I was already a fan of *Space 1999*, an SF British series

created by Sylvia and Gerry Anderson, of *Thunderbirds* fame. Their series –produced 1973-76, aired in Spain 1976-77– narrated how an explosion of nuclear waste unwisely kept on the Moon set our satellite spinning out of orbit into the galaxy, taking the 311 inhabitants of Moonbase Alpha with it. *Space 1999* was a success in many countries around the world (not in the US, where Isaac Asimov did a good demolition job out of its bad scientific premise). It still maintains a classic cult status in many of these countries, continued thanks to the DVD pack editions. I have no idea how many of the 48 episodes I did see, but by the time the memory that I'm narrating bore down into my brain, I was already totally fascinated by metamorph Maya, a humanoid alien female who could take any shape.

The episode I saw that afternoon, apparently within the TV magazine for children *Un globo, dos globos, tres globos*, was *The Beta Cloud* (season 2, episode 14). This is information I learned only two weeks ago, after an intensive Google search leading to the corresponding YouTube link. The adults chatting around me as I watched the episode (with my younger, far less impressionable brother) never knew that the story of how the Moonbase Alpha crew fought desperately to kill an unstoppable monster has stayed with me since then. For two reasons: the absolute terror produced by understanding that the monster could not be stopped, and a scene in which the creature is partially burnt when it runs against an electric fence –remember this is the first TV programme I ever saw in colour. My clever girl Maya finally stops the fearsome thing, and maybe that's in the end why I'm still writing about strong female characters.

I saw *The Beta Cloud* again a few days ago. The fine sets and special effects still maintain all their 1970s charm, and what can I tell you about that amazing spacecraft, the Eagle Transporter? Never sufficiently praised! The cheap props, though, and, above all, the flared trousers of the male crew uniforms quite spoiled my rediscovery of the series (the girls wore skirts...), and so did the haircuts –*Star Trek's* costumes have stood indeed much better the test of time. I won't comment on the acting, oh my! As for the monster, that was a howler –so silly! An obvious guy-in-a-suit hairy concoction, rubber-masked, moving like a toddler with a bad diaper rash case. Yes, I did recall the plot correctly, with the climactic electric barrier scene and Maya's last-minute intervention. I wasn't scared but I perfectly understood why my ten-year-old self was.

Before I move on, let me remind you of the context: this was late 1970s medium-budget British TV. On US 1970s TV, in contrast, they had the best SF series: the old *Battlestar Galactica*, *Logan's Run*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*. *Star Wars* soon followed, with its blockbuster big budget. Not that expensive, *Alien*, which is not that different in plot from *The Beta Cloud*, came out in 1979 with the marvellous monster designed by Giger. It was still a guy in a rubber suit but what a suit... Morphing, the computer technique that helps us to see on screen credible transformations, was first used in *Willow* (1988) –and *Space 1999* did without it convincingly for Maya. So, all in all, not that bad.

What puzzles me is this. *Space 1999* was not a series for children, but aimed at a general audience. Unless, that is, the Andersons were working on the well-known

premise that 'the Golden Age of SF is twelve.' At any rate, the inevitable conclusion after seeing *The Beta Cloud* is not only that I have personally outgrown its 1970s TV-related limitations (the whole generation I belong to), but that all TV audiences around the world have. Only a committed lover of vintage TV can really enjoy *Space 1999*, whereas good 1970s SF films survive much better. It might be a matter as simple as budget, with TV getting ever closer to what cinema requires (a trend started, by the way, by *The X-Files*).

As I smiled condescendingly at my younger self, I could not help thinking that a contemporary ten-year-old would not be scared by *The Beta Cloud*. I wonder indeed what scares today's kids! So much lost innocence...

PS If you have enjoyed my post, do read "Espacio 1999 y yo" by Antonio Quintana Carrandi at <http://www.ciencia-ficcion.com/opinion/op01379.htm>

15-IX-2013 DOES PATHETIC DEFINE THIS?: MY STUFFY CLASSROOM, ONCE MORE

If you care to check my entries for mid-September 2011 and 2012 you will find more or less the same content. In 2011, I was given recently revamped classroom 302 and I commented that "We have two tiny windows, a blind is broken and temperatures inside the classroom were yesterday at 15:00 in the afternoon above 30º (that's 86º Fahrenheit)." Last year, I was given a different classroom, possibly the same 102 I'm 'enjoying' now, and when, on the verge of collapse, I demanded the logistics chief that the temperature be taken for the record this was 32,5º.

Yesterday, with milder temperatures outside than last year (around 26º), once more 15:00 came and I found myself sweating like an iceberg in the tropics, facing 60 very uncomfortable students. I can't begin to describe the smell that saturated the classroom, occupied non-stop since 8:30. I have, of course, complained once more but, so what?

I find it appalling that the most important thing I need to discuss on the day the course begins, for three years in a row, is the temperature in my classroom. Back in the 'Licenciatura' times, teaching would begin in early October, but now, with the academic year's start pushed back two weeks into September, the weather is a serious problem. The weather and the building. I'm sitting today comfortably at home, no sweat, no air conditioning and the temperature is the same as it was yesterday. In contrast, my UAB classroom feels like a furnace. Why isn't the AC on? Because we're poor.

We are officially five years into the crisis triggered back on 15 September 2008 by the failure of financial giant Lehman Brothers. One of his former Spanish employees, the current Minister for Economy, Luis de Guindos, runs our finances since 2011. Just yesterday, his colleague José Ignacio Wert, Minister for Culture (and Education),

announced that 603.069 students lost their state aids last year, a total of 195 million euros. Those who do dare study, as you can see, are subjected to insidious forms of torture, such as overheated classrooms, in which no normal human brain can really function.

I feel downhearted today, and it's quite a physical sensation. My dignity as a teacher and as worker is being attacked, and so is that of my colleagues and the students suffering the same unacceptable conditions. I am really ashamed that students who have paid more than 1,000 euros to receive an education are treated like this and I am awfully embarrassed by what the Erasmus students must be writing home. My brother tells me that the good times, which now seem to be almost a legend, will never come back and that this is who we are: poor, undignified. Insert here one of my deep sighs...

I did think of staging a protest and asking my students to join me into wearing a swimsuit to class but, oh well, then I'd be thinking of swimming pools all the time and it would be worse...

23-IX-2013 INFINITE LAYERS TO THE CAKE: SOMETHING ELSE ON *OLIVER TWIST* AND THE DEATH PENALTY

Re-reading for the umpteenth time *Oliver Twist* I finally paid attention to something I'd ignored in the prologue by Philip Horner to the Penguin Classics edition (2002). This refers to Dickens' publicly expressed opinions on capital punishment and how they should colour our reading of Fagin's paradoxically unseen public execution.

Intriguingly, both Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray attended the hanging in 1840 of one François Courvoisier, a valet who had murdered his aristocratic master. Anticipating Foucault's seminal *Discipline and Punish*, Thackeray gives a very direct testimonial of the loss of effectiveness of public executions. He describes in his article "Going to see a man hanged" (<http://www.exclassics.com/newgate/courv.htm>) how the 40,000 members of the crowd enjoyed the proceedings as a grim holiday. Deeply shocked by the scene, Thackeray closed his eyes and thus missed the prisoner's actual death. When he writes that "I came away down Snow Hill that morning with a disgust for murder, but it was for the murder I saw done," he sounds as appalled by the callousness of the crowd towards Courvoisier's ugly punishment as by the state's cruel assassination of a citizen. Do read the whole text, it is certainly a magnificent chronicle.

Dickens, Horner informs us, first manifested his negative view of capital punishment in a letter of 1845 to Macvey Napier, editor of the prestigious *Edinburgh Review*. Do read the letter (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/25854/25854-h/25854-h.htm>) and see how for Dickens the death penalty "produces crime in the criminally disposed, and engenders a diseased sympathy—morbid and bad, but natural and often irresistible—among the well-conducted and gentle," as *all* feel its fascination. Dickens also worries that the rabble that attends executions may be tempted to read them as martyrdom rather than exemplary punishment and, so, glamorise crime. Gentlemen are supposed

to feel horror, though Thackeray and Dickens were actually among the pioneers to turn the tide against public executions, and not really representative of their (professional) middle-class background.

Horner mentions in passing a set of letters to the editor on capital punishment that Dickens wrote in 1846, as he revised *Oliver Twist*. Have a look at:

http://home.earthlink.net/~bsabatini/Inimitable-Boz/etexts/dickens_on_capital_punishment.html.

and read Beppe Sabatini's extensive analysis. Basically, as he says, "Dickens had become more conservative on Capital Punishment, and changed his stand from demanding total abolition (1846) to advocating private executions (1849)."

Returning to the theme he had failed to develop for Napier's *Edinburgh Review*, and in view of the popular craze for a series of executions, Dickens finally published his opinions in the *Daily News* after his own very brief editorship. The letters, which amount to more than 13,000 words are quite a substantial consideration of the matter, although, essentially, they expand on the arguments advanced to Napier. Dickens writes "in no spirit of sympathy with the criminal" but believes that "a firm and efficient stand may be made against the punishment of Death." He disputes vehemently the reality of last-minute repentance and religious reformation, questions the right of the state to kill, and, a well-known argument today, prefers that "hundreds of guilty persons should escape scot-free" rather than kill a single innocent by mistake.

The second letter refers directly to Courvoisier's execution. Like Thackeray, he describes an "odious" mob: "No sorrow, no salutary terror, no abhorrence, no seriousness; nothing but ribaldry, debauchery, levity, drunkenness, and flaunting vice in fifty other shapes." In the third letter, Dickens insists that the gallows is no deterrent at all, whether the crime is impulsive or deliberate. Stopping to consider what he calls hate crimes, and we call domestic violence, he claims that the threat of the gallows is by no means women's ultimate defence but even "that which lures and tempts him on." Dickens further argues that since executions are no good to prevent crime, they should be stopped. With impeccable logic, he rejects the eye-for-an-eye argumentation, claiming that if we obey the Mosaic law in this, perhaps "it would be equally reasonable to establish the lawfulness of a plurality of wives on the same authority."

In 1849, after attending a second execution, that of Frederick and Maria Manning, Dickens wrote two more letters, in this case to *The Times*. In the second he defends for the first time, private rather than public execution "within the prison walls." Sabatini explains how the report of the Royal Commission (1864-6) "leading to new legislation in 1868" which ended public executions borrowed some arguments from Dickens himself. The last persons executed in Britain (always by hanging within the prison's walls) were murderers Peter Anthony Allen and Gwynne Owen Evans, in 1964. The death penalty, Wikipedia confirms, "was abolished in all circumstances in 1998" all over Britain. Just yesterday.

Dickens finished *Oliver Twist* in 1839, before he attended Courvoisier's hanging. Now I need to think why he showed in this novel a negative attitude regarding the application of the death penalty to Fagin (as it is obvious from the fact that his execution is not narrated) whereas, in contrast, he imagined for the murderer Sikes an *accidental* public hanging in the course of his getaway. Fagin, remember, has killed none but clearly prompts Sikes to kill Sikes' own disloyal girlfriend Nancy and is condemned as an accessory to the crime.

Is this a case of poetic justice? Or is this, rather, hypocrisy? Let the novelist do what the judge should never do...

27-IX-2013 'THIS SHOULD BE ABOUT ME!': NARCISSISTIC READING AND THE PROBLEM OF CHOOSING BOOKS THAT INTEREST STUDENTS

Trying to find an adequate novel for a student's BA dissertation (or Treball de Fi de Grau), I finally read Lewis Grassie Gibbon's classic *Sunset Song* (1932). I say finally because I am indeed very much interested in Scottish fiction but have huge gaps in my reading list, like this one.

Reviews and academic criticism present *Sunset Song* as a wonderful novel about an engaging female character; besides, Scottish readers had voted this novel their favourite back in 2005 (above *Trainspotting*!!). My student is on an Erasmus stay in Edinburgh, so I decided that she should work on a Scottish author, and this seemed ideal. In the end, though, both Marta and myself have agreed that Chris Guthrie's life is not that interesting –after all, she chooses marriage and motherhood over an education. We have focused instead on a quite eccentric romantic reading of Janice Galloway's marvellous *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989).

I did enjoy reading *Sunset Song* and will eventually complete my reading of the other two novels in the *A Scots Quair* trilogy: *Cloud Howe* (1933), and *Grey Granite* (1934). Once you get over the hurdle of the Scots dialect, which is not that terrible, *Sunset Song* reads beautifully (maybe in this the audiobook is the perfect choice). I found, though, both plot and characters quite sketchy.

Gibbon's portrait of the transition onto the WWI years of his rural community lacks much detail, and so does his rendering of Chris's psychology (despite the positive feminist criticism). I never really understood why she makes most of the choices in her life, particularly concerning her love for the mulish, mentally unattractive Ewan. Even so, I actually believe that *Sunset Song* would have been much more interesting if Gibbons had focused on this young man's decision to enlist at all costs, or on his neighbour Long Robert's contrary decision to object to the war. That must be my fascination for WWI, for sure.

Anyway, I checked Amazon UK for readers' opinions and I stumbled onto a kind of mini-debate among young Scottish students who had been forced to read the book in, I think, secondary education (I'm not sure about the meaning of the Scottish 'Higher English' level). There are complaints about the difficulty of the Scots/English language but the most negative reader focuses on 'relevance'.

An anonymous city teenager writes in exasperation: "What teenager nowadays is interested in farming?!" S/he concludes that "for me to enjoy a book, there has to be a greater deal of significance and relevance to today's world." Another teenager, a girl, horrified by the negative comments, calls *Sunset Song* "a beautiful book which shows us the similarities between young people of the past and ourselves, among many other things."

This is tricky. As we all know, novels are excellent vehicles to transmit personal experience that we could not otherwise access. They require empathetic readers with an endless ability to put oneself in the characters' shoes. Now, if the reader is limited by the generational narcissistic view of relevance that the first teenager flaunts, then his/her own capacity to read novels will be drastically limited. See how, nonetheless, the second teenager defends *Sunset Song* on the grounds of its *comparative* relevance to her generation and not quite because it tells you what life was like in rural Scotland 80 years ago. As I reader, I do choose my books on narcissistic grounds, too, but I want to believe that I am open up to very alien experiences, different from mine in time and place.

As a teacher of students eighteen and upwards, I realise, though, that we hesitate all the time when it comes to relevance. The two times I have taught Scottish literature I have focused on the 1990s mainly: a selection of short stories by women writers, Ian Rankin, Alasdair Gray, *Trainspotting* (the film). In future editions, I'll update the subject and move closer to the 2000s: some theatre, possibly Ali Smith, Alan Warner, etc. The other teacher, the professor who originally set up the subject and sent me to Scotland as a PhD student, teaches a far less student-oriented selection, including *Sunset Song*. He consistently defends the position in all his subjects that students should adapt to the history of Literature and not the other way round. I myself do that only half the time: you *must* enjoy *Oliver Twist*, but I'll be teaching the Harry Potter saga.

I am wondering, also thinking of my student Marta, whether this has to do with my gendered position as a reader. What separates me from *Sunset Song* but makes me love Galloway's novel is, after all, relevance: Chris Guthrie's life has nothing to do with mine, not because she lives in rural 1930s Scotland and I live in urban 2010s Catalonia, but because she abandons her education. In contrast, Galloway's Joy Stone is a working woman (a teacher) whose life collapses when she her man dies. Funnily, this also happens to Chris but the way Gibbon and Galloway narrate the heroine's search for the trick to stay alive (keep on breathing...) is vastly different. Shallow in Gibbon, so deep that it hurts in Galloway.

As you can see, choice is the key here –Marta must choose ONE novel to work on, the Scottish teachers of Higher English must choose a limited reading list to teach, I must

also choose for my students. As readers, though, we needn't limit our choice and happily for me, I have read both *Sunset Song* and *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*. Now you enjoy them!

6-IX-2013 BACK FROM A CONFERENCE (AND WONDERING)

I have already written a few posts connected with conferences and if I am repeating the same ideas, this must be because things are not changing. I am back from a three-day conference, which makes number 57 in the long list of academic events I have attended since 1994 (not that many, really). As usual at this stage, once it's over, I have mixed feelings about the whole procedure. My arguments will sound familiar to everyone who's been in the circuit for a similar number of years but might give an introduction to problems unknown to junior researchers.

To begin with, attending conferences is very expensive. This last event, at a Spanish university, has cost me 500 euros, despite making considerable economies in terms of travel expenses. The 500 euros come integrally out of my pocket and although I know that it's not that much in comparison to international conferences, it's still a lot of money for a small item in my CV which will count nothing towards assessment. 350 euros, in contrast, would have gone a much longer way towards buying books that might help me produce better research. Yet, I've never spent that much in a few days on books.

Why have I attended? For social/academic reasons. First: loyalty towards the organisers, as this is was the 16th Culture & Power seminar, an event to which I have been attached from the very beginning in 1995 at my own university. Second: an interest in the potentiality of the topic –spaces– in relation to its application to SF, hence to increasing the academic visibility of this genre (there were six papers in two monographic sessions). Third: networking. I agreed to meet some colleagues for the purpose of furthering our common objectives, aside from the conference, and ended up coming across others unexpectedly, meetings from which other plans came out. Fourth: the need to take a break from admin duties (I'm degree Coordinator, or Head of Studies), which means having a good excuse not to check email.

As usual, question time, coffee breaks and mealtimes have been much more productive than listening to the presentations (well, to be fair, the best debates came logically out of the best papers). The colleague who organised the conference proposed that the next one be an extensive coffee break, with delegates discussing with each other papers forwarded in advance. I love the idea but remain a bit sceptical about it, as researchers often behave like bad students and might turn up with no homework done. At any rate, it is clear to me that the real exchange of ideas happens in conversation.

A worrying, seemingly unstoppable phenomenon is erratic attendance, by which I mean not only that many delegates attended just for one day (in one case, just to

deliver a paper) but also that many dropped off the programme the day before or even without warning. This way, although this was a 50-delegate conference, plenary lectures were attended at the most by 15 persons –a shame. I am myself guilty of not attending a couple of morning sessions, as, frankly, I could not face the 10-hour day.

I know that erratic attendance is mostly due to the ongoing crisis as impoverished tenured researchers and severely exploited untenured researchers are cutting corners to make ends meet. Certificates of attendance were granted to all, which might not be a good practice, I'm afraid. Yet it's difficult to find an alternative as having delegates sign for each session sounds too controlling (I'm paying, I choose what to attend...), and might completely alienate the poorest researchers. One-day conferences work, of course, much better in that sense, but, obviously, this is not a format for all kinds of conferences (I wonder what it is like to attend one of those medical conferences in my city, with up to 30,000 delegates...).

The worst part, for me, is that after many hours preparing the paper and the PowerPoint presentation I finally spoke to an audience of 10, including my two co-presenters. The session went very well and we had a very lively debate but, still, are 10 people worth so much effort? (with all my respect, of course, for those who attended my presentation). The best part, as with all the conferences I have attended, was the time spent with those special colleagues, who are actually personal friends. Perhaps we do need conferences that are just long coffee breaks. Or the academic equivalent of team building.

The last worry: age. Suddenly, I notice there's a whole new generation in the circuit and that in conferences people connect along age lines which, somehow, makes networking less effective (or more complicated). Joining a colleague of a similar age for, say, lunch, is easy but asking a younger colleague makes me feel quite awkward (silly me!). Dinner is even more complicated. It might be just shyness and, of course, it would not apply to my own doctoral students or younger Department staff. Yet, it is there.

Now to enter the conference in my CV...

10-X-2013 THE PIAAC RESULTS: NO SURPRISES... (ON THE UNVEILING OF SPAIN'S GENERAL ILLITERACY)

A couple of days ago the PIAAC results were published. This is a test designed to measure the educational competences of adults (16-65) in the 23 countries that are members of OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). The Spanish Government's webpage summarises the catastrophe (see <http://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/ServiciosdePrensa/NotasPrensa/MinisteriorEducacionCulturayDeporte/2013/081013InformePIAAC.htm>). Spanish adults occupy the second last position in reading comprehension (Italy has the honour of being number 23). My fellow Spanish citizens can read only at level 2 out of 5, with great difficulties to

extrapolate conclusions from a text and to follow the content in those of a certain depth, like *El Quijote* (this must be a joke as in order to be able to read Cervantes' book level 5 skills are required). The best readers are the Japanese, the Finns and the Dutch. An added humiliation is the fact that secondary school students of Japan, Holland and Australia are better readers than Spanish university students.

If anyone in Spain finds these results surprising then s/he has indeed very poor reading comprehension skills as regards the lamentable situation of the country and its so-called culture. Now try to tell kids below 16 that they should be better students.

Although PIAAC covers adults educated between 1956 and 2000, the Spanish Government blames their Socialist predecessors for the fiasco. They implemented LOGSE in 1990, the legislation that reformed the old Ley General de Educación 1970 act (under which I was myself educated –with many deficiencies). I'll remind you that we used to take primary education up to the age of 14 and then opt for secondary school or professional training, whereas now kids take primary education until the age of 12, then ESO (or junior secondary school) to 16; next comes the choice between higher secondary school (Bachillerato) or professional training. In both cases, 18 is the university entrance age.

I have a clear recollection of how things changed back in 1994, when the first LOGSE students reached university. My slightly older students (I started teaching in 1991) also quickly saw that the new generations lacked their commitment to studying and the preparation that the old COU year gave before university. Since then things have gone downhill, I'm very sorry to say. One example? Well, a French Erasmus student informed my Victorian Literature colleague that since she had already chosen to work on Anne Brontë for her paper, she would not read *Oliver Twist*. Fancy telling a university Literature teacher this. Now, to my consternation, when I told the anecdote (twice) to my class, hoping they'd be scandalised (or would pretend to be), they were not. I coolly reminded them that their education was not my concern and the sooner they understood they should educate themselves the better. These are students paying very high fees to be educated and I have no idea why they will not make the best of the resources we have to offer.

I think LOGSE was necessary to update the educational system (surely you don't want 14-year-old workers) but coincided with the beginning of a widespread trend in Spain: the rejection of education. I don't mean that Spanish people do not want an education, I mean that they prefer instead titles, degrees, certificates. Education is, for me, a much deeper, wider, larger concept which translates into an eagerness to know beyond what is provided in the classroom. Just for the sake of it and also to understand the world we live in. Being learned, though, has no prestige whatsoever in Spain, whether among 16-year-old kids or 65-year-old grandparents, for there is an assumption that an education leads nowhere. This possibly comes from the realisation that a university degree no longer guarantees a job, much less a good job. Also, from something else that is cultural: a distrust, disregard and mockery of anything that leads to thinking (I'm told Philosophy is to be taken out of higher secondary education). I'm sure that in Japan, Finland, Holland this is not the case.

So, the truth is out: we assumed that Spanish adults were all highly literate, young kids the (functional) illiterate ones. Yet it turns out that the whole country is illiterate for actual purposes. What a happy day for a Literature teacher. The solution is obvious: making a collective effort and not just at school. Yet, for that you need to feel the shame which comes out of having your pride hurt and since right now we have no pride left at all because of the crisis, I doubt anyone feels shame. This is what we'll be stuck in the bottom positions of OECD, as we congratulate ourselves on not being Italian instead of wondering what makes the Japanese such superb readers despite the obvious difficulties of their written language.

Deep, deep sigh...

15-X-2013 SELF-PUBLICATION AND THE 'NO CUENTA' MANTRA

Since I managed to open my website –despite the little technical help we get and the odd quirks of the DRUPAL programme– I've been wondering about its possibilities for self-publication. My institution insists that self-published work should go to its digital depository, yet where the actual file is placed is ultimately quite irrelevant. What matters is that I finally have the instrument to self-publish (I'm not sure this can be used as a verb...).

I have already set up a space for self-publication in the web, so far empty, though not for long. I've taken out of my digital drawer about a dozen documents that were there doing nothing except occupy space in my computer. What are these documents? Essentially unpublished academic stuff: conference papers presented at events generating no subsequent publication, rejected articles (ouch!), pieces accepted for publication in projects that never materialised. Why not simply update them and try publishing them in academic journals, books, etc? Because I know from experience that revising an article, given the enormous amount of bibliography published every year, is often more taxing than writing a new one. Also, because, typically, an article written for a specific conference, journal, or book will not easily fit a different kind of publication. Or just plain laziness (not really...).

I have now finished the process of editing with a certain homogeneity these dozen pieces and it's been a very strange trip down memory lane, as some of these articles go back to the late 1990s. It's been funny. I have gone again through the frustration of the rejection of some of the pieces, sometimes for reasons I totally disagree with, sometimes with good reasons. Also, although I fancy that one grows intellectually as time passes, I realise that the same bees have been in residence in my bonnet for quite a long time, albeit the amount of theoretical background I now surround them with is much larger. As requested today, since we seem to have got a collective high fever for massive numbers of quotations in each piece.

Why publish these documents? The answer is: why not? They're neither better nor worse than most of my legitimately published academic work and if someone finds in them an idea worth considering, then I'll be satisfied. They may simply gather digital (or virtual) dust, as one of my student says, but, then, I'm afraid that so do most of our publications anyway. It hurts really nobody to have the stuff online. Only perhaps my own reputation (if I have one).

By the way, most of these articles, not to say all, are peer reviewed, even though some may have been negatively so. My publishing them online is not, mind you, a little revenge against my less sympathetic reviewers. It cannot be, since –I know what you, my academic colleague, are thinking– self-publication does not count for official research assessment. Not even if I found five colleagues who would put their signature to my articles as peer-reviewed would they count since, as we all know, only work published in certain periodical publications and collective volumes really 'counts.' Ah, the famous 'no cuenta' mantra.

Now, to my surprise, this blog counts as a legitimate instrument for 'knowledge transfer' for the corresponding assessment which my Department passes regularly (these are the activities in which we academics take part to publicise what we do but which are not academic –in Spanish it used to be known as 'divulgación'). Well, I'm happy to contribute to the Department's kudos but also a bit annoyed at the arbitrary criteria by which some things count and others do not and for what.

Some other day I'll tell you the story of why among the documents I'll soon upload you can also find my book *Monstruos al final del milenio* (which I'll be giving away for free) but not any of the others I have published so far.

20-X-2013 LOVING LOVE STORIES: CATFISH, LAUREN AND DEREK (AND NEW-STYLE PLATONIC LOVE)

I simply love MTV's series *Catfish* (Tuesdays 22:00). This is a series inspired by the eponymous 2010 documentary directed by Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman. The film focused on the romantic disappointment of Ariel's brother, Yaniv (Niv), when he finds out that the pretty twenty-something woman he's fallen in love with on the internet does not actually have that age or physical appearance. Niv was soon flooded with messages from other Americans claiming to have gone through similar experiences or suspecting they were, hence the MTV show, which Niv hosts. Each week he and his buddy Max play amateur detective trying to unmask the often sad reality behind the lies people feed each other on the net. By the way, the title comes from a comment by a man in the documentary who explains that catfish were used to keep cod alert on long export trips; otherwise they faded away and died. Ariel and Niv borrowed the concept, calling 'catfish' whoever keeps you on your toes by doing fishy things on the net.

Last week I saw the memorable episode 4 of season 2: “Lauren and Derek.” Memorable because it has a happy ending. Let me explain that usually Niv and Max discover that the partner in the online couple reluctant to making face-to-face contact is lying. The reasons are diverse but usually have to do with having a physical appearance they don’t feel comfortable with. The tricked partner has to deal with the mismatch between the photos they assumed to be authentic and reality, which often results in heart-breaking disappointment. Lauren, who had never met the man she had been in touch with for 8 long years, asked Niv and Max for help. They, seeing how pretty Lauren is, were, logically suspicious that the handsome guy (Derek) in her photos did not exist as such. When it turned out that he did and that the love story was genuine enough, the surprise was, well, colossal.

Derek’s reluctance to meeting Lauren was so extreme that although they were clearly in love all the time (they met online when she was 14, he 16), he allowed her to go through a broken engagement and even a pregnancy. When a totally flabbergasted Max asked him why, Derek answered that his online communication with Lauren was so fulfilling and perfect that he was afraid of spoiling it with real contact. Her son added yet another worry to Derek’s many worries that sharing real physical space might spoil their virtual love. When they did meet, thanks to Max and Niv, however, all was perfect between them and between Derek and young Mason. Many tears of happiness were shed in America on the evening the episode aired (check Twitter!).

I’ll put my Cultural Studies thinking cap on to try to explain the attraction of the show and, in particular, of this story. Yes, we all love gossip but that’s not the (whole) point. This is rather the impact of the internet, and particularly Facebook, on dating. The USA are a territory big enough for actual contact to be potentially difficult, which makes long online relationships a possibility. Amazingly, Niv and Max use very basic detective skills that the persons concerned could also use –yet there is in most cases a reluctance to spoiling the dream of a perfect match. Inevitably, though, someone feels the need to touch and hug, and the dream collapses.

The show reveals, on the whole, two main difficulties in modern love. Although the protagonists often have a very solid connection which they call love, this often depends on believing in the physical attractive of the online partner –the real meeting mostly destroys this love, though it turns it into a more honest friendship in a few cases. Second, although the importance attached to physical attractive seems to dominate our notions of love, actually the show proves that contact based on conversation (written, spoken) matters even more than sex. Lauren and Derek’s case is happy and perfect, in any case, because there were no lies on Derek’s side, just fear. And both are equally attractive.

This fear is in itself fascinating –you might simply call it a typical male fear of commitment (or immaturity), but I believe it is not. On the same day I saw the episode I explained to my students the love story of JS Mills and Harriet Taylor who were bosom friends for 21 years, as long as her husband stayed alive, for fear of scandal. The class agreed that this platonic love (=asexual love) didn’t make sense anymore as conventions have changed; today JS and Harriet would simply move in together as

soon as she divorced. Derek's post-post modern brand of platonic love, however, has nothing to do with fear of scandal but rather with the fear that daily contact kills off true romantic love, as often happens. Time will show whether Lauren was right to force a meeting (perhaps leading to marriage... and divorce) or Derek to prevent it, paradoxically, for the sake of their romantic relationship.

Quite possibly, *Catfish* doctors the stories to put a more interesting spin on them – after all, this is a TV show. Still, they are very good stories as each episode ends up discovering yet another motivation for the 'catfish' to lie. The show has built its own generic conventions and is, thus, forced to offer a new twist at the end –besides, now it's so popular I doubt many 'catfish' feel at ease any more. Its focus on love and not, for instance, business (this could also be a possibility) makes *Catfish*, at any rate, a very singular approach to the very open conventions that now determine the most important relationships in our life.

Lauren and Derek: good luck!!

25-X-2013 TEN TIMES MORE MONEY: WHY BERKELEY IS BETTER THAN MY UNIVERSITY (BUT WE'RE NOT WORSE)

Last week, during the opening of the current academic year, our Rector, Ferran Sancho, explained that the University of California at Berkeley, roughly the same size as UAB in students and staff, has a budget of 300 million euros –ours is 30 (and fast diminishing). Since then the sing-song 'ten times more money' has taken up residence in my brain, colouring all I do, so here are a few examples of what having 30 instead of 300 millions means.

First, though, I'll note that, according to the 'Academic Ranking of World Universities' (<http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU2013.html>), UC at Berkeley occupies position number 3, UAB position 201. The top ten positions for 2013 are: Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, MIT, Cambridge, Cal Tech, Princeton, Columbia, Chicago and Oxford. Rector Sancho mentioned Berkeley because, let's remember this, it's a public, state-funded university –actually, the best one in the world according to this ranking.

The criteria used to assess universities considers (I'm citing from <http://newscenter.berkeley.edu/2013/08/19/berkeley-moves-up-to-third-in-arwus-2013-global-rankings/>): quality of education (10%), quality of faculty (40%), research output (40%), and per capita academic performance (10%). These factors include: "Nobel Prize and Fields Medal winners among faculty and alumni weighted by decade received, highly cited researchers from 21 subject areas, the number of papers in *Nature* and *Science* published between 2008 and 2012, the number of papers indexed in Science Citation and Social Science Citation in 2012." Harvard scored 100/100, Berkeley just a modest 71.3. There are no scores for universities below number one hundred (University of Freiburg, 24.3). If Berkeley is a B, then UAB is an E, or less. Nice...

Please, note: The ranking does not take into account funding under the heading 'per capita academic performance.'

If funding were taken into account the ranking would reveal that totally underfunded universities have amazing productivity ratios (the best ones might well be in Africa!). If, say, Berkeley has 2,000 staff (I have no idea, really) and so does UAB, it turns out that each of its members of staff has access to resources worth 150,000 euros, whereas in UAB's case that would be down to 15,000. I have no idea, either, how many articles a year a Berkeley researcher publishes, but suppose the number is 6 and suppose that a UAB colleague manages this astonishing feat. The cost of the UAB colleague article would be 2,500; the cost of the Berkeley article 25,000. Do you follow me? And I'm only speaking of research.

Now, if my school and Department had ten times more money, then:

I wouldn't have 68 students in my second year class

I wouldn't have to teach four subjects every academic year, two of them with that number of students

the supervision of BA, MA and PhD dissertations could be an actual part of our teaching load, as we'd have more teachers (including teaching assistants)

we wouldn't have to put up with the appalling heat in the classrooms, nor share offices

we'd have money for scholarships, for students at all levels, and so promote excellence

we would be able to buy ten times more books for the library and subscribe to ten times more journals

we wouldn't have to waste our research time in so much admin work (this is what more admin personal would do for us)

we'd have teaching and research assistants for each senior researcher

we'd travel to two or three conferences anywhere in the world a year

we'd have more time to THINK and produce the quality work that is quoted all over the world and appears in the famous impact indexes

I'm stopping at 10, just to continue the game around the 'ten times more' concept. I don't think that at any Berkeley Department they're checking which phone numbers might be disconnected to save money, as we're doing. Etcetera.

If a Berkeley colleague is reading me I'm sure s/he'll be annoyed: they do work hard there, and money is not just enough to win Nobel prizes, publish in *Nature*, make it to the top of the impact indexes. Yes, I know: but money makes talent flourish, whether local or imported. And this is it.

Now, ladies and gentlemen of the future independent Government of Catalonia: why don't you send a delegation to California and see how they have managed to put Berkeley at the top of the world universities with PUBLIC money? Then you'd have my vote...

29-X-2013 DON'T TOUCH MY HARRY!!: THE WRITER'S BATTLE WITH THE FANS

I'm reading the *Harry Potter* saga again –for the third time around– in preparation for my elective subject next semester. Also the academic materials that I'm going to use as background reading, and which include the Casebook recently edited (2012) by Hallett and Huey. In this volume there's a very interesting piece by Pamela Ingleton, "Neither Can Live while the Other Survives': *Harry Potter* and the Extratextual (After)life of J.K. Rowling," in which the author examines very critically Rowling's multiple attempts at limiting the use by other persons of any element of her saga. Rowling is, indeed, resisting the death of the author with all her might, just as –Ingleton argues– Voldemort resists his own demise.

No author can today totally restrain the use of their characters in websites for reference, or in fan fiction of any type (slash fiction included), unless they assume a certainly hostile stance against their own fandom. Authors can, however, do very scary things.

I'm not quite sure I fully understand the legality of the matter but the question is that Rowling sued in 2007 RDR Books when they tried to publish a print version of Steve Vander Ark's website 'The Harry Potter Lexicon' (<http://www.hp-lexicon.org/>). Her argument was that the volume took too much material from her own books and that, anyway, she wanted to publish her own companion (which she never did). The judge agreed with Rowling but granted RDR Books the right to publish a modified version, arguing that "the *Lexicon's* purpose of aiding readers of literature generally should be encouraged rather than stifled" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Harry_Potter_Lexicon). The book was published in 2009 as *The Lexicon: An Unauthorized Guide to Harry Potter Fiction*.

Now, the Lexicon *webpage* warns, sounding like one of Rowling's Howlers, that "NO PART OF THIS PAGE MAY BE REPRODUCED IN ANY MANNER WITHOUT PERMISSION. HARRY POTTER, characters, names, and all related indicia are trademarks of Warner Bros. ©2001-2012." Yes, Warner Bros., not JK Rowling –something Ingleton does not comment on. I do not know why Rowling gave rights to Warner Bros. over her work and I'll have to assume this is part of their (lucrative) deal regarding the films. No matter how well-paid she is, the fact is that Rowling is no longer sole owner of Harry and company. This is very worrying, as corporations, whether in publishing or in film, have no real sympathy for the free circulation of culture –academic work included. Wikipedia's entry for "Legal disputes over the Harry Potter series" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal_disputes_over_the_Harry_Potter_series) is a much better horror story than Harry's persecution by Lord Voldemort, believe me.

Although in principle, researchers and students should not worry about asking for permission to deal with any literary subject they wish to pursue, I'm beginning to wonder whether Warner Bros. (or other big brothers) will ever knock on our door. Some form of tolerance from authors and corporations applies to non-commercial websites but anything generating income is suspect –which leaves academic

publications stranded in a (very dark) grey area. The Casebook I'm using has its own copyright notice and no warning about the contents being subjected to copyright by Rowling or Warner Bros. Technically, it is as 'unauthorised' as the book-form *Lexicon* (it's fascinating to see how 'author' connects with 'authorization' in this context). If you ask me, I'm not sure whether unauthorised work can be restricted, though I grant that I do not see Rowling suing Palgrave Macmillan (even though *they are* making money out of her talent, not the Casebook authors).

Nor do I see either Palgrave Macmillan or RDR publishing something called *The Lexicon: An Unauthorized Guide to Philip Roth Fiction*. Clearly, the most popular fiction generates the more commercial spin-offs. Yet, then, I wonder why always those who already make so much money are the ones that most insist on defending their copyright. Even against admirers who only want to further publicise what they do. I understand the author's protectiveness of her own work and I certainly believe that making money out of other people's creativity is wrong. Yet, derivative or secondary work produced for non-commercial reasons by fans and academic seems quite another matter. I very much doubt that RDR's book has made millions.

So far, Rowling is giving his lawyers (and Warner Bros.) plenty to work on but there'll come a time, 75 years after her death, when *Harry Potter* will be out of copyright. Unless she has already hidden her horcruxes, Rowling won't be able to control her hero's fate. I cannot be sure that this is 100% positive, seeing the horrors produced on the basis of Jane Austen's novels, but it's the way culture works –much more so today, when younger audiences are used to sharing anything and everything on the net with little sense of property.

Food for thought...

3-XI-2013 RE-READING: THE BOTTOMLESS PIT

As I age I understand less and less the mechanism by which some stories are instantly embedded in our brains and other pass through leaving no trace. I keep lists of the books that I read and the films that I see like Japanese tourists who take photos of everything to fix the memories of their sightseeing. I imagine that, as happens to me, they must be often mystified looking at pictures of places they don't remember having seen at all.

My spotty memory might be also conditioned by the quantity of stories I consume –I have the feeling that my brain can only store so many (the hard disk capacity seems limited) and that as more come in, a selective process is triggered by which the less relevant to me are forgotten (or filed away in a corner I can't access). Perhaps assuming that total recall of stories will work after years or decades is simply unrealistic.

Re-reading (or re-seeing in the case of films) is, obviously, crucial to fix some plots in our memories. I find that the third re-reading is the one after which the text stays put. I also find, however, that there is a very tricky aspect to re-reading: the text never stays the same. Actually, the more one reads the more blurry it becomes (when will I be done with *Wuthering Heights*, I wonder?)

In Film Adaptation theory one of the basic tenets is that we, adult human beings, prefer being retold stories we enjoy in slightly different ways –kids, as we know, like exact verbatim repetitions. This is why even readers who already know a particular story will pay to see the screen adaptation. Re-reading is, arguably, something we tend to avoid, or something we postpone for years and even decades after the original experience, which in practice means that the second reading is almost brand new.

We, teachers and researchers of Literature, are in quite a different position for we need to re-read frequently, sometimes once a year, the texts we teach. To this we add the re-readings for research, either of a single volume or of the complete works of an author (my re-reading this summer Iain M. Banks' SF). I'm now re-reading the Harry Potter series for the third time around, wondering whether there will be a fourth time, hence this post.

The text, I was saying, never stays the same. Sometimes to our embarrassment. It's taken me four readings of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to realise that Gilbert's narrative, although produced twenty years after the events, offers not a single comment on that past from the perspective of the present (in hindsight). My students were particularly interested in chapter 14, in which Gilbert attacks Frederick Lawrence in a fit of jealousy and justifies at least three times his appalling action. I never realised until last week that he does so without a single shred of remorse, not even twenty years after the events –also that he tells his good friend Halford what he's never told his wife. Did Anne Brontë want exactly this?

I can start using metaphors here: novels (and films) are, as Henry James noted, baggy monster and they sprout tentacles all the time. Or, reading is peeling the layers of a gigantic onion (with no centre, let's not forget we're post post-modern). Re-reading is unveiling in the literal sense of taking off what prevents you from fully seeing (until the next veil is noticed). Or treading treacle that becomes less viscous. Re-reading is also, of course, facing again events we know very well but that we want to enjoy this time in the full knowledge of what is coming (Ada and Inman's meeting in *Cold Mountain* comes to mind). Or that we dread –yes, Sirius Black's death. There are only so many times one can mourn a character before starting to hate the author.

Logically, novels have too many words for us to retain them integrally in our memories, films too many images. Re-reading (or re-seeing) I'm puzzled by how some passages stick out immediately and with others it is as if they never existed to begin with. Also by how at a different times it is the other way round –this is why we never stop making discoveries that for other readers are obvious. Good research consists, yes, of coming up with the new angles about the text that change other (or most) readers' perceptions.

I really wanted to write about what happens to emotion in re-reading. Why I cry myself silly every time I see Baz Luhrman's film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, although I know very well what's coming –and I don't buy this tragic view of love! Why I cringe every time Marlow comes across Kurtz on all fours and tells him he will be lost –and I don't even believe we have souls! But then emotion seems to be a dirty word in literary criticism. Or I'm in the grip of emotion too big to make sense of it today, though I'm trying.

So much we don't know about how we read...

7-XI-2013 DEFINING LITERARY GENERATIONS: THE CASE OF THE NEW PURITANS

Back in 2001, Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne edited an anthology of short fiction, *All Hail the New Puritans*, which aimed at defining a new literary school. This, basically, applied the minimalist principles of the Dogme 95 film movement to prose fiction, as stated in the (controversial) manifesto that opens the collection. A few years ago, my colleague José Francisco Fernández Sánchez of the University of Almería had the brilliant idea of checking on that project to see how the anthology and the contributors had fared.

I invited myself (thanks Jose!) to contribute a chapter on Alex Garland, not only because I love *The Beach* but also because I find his drifting into screen writing a very significant career move, hinting at the increasing loss of weight of the novel in our times. The volume just published, *The New Puritan Generation* (Gylphi, 2013), deals in the end not just with Blincoe and Thorne's quite unsuccessful bid to build a new avant-garde but with the enormous difficulties of trying to make historical and critical sense of the constant flow of writers in any particular literature.

The New Puritan Generation is, to begin with, a misnomer as there is no such thing. The original anthology acted as a meeting point for a series of young writers (Geoff Dyer was the oldest) who have had very different careers. The chapters which assess the quality of the stories collected by Blincoe and Thorne offer a quite negative view of what was achieved then (David Owen does a particularly fine demolition job of the whole endeavour). This, to begin with, shows that literary manifestos have a very dubious utility, as they seem to curtail rather than encourage creativity.

The other chapters which, like mine on Garland, assess the individual careers of writers such as Scarlett Thomas or Toby Litt, may elicit feelings of perplexity. I'm thinking that perhaps the generation of British writers born in the 1960s are not the 'new puritans' but the 'mixed reviews crowd.' Let me explain: Garland is a different case, as, basically, he has stopped writing fiction and become a full-time screen writer. Litt, in contrast, has 10 books under his belt; Scarlett Thomas has 8 under hers. I tried to read Litt's *deadkidsongs* but, frankly, could not finish it and my memory of his lecture at the

AEDEAN Almería conference is not particularly happy. As for Thomas, well, I'm not familiar with any of her novels –nor was I aware that I should be. Readings the chapters by my colleagues and checking the internet, I get the impression that writers of this generation are ambitious, bold enough to combine in their books a myriad ideas but not that good at generating solid novels, much less masterpieces.

I'll try once more: the thrones occupied since the 1980s by Rushdie, Amis, Ishiguro, Kureishi, Barnes, McEwan, etc. still seem to be theirs. Despite Granta's efforts (see my post for 23-IV-2013) to find bright young things something –a mysterious X factor– is preventing them from reaching the heights that the older colleagues reached 30 years ago.

Something I noticed is that my colleagues are more enthusiastic about Litt's and Thomas's novels (and other writers in the Puritan generation) than the readers. As I read their presentations of each work, I sorely missed what I can only call 'critical judgement.' This is more and more common: someone spends 10 pages analysing a book (or a film) in minute detail, often in very clever ways, but it's hard for me to say whether they find the text in question 'good' (= worth reading and memorable). When I turn to Amazon or similar to check whether I should invest my scarce time on this book or that, the judgement readers pass turns out to be much harsher. An Amazon reader writes of Litt's *deadkidsongs* that "the ideas are smart, but his execution just creates confusion and boredom." This is exactly the impression I was getting but it's not the kind of judgement that I see in current academic work.

So, yes, there are two lines of thought mixed here: one is that contemporary (British) writers seem to deliver all the time less than promised (hence the 'mixed reviews generation') and the other is that we academics are not producing criticism but analysis –I'm not sure why. The other line of thought is that as I read *The New Puritan Generation* I felt increasingly confused about how we have made historical sense so far of Literature. I don't know whether in the smaller literary world of the past literary generations did exist in a more homogeneous way which is impossible to reproduce today in the overcrowded world of fiction, or whether the groupings are an invention of the critics. If the 'new Puritans' do not really exist, except in the title of the original collection and the new book, then, do the 'Romantics' or the 'Modernists' exist?

What is more, and this why I wanted to discuss Garland, what will happen when writers themselves realise that, like Garland's protagonist Richard, we'll soon have published authors lacking a literary education? It does feel like the end of an era and, somehow, it seems to me that the 'mixed review generation' is withdrawing into solipsism rather than address this huge issue...

Um, do have a look at *The New Puritan Generation*, see what you think.

12-XI-2013 LEARNING TO BE LESS AFRAID OF THE NARRATOR...

This post is, particularly, for our second-year Victorian Literature students who must be this week hurrying up to finish their paper proposals and thus meet the 18th November deadline. They have been asked to write a paper (1,500 words with three secondary sources) on the narrator(s) in either *Oliver Twist* or *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I know from experience that this is for them quite a difficult task as understanding the role of the narrator presents many problems at this stage of their Literary education.

This is because too often fiction is taught as if only the plot and the diverse themes each text deals with mattered, that is, as if how the text in question is built mattered less (or nothing). This is by no means the case. Actually, learning how a story is narrated is a top priority for any aspiring writer and it should be similarly important for university-trained readers.

I'm going to do something a bit odd here, basically recycle my article "The Narrator as Threshold Concept: Comparing Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the English Working Classes in 1844*" (in *Reading Between the Lines: Discussing Narration in the Literature Class*, eds. A. Monnickendam, D. Owen and C. Pividori, 2013 –see my website for the complete text). This article describes the experiment I ran last year by which I invited my previous Victorian Literature students to become aware of the narrator's role comparing not two novels but a novel and an essay. It worked nicely but not without contradictions, as I ended up developing a set of exercises that I have finally not used again, afraid that they were too 'secondary school.'

Anyway, as I explained in the introductory segment, Jan Meyer and Ray Land have changed the face of higher education pedagogy by developing their 'Threshold Theory.' Their idea is that students necessarily encounter 'threshold concepts,' that is, portals that open "a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" (2003: 2). They only mention 'signification' (2003: 3) and 'irony' (2005: 374) as threshold concepts in Literature.

Gina Wisker offers a longer list (2008: 13), including the social context and construction of texts and language, intertextuality, the reading process and critical literacy, representation and signification, ideology and enquiry and research. Together with Gillian Robinson, she explains that Literature students too often believe that "art is the copy of the real world" (2009: 323). If you put two and two together, you can easily see that a major threshold concept students need to grasp is the narrator's role as the lynchpin around which art (=Literature) offers a particular representation of the real world. Funny how that is not included in Wisker's list, which does include much more sophisticated items –or maybe that's why. We tend to overlook the obvious.

Students were quick to get the idea that the person called Charles Dickens is a much more complex entity than the author Charles Dickens, and also to understand that the narrator in *Oliver Twist* is a mask (or series of) that author-Dickens assumes. In Brontë's case it is perhaps easier to understand that the narrator is not the author, much less the real Anne Brontë, as she chose to narrate *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* through two fictional characters: a man (Gilbert) and a woman (Helen). So, last year we got a very nice crop of papers dealing with the narrator, although it took a while to refine the proposals into workable, adequate foundations. I have checked the post I wrote back in February: only 6 out of 48 papers were a fail. Good!

Now we're back to square one, logically, as classes are new no matter how old the experience of the teacher is. I got this question: can I discuss motherhood in Brontë's novel? No –you can discuss how motherhood affects Helen as a narrator in the later part of her diary. Or: can I discuss alcohol in Brontë's novel? No –you can discuss how fear of alcoholism conditions the opinions voiced by the female narrator, Helen. In Dickens's case, you may contradict Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's theory that this is the narrator's tale (and not Oliver's), perhaps explain that narrator-Dickens seems to be a variety of narrators in this text and not a unified construction (hence the inconsistency between sentimentality and the harsh social critique). And so on...

Students' difficulties are complicated to manage, as one feels tempted to change tack, abandon the idea of the narrator and go back to the more habitual approach. Oh, yes, let's discuss motherhood, alcoholism, the workhouse, the justice system. Yet, those very same difficulties seem to confirm that it's in matters like this (yes, the narrator's role or any other 'threshold concept') that students need to work. And teachers, indeed.

I miss more and more a subject which teaches us all the basics of storytelling from a writer's perspective –not necessarily creative writing, much less literary theory (narratology included). I mean, rather, a practical subject that would put students and teachers before the blank page and forced us to make the authorial decisions that result in this or that narrator. Wishful thinking, of course, given the rigidity of our degree structures.

My sources:

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19-XI-2013 LEARNING ABOUT EMOTION: FOR A LITTLE GIRL

A few months ago I saw with my two little nieces the Disney film *Bolt* (2008). This is a delicious comedy about a cute dog who, like Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show*, has no idea that his life is happening in front of hidden cameras. In this particular case, Bolt, a star in a very popular action TV series for kids, believes that he does have superpowers. When by accident he ends up in New York, the complicated trip back to his native California teaches him that his superpowers are fictitious.

Bolt learns to cope gradually with stark reality but when his new friend, the she-cat Mittens, suggests that his owner Penny is just an actress who does not really care for him, that seems a bit too much. Being a Disney film and a comedy to boot, however, it is plain even by mid-film that Bolt will find Penny again and that both will be happily reunited in everlasting friendship, together with Bolt's new road buddies (the fat hamster Rhino is truly great fun!).

I do love the film, as you can see, and never suspected that it might be the cause for any problem –but it turns out that it was.

My elder niece, aged 8, enjoyed the very funny gags and the whole plotline. The younger, aged 4, seemed, however, much concerned about whether Bolt would meet Penny again –she asked so often that her sister and myself couldn't help teasing her (nicely!!) about it. This annoyed her a bit but by the time the film ended she was fine and claimed to loved it.

Now, this weekend, months later, she asked to see *Bolt* again. I that know kids do that all the time, sometimes to their parents' exasperation (imagine seeing *Beauty and the Beast* twenty times or more). Also, knowing that she was already familiar with the plot and confident that this time she knew Bolt would enjoy a canine happy-ever-after with Penny, I accepted.

Things were going smoothly until a little scene when Bolt watches Penny embrace his replacement in the series (she's acting, he doesn't know this). Bolt, logically, doubts then whether Penny loves him at all. He still ignores, of course, that Penny is very sad that he's gone and does not like at all the idea of having to act with another dog. My niece took this well but when, a few minutes later, the pair Bolt-Penny are finally reunited for good emotion overtook her and, oh my, this baby can cry!!

After a really long bout of crying, say ten whole minutes, with her aunt (that's me) trying to comfort her and laugh the whole matter away unsuccessfully, she did manage to explain that she felt "a really big pity." I explained to her that it was not pity but

emotion, as nothing bad happened and all were very happy in the end –no need to worry at all! Now, try to teach a four-year-old the difference between sorrow and emotion... Even though she's a very sunny girl not at all a cry baby, three hours later she still could not mention the film without crying. Eight hours later, which much fun and many games in between, matters stood the same. I don't know whether to call her or not (this is thirty hours later) for fear that she'll cry again.

In contrast, she had a good laugh watching *West Side Story* with her elder sister. My 8-year-old niece had asked me to see this magnificent musical but ended practically in tears, finding some comfort only in my assurance that *Romeo and Juliet* has an even worse ending. The four-year-old, finding the romantic tale quite silly, cracked jokes all the time. When a character tells another 'Your world is rubbish' she went 'Ohhhh... you're going to need a big bin with a big lid.' That's kids' humour for you.

You must be thinking that I'm a terrible aunt. To tell the truth, I am indeed concerned about the little one's overreaction to *Bolt*, as I didn't see it coming. If comedy is not safe... I mean, I'd never show her *Bambi*, if you know what I mean. Now I see myself having a serious woman-to-woman talk before we watch any other film together!!

This little story happens to go exactly in the direction of what is worrying me these days as I re-read the *Harry Potter* saga: we know next to nothing about the emotion elicited by fiction –whether felt by kids or by adults. At least, I don't know much which might be of use academically. Our mistrust of sentimentalism is possibly to blame. What my little niece has taught me is that emotion can be really overpowering in unsuspected ways. I just hope next time she is overcome by laughter and not tears.

28-XI-2013 AN AWKWARD MOMENT AT A CONFERENCE AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT (MORE OR LESS)

Two weeks ago I attended a conference and I found myself listening to a paper which dealt exactly with the topic of one of my publications (a chapter in a collective volume, four years old). I'd rather not mention which topic as part of the self-censorship that I must apply here, or risk losing the effect of what I'm going to narrate. I spent the twenty minutes of the communication waiting for the gentleman author to refer to my work, without success. Um, I told myself: do I raise a stink and embarrass everyone? Should I do nothing at all? Two other colleagues from my research group were quite vocal in their criticism of the paper presented, and I decided to keep quiet.

Mind you, in other occasions I have indeed behaved in a totally obnoxious way –the most spectacular time was after listening to a paper on Alex Garland's *The Beach*. I had just written an article about it (the one in the volume on the New Puritans I wrote about a few weeks ago), and to my surprise this woman scholar gave a paper ignoring not my article (as it was not published) but *all* the bibliography on Garland. She showed instead in her PowerPoint pictures of scenes in the film adaptation – 'here you can see that...', 'here you can see this...'. I told her as straightforwardly as I could that

she should be ashamed of presenting that trash. In more polite but still extremely rude terms (English is quite helpful to do this). I'm not sure whether I lost it or did the right thing. (Others, yes, have been rude to me, but not because I hadn't done my homework).

So, going back to my anecdote: when I got home I decided to email the gentleman in question and tell him, this time nicely and politely, about my article, which I attached to my message. Oh, my, I thought –this is awkward but, then, what is the point of not telling a fellow scholar about one's own bibliography? As it turned out, I got a very friendly reply and discovered, to boot, that the gentleman had even reviewed a book in which I have another article (and had quoted one of my books in his PhD dissertation). The exact circumstances regarding which he had missed my article about his own topic of interest sounded plausible enough. So, yes, another linked formed, networking accomplished, despite what could have been quite a misencounter. Buff, what a relief!!

To be honest, my main concern as I listened to him deliver his paper was not that he wasn't quoting me but that, generally speaking, we, Spanish scholars, don't quote each other. We do produce a mass of work every year but, I don't know why, we tend to ignore it. Instead, our 'work cited' lists are dominated by the publications of Anglo-American university presses and journals. Perhaps I should say that we do not quote each other, nor anyone else outside these Anglo-American domain (an Italian journal, a Swedish university press book...?). Talk about academic hierarchy.

So, yes, it can well be that someone in the room in a Spanish conference has published something that overlaps 100% with your topic and you don't know it. I did check the MLA for my own book chapter and it is not there –whether this is Peter Lang's fault, I cannot say. What seems to be true is that not all we publish reaches the places where researchers look for secondary sources, which leads me back to one of my pet obsessions: we need to make ourselves visible. It an endless task: maintain a personal web, register in the main research portals, send MLA what is missing in your profile and... wait to be found in that bottomless ocean where so many other voices are drowned. I must be my own publicist on top of being teacher, admin worker and researcher. And it's very tiring work.

So: thank you, my new colleague, for your friendly reply. Next time we meet, we'll have much to discuss and enjoy together.

30-XI-2013 THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: TRYING TO DEFINE THE CURRENT DISCOURSE OF ROMANCE (IN FICTION)

For the last five weeks I've been teaching an MA course with the title of 'Postmodernity: New Sexualities/New Textualities.' This was originally called 'The Discourses of Desire,' a title I much preferred but that was dropped out to include

some reference to the confusing idea that we live in postmodern times (they seem to be lasting far too long).

The course includes: Annie E. Proulx's brilliant "Brokeback Mountain" (and the film by Ang Lee), Sarah Waters's sparkling *Tipping the Velvet* (with the BBC adaptation), Nick Hornby's candidly confessional *High Fidelity* (film by Stephen Frears), the frustrating romantic comedy by Nancy Meyers *Something Gotta Give* and the also candidly confessional novel by Rafael Yglesias, *A Happy Marriage* (see my entry about it on 13-1-2012).

I'm trying to come up with a set of rules that condition the current representation and discourse of desire and love in contemporary romance, based on these texts and others we've brought to class (last day we had a great session in which each of us presented a film about love, whether drama or comedy). Here's the set of rules so far, still much tentative, incomplete and disordered:

- *There is a tension between classic romantic narrative and the need to innovate narrative for romance in more ambitious films and novels
- *The stories portrayed are, nonetheless, quite close to everyday life, using a sort of low mimetic tone, often with protagonists one is not meant to identify with
- *Still, the association of romance with exotic places and characters remains in a few cases
- *The fantasy of love at first sight is common
- *It is believed that there is one true love for each person (though this can be the final person in a long list)
- *Love is presented as a feeling that can last indefinitely if that person is found
- *Yet, ironically, couples often assume their relationships might not work or last for long
- *Stories often deal with the individual's difficulties to settle down in a relationship (for fear there might be a better one)
- *'Happily ever after' endings are assumed to be actually temporary
- *Marriage is always mentioned, either as a goal or as something to be avoided, though cohabitation is more and more common
- *Commitment appears to be a much larger issue than passion, intimacy and even love itself
- *In quite a few cases the romantic discourse is attributed to the man, whereas the woman remains more sceptical and even in control
- *Male protagonists often review their past by making lists of ex-girlfriends or even visiting them
- *The search for happiness in love has been expanded to middle and old age (including coming out of the closet)
- *Yet, stories tend to focus on attractive people, mostly young (or young-looking for their age)
- *A pre-condition for love (for women) is that they must make themselves as attractive as possible (particularly those around 30, the spinster's age)
- *Love is always accompanied by very good sex; even first sexual encounters appear to be highly satisfactory

- *It is assumed that a loss of desire kills love though stories do not explain what happens to desire in a long relationship as people age and bodies lose their attractive (except as excuses for a break-up and the start of a sexier romance)
- *Intimacy is insisted on but, apart from sex, romantic candlelit dinners and perhaps going to the cinema or the theatre together, stories do not explain what couples are supposed to do together (or talk about)
- *Lovers tend to be shown in isolation from all their other relationships (perhaps with the exception of close families)
- *It is taken for granted that all happy couples want children and that marriage must lead to forming families
- *Domesticity is hardly ever contemplated
- *Men tend to look for more attractive sexual partners, women for more communication, though more and more stories deal with women looking also for younger, more attractive partners (provided the women are beautiful)
- *Romance is middle-class, with class differences seldom portrayed (or portrayed as an obstacle in unhappy stories)
- *Racial or ethnic differences are always assumed to be problematic
- *The inclusion of non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic or racial groups in romance is still very low
- *Gender inequality is hardly ever mentioned, unless the story deals specifically with abuse
- *The real impact of couple-related abused is ignored or downplayed
- *Gay characters are being progressively incorporated in romantic comedy for heterosexuals
- *Attractive men may turn out to be bisexual or gay
- *Love stories about gay or lesbian couples are only occasionally mainstream and of general interest for heterosexual audiences
- *No film or novel has really managed to explain a relationship based on friendship combined with sex –they all end up being about romance
- *Tragic endings (the death of a partner) are assumed to be romantic
- *A number of films deal with the end of a long, happy relationship by disease or death (Alzheimer's is creating a kind of sub-genre)

That's it for now... If you care to add any ideas, they're very welcome!!

5-XII-2013 MUFFINS AND CUPCAKES: THE INVASION OF UNITED STATES BAKERY (WITH A PLEA FOR COSMOPOLITAN RESISTANCE)

Jaime: This one is for you...

I'm sure you have noticed the relentless advance of US-inspired bakery in our cities and towns, aided by diverse TV shows (currently, for instance, *Cupcake Wars* on Divinity). This invasion of muffins, cupcakes and an endless variety of decorated cakes has been quite fast and, as it happens with fashions that take on very quickly, it seems to have left us with the impression that American bakery is already part of our local Spanish culture. Well, it is not, though I assume it is here to stay.

Reconstructing the history of this recent cultural import is by no means easy. (In case you have been on planet Mars in the last decade, you can take a basic tutorial from “Magdalenas, Muffins y Cupcakes: Diferencias” at <http://denikatessen.blogspot.com.es/2013/05/magdalenas-muffins-diferencias.html>). To satisfy my own curiosity I did a Google search limited by year, beginning in 1996, and although I do know that this is not 100% reliable, the results seem to make a certain sense. Let’s start with the muffins, then move onto the cupcakes.

Muffins seems to be a McDonald’s import, at least this is what a question formulated back on 1/02/2001 in the website *El Preguntón* (www.ruper.net/El%20Pregunton.htm) suggests: “¿Por qué en el McDonald las magdalenas se llaman Muffins y no McDalenas?” The first references to ‘muffins’ I’ve come across go back actually to 2000: an early recipe for honey muffins (10/03/2000, <http://igmoyay.apagada.com/recetas.htm#38>), and an article on polidextrose (02/02/2000, www.espatentes.com/pdf/2207816_t3.pdf) in which the author considers s/he needs to explain that muffins are “bollos o bizcochos similares a la magdalena.” So... the next step would perhaps ask McDonalds Spain... Funnily, I was under the impression that Starbucks was responsible for the popularisation of muffins, but it landed in Spain in 2002 when McDonalds was already offering muffins –or so it seems.

Now –cupcakes. This is complicated... and for a very peculiar reason it’s easy to detect plenty of rivalry regarding claims as to who opened the first cupcake establishment in Spain. I’ll stake the totally unproven claim that cupcakes were introduced in Spain in 1994, when the first Taste of America shop opened (<http://www.tasteofamerica.es/historia>). At least I’m reasonably sure that they must have sold already products to bake cupcakes at home. Now, I’ve found at least three likely contenders for the title of first Spanish bakery especialising in American cupcakes: 1) Acaramelada in Madrid (it seems to have opened in November 2000), offering “repostería creativa” (the finished product, courses, materials); 2) Patricia Arribáizaga’s shop (<http://www.tartasdecoradasycupcakes.com/>), which opened in 2001 and specialised in ‘designer cupcakes’; 3) and Golden Cupcake (<http://goldencupcake.com>), from León, which announce themselves as “la primera franquicia de repostería creativa” though I should contact them to find out when they started. By the way, the most popular blog in this area seems to be “El rincón de Bea” (<http://www.elrincondebea.com/>), since 2008.

You may have heard something about cupcakes and the TV series *Sex and the City*. Yes, correct: Mikel López Iturriaga explains that “Carrie y sus amigas no sólo enseñaron a las americanas que los cupcakes eran cool y te curaban de cualquier tipo de desencuentro con la vida, sino que les hizo vivir la fantasía de que no engordaban.” (“Todo lo que debes saber sobre los ‘cupcakes’”, 21/07/2010, <http://blogs.elpais.com/el-comidista/2010/07/moda-cupcakes-magdalenas.html>). In particular, Carrie and her posh friends were the clients of Magnolia Bakery (<http://www.magnoliabakery.com/>). Now, *Sexo en Nueva York* was first broadcast in Spain by the subscription channel Cosmopolitan in 2000. It seems, then, quite likely

that cupcakes, introduced more or less by then, actually came to Spain on the personal initiative of travellers who discovered in situ American bakery. The series may have just confirmed the popularity of cupcakes among middle- and upper-class urban women.

Personally, I don't like very much neither muffins nor cupcakes –too rich, too cloying. I'm not going to defend 'magdalenas' here, which, ironically, are also a cultural import, this time from French baking culture. I simply like much better the very fine local patisserie in Barcelona (think Farga), which seems to me much more elegant in texture and flavour than the US-inspired bakery. As I'm sure you are noticing, I feel actually quite annoyed by this American import because it seems to be yet another colonial surrender to a culture that has already overwhelmed us in excess.

In contrast, I'll defend the cosmopolitan virtues of another cultural import to Barcelona: the patisserie Ochiai with its Japanese specialities (<http://www.ochiaipatisserie.com/>). This is run by Takashi Ochiai since 1983 (he's one of those 'romantic' migrants few studies of migration seem to notice). One of his star products is the 'dorayaki,' "a red bean pancake which consists of two small pancake-like patties made from castella wrapped around a filling of sweet Azuki red bean paste" (Wikipedia explains). All Catalan kids know about 'dorayaki' because it's what the space cat Doraemon eats in the eponymous cartoon TV series.

There's, as you can see, a great difference between the cosmopolitanism of cultural variety (= the dorayaki) and the invasion backed by US imperialist cultural colonisation (= the muffins and cupcakes).

This post, by the way, is 100% Cultural Studies... I'll let in other hands the continuation of the work started here, you're very welcome. It's been fun!!

10-XII-2013 THE COMPETENCES OF THE TEACHERS (BUT WHAT ABOUT THE STUDENTS'?)

The Office for the Quality of Teaching (Oficina per la Qualitat Docent, or OQD) of my university asks me to pass onto the Department's students a link where they'll find a survey about which competences are desirable in a teacher. Curiouser and curiouser, I discover that the survey demands no ID, so I take it (I do tell them about this odd omission...).

The questions are based, as I eventually discover, on the work of the Grup Interuniversitari de Formació Docent (GIFD), to which UAB's OQD belongs. In particular, the survey refers back to the results of the research project "Proposta d'un marc de referència competencial del professorat universitari i adequació dels plans de formació basats en competències docents" (RED-U2012). RED-U is, by the way, the Red Estatal de Docència Universitaria (<http://www.red-u.org/>). I do recall having taken the survey addressed to the teachers. The rationale, as you can see from the project title,

is that if a set of necessary competences that all good university teachers should possess is established with the participation of teachers and students, then better teacher training can be offered and, so, higher education improved. Fair enough.

Now, the questions I asked the OQT are 1) whether they are aware that the competences which the survey highlights are by no means the qualities students prefer in teachers, as suggested by our habitual semestral surveys; 2) when they are going to elaborate a set of similar competences for students and survey teachers on these... No answer so far.

Have a look at the very interesting article “Identificación, desarrollo y evaluación de competencias docentes en la aplicación de planes de formación dirigidos a profesorado universitario” by the members of GIFD, published in the monographic issue of *REDU. Revista de Docencia Universitaria* (10:2, May-August 2012, 21-56) on “Competencias docentes en la educación superior.” (<http://gifd.upc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/REDU-Identificaci%C3%B3n-desarrollo-y-evaluaci%C3%B3n-competencias-docentes-GIFD1.pdf>). After selecting competences from different sources, the team established a set of six competences: communicative, methodological, interpersonal, planning and management, innovation, team work (which I have reproduced here in the order preferred by the teachers themselves).

Logically, the authors are concerned that teachers are resisting the idea that constant teaching innovation and team work are very necessary competences. I do find this worrying, although I’m quite sceptical about the idea that innovation should be tied up to the use of digital technologies. Team work, yes, by all means: as I know first hand sharing a subject with someone else is always being in good company and does not detract at all from the freedom to teach in your own style in class.

My point today, I’ll insist, is that there is no corresponding set of competences for students. Having written the competences for ‘Literature and Culture’ in our BA degree in English Studies I know very well what I’m talking about. We do have an impressive set of competences (just revised) but none that really refers to basic study skills. I’ll take, then, the teachers’ own and offer a similar set of students’ competences (in the order I prefer):

1) methodological: students read carefully the Syllabus as soon as it is published in July, buy the books and read them in summer; students prepare in advance of the lectures/seminars the necessary texts and exercises; students follow the teacher with their full attention and make notes (preferably not of what the teacher says but of what they think).

2) planning and management: students, having read the Syllabus for all their subjects in July, plan their work week by week, taking advantage of the assessment calendars we publish; students check at the beginning of September, when the complete programmes are published, that these match the assessment calendar; students complete the agenda for the academic year making sure that they adequately combine

study and assessment; students are completely autonomous and do not depend on the teachers' reminders for specific tasks.

3) innovation: the real innovation, as things are now –sorry to be, possibly, offensive to some students– is that students apply competences 1 and 2 to their work; innovation competences also refer to student's ability to use competently the internet for study, the databases we teach them, the library catalogue and any other digital resource.

4) communicative: students see the classroom (both presential and virtual) as a space for intensive dialogue and for the debate of ideas with their peers and the teachers; students always participate in class discussion and never assume a passive role.

5) interpersonal: students use their teachers' expertise as a resource from which they can greatly benefit by establishing a friendly, respectful dialogue with them; students value their teachers for the work they do and not for their availability, personal charm or for how easy it is to pass a subject with a particular teacher; students take advantage of the teacher's office hours to benefit from the teachers' guidance.

6) team work: students understand teaching as a collaborative effort and see themselves as part of a team (the whole class) helping the teacher do his/her work; students show a clear disposition to make higher education work for all involved.

Now that we know what's an ideal teacher and an ideal student, let's see how we can help real people match the ideals...

17-XII-2013 UNLIKELY PLACES TO FIND USEFUL COMMENTS ON GENDER AND RACE: GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S *PACIFIC RIM*

If you have already read my posts for the films *Battle Los Angeles* and *Warrior* you must already know that I find testosterone-driven Hollywood films very useful to grasp the real state of our current gender discourse, and, thus, correct the utopian drive of (pro-feminist) academic theory.

As I have been preaching for the last twenty years one of the very odd effects of feminism is that men routinely incorporate in these macho fantasies female characters that are often much spunkier (I mean agentive in the current academic parlance) than most female characters imagined by women writers. Are you worried that your little daughter is too fond of princesses (who need rescuing)? No problem: have her see Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim*. She'll find there Mako Mori (played by Rinko Kikuchi), co-piloting with a man a gigantic robot... and kicking to pieces the colossal sea monsters that threaten to exterminate the human species. Yes, rescuing us.

Travis Beacham and Guillermo del Toro borrow for the plot of *Pacific Rim* two classics of post-WWII Japanese popular culture: the giant monster Godzilla and the giant robot Mazinger-Z. Godzilla first appeared in 1954 in the eponymous film by Ishirō Honda and

has spawned other 28 films (by Toho Company), plus the Hollywood version, and countless apparitions in other media. He is a 'kaiju' or monster, and indeed the origin of the long list of Japanese 'kaiju movies.' In case we miss the allusion, Beacham and del Toro call their frightening amphibious monsters from the abyss 'kaijus.' Mazinger, which appeared in 1972 as a character in the popular anime TV series, is the originator of the immensely popular 'mecha' (or giant robot) sub-genre of Japanese culture. In *Pacific Rim*, the mecha are called 'jaegers' (or hunters). The idea is quite simple: a devastating species of 'kaijus' emerges from the deep to wipe out the human species and colonise Earth –nothing will stop them, except the (quite cumbersome) 'jaegers.' Ironically, the creatures can only be destroyed by using a nuclear device –I say ironically because Godzilla is the product of the atomic bombs dropped by the Americans on Japan.

Now, here's the funny thing: the jaegers require not one but two pilots who must be connected via a neural interface with each other and with the machine –one is the left hemisphere, the other the right one of the mecha's brain. The pairs are mostly male but the film focuses on a mixed gender team.

Pacific Rim would never pass the Bechdel test, which comic book artist Alison Bechdel introduced in her strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985). A pro-feminist movie should: 1) have at least two women in it, 2) who talk to each other, 3) about something besides a man. In *Pacific Rim* we don't see any women until the classic first turning point (minute 20). Once Mako is introduced, as a demure scout for new male pilot talent, she's alone for the rest of the movie –there's a Russian female pilot but they never speak to each other. Predictably, Mako is chosen by hunk Raleigh (Charlie Hunnam) to replace her dead brother. Unpredictably, his choice is based on his feeling perfect empathy with her, based on her combat and pilot skills and not on sexual attraction.

The obstacle she needs to overcome is her protective dad, Stacker Pentecost, the military officer that runs the 'jaegers' in full rebellion against the inefficient political authorities. Here's another unexpected twist: the father (Idris Elba) is black and he has raised his Japanese adoptive daughter on his own. He's protective but not obnoxious and soon sees that Mako must be allowed to make her choices. Do tell me about another film were you see this unlikely racial/gender/parenting combination. Even more: another pilot team is former by two Australian men, father and son, and, yes, the father is also a single dad. He even tells Raleigh when his son misbehaves that it might be his own fault for hesitating to give him a hug when required. Again: name a film with not one but two single dads, doing on the whole very well.

Mako is, surely, closely related to Sayaka Yumi, the girl who piloted the 'female mecha' Aphrodite-A in the Mazinger-Z series. The idea that robots are male or female is, of course, very silly but the image of Aphrodite-A firing her Oppai Missile System (yes, 'boob' missile system) has staid in the imaginary of all kids born in the 1960s. It seems that Sayaki never yelled said "breasts out" in the same way that Mazinger's pilot Koji Kabuto yelled "fists out" to launch its missiles, but Spanish boys playing in school yards made Sayaki's war cry also part of our culture. Anyway: here's my addition to the Blechdel test –a heroine is not a heroine unless that is her story. Ergo: neither Mako

nor Sayaki *are* heroines. They are sidekicks and, well, poor Mako is a little bit of a liability for Raleigh, as she still suffers from the childhood trauma of seeing Tokyo wiped out and collapses a few minutes before the final attack is carried out. Raleigh does rescue her, I'm afraid, but, then, it is clear, he could not have succeeded without her.

Where am I going with all this? Well, *Pacific Rim* teaches boys that girls can make excellent team mates, to begin with. Also that being a single dad is ok, whether of a boy or a girl. Not bad, all considered. It celebrates brute force but rejects interpersonal violence. Now, the problem is how I convince my little nieces that Mako is much cooler than any idiotic princess. Also, how we women start creating other Makos that instead of sea monsters fight (teamed up with men) the real monster: inequality.

27-XII-2013 KINDLE FREAKS: A SELECTION OF GOOD READING FOR FREE

Last post of 2013!!

Other bloggers use the label 'Kindle freak' meaning someone in love with their e-book readers, as sold by Amazon. This is not quite how I use the label here, as, although I like my Kindle Touch e-book reader fine I am not much in love with Amazon's attempts to control me and my reading habits. Once, as I loaded up new texts onto my Kindle I got a message from Amazon saying I should purchase 'legally' a classic I had downloaded very legally from Project Gutenberg. This is why my Kindle has always been off-line since then and why I use it basically to read texts I can access for free. I have not yet purchased any e-book nor intend to do so for the time being.

So: the label 'Kindle freak' means to me the kind of heavily addicted reader that is willing to upload any odd text onto their Kindle (or e-book) reader just for the sake of giving it a try, or ticking off an item from their own endless reading list. Since copyright expires 70 years after the death of the author according to US and UK law, this means that I'm reading plenty written by authors who died before 1943; also texts that for whatever reasons authors have simply made available. I assume that what is on offer from Project Gutenberg or Many Books fulfils these requirements. I'll leave for the time being aside the thorny matter of piracy.

My transformation into a Kindle freak, I must explain, is also a result of the current economic crisis in Spain. Suddenly, it makes no sense to spend 100-150 euros on books every two months just to feed my reading habit as I used to do. So, I'm just buying what I must buy necessarily while I use the e-book reader's possibilities to curb down reading expenses. Blame dear Artur Mas for that, as he's been taking off my salary about 250 euros (after taxes) per month for the last six months or more. The downside for the book industry of my Kindle freakishness, of course, is that I'm less and less willing to spend much on paper books, and even less willing to spend much money on e-books. I thought nothing of paying 25 to 35 euros for a book a few years ago—now I'm beginning to call myself Ms. Scrooge.

My Christmas present for you is a selection of texts (in no particular order) which I have read for free and that might interest you. There's a little bit of everything, so hopefully you'll feel curious about at least one or two. Do use Wikipedia for extra information, it's much more interesting than my providing comments... And enjoy!!

Four Stars Reading out of Four:

Bierce, Ambrose. *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/972>.

Defoe, Daniel. *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/376>.

Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (1845). Trans Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17306>.

London, Jack. *The People of the Abyss* (1903), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1688>.

Odd Classics:

Dickens, Charles. *Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Everyday Life and Every-day People* (1836), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/882>.

Stevenson, R.L. *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes* (1879), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/535>

On Women and Feminism:

Gillman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland* (1915), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/32>.

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House* (1879), trans. not specified, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2542>.

Sanger, Margaret. *Margaret Sanger: An Autobiography* (1938), <http://archive.org/details/margaretsangerau1938sang>

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. *Eighty Years & More: Reminiscences 1815–1897* (1898), <http://manybooks.net/titles/stantone1198211982-8.html>

Solid Fantasy of the Old Kind:

Dunsany, Lord. *Tales of Wonder* (1916), <http://manybooks.net/titles/dunsany13821382113821-8.html>.

Hodgson, William Hope. *The House on the Borderland* (1908), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10002>.

MacDonald, George. *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/708>.

Sarban (John William Wall). *The Sound of his Horn* (1952), http://www.munseys.com/book/21900/Sound_of_His_Horn,_The.

SF Old and New:

Bates, Harry. "Farewell to the Master" (1940), http://manybooks.net/titles/batesharryother09farewell_to_the_master.html

Bloch, Robert. *This Crowded Earth* (1958), <http://manybooks.net/titles/blochr2577625776.html>

- Doctorow, Cory. *Little Brother* (2008),
http://manybooks.net/titles/doctorowother08Little_Brother.html
- Forster, EM. "The Machine Stops" (1909),
http://manybooks.net/titles/forstereother07machine_stops.html
- Lovecraft, H.P. "The Color Out of Space" (1927),
http://manybooks.net/titles/lovecrafthother10Color_out_of_space.html
- Norton, Andre. *Star Born* (1957),
http://manybooks.net/titles/nortonaother05star_born.html
- Stross, Charles. *Scratch Monkey* (1993),
http://manybooks.net/titles/strosscother08Scratch_Monkey.html

On Theatre:

- Irving, Henry. *The Drama* (1892), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13483>
- Terry, Ellen. *The Story of My Life* (1908),
<http://manybooks.net/titles/terrye1232612326-8.html>

American Novels:

- Cather, Willa. *O Pioneers!* (1913),
<http://manybooks.net/titles/catherwietext92opion13.html>,
- Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt* (1922), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1156>

Non-fiction on Slavery:

- Jacobs, Harriet Ann. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861),
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11030>
- Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (1901),
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2376>.

British Novels:

- Barrie, J.M. *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3490>.
- Corelli, Marie. *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895),
<http://archive.org/details/sorrowsofsatanor00coreuoft>.
- Hilton, James. *Goodbye, Mr Chips* (1934),
<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks05/0500111h.html>.
- Hilton, James. *Lost Horizon* (1933), <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks05/0500141h.html>.
- Jerome, Jerome K. *Three Men in a Boat* (1889),
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/308>.
- Lowndes, Marie Belloc. *The Lodger* (1913), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2014>
- Rohmer, Sax. *The Insidious Fu Manchu* (UK title *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1913)),
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/173>

WWI- British:

- Raymond, Ernest. *Tell England: A Study in a Generation* (1922),
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15033>.
- Ewart, Wilfrid. *The Way of Revelation* (1921),
http://www.archive.org/stream/wayofrevelationn00ewaruoft/wayofrevelationn00ewaruoft_djvu.txt

WWI – Other languages:

Latzko, Andreas. *Men in War* (1917). Trans unspecified, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/8440> (Hungarian writer, novel in German)

I assume everyone knows about Calibre, the programme to transform files to the format your e-book reader accepts, but just in case check: <http://calibre-ebook.com>

Happy New Year 2014!!! May you read and enjoy much Literature.

5-I-2014 THE SWEDISH FILM RATING AGAINST SEXISM (AND DISNEY'S FROZEN)

Time does fly... I first read about the new Swedish film rating system against sexism back in November, made a note to discuss it here but then other topics caught my attention. I don't understand Swedish and I'll have to rely, therefore, on English-language media for an explanation of how the rating system works. Have a look at, for instance, Charlotte Higgins' "No sexism please, we're Swedish – films classified by representation of women" published at *The Guardian* (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/06/sexism-swedish-cinemas-films-women>). Basically, the idea is that films get an A-rating if they pass the Bechdel test, which I described two posts ago when discussing *Pacific Rim*: an acceptably pro-feminist movie should: 1) have at least two women in it, 2) who talk to each other, 3) about something besides a man. As Higgins' panoramic article proves, the test is too crude, too blunt, and so is the rating – a more nuanced system is needed or, rather, a massive upheaval of the male-dominated media industry all over the world.

Higgins mentions in passing a piece of Swedish legislation on gender equality in the film industry. A note in English on the website of the Swedish Film Institute (<http://www.sfi.se/en-GB/Statistics/Gender-equality/>) informs that "The current National Film Agreement for 2013-2015 contains an equality directive which states that 'the funding shall be divided equally between women and men' in the key positions of director, screenwriter and producer in those projects which receive funding from the Swedish Film Institute." The statistics they offer are not, however, that encouraging. For the period 2000-2005, of all the feature-length films released in Sweden, only 17% had been directed by women; for 2006-2012, this was up to 18% but for 2012 alone the figure was just 7% (for women screenwriters, the corresponding figures are 25%, 28% and 19%). According to CIMA (Asociación de Mujeres Cineastas y de Medios Audiovisuales), the percentage of women directors in Spain is also 7% (just 10% membership of the Director's Guild of America, remember, corresponds to women).

Turn now for *Frozen*, the new Disney movie. *Frozen*, a free adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen," has been both defended and attacked on feminist grounds (Jennifer Lee, the screenwriter, maintains she has penned a feminist story). This controversy shows that not even we, feminists, agree on what films may offer positive role models for young girls in the 21st century. I guess *Frozen* has been

awarded an A rating by the Swedes as the movie is about two young women who have much to discuss which does not concern men and, so, passes the Bechdel test. My own personal position is that although *Frozen* encourages women to revise the notion of 'true love' beyond the usual heterosexual couple, to encompass love among women (sisters in this case), the message is still couched in the horrid idiolect of Disney's princess cult. I saw the film with my two little nieces and, frankly, I didn't see them look at each other lovingly when the film finished –I saw them mesmerised as usual by the stupid glamorisation of a pathetic fairy-tale lifestyle.

I totally disagree that princesses can be empowering figures and prefer as an alternative spunky Vanellope von Schweetz. When she wins the race at the end of Disney's own *Wreck-it Ralph* (2012) and finds herself hailed 'Princess' by her Sugar Rush subjects, she quickly sheds off her pink garb plus tiara and declares: "I'm thinking more along the lines of constitutional democracy. President Vanellope Von Schweetz! Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?" Of course it does. Women are much needed to radically change the face of politics, for our own empowerment and to challenge patriarchal power, including that wielded by women (Christine Lagarde runs the IFM, Angela Merkel the EU). As the Swedes assess the benefits of their new rating system, do consider who you want you daughter to grow up into. (I wonder what the current European royal princesses tell their daughters about their Disney's counterparts!!).

A last word: the Swedish rating system condemns wholesale all films that focus only on men. I do not agree that a film is sexist because it has no women in it –actually, the sexist films are usually those with just *one* woman in them. Paradoxically, films which deal exclusively with women are called 'feminist' whether they are so or not, whereas those with only men are beginning to be called 'sexist.' I agree that there is an acute imbalance in the representation of men and women on the screen but I don't want men to be forced to give up their own stories for the sake of a censoring feminism. I do want them, though, to make room for women in the media industry until we are 50%, for we are 50% (or slightly more) of the human species.

10-I-2014 PAYING TO QUOTE: OH, NO....

An ex-student who's now a good friend and a brilliant scholar tells me that he's about to publish a volume based on his PhD dissertation. So far, so good. What truly scares the bejeesus out of my scholarly self is what he explains next.

It seems that his publishing house (a mid-range academic one) warned him that he needed to clear all copyright permissions with the literary authors he quoted. Yes, you heard well. He did so and found that most of the authors to whom he had devoted his dissertation granted immediate permission to reproduce their words in the book. One at least, however, forwarded my friend a message from his publishers demanding a fee of 70 pounds (plus VAT) for a three-year licence –if I remember this correctly this was for just three quotations. If the fee was not paid in full, the publishers threatened, then

the quotations from their author's texts should be blocked out in black in my friend's book.

In a way this does not come as a surprise. Literary authors (or their agents and publishers) are finally beginning to realise that someone is making money out of studying their work. Surely, not we, academics, since I'm sure that only the likes of Harold Bloom must get royalties off their books (and possibly only for the edition of his famous Casebooks). I mean the academic publishing houses. The idea is quite simple to understand: if I write a brilliant novel and you write a brilliant dissertation about it, this is fine as long as you're not commercializing your research. When you publish a book, however, you and your publisher stand to gain something and, so, I also want my slice of the cake. Yes, it's called copyright.

If you do research on authors still living after 1943 you face, like my friend and myself, a very serious problem for, if authors wise up and we have to start coughing up money we don't have, research on contemporary culture may simply grind to a halt. If even academic authors start asking for licences to quote from their works (why pay, say, Martin Amis and not Terry Eagleton?) then we're done for. This is not only truly regrettable but a serious danger for the authors themselves who might think they don't need us, academics, anyway, without realising that we're their publishers for posterity.

So far we operate under a blanket unwritten licence which supposes that a) we quote within reasonable limits, b) we respect copyright, c) we don't benefit (much) from our scholarly work. The problem is that this is a very tricky, ambiguous situation. I did write some time ago about author China Mieville's proposal that the state should pay a salary to writers (of merit), a proposal that was howled down by British authors themselves as smacking of ugly Communism. Yet, we do use public money to pay Literature teachers on the grounds that we offer a public service. If you look at things from Mieville's point of view, we are indeed sponging on the poor authors. It's a scary thought, particularly as it has many unforeseen implications. If, say, a teach a seminar on, for example, Sarah Waters and I'm paid, is she entitled to part of my money? Or am I, on the contrary, a fabulously cheap way for her work to be publicised? (Authors: remember that each time we teach a book we sell many copies and you do get a share).

The key factor here, going back to my friend's book, is the middleman –the publishing house. We already have the tools to circulate research for free by using websites, university repositories and research portals like Academia.edu or Research Gate. However, the accreditation and assessment systems in many nations –and our own various fetishisms– insist that the only serious publication is via the academic publishing houses and journals. I'm fully aware that, logically, the best of these guarantee a high standard of quality that self-publication cannot guarantee right now. Yet, the way things are going it's already quite clear that, as it is happening in many other areas of knowledge, the era of publishing at cost zero in English Studies is coming to an end. Not only the authors but also academic publications (from journals

to monographs) will soon require payment, and without a powerful university backing you, my friend, this money will have to come out of your pocket.

How this will further the gap between rich and poor academics is easy to foresee. How to resist this trend seems hardly in our hands right now. Unless... (here insert your own solution).

12-I-2014 19/17: HOW MARKING EXAMS FEELS AND WHAT THEY SEEM TO INDICATE: THE DIVIDED CLASSROOM

I have mentioned exams now and then here but have not really got around writing specifically about them. After marking a batch of 63 during two very intense working days (that's 126 short essays on Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) this seems a good moment to consider them.

Once my niece, then aged 6, visited me at my university. She sat down on my office chair and I took the students' habitual place to role play with her: 'Professor,' I told her 'I'm here to review my exam.' And she, absolutely deadpan in her role as college teacher, asked me 'What's an exam?' Oh, my! Waves of nostalgia flooded me for that childhood time when I didn't know what an exam was, either as student or teacher. Since then I've taken many exams in my life (the most gruelling one for tenure) and have forced many students to take them. I have also learned in the meantime that exams were first introduced by the Chinese for the selection of their civil servants, hence my (avowedly xenophobic) impression that they constitute a form of Chinese torture. Both for students and teachers.

As you may guess, I don't particularly like exams. I feel even embarrassed to look at my students when I see them, as I did a few days ago, struggling for two hours to answer my questions in acute psychological discomfort. I am not convinced that exams relate to real life, which is, I know, quite obstinate of me, as I'm one of those civil servants for whom the Chinese invented them. So: why torture my students as I was tortured myself? Is it payback, the usual cruelty of the finally empowered against the disempowered? Well, no, since I have to mark the exams myself... Actually, I'm sorry to say, the main reason to maintain exams is that the classroom still provides a more controlled environment as regards plagiarism –although smartphones are fast putting an end even to that. There's also a generalised impression that people under pressure show their true colours, though it might well be that the only thing they prove is their capacity to withstand pressure.

All teachers hate marking exams, what with their messy handwritten presentation, often impossible to decipher, and the trite repetition of half-digested ideas (mostly our own). Sorry but this is how it is. I've tried all the possible strategies: rigorous alphabetical order and random order, 8-hour marathons and splitting marking along several days in equal batches, marking whole questions for all exams and marking complete individual exams, combining marking with other little tasks (which might

even include housework). No matter –it still hurts. I mean literally. What gives me the headaches are those sentences impossible to straighten out, particularly the ones carrying some meaning which the student has not managed to express well (or at all). Every teacher knows that exam language is contagious and you should never write academic work as you mark.

As usual, the most recent batch has only confirmed my impression of students based on how they do in class: participation, yes, but even their body language. I know that in other countries they mark exams anonymously precisely to free marking from prejudices originating in class interaction. I'm not sure about that. I'm open to surprises and would be very happy to see that I'm wrong about a particular student and that s/he is much more interested than his/her body language suggests in class. This seldom happens and most of the time these surprises involve students who are shy but, as I can see, paying attention (sitting up, listening, making notes). So, in a way, exams simply confirm what is easy to guess in class as regards students' interests and abilities. They are the proof that validates our teacher's intuition, no more.

Perhaps what has surprised me most this time is a peculiar symmetry: out of 63 students, 17 (26.9%) have scored more than 8 points, 19 less than 5 (30%). 27 (42.8%), of course, have marks between 5 and 8. I'm not sure what the almost exact equivalence between the number of outstanding and underperforming students means but it must mean something. As usual, I find myself perplexed that the same teaching on my side results in wildly different responses and I wonder what classes would be like with only the top or the bottom 30%. I'm sure that both must be frustrated: the top students because they could perform at a much higher level in a more advanced class, the bottom students because they find themselves at the end of the tether because of our demands.

The theory indicates that when you mix students with different capacities the top ones force the less capable ones to do better. My impression is that this is not true: the exams indicate an increasing polarization and a diminishing middle-ground, now below 50%. Food for thought.

16-I-2014 SALARIES ONCE MORE: THE ACUP REPORT

I have already written several entries about the matter of salaries. This one is prompted by a news item published in many media on 13th January regarding a seminar and a report by the ACUP (Associació Catalana d'Universitats Públiques). Their web (www.acup.cat) has detailed information about the seminar, including an interesting document which compares university teachers' salaries in a few countries of the world (<http://www.acup.cat/sites/default/files/ivanpacheco.pdf>).

Since this excludes Spain, however, I'm not very sure where the newspapers got the figures they relay. What I heard on TV is that full professors and tenured lecturers (like me) are not doing that badly in comparison to their European colleagues –but that,

most importantly, more than 50% of the current teaching staff hold temporary jobs paid between 300 and 1,200 a month (these are post-docs with a research fellowship).

I borrow from *El Periódico* figures I don't quite understand, as they refer to the Catalan systems (based on contracts) and not the Spanish civil service. A full professor makes, according to this, 6.559 euros a month (before taxes), a teacher with a permanent contract, or 'agregat', makes 4.615 euros a month, and a teacher with a four-year contract or 'lector' 3.350 euros. That was back in 2008, when salaries were frozen and without considering the taxes, which in my own case amount to 32% (last time I checked, plus discounts from Generalitat). 4.615, which is more than I make, minus 30%, equals 3.225 euros. This puzzles me, as I have never earned that much money and I've been tenured for 11 years (with all possible complements, etc.). Anyway, the whole point is that while in the upper range, Catalan salaries are similar to those in Europe in the mid range they're not capable of attracting foreign talent, which the Generalitat is very fond of.

Let me talk about the low-range salaries. Again. The third time around, I think.

Students have no idea that more than 50% of the staff teaching them are associates. An associate is supposed to be a professional who devotes a few teaching hours to the university, which is why s/he draws a very modest salary as it is supposed to complement his/her main salary. I think we have two that correspond exactly to that profile.

Things get very complicated, however, when these associates happen to be ambitious about their research –which, anyway, an associate is not expected to carry out at all. Or, if you want to put it the other way round, the university uses shamelessly the figure of the associate to obtain cheap teaching and cheap research from individuals willing to risk it all for their 'careers,' in inverted commas because no matter how real these careers are for the people involved, they do not exist for the university. (I am not giving 'university' a nationality because a friend just told me of a very similar situation in Britain).

Legally, universities cannot have so many associates. The section I belong to in my Department (Literature and Culture) has currently 11 teachers: 1 full professor, 4 tenured lecturers, 6 associates. The last one to be hired is replacing at 700 euros a month a retired full professor who made (my guess), 4500 net euros a month. I have already explained here that this associate teaches as many hours as the professor used to teach (and that being part time, associates cannot help with admin tasks, a rule we're about to break). As you can see, the balance is tipped the wrong way already, with a 5/6 ratio, which should ideally be 8/3. All full time, for the only real Literature associate should be a writer teaching creative writing.

The most sinister part of all this is how the system abuses the good will of the grossly underpaid associates. When a university hires you, as I remember very well, you feel flattered: oh, my, I must be good!! This apparent flattery leads, however, to no moral compromise: associates can be dismissed at will and are not offered any tenure tracks.

If they stay on, the system implies, this is their free choice. They are, as Dickens would put it, people of 'great expectations' entangled in cases as hopeless as those of the Chancery Court in *Bleak House*. I understand their determination to carry on, because I shared it myself (though with a full time contract) but, surely, there must be a limit and a time to say 'enough is enough.'

So: how can we, privileged seniors, help?

20-I-2014 MICROPLAGIARISM AND SUBCONSCIOUS PLAGIARISM: THE NEW PLAGUES

Yesterday I spent a complicated morning dealing with students whose papers presented evidence or suspicion of plagiarism. It used to be the case that students plagiarised from solid academic sources in full knowledge of what they did. The explanation that our very surprised students are now offering is that they have no idea how a sentence evidently copied from elsewhere has slipped into their papers without their noticing it. They also complain that it's unfair for them to fail a subject just because of a few borrowed lines.

Let me explain a few cases.

Students A and B failed the exam but managed to produce an acceptable paper. The problem with their papers is that they seemed clearly full of what I'll call 'microplagiarisms', that is to say, unacknowledged borrowings of just a few words, two or three. How do I know? Because the register that students use is logically quite even and coherent –that is to say, a student does not write a very poor sentence followed by a very good sentence, rollercoaster style, unless the better sentences are not theirs. There's a natural cohesion in the style we produce, it's poor, average, good or outstanding according to our linguistic skills; nobody can mix poor and outstanding linguistic performances in the same paragraph without attracting attention to themselves.

In both cases, the average mark meant the student in question did get a pass. Just look at their reactions: student A didn't even bother to answer my email message accusing him/her of plagiarising. Student B answered at once and came to my office to offer an explanation: s/he had not really revised for the exam but had made an effort with the paper. Now, if the effort includes searching Google for more advanced vocabulary, this is fine as long as the advance vocabulary is common usage –and not someone else's original invention. That would be (micro)plagiarism.

Students C and D had copied between one and three lines of texts we could easily identify: Wikipedia, even the handbook. The lines copied were not very important for their paper, in that they just contributed general background information and not argumentation. We reminded them that the Department's policy is very serious about plagiarism, and that no matter how small the plagiarism this results automatically in a

0 for the exercise, if not for the whole subject (in the fourth year). Were they aware of this? Yes, they said. Unfortunately, they added no apology and even insisted that it was just a matter of a few lines. This is like telling the police that you have just killed someone a little. Either you have or you haven't (and no, I'm not saying that plagiarising is as serious as killing).

Curiously enough, student C claimed s/he could not recall having inserted the copied line on purpose in the paper –this is something I've heard too often: students make notes without keeping references as to where they borrow material from and then, they claim, are confused about what is theirs and what is someone else's. If this is the case, I'm mystified, for I cannot explain how someone can identify as theirs borrowed text. I'm also worried because a basic point in academic methodology is that one must keep track always of all the text copied from other sources.

Case three: student E. S/he was so worried that s/he would never pass the subject that s/he asked other persons (unidentified, possibly an English language teacher) to correct the paper. This is wrong to begin with, as we need to assess your individual performance. If the review results in minor corrections of typos and very basic mistakes, it may be acceptable, with many, many doubts. However, when the review results in a rewriting so thorough that the student's style appears to be completely different from that of the exam written in the classroom, we have a serious problem. Passing as your own production something which someone else has substantially modified is, well, cheating.

Several German ministers have lost their positions because it was proven that they had plagiarised their MA and PhD dissertations. The Germans take this so seriously because they correctly understand plagiarism as a blatant form of dishonesty. Here, in true Spanish fashion, we downplay it as a minor the fault. The students who told me that it was very unfair for them to fail a whole subject just because of a few copied lines should understand that the point is not how many lines are copied, but the intention to deceive.

The words 'I'm very sorry, I've made a mistake, it won't happen again' are almost a joke now in Spain in view of King Juan Carlos' hollow apology but they do sound much better than 'I'm not aware that there's plagiarised text in my paper' or 'But it's just one line', or 'The language may not be mine, but the ideas are.'

Students: just consider how much trouble a pair of quotation marks and a reference can save you.

24-I-2014 UNDERPAID AND OVERRATED AUTHORS: HIERARCHICAL READING IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

Two pieces published within days by Alison Flood in the Books section of *The Guardian* catch my attention. I'm wondering here how they connect –I think they do. The first

one announces that “Most writers earn less than £600 a year, survey reveals” (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/17/writers-earn-less-than-600-a-year>); the second reports that “Writers attack ‘overrated’ Anglo-American literature at Jaipur festival” (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/20/writers-attack-overrated-american-literature-jaipur-festival>). Not much to connect them at first sight, you might think. They are, though, twin aspects of the same issue: how to make your literary voice heard in a seemingly open but actually hierarchical global market.

The article on the poverty-stricken writers, refers to both “traditionally and self-published” authors: 54% of the former and almost 80% of the latter earn less than \$1,000 (£600) a year. I’m confused about how print and online publishing overlap with these categories. The grandly called ‘Digital Book World and Writer’s Digest Author Survey’, covered 9,000 writers (possibly all in English) –more than 65% calling themselves “aspiring authors”. The survey authors clarify that only the top 2% authors can be safely called professional. These include the tiny, tiny percentage making a fortune based on global sales... and luring all the others. The overnight success of a handful of self-publishing luminaries is also pulling ever more writers into the market. The survey authors believe we should celebrate that today “five to 10 times as many people are paying bills with their craft today as there was just a few years ago.” Taking as a reference the 9,000, today only 180 of them are full-time professionals in comparison to between 36 and 18 a few years ago. Suppose this refers to the UK, with 63 million people, or even only to Ireland, with 6 million. I don’t quite see much to celebrate...

The other article reports Xiaolu Guo’s harsh critique of how English-language “mainstream” spoils reading tastes. Guo is Chinese/British, and “one of Granta’s best of young British novelists.” She dislikes in particular US Literature, which she called “massively overrated” to the face of US top novelist Jonathan Franzen. This was within a session on ‘the global novel’, whatever that might be. Gao complains against the reign of plot-driven narrative, and how this tends to flatten all stories into quite similar novels, leaving no room for lyricism and “all the alternative things.” For Indian/American Jhumpa Lahiri the problem with American Literature is that it lacks the healthy infusion of other literatures through translation. Guo agrees. Franzen shows a polite concern with the “homogenisation of global culture” (meaning US-dominated corporate publishing business).

His other remark links the two articles. Even supposing everything could be translated automatically, no reader would be able to cope with the flood. “In a funny way,” he says “you’d think there’d be greater diversity in what is read, but I worry that the trend in a more global literary marketplace is even more towards a kind of star system and a vast sea of people who can’t find an audience.” We come thus full circle – the tiny group of millionaire writers at the top of the survey are, I’m sure, producers of English-language mainstream novels. Most readers, unable to find what they might enjoy in a sea of 9,000 writers, chose the top 180 or, more likely, the top 18. Possibly not even the top 18 writers, but the top 18 mainstream novels of the season. If they’re American 17 will be American, if they’re European, 8 will be American,

I know the argument is a bit fuzzy but now that the internet has created a truly global foundation for the liberation of Literature from publishing restrictions, we still have to cope with two serious problems: language barriers (which favour English), and the readers' tendency to choose for safety (which favours the mainstream). The bigger the market, the smaller the chances to become a professional writer... for more than two novels. For readers, the tragedy is that possibly most of the books that we'd love to discover bypass us, either because they're in a language we cannot access or because we never even learn they exist.

Gao, of course, ironically represents those who cannot understand that the ideal market for literary innovation is a market as tiny as possible for a select group of readers, whether they read poetical literary novels or hard SF. Globalization means they needn't be in the same place, and might be a relatively much bigger group than if they were in just one nation. But her implicit dream that if you suppressed mainstream US literature, the world would be a wonderful intercultural forum, a truly democratic global world, is simply not realistic. She herself, by the way, writes in English. Her other language is Chinese. Not exactly the best possible position to understand how it feels to be really marginal in our global world.

30-I-2014 MADNESS IN THE METHOD, METHOD IN THE MADNESS: PREPARING A VERY LONG TEXT FOR CLASS (YES, HARRY POTTER)

As we all know, the problem of how much reading a student is willing to do for a subject complicates enormously our task. A few weeks ago, one of our Erasmus students abroad explained that a typical Literature course in the university she's visiting, Edinburgh, might have up to 10 books –basically one per week. Often, she explained, this leads to very superficial analysis with hardly any close reading (that was her experience, I don't know how common that is).

Last year I did include 10 books in a course, but they were 10 plays, amounting to about 1,100 pages in total. This is more or less the same amount for Victorian Literature, divided into two long novels about 450 pages long and two novellas, 100 pages each. Now, the Edinburgh course runs to about 3,500/4,500 pages, a real mountain for second language students. Hopefully, not mine for the second semester, as in the elective 'Cultural Studies: The *Harry Potter* Case' we'll be dealing with a text which is 3,500 pages long (the Bloomsbury edition I use).

Popular culture abounds in very long print and filmed series and this is quite an obstacle for an understanding of how it works. Sagas like Rowling's are hardly ever found in creative literature (think how exceptional Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is) but they're quite common particularly in SF and fantasy. I wish all my luck to the brave (or foolish!) lecturer who decides to teach Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* –that, I assure you, won't be me... The problem of how to handle a very long text is also extensive, of course, to TV series, as I know very well having written a book on one of

the longest, *The X-Files* (1993-2001, 200 episodes, 150 hours). Fancy teaching a subject about that... or writing a PhD dissertation about *The Simpsons*.

I don't think I'll ever programme again a course with such a huge amount of reading. I'm making an exception here because students are supposed to have read the text already, and because I'll teach the saga as a single work and not as a collection of seven novels.

Today, finally, I have finished preparing the basic materials I need to teach *Harry Potter*. A few things I knew from the start: a) teaching the series novel by novel makes no sense, b) I cannot bring all the books to class nor can students, c) the text must be approached from an issue-based perspective. The first thing I did, then, as I explained here back on 25-V-2013 was to select the main intradiagetic issues, combining them with extradiagetic ones such as the students' experience as readers (to be dealt with in oral presentations). Next, I chose (as I explained on 29-V-2013) the background reading materials, a quite useful Casebook at an accessible price. What I have done, for I see no other way to do it, is prepare the whole text in advance to simplify my weekly and daily tasks.

Last autumn I read the seven novels again, pencil in hand and with the topics list in view. I marked key passages with the number(s) corresponding to each topic, and have made notes to summarise the plot by chapter. This third reading of the whole saga took me two months between October and November (obviously I mean apart from my working hours). Next, I have reduced the 3,500 pages to a 200 page digest, which includes a chapter-by-chapter summary (mine for the first three books; borrowed from acknowledged sources for the four last, which are much denser) and the selection of quotations I need to use in class, identified by each issue's number. Not that different from preparing any other book –the difference is that instead of carrying to my classroom seven huge volumes with little papers sticking out all over, I'll carry just the 200-page booklet. The idea is that before each session I'll just have to select the quotations I need from this and the Casebook and then prepare an outline. Producing the booklet has taken me five full working days.

Have I typed 200 pages of quotations? No, of course not. I'll leave it to the readers' imagination and perspicacity to guess the (mad) method used, which is the only possible one unless you have a teaching assistant or infinite time. It can be done with photocopies but that's not the method I've used. The booklet is for my personal use.

I hope this helps if you are one of those brave or foolish teachers thinking of enjoying very, very long texts in class with your students. Or a student thinking of writing a dissertation (BA, MA, PhD) about a very long text, whether this is print or filmed (the key for filmed text are, of course, the scripts).

One thing I can say is that no matter how many shortcuts you take, the text has to be read, the passages selected and the notes made. The longer the text, the longer the process. What frustrates me is how much I have already forgotten as with such a long,

long text details soon evaporate from our limited brains. It took the author 5 years to organise the plot and possibly not even she can has total recall of each detail.

There are days I long for one of those neural implants so common in today's SF...

3-II-2014 MY GOOGLE SCHOLAR'S PROFILE: SOBERING UP (BUT WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?)

I recently came across some online form asking for my h-index. The same site explained about the need to open a Google Scholars account, so I opened one and found that my h-index was 0. I'm so stupid I didn't realise I should have to enter my publications manually one by one for Google to calculate my actual h-index. I have done so this morning (pre-storm... the second semester begins next week), so now I know that after 89 publications (books, chapters in books, articles in journals) and 19 years my h-index is 5 (4 since 2009), and that two of my publications are i10-index (meaning they have been cited more than 10 times). I have been cited a grand total of 45 times (24 since 2009).

Jorge E. Hirsch, a physicist, came up in 2005 with the (insert adjective here...) formula to calculate the now ubiquitous h-index: "A scientist has index h if h of his/her N_p papers have at least h citations each, and the other ($N_p - h$) papers have no more than h citations each." In other words: the scientist with the highest h-index (1983-2002), Solomon H. Snyder, had 191 papers cited at least 191 times each, ranking h-191. My 5, as you can see, is modest to the point of embarrassment. I have decided, nonetheless, to go ahead and make my profile public. My rationale is that I have nothing to hide and if my career is mediocrity itself, then this is it. I'm so happy not to be an h-0 scholar than the rest doesn't matter. And I read that Einstein's career would have only amounted to an h-4...

I agree with critics of the h-index that a) it's too closely related to the scholar's age (the older you are, the higher it can/should be); b) it works poorly for the Humanities; c) it's been given undue importance. I'll take it, then, with a pinch of salt. I recommend you, in any case, to open a Google Scholars account, check on your h-index, keep a stiff upper lip and move on. I'm going to do that. Deep sigh...

Something that has made me very happy is that my two books, *Monstruos al Final del Milenio* (2002) and *Expediente X: En Honor a la Verdad* (2006) are among my most cited works (the former is one of my two i10-index). Happy indeed because when I decided to publish them with a non-academic press I made a complicated decision, based on the idea that I wanted to bridge the gap between academic and non-academic audiences. It seems I did so more or less well, so task accomplished!! What I never expected is that my other i10-index is "Gothic Scholars don't Wear Black: Gothic Studies and Gothic Subcultures", an article I published in *Gothic Studies* (2002) in which I considered the problematic fit between these two Gothic-related fields. This is quite a surprise, particularly as I considered it quite an eccentric piece.

The rest tells me that whoever has quoted me, has paid more attention to the international publications, whether online or not. If I go by my h-index, publishing in Spanish collective books is no use at all for the dissemination of your work, something that I'm trying to correct in my personal case by using my website and my university's repository to upload all I am allowed to upload. Logically, this means that a great deal of what I regard as my best productions are buried in books and journals nobody will ever read (this includes international journals, too).

I'm turning next to Academia.edu, as one of my younger colleagues has convinced me that this is the way to go. I feel increasingly that I should hire a personal community manager... Just think about this, next time I publish something I'll have to index that item in: my personal CV, the UAB's CV application (Ein@), my web, Google Scholar, Academia.edu and whatever else I do next (I've just been told about Research Gate). No, I don't have a Twitter account yet. No, I'm not on Facebook, nor LinkedIn.

We are producing a strange academic culture which combines a very narcissistic approach (what I do matters!!!) with a harsh bibliometric approach which seems designed to demoralise even very senior scholars. An approach, that, besides, does not take into account the actual conditions of humanistic production (I'm NOT a scientist!!!), and the particular geographical areas where this is produced. Reputation used to be measured exactly by that, by reputation. Those days are gone and I wonder what else will be introduced next in this huxleyan academic world of ours, increasingly divided into alphas, betas... and, us, deltas.

Some soma, please...

9-II-2014 THE GENTLEMAN PLANTER, AN OXIMORON: FANNY KEMBLE'S JOURNAL OF A RESIDENCE ON A GEORGIAN PLANTATION 1838-39

Following the thread started by my reading Solomon Northup's memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), prompted by Steve McQueen's film adaptation, I came across a list of films about slavery. This included *Enslavement: The True Story of Fanny Kemble* (2000), an apparently mediocre TV movie. I knew about Kemble as a famous Victorian English actress but had no idea she was also the author of a key text in the history of slavery in America, on which this film is based: *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation 1838-9*.

Kemble (1809-93) married one of the richest American bachelors, Pierce Butler, who retired her from the stage. She probably knew about the origins of Butler's immense fortune. Yet, whether this was the case or not, Kemble was certainly appalled by the slaves' situation in her husband's rice and cotton plantations in the Sea Islands of Georgia. As anyone interested in the history of slavery knows (but I did not), Fanny's diary is quite unusual: it offers a unique testimony by a white mistress of the black slaves' misery –a foreign, reluctant mistress who maintains throughout an adamant

abolitionist stance, confirmed by her brief but intense experience of (moderately) sordid slave life.

For me, the most interesting aspect of the journal is Kemble's sympathy for the enslaved women, in particular the mothers. She is specifically concerned that the regime of ruthless human exploitation by which her husband's plantation was run required mothers to return to the fields only three weeks after giving birth. Fanny is appalled by how the care of the newborn babies was left in the inappropriate hands of barely older siblings, and, above all, by the harm done to the women's bodies with this ill-treatment. For which none other than her husband was responsible.

There's a particularly poignant passage in which "a gang of pregnant women" petition Butler for an extra week of rest. Kemble finds herself unable "to listen to the details (...) for I am unable to command myself on such occasions, and Mr.—— seemed positively degraded in my eyes, as he stood enforcing upon these women the necessity of their fulfilling their appointed tasks." She claims that he'd be more "honourable" if covered in the dirt of the "the coarsest manual labour" than he is in his disgusting role as master. She expresses the "hope" that her stay among his slaves "may not lessen my respect for him, but I fear it; for the details of slave holding are so unmanly, letting alone every other consideration, that I know not how anyone, with the spirit of a man, can condescend to them."

Fanny eventually lost her love and respect for Pierce, and they separated in 1845. She went back to the stage and the couple faced a very scandalous divorce process in 1849. By the time Fanny published her diary in 1863 –to aid the cause for emancipation, in the middle of the American Civil War– Butler, an extravagant spendthrift, was already a ruined man. The sale in 1859 of his 436 slaves made it to the books of American history as the largest sale of human beings in the United States.

I'm highlighting this passage out of all the striking passages in Kemble's memoir because she expresses here a shocking truth about the American gentleman planter that, although widely known, is hard to read straight from his wife's pen: that he was no gentleman but, like all slave holders, "unmanly." Apparently, Butler did not rape his female slaves but Kemble is, nonetheless, horrified that the same (gentle)man who treats with respect white ladies in society has no qualms to mistreat black women so appallingly. That white ladies were, nonetheless, by no means free citizens is proven by how Butler deprived Fanny of the custody of their two daughters when they divorced.

Perhaps the only way I can express my renewed shock at the obvious duplicity of American gentlemanliness is by asking my reader to take Austen's Darcy and imagine him a slaveholder –as many men of his class were indeed in his day. The Brontës, a few years younger than Kemble, were, of course, closer to this unappealing reality, as we can see by Rochester's behaviour towards his wife Bertha and the suspicion that Heathcliff has, ironically, become a gentleman by employing himself in the Liverpool slave trade.

The difference between Fanny Kemble and the southern ladies –whose slave-inspired “inelegant pronunciation” and class-bound “extremely sickly” appearance she criticises– is that Kemble chose to end her complicity with the un(gentle)manly men running the plantation system at a high personal cost. The southern ladies, in contrast, were fully (or mostly) complicit. Fanny is dismayed by hearing the languid ladies describe their men as, in her words, “idle, arrogant, ignorant, dissolute, and ferocious as that mediaeval chivalry to which they are fond of comparing themselves.” A chivalry which was taken as a very shaky foundation for the basis of gentlemanliness on both sides of the Atlantic but that, seeing what happened in the American south, hardly masked the monstrous patriarch beneath.

How terrifying... still today.

16-II-2014 A DOCTORAL STUDENT ABANDONS: AT A LOSS ABOUT WHAT TO ADVISE...

A doctoral student who was supposed to defend (as we say) his PhD dissertation next September suddenly tells me he’s giving up –in his fifth year. I’m writing this aware that he might read it and after emailing him advice about what he needs to consider before quitting for good (if at all). With many doubts on my side about my training (or lack thereof) to give the best possible guidance at this point.

The colleagues to whom I have explained the situation have worried mainly about the hours I’ve already spent supervising that dissertation. This is not a main concern for me. Even if I get the 75 hours which a PhD dissertation successfully submitted would add to my personal teaching account, they make little difference. Nor am I concerned about my own CV: I have already supervised three dissertations and another student is more than certain to finish her dissertation this year. My main worry is that I’m quite at a loss about what to tell this student in this crisis. I worry about making a serious mistake.

The student in question is a very capable man. When I agreed to supervise his work, he was supposed to move to Barcelona (from Italy, where he lives) in just a few months. His plans, however, changed and eventually it became clear he was to remain in Italy. We have met no more than twice a year and, obviously email is no replacement for that; as for Skype, I simply don’t use it. First two hard lessons learned: a) circumstances may change radically in the life of doctoral students; b) avoid supervision at a distance if possible. Ironically, I’m supervising two more supervisions by students who don’t live in Barcelona –one has migrated to Finland in search of work, the other lives elsewhere in Spain and simply cannot move to Barcelona to work with me. I’m not too happy, but, then, even seeing regularly PhD students who live close by is complicated. Mainly for them, as they work. Full time...

The assumption is that doctoral supervisors know what they’re doing, having been themselves doctoral students. Yes and no. I believe that I’m giving my students better

practical advice than I was given about length and structure of the dissertation, where to start publishing, which conferences to attend, how to network. However, my own assumption is that doctoral students know what they're doing and my task is simply to help them to achieve their own goals. I contribute 20% at the most, 10% ideally, hopefully just 5%. This doesn't mean I'm not committed –it means that a PhD dissertation needs, above all, full autonomy from the student as a researcher. If you don't have it, this may be a problem. It's your thesis, not mine.

I find, of course, that this much needed commitment is harder to maintain when the student is writing a PhD dissertation for reasons of personal fulfilment rather than as part of a budding academic career. I was myself already employed as a junior teacher as I took my doctoral courses and wrote my dissertation. I would have written a dissertation even if employed elsewhere but I understand that outside the university walls the need to invest so much energy in such a peculiar personal project may seem odd –if not downright absurd. Partners, family and friends may sense this and become stern spirit dampeners. A doctoral degree, after all, is worth next to nothing, particularly in the Humanities. Some paradox in a world in which nobody can have serious professional aspirations without a BA or an MA.

So, as I have written to my student, I'll be very happy if he finishes his dissertation but never at a high personal cost to him: writing a thesis has to make the prospective doctor happy and satisfied, otherwise there's no point. The road may be hard and paved with many potholes but if suddenly you start seeing no road and, what is worse, no destination, then stop. The problem is that, to be honest, I don't know whether my student is facing the final crisis before the 350 blank pages he needs to fill in, or coming to the end of his road.

A few days ago a lovely, brilliant undergrad girl student visited me to tell me about her plans to get a doctoral degree. When I asked her what for she replied "to reach the highest possible level in my education." I told her that this is not what a PhD dissertation does and tried to explain that writing one is a very lonely process in which you need to be ready to face your own limits, and in which you no longer have teachers as you're actually training to leave them behind. You just have a guide, him or herself lacking the training required to deal with your doubts. This was before the situation I have described here came about.

So, please, any future doctoral student out there: your thesis is your project, we just set up the signs to keep you safely on the road. None better than yourself to assess whether the road is worth travelling, whether you're fully equipped to do so, whether you have a supporting team of family and friends.

And I hope, Dave, you make the right decision. I'll support you in it no matter what you choose. It's always been a pleasure.

16-II-2014 FIRST WEEK WITH HARRY: GLEE (AND WANDS)

I have started teaching my elective subject 'Cultural Studies in English: The *Harry Potter Series*' this week... and it's been a very good beginning. I have around 50 students, of which 8 (I think) are auditors (non-registered students who get no credits); they come from BA degrees such as Translation or Anthropology and three are my own MA students. The Erasmus and exchange students have started arriving on the second day and all in all, this looks very good so far.

I've also added a new guest to my list of three so far: 1) a doctoral student of mine, Auba Llompart, writing her dissertation on childhood in gothic fiction for young readers; 2) a learned (Goth) colleague, Bela Clúa, who gave me the motivation I lacked to read Rowling; 3) Kika Pol, an MA student writing under my supervision her dissertation on the construction of secondary characters with a focus on Snape and, finally, 4) Jaime Oliveros, an MA student working on curses and hexes in Shakespeare – who has turned out to be a Potterhead!!

Here are a few funny moments. It felt very, very odd to announce that I'd devote a lecture to discussing house elves, with an emphasis of course on Dobby and Kreacher. I don't know why but it's the first time I've thought 'my, this is weird' –I need to think further about this. Just consider that I have already declared in public my infatuation with Sirius Black, as understanding it is a major motivation for me to teach the subject.

Then, trying to teach my students how to control their fan passion for the saga, I asked them to which of the four houses they belonged: Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. The idea was to teach them that a critical reader would question the very presence of the houses in the text, their imbalanced presentation, how Rowling encourages absurd rivalries, etc. To my surprise, they all knew which house they 'belong' to (yes, some Slytherins included). I, the supposed guiding critical reader, ended up taking not one but four online tests to confirm what I knew intuitively: I'm Ravenclaw (like Luna Lovegood). No surprises there, as I have Mulder's 'I want to believe' poster in my office, Quibbler-style, and I'm known for studying hard...

Next came the wands... I had already checked where you can buy and how much they are with a view of getting myself one as a memento of the course (Luna's, I think), but was put off in the end by the 35 euros they cost (I mean the copies of the wands in the films). I asked my students whether they owned a wand and I think 85 to 90% said yes... of course. I need to think on which day they can bring them... I told a colleague who's not at all into Harry Potter or popular fiction about this and she was quite unsympathetic about students spending that much money on the silly wands and not on books. I realised it would be simply impossible to explain to her the attraction of owning a wand or, for that matter, a lightsaber (or my little Pikachu!).

I'm giving the students a two-week preliminary introduction to Cultural Studies before we plunge into the text. I can already see, however, what the main challenge is going to be: understanding the sheer glee which any comment on the series brings on. We had a moment of pure enjoyment when they named their houses, a moment that I've

never enjoyed in connection with any of the literary texts I've taught. Uninformed onlookers might have mistaken that for childishness but, then, we're all past childhood, I more than anyone else. It's something else.

This glee does not incapacitate anyone to produce good critical work, as I know first hand but has to be repressed, so I need to walk a fine line between giving students the necessary academic training and giving them room to enjoy themselves. And I'm highlighting this because I thought that my main challenge would be dealing with the sentimental attachment to the text (which I do share).

Last year in my English Theatre class there were many intense moments and a certain ongoing impression that we were doing something transgressive, and fun, instead of boring ourselves silly with lectures. This year, and this is just the first week, I get a clear impression that, finally, students are dealing with a text that matters to them as part of their own private reading experience (the 'finally' is more theirs than mine). The *Harry Potter* series is, evidently, a text they do want to learn more about and I can see they trust me as a guide. This is thrilling, very, very exciting.

I will ask them towards the end whether other texts would have the same effect, for future subjects (*Star Wars* has been mentioned). Perhaps I'm the luckiest teacher in my university and, for once in my career, students agree 100% with my choices. I'm well aware, though, that it may never happen again.

22-II-2014 COFFEE WITH STUDENTS: THE IDEA OF MENTORSHIP

I was having coffee with an American visiting scholar and a local colleague from UB, and, I'm not sure in what exact moment of the conversation, he asked whether we had the habit of taking coffee with students, meaning the teachers in each Department. My colleague quickly replied "no, we don't" and I answered almost on top of her words, "yes, I do." I didn't get a chance to ask the visitor why he'd asked, but I assume he wanted to be given the 'rules'. 'Rules' we don't have, which is why the whole process is complicated.

I believe that there is room for friendship between teachers and students, and this often starts with a coffee. My own experience is that this first coffee can lead to personal, long-lasting friendship although there is always a little bit of mentorship in it. If only because of the obvious age difference and life experience.

This means that the teacher must always keep a little distance and, this is very important, never appear to 'need' the friendship with the student –this even sounds scary to me. We, however, are also human beings and, well, we do have emotional needs which may not always be under control. Let me clarify for the dirty-minded that I absolutely abhor the idea of sex between teachers and students as it involves too many power issues. If the attraction is there, and it is genuine, then it'll have to wait

until the pair in question no longer share a classroom. There, I've said it. Now, let the gossip flow...

My Department takes office hours very seriously and we're always available for students. Mostly they come because they have a problem but I simply love it when the resolution of the problem ends in friendly conversation and, indeed, when they simply drop in for a chat. I like very much talking with my students and I must also say that I *have* to talk to them, because without a minimum communication with them the intergenerational connection would be lost. I really hate it when I have to rush or finish a good conversation because I have other things to do, usually far more boring.

The next step is obvious: whether a student is in my class or not, if there's a chance of a more relaxed conversation over coffee I take it. At the university cafeteria for, as a rule, coffee elsewhere is best once the teacher is no longer assessing the student –in individual cases, I mean. I see no problem in meeting groups of students for socialising outside the university, though I realise that coffee or, even better, dinner with a whole MA class is much easier and comfortable than organising something with a handful of under-grads. Likewise, coffee outside the university with a doctoral student is a common matter, whereas meeting an undergrad needs, somehow, justification.

Here's the tricky matter: who takes the first step. I think it should be the teacher. If a student in my class asks me to meet for coffee, this might be misconstrued as a form of undue flattery (or, em, sucking up to the teacher). This is also why I tend to ask individual students once I'm no longer their teacher. It's not easy. Or I should say it's particularly difficult with heterosexual boys –let me be honest. Girls and male gay students usually accept coffee with no second thoughts (sorry, I don't know about lesbian girl students as I don't know who they might be...). Boys, even when they positively know that the teacher, that old thing, cannot, surely, be after them, always hesitate a little bit... Unless they are post-grads with a good grasp of how mentorship works and quickly see the purely friendly reasons for the invitation.

You may believe me or not, but my habit is to invite to my office or to coffee students for whom I think I can do something positive. This is what mentorship is about. This is not about picking up the cleverest ones but those with whom good personal rapport may lead to enjoyable conversation and whatever I can do for them. I'm happy to receive in exchange a little room for communication, as the simple truth is that with my colleagues most talk is about bureaucratic matters –hardly at all books, films or things that matter outside the university. And, yes, in the end it's for the student's benefit as we teachers are very often asked to provide references for other universities, jobs, etc. Also part of mentorship.

I have no idea why the university is often so uptight and has so little room for socialising among teachers and students. Whenever I have seen the chance, I have asked my students to celebrate all together the end of the semester. We don't have a place for that in my school and I use the classroom for partying, for which I'm frowned upon by the caretakers. So sorry... (not really!)

I'm SO looking forward to the final party in June with my Potterheads!! And, yes, also to the many coffees I intend to share along the semester...

26-II-2014 JO ROWLING: SOMETHING'S MISSING... (CALL IT THE BUBBLE EFFECT)

I'm preparing my lecture/seminar on J.K. Rowling, the author, for tomorrow and I have finally decided to turn to my blog, see if writing a post clarifies my confused thoughts.

The idea is to discuss with my students what kind of writer Rowling is from a Cultural Studies point of view, taking into account her personal identity, the material conditions of production of the *Harry Potter* series, the issues highlighted in her public presentation (website, Wikipedia entry), the rags-to-riches legend accompanying her fantastic success, the awards she's collected... I have done this for many other writers but in her case something seems to be missing and I find myself in doubt as to what exactly.

I'm going to call this for the time being 'the bubble effect'. See if I can explain myself.

To begin with, the comments by Rowling's teachers I've come across portray her as rather average. She was rejected by Oxford University, which in itself might mean nothing but is beginning to make me see why she made Harry also an indifferent student. Also why, despite Rowling's claims that Hermione is like her own girly self, you can see in the series how hard study is patronised and even despised.

Next, although Rowling claims she first wrote a story by the age of 6, the inspiration for Harry materialised in that famous train ride to Manchester when she was already 25, having tried to publish nothing in the meantime. The first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* came out in 1997, when Jo was 32 already. She names among the writers that inspired her Jane Austen but nobody in the canon of children's literature, which is the genre she chose to practice first. Odd, very odd.

With this I'm getting closer to what nags me: her lack of commitment to a genre. After *Harry Potter*, remember, she's published only books for adults: a tragicomedy (her definition) and detective fiction (as Robert Galbraith). Writers do mix genres but usually with a greater commitment: my adored Iain M. Banks used to produce creative literary fiction and science fiction in turns; others produce parallel outputs in fantasy and the historical novel, or science fiction and fantasy, etc.

What I find odd is Rowling's production of children's fiction, then tragicomedy (?), now detective fiction... On the positive side, she appears to be a writer open to experimenting with different popular or middlebrow genres; on the negative side, she seems to be in serious trouble to find her real territory. I just find it very strange that after *Harry Potter* she has no more stories to tell children, except those derived from the series itself. Of course, the future will tell... I also find it very odd that after

cultivating an intense relationship with a readership that, essentially, grew up with Harry she decided next to abandon them for the sort of adult that might enjoy her novel *The Casual Vacancy*. I myself haven't read it, have no interest at all in reading it and would never in my life consider teaching it.

That's what I mean by the 'bubble effect' precisely: *Harry Potter* seems isolated in the author's career and in the reader's experience. And this is hard to explain because there are not really similar cases. JRR Tolkien did not write *The Lord of the Rings* and next something totally unrelated. Even in the case of authors trapped by their creations, like Conan Doyle and his failed attempt to murder Sherlock Holmes, their inroads into other genres seem much more consistent than in Rowling's case.

I think I'm trying to say that I find her career surprisingly inconsistent. After a phenomenon as gigantic as the *Harry Potter* series, perhaps it would have been best for Rowling never to publish again (as Arundhati Roy decided following the overwhelming success of *The God of Small Things*). Strangely, Rowling insists on publishing and even came up with the suspicious use of a male penname to start afresh without the pressure of public opinion. I say suspicious because I very much suspect she wanted to be found out.

I know that many writers in the circles of fantasy and children's fiction were surprised by Rowling's success, as others seemed much better writers. These voices may have been silenced by the very long list of literary awards she has received, though I have a nagging suspicion that these acknowledge her creating a phenomenon rather than her quality as a writer. Remember: she was awarded the 'Príncipe de Asturias de la Concordia' but not 'de las Letras'. Just think how odd it would have been to award Tolkien the same distinction and perhaps you'll begin to understand what I mean by 'bubble effect'.

Now we'll see what my class says...

3-III-2014 BEYOND COFFEE: WHAT IF...?

As I assumed it would happen, someone asks me what happens if during coffee with the teacher something else comes up. Actually she tells me her own story with an ex-teacher, now her romantic partner. This is my answer... the public one, the private is for her eyes only.

I was once a member of a very short-lived research project, *Pedagogías alternativas en la enseñanza de la literatura y el arte*, directed by Prof. Manuel Asensi, of the Universitat de València. We read René Schérer's controversial *La pedagogía perversa* (published in Spain in 1983) with the aim of responding to it in a collective volume. I ended up writing "Leyendo a René Schérer desde la óptica de la educación superior: Ambigüedades y silencios en la perversión de la pedagogía universitaria española" (<http://ddd.uab.cat/record/113503?ln=ca>). This remained unpublished after the

group's sudden ending and I never got around to choosing an academic journal to publish it. Pedagogy is not my field and I decided the article would not be welcome by the experts. Hence self-publication. Have a look, if you please.

Schérer defends the idea that pedagogy has been perverted by the politically correct readings that demonise as sexual all emotional contact between teachers and students. I extrapolated this to the Spanish university, a context which, in general, keeps silent about these matters. I argued in the article that I agree with Schérer as regards the need to find and maintain an emotional connection between teachers and students, beset as this inevitably is by power issues (I grade you, I have power over you).

However, as I wrote in my previous post, I totally detest the idea that teachers (usually male) may take advantage of that power to coerce students (usually female) into having sex with them. The additional problem with consensual sex in the university, the typical case of the 20-year-old pretty girl and the 45-year-old ageing male teacher, is that it may well turn out to be exploitative, without the girl (who's no longer a minor) being really aware of the man's serial abuse of his position for purposes which are purely sexual. Of course, the opposite case, the young girl who is a serial seducer of male teachers, is also well known though, to be honest, I couldn't name one. And I'm thinking of a particular male colleague of mine, very popular among the ladies, who, poor thing, simply cannot ask any student for coffee as gossip would be impossible to manage –no matter how clear he made his position as a devoted family man.

But what if romance blossoms and it is in earnest? Let me begin with sex: adults should face the consequences of their acts and also be honest about them. If it happens, it happens but if there is any reason for it to happen beyond pleasure (say higher grades), then it is corrupt –not in the sexual but in the academic sense of the word. I insist that if a teacher realises he (em, she?) likes a student and this student requites, then the academic bond must be severed at once. As publicly as possible, for in these cases there is nothing worse than secrecy.

Let me continue with romance. At one point there were in my Department four male teachers married to female ex-students. First lesson: serious, long-lasting romance does happen but mostly on the basis of the clichéd May-December age gap, with no female teachers that I know of marrying (or living with) male ex students. And, mind you, the age gap needn't be that big. Think Shakira (35), 10 years older than Piqué. But, then, she's a very pretty, famous singer which is fine by younger men, it seems, a taste not extended to female teachers apparently. Or, perhaps one thing I'll discover after writing this post is that there are indeed some Shakira-Piqué pairings in the Spanish university, though my impression is that the Flavio Briatore-Elisabetta Gregoraci model is more common (without the tons of money, I must say, but with the intellectual cachet).

I understand that every case is singular and that relationships that may seem perverse from the outside may be truthful and committed from the inside, no matter the age

gap and the original setting of the first encounter. I'm not vindicated here, either, for God's sake, female teachers' 'right' to bed or marry their male students, for this can never be a 'right'. I'm just wondering why both inside and outside the university the age/gender pattern of couples still remains so unchanged.

And, a final piece of advice, teachers don't ask students for coffee if you smell trouble. Students: don't accept coffee if unsure of the consequences. Or do it... for what is life if not trouble? Just please, please, please separate your new friendship or romance from your academic bonds and obligations as quickly as you can. Honesty, as in all, is the best policy.

Hey, this was fun to write. Now for the gossip...

9-III-2014 'LET THEM INVENT!': THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF CSIC?

We live in the darkest times. As I wait for Putin to start WW III in Crimea, an article in *El País* catches my attention: "La caída de personal y financiación hace regresar al CSIC una década atrás" (http://sociedad.elpais.com/sociedad/2014/02/24/actualidad/1393271163_538095.html). CSIC, the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, the sub-heading announces, has lost already 2,200 workers and will offer neither contracts nor grants (pre- or post-doctoral) until at least 2016. The article claims that having lost 32% of its state funds since 2009 and 49% of private contributions since 2011, CSIC will soon revert to 2007 levels. Only 2007?? 1997 seems more accurate, if not 1987.

More figures: total staff (end of 2012) 12,795 employees of which 3,034 full-time researchers (my university, UAB has 3,262 researchers, who also teach). 50,7% women researchers, 1,583 research groups. Average age: 53!!! No young blood, clearly. Budget: currently 453 million euros (731 in 2007...), as opposed to 3,415 (German Max Planck) and 1,530 (French CNRS). Publications 2007-2011: 49,873 (up 6% since 2012 in range A journals), not so bad in comparison with CNRS (54,200) but in embarrassing contrast to Max Planck's 215,261. The Germans have 18 Nobel winners, the French 17, CSIC none. Principal problem apart from funding: researchers are tenured, too little hiring flexibility, too much centralization. Apparently, the scientific programmes run by the regional governments work better: CERCA (Catalan), Ikerbasque or Imdea (Madrid).

Unamuno's famous boutade, "Let them invent!", comes, according to Spanish Wikipedia from a long-lived debate (1906-1912) with pro-European José Ortega y Gasset. Unamuno wrote an essay for *La España Moderna* titled "Lo europeo moderno o lo africano antiguo... ¿por qué no ser africano como lo fue San Agustín?" in which the argument, I gather, is that some fuzzy kind of religious mysticism makes Spain essentially anti-scientific... The famous sentence comes, it seems, from a letter to Ortega (1906) in which Unamuno declares his anti-Europeanism. The idea is that rich Europeans invent and that we passively benefit from their inventions.

This idiotic stance has conditioned since then the work of poor Spanish scientists and, generally speaking, researchers, as we need to justify at each step why we do what we do. Ramón y Cajal, after whom the major research fellowships are named in Spain, obtained his Nobel prize for Medicine in 1906, the same year when Unamuno's mysticism was razing to the ground the shallow foundations on which Spanish science lay. There's some irony there. And tragedy as, unfortunately, Unamuno and not Cajal seems to have been since then the main inspiration for the successive Spanish governments. Perhaps with the exception of the few years back in the early 2000s when Spain even started to lead research worldwide (I'm thinking of Mariano Barbacid and María Blasco's research on cancer at the Centro Nacional de Investigaciones Oncológicas).

I do not know CSIC first hand and it might well be that its structure is in dire need of reorganization, that it is a house of Usher showing serious cracks. Rumours abound about its being a clumsy, slow dinosaur in our international world of fastest science (if my friend Carme Torras is reading me, maybe she can offer her own insider's opinion...). What I know is that no institution, scientific or otherwise, can progress with reduced funding and the constant threat of annihilation.

Perhaps, in view of how things are, CSIC researchers should work on a single common project: building the time machine to fly back to the few pre-crisis years when their house seemed on the way to be, one day, another Max Planck. And when Spain seemed to be a European country capable of inventing and ...of thinking.

9-III-2014 A WOMAN HERO WHO DESERVES MORE HONOURS: EMMELINE PANKHURST (AND MERYL STREEP...)

I've read back to back Frederick Douglass' autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, revised 1892) and Emmeline Pankhurst's memoirs *My Own Story* (1914), just by chance. The first page of her volume already shows how closely connected both books are, for Pankhurst (1858-1928) was the daughter of British activists and she writes that "Young as I was—I could not have been older than five years—I knew perfectly well the meaning of the words slavery and emancipation." The American Civil War was her childhood school in civic values and she learned from the cause of the slaves what the cause of women needed.

Pankhurst (née Goulden, in Manchester) not only enjoyed the good luck of having illustrated parents that educated her in the struggle to achieve justice for women, but also the good luck of marrying a staunch feminist man, barrister Richard Pankhurst (24 years her senior). He was himself very active in the fight for women's suffrage. A widow and a mother of five children—two of whom, Christabel and Sylvia became famous suffragettes on her own—Emmeline founded in 1903 the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU).

Led by Emmeline, suffragettes ran a ten-year campaign in favour of votes for women that today would be described as 'low intensity terrorism' (or kale borroka...) and which took many of them to prison (including men). Their hunger strikes were broken by methods that can plainly be described as torture. When WWI broke out, the WSPU stopped its guerrilla warfare (against property, never persons) to support the Government. Women were rewarded in 1918 for their efforts with the vote for those over 30. Those over 21 should have to wait until 1928, the year Pankhurst died, when women finally enjoyed equal franchise rights with men.

Pankhurst was included by *Time Magazine* in their list *Time 100: The Most Important People of the Century* (1999). She has been honoured in many other ways. However, as I read *My Own Story* and found myself appalled by the intensity of the misogynistic policies of the Liberal Party in power and of so many men during the suffragettes' campaign, I wondered why Pankhurst's political activism does not have a more prominent public profile. The word 'suffragette' does not bring the word 'heroism' to mind, but quaint photos of ladies in 1900s hour-glass dresses arrested by moustachioed policemen. In contrast, the IRA hunger strikes, not so different from what Pankhurst's women endured and perhaps even milder, are regarded as the stuff heroes are made of (see Steve McQueen's film on Bobby Sands, *Hunger* [2008]).

Ironically, as I wondered when someone would think of making a biopic of Pankhurst's life, one had already started filming. According to *Screen* (February 19), Meryl Streep is to play Mrs. Pankhurst in a film scripted by Abi Morgan, who also wrote *The Iron Lady* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2011, with Streep as Thatcher). Sarah Gavron (*Brick Lane*) directs. The film is called *Suffragette* and it is not quite a biopic but a story focused on a young woman in the movement, played by Carey Mulligan.

I was going to write that, happily, Streep did not win an Oscar this year for playing the bitter matriarch of *August: Osage Country*, as she has better chances for next year. Yet, I'm not quite sure at all that a film with that title and written by someone who simply could not deal adequately with Margaret Thatcher is good news. I read elsewhere, I cannot find where..., that Streep is quite worried about what kind of accent Pankhurst, a Mancunian partly educated in France, spoke with. In the end, *Suffragette* runs the risk of reducing Pankhurst down to a challenge for brilliant Meryl Streep, which is by no means what Pankhurst deserves.

Also, though I'll sound quite a misogynistic note here, the film is in the hands of a woman director and a woman screen writer, which means that it will be seen as a woman's film and will fail, as usual, to attract a large male audience. I still haven't seen *Hannah Arendt*, directed by Margarethe von Trotta and written by herself and Pam Katz, and I don't want to be unfair really. Yet, how come that already in the 21st century women heroes are still deemed to be women's concerns?

One of the aspects that I have enjoyed when reading *My Own Story* is the evidence that many men, beginning with Richard Pankhurst, were active in the women's suffrage cause. Emmeline describes brutal misogyny resulting in actual verbal and physical assault but she also names many acts of resistance to these shameful policies

coming from men. In the end, men also fought their own struggle to give women the vote against other men (the recalcitrant patriarchs). I do hope that *Suffragette* does not forget to address the descendants of the pro-suffrage men in the audience for we need them (more than Streep needs another Oscar).

As for Emmeline, the best homage you can pay is reading *My Own Story* (614 downloads from Gutenberg, in contrast to the 15,690 for the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*).

9-III-2014 THE TWELVE STEPS: HARRY THE HERO, A COMMON MISTAKE ABOUT WRITING ON HEROES AND A SCARY MONSTER

This week my friend Bela Clúa has visited to introduce my students in the *Harry Potter* class to the basics of writing about heroes. She spoke to them about how heroic narratives have been famously studied by psychoanalysis (Carl Jung, Otto Rank) and by scholars interested in myth (Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye).

Next she mentioned Christopher Vogler's twelve-step break-down of the widespread hero narrative in his well-known *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers* (1992, see <http://www.thewritersjourney.com/>), inspired by Campbell and a must for any aspiring screen writer. She took Vogler's twelve steps and contrasted them with the plot of Rowling's series (I was thinking all the time of how Alcoholic Anonymous also uses twelve steps in their own heroic narrative...). They matched reasonably well.

Vogler's own website offers a presentation of the twelve steps, accompanied by another list of in this case 10 steps for *The Heroine's Journey* (adapted from the 1990 eponymous book by Maureen Murdock, a Jungian psychotherapist). The rationale behind Vogler's steps is that since they appear so frequently in our myths and favourite hero narratives, a good knowledge of them will guarantee successful screen writing. After all, I'll add, George Lucas knew his Joseph Campbell fine and look at *Star Wars*...

This is a very common mistake. Jung, Rank, Campbell and company took an immense corpus of extant myths and stories (mostly Western) and extrapolated from them a series of (dubious...) universal features that seemed common to most. Something in the human psyche, they argued, makes us retell a similar ur-story in many different variants. Vogler applied this to Hollywood scripts and the sad result is that what used to be part of the mystery of being human is now reduced down to trite formula. Even worse is the mistake that stories that match the formula are derived *from* the formula, when actually they're new blood added with great pains to the hero's journey: see *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dune*, *Star Wars*, *Terminator*, *The Matrix* and *Harry Potter*.

Rowling is, then, telling us the ur-story that we know from so many other instances in a new way: Bela Clúa stressed how much the hero's search for his own identity matters and the post-modern insistence on textuality in the construction of the characters.

Rowling's claim that Harry materialised in her mind all of a sudden on a delayed train has been resisted by my students who quickly saw that no 20th or 21st century writer can claim an absolute ignorance of the other heroic narratives. I joked that perhaps she had had a direct insight into Jung's collective subconscious and maybe I'm not that wide off the mark. I proposed to my class as homework that they took Vogler's twelve steps and wrote a story –they all saw this might most likely lead nowhere... without that insight.

So, suppose the insight theory is valid and, somehow, Jung help us, each new hero narrative taps directly into that mystical source. What the theory should also clarify is that, as Bela Clúa noted, the hero narrative is far from universal and has its own cultural markers. The clearest one is patriarchy for, as you can see, the heroine's journey is narrated differently (by the way, it should be the female hero's journey in current American-inspired parlance, for which a 'heroine' is just a female protagonist).

Many years ago as I did research for my doctoral dissertation on monstrosity (<http://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/4915>) I learned about the oldest hero story: The *Enuma Elish* (ca. 1100 BC, perhaps earlier, Bronze Age), or Babylonian creation myth, discovered in the 19th century. In its thousand lines, we witness how the hero Marduk slays the ferocious sea female serpent Tiamat, from which later dragons descend. This combat has received metaphorical and allegorical interpretations but it's clear to me that it is part of the Aryan and Semitic patriarchal religions onslaught against femininity, as Jules Cashford and Anne Baring argue in *The Myth of the Goddess*.

Still, the Bronze Age seemed not old enough. Thanks to Bruce Chatwin's beautiful travel book *The Songlines*, about the myths assembled by the Australian aboriginals, I first read about the theories defended by palaeontologist C.K. Brain regarding how we stepped out of the predatory chain to become the hunters. In *The Hunters or the Hunted?: An Introduction to African Cave Taphonomy*, Brain (1981: 266-274) concludes that the fossils found in the Sterfontein caves in South Africa hint at a correlation between the appearance of the first men and the extinction of a carnivore which preyed almost exclusively on hominids: 'Dinofelis', a big feline similar to the sabre-toothed tiger, which lived in dark caves and hunted at night.

There is no definitive evidence as to why and how *Dinofelis* disappeared; however, Brain's hypothesis is that its prey learned somehow to repel its attacks, at first possibly with fire until a more aggressive defence brought the first death of the beast. This supposition opens the way for Chatwin's speculations (1988: 252): "Could it be, one is tempted to ask, that *Dinofelis* was Our Beast? A Beast set aside from all the other Avatars of Hell? The Arch-Enemy who stalked us, stealthily and cunningly, wherever we went? But whom, in the end, we got the better of?" Or not...

Could it be, I'll add, that the first death was brought about by a young prehistoric man of unknown origins who appeared one day to free the tribe from its night horrors? Could it be that this was Harry Potter's original ancestor and that *Dinofelis* became somehow humanised once gone, first as female goddess Tiamat, later as the arch-villain –from Sauron to Voldemort?

Perhaps, just perhaps and speculating wildly, wildly, wildly if the hand that slayed Dinofelis had been female, the world would be a matriarchy (unfair or not, I don't know).

But then, that's another story.

15-III-2014 HIGH-FLYING PLAGIARISM: NO PUNISHMENTS, NO LIMITS

A friend explains to me that a tenured senior lecturer from another university has 'borrowed' her PhD dissertation –acknowledgements included– and submitted it as his own research for an award. How was he found out? Just by chance: someone in the judges panel had read my friend's dissertation... This started a very paranoid conversation about how many articles and books must be out there published twice or more. She added to her astonishing revelation that someone told her she was a high-risk researcher for potential plagiarism, as she has published plenty and her work is easy to find.

A quick Google search reveals that a) Germany is the country where plagiarism is taken most seriously (the minister of Education lost her doctorate for that and had to resign), b) in Spain the most common case of high-flying plagiarism seems to be committed by full professors unduly benefiting from their doctoral students' work. I've come across information on two similar cases with a very diverse resolution. And it's funny that I hesitate to name the culprits even though they should be shamed for all eternity.

In one case, the Spanish Supreme Tribunal fined a full professor ('catedrático') 5,000 euros for plagiarising his student's PhD dissertation twice: for an article in a collective volume, and for a booklet. He also had to pay the judicial fees and, wow, the cost of publishing the sentence in a national newspaper. To my horror, he had been previously condemned for sexually abusing the same female student –but absolved. The fine in that case was 9,000 euros. The victim was told she had not made it clear to her supervisor that his advances were not welcome and that the actual offence was minor. He is still teaching. Fortunately, so is she.

In a second case, a male student denounced his PhD supervisor for having plagiarised in four occasions research produced during the postgraduate courses he took with this person. A problem in this case is although the student could prove that this teacher (another full professor) had been plagiarising his work since the mid 1990s, the university concluded that the *four* offences had legally expired (they did so after only two years...). The plagiarist, by the way, argued that the student's work had been produced following his own teaching, therefore, the contents were also his. A sad conclusion to this case is that the student never found another supervisor and never finished his doctorate.

I've also come across many comments on the booming internet market for BA, MA and PhD dissertations –I remember reading once that this started in Harvard about 100 years ago, as soon as typewriters started being used commonly. In the case of bought research, technically nobody is committing plagiarism as the real author, the ghost writer, has agreed to charge a fee for his or her work. This practice might explain how politicians I will not name suddenly become doctors overnight, when, as everyone knows, a PhD dissertation takes about three full-time years, usually more.

Technically speaking, the person who has presented my friend's PhD thesis as his own research has not committed plagiarism, as this consists of inserting text from unacknowledged sources in your own work. He has committed the cheekiest theft, of a kind I thought simply nobody dreamed of committing. Even though I know of a famous case in which a candidate for tenure submitted as his own the very report written by his board's president for her state examination. In that case, the offender got hold of a text that had been circulating, it seems, anonymously, and he simply didn't know who he had stolen it from...

When I hear of cases like the ones I've summarised here I wonder with what authority we can demand that our students refrain from plagiarising. In my Department we take this problem very seriously and we're failing students for plagiarising parts of sentences, provided, of course, we can prove the offence. Now think of someone stealing a complete dissertation... Do I need to say more?

A last comment: we, researchers, have been told that an 'open access' policy guaranteeing the maximum visibility and availability of our work is the only way to go in our internet-ruled times. I'm going that way myself, with the web, Academia.edu, etc. Now it turns out this increases the risk of being plagiarised... Catch 22...

15-III-2014 THE WARRIOR AND THE CIVIL/CIVIC NARRATIVES OF MASCULINITY AND WHY HARRY POTTER'S SUCH AN UNCOMMON HERO

One doesn't read doctoral dissertations for pleasure, I'm sorry to say, but I have very much enjoyed reading Linda Wight's *Talking about Men: Conversations about Masculinities in Recent 'Gender-bending' Science Fiction* (2009, <http://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/11566/1/02whole.pdf>). She had the very good idea of taking a selection of winners and nominees to the James Tiptree Jr., a prize awarded to SF with a progressive gender issues stance, and consider to what extent these texts were actually forward-thinking. The results are mixed.

At any rate, what interested me very much is that Linda Wight based her thesis on the idea that plenty of SF (and fantasy) is still focused on the 'warrior narrative' for masculinity, whereas in real-life the avant-garde, anti-patriarchal narrative is the one she called 'civil' and I have started calling 'civic.'

I emailed Linda to check whether the label 'civil narrative' was hers. It seems it is. She kindly explained to me that she drew extensively from Ellen Jordan and Angela Cowan's "Warrior Narratives in the Kindergarten Classroom: Renegotiating the Social Contract?" (*Men's Lives*, Michael S. Kimmel & Michael A. Messner, eds. 4th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998. 127-40). Paraphrasing her own explanation, it seems that the authors described how in kindergarten the 'warrior ideal' all little boys enjoy in games and fiction, is being replaced by a "masculinity of rationality and responsibility." Linda mixed this with Carol Pateman's ideas regarding patriarchy as the actual basis of patriarchy and she came up with the 'civil narrative of masculinity.'

Last week I discussed with my class the nature of Harry Potter's heroism and why they dislike so much the final duel with Voldemort as (SPOILERS AHEAD!!) Harry does not use 'Avada Kedavra' to kill his arch-villain but very cleverly uses 'Expelliarmus' to have Voldemort, essentially, terminate himself. I argued, persuasively I hope!!, that although Harry is naturally inclined towards the 'civil narrative,' Voldemort's rabid emergence and Dumbledore's interested grooming (argh!) force him to take up the 'warrior narrative' if only until the threat is over.

He, thus, becomes proficient at duelling (I had to explain how important this pathetic practice had been in the past for men), the rules of which he happens to understand much better than the quite stupid Voldemort. Once the duel to end all duels takes place, Harry, as the epilogue shows, is happy to return for good to the 'civil narrative' and become the kind of hero Rowling loves best: a loving, caring family man. 'Petty bourgeois', yes, indeed, but thank god for that in a world of Hitlers, Stalins... and Putins.

I'm sure the 'warrior types' out there are disappointed –an Austrian student kindly explained to me that in his homeland many young men regard Harry a bit of a 'douchebag'. Even my students (men and women) are a bit disappointed that Harry did NOT kill Voldemort. I am myself, however, quite happy that the 'civil narrative' dominated.

I don't like quoting dictionaries very much, but I do need the Oxford Dictionary to show how 'civil' and 'civic' overlap and intersect. 'Civil' refers to citizens, as opposed to 'military' or 'ecclesiastic' (you get the oxymoron 'civil war' from that, also 'civil law'). 'Civil', interestingly, also means 'courteous and polite', which goes very well with my pet idea that gentlemanliness should be brought back. 'Civic' connects more closely with the 'city or town', both its administration and the citizens' duties and activities. 'Civil' and 'civic' refer, then, jointly, to active, non-warriorlike citizenship.

Back to Harry. I'll argue that Rowling is to be praised for defending 'civil' over 'warring' masculinity. Yet, she falls short of defending 'civic' masculinity. Harry, poor thing, is too young to carry this immense weight on his shoulders. Yet a truly 'civic' man would have arrested Voldemort and demanded from the Ministry of Magic a complete upheaval of its very dubious justice system to guarantee just punishment for Voldemort. My students told me that a living Voldemort would escape Azkaban, start the Death Eaters again, etc, etc. Fair enough.

I just think we need that story in which the hero (and now I understand why Rowling thought of a boy, not a girl) undermines the patriarchal warrior narrative from the inside to replace it with a masculine narrative based on civic duty, that is to say, on the defence of justice on behalf of the community. That Harry has to accept becoming a killer (even though technically he's never one) is a sad comment on his (and ours) society's inability to trust justice –acknowledging here that justice in the world of wizards and witches is only marginally better than Voldemort's injustice.

Thanks Linda!

23-III-2014 THE CLAPTRAP, I MEAN THE MOUSETRAP: IS THIS THE ULTIMATE POST-MODERN JOKE?

Last evening I saw *La ratonera* at Teatre Apolo, here in Barcelona, the Spanish translation of Agatha Christie's very famous *The Mousetrap*. I am really mystified that this absolutely mediocre play, to call it something polite, is still on 62 years after its opening night. That is the real mystery and not what the plot narrates...

The Mousetrap, presented as a "comedy-thriller," was judged a "middling" play in which "coincidence is stretched unreasonably" when it first opened at the Ambassadors' Theatre (I'm reading the original *Guardian* review of November 1952). In 1974 it transferred to St Martin's Theatre, where it remains –a tourist trap, as denounced by the 11 brave souls who dare say so on TripAdvisor (of a total 321 opinions: 142 excellent, 117 very good...). The author herself, Wikipedia claims, declared in her autobiography that she only expected the play to last for eight months at the most. Christie, by the way, presented her grandson Matthew Prichard with the rights to the play for his 9th birthday. He must be quite rich by now as the play reached its 25,000 performance in 2012, the longest uninterrupted run of any play anywhere in history.

Wikipedia informs that the play, originally a short radio play, was inspired by the real-life case of poor Dennis O'Neill, an orphan who died while fostered by a couple of farmers. Technically, *The Mousetrap* is a revenge play as the murders hinge on the efforts of the murderer to make those responsible for a child's death pay for their cruelty and sadism. This is, from my contemporary perspective, possibly the only plot point worth commenting on (there is also a gay man, much laughed at, and a lesbian, less laughed at). However, not much is made of the sad issue of child abuse –for the simple reason that everything is as shallow as it can be.

I've never been a fan of Mrs. Christie, whom I find to be a clever but fairly mechanical writer. Here her plotting is not just mechanical but truly amateurish. Forget about the improbable coincidences, the glaring gaps and the utter failure to explain what the characters are doing in the small rural hotel where events take place. Let's just say that someone who could and should have prevented a crime does nothing to stop the

murderer, and that someone who should have declared their identity at once to the said murderer (and thus prevent not one but two crimes) remains silent. Appalling, really. (All plot details available from the published edition of the play... or Wikipedia, I wonder why they ask audiences to keep the murderer's identity secret).

My admired Tom Stoppard wrote in 1968 *The Real Inspector Hound*, a parody of *The Mousetrap*. I read it long ago and have forgotten the details but I recall that the action progresses as two critics discuss the events onstage and are themselves trapped into the plot. It might not be the first case of the spoof being much better than the spoofed but I do wonder how come *The Mousetrap* has ever reached the status it has. John Thaxter has called it "a beautifully preserved example of a country house murder mystery, a throwback to theatregoing in the thirties (minus the matinee tea-trays)" (2004, <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/2406/the-mousetrap>). In the usually very witty blog *A West End Whinger*, we are told that criticising is like "going to Madame Tussauds and being surprised to find that it's crap." (<http://westendwhingers.wordpress.com/2010/06/10/review-the-mousetrap-st-martins-theatre/>). Fair enough, it's the same category of trash. Crap. Whatever. The odd thing is how abundant the positive criticism is and scant the negative voices.

Three years ago I saw an excellent Spanish production of J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* with Josep Maria Pou in the title role. I wrote on it here, comparing it to Shaw's *Pygmalion*, odd as this may sound. As I endured Christie's trash yesterday I could not help thinking (very fondly) of Priestley's 1946 masterpiece, wondering why it hadn't been so lucky. In the end, as I said at the beginning, the real mystery is the very endurance of the play. A jealous Noël Coward congratulated Christie on her success but I wonder what Samuel Beckett and company thought all along (*Waiting for Godot* was first seen in France in 1953, in England in 1954).

There's a joke I'm missing here, but it's so ultra post-modern we might need Derrida to decode it...None seems interested, though.

28-III-2014 THE MANY LIVES OF THE ARTFUL DODGER

I have finally read Terry Pratchett's *Dodger* (2012), a novel oddly marketed as young adult fiction and, yes, closely related to Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. I was going to write a post specifically on it but, when checking Wikipedia for more information ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dodger_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dodger_(novel))), I've come across a strange literary phenomenon: the recent resurrection of Jack Dawkins, a.k.a the Artful Dodger.

Dodger has appeared, according to IMDB, on 28 occasions on the big and the small screen, the earliest in 1912. As Wikipedia claims, the first volume of Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's comic series *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999), placed the Dodger in 1898 London, as Fagin's successor in the business of running a gang of boy thieves. He must have been in his late 70s...

There is, though, a considerable time lapse between that glimpse of the Dodger and *The Further Adventures and Life of Jack Dawkins, Also Known as the Artful Dodger* by Alan Montgomery (2010). This has left no trace among Amazon readers, a sure sign of its low impact. Tony Lee published next *Dodge & Twist: A Sequel To Oliver Twist* (2011), which, despite being also little noticed is now, as IMDB confirms, in development as a film. In Lee's story, a ruined Oliver and his former pal Dodger conspire together to steal the Crown Jewels (?). Then came Pratchett's *Dodger* (2012) and *Jack Dawkins* (2013) by Charlton Daines, with a handful of positive comments on Amazon. Also in 2013 James Benmore published another *Dodger*, which, like Daines's, imagines an adult Jack returned from Australia. Benmore's novel has 22 five star reviews on Amazon.uk: either it is truly attractive or the author has 22 very good friends.

Both US and UK Amazon readers award Pratchett's *Dodger* a 4,5 star rating (out of 5). The very negative opinions are about one dozen in total and include a terribly cruel voice. Pratchett is suffering from the worst possible form of Alzheimer's disease, which makes any new book a little miracle. A displeased reader, however, has the bad taste of attributing the novel's faults (in his view) to the muddled thinking caused by the disease. He even has the gall to call for the author's retirement...

Dodger is a quite competent piece of 'historical fantasy' (the author's own label). He stretches historical chronology quite a bit by having Queen Victoria already on the throne although *Oliver Twist* started publication in 1836 when her predecessor William IV still lived. Charlie Dickens, the street-wise journalist, could hardly have got his inspiration for his Dodger from the Dodger he meets in Pratchett's London. Still, this doesn't matter. Pratchett concocts a heady, delicious brew which I truly enjoyed. There is a scene when Dodger is measured for a suit by tailor Izzy when I had the funny feeling of believing I was reading a Dickens novel.

Also present in *Dodger* are Sir Robert Peel, Benjamin Disraeli, Henry Mayhew, Mr. Tenniel and even Sweeny Todd (in a very attractive character rewrite). And two discoveries: philanthropist Angela Georgina Burdett-Coutts and Joseph Bazalgette, the civil engineer that tidied up London's sewers. For *Dodger*, you see?, is a tosher here – a sewer rat, or scavenger. Pratchett explains that he actually got his inspiration from reading Mayhew's massive *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-2, four volumes), where toshers appear. Dickens himself was well-acquainted with Mayhew, both the gentleman and his work.

Even though Pratchett is undoubtedly Dickens's disciple, if not living reincarnation, he corrects the master's appalling anti-semitic bias by totally recycling Fagin. His Solomon Cohen is not a criminal but a refugee who has fled not one but many pogroms in Eastern Europe. He makes a living by repairing delicate mechanisms, the clockwork fancies of the very rich. He has good sense and good connections, from which Dodger benefits. Cohen is a more than a heavy hint that Dickens' needn't have linked Jewishness and criminality though, of course, if Fagin had been as generous as Cohen, Oliver's story would have no point.

This leads me back to my own point: why Dodger? Sweet Oliver Twist is found to be too self-righteous, his story too sentimental. We prefer instead the Dodger's in-your-face cool –who can forget his speech to the judge that condemns him to be transported for life (which Dickens seems to have borrowed from a real-life boy)? In Pratchett's version there is not even an Oliver and the only focus is the picaresque adventure that Dodger's life is. Or struggle for survival, probably the same. No rich Mr. Brownlow for him, though Pratchett does rescue, after all, the Dodger, by means of much more powerful gentlemen –maybe this is what has irritated a few readers. And maybe what won my heart is that Pratchett supposes Dodger deserves being rescued from extreme poverty because, practically out of instinct, he does the decent thing: rescue a battered wife from an appalling marriage. Poor Nancy, if only she'd been so lucky.

Sir Terry asks his readers to read Mayhew's *oeuvre* –now waiting in my Kindle. What a challenge for a teacher of Victorian Literature.

2-IV-2014 THE WAND CHOOSES THE WITCH: A STORY FOR POTTERHEADS

If you're not a Potterhead and if you find the idea of buying movie-related merchandise absurd, you will find what I'm going to narrate here simply silly. If you are a Potterhead, I'm sure you will love it...

When I started teaching the *Harry Potter* elective and about two thirds of my class declared they owned each a personal wand, I realized I should have to get my own sooner or later. My students explained they had purchased (for 40 euros!) the 'official' wand 'belonging' to their favourite character. In my case, as they all know by now, this is Sirius Black. However, as I told them, I found it impossible to choose his wand as I don't understand myself my strong emotional attachment to this very tragic figure (I'm working on it). I decided to buy instead Luna Lovegood's, a character I like very much, or, perhaps even commission a tailor-made one from a sculptor that sells his wares on the internet. I never checked what each wand looked like, just how much they cost and who sells them (the Noble Collection, "the world's premiere designer and manufacturer of high end movie prop replicas and collectibles"). And I insisted to everyone who asked me that I would never buy Sirius' wand, that was totally out of the question.

On Saturday afternoon my husband and I went for a totally improvised walk in Barcelona's 'friki' triangle (Passeig de Sant Joan/Bailén/Alí Bey). We first visited the new Gigamesh shop on Bailén street. Next we wandered into Norma Comics and the first thing we saw was this display, with fifty *Harry Potter* wands. About half had the name of character 'owners' on them, not the rest. I checked Luna's but didn't like it much, and I spent about 15 minutes going through the whole collection, not seeing 'the one.'

My husband eventually pointed one to me, “that’s the one for you”, and I feel in love with it at once. I didn’t care whose it was –that was my wand. What a beauty. After procrastinating for as long as I could, for I sensed what was coming, we asked a shop assistant whose wand that was. He said either Snape’s or Hermione’s. Good, I said, either is fine for me. He asked a second shop assistant, though, and in the minutes that went by I knew it: “It’s Sirius Black’s wand,” he said. I promise I got what I can only describe as an electric shock. My husband blanched. The kind assistant smiled a smile which said “we get this here in this shop every day.” I purchased the wand, the assistant congratulated me when I explained it was not a present but for myself. Here it is now, in a place of honour among my books, below the *Harry Potter* set.

I felt weird for hours, enjoying very much this magical moment (and I must thank my husband for sharing it with me to the full). This really is, he said, a case of the wand choosing the witch –we laughed much. When we managed to rationalize a little this odd occurrence, he theorised that perhaps I had seen the wand before and my subconscious recalled it (I don’t think so). Or that, I like this better, the wand designer had perfectly captured the nature of the character and I related to that again subconsciously, which was why I chose the wand (or the wand chose me...). The wand is, well, handsome and so is Sirius but I really don’t know what happened in that shop. Can an object represent a character this well?

You may call it a simple coincidence and dismiss the anecdote as a very silly accident that only shows how childish an adult (me) can be. Fair enough. After all, here I am, investing much emotional energy in possessing an outrageously overpriced piece of high-quality plastic, which is, in addition, mass manufactured. Yet if you go down that road, the world is a dreary place and I prefer going up the other road: the one suggesting that yesterday afternoon I enjoyed the most magical moment in my forty years of reading. I’m sure all my Potterhead students understand me. Also, if you own a light-sabre you will understand me.

This wand is not the only piece of movie-related merchandise in my home. My living room is decorated with many of these, and presided by quite a big replica of the Millennium Falcon (and of Mazinger-Z). My pragmatic nieces have asked straight away why, being adults, we still have toys. We have explained that ‘toys’ are not only for children and that growing up and being able to enjoy them is very beautiful –we hope they grow up like that. My two personal favourites are my Jack Skellington from *Nightmare before Christmas*, and my Sully from *Monsters Inc.* I find them cute. The difference with Sirius’ wand is that I went out one afternoon to buy them, understanding exactly what emotions they suggested.

I guess this is what being a ‘freak’ is about, though I’m not the kind of freak that joins fan communities. I know very well that any anti-freak colleagues reading this post will find me naïve and even stupid, and probably consider I am incapable of any serious teaching and academic work. Well, my entire academic career consists of turning fan’s passion into proper research, which is what I am currently teaching my students. Still, I don’t want to miss the little irrational moments –for this are the ones which, happening very often back in childhood or in our teenage years, finally led us to

become adult literature teachers. That they were elicited by Don Quijote or Hamlet, and not by Sirius Black, is to me just a slight difference, though it may be immense to others. It's all about the magic of reading (and seeing films, of course).

The wand I share with Sirius does have magical powers indeed: whenever I look at it in the future I'll recall the happy time when I taught 'Cultural Studies: The *Harry Potter* Series'... and the wand chose the witch.

6-IV-2014 A CALCULATING WOMAN: PLANNING NEXT YEAR'S SCHEDULE

One of the main tasks I must fulfil as BA Coordinator is planning the schedule for next year. Calculations used to be simple: 1 credit was the equivalent of 10 teaching hours and, so, a full time, tenured teacher was supposed to teach 24 credits, 240 hours. My contract specifies that I work 37,5 hours per week, so if I multiply by 48 weeks a year (minus a 4-week holiday) the total is 1,800 hours. Deduct the 240 hours and I was left with 1,560 hours to prepare classes, do research and contribute to the Department's management.

Then several things happened a few years ago. The new ECTS system was introduced. This means that for 1 credit students work a total of 25 hours, of which one third (5) is classroom time. Teaching 6 ECTS no longer meant for us, teachers, 60 hours but, oddly enough 50. Suddenly, those of us teaching 24 credits were teaching 200 and not 240 hours. Odd. My university decided then to add an extra ratio for each taught hour that would account for preparation, correction, etc, and, don't ask me how, we ended up with a strange figure: 560 hours of teaching. For the first time, the size of groups was taken into account, so that teaching a compulsory subject to 70 students would count for many more hours than teaching an elective subject to 15. Fair enough (though I've never understood the mathematical formula that was applied).

This year my university has finally approved a formal scale to calculate our teaching hours which takes into account the Wert Decree of two years ago. The decree famously decreed that tenured teachers with Ministry-certified research should teach less, those with no certificates (I mean 'tramos') should teach more. My university has dragged its feet about this as, I assume, there must have been much pressure from teachers who didn't to want teach more than 24 ECTS. I don't know.

The question is that if you have three 'tramos' you are entitled to teaching only 16 ECTS, if your last 'tramo' has not expired yet you teach 24, but if it did expire you teach 28 for the next three years, hoping you'll get it back. If you do no research then it's 32. Now consider that the 28ers and 32ers are not supposed to teach, anyway, more than 240 classroom hours, the same as the 24ers.

Still with me?

Our Vice-Rector for Faculty is a mathematician. He has determined that in order to know how many hours we should teach we need to multiply our ECTS by 17.5. So, if you teach 16 ECTS, that's 280 hours; 24 ECTS, then 420; 28 ECTS, that's 490 and, finally, 32 ECTS amount to 560 hours. That's the total teaching time, remember, including the famous 240 maximum presential hours, plus supervising BA, MA and PhD dissertations. Now add to this a second mysterious ratio which calculates teaching hours according to the size of the group. Your group is less than 20, then multiply your teaching hours (6 ECTS= 50) by 1.5. Between 20 and 29, then by 1.7. Etc, etc.

So far, I have spent two gruelling mornings, calculator in hand, trying to work out a) how many hours each member of our staff is supposed to teach (we've been given a figure for the reductions each person is entitled to, but not the actual hours); b) the sum total of the teaching hours per person taking into account the figure for each group/subject. We have a computer application which simply shows the results of someone else's calculations for the groups but not an application we, poor Coordinators, can use to calculate variations on the official figures.

The results? Well, same as without all the formulas, for we need to teach what we need to teach and without more staff there's nothing much we can change. I forgot to say that MA teaching time is treated as if were BA teaching time...

Actually, with all those numbers in our hands, we can prove that most faculty members will have to tutor BA and MA dissertations for free. PhD dissertations are always tutored for free, as although the hours are eventually added, this does alter our dedication in a particular year. Take my own case: I must teach 210 hours (I'm a 16er and get a reduction as Coordinator), but my two subjects next year amount to 220 hours. I need to supervise at least two BA dissertations and 1 MA dissertation since both degree programmes simply need my help. That's 35 extra hours...

All this is quite confusing but at least at UAB we're still lucky that we have no computer programme clocking in our research and management time (well, for management that might be good). In other Catalan universities some bureaucrat has quantified in hours activities as impossible to calculate as writing an article. Or, if you care to know, preparing a lecture: one day it may be three or four hours, the next one 1 minutes (if you just check what you did last year).

We're civil servants and should be accountable to the public for the hours we work, I know that. I also know that, somehow, my frantic use of the calculator is preferable to the computer doing the calculations for me –at least, there's a human touch there. In the end, though, I'm not sure who all these numbers benefit.

Nor whether they do reflect at all our real activity, whether we do more or less than we should. That's my main concern.

12-IV-2014 THE ANOMALY OF COPYRIGHT: THINKING OF FAN FICTION

I'm congratulating myself for having given my students the chance to teach me –about fan fiction. I know about this phenomenon academically, meaning that I've read academic work on it. I'm not, however, a reader or a writer and, so, I delegated the task of instructing my *Harry Potter* class on the subject to those who know: eight wonderful girls students who gave us an exciting collection of presentations.

They covered plenty of ground: defining fan fiction as legitimate literary practice; discussing the thorny matter of copyright infringement; exploring its sub-genres, main themes and canons in general and in relation to *Harry Potter*; going into the murky depths of slash fiction; presenting other forms of fan production (musicals, vids, songs...) and even teaching the basics of fan fiction criticism –for, yes, fan fiction contains the abysmally bad but also the properly literary. All genres, as I always maintain, tend to form their own canons, as they confirmed. I contributed the word 'acafan', Henry Jenkins's label to name the academic who has a fandom background, whether in community or in a more isolated situation.

So many ideas came up that it's hard to select a few. I'll start with the notion that fan fiction goes back to the beginning of the commercialization of culture and ties in with the later idea of copyright. As a student argued, Shakespeare was a fan fiction writer since his sources were never original and he did what fan writers do today: take someone else's material and elaborate on it. Also, the same student pointed out that, on the completely opposite side, Cervantes was motivated to write the second part of *El Quijote* by the publication of the anonymous sequel, known as *El Quijote de Avellaneda*, which he loathed. Recently I published a post here about Pratchett's *Dodger* which, technically, is also fan fiction.

Charles Dickens cannot voice an opinion about *Dodger* but living authors have much to say about what others do with their characters and ideas. Their reactions to fan fiction are mixed: some tolerate it (Rowling), others hate it (Anne Rice). This is because of the Romantic worship of originality and the ensuing Victorian capitalist idea of copyright. In the oral tradition that the Industrial Revolution killed off, anonymity was the rule and, in a way, it's tempting to argue that the current flood, for it is a flood, of fan fiction is a backlash against these three factors I've named.

The rule that legal authors impose is always that fan fiction must not generate any money. Those who eschew fan fiction usually argue that they are annoyed (and even disgusted) by the idea that someone else may freely manipulate what they have so painstakingly created and so painfully published. I wonder, though, whether what is really at stake is the fear that someone else does it better: think again of Shakespeare outdoing any of his sources, and imagine him reborn rewriting any of our current authors. Well, he would not be able to do that and make a living as he did in copyright-free Elizabethan theatre –though, I know, he never published his plays worrying others might make an illicit use.

I'm not against copyright (though I find the idea of copyright inherited by the author's heirs monstrous). I do want to keep the copyright of my own texts and limit other persons' use of them to legitimate quotations. Yet, I'm beginning to consider whether the very idea of copyright is not in itself an anomaly, particularly when, at the beginning of the 21st century the generalised impression is that few things are truly original, most culture is recycled. I even heard reputed Catalan designer Claret Serrahima recently declare on TV that art is spent and the avant-garde dead.

In this context, the author's wrangle with his/her own fans for only authorship and ownership may even seem fantastically narcissistic and even mercenary. After all, if I infringe Rowling's copyright, I would not even be sued by her but by omnipotent Warner Brothers to whom she has sold her rights (or part thereof).

The strangest anecdote that came up was the case of Marion Bradley Zimmer, who was sued by a fan for plagiarising the fan's own Zimmer-inspired fiction for a novel. The fan wanted no money, just that Zimmer acknowledged the plagiarism (she never did, claiming it was a coincidence that both had thought of basically the same plot). He also wanted to be credited as co-author on the cover of the novel when it was eventually published. The author decided instead to leave the novel unpublished, in limbo. And this is just one of the stranger, and stranger struggles we'll see between authors and fans.

Finally, I enjoyed very much the manifest energy that fans put into theorising their chosen field. It is simply what we, academics do, with the difference that they receive no reward and are even mocked for their efforts (by those who fear to be called fans of Jane Austen or James Joyce).

23-IV-2014 THE LIMITS OF THE COSMOPOLITAN NOVEL: MISSPELLING BARÇA...

The cosmopolitan novel, according to Berthold Schoene's eponymous volume (2009), opposes both the novel limited by the national territory (whether it is nationalist or not), and the post-colonial novel, which questions the very essence of the territorial from a critical position. The cosmopolitan writer has been freed by globalization to write about any theme located in any place s/he fancies, albeit it's important not to confuse the cosmopolitan with the global. The novel of globalization is still imperialistic and colonialist whereas the true cosmopolitan novel supposes that cross-cultural representation is open to all. We should expect in the near future Russian novelists to deal with Spain, or Indian authors to write about Japan, if you get the drift. As citizens of the world truly interested in other cultures. Fair enough.

The actual examples I've come across, though, have a good share of problems. Perhaps the classic case by now is Albert Sánchez Piñol's novel *La pell freda* (2002), a peculiar tale which mixes Conrad and Lovecraft in a South Pole location, and with an Irish protagonist. The novel is written in Catalan but, as you can see, neither the setting nor

the characters are connected at all with Catalonia. The impression the reader gets is that the book is a translation of a missing original in English, not because the Catalan language is misused (far from it) but because the plot is culturally alien to the language. I know this is an odd statement.

The cosmopolitan novel seems to be a growing trend in SF, or at least this is my impression after reading a while ago Paolo Bacigalupi's thrilling biopunk novel *The Windup Girl* (2009, set in 23rd century Thailand), and more recently Ian McDonald's ambitious nanotech novel *The Dervish House* (2010, set in 2027 Istanbul). McDonald might well be *the* cosmopolitan writer of the current SF wave, considering other works like *River of Gods* (set in India), or *Brasyl*. Bacigalupi, by the way, is American; McDonald, born in Manchester, lives in Belfast.

The Dervish House opens with a prologue in which McDonald explains how to pronounce the many Turkish names in his volume. I didn't bother with this, as I would have needed, anyway, an audio file to understand the sounds. I braced myself for the necessary immersion in a doubly unfamiliar world for me: that of the city of Istanbul, and that of a near future saturated with nanotechnology. As I struggled with both the Turkish names and the SF neologisms, I wondered whether the author spends a few months on location before writing his novels or whether this was a Google kind of novel (the current equivalent of Bram Stoker writing about Transylvania in the British Library). I decided to trust McDonald on the accuracy of the Istanbul settings and the Turkish names, and let myself be impressed by his research. I was, however, thrown off this path by his mentioning, in the context of a remark on a football match to be played in Istanbul, my local football team, Barça, as Barca. Oh, oh, I thought...

As usual, I turned next to Amazon and, sure indeed, there was a reader, claiming to have been an Istanbul resident, bitterly protesting against McDonald's bizarre handling of the local names and language particularities. He complained particularly about how a) mistakes could have been avoided with more careful editing, b) having Turkish characters speak English heavily distorted their cultural singularities. I understand what he means as, once more, I felt that the dialogues were translated (or 'dubbed'). Another reader had started an angry discussion by arguing that since few local Istanbul readers or Turkish speakers would read McDonald's book, the complaints were besides the point. So much for the didactic potential of cosmopolitanism.

There are, I think, diverse comments to be made here. One is that perhaps *The Dervish House* and similar novels are not really cosmopolitan but examples of globalization's top heavy view of the world, still privileging English-speaking authors to 'use' the world as they please. Another is that the idea of the 'exotic' is not dying at all, despite the efforts of post-colonial scholars to show that it smacks too much of the colonial and the imperialist. Some would argue here that, simply, the cosmopolitan novel cannot really surface without globalization being completed, which would mean positioning all cultures at the same level regarding the ability to produce cross-cultural narratives. Either we're all exotic to each other and say so, or we abandon exoticism for good on the basis that all human experience is, basically, the same all over the planet.

My conclusion, after reading *The Dervish House*, though, is that true cosmopolitanism should consist of making all local writing, in whatever language, available to all other cultures. It would be great to read a Turkish SF novel in Catalan. And invite McDonald to write an SF masterpiece set in his home town, Belfast. For, as Alasdair Gray claimed in *Lanark*, places are only made real, even for their own inhabitants, if imagined in books by those who live there.

27-IV-2014 IN AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND: CHARLES STROSS'S *HALTING STATE*

Charles Stross is an English SF writer, born in Leeds (1964). I have no doubts that he is amongst the most interesting authors in the genre working today, and I am personally developing quite a taste for his dense, clever fiction, of which I've gone through four books so far (just the tip of the iceberg... see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Stross).

The last one I've read, *Halting State* (2007, a Hugo and Locus nominee) came quite as a surprise, for it is set in an independent Scotland (supposedly separated from the UK in 2006). I didn't know that Stross has been an Edinburgh resident for a while, and I'm at a loss to understand why the collective volume edited by Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Scotland As Science Fiction* (2012) doesn't devote some room to *Halting State* (four of Stross's books, including this one, are just mentioned in the bibliography). Perhaps this has to do with Stross's being born in England. Funnily, SF magazine *Asimov* called Stross, a "new Scottish writer." As he explains in an interview, though, he's rather, "a bit of an anomaly" as he's quite rootless ("just happen to have settled in Edinburgh for a while") and too experienced an author to be called 'new' (he started publishing in 1987; see the interview at: <http://www.revolutionsf.com/article.php?id=1096>).

Those of us who enjoy SF always tell each other that only SF writers truly understand the world we live in. I stand by this. *Halting State* is a political thriller based on the idea that the online *World of Warcraft* might be used as a gigantic online platform for espionage by devious agencies exploiting unsuspecting players. Guess what? NSA was doing exactly that (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/09/nsa-world-of-warcraft_n_4413914.html). This is why after Edward Snowden's heroic revelations, Stross gave up plans for the third part in the intended trilogy (there's a second novel, *Rule 34* (2011)). "Sometimes," Stross wrote in his blog, "I wish I'd stuck with the spaceships and bug-eyed monsters. Realism in fiction is over-rated." (<http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2013/12/psa-why-there-wont-be-a-third.html>).

In the same post, Stross explains that another good reason to stop the trilogy on its track is the oncoming Scottish referendum on independence (18 September 2014). Also the still date-less referendum on whether the UK should remain in the European Union. Scotland might certainly change too much for a novelist to write about it consistently during the same period and so, Stross concludes, he'll either have to wait (or set his futuristic thrillers elsewhere). Still, some lessons can be drawn for real

politics in Scotland from the nation's bolder version in *Halting State*, where the Scottish *Republic* is a member of the European Union enjoying the benefits of the euro. I worried that Stross had picked up on the new state to discuss its particular vulnerability to cyberwar but this is not the case. Rather, I got the impression that the point he was making is that any state, new or old, is absolutely vulnerable (and that the Scots end up managing the crisis quite well).

Stross is quite sceptical about the SNP's view of Scottish independence but even so his own independent Scotland works. By this I mean than in *Halting State* the Scottish background feels quite 'natural,' as if the new Scotland were one more country, with the same problems as others. There's been no major crisis with the rest of the UK, apparently, which is mentioned, rather, as previously overdoing the possible effects of the split. This lack of historical hysterics is quite refreshing for me, a Catalan reader tired and disgusted with the mismanagement by both sides of a similar situation back home. Imagine a Carlos Pérez, from Valladolid, living in Barcelona and writing a futuristic thriller set in a near-future Catalan Republic and you'll quickly see what I mean.

Stross's prose is notoriously packed with cutting-edge technological information and he has been often criticised for writing just for the handful of nerds who can follow it. I don't claim to be one of them but, then, what I like is that I have to struggle with Stross's (post-)cyberpunk view of the world, as this is the only one that really makes sense today. There's a very funny, very scary moment in which the Edinburgh police squad chasing the bad guys realise that their cell phones are compromised but they need to stay in touch anyway –they go crazy figuring out how to be invisible to Big Brother out there. This is something all of us can understand.

The lesson, ultimately, that *Halting State* offers is a very serious warning: you may live in independent Scotland or Catalonia, or be firmly attached to the UK or Spain, but what really matters is that you'll be subject to thorough, intrusive, malignant surveillance all the same.

Brave new (2.0) world...

4-V-2014 A (CONFUSED) WORD ABOUT NON-FICTION (AND ROBERTO SAVIANO'S ZEROZEROZERO)

Almost exactly two years ago I published a post titled "The other books: The problem of non-fiction". I started by worrying about whether it is really true that as readers age the novel loses its charm and the other prose books gain ground in our preferences as readers. As I approach my 48th birthday I can very well say that this is the case, although novels still play in my reading habit a role that no other prose book can fulfil. Having said that, I know already, and it is only May, that I won't read this year a better book than Roberto Saviano's *ZeroZeroZero*, which begs many questions about what the best books are today (and what we mean by that).

To begin with, it's hard to say to which genre *ZeroZeroZero* belongs. Saviano is a journalist and what he offers here is a report based on his (life-threatening) research. Yet, the chapter organization, the personal considerations and the often literary prose suggest that the aim is not just transmitting a certain type of information and a thesis (that cocaine plays a much bigger role in the world's economy than we suspect). The aim is demonstrating that thesis, of course, but Saviano chose to do so in a way that also tickles the reading centres of our brain.

As I read I was, however, a bit confused about what I was supposed to feel, for my reactions veered from total horror at the violence Saviano narrates to admiration at the intelligent way he handles the telling of the tale. His previous book, *Gomorra* (2006), which I also admired very much, produces a similar effect: as a reader I don't know what is the main key to the text –what it tells, how the author tells it or that Saviano has risked his life and lives under escort since then for his readers. I was going to claim that I 'enjoyed' *Gomorra*, but perhaps this is the key to my problem: it seems quite callous to enjoy Saviano's books and perhaps I should stay with 'admire' as the most fitting verb.

Saviano answers towards the end of his book the question every reader is asking him mentally: why risk your life, and enrage the gangsters that run the world? He explains that his aim is telling the truth and that he will have been successful in his task if, after reading his book the reader feels that the world is a different place from what it was before opening the book covers. I do feel that and I thank Saviano for opening my eyes but, and this is a problem shared by Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, I wonder whether these heroes really get their admirers to go beyond that admiration. Here I am saying that *ZeroZeroZero* is a great book, which is as absurd as praising Wikileaks for the quality of the prose in their communications. Perhaps, I am just wondering, this is Saviano's fault for choosing to write a beautifully written volume instead of a dry report (I did miss, if you ask me a dramatis personae list as I couldn't retain the many gangsters' names he mentions, and I would have been grateful for an appendix with a map of the main cocaine transport lines).

Also in the last chapters Saviano considers for a moment whether he would have saved himself much trouble by writing *ZeroZeroZero* as a novel. In his way, he could have used false names for the gangsters and protect himself from their wrath. Actually non-fiction very often uses a hybrid form that he could have used, with frequent dramatisation of key scenes in the style of novels including dialogue that may or not have happened as it reproduced. Saviano's book is full of memorable, terrifying scenes and it's easy to imagine a soon-to-come film version based on them, as happened with *Gomorra* (made into a film in 2008). Yet, he uses mainly reporting prose to tell these stories, making it clear that his territory is not that of the novel, not even of the novelised non-fiction book in the style of Capote's pioneering *In Cold Blood*.

I don't take cocaine and never have, which is why in a way I can easily disconnect from Saviano's whistle blowing –I find people who choose to destroy their precious neurons as deserving of their sad fate as people who choose to drink or smoke themselves to

death. I know I sound smug but all addictions are initially a matter of choice. What I really appreciate in Saviano's books (and I know that here I'm writing like a bad student, introducing new ideas in what should be my conclusion) is his relentless portrayal of patriarchal masculinity.

Reading about the lives of gangsters in *Gomorra* and of the cocaine lords in *ZeroZeroZero*, men always destined to be eliminated by their competitors often in very cruel ways or to serve long jail sentences, one wonders what the attraction can be. Unlike the public gangsters we all have in mind, I mean the corrupt politicians who live *la vida loca* without hiding at all, Saviano's villains get, as the proverb about the wicked goes, no rest. He does explain in both books the simple truth: any disempowered man (and a tiny handful of women) given the chance to enjoy absolute power in his circle even at the risk of losing it all quickly will go for that, take his chance and hope it lasts.

Every time you snort white powder up your nose think of how you're upholding the most sinister version of patriarchy. I'm sure few think of that...

12-V-2014 A VINDICATION OF AUNTS... (READING THE *HARRY POTTER* SERIES)

I have been VERY busy finishing the edition of a collective volume which gathers together my students' essays on their experience of reading the *Harry Potter* series. This volume is called *Addictive and Wonderful*, a phrase borrowed from the essay in it by Marta Canals, and will hopefully be available on the internet soon. I'm publishing it on the UAB's repository as part of my personal campaign to vindicate the free dissemination of academic work, or, rather, of knowledge.

The volume runs to about 72,000 words, a full book. I decided, though, NOT to contact any publisher. I don't think this is a product to be welcome by a commercial or academic publishing house, I shudder just to think of the mess involved in asking Ms. Rowling and Warner Bros. for permission to publish anything on *Harry Potter* for profit, and I simply want publication to happen as I still teach the *Harry Potter* elective. My students are currently presenting to their classmates what they wrote for my benefit, and their reward will be the online publication. My own reward is how beautiful the volume is, trust me...

I'll say more about the collection when the volume is out. In the meantime, let me focus on a curious point in my students' memoirs about *Harry Potter*: the role of aunts. Though most of the 56 essays mention parents, to my surprise a very nice total of 14 mention aunts. Only 3 mention uncles... and very differently. I am an aunt myself, meaning that though childless and not particularly fond of children, I'm finding great personal fulfilment in the role (see the following post...). My four nieces are readers (not my nephew...) and it is for me particularly rewarding to choose books for them. I'm actually waiting for the eldest to be 11 to buy her the first *Harry Potter* book. After

reading what my students have to say about aunts, I wonder whether I can still wait for 18 more months...

In *Addictive and Wonderful*, aunts are seen to do their 'duty' by their nieces and nephews and buy *Harry Potter* books for their birthdays and Christmas, sometimes following the children's suggestions but also because they know Harry and seek to please them. In one case, a boy who was abandoned by his father with his great-uncle and aunt, whom he calls the Dursleys, is amazed when Aunt Dursley buys him a *Harry Potter* book –for that is the only real present he ever got from her (apart from socks...). In another touching case, the aunt is only a few years older than the niece and the first *Harry Potter* book is also the first present she gives the little girl. For the little girl, in her turn, this is the first 'real' book she gets. Other aunts, described as 'avid readers' keep an eye on what might interest their nieces and nephews and inform the parents, usually the mother. In some cases, it's the other way round: aunts buy what parents suggest.

Four of the seven aunts described as 'avid readers' not only buy some of the books or take the children to see some of the movies: they share the whole experience, also 'avidly'. A girl explains how her aunt got so interested in the books that she decided to learn enough English to read them in the original version; the girl followed her in this, borrowing the volumes from her aunt. A second girl is fortunate enough to share not only the books but the eight films as well with her aunt. Another girl names her aunt as an example of a person of a different generation also interested in the series. As proof that *Harry Potter* actually interested three generations, a fourth girl mentions a paternal aunt, who bought her niece the books on condition that she could borrow them!

Uncles, in contrast, are far less visible. A boy explains that his uncle and aunt, his godparents actually, gave him the first book as a Christmas present. The second uncle mentioned is employed at a printing press, and he simply gives his niece a pile of books, among which the first *Harry Potter*. The third uncle is mentioned but for exactly the opposite reasons why the aunts are mentioned. A girl recalls how her uncle upset her by declaring: "You're wasting your time. You don't really think you will be interested in *Harry Potter* in a few years, do you? By the time the last movie comes out you will be around 18. You will have long forgotten about it." Contradicting her short-sighted uncle, she writes: "But I think that is exactly the reason why I feel so attached to the saga. I grew up with it." A view most students subscribe.

Only 14 of the 56 essays are by young men, as this happens to be the ratio of men to women in class (actually I invited 2 students not registered in the course to submit essays). It is then quite logical that I have referred here mainly to essays by girls. The fact is that aunts are mostly mentioned by girls (boys very often mention mothers), and it might well be that we, aunts, manage better to form steadier relationship with nieces than with nephews. Part of that relationship consists, it seems, of making books available and even sharing them with our nieces. At least, I haven't come across an example of an aunt sharing *Harry Potter* with her nephew, though the sample surveyed might not be extensive enough. Alternatively, boys who have reading

mothers seem not to require reading aunts, whereas girls are happier to get as many reading females in the family as they can.

Ironically, though the supply of nice aunts seems to be quite satisfactory, the demand for nice uncles is by no means covered. A girl writes about Sirius Black, my own favourite character in the *Harry Potter* series and seemingly everyone else's (apart from Hermione for the girls) that Sirius was "the uncle I always wanted." Absolutely!! In the saga Sirius buys Harry a spectacular flying broom for Quidditch, but I can very well see him giving Harry... the first *Harry Potter* book and sharing the whole experience with him. The uncle I always wanted, indeed.

Professor Freud, poor thing, had no idea really...

12-V-2014 CONCHITA WURST, THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST AND A BEARD: A VINDICATION OF THE WORD 'PERSON'

For the last three years I have been watching the Eurovision Song Contest with two of my nieces. I think I grew nostalgic of the great fun that watching the show was for me as a little girl, hence the idea to share this with the girls, now 9 and 5. This year the experience has turned into a magnificent lesson in Gender Studies, which is why I'm writing this post. As a researcher, not just an aunt ;-)

As you, my reader, possibly know by now the winner turned out to be Austrian singer Conchita Wurst and her atmospheric song "Rise like a Phoenix". My eldest niece is quite alert to gender matters and highly sensitised against homophobia because of the presence of gay relatives and friends in her life. So I explained to her that both Russia and Belarus had demanded that Conchita's performance be censored for she happens to be... a lady sporting a beard. The homophobes all over Europe were horrified by her ambiguous looks and, I read on Friday, the Austrians had decided to support their representative by sporting fake bears (or natural ones the men) throughout the show. This is why before the show started, the girls and I built ourselves very nice beards (cut out from paper and painted with coloured pencils, then stuck to drinking straws, in the style of elegant carnival masks).

I loved best the lovely Dutch song and actually voted Conchita's second best in our own private family vote. My nieces were all for Iceland's Pollapönk, a band made up of four primary school teachers who charmed the girls with their colourful suits and lively performance. To my pleasure, the lyrics to their song "No prejudice" include the following refrain: "Let's do away with prejudice/ don't discriminate, tolerance is bliss/ we got to get together on this/ cross this problem off our list." My nieces found Conchita charming, we donned our beards as she sang (they made a paper wig for my husband!) and we were all generally happy that the Austrian representative won a very clear victory. It was a big night for Europe, a night in which prejudice was erased, if only a little bit. It all counts.

The following morning, I made a mistake: I Googled Conchita. I had initially decided not to worry about whether Conchita was the classic freak-show bearded lady in post-modern version, or a drag queen but curiosity bested me. Conchita is Tom Neuwirth and, if you ask me, he looks very nice as Tom though far less intriguing than Conchita. I asked my nieces whether they wanted to see Conchita with no make up and no beard and very wisely the youngest said no way. The eldest said yes, why not?... and got monumentally annoyed when she found out that Conchita, after all, was no freakish-looking lady but a guy. I tried to explain the concept 'drag queen' to her but she only got even more annoyed. She felt cheated.

So, here I was, the Gender Studies specialist, celebrating charming Conchita's triumph and considering whether this was the beginning of a new view of gender, with the word 'person' taking over, instead of 'man' and 'woman'. And there goes my niece to bring me back down to Earth. For her, sticking up to a woman, no matter in which shape, was fine; defending a man impersonating a woman, bearded or not, not so fine. How naïve of me to think we were moving forward.

Of course, she could not articulate the reasons for her dislike of Tom Neuwirth and I feel guilty for having kept up the fantasy that Conchita might be a girl. To add to this, my mother suggested that Conchita had won because of the morbid interest of audiences on her/his body, an idea which I tried to reject on the grounds of her exceptional voice –but which kept resurfacing as Sunday moved on. Today, Monday, I have decided to write this post but not touch Google again. We'll see how Conchita progresses or not.

To be honest, let me acknowledge that I don't sympathise much with male to female transvestites, as they impersonate a type of femininity that only exists in patriarchal fantasies. Sorry. What I like about Conchita is how the beard contradicts this stereotyped view of femininity. I had not classed her with the drag queens actually because they tend to be quite flamboyant and Conchita's style is more muted. I thought that the beard was a very clever comment on both transvestism and the whole drag queen phenomenon though I may have been duped by the facial hair into, as my niece saw, supporting a guy. Once more.

Let me go back, anyway, to that sweet moment when Conchita took the statuette that goes with the award and I saw on the screen a *person*, neither man nor woman, for it was an absolutely liberating moment. I have no idea about what Tom Neuwirth meant, maybe he just wanted his 15 minutes of fame, but I just wish there were more Conchitas around –and now I mention this, more men in skirts like the wonderful dancers accompanying the Irish singer. What a pity she didn't make it to the final...

All in all, I'm still very happy that the homophobes of Europe failed so utterly... Putin, eat this!!

18-V-2014 ADDICTIVE AND WONDERFUL: THE EXPERIENCE OF READING THE *HARRY POTTER* SERIES

As I explained two posts ago, I have been very busy editing a collective volume which gathers together my students' essays on their experience of reading the *Harry Potter* series: it's called *Addictive and Wonderful*. The .pdf file of the volume (132 pages!!) is now available online, from the UAB's repository, at <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/118225>. I am now in the process of publicising it among anyone who will listen and I'll ask you, please, to help me. I'm neither on Facebook nor on Twitter... Thanks.

As I explain in the 'Preface', I gathered together the essays thinking of writing an article which would contradict Harold Bloom's famous attack in *The Wall Street Journal* (November 2000). This is a review of the first volume in the series in which he called Rowling's young readers 'non-readers' and in which he basically came to the snobbish conclusion that 'oh, well, at least turning pages is better than using screens.' The 56 persons who have contributed to the volume (mostly BA students in my class, but also some MA students who showed an interest, my colleague Bela Clúa and myself), offer quite a different impression of the process of reading the series. Most, whether they were already readers or not, make the claim that reading *Harry Potter* confirmed their passion for reading –indeed beyond the series, and into the university.

The volume contributors were asked to write personal, informal essays (not academic) about their experience. I provided them with my own essay as a sample, which was written very much in the same chatty but earnest tone I use here. Logically, since I started reading Rowling's series at 38, my experience had to be different from theirs. Where I am flippant, they're candid, where I try to conceal my overreactions, they show pure emotion. After all, they're dealing with their own childhood. I must confess that some of the essays brought tears to my eyes, as the authors described difficult childhoods, marred by abandonment or divorce, and how they found comfort in reading *Harry Potter*. You will see, however, very easily why other essays moved me to tears for more positive reasons: for the happiness, enjoyment, pleasure the good memories transmit (often shared with mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins, aunts, friends...)

I invited my students to present orally to their classmates what they'd written and the three sessions we've used confirmed an unexpected find: the experience is quite homogeneous despite the cultural (and personal) differences. Students from Canada, Bulgaria, China, the United States and the United Kingdom narrated essentially the same process as my own Catalan and Spanish students (I make the distinction here because the language of their original contact with the series did matter). Many teachers of English Studies might be surprised to learn that impatience to know how the characters would fare led many of our students to attempt to read the books in English quite young (around 13), whether they were ready or not. They not only grew up with Harry, but learnt English with him. And here they are, reading more Literature in English with us.

Many aspects of the essays and of the situation I have stumbled into surprise me very much: as I write in the 'Preface' I have quite accidentally become a catalyser for an experience which, I think, is shared by many, many more students than we might think. I've had students bringing friends to class, another came from the Universitat de Barcelona last week as soon as I told him about my subject. Next week I'll be publicising the online volume in my school, we'll see what happens... I know that many are not only indifferent but also disdainful (not really hostile), but I myself have learnt plenty about my own approach to reading, and this is what matters in the end.

The email messages I have got from my colleagues mostly congratulate me on the initiative of working with the students (sorry, I feel very smug today!!). What I need to say here is that I firmly believe that the work I've carried out has application beyond the specific topic that occupies me. The good contacts with the staff that runs the DDD (the repository) at UAB are allowing me to self-publish not only my own academic work (strictly speaking, as this volume is also academic work) but also to test out new ideas as regards my teaching. In July I hope to publish a second volume on *Harry Potter*, this time with the best papers by the students. And next year, when I teach 'Gender Studies' I'll publish a volume with the students' own view of how gender issues affect them today. As a teacher told me, *Addictive and Wonderful* had allowed her to get an insight into who the students are and I think we need to learn that – at least as an ageing teacher, I need to find a way to learn who these young people are!

Send me comments or email me, please, if you happen to enjoy *Addictive and Wonderful*, as I hope you will. As I have. I must confess that when I finished the volume I burst out crying – I could only explain to my sympathetic husband that I was already nostalgic of a teaching experience I may never have again, not with the same emotional intensity. As we agreed in class, neither Literary Theory nor Literary Studies have quite managed to deal with emotion (not even in reader-response theory). Much less with our very deep need for the people whom we meet in the pages of the books we love best.

Harold Bloom and company... really...

25-V-2014 REVIEWING (FOR FREE): CONSIDERATIONS ON FREE TIME AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

I remember asking a few years ago a well-published Spanish writer –I was going to say 'professional' but she actually works as a lecturer– whether she ran a blog of her own. Elia Barceló, that was the author in question, answered she'd rather not write without getting paid (though I see she relented, at least for a while).

I often think of her words. When I wonder whether what I do by writing this blog is professional or personal (both, I think) and when I wonder how much spare time people have, seeing they offer countless reviews online... for free. I keep this blog, to be honest, for reasons of mental hygiene –I'm not enrolled in any gym (I did practice

yoga for four years but this seems to be over), yet I have turned out to be quite disciplined when it comes to forcing my neurones to take periodical exercise. Every four days ideally, at least once a week. Um, sounds like something else!!

Writing is always a pleasure but, as happens with any kind of sport, it is also a chore. I recall my Spanish Literature teacher in the last year at secondary school, the wonderful and demanding Sara Freijido, claiming that intellectual work is also physically tiring, something that for me, a blue-collar worker's daughter, was short of anathema... (imagine for my father!) So, like people who run marathons, I love writing but I have to force myself to do it. In a way the blog also exists to discipline me into curbing down the temptation to procrastinate (I find that I write faster but it still takes me forever to start academic articles). I recommend it...

All this comes from two main nagging ideas. One is my students' class presentations and comments on fan fiction; the other is my having read a very good review on Amazon.com (of Richard Morgan's SF novel *Altered Carbon*). Both ideas share this basic wonder or curiosity: how come people use their spare time for writing and for reviewing... just for the sake of it?

Possibly, this is because I don't understand very well the idea of free time. My main hobby has always been reading and, thus, whenever I have free time you'll find me with a book in my hands –which often becomes part of my professional pursuits. I use my 'real' free time for other matters such as seeing friends, going to exhibitions, theatre, concerts, etc... Yet, I don't do activities in my spare time that result in 'products', from, I don't know, a dress to... fan fiction or a review (this is why I think the blog is work, not leisure). It baffles me absolutely when I see people 'produce' something in their spare time, from muffins to... fan fiction or a review. It's so... Victorian!!

I read very often IMDB and Amazon reviews written by people with time in their hands and a wish to enlighten the world. I keep a list of films watched on IMDB, and in this way I force myself to go through the titles I have seen more or less every month. It's good to fix their imprint or lack thereof in my memory. IMDB offers the possibility of rating each film and also of writing reviews –I rate all the films I see but I never write reviews, particularly when I see hundreds of people have already contributed. If I write at all, it's only about very little known Spanish and Catalan films that deserve much more attention (or documentaries). I must have written about 6 reviews in total, out of a list recording more than 3,000 films watched.

I find that reviews should be limited to a couple of paragraphs, as people tend to write overlong pieces –yet, this adds to my bafflement about why they use so much energy in reviewing. Is it a didactic instinct or is it narcissism? I know that there are lists of 'top reviewers', people who have written literally hundreds of reviews, or more... Same with Amazon. Whenever I read a book, I check the most valuable negative review (I never find the most positive ones really trustworthy) and I marvel at how widespread the ability to offer good criticism is. Reviewing is a very hard exercise and when I read a good piece over 500 words long I know that the author has possibly employed a

couple of hours of his/her time for my benefit and anyone else's. That's, well, very nice.

I wonder what's happened to professional critics since the mid 1990s when everyone started publishing opinions online. I'm well aware that they may have managed to retain their authority since cultural consumers still make a distinction between the professional with a unique individual voice, and the amateur on the social network – who remembers their names? I'm also well aware that the reviewing realms I visit are heavily biased: to begin with, they're in English; second, there's always the suspicion that the enthusiastic reviewers that push totally forgettable books and films to the heights of hype are on someone's payroll. Still, they're there, making and breaking reputations.

Perhaps this works not so much because we want guidance, or sharing opinion, but because we're lazy. I had already read *Altered Carbon* years ago and dismissed it to the point that I gave the copy away. A variety of circumstances led me to think I had undervalued, perhaps, this novel, so I returned to it. Once I decided I wasn't going to include it in the course on SF I'm planning for 2015-16, I just got too lazy to think it through and pin down the reasons for my dislike. So, I checked *that* Amazon review and, well, *that* guy got it so right... His effort freed me to employ my neurones in writing this post. Some irony there.

One thing I can tell for sure: hardly any film with less than a 7 on IMDB is worth watching... This would be 3'5 stars for books on Amazon. And in a world with so much to read and see this is very valuable information. Isn't it wonderful that this comes out of so many people, so much free time?

28-V-2014 THE MATTER OF SCOTLAND AND WHY SCOTLAND MATTERS

Twenty years ago, I spent some time in Scotland on a scholarship as a doctoral student at the University of Stirling (though I eventually moved to Glasgow). I have kept since then an interest in Scottish Literature (you've read here about my beloved Iain M. Banks), and, intermittently, in the matter of Scottish independence. I actually consider the comparison between Scottish and Catalan nationalism one of my research areas, though a very minor one. I have published some pieces, which you can find in my website. Now I'm waiting for the end of 2014... to go on.

The thesis I have been arguing is that Scotland and Catalonia are vastly different but share, nonetheless, major traits: a dislike for political violence (unlike Ireland and the Basque Country nationalisms, at least until recently) and a strong civil society used to achieving goals through dialogue and compromise. Roughly speaking, as regards recent historical times, the Scots learned very much throughout the 1980s from Catalan 'autonomia' about how to proceed in their quest for Devolution. When this came, courtesy of Labour's Tony Blair, in 1996, the SNP vowed to stage a referendum for independence in 15 years time. 2011 did not bring the referendum itself, but it did

bring the election as Scottish PM of SNP's Alex Salmond. He fulfilled his electoral promise and the Scots will have a completely legal referendum on September 18 as we, Catalans, look on with envy.

Let me explain this envy, on very personal grounds. Yesterday I watched on TV3 the documentary 'Homage to Scotland', which I found tedious, predictable and conventional. I keep however, from it, two moments: one, the information about the White Book by the Scottish Government on the future of Scotland if the vote for independence wins (the .mobi file is already in my Kindle – where's the Catalan White Book, I wonder?). Two: David Cameron's campaign meeting, asking the rest of Britons to call their friends and relatives in Scotland to convince them to stay... because they love them. I know this is manipulative sentimentalism of the worst kind but, still, it's nice when you're asked by a friendly voice not to leave... because you're loved.

I'm not going to raise here the spectre of Catalanophobia so often invoked. I had a very long talk with my ex-student Samuel yesterday and I'll borrow his thesis that what marks the relationship between Spain and Catalonia is not hatred but indifference towards the other's reality. The way I see it, a major flaw of the Spanish state is its failure to instil pride in the cultural diversity of Spain because of its indifference towards variety. In a state proud of this amazing bounty, all children would be taught in school a smattering of the other languages of Spain –and the Spanish 'Presidente' would speak them reasonably (well, I don't know about Basque!). Instead, I have always felt that monolingual Spain sees the other cultures as either local eccentricities or irksome obstacles in the smooth path towards linguistic and cultural uniformity.

Spanish TV, for instance, has local regional branches in the 'other' languages, but it never shows a complete programme in Catalan, Galician or Basque on its national channel. You may spend your whole life in Spain and never hear someone speak the other languages on national TV for more than a minute or two. This, for me (remember I'm a philologist), is not reasonable. I know that the linguistic argument does not apply to Scotland, which is why I have always maintained that theirs is a completely different case. And, actually, what is absolutely misunderstood mainly by the Spanish nationalists and to a great extent by the Catalan nationalists is the bilingual, bicultural reality of most people in Catalonia. I'm happy to have had access from childhood to two languages and two cultures (no, I don't vote Ciutadans). Catalan must be protected by both the Catalan and the Spanish governments, for it is in danger of disappearing. At the same time, I know from the children in my family that an education in Catalan is no obstacle for active bilingualism.

I really think that Rajoy could take lessons from David Cameron. How can he not see that every time he says 'no' to Artur Mas's 9th November referendum independentism grows at least 1%? Will he turn out to be a bigger independentist, in the end, than Oriol Junqueras (by the way, a UAB colleague from the History Department...)? In Scotland many claim that their wish for independence is mainly due to Maggie Thatcher 1980s anti-Scottish policies. Just think of Rajoy calling Mas to say "don't go, we love you" (or even better, "no marxeu, us estimem"... or the equivalent in his native Galician), and you'll quickly understand what's missing here –call it political

hypocrisy, or genuine affection, I'm sure you'll agree with me that, at least, there's some kind of dialogue between Cameron and Salmond.

Insert here a deep bilingual (or trilingual) sigh...

1-VI-2014 DUBBING: THE IGNORED ACTORS

When I included the film adaptation of *Harry Potter* as a topic for my course I intended to consider how the movies betray or enhance the text –yes, the old-fashioned fidelity criterion. Also, I wanted to examine the very British cast. However, I ended transforming the two planned lectures into far more active sessions on, first, translation (with the help of Ariadna García Turón, working *Harry Potter* for her BA dissertation) and, second, dubbing.

A friend suggested that I contact Masumi Mutsuda, the actor who dubbed Harry into Catalan. Although a bit disoriented by his name (his dad is Japanese, his mum Spanish) I did so and he, very generously, allowed himself to be interviewed not only on Harry-related matters but on the much wider issue of dubbing. It was, for all of us, a great lesson on how culture works. Also, the best possible ending for the course.

Masumi's answers allowed us to understand not only how the whole process of dubbing a film works, starting with casting, but also how invisible this practice is. When I asked which scene I should show as a sample of his work, he chose one in *Deathly Hallows*, part 1, when Harry, Hermione and Ron –much stressed and on the run from Voldemort– quarrel. Ron then leaves. You should see the surprised faces of my American and British students, hearing the trio they know so well speak in a totally unknown language... We had to explain to them matters as peculiar such as the fact that several famous Hollywood actors share the same Spanish or Catalan voice. And this *is* odd. Yet, we take it for granted.

Dubbing was introduced by Hollywood studios as soon as sound made it into films (1927, *The Jazz Singer*). In the Babel tower that Europe is this resulted in a split in the 1930s between countries who opted for subtitling and those, like Spain, which chose dubbing. The high illiteracy rate of spectators made reading subtitles impractical. I refer to the times of the Spanish Republic (1931-6). Franco's regime, imitating Hitler and Mussolini, passed a law in 1941 banning subtitles in any language spoken in Spain and making dubbing compulsory, albeit only in Spanish Castilian. Subtitles were gradually allowed from the 1950s onwards (in Castilian, for art-house films). Dubbing into the other languages, however, only re-emerged in the 1980s with the new regional media. *Dallas* made TV3 very popular.

Masumi Mutsuda argued that, for the spectator, the most reasonable practice should be to see in the original version the films whose original language the spectator understands and, then, consume dubbed versions for the rest. This sounds very sensible. Yet, I put a stop to this in my own practice when I saw a Korean thriller (I forget the title) in which a gang of Chinese criminals and a gang of Korean villains met

to discuss business –they spoke English to each other but their native language among themselves. Now imagine all this dubbed into Spanish... Ironically, it seems Masumi dubbed the scene!!

Children, who cannot really read fast-moving subtitles proficiently until at least twelve (my guess), are quite another matter. I don't know how they manage in, say, Finland, when they show Disney films to kids who don't even know how to read, but in that context the matter of dubbing makes sense. Actually, Masumi and my own students were at the centre of a fascinating, still on-going war between the Generalitat and the Hollywood distributors for dubbing into Catalan.

I chronicled that in an article you can find in my web (<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinalegre/files/Culture%20&%20Power%20Major%20Films%20Minor%20Languages%20S%20Mart%C3%ADn.pdf>). Basically, Warner Bros. declined to dub the first *Harry Potter* film (*Philosopher's Stone*, 2001) into Catalan, despite having obtained already a subsidy to do so from the Catalan Government, Generalitat. 50,000 angry parents of the 200,000 children who'd read the book in Catalan (as many as children who'd read it in Spanish in Catalonia) started a furious campaign... that led Warner Bros. to apologise and to offer a few subtitled copies (useless...). They agreed to dub all subsequent *Harry Potter* films into Catalan. Now: my students were among these 200,000 children, the campaigners were their own parents or their peers, and Masumi was cast to be Harry from the second film onwards –he did dub the first one, too, for its TV3 release. He knew about the conflict, my students did not or had forgotten.

My students moved onto the original version of the books and films as soon as they could, around age 13, and often with great difficulties. Considering that most started reading *Harry Potter* aged between 7 and 10, you can see how great their dependence was on the translations of the books (and how nonchalantly these were produced!!) and on dubbing –in the language of their choice. Dubbing even affected the translation in the Catalan case and in many others it seems. The (very questionable) translator Laura Escorihuela was replaced after book four when she refused to give Warner Bros. for free the right to use her translation as the basis of dubbing for the first film. What a story...

Masumi tells me that in Japan dubbing actors (or voice actors, the term he uses) are big stars with specialised magazines, fans, etc. Here, even though their contribution is so crucial for our access to foreign culture and their quality amazingly high, they're anonymous. He himself, though a professional making a living off his trade, runs a small start-up company with some friends on the side. Just in case work turns slack.

I believe that film critics are very much to blame for this state of affairs. I hate it when they praise the work of a particular actor despite having seen a dubbed version of the film in question (when they even mispronounce the names of actors or characters that is obvious). If they got into the habit of seeing both versions and praising the talent of the voice actors, things would be quite different. The pretence that voice actors

contribute nothing and are just a transparent medium for the original actor to shine should be dropped urgently.

Thanks Masumi!! I'll do my best to teach this to anyone who'll listen.

8-VI-2014 FANTASIZING ALTERNATIVE FATHER FIGURES: *THE WAY, WAY BACK*

Just three posts ago I wrote about reviewing in websites like Amazon or IMBD. Today I'm opening this post with my eyebrows raised because the IMDB reviews I've just been reading for a film I enjoyed last night (Nat Faxon & Jim Rash's *The Way, Way Back*, 2013) seem to describe ten different films. The average rating for the film is 7'4. For me it's an 8. For 7605 voters this is a 10, for 629 this is a 1 (IMDB does not allow 0s). How can I recommended it in view of this? How can anyone recommend anything, I wonder?

I'm taking then an oblique angle on the film to say: Potterheads, if you care to see a successful Muggle version of the Harry-Sirius relationship, this is it. For this a story about a teen boy, Duncan, who finds someone who cares, Owen. And what I love about Owen, and possibly what any Potterhead loves about Sirius, is that neither has the obligation to care. Yet they do.

Let me explain. Most teen pics focus on 16-year-olds discovering how to empower themselves in relation to their parents and peers. Duncan is, in contrast, totally disempowered. He's just 14, that uncomfortable age in which he cannot yet refuse going on a summer holiday with his mum, her obnoxious new boyfriend and his odious teen daughter. Raised by a divorced mother too scared, as she confesses, to face life alone, and distant from a father who does not care for him, Duncan needs badly a reliable man in his life. Trent, the boyfriend, is simply hateful –a Dursley if I've seen one. At the film's start he asks Duncan how he'd rate himself on a scale from 1 to 10. The boy, confused and upset, answers 6. Trent (based on a stepfather of one of the film directors) replies that for him Duncan's just a 3. What kind of man, later Duncan wonders, would ask a boy a question like that?

As I've been arguing for years, the main topic of US cinema is not romantic love but the father-son bond. Fun or tragic, Leia and Han Solo, Amidala and Anakin are not the centre of the story –the centre is Darth Vader's revelation to Luke Skywalker that he's Luke's father. Whether close or absent, fathers are mostly inadequate, as films written by men have been complaining for about three decades. *Fight Club* (both novel and film) has that devastating dialogue in which Tyler Durden and his alter ego (or viceversa) come to the conclusion, after discussing how useless their absent fathers are, that "We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need." Indeed no. The answer is an (alternative) father figure.

As fantasy father figures go, Owen is great. He's, I think, what Sirius could have been without the long years in prison, the bitterness. Even though Owen is the embodiment of irresponsibility when it comes to his own life and job (he manages a water park), he acts very responsibly by Duncan. He takes the boy under his wing, gives him a job and embarks him on a programme aimed at raising his self-esteem, dispelling his overwhelming shyness. It works reasonably well given the short span Duncan spends (secretly) under Owen's tutelage. Harry would have been so happy to have Sirius help him this way.

Funnily, neither the film nor the reviewers note how complicated navigating the matter of sexuality is here. A spectator does complain that the film is sexually too sanitized, another one that Duncan's mother is too careless about the company his son keeps. The boy simply does not tell his mother where he's working and who for, and this seems right for, surely, relationships between boys and adult men are so contaminated by the sad reality of abuse that it's hard to imagine how the fine friendship that develops in the film could happen in real life.

The Way, Way Back is a very simple tale in comparison to *Harry Potter*, and there's absolutely no need for Owen to sacrifice himself at all as Sirius does. What the film highlights for me is how necessary the intervention of well-meaning adults is for young people (and I also include girls) beyond the family circle. Yet, if the intervention of adults entitled to help, such as teachers, is difficult enough, imagine how impossible to digest is the presence of someone like Owen –who helps Duncan just because he feels like doing it.

You may undermine all this by arguing that in reality Owen would seek some satisfaction, whether sexual or emotional, but, well, I'm not discussing reality, I'm discussing fantasy, for this is a fantasy no doubt. What the directors and screen playwrights are showing is wishful thinking, but as it always happens with wishful thinking what matters is the absence, the lack it is built on.

Food for thought, there in Hollywood and here.

13-VI-2014 GIVING ADVICE ON ACADEMIC CAREERS: AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK

In the last month I have given advice to three students who'd like to pursue an academic career and, to be honest, I didn't know what to tell them. The easiest part is describing the mechanics of doctoral programmes and the accreditation system. The hardest part is assessing for them their chances to ever get a job as a university teacher. Slim, really slim.

I myself came up with this crazy idea that I wanted to be a university teacher of Literature at 17, in my last year in secondary school. My family are working class and I knew from a very early age that a) I didn't want to work in a factory, b) I didn't want to

work in an office. Being a teenager myself, and not liking teenagers that much (nor younger children) but having a vocation to teach, I realised the university had to be my choice.

Also, the person I most admired then was my Spanish Literature teacher, Sara Freijido Fidalgo, a formidable woman. I was in such awe of her wisdom that I even failed an exam with her, the only time I've failed a Literature exercise in my life. Retrospectively, I wonder why someone as brilliant as Dr. Freijido (I think she was a doctor, I'm not sure) had not been kept by the University of Barcelona, where she'd been an associate teacher, rumours indicated. Add to this the mysterious words that my friend Eva Ceano pronounced when I announced to her my decision to be like this other Sara but in a university context (and teaching English, not Spanish Literature): 'You know they're a mafia, right?' No, I didn't (Eva had the middle-class background, not I) but her warning has helped to keep me on my toes. Since then.

Mafia, no, not quite. Feudal system (that's another label often heard) no, not quite. What is true is that, as I discovered in my own case, university teachers are also talent scouts, always bearing in mind certain talented students for whenever a job comes up. In my own case (sorry to sound so smug), I did get a call, but then I had to compete hard for the position that had opened. I continued competing hard with others for the following 11 years, until I got tenure –endogamy, yeah, sure... Not for me.

When I responded enthusiastically to that early call, the person who made it poured a little cold water over my hot head by warning me that the pay was low, less than I was making as an English teacher in a language school. Who cared? I was in... Nobody warned about what was coming to my life, which often felt like the worst nightmare, but I would not have listened anyway. That's the problem with vocations: you don't listen.

So when I meet students as keen as I was on an academic career and I paint to them the whole black panorama, I still see that look of resistance in their eyes –I'm going to try, anyway, I don't care what you say. When I tried myself, there were full time jobs for beginners without doctoral degrees because the Socialist Government was investing much money on public education and the university was soaking it up. Today, 23 years later, the full time jobs are gone and nobody knows how we're supposed to train the new generation of teachers. According to a recent report by the Tribunal de Cuentas, a major problem is that although the Spanish university has too many teachers, it keeps on hiring staff and even offering tenure. This totally mystifies me, as it is by no means what I have seen in more than two decades in my own Department. We have always had too few teachers.

Actually, the situation is getting worse all the time. Just last week, we were told that the vacancies left by retired or deceased teachers will simply disappear in a new 'clean-slate' policy. We counted on these vacancies (six in our Department) to consolidate the aspiring tenures with accreditations who've been around for more than ten years, as no new positions (as mine was) are being created. I'm well aware

that other Departments are overstaffed but I'm more and more certain that this is a case of 'justos-por-pecadores.'

I'll explain, then, in case someone else is interested, that whereas I could produce my doctoral dissertation in three years while I was employed full time as a teaching assistant by UAB, now aspiring academics are on their own. From the beginning of the MA to post-doc level universities offer practically no help. I've seen recently a very brilliant student, with close links to the research group I belong to, be denied all grants – he's migrating to Holland. Clearly, they're cropping us off at the bottom, and at the top. I very often feel I'm the last of the Mohicans.

I guess that those with the stamina which the challenge requires will find ways to train on their own for an academic career and then come knocking on our doors in ten years' time. Necessarily, some position will then come up, unless the plan is to wipe out the entire Spanish university. A fast ageing teaching establishment makes very little sense in a fast changing world. When I mentioned there were plans to perhaps extend our retirement age to 75 (it's 70 currently) one of my male colleagues expressed his hope that the authorities would take into account weakened prostates...

There are days when I feel not only privilege but also guilty when I think about the future of the younger academics, even though I'm trying to do my best to help them. The only thing I can say is good luck, don't give up, fight the fight. We do need you.

19-VI-2014 ATTACKING ACADEMESE IN THE HUMANITIES: THE HARD SF VIEW (ON GREG EGAN'S *TERANESIA*)

Reading the SF novel *Teranesia* (1999) by Australian novelist Greg Egan, I'm surprised to find an anti-academese critique embedded in a key subplot.

The protagonist Prabir, a teenager, and his younger sister Madhusree lose their parents in the first segment of the book. The couple, Indian scientists doing research on a mysterious butterfly in a remote Indonesian island, are killed in terrible, war-related circumstances. The children survive to be eventually fostered by a cousin, Amita, who works as a 'Diana Studies' lecturer in Canada. Her ex-partner, Keith, whom she keeps around in case the children need a "male narrative" is also an academic specialising in 'X-Files Theory'... Egan, whose domain is hard science-fiction, has a BA in Mathematics, according to Wikipedia, and used to make a living as a computer scientist before becoming an author. He has very little sympathy for the current theory-based Humanities discourse. Or maybe this is a case of seeing the Emperor's clothes for what they are. Only he misses the point that there seems to be more than one Emperor.

Amita and Keith are good people, well meaning by the kids who are so unexpectedly dropped on their laps. It's just that they speak academese all the time, the kind of jargon you do find in academic publications on Feminism, Literary Theory, Cultural

Studies, etc. too often. Egan gets it right, to my great amusement, but quite humourlessly, forgetting that the liberal humanities crowd is doing much to get SF out of the ghetto. Including hard SF. I'm not going to defend that kind of molasses-thick prose whose meaning very often collapses the moment you attempt translation –not only into another language but into simpler terms. I'll let you judge whether Egan goes too far.

One day brilliant Madushree returns from school, she's just 9. What have you learned today?, Amita asks. Her lesson: since in the 1960s and 1970s people's fight in the streets and the institutions for actual power –both in feminist and civil rights movements– was beginning to succeed, the concerned Government had to seek a solution to curb it down. In the 1980s the CIA, Madushree explains, “hired some really clever linguists to invent a secret weapon: an incredibly complicated way of talking about politics that didn't actually make any sense, but which spread through all the universities in the world, because it sounded so impressive.”

The new babblers eventually hijacked street activism, and delegitimized its language, so that instead of shouting “‘How about upholding the universal principles you claim to believe in?’ the people in the social justice movements ended up saying things like ‘My truth narrative is in competition with your truth narrative!’” Logically, those in power could then dismiss their claims as unintelligible. “And the secret weapon,” Egan has his little puppet conclude, “lived on in the universities for years and years, because everyone who'd played a part in the conspiracy was too embarrassed to admit what they'd done.”

I agree with Egan that academic prose in the Humanities has been colonised by unnecessary, distorting jargon that seems designed to obscure rather than illuminate meaning. Obviously, there is no conspiracy, although I'm well aware that an inability to spout certain types of jargon is a serious obstacle to publication in many major journals. Whenever I hear someone confidently delivering a paper in a conference written in said jargon, I marvel at how it is done. It often feels like a foreign language embedded in English which I will never master. I do doubt that, apart from papers, though, people speak like this in real life, at least I've never heard anyone use the language Amita uses with the children in *Teranesia*. Language from which Prabir feels called to protect his sister to the point of claiming a very early emancipation from Amita, which even jeopardises his own education.

Madushree, who chooses to pursue an education as a scientist, plays in the late stages of *Tiranesia* a crucial role, though still an undergrad. Here's the joke on Egan: these final chapters of his novel (too hurried, not that well written) reveal ultimately the inability of current scientific language to connect with the average reader. I trusted that the medical bio-babble his characters were spouting made sense in a scientific context, though some reviewers pointed that was not the case. The particular problem revealed by Egan's dialogue, I'll insist, is that hard SF highlights the enormous distance between scientists and non-scientists in our current culture. As everyone knows, of course, who is aware of the disputes in the field of SF between the hard and soft options.

Egan, of course, would tell you that unlike Amita and Keith he is using accurate language and that for him a spade is a spade. I can even hear Amita and Keith celebrating the complexity and richness of Egan's scientific mentality, and even defending the idea that they're contributing to creating a scientific vocabulary for the Humanities (as if criticism needs that). I just feel frustrated that while he sees that the Humanities' Emperor may be naked, he does not see –quite stubbornly– that the Sciences' Emperor is, if not naked, at least wearing very strange clothes.

I wonder how Egan and Amita would communicate if left alone for coffee. And if anyone listening in would understand a single word.

22-VI-2014 UNIVERSITY TEACHERS WHO DON'T DO RESEARCH (SO, WHAT DO THEY DO?)

A pleased colleague tells me he's been awarded the fifth 'sexenio', which means that his last personal research assessment exercise was positive and that he has validated by now, before the corresponding Ministry's agency, 30 years of research. He tells me that this fifth exercise is valid for the rest of his professional life and so he need not worry about the sixth 'sexenio' (which is also the maximum allowed).

He is particularly happy that under the current Ministry's regulations he'll only have to teach 16 ECTS until he retires. I understand his happiness. The little detail missing here is that he's already 60. He still has 10 years ahead before retirement at 70 and, so, the chance to obtain that last 'sexenio'. But, well, excuse me, 60 seems respectable enough anyway for active researchers like him to be awarded some kind of leeway after 30 years of service...

I think of myself trudging on, with at least 9 years ahead in the best case scenario, before capturing the golden snitch of that fifth 'sexenio', or else. Else meaning that instead of my current 16 ECTS I'll be 'punished' if I fail to validate my research with 24, or at worst 32 ECTS. My colleague and I discuss after his happy news how little enticing the system is now. The perspective of my reaching the nice age of 60 burdened by 32 ECTS despite all my research sinks me. Just don't think, as we all know, that doing research is the same as having research officially validated.

Deep sigh...

Searching for information about that fabled fifth 'sexenio', however, I come across a piece of news that both puzzles and irritates me. Angers me. The headline, from ABC (<http://www.abc.es/sociedad/20140505/abci-educacion-universidades-rectores-201405041703.html> 06/05/2014), claims that 'Más de la mitad de los profesores de universidad apenas investiga' which is a peculiar way of saying that 'Less than half of the Spanish university teachers do research'. Empty bottle, full bottle. The sub-headline is a bit trickier, for it clarifies that 'El 57% del personal docente tiene uno o

ningún sexenio reconocido.' I wonder whether this is misinformation... How many of those with one 'sexenio' are still active researchers? If not, why they did abandon research? Can you really compare someone who does have a 'sexenio' with someone who's never cared or bothered to publish?

Let me gather some figures from the article. According to a 2010 report by the Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades Españolas (CRUE), Spain occupies position 22 worldwide by scientific documents by million inhabitants, 16 by number of citations. Not that horrific. But now consider more figures, connected with that 57'6%: 37'6% of Spanish university teachers have no 'sexenio', 20% has one. Now for the remaining 42'4%: 18'4% has two. If my calculator is right 24% have three or more 'sexenios'. My five-sexenio colleague must be in the top 5%... Yet... Only 70% of all full professors, 40% of all lecturers do research (how the rest got their tenure mystifies me; maybe it's a matter of 'when').

If you follow me, this means that the minority, the 42'4% who has more than two 'sexenios', is producing the documents that result in that 22nd position. I know that my argumentation is quite murky but so is the reality of the Spanish university. Between 42'4% and 60'4% care or have care at some point for validating their research (that's not compulsory, by the way, it's voluntary). Let me wonder about the remaining 37'6%.

I know quite a few cases in which research is being done but the Ministry has not validated it for its own reasons (lack of money being one, surely). So, let's suppose that the actual figure of university teachers who do no research at all is 20%. One in five. These are teachers who, let's recall this, are employed the same number of hours I am and earn the same salary (minus the research complements, a grand total of 120 euros a month each). If all teachers are supposed to teach, do research and contribute to admin tasks, what do those who only teach do in their daily routine? I wonder.

By contract we're supposed to work 37,5 hours a week, with a teaching workload of 6 to 8 hours for teachers employed to teach 24 ECTS. Teaching involves 15 weeks per semester. If I manage to do my teaching, my admin tasks and my research by working, say, a 45-hour-week (evening and weekend reading aside), what do the colleagues who only teach do? If, for me, say, teaching involves half my workload, 22 hours a week, what do they do with the spare 15'5 hours? Suppose they read though, of course, reading is not the same as doing research, not even in the Humanities, as we're supposed to write and publish. But, here's the creepy thought, suppose they do nothing professionally relevant in that time.

Now complete the sentences:

*if that 20% put their 15'5 hours a week to the service of research...

*if validating regularly your own research was compulsory and not voluntary, teachers who do no research...

*if the Ministry's validation system was more supportive of researchers...

And:

*if 'sexenios' are used to punish rather than reward, the effect...

9-VII-2014 NETWORKING: BEYOND THE ANGLO-AMERICAN WORLD?

[The last two weeks have been too hectic for me to keep up the pace of regular posting here. Yes, teaching is over but not marking, or BA and MA examining boards. Bureaucracy is, well, eating me alive. Every time friends or relatives ask me whether I'm already on holiday I go ballistic...]

Two very different matters lead me to consider today networking. One is a conference, the other a doctoral dissertation.

Recently, I attended in Barcelona the Spring conference of At Gender: The European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation (<http://www.atgender.eu/>). I found out about this association through an email sent by the Institut Interuniversitari d'Estudis de Dones i de Gènere, to which I belong –and whose name has always puzzled me (aren't women gendered??). Since I'm used to English Studies conferences it took me a while to get the idea behind At Gender: no Americans, hardly any Brit, plenty of Scandinavian scholars and many others from all over central and eastern Europe. Ah!, I thought, so Europe does exist after all –how nice.

I did enjoy the panels I attended and met two awesome ladies, one from Finland, one from Barcelona itself. Chances for networking? Well, frankly much higher with the local lady than with the other lady for, let's be frank about it, it's hard to keep in touch with people you are with for a couple of days, much easier to meet for coffee with someone nearby. Second observation about networking: attending a conference in one's city is a very bad idea as the need to socialise (=network) with one's peers is lower than if you're thrown together with them in a distant location. Third observation: once an association has been running for years, the chances for new incomers to network diminish as the basic nets have been formed. When you see so many people greeting each other by first name, the chances to introduce yourself and start conversation dwindle (or that must be my shyness). Anyway, so that you know: At Gender exists, and so does the grandly named, EU-funded 'European Institute for Gender Equality' (<http://eige.europa.edu>). That its central office is in Vilnius, Lithuania says all I need to know about how peripheral gender is to the European Union. With apologies to gender scholars in Vilnius.

My doctoral student Auba Llompart, author of an impressive dissertation on children's Gothic to be soon submitted, has applied for a 'Mención Europea'. This is a certificate added to her doctoral degree stating that she has done research elsewhere in Europe for at least 3 months under another scholar's supervision. Now, if you're into English Studies, 'elsewhere in Europe' means Britain, where, by the way, hardly anyone knows what a 'Mención Europea' is. It turns out this is not a way of certifying all over Europe that you're a doctor but just something that Spanish universities are promoting, with validity in two or three more countries.

Anyway, Auba must have on her board a foreign expert and we have invited someone from the British university where she did her research. Now, here's the tricky situation: we need two other scholars to act as external examiners and write reports on her dissertation. It seems that one of these can also be based at a British university but the other must be based in some other European country. Uff. Not that easy... as my networking gravitates towards Britain.

Apart from the corresponding emails to anyone who might help, I spent a couple of hours surfing Academia.edu, trying to make a list of suitable specialists outside Britain. Start with my own contacts, check those of my followers and of people I follow, use research labels to locate other scholars and so on. I came up with a couple of names, one in Germany and one in Sweden but what Academia.edu revealed was what I already knew: networking is pyramidal, with the UK and the USA at the top. You get a smaller web of local connections (Spanish scholars following each other) and then a bigger web of international connections all pointing to 'Anglo-America'. How many, say, Finnish and Italian scholars know of each other? If any? Something's wrong here, I'm not sure what. Surely, my non-British equivalents in academic inclinations and aspirations must exist in all European countries, but how do we find each other?

Conferences? Well...

13-VII-2014 BA DISSERTATIONS/TFGs: EMOTION RUNNING HIGH...

Oddly enough, BA dissertations are eliciting quite a high degree of personal involvement from both students and teachers. I say oddly enough because this is unexpected for a dissertation at this basic level, and because the teachers are not reacting in the same way to students in their own BA courses. Possibly, not even to their own tutorees if registered in those.

I'm aware that BA dissertations are common in many degrees all over Europe. In Spain, as happens, until recently they were a requirement only for Engineering and Architecture old style 'Licenciaturas' (for which students actually submitted 'projects'). Some bureaucrat in the Education Ministry had the 'brilliant idea' of introducing dissertations without taking into account how the staff would cope with so many... nor the high anxiety that naming them 'degree's final work' ('trabajo de fin de grado') would generate among students.

It is, however, simply not true that the new BA dissertation comes at the end of the degree (for us the only requirement is that a student has passed 160 credits), nor is it true that the TFG has an impact on the whole degree. It certainly tests the specific competences of the degree but it is, after all, just one more subject. It should have been named something like 'Advanced Academic Skills', or, perhaps just 'Project.' The problem is that we're beginning to tell ourselves this now, two years into organising the TFG. If we had started with this plain truth rather than with the assumption that

the TFG was a kind of proto-MA dissertation or the students' only chance to truly choose a subject for themselves we'd be better off today. Both sides.

Although numbers have been growing, and many more students have submitted their TFG this second year than the first (63 instead of the original 22), we have tried to maintain the spirit of that first year, when we used too many hours to tutor the pioneering students who dared submit their TFG first. With a growing demand (perhaps up to 90 for 2014-15), we have no option, though, but to curb down the students' and our own enthusiasm –though, to my surprise, this has already led to intense misencounters among teachers. Some feel somehow sorry that students will no longer be given the chance to freely choose their topic (we'll offer a closed list, pre-inscription will depend on the student's average grade); others (like me) worry above all about the impossible workload we've been assuming in the first two editions.

The personal involvement I was talking about, nevertheless, has other foundations apart from the so far free choice of tutor and topic. One is the decision we made to have supervisors (or tutors) be present as examiners in the oral presentation; the second, the decision to honour two deceased colleagues.

Generally speaking, the impression is that we tend to overvalue TFGs as tutors/supervisors, since the final product comes at the end of quite a long process, which may have involved many meetings with the student (an exceptional situation in relation to our regular courses). In contrast, the second examiner knows nothing about this and generally has a less involved view of the matter.

About the presence of the supervisor in the oral exam, I'm myself in two minds about it. On the one hand, I'd rather 'protect' my students from that second less sympathetic examiner (though, to be fair, this is not always the case); on the other hand, as second examiner I have often felt quite annoyed by having to put up with other supervisors' fierce defence of their students. About the prize awarded to the best Language and the best Literature TFGs in honour of our deceased colleagues, this has unleashed a strange competition among tutors promoting the candidacy of this or that student. Strange in the sense that, from what I have seen, who happens to tutor the best TFG is quite a lottery.

I have been asking colleagues in other Departments how they have organized matters both to limit teachers' workload and to reach fairer standards of judgement. My impression is that the same problems are repeated everywhere. A colleague explained to me that she's tutoring 19 *different* TFGs, the figure necessary for her tutoring to count as 6 ECTS, or a full course. This is, for me, madness (sorry)...

In our case, we started with 2 to 3 TFGs per teacher, supervised for free, apart from our official teaching hours. We're still following this pattern, complemented with a novelty. With the application of the new teaching model, some teachers will have to supervise up to 10 TFGs to complete their teaching workload, a situation which surely calls for some kind of streamlining. We're asking students to work on very similar TFGs

if possible connected with electives (you're teaching Shakespeare? Then you tutor that year only TFGs on Shakespeare). We'll see how all this works.

I know students are not too happy, as the chances for a free choice of topic and tutor have dramatically diminished –and we're bracing ourselves for the pairings in which neither tutor nor student will be happy to work together. Yet, there is only so much we can do before putting at risk precious time we need for research.

About my own experience, well, in the first edition I tutored three TFGs in which I was personally highly involved as I loved the topics and enjoyed the whole process very much (you may read them following the links in my own website). This year I have tutored three more, and though I loved once more the topics, contact with my tutees has been more erratic, my involvement lower. Ironically, I have established the closest working and personal relationship with the student I have tutored online. Her TFG has been, all in all, an experience I'll never forget on literary, academic and personal grounds –she's done very well, of which I'm proud and happy. So you see...

I spent, by the way, two very enjoyable days attending the 23 TFG presentations (which I coordinated)–for, as I told everyone, I'm so fed up with discussing only bureaucracy with my colleagues that the chance of talking books was absolutely refreshing.

This, of course might be the root of that personal involvement I mentioned at the beginning of the post. The hours spent tutoring are often the only real chance along the semester to discuss books in depth with someone equally involved (which is not always the case in BA classes). What a pity, then, this will have to change... for lack of time.

15-VII-2014 'HEAVILY FICTIONALISED': THE SADISTIC TREATMENT OF ARTEMISIA IN *300*, *RISE OF AN EMPIRE*

When I saw Zack Snyder's *300* (2006), based on the graphic novel by Frank Miller, I knew at once that was a film I would write about –infuriating but original, ridiculous but deliciously camp, dangerous in its exaltation of laddism but key to understand today's patriarchal backlash.

I did write about it, criticising its failure to produce a dignified model of masculinity for the hero and its blatant homophobia. You may see the results at my own web (<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/content/chapters-books>). I also included it in the syllabus of the sessions I teach on heroism for the Cultural Studies module in UAB's MA in Literary and Cultural Studies. It never fails to stir debate, particularly as regards its wild departures from historical evidence.

Sooner or later, then, I was bound to see the sequel, *300: Rise of an Empire*, directed by Noam Murro, but scripted, like *300*, by Zack Snyder and Kurt Johnstad, and also

based on a graphic novel by Miller, *Xerxes*. I'm now horrified –not just in an intellectual sense, meaning that I abhor the film for its low quality. I'm horrified in a very physical sense, for I am worried sick about the (possible) reactions of male audiences when seeing what is done to Artemisia, played by Eva Green. Let me explain. (I'm actually writing this to keep a clear memory of my dread for future reference, as I need to teach *300* again in the MA and in my new BA course on 'Gender Studies').

300 takes the story of Leonidas's defeat by Xerxes at the Battle of Thermopylae and turns it into a celebration of the male body in military action. A handful of almost naked Spartans sporting awesome six-pack abs maim in slow motion, displaying plenty of blood and guts, the heavily-clad, ineffectual 'Immortals.' The Persian forces are led, to cap this widely distorted version of History, by an orientalised Xerxes styled as a barbarian drag queen. The whole concept depends on the by now famous scenes of carnage and on the unwitting camp subtext contributed by Rodrigo Montoro's bejewelled Xerxes and, to a great extent, by Gerard Butler's tongue-in-cheek performance as Leonidas. If anyone on that set understood how preposterous the whole film was, that was Butler.

If you check IMDB you will see that the tide in favour of *300*, by now a cult film, has not abated in eight years. The film still has a remarkable 7'8 rating despite the many protests from Iranians outraged at Hollywood's mistreatment of the glories of the Persian Empire (the Americans were then occupying Iraq). *300: Rise of an Empire* (which empire? even the title is confused) has a much more modest 6'5 rating, absolutely too high in view of the trash this film is.

What has changed is the amount of resistance from those misrepresented. Many non-American spectators, including many from Iran and Greece, have raised their voices against this atrocity for its total disregard of the History books (a matter that begs the question of why historians work at all). Among the very negative reviews only one, though, complained that Eva Green's Artemisia is an 'obscene' rendering of the Strong Female Character. In contrast, and this is scary, her Artemisia is often praised among the most positive opinions about the film (mainly by American men).

The point I want to raise here is not so much a complaint against this Queen's misrepresentation on the screen but in particular about the end that Green's Artemisia receives. The historical character was, though Greek, a wily ally of Xerxes. She did command five ships in the battle of Salamis, which she survived with a little bit of trickery. And, well, she was an aristocrat, daughter, wife and mother of kings and a queen herself. Instead, Miller, Snyder and Johnstad imagine her as an orphan raised by Xerxes' father Darius, saved from a miserable life of sexual abuse after her whole family is massacred by the Greeks. The girl is raised to be, basically, a psychopathic killing machine enmeshed in an obsessive game of revenge. She participates with the same glee as the Athenians in killing and maiming her enemies.

What scared me is that the whole point of this movie is raising a justification to (spoilers!!) kill Artemisia. Queen Gorgo, Leonidas's widow, is given the narrator's voice and the final battle scene as a way to maintain a certain political correctness, if that

makes any sense at all. Yet, the whole concept behind this sequel is justifying the scene in which Athenian general Themistocles (played by a totally useless Australian actor) stabs Artemisia in the belly (the womb?), draws the corresponding explosion of blood and watches her die. What you see –forget about the characters– is a heavily muscled man doing his ‘duty’: killing a woman, who, well, was asking for it.

In a previous scene, said Themistocles is, predictably, seduced by beautiful Artemisia in an extremely ugly and vulgar scene, which is anything but subtle. The whole point in that scene is that Themistocles gets to fuck (excuse me) Artemisia but refuses her tempting offer to side with her in battle –thus humiliating her. I forgot to say that Xerxes, who respected the real Artemisia very much, slaps this one hard as soon as he has the chance.

Strong Female Characters, about whom I wrote a post last September, reach with Artemisia a sad climax. Male screen writers routinely present them in isolation from other women, as signs of how freakish female empowerment is, and, what is more worrying in *300: Rise of an Empire*, as embodiments of pure misogyny disguised as something else (justified enemy hatred in battle). You might argue that Miller, Snyder and Johnstad’s Artemisia is the very incarnation of Judith Halbertsamy’s questioned ‘female masculinity’ and, thus, a step beyond femininity.

The physical prowess she displays, though, which is simply impossible in real life in which even a small gang of brutal men can overpower any woman, is by no means intended to cheer women up but to give a further justification for Artemisia’s murder – for, after all, she shows herself quite capable of attacking Themistocles. Her choice to die as an honourable enemy rather than live captive (again) makes sense in the patriarchal script. Still, no matter, I see a man kill a woman callously and brutally for ‘justified’ reasons.

What made my hair stand on end was the realization that lads all over America, and possibly in other countries, must have cheered on at this climax. Green/Artemisia’s screen death is, of course, just one more among many thousands cinema has depicted, both male and female. Yet, what makes it particularly galling for me is that Artemisia is initially presented as a victim of patriarchal violence as a child and a young woman. The victim grows revengeful by embracing the very violence that turned against her family and for that she is victimised again –not raped, as she becomes too powerful for that, but killed.

So much for (anti-patriarchal) justice.

22-VII-2014 PUBLISHING IN SLOW MOTION (AND OTHER LIMITS TO PUBLICATION)

Last summer 2013 I managed to finish two articles I’d been working on for a long time. One is called “Rewriting the American Astronaut from a Cross-cultural Perspective:

Michael Lopez-Alegria in Manuel Hueriga's documentary film *Son and Moon* (2009)" and the other's title is "A Demolition Job: Scottish Masculinity and the Failure of the Utopian Tower Block in David Greig's Play *The Architect* and Andrew O'Hagan's Novel *Our Fathers*."

The reason why they took so long to write is that lately I have very little quality time for writing, which means that basically I can only find two or (with luck) three weeks in July/August to write in peace and quiet. It's very frustrating to see how productive a single week off email and teaching can be in comparison with the usual weeks during the course, with time split among a myriad little things.

Anyway, as any scholar knows, completing an article is just a small step in the long process of publishing. For both essays I had a certain idea of to which journal I wanted to send them. In the case of the article on Hueriga's atmospheric documentary on the manly Lopez-Alegria I chose first a journal on masculinities studies. They found it inappropriate, since they focus on sociology mainly, but pointed me in the direction of *Culture, Society and Masculinities* from the same Men's Studies Press. This was fortunate, as the editor found me sympathetic reviewers. This week I have finished the revisions I was asked to introduce and I'm very happy to say that the article is off my hands.

I did agree with the reviews though, as usual, they suggested several small modifications that have made my article grow to almost 10,000 words. The whole process is so slow that a film I mentioned in a footnote, not yet released, occupies now a long paragraph, as it's become practically inevitable to discuss it regarding the astronaut on screen (I mean *Gravity*). All in all, my astronaut has kept me busy for about two and a half years, since I first saw *Son & Moon* and knew *I had to write about it* during Christmas 2011. The article will come out next Spring 2015, making this process in a total three and a half years long. That's the happy story.

Now for the unhappy one. I first read Andrew O'Hagan's novel *Our Fathers* back in 2002 and saw David Greig's acclaimed play *The Architect* at Teatre Lliure in January 2011. I can safely say, then, that the idea for the comparative article was already two and a half years old by the time I sat down to write it last August.

Funnily, I did check the website of the journal I had targeted for the word limit –always my nightmare, as I tend to write much more than required. The web nonchalantly announced it would accept pieces with no specific word limit, so I let myself go, read like crazy about Le Corbusier, the residential blue-collar skyscraper and local council regulations in Scotland to end up with a piece 12,000 words long. To my immense mortification, the journal sent me back the essay claiming they only accepted articles up to 6,000 words. I did cut down my article to that size... and sent it elsewhere. This second journal found my methodology 'too Cultural Studies.' So, back to the first option.

To my surprise they asked *me* for the names of possible reviewers. I named two; they disagreed. I was ask for a third name, which I supplied. And, then, on the basis of not

three but only two reviews they told me I had to rewrite and resubmit, with no guarantee of publication. They found my poor stumpy article under-theorised (no wonder...).

I took a deep breath, spent 24 hours agonising about whether to go back to the drawing board or not and recalled a friend's words. When they start asking for major revisions... the bloom is gone. So, I went back to the unpublishable 12,000 word version and emailed it to the Deposit Digital de Documents of my university, where it will soon be available online. That's the unhappy story.

Why's that unhappy if I have made my work available and will hopefully reach a few dozen readers? Well, it's unhappy because the time employed and the effort I made will count for nothing as regards my future research assessment by the Ministry. It's 2014, and this is due by the end of 2017 which means that I'm already in a hurry. I'll remind you, readers, that I need to have published five 'quality' pieces in six years, which is why 'throwing' on line this article I'm telling you about feels very much like hitting myself in the face –hard.

On the other hand, experience tells me that when an article starts doing the rounds with difficulties and nothing has happened after one year, it's better to move on, write another article (which is what I'm doing these days), try my luck elsewhere. Online publication at my university's depository is, of course, a sort of consolation prize and much, much better than the proverbial drawer (or personal computer disk) where discarded papers used to die. Yet, tell the Ministry that.

There's a third strange story. I emailed an article to a Spanish quality journal last November (2013). The editor did not acknowledge receiving it for a couple of months. I insisted, he'd been sick, poor thing. My article (he told me) would be considered for publication and I would get an answer by May 2014. June and early July came, still no answer. I checked their web: there's a new editor. I emailed her and it turns out they're restarting the journal as the former editor has retired. She suggested that I resubmit next November (that's 2014, one year gone from the original submission) when things start rolling. I said yes out of loyalty, as she's a friend, wondering whether the new journal will keep the good ratings of the old one.

I wonder how journal publishing works in the sciences, I really do. I doubt *Nature* or *Science* take so long to publish articles. I know everyone does what they can but on the whole we can safely say that in the Humanities publication lags about two years behind research. It's a long time... Not to mention how word limit conditions us, for not all ideas can be properly argued in under 6,000 words. As I know.

27-VII-2014 THE PROBLEM OF AVILABILITY: MAKING RESEARCH ACCESSIBLE (OR NOT...)

Samuel sends in a comment which includes a question: “Surely if the government is sponsoring academics, they should want the results of their hard work to be available to a much wider audience?” He also writes that “There’s been a lot of good work done to make journals available to at least current university students, but I don’t think it’s enough.” Certainly. Inspired by open-access policies suggesting exactly this –that research should be made freely available online for all to see– I have spent MANY hours this past academic year organising my website, opening an Academia.edu account and pestering the very kind workers at my university’s repository (UAB’s DDD).

Here it’s how this has worked.

To begin with, I had to go through my CV, make a list of what was potentially of interest (should I put online my pre-doctoral articles?) and start a very, very long round of emails asking for permissions. Yes, it’s my own research work but even when publication was paid for with funds from conferences or research projects I might be infringing publishers’ rights (in many cases it was not even clear whether I retained copyright).

In the case of journals, those whose articles are available on databases were not necessarily more reluctant to grant permission. Only two journal editors flatly denied me permission: one editor, of a smallish but well-known journal, very clearly explained they wanted to make money out of past issues’ sales (of which we authors see not a cent, penny, whatever). The other one called me an idiot to my face for not knowing the basic rules of academic publication. Really.

Except for these two, practically all I have published in journals is online at UAB’s DDD (they double-checked on these permissions). I must say that both in the case of journals and book chapters, I spent hours scanning my work myself. Actually, if my Department hadn’t purchased a totally user-friendly photocopier/printer/scanner, I would never have started this process. No, I don’t have a teaching assistant nor an intern to help.

Chapters in books. My!, that’s complicated. I scanned them all, asked for permission, checking first whether the books were available from the publishing houses’ websites. In some cases I’m speaking about work 10 to 15 years old. I discovered that there’s a kind of gray area, as editors could no longer contact publishers, nor could I myself. Most gave me permission and you can see the corresponding .pdf files in my personal website. Funnily, the repository administrators are far more reluctant to upload pieces of books, and to ask for this kind of permission. To be honest, I’m not sure that all is legal in my website (I think it is) and, anyway, whatever I have made available is split between my website and the DDD.

As I have commented on here, my web and the DDD have also opened up for me very interesting possibilities for self-publication, at the cost of discounting part of my production for official research assessment. I'm not using Academia.edu for publishing, just to offer information on all I have published, leading to the corresponding web and repository links. It seems that Academia.edu and other networks like Research Gate might be infringing copyright by allowing researchers to upload their own work. So, I will not risk it...

So, Samuel: two answers so far. One, it takes time, a moderately advanced user's knowledge of computers and much stamina to make one's own work available. We have to do it ourselves, none will do it for us (at least not where I work). Two: the main obstacle, from what I see, is money, the money that academic presses and journals are still making out of work published long ago. In a way, the idea is that the more successful research is, the least available it is made as that's the type of publication experts and students are willing to pay for.

Now for two odd situations. I have recently published an article in a collective book issued by a British press. The volume is expensive (£54.99) and since we get no courtesy copies, we asked the editors for, at least, a .pdf file of our own chapter (for own reference, not even to upload). They said no, as the publishers adamantly forbid this. So, if I want the .pdf of my own work I'll have to spend money on the volume or buy it for UAB's library. My own work.

The other case: I'm sending this week an article to a young journal that started online. Checking their website, I saw a recent announcement I had missed: they're leaving open internet publishing for limited JSTOR and MUSE availability (apart from print). You must be thinking, Samuel, that this will not increase their readership, quite the opposite. Yet, from what I deduce, still today, almost twenty years after the internet totally upset our world, free online publication is frowned upon and considered less serious than the other, more restrictive type.

Every time I visit Academia.edu I notice two things: one, not even in platforms like this have people understood the need to self-publicise and make available as much academic stuff as possible; two, relatively few senior academics are present there. In the future, as I keep on preaching, things will change as younger academics will learn to self-publish using resources like this (which, besides, have a helpful labelling system). The only barrier you need to add to all this is, as I always explain, Ministry rules.

So, going back to the initial question: "Surely if the government is sponsoring academics, they should want the results of their hard work to be available to a much wider audience?" No, as long as the experts determining quality matters foreground the less accessible (i.e. expensive) over the cheaper, or, in short, where you publish and not what you publish.

Still frustrated, right? Me too...

31-VII-2014 ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO: WOMEN, FREEDOM AND WWI

My colleagues David Owen and Cristina Pividori are editing a volume on WWI and I was commissioned to write a piece on two middle-brow best-selling novels, Ernest Raymond's *Tell England* (1922) and Wilfrid Ewart's *The Way of Revelation* (1921). I'm writing on men's friendship, considering the idea of whether WWI forms a divide after which any expression of male same-sex love/affection was necessarily tied to (homo)sexuality. I am worried indeed that this may sound homophobic but my argument is that heterosexual men have lost or are repressing a wide range of feelings for fear of homophobia, feelings that pre-1930s fiction candidly indulges in. We may call them homoerotic but I think this is not enough.

Well, before I drift off my topic... It turns out that Ewart's excellent novel, a very complete portrait of combat in WWI, also offers a terrific insight into women's lives. Upper-class, yes, and as such, limited but fascinating nonetheless. (Spoilers ahead!!!)

This is done by means of one of those sacrificial heroines that I dislike so much: Rosemary. Since this poor thing is not the main protagonist and her demise is balanced by the pragmatism of the other main female character, I cannot really accuse Ewart of following a simplistic anti-feminist line. It's more complicated than that, as the question Rosemary answers is what happened to post-Victorian women when suddenly WWI gave them the chance to free themselves. The answer is that not all knew how.

Let me give you the basics of the novel. This is the story of 21-year-old Adrian Knoyle, who's living 'la vida loca' (the 'gay' life in the text) with his buddy Eric Sinclair. Adrian is the romantic celibate type and he absurdly idealises the beautiful Rosemary, ensnaring her into a betrothal for which she's not ready. Eric, fond of dining and wining, etc, a string of chorus girls, typically chooses the steady, down-to-earth Faith to put an end to the fun period of his life. All are rich, by the way.

Here's the surprise the men are in for: Rosemary's mercenary mama finds Adrian too poor, Faith finds Eric 'nice and gay' but just 'a little playboy.' This is solved by WWI, which makes a man of the delicate, girlish Eric. Tall, dark Adrian is not so lucky: his papa dies, he becomes rich, Rosemary's mama grants her permission.. but the girl insists on living her own 'via loca' (and being unfaithful).

What's wrong with Rosemary? Nothing according to our current standards: she's a 19-year-old girl who wants to have fun. Her problem is that fun as we know it today had not been invented yet. Initially, she worries herself sick because her mama will think her wicked for being alone, unchaperoned, at all hours with Adrian. As the novel progresses, though, mama looks the other way since Rosemary's other boyfriend is loaded. He gets free access to their flat and eventually to her body (if I read the opaque prose of the novel correctly, for it took Lawrence still a few years to unveil sex for fiction).

Adrian reappears twice to claim her back from her profligate ways but the idiot decides to join Eric back in the trenches rather than stay cowardly at the home front. Without him, dependent Rosemary spirals down into a course of self-destruction which includes the drug addiction that eventually kills her. More or less accidentally.

I think of Peaches Geldof, 25, wealthy career woman, happily married and a mother of two, dying in April this year of a heroin overdose in the same room where her baby slept. And it seems to me this would have been Rosemary's fate if she'd married Adrian. The heroine destroyed by heroin, forgive me, is also celebrating its centenary together with WWI.

The usual argument in the case of pre-WWI heroines like Madame Bovary or Edna Pontellier from *The Awakening*, is that these were women striving for their freedom who chose death instead (I wonder why Nora's slamming the door is less often mentioned than Hedda's shooting herself). What strikes about Rosemary is that when WWI sets her free she does not know how to react.

Her friend Faith blames Rosemary's mother and the whole social system for failing to provide women with guidance at this time of crisis. Yet, surely, the whole point is that neither could really provide any pointers as nobody had a clue about what was going on. Reading about Rosemary and Adrian's new-style of courting, with no chaperons, I suddenly realised that this is very new. The rules were so confusing that Rosemary has to force Adrian to spend the night with her –yet, it seems clear they spend it 'making love', that is, talking about love, rather than 'making love', that is, having sex. (I think it's not so with the other boyfriend)

Rosemary thinks she's found in Gina Maryon's avant-garde clique the answer to her search for excitement but Ewart points out this is just shallow excitement. If she were alive today, Rosemary would be performing fellatios non-stop in a Majorca disco or getting drunk on a boat off Barcelona's coast. Professionally, she'd be a successful top model. The idea is the same one: you're young, beautiful, rich and female –your mama no longer controls you, and society tells you you're free to behave as you like as life is short and who knows what the future may bring. Rosemary gets so afraid she begs Adrian to rescue her; needing rescuing himself he fails to play gallant knight. And down she goes.

Now here's a nasty thought (which never crosses desolated Adrian's mind): perhaps if Rosemary had been drafted into combat, as young men her age were, she would have found all the excitement she craved for. Sometimes, being a woman is strangely privileged.

Still, I thank Ewart for his peculiar insight into the problem of women's freedom. And on terrible, fascinating WWI.

20-VIII-2014 3,000 BOOKS: (HALF) A LIFE-TIME OF READING

(Back to writing, a bit more relaxed after a well-deserved holiday... spent 'doing a Wordsworth,' that is, enjoying the beauties of the mountains, those of the Pyrenees).

Today's topic is keeping track of reading –here we go.

I started keeping a record of the books I read, out of my own initiative, back in 1980 when I started my secondary school education, aged 14. I used a small spiral-bound notebook, which I still keep, in pretty blue paper (no pretentious Moleskines for me). This lasted me until 1994, when I moved the list onto my computer.

I call this list my 'reading diary' because I follow a chronological order but it is simply a list, written now in an impractical series of Word files, with a basic rating system (maximum 4 stars) which I started using also in 1994. Last year I opened a GoodReads account but I never use it (though as you know I read plenty of Amazon users' reviews).

Now and then I wonder what anyone would make of my life looking at this list, particularly because I don't keep a personal diary, or journal (this blog comes closest). I also wonder what researchers would do if they came across something similar for, say, Charles Dickens.

What did I want the list for? Obviously, to remember what I read. I was already a voracious reader and knew that sooner or later I would be unable to recall all the books I read. Not that the plan works that well, though, for the list often throws up books I seem to have read but have completely forgotten –quite spectacularly, it turns out I had already read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1992, but I was absolutely sure I never had when I read it this year (without first checking the list...).

Every January, when I start the corresponding yearly list, I have a quick look, see what I've been up to the year before. I also keep, by the way, a second list organised by nation and author for fiction, drama, poetry, etc, and by topic for essays. This is a pain in the neck to update but that has proven quite useful when, for instance, programming my future SF subject, as I know exactly which SF authors I've read throughout my life so far. And I couldn't have gone through my doctoral dissertation, either, without my reading list.

Although I set myself some rules, I keep on breaking them which is why my list is such an imprecise record of all my reading. It only includes complete volumes, yet in some cases (plays, for instance) they number fewer pages than I've read in volumes I have abandoned half-way through (and that remain unrecorded). Then, sometimes I count re-readings, sometimes I forget. I'm never sure what to do about comics and graphic novels, either. The many articles I read every year go unrecorded, which I often regret for research reasons, but, then, a list of *all* I read might seem a symptom of some mental disorder rather than a useful memory enhancement tool. And, um, I have been unable to recall more or less reliably what I read before the age of 14.

Anyway, before I took my holidays, I realised that I would soon reach book 3,000. That's fun, I thought, let's see which of the many books I'm planning to read this summer becomes volume 3,000. I didn't want the number to be meaningful, as the list, all considered, is quite inconsistent. Yet, this was not to be. To my amusement, when I updated the list after my holiday break, it just fell short of book 3,000 (book 2,999 was Lois McMaster Bujold's fantasy novel *The Curse of Chalion*, which would have satisfied me enough as book 3,000). Oh my... meaningful it must be, then.

After a longish absence, I visited my beautiful local library (Jaume Fuster at Plaça Lesseps) not really planning to borrow anything, just keeping my husband company as he searched for comics. Yet, book 3,000 came to me (I swear!), as it had to happen: it is Isaías Lafuente's non-academic essay *Agrupémonos todas: La lucha de las españolas por la igualdad* (2004). Never heard of it? No wonder, it's out of print –what a shame. But I loved the book and I totally love it that my volume 3,000 is a feminist book written by a man, teaching me plenty I didn't know about women in Spain. (More about this in the following post).

I recently saw a BBC documentary on the impact of the social networks in our lives. A nine-year-old boy voiced his learned opinion that life before Facebook (what was he doing using Facebook??) was really boring... people had to read books! It would be idiotic to claim that reading and using social networks is incompatible, so I won't embarrass myself. I'm just sorry this boy won't enjoy the company the 3,000 volumes (better 'friends' than often Facebook 'friends' are) have kept me so far.

By the way, I don't care and I don't mind whether 3,000 are a lot of volumes, average for a university lecturer, or pitifully few. I'm not out to break records, whether absolute or personal. Actually, I find that the number has freed me from having to read a minimum a year, as I did when I was a student. I have no idea how many more I'll be able to add and calling this list 'half a life-time of reading' may be not only overoptimistic but downright silly, who knows whether I'll reach 96...

Just one thing: if you have children who read, start that list for them. They'll be thankful when they grow up and start managing it themselves.

22-VIII-2014 UNSUNG HEROES OF SPANISH WOMEN'S HISTORY (WITH MY THANKS)

Isaías Lafuente's non-academic essay *Agrupémonos todas: La lucha de las españolas por la igualdad* (2004) has been, as I explained in my previous post, a book I have devoured with great pleasure. And shame... that I didn't know many of the women and events he mentions.

In the effort of trying to grasp the basics of US and UK feminism and women's history as a specialist in English Studies, I have had no time to do the same for the Spanish and

Catalan contexts. My secondary education should have filled in that gap, as it did for many other matters of local History. Yet, apart from the women writers (and not that many), and the queens, no other relevant Spanish (or Catalan) women were made visible to me. Lafuente is dismayed to see that the woman who brought the vote to Spanish women, Clara Campoamor, is not mentioned in the major Spanish biographical dictionary. I'm dismayed to realise that I only understood who she was when I saw Laura Mañá's excellent TV movie entitled, of course, *Clara Campoamor: La mujer olvidada* (2011).

One thing I have learned from reading about women's history is that it is hard to say whether the impact of pro-feminist legislation and social changes is, in the end, what matters most. It should be so, yet reading Lafuentes' book I'm struck by how truly important are in the struggle to free women from our bonds things we take for granted: such as diapers, sanitary pads or even the mop. It is also peculiar to see how details I recall from my childhood, seeing my mother perform her household chores or worry about 'adult' matters, fit a much larger pattern than I assumed (perhaps because Spain has been quite a homogeneous country until recently). This ranges from her washing by hand all our clothes before the first washing machine was purchased to anxious conversations about the mysterious 'pill.'

The hardest part of understanding recent women's history in Spain is the realisation that we almost got it right. During the (chaotic) Republic of 1931 to 1939, when the Civil War was lost, Spanish women embarked in an often very fast process of equality with men. It is painful to see how all their achievements were brutally erased in 1939: often the distance between the first and the second woman pioneer in a particular field amounts to forty years. Also, even though the little conquests under Franco's regime were often made by right-wing women, like Mercedes Fórmica, it is heartbreaking to see how much cruelty was poured on the bodies and lives of the 'rojas,' the women of the losing side. The split is so deep that we can say there are two histories of women under Franco, still to be fully written out.

I want to make a note here, then, of the unsung heroes who did the hard work for us, to remind those women who think we don't need feminism that, if that is the case, which I very much doubt, it is thanks to their spirit and efforts. There are many others, it is just a small selection:

*María Elena Maseras, first woman to enrol for a university degree (1872, Medicine, Universitat de Barcelona) realising there was no formal prohibition against women.

*Dolores Aleu, first woman with a doctoral degree (1882, Medicine)

*Teresa Claramunt, textile factory worker and union activist, co-founder of the Societat Autònoma de Dones (1892)

*Carmen de Burgos (Colombine), journalist and first war correspondent. Published the first surveys on divorce and women's suffrage (1900s-1910s)

*Emilia Pardo Bazán, major writer, denied three times a place in the Real Academia. In 1916 she was the first female full professor in Spain (by appointment): she never taught, as all (male) students rejected her. (M^a Ángeles Galino, was the second woman professor, in 1953).

*María Espinosa de los Monteros, co-founder of the Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Españolas (1920)

*Victoria Kent, first professional woman lawyer (1924), 'Directora General de Prisiones' under the new Republic (1931). She was the first woman MP together with Clara Campoamor, and Margarita Nelken. They were elected in June 1931 when women could not vote yet.

*Matilde Ucelay, first Spanish female architect, graduated 1936.

*Dolores Ibárruri, La Pasionaria, communist politician, Vice-president of the Republican Parliament.

*Federica Montseny, first woman Minister in Europe (1936).

*María Telo, lawyer, founder of the Unión de Mujeres Juristas, helped get back for women the full civil rights lost under Franco in the 1970s.

I'll end with a reminder of the terrifying forty year gap:

*Vote for women: 1 October 1931. Re-instated in 1975.

*Divorce and Civil Marriage: 28 June 1932 (made illegal retroactively by Franco in 1939). Civil marriage was re-instated in 1978, divorce in 1981.

*Abortion: December 1936, legalised by the Catalan Generalitat. Made illegal in 1941, legalised again with strong limitations in 1985.

*Legal equality with men: 1937. Lost in 1938, re-instated fully only in 1981.

*Birth control: All methods made illegal between 1944 and 1978.

Until the 1975 legislation reform, women were regarded as minors to the age of 25 (21 for men). Married women were subjected to the 'licencia marital': they had to obey their husbands, who were entitled to their professional earnings (until 1981), and had to obtain their permission to sign contracts, open bank accounts, get a passport...

This, I'm sorry to say, is not History way back in the past but within living memory. Ask your grandmothers, if your mothers are too young.

Learn and remember... and thank those who fought for you.

25- VIII-2014 'I DON'T NEED FEMINISM...': TEN REASONS WHY YOU DO

Next semester I'll be teaching for the first time a new BA elective, 'Gender Studies (in English).' This might be my only chance since, if Minister Wert's reform of the BA degrees proceeds, we might lose altogether the fourth year and with it the electives. Anyway, I'm paying even more attention than usual to gender issues, which is why I came across the Tumblr space opened in 2013, 'Women Against Feminism' (<http://womenagainstfeminism.tumblr.com/>).

Rightly, this should be called 'Young Women Against Feminism' for a classic problem of feminism is its generational split. I recall a round table on SF and feminism a few years ago in Madrid. My three colleagues and myself were protesting against the ghettoisation of SF women writers, using by no means a radical feminist discourse. To

my horror and consternation, a twenty-something girl in the audience told me 'I don't know what *your* problem may be, but in *my* generation we have solved them all.' Well, if that were the case I would be happy but it is not –something you learn as you age. "I don't need feminism because equality of opportunity already exists," a young girl writes on Tumblr, and my question is 'where?' Because if it is only in your own personal life and you don't see beyond it, then this is a very callous attitude that disregards the reality of many women's lives around the world.

I went myself through an acute anti-feminist phase twenty years ago, as a doctoral student. I rationalize it thus today: when a woman is young, starting her career and has not come across crude discrimination yet, feminism's insistence on women's victimization is annoying and frustrating. It feels disempowering. Besides, radical feminism can be deeply androphobic. This is something that young women going through the process of establishing long-lasting romantic relationships often find incompatible with their being in love. At the end of an angry androphobic conference panel I asked the leading androphobe, a married woman, how she managed to communicate with her husband at all. She was stunned. So was I at my own question... That was a turning point for me. The misogyny that feminism exposes makes me *very* angry, and this is hard to cope with. Sometimes it is mild anger that my partner sees no dirty dishes to wash, sometimes it is wholesale anger against men because one has killed his wife or raped a little girl. So, yes, there is that.

From what I read in Tumblr many young women think that feminism can be best defined as 'androphobia' (i.e. hatred of men). This, however, is just *radical* feminism, much less abundant anyway than misogyny. For me feminism is best defined as 'the search of justice for women,' that is to say, the struggle to ensure that nobody is discriminated against or hurt just for being a woman. If you're one of the happy few women who have never met any obstacle or aggression in life because of your gender, then congratulations. What you need to do next, as a feminist, is to make sure that all the other women in the world enjoy the same beautiful life.

I have set for myself a target here, which is finding ten reasons why the happy young women writing in Tumblr might want to join the feminist fight for justice and equality in education, job opportunities and personal development. I'll refer only to Spain, a Western country and a European Union member –paradise, in short. The figures are for 2013:

*women killed by ex-partners or current partners: 54, and this is the lowest figure in 10 years. Current figures for August 2014: 39.

*women who denounced psychological and physical abuse by partners and ex-partners: 124,894. More than 63,000 remain under police surveillance for fear they might be attacked. None really knows how much abuse goes unreported.

*number of rapes reported to the police in 2013: 1,298 (at least 60% are not reported out of the victim's fear and shame).

*average salary difference for men and women doing the same job: around 20% (16'4% for the whole European Union).

*(un)employment: rates are slightly higher for women than for men and bad for all. 52'3% of women under 25 are unemployed, 23'6% of women above 25. Yet note: 75% of part-time contracts correspond to female workers. Only 75'5% of all employed women have full-time contracts, the figure is 93'4% for men.

*paternity leave: 13 *days*, as opposed to 16 weeks for the mother. Up to 40% new fathers only take the mandatory 2-day leave. 90% Norwegian fathers take paternity leave (which is months long).

*excess hours women spend per week doing household chores (in relation to their male partners): 6 (which the partners enjoy as free time)

*percentage of women members of Parliament and Senators: 37% (same as the European Parliament). But remember that women are 52% of the population and this was achieved because PSOE introduced a quota system. And we have seen so far no woman President of the Government (yes, I remember Maggie Thatcher...).

*percentage of women members in Boards of Directors (for the 35 top Spanish companies): 10'9%. This is where business power lies...

*percentage of women professors ('catedráticas'): 20% (but percentage of women graduates 54%). So... what happens to women when they start an academic career?

I need only compare myself to my mother to see how privileged I am on the professional and the personal fronts, often thanks to the efforts of feminist women in the 1970s and 1980s, whose names I don't even know. And men, for let's not forget that all-male Parliaments and Governments have often legislated in favour of women. Now think of women in less fortunate countries.

If you want to rename 'feminism' and call it 'gender equality' that's fine by me. Whatever you call it, we certainly need it.

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