

THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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PLEASE, NOTE:

These are the posts that I have published in my academic professional blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* (blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/, since September 2010-) between September 2015 and August 2016. The volume, like the five previous ones, covers, then, a complete academic year. I have not re-edited the texts. They may show some dissimilarities with the final published posts. The differences are, however, negligible.

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5 September 2015 / I (DON'T) REMEMBER WHEN...: FORGETTING THE PRE-INTERNET PAST

This week I took a guided tour of the Biblioteca Nacional de Catalunya (<http://www.bnc.cat/>), a superb example of Catalan civic gothic which houses a truly impressive collection of 4,000,000 documents (it is the Catalan copyright library). This was organized as part of a conference on science, fiction and science-fiction I have attended these days, which means I was surrounded during this visit mostly by scientists and engineers, colleagues very much aware of how the history of technology has evolved...

Eventually, we reached the area that houses the old card library catalogue, inactive since the mid-1990s when the catalogue was moved online. I realise that the phrase 'card library catalogue' possibly will bring no immediate image to the minds of the generations born in the 1990s—do Google it. A scientist colleague suddenly declared he could not recall at all having used the cards, even though he knew he must have done so, as he submitted his dissertation in pre-internet times. So did I. And yes, I recall using cards and navigating my way into the available bibliography at great pains and expense. In contrast, I don't recall how we managed to communicate before e-mail. Odd.

So, here's a little techno-academic chronology, hoping colleagues will help me to complete it. A key aspect is this: my generation (born 1960s) has gone through a dramatic technological change as applied to academic work which has no parallel for the current students' generation, born in the 1990s. You'll see...

Checking the few papers I keep from my secondary school days, I notice that they were handwritten up to my final year 1983-4. I inherited a clunky typewriter with which I produced my C.O.U. (pre-university) work, hating it all the way as I had to tippex out my many mistakes and even repeat whole pages. My mum, who had done secretarial work in her time as a paid employee, and could type with all the fingers in her hands—

still today, I can only manage a two-finger typing style—helped me one stressful evening to meet a deadline I could not have managed on my own. Typewriters were, in a way, recycled into computers in the 1980s. I went on typing my papers until 1987-88 but I must have used afterwards a programme incompatible with early Microsoft's Word (was it Corel's WordPerfect?) because I do not have the files. Word files started materializing coinciding with the beginning of my doctoral studies in 1991.

There was no internet in Spain, then, throughout the years of my doctoral studies, except for small pockets of pioneering users in technological universities. I got my first laptop, an awesome Toshiba, back in 1994-5 when I spent a year in Scotland—the screen was black and white and I had no internet connection. I don't recall anyone using it in Stirling University and we doctoral students, definitely, had no e-mail address. I still keep the *letters* that family and friends sent me. These, yes, are the last personal letters to have ever reached me and I cannot begin to say how sorry I am that letter-writing is dead. Facebook and Twitter can by no means replace that, though e-mail may have done so for a while.

I submitted my doctoral dissertation in 1996, which is also the year (I think) when I got my first official university e-mail address (it might be 1997, rather). No internet access yet. General talk about the internet started in Spain in 1994 but monopolistic Telefónica provided the first commercial services as late as 1996: Infovía, which lasted to 1999 and Infovía Plus (1998-9). These internet connection services, like expensive lawyers, billed clients (using modems!) by the hour. They were so costly that one of the main incentives for me to join the online Universitat Oberta de Catalunya in 1998 (founded in 1994) was that the contract included free internet access (of course... but not for long).

Customer pressure mounted and by November 2000 the first flat rate ADSL service was commercialized (it was legislated by the Spanish Parliament in 1999), finally charging by month regardless of the amount of hours of actual connection rather than by time spent surfing the net. Still, the new flat rate was too expensive for most Spanish homes and further campaigning was needed to reduce it, which finally happened in 2002 (Telefónica was privatized in 1999, so this must have coincided with the liberalization of the communications market in Spain under José María Aznar's Government).

Although I am not sure whether this is reliable data, I made a note here in another post saying that internet access was made available in classrooms only in 2006-7, not even 10 years ago. I really cannot recall when I started using databases like MLA or websites that now seem fundamental to me, like IMDB. The web 2.0 revolution launched in 2004/5 still makes me nervous, however. I have, I think, adapted well to resources like Academia.edu, or the Dipòsit Digital de Documentació of my university and, of course, I have been publishing this blog since 2010 and have my own website since, possibly, 2012. Yet, I have no Facebook account and Twitter overwhelms me. No Instagram, either. And, um, I use my cellphone mainly... as a phone.

This summer I have been re-reading and even translating some of my oldest papers and I realise that their modest list of bibliography has nothing to do with my inability to find sources but with how the demand for long bibliographies only started after the uploading online of the main bibliographical resources. MLA is very imprecise when it comes to informing about the exact date when this happened in the case of their International Bibliography, simply noting it was the mid-1990s. The database indexes now items back to the 1880s, as in April 2003, the JSTOR's language and literature collection was added. The print version was finally discontinued in September 2009. As we all know, 30-page papers including 50 to 75 citations are now common when in my time as a doctoral student 6 would do for a course paper. As I have already mentioned here how my MA dissertation (submitted in 1993) has an enormous bibliography because I was trying to prove my proficiency as a research—the bibliography that took me months to complete can now be completed in one morning.

Now, if you were born from 1996 onwards in Spain this means that you have known no other world than the current one, dominated by the internet. Perhaps from this perspective it is easier to understand the addiction to Wikipedia of the oldies who had to make do with library cards...

I think that my scientist colleague had forgotten how to use a card library catalogue because we are a little bit embarrassed as a generation. Recently, I had to explain to my 14-year-old nephew what a cassette player is—remember we are the 'compilation tape' generation, best embodied by Nick Hornby's Rob Fleming in his novel *High Fidelity*. We got rid of the cassette tapes, then the VHS tapes, now DVD is going out pushed by BlueRay. I still keep in my closet a, um, vintage telephone with a rotating disk instead of buttons for the numbers.

Can we be this Jurassic?? Early cellphones are, frankly, pathetic but they are a first sign of a revolution happening. Catalogue cards, in contrast, are a memento of a world that lived long but died in just about five years. This is, I think, why we have blocked our memories. It must be similar to what the generation that passed from horse carriages to cars felt back in the early 20th century.

So, let's recall... unless we forget.

10 September 2015 / AGGRESSIVE PEER REVIEWING: ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

This morning I have sent the message you can read below to the editor of an A-list journal which has rejected an article I have submitted. This is an article on which I have put long hours, much effort and much personal commitment, not to say passion. I am aware, of course, that my article can be improved with good peer reviewing, which has always been the case whenever I have been asked to reconsider aspects of my work in the past. Mostly.

Now, when I finally received an answer from the editor, after five long months of waiting, I found attached to it two reviews (whatever happened to the three-review rule?): one very tepidly suggesting that perhaps if I change most of my article there is a tiny little chance that it might be published; the other a very negative review full of unspeakable bile against my work and my person. Both reviews, by the way, coincided in censoring my feminist approach and absolutely denied my right to produce literary criticism in which I judge a woman writer an androphobe (how many times have I seen a male writer called a misogynist???).

My mouth still dries and my heart skips a beat when I re-read the reviews, and this is three weeks after receiving them. I feel hurt, unfairly wounded, and depressed as now I have to go through the harrowing process of finding a new home for a piece written specifically to meet the demands of this journal. I think all you know what I am talking about.

I must clarify that, to my surprise, the editor wrote to me that although there were serious doubts that I could manage a proper rewrite, they were willing to see a second version of my article. Here follows my reply:

Dear Editor,

Sorry it has taken me a while to answer your message. It's been hard for me to make a decision about how to answer.

I must say that I am mystified by your decision about my article, as I fail to see how you think I can be encouraged to proceed and write a second version in view of the aggressive, negative tone of the reviews, particularly the negative one recommending rejection of my article.

I am actually dismayed to see that a publication with such a good reputation encourages this kind of appalling reviewing in which a peer feels entitled to insulting authors. I have done my best and I know that the article I submitted is a good one—all work can be improved, and I have no doubt that mine can also benefit from good reviewing. I am by no means a novice and I have passed a number of peer reviews in my career but I am no longer willing to put up with patronizing attitudes and abuse.

I will certainly discourage any colleagues and doctoral students from submitting work to your publication, and I recommend that you never employ again the services of reviewer number 1. What a sad example of academic lack of empathy, and of sheer arrogance.

Yours,
Sara Martín

I am not naming the journal because the point I am making is that too many journals and editors are encouraging unacceptable peer reviewing. And this is growing because, ashamed of rejection, we do not discuss this growing trend with our colleagues. I have

produced myself a good number of peer reviews and I have judged appallingly bad work: this is why I know that not needing to add your name to a blind peer review, you feel tempted to be nasty and cruel. I have vowed to myself, however, that I will always try to be at least courteous to the author for this person, despite what I believe, might be certainly doing his/her best.

As we all know, the problem with abusive peer review is that our egos are extremely fragile and in a work atmosphere which is geared towards constant competition, one failure signifies a general personal failure. If this article I produced, which I personally think is among my best, if not the best one, has been rejected in this harsh way, how have I managed to publish anything at all? Am I a fraud? Reading a novel by Neal Stephenson these days I came across a conversation between two women in very high work positions as scientists discussing the 'impostor syndrome', a phrase I didn't know. This refers to the constant anxiety that you are not good enough at what you do and that sooner or later the cover will be blown and you will be exposed as an impostor, as a fraud. Each negative review feels like that: a blowing up of the carefully built cover.

Leaving my wounded pride aside, but with a still dry mouth, I want to make a call here for a better style in peer reviewing and, if possible, to put an end to the inquisitorial practice of *blind* peer reviewing. It is interesting to note that when we submit our CVs for assessment to ANECA (or similar agencies), we do know the names of the persons judging us and we can even access their CVs. I am well aware that ANECA has produced a high number of aggressive reviewing, and I have even heard of a lawsuit in this regard. Yet, at least, the principle of anonymity is questioned. I think we should sign our peer reviews and we should opt for more transparent systems. I have recently participated in a few peer reviewing exercises on Academia.edu in which some colleagues have submitted work in progress and asked for opinions. The tone was what it should be among peers who respect each other and the discussion enriching.

By the way, one of the articles discussed was an impressive piece by Rosalind Gill, a very well-known British scholar, "Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia". In it she discusses the same unprofessional conduct I am discussing here, noting that 20 years ago reviews were not as "hostile and dismissive". When, she wonders, "did it become acceptable to write of a colleague's work 'this is self-indulgent crap' or 'put this manuscript in a drawer and don't ever bother to come back to it'—both comments I have read in the last year on colleagues' work. What are the psychosocial processes that produce this kind of practice?" In her view, all this negativity is the product of the "the peculiarly toxic conditions of neoliberal academia" (see my post about it). Instead of lashing out at our oppressors we lash out at each other under cover of blind peer reviewing, that's her thesis. She might well be right.

I know that it is not the habitual practice to question negative peer reviewing and that messages like the one I have sent can make you a few enemies, particularly in local contexts (this was an international journal, by the way, published in the USA). Yet, a while ago a colleague whom I respect profoundly and who is extremely proficient as an academic, told me she had started emailing back in the tone I have used in my message whenever she got a negative review. No, it's not a good idea to do that if you

are a post-grad student still in the process of hardening your skin against rejection. Yet, there comes a time when enough is enough and after twenty years in the publishing circuit I am just not willing to put up with gratuitous abuse. I'll insist: I am willing to accept constructive, positive criticism but never again abuse.

And if you must reject my work a 'No, thank you' will do.

17 September 2015 / HEADACHE: BEGINNING A NEW ACADEMIC YEAR

My tension headache is back after the summer break and only one week into teaching. I feel as if someone is pulling my head into my neck as the typical head band pressure mounts on my forehead. Painkillers are no use, as I know, only trying to relax, something hard to do when one is, as I am, a control freak that needs tidiness and perfect order around. And right now, my teaching is a bit of a mess. Why? The usual reasons with some added twists.

Our semesters run for 18 weeks, of which 15 correspond to teaching. Someone decided to advance one week the end of the first semester to 31st January. Then they counted backwards and the beginning of week 1 materialized on 9 September. Until 6 years ago, semesters had 13 teaching weeks, and we would start the course between 25th September and October 1st. This year, our classes started earlier than primary and secondary school (14th September), with the added problem that the previous course had not even ended, as we have all those MA dissertations to judge until September 18th—an overlap, which, interestingly, does not show on the official calendar. And what baffles me is that the second semester seems to run for about 20 weeks, as we start teaching on 8th February (only one week between semesters) and assess the BA dissertations in early July. All in all, this leaves us with two weeks for research and preparing new courses in summer. For we do have a right to enjoying a four-week holiday like all other workers, don't we?

Three sessions into my course, then, when I am about to start discussing the first book (the corresponding exam is on October 14) I find myself facing this situation:

*students don't have said book, nor the handbook on which they need to take a quiz on the same day because even though the syllabi are published in early July they don't check them nor order their books in advance

*I opened our virtual classroom on 10th August with a welcome message, the complete programme week-by-week and a warning to get the books; they checked this information 24 hours before the beginning of the course, and, as I could show them in class, some of them had not even entered our virtual classroom yesterday

*then, during the first weeks of teaching, we see a stream of Erasmus visiting students move from classroom to classroom deciding what to sign up for. Even supposing they make up their mind soon enough, they only have access to virtual classrooms once they register, which might be as late as the end of September. Logically, they start

emailing teachers asking for the Syllabus—yes, the same one available online since July...

*Even more puzzlingly bureaucratic red tape prevents our returned Erasmus students from registering in July, as they should, because their official student records are not updated in time. Why? No idea—it seems that all European universities have very lazy admin workers, or at least, this is the impression I get.

So, basically, although officially there are 39 students in my Victorian Literature class, I may end with 55 (as usual), God knows when... Deep sigh... My class list shows different signatures for every of the three initial sessions.

Then, as usual, I have been given yet another terrible classroom. I teach at 15:00, it is still summer, our walls are made of concrete and keep all the heat in. A kind colleague worried last Monday that I was going to catch a cold seeing my light summer dress but the truth is that I ended up my lecture drenched in sweat. Both blinds were broken, one could not be raised, the other could not be lowered and, thus, let the sunshine stream into the middle of the classroom. This annoyed me royally, as I had asked the Facultat specifically to see to the blinds over the summer—a very kind, concerned janitor explained to me the blinds had been revised but had already broken down, on the very first day. Too old. Since the screen was also broken and I needed to use PowerPoint I sought refuge in another classroom which this embarrassed janitor found for me. I am, yes, occupying a classroom as a teacher-squatter. Yesterday my students, poor things, took pity on me when they saw that the projector was malfunctioning and cutting the left side of my PowerPoint presentation; also that there was no eraser for the whiteboard. By the way, I took a member of the Dean's team to visit my official classroom (I have asked to be placed elsewhere) and she was appalled by the smell. Oh, yes, the smell.

All these minor disasters would be stuff for stand-up-comedy if it were not for the fact that my university boasts of being an international excellence campus. Of course, as you can imagine, I am very well-known in my Facultat for my constant complaining. I have been told that our institution is poor and this is why we cannot have better classrooms and equipment. I do know we are poor, but, then, how can we also be a campus of excellence? Is it, in short, too much for a teacher to ask that students come prepared to class on the first day, that registration is completed during the first week at the latest and that classrooms are nice and well-equipped?

Am I a nagging witch? I might be but, then, if I don't upload my Syllabus in July, set up the virtual classroom at some point in summer, and get all ready before my course begins, then I am a bad teacher. This is what annoys me: I am fulfilling my side of the deal but I am the only one and there is no way one can produce good teaching without the collaboration of the students and the institution. Hey, I have just let go a very deep sigh... literally.

Please, don't commiserate—this is not really about my personal situation but about the distance between reality and the ideal in my university and possibly in many other big,

underfunded universities all over the world. I have been writing more or less the same post here at the beginning of each semester and not much has changed (or very little).

As far as I know, pedagogical treatises do not contemplate the factors I stress here, at least I have never come across advice on how to deal with an ugly space and the mysteries of registration. Somehow, the supposition is that teaching operates on an smooth basis and that you need not concern yourself about the state of the equipment or whether you'll be too hot or too cold in class (will sweat stains show should not be part of a teacher's worries). Yes, this is part of our teaching and I find that even the best-prepared lecture can collapse if the conditions are not what they should be.

Nagging witch...

22 September 2015 / LOST IN TRANSLATION?: THE ODD EXPERIENCE OF TRANSLATING MYSELF

Last semester I decided that it would be a good idea to go over my many published articles and see if I could produce at least one volume, hopefully two, out of them. The idea, let me clarify, was that said volumes would be in Spanish and mostly depend on translations of articles originally in English. I proceeded next to contacting a couple of local publishers who, um, ignored me—story of my life. A bit sheepishly, I decided to read as critically as possible my material and start translating myself in order to offer these two publishers (or others) the finished product in Spanish. In the meantime, I contacted six of the Anglo-American publishing houses I had published my work with, the ones everyone knows about, not quite asking for permission but notifying that a) I intended to upload my translated work onto my university's repository and b) possibly use it for a book in Spanish.

I'll start with the publishers' answers. One has not answered yet, after two months... Another one suggested that since the copyright over any translation was also theirs they would charge me a small fee for the re-use of my work in another language. I was mystified, not to say enraged. For some odd reason this publisher believed I intended to use my article only with MA students and not place it online and so, I was told, the fee would depend on how many students would have access to my translation. I decided to let the article be—we're speaking about a 15-year-old piece... Oh, my. Other three publishers gave me permission (?) to translate and upload my work online but not to republish it in book form; ergo, whenever the possibility of benefits raises its head, I lose my right to do as I please with my work (for which, remember, I have never got a cent, always the case for articles in collective volumes). The sixth publisher, actually the editor of a journal, gave me his permission and his blessings. I have reached the conclusion that it'll be simpler to start a new book from scratch, perhaps follow the research line in the journal article.

Now for the translations. I decided that since I had to read my work critically I could in the process start discarding what I didn't want to be re-published in a book. What

better way, I thought, to make sure that my work is still passable than translate it? I have always worried that if you publish in English abroad nobody knows you in Spain and so, occasionally, I have published the same piece in English and Spanish. Recently, I wrote a bilingual Catalan-English conference paper aided by Google Translate and finding it has improved vastly, I determined to give other translations a try. I have translated eight articles originally in English this summer (whose copyright is firmly in my hands) and have just finished today the translation of the journal article that may finally result in a book. I have about half a dozen more pieces awaiting translation and plan to go bilingual as often as I can in the future.

Yes, as everyone knows I'm a little bit crazy and use my time in ways that other scholars might think wasteful but, apart from the matter of the low impact that English Studies specialists who publish regularly in English have in our native Spain, I worry that I no longer know how to write in Spanish (or Catalan). I have written books and articles in my own two languages but I am so little in touch with them that I am beginning to be seriously concerned. I mean that although I do have conversations all the time in my dear native languages, I read very little in them; most films I watch are in English (or French, even Japanese), and I watch practically no local TV. Translation, then, seems like a good way to kill not two, but several birds with the same stone.

Google Translate works, as I say, much better than I expected, and than I recalled from previous exasperating experiences—to the point that I'm wondering whether professional translators ease their workload by using it. Please, don't think it provides word-perfect translation; rather, I use Google's version as a draft which then I adapt to my own style. I must say, though, that I have been often surprised when a whole paragraph has required no changes at all and when Google has provided a version that somehow improves the Spanish or Catalan I would have produced myself. So you see...

At one point I got totally paranoid that Google would demand a fee on all my translations (perhaps depending on downloads from my university's repository?) and I contacted the legal services of CEDRO (I'm a member) and of my university. Both appeared to be quite baffled by my query. CEDRO answered back a bit mischievously that neither animals nor machines can be considered authors and that in their view Google Translate is a machine, hence not a person who can be legally considered author or translator. The UAB services surely thought I was mad and on the verge of considering my computer a favourite pet, for they truly could not understand what I was up to. They gave me eventually a similar answer and, so, I concluded that I owe Google Translate no fees, as I owe Microsoft no fees for using Word to write books. I hope. Having said that, and since I know that Google Translate keeps tabs of all you translate, I'm putting my work in it a paragraph at a time. Just to confuse the Google guys.

After nine self-translations, or ten if I count the conference paper, I feel that one linguistic aim has been accomplished, as I have had to think long and hard about how to express myself in Spanish correctly. I find my translated sentences too short, too choppy, syntactically very un-Spanish and I have tried again and again with little conviction to use subordination instead of a stop or a colon. Quite often Google's bare

version reads terrible, not because it is incorrect but because it underlines the weaknesses of my English, or simply because what sounds fine in one language is appalling in another (or cannot be expressed). I have found a little comfort in the translation of the quotations originally in English by native authors—many have given me a very hard time and have resulted in a few emperor-with-no-clothes revelations when translated. Translating, I find, works very well to test whether what you are writing is sheer nonsense, no matter how cool it sounds in the other language. In the end, then, the translations are much better works than the original texts and also a peculiar self-examination of how I write and think, painful at times.

Last year I had half a dozen Chinese students in an MA class who could not communicate with me in Spanish at all but handed in papers with a Spanish closer to Cervantes than to Pérez Reverte and indeed to what any local student usually manages. We, the teachers, soon realized the papers were not plagiarised but Google-translated (does this word exist?). This is a very tricky situation as the MA they had signed up for did not have specific language requirements of the kind an MA in Spanish (philology) has. My own students in English Studies should stand warned, then, that the use of Google Translate is not welcome—they need to write their exercises in English in their own words; automatic translation is, as I now know very well, easy to detect.

The doubt eating me up is whether you can truly say ‘this is my translation’ if you have used Google Translate. I think you can since you have the final word yet, oddly, I feel a bit uncomfortable. I have been thinking for a while of producing a companion to my book of translated short stories *Siete relatos góticos* (<http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116808>) but I suddenly see no point. Or, to be honest, I feel too lazy to undertake very hard work that can be done much more easily. I firmly believe that using Google Translate for this would be cheating, which is not the case for my own academic work. Yet, again, I wonder how many translations of literary works are being published using this extremely useful tool, or shortcut.

Any professional translator out there?

27 September 2015 / LITERATURE TEACHERS AND LITERARY PRODUCTION: WHEN A MERIT IS NOT A MERIT

Back when I was a doctoral student and computers were starting to be the sophisticated tools they are now, I asked my MA dissertation supervisor whether she would contemplate the idea of my submitting a novel for my PhD dissertation. I was thinking of producing something hypertextual because I had then read that William Faulkner wanted to have his masterpiece *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) printed in inks of different colours, depending on whose internal monologue we read. Fancy that, I thought, it would be wonderful to produce a text that benefitted from all the digital advances and that would go much, much further than the two-tone fantasy Faulkner entertained.

Understandably, Faulkner's publisher talked him out of what would have been a high-cost operation and today we're still stuck with boring black-on-white books; hypertexts have not really taken off, either, I'm not sure why. My own supervisor initially encouraged me, even though I had never written fiction at all, but finally decided no tribunal in Spain would be ready for the experiment. This was 1993, before anyone had heard of creative writing here, although the famous programme at the University of East Anglia had been established by Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson back in 1970. "The UK's first PhD in Creative and Critical Writing followed in 1987", the website of UEA proudly claims, whereas "Creative Writing at undergraduate level has been taught informally since the 1960s and formally since 1995".

No, I have never got around to writing either a publishable short story or a novel, which now and then (like today) worries me. The nagging question at the back of my head is whether a university Literature teacher should be able to produce Literature in the same way, say, a Chemistry teacher must be able to produce suitable experiments leading to advances in his/her chosen field. The consensual answer is a rotund no, as we, Lit teachers, are in the business of producing literary criticism and not Literature.

This comforts me except on the days when I feel green with envy considering the pile of money our Murcia ex-colleague, María Dueñas, has made out of her very limited literary talent (she used to teach Language, I'm told). On other days, I feel completely floored down by the case of my neighbour in the Department upstairs (Spanish), Carme Riera, who is not only a prestige writer but also a full professor. (I wonder how it feels to sit as a guest through a conference about your work, as she has done—can you criticise the papers presented as an academic, too?). The question is that, as another well-published colleague from the upstairs Department, David Roas, tells me, publishing Literature is not regarded as a merit by the academic authorities that be. It is very odd. David confirmed to me he did not know whether his own CV should include his short story collections and his novels...

As happens, two of our new MA students have also tentatively asked whether they can submit fiction for their MA dissertation, a tricky question since we don't run a Creative Writing programme. We have not really, then, progressed much from the days when I had the idea of shaping my PhD dissertation as a novel.

If I had never written fiction, where did the idea for the never-written thesis come from? I am thinking of John Scalzi, the rising US SF writer, who wrote his first novel, *Agent to the Stars* (2005), as he candidly explains in the acknowledgements, simply to learn how it was done. That's it. It is not the best possible strategy but I find Scalzi's modest approach quite refreshing and I wish many more writers followed his lead, instead of claiming they were possessed by the need to tell a story or make it into the history of Literature.

In my own case, I can always say that I simply don't know whether I can write a novel, as I have never had the time to try and, besides, a novel requires investing precious time that I need for my academic career (for the proper items that count). Some days I

think I will take one year and see what comes out, but I know it will not happen. Either you feel the urge to fabulate from the beginning of adulthood or you do not and, besides, Literature teachers tend to be too self-conscious about the possibility of writing a mediocre piece. I wonder nonetheless what my imaginary novel would be about, though one thing I do know: it would NOT deal with a university Literature teacher. No way.

Translation, by the way, doesn't count either as an academic merit in this country, no matter whether what you produce is a fine translation of, say, *Paradise Lost*. We used to have a teacher in the Department, Prof. Josep Maria Jaumà, whose main academic task consisted of translating poetry and I'm sorry to say this was never acknowledged as a serious pursuit by either Ministry or university; translating poetry seemed to be classed, rather, as a highly eccentric hobby. I believe he never tried to apply for a personal research assessment exercise on the basis of his translated poems but I do know of someone else who did try and was flatly rebuked with a hint more or less covert that this was an attempt at cheating. Research is research and it consists in our case of producing literary criticism, as I said. Of course, if you are a writing scientist, as my good friend Carme Torras is, things are even worse as colleagues tend to think that Literature is a waste of time in a scientist's career. Prizes or no prizes, as it is her case.

An infinite variety of writers are, of course, also teachers, and viceversa, at least in the Anglophone area. In civilized countries they even have this intriguing figure, the visiting writer, supposed to draw his/her inspiration from staying at a particular university (mine would surely inspire some Ballardian entropic tales...). I learned to distrust the idea a bit when Lucía Etxebarria was appointed visiting writer by the University of Aberdeen, but, well, I'll take this as proof that all systems have imperfections. And, yes, Creative Writing abounds as a degree-awarding discipline at all levels (BA, MA, PhD), though I'll quote Stephen King again when he says in *On Writing* that a programme of this kind can help if you're talented but cannot supply deficiencies if the talent is missing. Also, I'm told that many of the students in Creative Writing programmes tend to be writers who do not read, which partly explains the limited impact they (the programmes) have on truly outstanding Literature. But I ramble...

I have no answer then to the question of why the production of literary texts is not considered a merit in the academic career of a Literature teacher, beyond the suspicion that at heart Literature is not taken to be a serious affair. At another level, when I complained that I was fed up with having to pay the texts I teach out of my own pocket, a Language teacher told me, quite bemused, that he did not see why the university should pay for novels. That's a good one.

As for students' demand that literary production can be part of an MA called Advanced English Studies, the truth is that, even recalling my own naïve wish to submit a novel as a PhD dissertation, I don't quite see it. It is not just because we are not Creative Writing teachers but rather the impression that we should have to learn from scratch how to judge the work submitted. There is quite a tight consensus on what constitutes

good academic work, but would we agree on the merits of a novelette or a novel? Not without important changes in our training.

And, yes, it would have been foolish of me to attempt to write a novel as a doctoral student. Or maybe I missed then the chance to be a writer/teacher? I wonder, to finish, who will be up to the task of supervising the proposed MA dissertations if we greenlight them.

2 October 2015 / PREPARING FOR DISASTER: READING POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION

Post-apocalyptic fiction deals, as it names indicates, with the aftermath of a catastrophe which affects a very large territory or even the whole world. Typically, an individual or a small group of survivors narrate their efforts to rebuild civilization, or to accept reluctantly that it is gone for ever. In some extreme cases, only one person survives (Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826)). Post-apocalyptic fiction flourished in the 1950s and 1980s as a consequence of fears connected with nuclear weapons, and is now undergoing its most productive period or 'golden age' (post 9/11 2001). Yet, Mary Shelley's novel suggests that the secular fear of total annihilation is older than we think. I emphasize 'secular' because, of course, Bible readers are only too familiar with Saint John's lurid description of the end in his *Apocalypse*. Funnily, 'apocalypse', a Greek word, does not mean 'catastrophe' but 'revelation'.

Essentially, post-apocalyptic fiction imagines three types of total destruction: one originating in natural causes, the second caused by man's intervention and the third by an intelligent, non-human enemy. Natural causes include comets and asteroids crashing against Earth, our own planet going berserk, an unexpected mutation causing a plague. Man-made disasters include, as I have noted, the feared nuclear holocaust, unstoppable environmental damage or irresponsible experiments (Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, 1990). The third case responds mainly to alien invasions (though in Octavia Butler's late 1980s *Lilith's Brood* trilogy the invasion appears to be a solution of sorts to the nuclear apocalypse).

Those of use who were young in the 1980s surely can still recall the intense fear of total nuclear wipe-out. 1984, in particular, the year when the first *Terminator* movie was released, is not for me an Orwellian year but rather the culmination of the madness that led Cold War leaders to amass enough nuclear power to destroy the world several *thousand* times over. Here in Barcelona, then a pre-Olympics nonentity, we wondered whether we were important enough to deserve the attentions of a Soviet missile. It is in human nature to control our worst fears by imagining terrifying catastrophes and this is what fiction did then copiously. We could choose between the 1980s terrifying productions (Robert McCammon's very long novel *Swan Song* of 1987 became my absolute favourite as I loved the girl protagonist); or read the quaint fiction of the 1940s and 1950s, when a nuclear planetary Judgment Day was still fantasy and not a daily possibility.

With almost 16,000 nuclear bombs right now on Earth (93% in the hands of the USA and Russia, the others in those of France, China, United Kingdom, Pakistan, India, Israel and North Korea... some list) we cannot really say that the 2010s are substantially different from the 1980s, they are perhaps even worse. Yet I am sure that for most earthlings all the other potential catastrophes I have named are more likely to happen, particularly the (unlikely) zombifying plague as seen in *The Walking Dead*. In the best post-apocalyptic tale of the 21st century, so far, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) no specific cause is named as the originator of the dreadful life to which the father protagonist so fiercely clings (for the sake of his son).

I have the impression that the United States have been narrating their own decadence since 2001, when a very small group of terrorists launched an attack that, seen on TV, seemed bigger than any alien invasion (think *Independence Day*, 1996). American fiction, whether it is *The Hunger Games* trilogy or the action film *San Andreas*, is imagining with rabid insistence what it is like to go through unthinkable destruction (with abundant technological glee) and to adapt to a civilization which has little to do with the one before apocalypse. I am fascinated by this already long-lasting phenomenon but I am wondering when it is going to end, since a consequence of post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction is that it increases depression. This need not be so. The wonderful *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (1974) by Manuel de Pedrolo, which taught me to love science fiction, is post-apocalyptic fiction of the alien obliteration variety. It is meant to give hope in human resilience even in the face of hyperbolic destruction, which also used to be the case in older post-apocalyptic tales. Hope is today small and waning, or plain incredible.

Let me name a few post-apocalyptic novels that we, the depressive paranoid types, indulge in (apart from the ones I have already mentioned and excluding alien invasion stories for the sake of brevity):

After London (Richard Jefferies, 1885)
The Scarlet Plague (Jack London, 1912)
Earth Abides (George R. Stewart, 1949)
I am Legend (Richard Matheson, 1954)
The Chrysalids (John Wyndham, 1955)
The Death of Grass/No Blade of Grass (John Christopher, 1956)
On the Beach (Nevil Shute, 1957)
Alas, Babylon (Pat Frank, 1959)
A Canticle for Leibowitz (Walter M. Miller, Jr., 1960)
The Drowned World (J.G. Ballard, 1962)
Lucifer's Hammer (Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven, 1977)
The Stand (Stephen King, 1978)
Riddley Walker (Russell Hoban, 1980)
The Handmaid's Tale (Margaret Atwood, 1985)
The Children of Men (PD James, 1992)
The Road (Cormac McCarthy, 2006)
World War Z (Max Brooks, 2006)

The Passage (Justin Cronin, 2010)
Wool (Hugh Howey, 2011)
Seveneves (Neal Stephenson, 2014)

No, I have not read all of them, just about two thirds. And if I am writing this post today it is because of two strange feelings associated with, in particular, *Seveneves* and the novel I finished yesterday, *Earth Abides* (soon to be a TV mini-series). In Stephenson's massive book a micro black hole disintegrates the Moon, whose pieces destroy Earth by setting the atmosphere on fire as they fall. Two years mediate between our satellite's collapse and apocalypse and, this is very odd, I felt *relief*. Oh, well, two years to go, how many stupid things can be finally left undone...

Stephenson imagines that mankind's ingenuity (women's mostly) allows human beings to re-make themselves and eventually reconquer Earth in fabulous high-tech style. Yet, unexpectedly, I don't believe a word of it. In contrast, the far more modest *Earth Abides* (which inspired King's also massive *The Stand* and probably also *Seveneves*) deals with the possibility that no adequate leader is found to reboot civilization. Ish Williams cannot cope nor can his small community understand the need to educate its children at least to be literate. The young quickly forget 20th century life, yet having been born after the ruinous plague and having missed the comforts of this by-gone life, they quickly adapt to the new circumstances. Just like our own young people, a friend tells me, are adapting to our post-crisis, post-apocalyptic times. No doubt.

I am told that not only extreme-right survivalist groups in America but also common citizens here in the little corner of the world where I live are preparing for world-wide catastrophe. People stupidly chose to believe in the recent past that an underground shelter would protect you from nuclear catastrophe, as they now seem to believe that learning basic survival skills (lighting a fire with two sticks) can protect you from the terminal destruction of Earth by the very obvious climate change. In *Earth Abides* the protagonist is a scholar (a geographer) who soon realizes that his scavenging community is no good; also, that urban dwellers too specialised in one task (like selling perfume) cannot survive. I have no illusions about my own usefulness yet I still see no point in learning to survive in caves. What you learn from reading post-apocalyptic fiction is that survival is not always the best possible option.

Having said that, this post has not been motivated by my apocalyptic fears about what the current political circumstances right here right now may bring (perhaps my reading list has) but by the tiny hope that apocalypse can be prevented and post-apocalyptic fiction be read as just a nightmare. Hopefully.

11 October 2015 / THE PARADOXES OF MIGRATION: SILENCES, ABSENCES AND UNHEEDED (LITERARY) WARNINGS

I have attended this week the international conference "New Typologies of (E/Im)Migration: Mobility and Transcultural Spaces" beautifully organized by my good

friend José Manuel Estévez Súa (<http://www.josemanuelestevezsaa.com/>). This was also the 17th Culture and Power International Conference, marking the twentieth anniversary of our seminar's activities (<http://www.cultureandpower.org/>). I am not myself at all a specialist in the field but having attended all but one Culture and Power seminar, I felt compelled to submit a paper. And this, I did.

I described my research for this paper in the posts of 1 and 21 June. I visited then the Museu d'Història de Catalunya and the Museu d'Història de la Immigració in order to check why the public visibility of the migration to Catalonia of many Spaniards from other regions is so low. My starting hypothesis was that there is a clear political intention to make this internal migration subordinated to the foreign migration started in the early 1990s. This, however, is open to two readings: one positive, with the low profile of Spanish migration connoting total integration; one negative, with the nationalist/independentist agenda seeking actively the silencing of the former migrants and their descendants. MHC somehow complicates matters as its displays are based on choices not conditioned by the Generalitat (as happens in MHC) and, yet, the narrative offered is quite limited and strangely optimistic, glossing over all the problems that Spanish migrants faced and how their experience connects with that of the later 1990s foreign migrants.

What is most surprising to me is the fact that the Spanish internal migrants themselves have not narrated this experience nor the following generations in their families. In English there is an abundant list of fiction and non-fiction on the migrant experience of practically any ethnic group, from Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), about a Jewish migrant to the USA, to the recent novels on the Polish migration to the UK (post 2004), which Noemí Pereira discussed in the conference. Yet, in Spanish we do not really have a sub-genre dealing with migration, much less with internal migration. From what I heard, Galician writers tend to focus on international migration (mainly to Argentina and Cuba), and from what I know here locally in Catalonia the early example of Paco Candel and the novels by Juan Marsé still remain quite exceptional cases.

A colleague forwarded me a while ago a list of documentaries on the topic I am discussing here:

- *La aldea maldita* (1930 silent and 1942, sound), by Froilán Rey.
- *Surcos* (1951) by Juan Antonio Nieves Conde.
- *La piel quemada* (1967) by José María Forn.

Specifically towards Catalonia, the works by Llorenç Soler (see some here <http://www.culturaenaccion.com/llorenc-soler-videos/>):

- *52 domingos* (1966)
- *Será tu tierra* (1966)
- *Largo viaje hacia la ira* (1969)

Enrique Martínez-Salanova Sánchez's webpage (<http://www.uhu.es/cine.educacion/cineyeducacion/emigracion.htm>) shows how the subject of internal migration seems to vanish in 1970s cinema, perhaps because the Transición becomes a priority, to resurface in the 1990s with the new foreign

migration. The main exception seems to be the TV movie co-produced by several regional public TV channels *La Mari* (2003).

I don't have a similar information for the novel as I am not a specialist in Spanish Literature yet my assumption is that the same pattern is repeated. My very amateurish conclusion as to why this pattern exists (in the specific case of Catalonia) is that there was too little time between the end of the Spanish migrant influx around 1980 and the beginning of the foreign migration around 1990 for the internal migrants to process their own story. The Generalitat insisted, and rightly so, on imposing the general assumption that integration had been achieved and very successfully—rightly so because a fractured society has no future. Yet, I wonder why in the end the balance between integration and the migrants' right to celebrate their culture is best represented by the big FERIA de Abril in Barcelona (established in 1971) rather than by a stream of novels and films.

My working hypothesis is that by the time the second or third generation got college degrees and a sophisticated awareness of their own family's experiences it was too late for the market to offer a niche, as this had been taken up by the foreign experience of migration (in Catalan the main example would be Najat El Hachmi's *Jo també sóc catalana* of 2004). I wonder whether, and I said so at the conference, the current Spanish young persons, forced to migrate abroad due to the dramatic lack of jobs here, will be the ones to finally make sense of this past experience and of their own. Paradoxically, Anglophone post-colonialism has provided us with conceptual and academic tools we lacked in the past; sadly, these are still unknown among most Spanish writers and intellectuals and little appreciated in Spanish Departments, the ones that should be researching why there are no works narrating the Spanish internal migration.

Apart from this paradox—the absence of a rich literature of migration in Spain despite the copious national and international experiences of many Spaniards—I noticed another paradox. The novels and films depicting modern migration are at least 100 years old, if not more. And it is obvious that the story they narrate is quite similar: an individual feels the need to leave his or her home country pushed by the realization that there is no future for him/her there; the choice of destination is conditioned by the fantasy that the opportunities are many and the reception will be positive; harsh reality intrudes to shatter that fantasy and show the migrant that s/he can only occupy a low place in its new receiving society; the migrant is sorely disappointed, and the story ends either in failure or in a deferred hope that later generations will fare better. I made many people laugh among the conference delegates when I commented that ignoring the literature on migration seems to be an intrinsic part of the migrant experience: migrants could be better informed but they are not, and thus the same story is repeated. I am not sure why they laughed. You can attribute this pattern to the fact, I'll add, that many migrants have no access to education. Yet a colleague answered that migrating is like having a child—you plunge into the experience and take risks, unheeding all the warnings against it (otherwise nobody would have children). Fair enough.

This begs, however, the thorny question of whether narrating the migrant's experience in film or fiction makes sense at all. Another delegate (from India) complained that, in addition, the market selects which aspects to consume and which to ignore, so that even the best informed reader/viewer only gets a partial impression of what migration entails. The migrant, hence, by definition, faces his/her journey as a journey into the unknown even when much can be learned beforehand from the experience of past migrants. Perhaps migration is in part sustained by the migrant's confidence that s/he will do well unlike the many who failed (remember *Angela's Ashes*?). You have to migrate, you hope for the best because in the end the worst is what pushes you to migrate.

What totally mystifies me is the assumption by educated migrants from poor countries that they will be treated according to their qualifications... Also, here's another paradox, how many migrant experiences are not called that: executives, artists, academics and in general liberal professionals from rich countries do not migrate, they 'relocate'.

So much to consider...

18 October 2015 / WALTER TEVIS' SF MASTERPIECE *MOCKINGBIRD*: THE END OF LITERACY

I did not mention in my post of 2 October on post-apocalyptic fiction Walter Tevis' excellent novel *Mockingbird* (1980) as I started reading it right after writing the piece. It refuses to be consigned to my memory without further ado, so here we go.

As it happened to me, the name Walter Tevis may be familiar if you're around my age (49) in relation to two film adaptations of his novels: *The Hustler* (novel 1959, film with Paul Newman 1961) and its sequel *The Colour of Money* (novel 1984, film 1986—again with Newman and a young Tom Cruise). I was very much surprised to see that this Tevis is the same Tevis of not only this SF masterpiece but also of another SF peculiar novel, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1963); its 1976 adaptation by Nicolas Roeg with the charismatic singer/actor David Bowie as its protagonist, in the role of an alien visitor, is one of those cult films which re-surfaces again and again.

Tevis (1928-1984) was a teacher of English literature and creative writing at Ohio University (Athens, 1965 to 1978). As he explained, the inspiration for *Mockingbird* came from the realisation that his students did not care for reading. Hence, he imagined a strange post-apocalyptic 25th century American civilization in which all human beings are illiterate. The situation is strange, I'm claiming, because individuals choose of their own accord to abandon reading progressively; ironically, as literacy decays technoscience evolves fast enough to produce efficient robots that take over from humans not only the most onerous tasks but also the running of civilization itself. The most advanced robotic model, Make Nine, has been designed to manage complex

organizations and—you may start chuckling now...—Spofforth, the android protagonist, happens to be the Dean of New York University.

The other post-apocalyptic novels I mentioned, including the one I'm currently reading (*Alas, Babylon!* by Pat Frank) are quite upsetting as they show how defenceless we, the common people, are in the face of accidental or purposeful destruction, whether this is caused by a plague or by a nuclear holocaust. What is most terrifying about *Mockingbird* is that there is no catastrophe but a progressive erosion of the interest in the written word, and, accordingly, of civilization (as Tevis knew it). This erosion is supposed to have started by the mid 1970s, when, as I have noted, Tevis was an English teacher—which shows that Literature teachers have been worrying about falling literacy standards for a long time... In Tevis' 25th century New York not even university teachers are literate (the scant education offered depends on audio-visual media). The plot simply concerns android Spofforth's decision to help a male teacher, Bentley, to teach himself to read and, later, educate the spunky heroine, Mary Lou, with the aim of giving humanity a chance to regenerate itself.

Human beings can survive in a state of illiteracy; indeed, along history most people were illiterate, with literacy spreading recently mainly due to the needs of the Industrial Revolution (complex machinery cannot be operated without written instructions), with a push from Protestantism, for which Bible reading is essential. As I commented in my post of 2 October George Stewart's post-apocalyptic novel *Earth Abides* deals with how the surviving generation fails to educate its children and how, nonetheless, the younger people do go on to establish a new life similar to that of primitive tribes. What is at stake is not, then, survival itself but a much feared drawback into a darker age and the ensuing loss of our collective memory. The inability to read and write means an inability to connect with the past, logically, whether this refers to History or to the achievements in science and technology. In Tevis' novel technology thrives as human beings become mentally numb, yet it is a technology with an absurd self-serving purpose and totally unable to connect with human needs (with the exception of the melancholic Spofforth).

Obviously, the reason why *Mockingbird* has impressed me so much, apart from its overlooked literary quality, is the central concept—the idea that individuals can *choose* not to read, therefore, not to be educated. We all know there was never a golden age when everyone read and very keenly so; yet, the Enlightenment promised to bring forth a civilization in which not only would all human beings have access to education but all would demand it. The central idea was, remember, to guarantee the rights of men (and of women as, later, Mary Wollstonecraft demanded). Almost 300 years later we have proof positive that many persons just do not want to be educated, which is not only puzzling but also a tragedy. The Victorians insisted very much on the idea of self-improvement and proceeded, besides, to place education in the hands of the Government, which was then a very novel idea. I am personally of the persuasion that a day when I have learned nothing new is a day wasted, and even though I do learn much from audio-visual media, nothing can replace reading.

And I mean by this, not just reading short texts but, most essentially, books. This is what my colleagues and I see these days in our university classrooms: students do not buy books, they do not bring the required set texts to class, they do not borrow them from the library. The overall impression if you read the press is that the book market is slowly dying; I'm told that most novels sell 400 copies and that successful novels sell just above 2,000. This is nothing in a country of 47 million people. The person in charge of purchasing books for our excellent Humanities library tells me that borrowing has dramatically decreased—I know, for I can get anything I need with no fear that someone else will have the book. So, yes, literacy persists as the social networks depend very much on the written word but the ability to read for long is on the wane, reduced to short pieces, with books looking impossibly long. At least, that's my impression.

Walter Tevis, remember, had a similar impression when the internet was still firmly in the hands of a military clique and nobody had dreamed of its being a most important resource for interpersonal global communication. The internet per se is not an enemy of literacy—what am I doing here but use it to publish texts? What seems to be the main enemy is the generalized perception that reading is an optional pursuit, when it is actually the basis of all (post-tribal) civilization. Just imagine what kind of medicine we will have in the future in the hands of doctors who do not want to read. For, in the end, what matters is not quite whether Charles Dickens' immortality is guaranteed (just to name someone I love) but whether we can maintain the living standards to which we are used for long. Don't tell me now that the existence of nuclear weapons contradicts my argument as they are also a product of advanced education. Think, rather, of how the knowledge that sustains the comforts of our daily lives can be transmitted without the support of books and of interested readers. It can not.

Yes, we Literature teachers always complaining about the same, what a bore we are... I'll add, just in case, that having finally seen this week the BBC's wonderful 2005 adaptation of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, I am even more convinced of the pernicious impact that the current fad to call TV series the 21st century equivalent of the 19th century novel is having. For, no matter how good the BBC's *Bleak House* was, its 510 minutes can by no means replace the much richer experience of reading the book. And not even the best-written TV series compares to the best-written novel.

This is just in case we go the way of Tevis' professor Bentley and end up teaching audio-visual texts to illiterate students being ourselves also illiterate. Some nightmare...

23 October 2015 / BOXED IN: ACADEMIC LIFE, TERRITORIALISM AND STRAYING OFF THE PATH (WITH THE BOLSHOI BALLET)

I have just accepted tutoring an MA dissertation on how the new digital media conditions the task of the dancer and choreographer. What is an (English) Literature teacher doing supervising this? Let me retrace the steps.

Since I have always been interested in the process of film adaptation, having published many articles about it, and since I have taught English Theatre a few times, I was invited by my colleagues in the Catalan Department to teach part of the course 'Theatre Arts and Other Arts' within their MA in Theatre Studies. I chose to teach a 12-hour seminar on 'Shakespeare on the Screen', based on a previous BA elective (see the materials at <http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/content/teaching-0>).

I met in class my new tutoree, Toni, who had been, by the way, already my student in my UOC 'Introduction to English Literature'. Yes, I am offering some kind of insidious critique against online teaching by saying I have 'met' someone I already knew as a student. But I digress. Toni is a retired contemporary dancer with a long career, currently a teacher at the Institut del Teatre. He wrote for my course, following my suggestion, a great paper on Scottish dancer Michael Clark's performance as a totally silent Caliban in Peter Greenaway's atmospheric film adaptation of *The Tempest*, *Prospero's Books*. I gave a lecture within my course on how technology has impacted the evolution of theatre (I wrote about this here, see my post for May 11, of this year). Toni put two and two together and decided that I might be interested in seeing how digital media impact dance today. I certainly am but, believe me, I did agonize about whether I was doing Toni a favour by accepting his supervision. He seems to be far more certain than I am. But, then, as a colleague told me, he brings the knowledge, I contribute the know-how (to write a dissertation).

Discussing all this with my UAB colleague Teresa López Pellisa, she explained to me her work on theatre and cyberculture, which I ignored (this happens all the time—we don't know what the neighbour next door is doing but we're familiar with the last advances in, say, Toronto). I met Teresa when she organized in 2008 the 'I Congreso Internacional de Literatura Fantástica y Ciencia Ficción', so far with no second edition. We share also, apart from a love of CF, a course in another master's degree, so I know about her interest in the post-human and Latin-American CF, but I didn't know, as I say, about her work on new stage technologies. At one point, she mentioned working on a play with no text whatsoever and vented her doubts about how that fits the department she works for, the Spanish Department (within the area of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature, to be precise). Can you do research on wordless 'texts' from a language and Literature department? Can I supervise an MA dissertation on dance?

Obviously, it is clear to Teresa and myself that there should be no watertight compartments dividing academic work. The academic field should look, precisely, like a vast field with academics tending gardens in many different pretty nooks into which other academics might stroll and be welcome. Instead, it often seems to be a suburb composed of fiercely guarded small plots, with walled-in houses into which no neighbour is invited. Even worse, many of the houses are old crumbling mansions and construction stopped many decades ago—new architectural styles are just anathema. Just imagine: in Spain there are no Cultural Studies, no Film Studies, no Theatre Studies, etc, etc, either as degrees or Departments. This is why we find ourselves going out of our way so often. It is either that or Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf for ever.

I believe all my colleagues would tell you that we have internalized the fierce inquisitorial image of a tribunal member checking on us all the time, telling us off for straying off the path. In my case it goes something like this: 'isn't it enough for you,' this inquisitor tells me, 'to waste your time doing research on popular trash, now you want to go into territory that belongs to other specialists? Why don't you stick to Shakespeare?' Well, if you recall this is all Shakespeare's fault, in the first place, for giving Caliban a physicality so manifest that only a dancer as wonderful as Michael Clark can make sense of... Will this do? As for the 'trash', um, as I wrote, the delicious SF movie *Forbidden Planet* is also an adaptation of *The Tempest*, at least in plot and subject matter, if not in textuality.

This anxiety that you're occupying someone else's territory or living perilously outside the boundaries of your own territory is the true source of much waste of time. Nobody is asking me at this point whether I should be supervising the MA dissertation on dance and I'm sure that my colleagues will find it thrilling (oh, here goes Sara again...). Yet, my internal tribunal member, a distillation of the tribunals I have actually faced, is here to remind me that this will look odd in my CV. I wonder! It might even lend some respectability to a CV full of 'trash'.

This waste of time I have mentioned, and of energy, results in, as you can see, a constant need to justify yourself, as I'm doing here. In civilized countries you announce who you want to be by means of your doctoral dissertation, then you proceed to teaching courses that fit your academic interests and start a consistent line of publications. Here, it doesn't work like that. I did announce my intentions with my own dissertation on monstrosity but it all seems geared to make you struggle to find a niche—teaching is restricted by absurd legislation that gives the Government (the Government!!) custody over our syllabus, you cannot invent elective courses, research assessment is based on the conservative suburban layout I have described. I may be protesting too much, since, after all, here I am a tenured teacher with a 24-year-long career. Yet, the insecurity about being judged negatively never vanishes.

Let me clear the unwholesome air and go back to dance and digital technologies. A couple of weeks ago I found myself in a Barcelona cinema watching the live transmission of the Romantic ballet *Giselle* performed by Moscow's Bolshoi company. This was the first time I attended an event of this kind, even though there have been already several seasons, including opera and, a novelty this year I think, the Royal Shakespeare Company. It was a weird experience, as, first, I could not help feeling it was a film and not a live performance; second, I felt a little like a *voyeur* in relation to the audience cheering in Moscow. There were even people eating popcorn in my local theatre and nobody clapped, confused by their role as spectators. Anyway: what I didn't expect was the intense aesthetic emotion generated by the loving detail with which dancers' faces and bodies were shown. This is something I would have missed in a theatre.

So, you see?, there is no way you can put, as we say in Spanish, gates in the (academic) field. A ballet one Sunday afternoon in my free time turns out to be the reason why, in

the end, I accepted tutoring Toni's MA dissertation for, after seeing the Russian dancers I got home promising myself to learn more about dance. Toni's petition to be his tutor came only two days later...

Yes, I am so privileged... and, yes, some days academic life is beautiful.

29 October 2015 / GOING BACK WITH ALICE TO CHILDHOOD (WITHIN LIMITS)

Next week I am returning to Wonderland once again, this time to introduce the students in my Victorian Literature class to Carroll's classic. To be honest, I'm not completely sure that I like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) in the same way I like, for instance, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911). I'm truly sorry I will never get the chance to teach Burnett's classic, as it is not Victorian and we don't teach children's Literature. In contrast, though I am happy indeed that I can teach Carroll, I am concerned by the many difficulties this involves.

I own a Penguin Classics edition which also includes *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). Both this text and *Alice* are accompanied by John Tenniel's perfect illustrations, which is quite a nice touch considering this is an adult edition. I realize that the most popular image of the girl Alice, with her famous head-band (now known as an Alice band) and her pretty striped tights comes from *Looking-Glass*, which is a bit confusing. Actually, every time I read the two texts I end up confused about what goes in which, possibly a sign that they work better as a single unit rather than as book and its sequel.

This Penguin edition, I was trying to say, is a proper academic version and, as such, it is accompanied by a multitude of notes. These notes reveal that much of the nonsense of Carroll's twin texts has to do with his relentless mockery of other texts, mainly poems, both for adults and children. It seems, then, that much of the humour appreciated by original audiences has to do with topical references lost to contemporary readers. I can imagine the glee of many child readers when offered very rude, impolite re-writings of poems and songs they may not have enjoyed at all. Yet, I constantly have the feeling that I am missing much that not even the original texts parodied by Carroll and included in my edition can make up for.

Alice was a text improvised orally by Carroll, as he had improvised many others, in a famous golden afternoon spent in the river with the three Liddell sisters. The author wrote it down accompanied by his own illustrations to offer it as a Christmas present to his beloved Alice Liddell, calling it then *Alice's Adventures Underground*. Little by little, he rewrote it as the text universally known today, choosing Tenniel to offer a more professional rendering of his amateurish illustrations. The process, as you can see, starts with an adult improvising a tale for the amusement of three little girls whom he knew very well; the mechanisms on which the humour of the events in the plot depend must, then, connect closely with the narrative strategies that, as he knew,

would trigger the girls' pleasure. If you have a child in your family, or remember your own childhood, you will agree with me that there is nothing more delicious than making them giggle, particularly by appealing to shared, secret jokes. And that is what *Alice* appears to be in my view: a text intended for restricted consumption by three specific girls full of private jokes that possibly only they could decode.

I am not saying that *Alice* is unreadable but whenever I read it, I do feel very much as Alice does when the Mad Hatter tells her that his watch tells the year: "I don't quite understand you. What you said had no sort of meaning in it and yet it was certainly English." The whole text by Carroll is obviously in English but demands from the reader an ability to not-understand but still enjoy oneself that possibly only children have (or readers or James Joyce...). One thing that puzzles me tremendously is how contemporary cartoons for kids appeal to that kind of pleasure—watching an episode of *Gumball*, which I love for its very many allusions and clever scripts, I realized that my six-year-old niece could not possibly understand it all, as she granted. Yet, she had chosen it, claiming it was her favourite (it's 'The Fridge'). I'm sure, then, that Carroll's genius consisted of getting absolutely right what would tickle a Victorian child—though, and here's the root of my problem, there is no secondary level in *Alice* meant to appeal to an adult as there is in *Gumball*.

This means, if you follow me, that the ideal teacher and academic critic of both *Alice* and *Through the Looking-glass* should be a child. Unfortunately, I am not one, nor are my students, hence my concern. Take any passage from either book and you will see, as you pile different meanings overt and covert on it, that the whole edifice of literary interpretation comes crashing down as... nonsense. It is often said that Carroll plays with logic (he was a logician by training and profession) and that his nonsense is based on perverting its rules. I quite disagree. I think that *Alice* works because it generates a logic of its own and it has become a universal classic because beyond the actual comprehension of what is going on in the book readers are ensnared by it. I am amazed to see how many bits of *Alice* resonate in many other texts of all kinds and yet how different the are allusions to, say, the allusions made to Shakespeare's plays. Why is "off with his head" so funny to quote?

There is something else I am possibly missing, like any other reader. Often, a book blossoms into a favourite among its target readers because it smashes its predecessors. I am not familiar with children's fiction in the Victorian age but I'm sure that both traditional fairy tales and contemporary stories addressed to children depended too much on teaching morality to their little readers. *Alice* must have felt like a breath of pure air as, if it has anything to teach at all, this is pleasure—particularly to little girls who, unlike boys, were never offered *adventure*. Curiouser and curiouser...

Another way to try to make (adult) sense of *Alice* and *Looking-glass* is by recalling that both are dreams and, as such, they are full of incongruous details and happenings. The last part of each book, when the sleeper finally awakes, has Alice realize that noises and other background factors (like a kitten) have been transformed in her dream into strange event triggers and characters. This, I think (sorry Freud!) is how dreams work: their often bizarre plots are nonsense, yet somehow connect with the events of the

previous day. *Alice* was written before Freud became a popular household name and thus Carroll could have no notion that the subconscious of her girl protagonist was shaping her dream. I am here supposing that he told himself 'this is what a vivacious little girl like Alice Liddell would dream'.

I'll end by saying that even so, Carroll's insight into the child's mind is limited by his condition as an adult—and necessarily so, as Jacqueline Rose and many other specialists in children's Literature have pointed out. Thinking of the very odd questions my little niece asks me (the last one was 'do you go to prison if you cross when the red light is on?') I believe that we would have a very strange view of the world if we could get into a child's mind only for an instant. Perhaps for them every day is a bizarre adventure in wonderland, hence the popularity of Carroll's book.

Um, I would give anything right now to be able to re-read the book as a child of 7, Alice's age... Too late...

5 November 2015 / IN SEARCH OF GOOD MEN (AS ANTI-PATRIARCHAL ROLE MODELS)

I have finally seen the BBC's adaptation of Dickens' *Bleak House* (2005) and *Little Dorrit* (2008), both scripted by the very talented Andrew Davies. Although I bought the DVD pack which includes both basically because I wanted to see the highly famed *Bleak House*, and I had no particular interest in seeing *Little Dorrit*, I found myself enjoying the latter even better. In both cases, though, I took much pleasure from seeing good men celebrated in the main characters John Jarndyce (*Bleak House*) and Arthur Clennam (*Little Dorrit*). No doubt, much of my pleasure derived from the excellent, elegant interpretations of Denis Lawson as Jarndyce and Matthew Macfadyen as Clennam. In these times in which actors are praised for playing evil men (a vogue possibly started by Anthony Hopkins' Oscar in 1991 for the role of Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*), it is rewarding to see that some actors can play good men with full credibility, without seeming too bland or sentimental.

The ten-minute (re)search I did to document this post revealed, nonetheless, that praising good men is not the thing done. A quick check of the MLA using the phrase 'good man' threw a limited number of results, most of them dealing with Flannery O'Connor's famous short story of cynical title "A Good Man is Hard to Find". In this story, written in 1953, published in 1955, there are no good men at all and, actually, the focus falls on a murderer. The novel by fellow American writer Jim Thompson, *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), a disgusting and disturbing insight into the worst kind of male mind which makes Breat Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) look like a fairytale, had already made it clear that good men were gone. I am not sure whether this is an American phenomenon but a few more things made me take a deep breath and reconsider matters. One is that the Urban Dictionary defines a 'good guy' as "A male who despite being caring and respectful to his female friends and acquaintances will never become anything more than" (what Borja Cobeaga called 'pagafantas' in his

2009 eponymous film). The other is that The Good Men Project (2009), a multimedia resource founded to allow good men to share autobiographical key turning points, was the brainchild of James Houghton and a man whom few (women) define as good, Tom Matlack. From what I read, the project started as feminist-friendly but soon started showing signs of being, rather, patriarchy-friendly.

Back to Jarndyce and Clennam, I found on MLA only one piece related to Dickens' good men, a positively ancient dissertation (MA or PhD is unclear to me) by one Thomas Richard Hagwood, of whom Google throws no further notice: "Dickens and the Power of Goodness: The Portrayal of the 'Positively Good Man' in Dickens" (1976, Dissertation Abstracts: Section A. Humanities and Social Science (36:) pp. 8073A-74A). The MLA database also led me to Naomi Segal's article "Why Can't a Good Man Be Sexy? Why Can't a Sexy Man Be Good?" (in David Porter's collective volume *Between Men and Feminism*, 1992, 35-47). The title is a bit misleading as what seems to worry Segal is why female sexual desire cannot be kept alive in a long-term domestic situation when your partner is a good guy (really?). She seems to me terribly confused, even worrying that a good husband (in the feminist sense of the word, a true partner) becomes in the end a 'wife'. Segal claims she is not defending the sexiness of bad men but there is clearly a problem in an argumentation that cannot see masculinity and goodness as part of the same man.

As I have explained to my students again and again, 19th century narrative relied very much on this combination of features, a combination which we now deem unlikely. Both men and women writers agreed that the good man was an essential part of society: men saw in him the true gentleman and women the trustworthy husband that would protect them from the worst excesses of patriarchy. If you wish, the 19th century good man is defined by his choice not to abuse the power granted to him by the patriarchal system and by his decision to use that power to do as much good as he can. I am beginning to see that good men could (and did) subvert patriarchy in this way and I am sure that masculine goodness is the key factor that allowed children and women to secure the rights owed to them as citizens. Think J.S. Mill. I have, then, no illusions that Dickensian men like Jarndyce, Clennam and certainly John Brownlow are patriarchal but, well, I appreciate their gentlemanliness, generosity and plain human decency, which is a lot to say, particularly in comparison to contemporary male characters.

Contemporary fiction is not fully deprived of good men, though perhaps all of them are implicitly neo-Victorian. Leaving aside the ones that can be found in romance, a genre that I simply do not read (and if any is still found after the unleashing of the monster Christian Grey upon that genre) I have found some examples—all in literature addressed to children and young adults. Harry Potter's godfather Sirius Black (possibly also Severus Snape), Katniss' gentle admirer Peeta Mellark in *The Hunger Games* and the most recent addition to my list, Tom Natsworthy in Philip Reeve's steampunk, post-apocalyptic quartet *Mortal Engines* (2001-6). Sirius and Tom are British, Peeta American, just in case this means something. Oh, my, I forget Orson Scott Card's Ender Wiggins.

Yes, Harry Potter is no doubt also a good guy, possibly the reason why he has so few admirers as a hero (readers of Rowling's series seem to like the story better than the protagonist). And here is where I am going: 'sexiness', in the widest sense of the word, call it 'appeal' if you will, depends to a large extent on admiration (doesn't it?). Men positively ugly are loved by beautiful women as long as they have something to admire in them, whether this is athletic prowess or intellectual ability. What exactly is admired is the sexy bad guy is quite beyond me, though I suppose that what attracts is their power to resist domination and the challenge this entails. Now, the question is that goodness is not seen as admirable, hence appealing, hence sexy. I am sure Dickens would be mystified if we told him that few girls would rush to marry Arthur Clennam but this is the case. Jarndyce is a different matter as he is too old for Esther, the heroine, the very reason why he ultimately gives her up (allowing him, by the way, to marry another good man, Dr. Allan Woodcourt). Amy Dorrit (the quintessential good girl) chooses Arthur, then penniless, imprisoned and prematurely ageing, because he is a good man. Today we find the novel's resolution sentimental and condemn these two, Amy and Arthur, as either too goody-goody to be believed or too damaged to be truly happy.

Perhaps the central weakness of ideas like the one behind The Good Men Project is that a man cannot step out and declare himself 'good'. This is for others to do: mainly women but also other men. A man who protests that he is a 'good guy' protests too much, for if he were truly good there would be no need to proclaim it. Good men may be hard to find, as O'Connor suggested, but there must be many (some?) worth honouring, whether in real life or in fiction. What I am suggesting is that we need to make them central to the anti-patriarchal struggle to find alternative masculine models. Yes, I grant I sound terribly old-fashioned by vindicating Clennam and Jarndyce and, in general, the Victorian ideal of the gentleman (and look what Stevenson revealed about him with Dr. Jekyll).

Yet, the fact that good men are not our favourite persons and that we celebrate, above all, the powerful man explains why our current civilization is so fundamentally rotten. Doesn't it?

10 November 2015 / A BRIEF RETURN TO HOGWARTS, WITH QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMERCIAL LITERATURE

A week ago I visited my good friend Antonio Penedo's class to deliver a lecture on my experience of teaching the *Harry Potter* series in the Spring of 2014. This was for his elective course 'Estudios Culturales' within the Minor in Comparative Literature and Theory of Literature (which used to be a second-cycle Licenciatura... alas!... always losing chances to enrich our academic panorama). His class is crowded enough and in addition I had the good company of some of my Victorian Literature class, probably close to 100 persons, a size I am not used to (my classes are around 50 students at the most). I think I can safely say that possibly 75% would have joined a new *Harry Potter* course if I had offered it on the spot; quite a few did ask me to do so.

I'll deal first with the problems involved in going back to Hogwarts and then with two of the questions I was asked.

I could certainly teach again 'Cultural Studies: The *Harry Potter* Case' within the degree in English Studies... unless, that is, we start the feared 3+2 model immediately (whether within the Spanish Kingdom or the Catalan Republic, I don't even know...). As I explained to students, this 3+2 models means the end for fourth-year electives, that wonderful chance to catch students right where you want them, at the end of three years of academic training in our style and with up to 35 persons in class.

My experience of teaching in masters' degrees is that the electives do not work at a higher level (with the exception of the early years of the MA in Comparative Literature, then crowded with many absolutely brilliant Latin-American students, later expelled from the system by our crazy non-EU rates of up to 6,000 euros). Why not, if MA students already have a BA degree? Well, because they come from different backgrounds, both national and international and by the time you manage to produce a homogeneous academic approach the course is over... Sorry, but I think this is a common experience. I simply don't see myself teaching *Harry Potter* in the first year of a two-year MA which, besides, needs more than 10/15 students, a critical mass big enough to generate a variety of experience.

Beyond the 3+2 problem, the fact is that a new *Harry Potter* course could not compare with the one I have taught in terms of the serendipity that made that one a unique occasion—I could have the same guests, the materials I could generate would be very similar to the ones I have published (or are still trying to publish). It would be haunted by intense déjà vu. And, then, it should be now or never, before the original readers leave university. As for teaching *Harry Potter* to students in another degree, the problem is that I don't see myself teaching Rowling's series in translation. I would cringe all the time... I did this once, I mean teach the same elective in English at 10:00 and in Spanish at 15:00 and it worked very well because the texts were essays and documentaries and, somehow, the translations worked (this was a course on the US critique of US-generated globalisation: Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky, Michael Moore...). The problem with *Harry Potter* is the magical jargon which Rowling developed—the Death Eaters can never be Mortífagos for me, no matter how accurate the translation. Yes, I know, this sound snobbish but this is not what I mean—I'm sure my literary colleagues understand me.

Now for the questions from the floor: 1) if Rowling did not plan beforehand her heptalogy as a best-selling series, how come this is perceived as a commercial product?; 2) is the *Harry Potter* series Literature? My answers...

As it is well known, the Rowling myth is a rag-to-riches story. Here is this recently divorced mother, raising her daughter in Edinburgh, supported by the generous Scottish benefits system. She went through many difficulties to sell her first *Harry Potter* novel, and even when the first three novels (I think) were already successful in Britain, many publishing houses in other countries rejected them. If this had been a

commercial operation from scratch, then Planeta would have published Rowling, instead of the (lucky) Salamandra, the only one to bid for her books then. Likewise, please do visit the awesome bookshop Gigamesh to see how far the profits of George R.R.R. Martin's saga have taken its eponymous publishing house, which believed in Martin when nobody did in Spain.

The intensive commercialization, as I explained, corresponds mainly to the film adaptations and the entrance of the gigantic Warner Bros. corporation in Rowling's universe. Once the series became a world-wide phenomenon turning Rowling into a billionaire, it became hard to say who was the owner, the author or the corporation. The colossal publicity campaigns connected with the book and film launches may make us believe this had been planned from book one, but it is simply not the case.

What is certainly true is that successful products inspire the intensive commercialization of similar products, often commissioned. Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games* was, I believe, a phenomenon similar to *Harry Potter*, whereas now many of those who practice the new sub-genre spawned by Collins, young adult dystopian fiction, do so not out of conviction but because they see an easy chance to make a quick buck. Or because publishing houses head-hunt them, as was the case of Veronica Roth, author of the *Divergent* trilogy. The derivative product is easy to spot because it tends to be inferior in quality and seems to be written by joining the dots, if you know what I mean. Collins can be read (more or less), Roth is trash.

Is *Harry Potter* Literature? I wonder how many times I have been asked this... No, it is not if you understand by Literature the endeavour to produce (in fiction) high-quality prose in which you can observe the artistic ambition of the writer. I only found one passage I would call literary in that sense, corresponding to the description of the clashing wands in the duel between Harry and the resurrected Voldemort in the fourth book, *Goblet of Fire*. Rowling's prose is palpably functional and extremely effective in leading the reader by the hand; this is a kind of prose which is not that easy to produce, for it can quickly become too obviously hackneyed. I think that Rowling naturally writes this way, that this is her talent (though I must say I have not read her other books).

This is not a literary talent as subtle as what you can find in any of the literary elite writers, from Philip Roth to Margaret Atwood, yet it is an aspect of Literature, whether we like it or not. As I explained, we need to think that the *Harry Potter* series was addressed to children and teenagers, not to adults and, hence, it operates within certain literary limits (yes, I remember the poetical *Platero y yo*, but that's an exception). What I most appreciate, and I think there must be some authorial control here, is Rowling's ability to darken her prose as Harry's confrontation with Voldemort proceeds. The style of the first and the seventh book is very different: each suits the needs of the story and the age of the implied reader (7-10 in the first case, 16-18 in the latter). I myself was put off by the first book, which I found too childish, until I gave the series a second chance—when I got to book three, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, I finally understood the gimmick.

Sirius' handsome wand, a central icon in the décor of my home office, watches my back as I write—this is how close Rowling's series remain to me. Now, let me think about teaching the elective again...

17 November 2015 / THE WRITER'S VIEW ON STYLE: A PASSAGE BY R.L. STEVENSON

I was planning to write a post today on what I have seen and heard in the recent XXXIX AEDEAN conference (11-13 last week) but this needs a bit of careful thinking I have no time for today. Unexpectedly—because it often happens that I end up writing about something that I never thought I would consider—I have woken up with this urge to write about R.L. Stevenson. I have already written plenty about the text by him which I teach every year, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but today I'm dealing with something quite different: the article "A Note on Realism" (1883, *Magazine of Art*), included in the volume *Essays in the Art of Writing*, which you can download from https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/stevenson/robert_louis/s848aw/index.html.

This is a passage I have often used in class, as I did yesterday (forgive the long quotation):

Style is the invariable mark of any master; and for the student who does not aspire so high as to be numbered with the giants, it is still the one quality in which he may improve himself at will. Passion, wisdom, creative force, the power of mystery or colour, are allotted in the hour of birth, and can be neither learned nor simulated. But the just and dexterous use of what qualities we have, the proportion of one part to another and to the whole, the elision of the useless, the accentuation of the important, and the preservation of a uniform character from end to end—these, which taken together constitute technical perfection, are to some degree within the reach of industry and intellectual courage. What to put in and what to leave out; whether some particular fact be organically necessary or purely ornamental; whether, if it be purely ornamental, it may not weaken or obscure the general design; and finally, whether, if we decide to use it, we should do so grossly and notably, or in some conventional disguise: are questions of plastic style continually rearing. And the sphinx that patrols the highways of executive art has no more unanswerable riddle to propound.

To begin with, I find it a great pleasure to read texts about the craft of writing penned by the authors themselves. I would make it compulsory for all kinds of literary work to carry a writer's comment in the style of the director's comments on the DVD and Blu-Ray editions of films. Interviews would also do. I miss very much the many presentations by writers the Barcelona British Council used to offer, because they gave me the chance not only to collect autographed books but to hear authors discuss in person the tricks and challenges of their trade. At one point I asked the British Council whether we could edit a volume with the transcriptions of these presentations but the task was so gigantic that we soon abandoned the idea. I was at the time fascinated by

the series of volumes offering interviews with major writers published by the *Paris Review* (now online <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews>). I still am.

Anyway, back to Stevenson. Consider what he says: talent (i.e. “passion, wisdom, creative force, the power of mystery or colour”) is innate but style, the “mark of any master” can be learned and even “improved at will”. He speaks next of working on “the just and dexterous use of what qualities we have” to reach “technical perfection” which is, in his view, “to some degree within the reach of industry and intellectual courage”. I may be misreading but my impression is that Stevenson is here over-optimistic in the sense that, correct me if I’m wrong, but ‘industry’ and ‘intellectual courage’ also depend on inborn qualities.

Let me rephrase this: if a writer is born with talent that amounts to 80% of what is required to become a ‘master/mistress’, the 20% that depends on hard work will also depend on their having the required innate capacities to make the best of their talent. Inborn talent + limited ability to develop style = not a master/mistress (or an oxymoron). And the other way round: if a writer is born with a 20% talent for producing good writing, there is no way s/he can ‘learn’ the remaining 80%, as acquiring skills cannot compensate for limited innate talent. Or, as Stephen King argues, creative writing courses can help only if you already have a natural talent; ergo, only those with a natural talent are in a position to complement it with the ‘industry’ required to polish it into producing outstanding writing.

Stevenson does not seem to think that there is a direct link between the inborn talent and the subsequent industry (unless I misunderstand him) because he apparently thinks that the hard work he does on his texts should have similar results for all writers, which is not the case. His style is not a ‘natural’ product in the sense that, as I taught my students yesterday, he wrote *Jekyll and Hyde* in a six-day fever but spent then six weeks re-writing the text. This re-writing, the search for style and ‘technical perfection’ which he describes in the passage is what makes the work outstanding—both, I’ll insist, depend on inborn abilities. The ability to reach ‘technical perfection’ can be improved but not learned from scratch and much less in the absence of inborn talent. Now, what exactly causes some individuals to be naturally inclined to producing good writing is a mystery. Perhaps one day scientists will discover that it is a mutation.

The features that Stevenson describes as contributing to ‘technical perfection’ will surely remind you of Edgar Allan Poe’s famous review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* (1842) and his defence of “the unity of effect or impression” (he’s actually discussing poetry). “The true critic”, he writes in defence of the short story, “will but demand that the design intended be accomplished, to the fullest extent, by the means most advantageously applicable”. This is what Stevenson seems to bear in mind when he writes that ‘technical perfection’ consists of “the proportion of one part to another and to the whole, the elision of the useless, the accentuation of the important, and the preservation of a uniform character from end to end”.

This was useful for me to remind students that Victorian writers who serialized their work for as long as it could find an audience (Charles Dickens) or those forced to fill in

a three-decker (Anne Brontë) could not afford the luxury of trimming their texts as both Poe and Stevenson recommend. It seems then that both the short story and the novella (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is one) clashed with the novel in this sense until the one-volume novel became the norm (in 1894, when Mudie's and Smith's refused to distribute three-deckers). The famous designers' rule that 'less is more' (according to Wikipedia adopted in 1947 by minimalist architect Mies van der Rohe but first found in Robert Browning's poem "Andrea del Sarto" of 1855) also applies, then, to Literature. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is, in that sense, an absolute masterpiece—whereas the other novella I teach, *Heart of Darkness*, would be by Stevenson's standards in need of some pruning for its verbal flamboyance.

I agree wholeheartedly that trimming and pruning are essential tools for good writing—no matter how frustrated I feel every time I am asked to reduce my articles... The mystery, then, is why the current dominant trend in fiction writing is not the pared-down text that Ian McEwan is so fond of but the sprawling series. I wonder what Stevenson would think of Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, now reaching its sixth volume and nineteenth year as I do wonder how Martin values style...

22 November 2015 / A FAMILY SNAPSHOT: LITERATURE IN THE 39TH AEDEAN CONFERENCE

Last week I attended the beautifully organized 39th AEDEAN (Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos) conference at the University of Deusto, in Bilbao. The association has about 1,100 members—quite a substantial number—of whom about 200/250, depending on the year, present work at the conference. I always say that the conference's strong point is networking and PR: it functions very well as a meeting point for colleagues who joined the ranks of the field long ago and for newcomers to get a first taste of academic life. This year I have indeed enjoyed excellent work by doctoral candidates, and have approached them to offer congratulations (after being told by one of them, an ex-student, that younger researchers feel shy to approach senior researchers, which I certainly am after 24 years).

My post today aims at offering a (family) snapshot of what AEDEAN offered as regards Literature. My initial hypothesis concerns not just this conference but what I believe to be a general trend in research in the field of literary studies: while contemporary literary authors remain a stable object of interest (whether canonical ones or new names), the so-called popular or commercial novelists are being abandoned in favour of TV and cinema. Paradoxically, this is a side effect of the liberation from canonical constrictions that Cultural Studies started introducing 20 years ago in English Studies in Spain, a trend in which I myself was a pioneer. Younger generations read fewer novels and watch more series, with the result that in some fields (perhaps particularly SF), the so-called 'popular' novels are practically unknown and the audio-visual version of the genre is assumed to be the 'real thing'. Of course, the AEDEAN conference is just a sample of the whole field and, as you will see, it turns out I'm not quite right—but let

this post act as a call for young scholars to re-integrate the 'popular' novel into their field of research. And also to get an overview of what our colleagues are reading.

Briefly, this is a map of the authors dealt with (for full details, you may refer to the book of abstract, still available at <http://aedean2015.deusto.es/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Book-of-abstracts-39th-AEDEAN-Conference.pdf>)

PLENARY CONFERENCE (by David Río), "Renovating Western American Literature from an Urban Perspective: Contemporary Reno Writing", dealing with Raymond Carver, Joan Didion, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ishmael Reed and local authors Willy Vlautin, Tupelo Hassman, Claire Vaye Watkins, etc. Note this deals with the representation of Western America, not with the genre of the 'western'.

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: authors studied include James Joyce, Graham Greene and José Luis Castillo-Puche; T.S.Eliot and Anna Akhmatova; Robert Bringham; Charlotte Brontë; Eugène Labiche and Sydney Grundy; Wallace Stevens and Harold Rosenberg; Charles Sedley (17th C) and a selection of other 17th C theatre.

CRITICAL THEORY: authors and titles dealt with, leaving aside the papers raising theoretical issues, include disability memoirs by Christina Middlebrook, (*Seeing the Crab: A Memoir of Dying Before I Do*) and Harriet McBryde Johnson (*Too Late to Die Young*); fiction: Tash Aw's *Five Star Billionaire*, David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, Michèle Roberts's *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta*, Linda Grant's *Still Here...* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

CULTURAL STUDIES, yes, also offers its good share of fiction studies including *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Marita Colon's *The Magdalen*, Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*; SF authors Joanna Russ and Ursula K. Leguin were also dealt with in a paper considering women's art.

The FILM STUDIES panel included two papers on dystopian films, some of them adapted from novel series such as YA SF Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* but the focus, of course, was on the films. I believe neither paper was actually presented.

GENDER AND FEMINIST STUDIES offered papers on literary novels (Camila Gibb's *Mouthing the Words*, Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We* (1930) and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Mary O'Donnell's *The Elysium Testament*), short stories (Alice Munro's short story "Bardon Bus", Téa Obreth's short story "The Tiger's Wife", Angela Carter's revision of Cinderella) and drama (Sarah Ruhl's play *In the Next Room, Or the Vibrator Play*). Here some popular fiction could be found (crime fiction): Louise Welsh's *The Girl on the Stairs*, Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, and Jessica Knoll's *Luckiest Girl Alive*.

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: with papers on A.S Byatt's *The Children's Book*, Jonathan Smith's *Summer in February*, Imogen Robertson's *The Paris Winter*, Kate Mosse's *The Taxidermist's Daughter*, Sara Stockbridge's *Cross my Palm*, Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaney's*, J.L. Carr's *A Month in the Country*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Charles Yu's short story "Standard Loneliness Package"; also authors Walter Scott and Irish playwright Marina Carr. A paper dealt with the intersection in popular fiction of two favourite topics: vampires and the Salem witches (*Her Dear and Loving Husband* by Meredith Allard, *Jonathan Alden: The First American Vampire* and *Salem Lost* by Frank R. Godbey, Jr.). The round tables mentioned Niall Griffiths's *Grits*, Louise Kehoe's *In this Dark House*, Lisa Appignanesi's *Losing the Dead* and Linda Grant's *The People on the Street*, Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty*, among others.

In POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES authors and novels dealt with included Arthur Phillips's *Prague*, John Beckman's *The Winter Zoo*, Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Ama Ata Aidoo's short stories "Nutty" and "About the Wedding Feast", *Travels in Nigeria* by Noo Saro-Wiwa. I need to highlight, of course, the round table on postcolonial crime fiction chaired by Bill Phillips.

SHORT STORY panel: authors dealt with include Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen, H.P. Lovecraft, Elizabeth Gaskell, Angela Carter, Helen Simpson, Janice Galloway, A.S. Byatt, and Jeanette Winterson.

Finally, US STUDIES offered work on drama (Edward Albee's *The Goat; or, Who is Sylvia?*, Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*); the novel: Tupelo Hassman's *Girlchild*, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs*, Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams*, Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'hybrid' novels, Ayana Mathis' *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*, Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (really!?) and *10:04*, Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* and Toni Morrison; short fiction: Poe, Annie Proulx's *Wyoming in Fine Just the Way It Is*, George Saunders' "The Semplica Girl Diaries" (Tenth of December 2013) and non-fiction (Perry Miyake's *21st Century Manzanar*). Saunders' story is SF, as is the novel by Frederik Pohl, *The Space Merchants*, also dealt with in this panel.

The surprise came for me from the PRAGMATICS AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS panel, which included work on the most neglected popular genre, romance – the paper "Discourse types and functions in a corpus of popular romance fiction novels (work in progress)".

What does the snapshot show? First, that TV has not found yet its way into the AEDEAN conference... despite the round table on *The Wire* (in Film[?] Studies). Second, that there is a refreshing, up-to-date awareness of current trends, with many novels published in the 21st century and many new authors. Some classic authors remain (Carter, Morrison) but the field of research is fast expanding, specially as regards American authors of non-white ethnic backgrounds. Third, that only two popular genres (detective fiction, SF) are present in the panels, the former more consistently

than the later but neither quite a strongly visible genre (both use the umbrella provided by other labels). Fourth: you may use this list as a very attractive reading list for 2016...

Is this representative or accidental? Yes and no. Take my own case: I've been devoted mostly to SF this past year but have presented a paper on two films with gay protagonists, *Brokeback Mountain* and *Gods and Monsters*, both adaptations of American authors. This is part of the research on masculinities produced with the group I'm currently working with and typical of what I tend to do, yet at the same time not what I am doing mainly now.

So, please, take the map with a pinch of salt... and enjoy!!

29 November 2015 / RAMBLING THOUGHTS ON EMPATHY: TOWARDS A BETTER WORLD

There are many things that are disappointing about the 21st century. Surely we can do without the flying cars so often fantasized, and even prophesized, by SF writers. Yet, it is both tragic and absurd that religious wars and racism persist. A time will come, hopefully, when the need to kill people on behalf of a totally imaginary deity will cease and also when the need to classify people according to their skin colour will be regarded as a barbaric practice (seeing the hatred against certain racial and ethnic minorities, I always wonder how other human species would fare if they shared Earth with us). These thoughts are prompted not only by the aftermath of the horrific terrorist attacks of Paris two weeks ago but by more academic matters, such as reading Thomas Huxley with my Victorian students and attending a conference on post-colonialism at my own university.

Huxley is famous for being the grandfather of a far more famous Huxley, Aldous—who penned, of course, *Brave New World*—and for defending Charles Darwin's theories in a famous debate in 1860 with Samuel Wilberforce; his staunch, early defence of evolution earned Huxley, as it is well known, the nickname of 'Darwin's bulldog'. The point that interests me more about Huxley, however, is that he has legated to us the very handy word 'agnosticism', which he invented about 1869. He conceived of believers as persons who had reached some kind of 'gnosis' or knowledge about divinity and so he came up with 'agnostic' to define those who, like himself, had not been enlightened by belief. In Huxley's own words, "It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe" ("Agnosticism: A Symposium", 1884). I consider myself an atheist even though I do believe in the supernatural and would be happy to be offered scientific proof of its existence, which technically makes me an agnostic. My atheism is what makes so impatient with religious belief, which I find a very shallow way of coming to grips with the scary thought that we humans are alive in the universe and do not know why. Sorry, I philosophize.

In the text by Huxley which I shared with my students, “The Interpreters of Genesis and the Interpreters of Nature” (1885), he makes a totally reasonable point: religious fanaticism is the root of bad science, and therefore religion should leave science alone, as much as science should not interfere with personal belief. He also hints that knowing about how monotheism recycles paganism helps to understand the root of contemporary religion and to make informed decisions about what to believe. Reading this I suddenly thought, and so I told my students, that for all its bad press, paganism doesn’t seem to be less civilized than monotheism and is, on the whole, possibly a much better alternative if you *must* adore something. Greeks and Romans were pagan, remember?, and look how much they contributed to civilization... No, I am not going to call for a return to worshipping gods and goddesses but I wish the Isis I hear discussed all day long was the Egyptian goddess and not the Islamic State. We’d be better off.

The conference was the ‘International Conference Relations and Networks in Indian Ocean Writing’, organized with her habitual efficiency and *savoir faire* by my good friend and colleague Felicity Hand. There was a paper in this conference on the now forgotten terrorist outrage in 1982 against an India Airlines flight, in which 329 persons died when a bomb detonated off the Irish coast (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_India_Flight_182)—the largest casualty count before 9/11. The presenter called our attention to the specific Indian Canadian identity of many of the 268 Canadian citizens killed and she speculated (or rather defended) the idea that grief and mourning are culturally conditioned. Although I see her point, and I agree with the need to specify how this particular community was hit by the attack, apparently perpetrated by the Sikh terrorist group Babbar Khalsa, it deeply worries me that grief is not perceived as something universal for I believe that empathy is undermined this way. And we need it so much...

Terrorism connects with my musings on Huxley because it has been mostly caused in the 20th century and is being still caused in the 21st century by religious fanatics (IRA and ETA also count as fanatics, but of a political persuasion). Terrorism also connects with ethnicity and race because as you can see who is killed and how they’re mourned matters very much, whether they are Indian Canadians or French. In the Paris attacks, the novelty is that what is eliciting most anxiety is not the identity of the victims—a cross section of today’s multi-ethnic France plus her visitors—but that of the also French (and Belgian it seems) terrorists. They invoke Allah to justify their crimes but you don’t need a PhD in sociology to understand that the barriers that north-African, Arab migrants find in France regarding upward social mobility are the breeding ground for their atrocious way to seek empowerment. Daesh, Isis or whatever you want to call it, offers the dispossessed literally a social network to meet and vent their anger.

Let me go back to empathy. It seems to me that this should be the main project of post-colonialism as an academic field, I mean building empathy. My own environment is 95% white, with still very few students of non-white backgrounds, and it is then for me exceptional to meet people of so many different ethnic and racial backgrounds. My colleagues Felicity Hand and Esther Pujolràs have been working lately on ‘life writing’ and I attended at least two presentations at the conference that connect with this idea of narrating your life as a way to make sense of your own positioning and, thus, work

towards increasing empathy with others. In one presentation, Neville Choonoo, a scholar born to Indian and Tamil parents in South Africa and now living in the USA, explained to us, with a great deal of emotion, how it feels to be him after the crises he has endured connected with the racial issues in his background. Another scholar, Flora Veit-Wild, a white German woman whose work has had a great impact on the academic and literary world of Zimbabwe, discussed, or rather narrated, the links with India of her family: two uncles and her grandparents, German Jews who had to flee there when Hitler came to power.

I must confess that I wondered whether an academic gathering is the right place for this kind of presentation, as we're supposed to be able to theorize even our own life. Yet, on second thoughts if even academics feel the need to cross oceans to narrate how our lives are conditioned, then something is going on—perhaps a certain weariness with the limits of the (impersonal) academic discourse, to begin with. I'm wondering, going back to the idea of 'life writing' whether the young French terrorists would have used words rather than guns to explain themselves if given the chance to be heard. Violence, it seems to me, is after all the opposite of discourse, hence discourse might do away with violence. But I daydream of course.

Let me finish this rambling post written on a sluggish Sunday afternoon by attempting to link the dots: (monotheistic) religion and racism are two of the most formidable weapons to prevent empathy from connecting human beings among themselves; do away with either or both and a great deal of the suffering in the world will disappear. I have no patience, as I say, with believers not only because, as I said, I'm an atheist but also because they insist on inflicting organized, hierarchical churches on the rest of us—can you not believe on your own if you absolutely must?? Racism scares me on two counts: one, because it seems to be an almost universal principle of human life; two, because it is based on plain absurdity. Imagine a world in which people were classed and discriminated depending on their foot size and you get the idea...

If only we could explain who we are to ourselves to each other...

5 December 2015 / THE GOOD STUDENT (AND WHY HAVING ONE IS SO EMBARRASSING)

I have an exceptional student in class. This is when you know that someone might pursue an academic career and quite possibly do much better than any teacher s/he's met at university, including yourself. I have gone through that a few times and it's beautiful, pure enjoyment. I am, however, concerned that this kind of students are now painting themselves into a corner, as the whole system seems geared towards suppressing excellence.

This good student is not the only one in class. Judging by the marks in their last exercise, I have 6 very good students in a group of 43—and his is not the best exercise. As happens, the number of students who have done very poorly in the same exercise is

7, which seems quite balanced. This, however, puzzles me very much for, essentially in this case the exercise consisted of following my instructions to produce an abstract, accompanied by a bibliography and a selection of quotations in preparation for writing their first academic paper. Naturally, all my students have received the same instructions so what makes the difference is their ability to follow them; also, their keenness (or lack thereof). The best 6 have fulfilled all the requirements, the 7 worst ones have failed to do so... twice (I allowed them to re-submit).

This makes me wonder whether the exercise itself is beginning to show signs of its unsuitability, for if only the top students can complete it, then it's clearly above the abilities of most students. Yet, I cannot lower standards for, as I explained to my class, with the new 3+2 BA and MA degrees it is even more urgent that they learn basic academic skills in the second year—this process simply cannot be delayed. On the other hand, I'm concerned that the papers I used to mark in my first years as a teacher, so more than 20 years ago, in the same second-year course, would now do as BA dissertations. I did not have to teach my students then to search for secondary sources, they knew where to find them; now I need to explain what valid academic work is constantly. I'm also very worried by what a colleague told me: her students recently mounted a rebellion against her teaching and plainly refused to do the exercises she demanded for assessment, as they found them too difficult. As it turns out, my colleague had been using the same exercises for years with no complaints.

Back to the good student. The other good students follow my lectures with interest (mostly); they look at me as I speak, something which not all students do, nod their heads in agreement, make notes now and then and even smile in encouragement. The bad students, by the way, keep that glassy stare that makes no bones of politeness and clearly announces they're bored, sit either rigidly or slumping, never make a note, sigh when I go on for more than five minutes in one of my usual tirades. Their attendance is spotty (I check it). The very good student attends quite regularly, takes notes (perhaps not of my lectures) but is constantly switching on and off. I don't mean he is distracted. What I mean is that he sort of skims as I speak but lights up almost visibly when I go into deeper waters. The problem is that he tends not to acknowledge the allusions I make to names only he recognizes and possibly knows well, since being the centre of attention as a pedantic student (which he is not at all) must be a drag.

I do not connect particularly well with him. I'm used to establishing a sense of complicity with my better students, which often leads to my being later their tutor in one way or another. I have tried with this young gentleman but I simply feel too embarrassed: I know he sees through our collective mediocrity. And this is the problem I really want to discuss here.

Perhaps I am wrong to attribute this to the language barrier but I'm frustrated that we (I'm speaking of the Literature teachers, though I assume this also applies to language) cannot give our best. In a sense, this student is displaced in time, as he seems to belong in one of my 1990s classes, when my being very junior mattered less because my students were better read. Now when I am a senior teacher, when I know more than ever, my students reach me with the lowest training in culture and literature I

have seen in 24 years. The result is an uncomfortable mismatch: instead of raising the level of my lectures I find myself simplifying my teaching to levels that often want to make me cry. Particularly when I notice my very good student disconnecting, which is his polite way (for he is very polite) of telling me 'you're not doing well'.

I'm not paranoid, believe me—I have discussed this student with another colleague and it's funny how relieved we felt to share the same anxieties. I have had students look at me with critical eyes often but I'm very self-assertive, despite my many insecurities, and usually enjoy the challenge. With this young man, though, there is no challenge, for he puts up a mirror and I see myself as what I don't want to be: a mediocre teacher. To compensate for that I have a very sweet student, another young man, who spends my lectures looking raptly at me, taking in every point I make, even the silly ones, as the voice of wisdom. I could do with more like him, certainly... but I wish I had many more of the other kind.

The language barrier is a problem, as I say, because it makes it hard for students to follow the texts they need to read, leaving aside their increasing displeasure with reading. The other problem, however, what makes me so self-conscious with my very good student is the diminishing understanding of what academic work is, as I have hinted. Students seem to think generally that we're teachers, not active researchers; I make a point of telling them what I'm up to in that sense but they see us primarily as their teachers. In my first year as a student when, together with the rest of the class, I was frightened by the loud-voiced Prof. Luis Izquierdo into going at once to the library or else be branded an idiot for the rest of my studies, we got the message. Either you wise up or you're out of the game. Now, the game is invisible for the students—except that one.

I don't think he reads my blog, but if he does, my other concern is that he needs to be a bit more humble. I'm not saying that his constant scrutiny is not welcome, for it keeps me on my toes and this is refreshing. What I mean is that it can be self-defeating, as lacking the stimulus to do his very best, he's just doing well—probably with more ease than effort. The difference between his exercise and the other good students' exercises was precisely that: the other were trying harder. Also, everybody needs a mentor—whoever that is.

Message sent...

10 December 2015 / HACKING DOWN THE HUMANITIES: THE JAPANESE WARNING

This piece of news has taken a long time to reach my ears, which since then are ringing. The very fact that it did not make front lines in Spain (which I do check more or less daily) is proof enough of the insidious ways in which the Humanities are under attack.

To cut to the chase: on 8 June the Japanese Minister of Education Hakubun Shimomura sent a letter to all national, state-sponsored universities requesting that Social Sciences and Humanities faculties were closed down. This request was accompanied with a direct threat to withdraw funding if the measure was not implemented in the academic year 2016. Even though recently the Minister declared that his instructions have been misunderstood, nonetheless 26 universities (out of 60) have already announced plans to close their corresponding faculties or to convert them, as the letter ordered, “to serve areas that better meet society’s needs”. The Minister, needless to say, was simply applying the liberal economic doctrine defended by President Shinzō Abe, popularly known as “Abenomics”.

Among many other articles, “Humanities under attack”, an opinion piece by Takamitsu Sawa, president of Shiga University, published by the *Japan Times* on August 23 (quite late...), informed the rest of the world about the catastrophe threatening the survival of the Humanities in what had so far appeared to be an extremely civilized society (see <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/08/23/commentary/japan-commentary/humanities-attack/#.VmmQrl7W1Bp>). Sawa complained against the long-lived interference of business interests in Japanese higher education, explaining how during World War II, “students of the natural sciences and engineering at high schools and universities were exempt from conscription and only those who were studying the humanities and social sciences were drafted into military service”. In 1960 there was a first attempt by the Government to abolish the same faculties now under attack or, alternatively, push them onto private universities. Sawa makes the far-fetched claim that only Social Sciences and Humanities students have the “superior faculties of thinking, judgment and expression, which are required of political, bureaucratic and business leaders”, which seems to be a *faux pas*. I agree though that we teach students to cultivate a “robust critical spirit”, indispensable in democratic societies.

A more recent article, of 6 November, by German correspondent Julian Ryall (<http://www.dw.com/en/backlash-prompts-japan-to-rethink-controversial-university-policy/a-18831857>), informs that the controversial policy is being reconsidered because of the vast protest coming not only from Humanities and Social Sciences academia but also even from its alleged enemies: industry (represented by the business federation Keidanren) and science (with organizations such as The Science Council of Japan). In a further document of 1 October, the Japanese Government clarified its position, or, rather, backpedalled, stressing that “The importance of versatility cultivated by liberal arts education is indeed growing in an era that calls for the autonomous ability to seek out solutions to problems without definite answers”. Unsurprisingly, Japanese academics remain wary and distrustful. With exceptions. Ryall reports the treacherous words of one Yoichi Shimada, professor of International Relations at Fukui Prefectural University. According to this gentleman, the Ministry’s main concern is “to secure jobs for graduates” since, he adds, “People who study philosophy or French literature do not easily find jobs and don’t contribute much to society. This would be beneficial to them”.

I don’t know how many Japanese university teachers will see their careers destroyed by the decisions made in these 26 universities loyal to the Ministry, but I assume this

will be a considerable number. I can only sympathize and think of that popular Spanish refrain, “cuando las barbas de tu vecino veas pelar pon las tuyas a remojar” which translates more or less as “when you see mischief done to your neighbour prepare for mischief to be done to you”. So there we are. If the Japanese Government can do it, then any other Government will do it. By the way, the same person who told me about the news in Japan, an Anglo-Indian senior lecturer in London, also told me that according to new anti-Jihadist British Government policies (see <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/6/contents/enacted>) teachers should be monitoring students for signs of radicalization. One of her students recently asked her whether watching Edward Said on video could be taken as one of these signs. And, yes, if you Google the word ‘Jihad’ in a school computer to learn what it is about and how to be in a better position to maintain a critical stance against it, this will trigger an alarm. There are, then, many ways of killing the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

I am in this context fascinated by the contrast between the two main meanings of the word ‘liberal’: a) a believer in the freedom of the market, b) a believer in the freedom of thought. I’m vastly simplifying here a very complex issue but, essentially, the ideology started in the Enlightenment in defence of the individual has eventually lead to quite a bizarre situation by which the doctrines of economic liberalism are trying as hard as they can to eliminate intellectual liberalism for the very simple reason that liberal intellectuals are the main critics of liberal business.

So far, we, liberal thinkers, depend on the delicate balance of prestige, by which societies have willingly accepted that part of public funding pays for our jobs. As it can be seen, the point that Minister Shimomura is making on behalf of the Japanese Government is not at all that the Social Sciences and the Humanities should disappear but that they should receive no public funding. Of course, all liberal thinkers understand that they offer a public service (I certainly do) and that placing us in private universities makes absolutely no sense at all. Many liberal intellectuals have certainly developed their careers in private contexts, above all in the United States, but there is always something suspicious about a critic who makes a living off who knows what private-company interests. And needless to say, barring the access of working-class and low-middle-class students to the Humanities and the Social Sciences is simply a social crime, for they are the ones best equipped to understand the inequalities brought on by economic liberalism.

Having staked my claim in defence of my own field (and job), I will now declare that the Japanese and international protests against Shimomura’s famous letter (not even a decree by law!) ring hollow. They feel completely patronizing. Two main arguments are advanced, both built on shaky foundations: business also needs persons trained in the Humanities and the Social Sciences because business requires skills not always taught in the corresponding schools; or, society needs persons willing to put intellectual commitment before spurious business interests. Both ways we are told we don’t have a role of our own: either we become part of business or we accept that we’ll never be successful persons in society. If both business and society believed in the Humanities and in the Social Sciences then it would never be the case that “People who study philosophy or French literature do not easily find jobs”. Notice that the public

university is in most countries the one and only institution willing to offer us jobs. If our university departments close, this is the end.

There was a time when I believed the university was a safe haven for us, Humanities and Social Sciences scholars, mostly (though by no means always) liberal thinkers—not any more. Little by little we are becoming like any other worker, a person whose rights are never secure and whose job can be always eliminated. Just because a Minister sends a letter. In a way this is only fair, for who are we to demand a special treatment from the appalling liberal economy that is causing so much suffering? Yet, at the same time, what's the point of our jobs and our task if we are not encouraged and respected by the very persons who fund these? No point at all...

15 December 2015 / SUPERVISING DOCTORAL STUDENTS: A COMPLICATED TASK

I have so far supervised 4 doctoral dissertations, I am currently supervising 4 more and have been asked in the last month to supervise other 4 dissertations. This nice symmetry is completed by the fact that 4 students who started writing their doctoral dissertation under my supervision have eventually abandoned it. The 16 cases teach me a variety of lessons, all more or less connected with a basic situation: gone are the times when Departments were full of young persons combining full-time teaching with writing their PhD dissertations.

I wrote my own PhD dissertation between 1993 and 1996, in three academic years. The first year I taught 24 credits (12 each semester) as a full-time teacher in my third year as an 'ayudante', a contractual figure now extinct. The second year, I was in Scotland as a visiting PhD student with a grant from 'La Caixa' and so I had all the time in my hands for my research (I didn't teach for fifteen months!). The third year, I taught my 24 credits in the first semester just by chance, not because I asked, and then I spent from February to July writing non-stop. This means that half the time of my three years I was a full-time PhD student. It also explains why my dissertation is so long.

In those years, I was by no means an exception. I cannot tell you exactly how many of us, junior members of the Department, were both full-time teachers and PhD students but I'm sure it was a handful, perhaps close to eight persons (in a Department of about 35?). Then the Government suppressed the figure of the 'ayudante' and the moment we lost the possibility of employing young persons full time, earning a doctoral degree became a very complicated affair. Either you got a scholarship by joining a research group (FI, FPU) or by being awarded one of our only two Department fellowships (which carry the funny name of PIF), or you hanged by the skin of your teeth onto the Department as a part-time associate teacher doing two jobs apart from your research. I don't know about FI and FPU but PIF and are woefully underfunded, with a salary actually lower in relative terms than what I used to make as an 'ayudante' 20 years ago. Associates, of course, are supposed not to do research but what else can one do?

How one can balance eating and researching for a PhD is itself the object of a potential PhD dissertation. (You realize, I'm sure, that the implicit Government strategy is to stop people from wanting to earn doctoral degrees...).

I had two supervisors, one in the Department and one in Scotland. Contact with them was no problem: I simply dropped in my Department supervisor's office whenever we agreed on an appointment (or just chatted in the corridor) and I saw my Scottish supervisor regularly every two weeks for a long two-hour session. I don't recall at all being anxious about the regularity of these meetings though my Department supervisor used to make me quite nervous by demanding that I submit written work when I was in the early stages of my research and had no clear idea where I was going. My Scottish supervisor was happy enough to see notes, and to discuss with me ideas, my reading list for the previous two weeks, passages from the secondary sources... anything I needed. He would also offer many suggestions for further reading. My third year was, in contrast, quite lonely because my Department supervisor was himself away in Scotland and those were the times before email. I was by that stage, anyway, very busy writing and needed less supervision.

All this has very little to do with my own experience of tutoring doctoral students. To begin with, making appointments is always complicated because they work full-time outside the university. I have ended up using a downtown cafeteria in Barcelona as my second office, since reaching my university often adds many complications. The meetings are never regular, nor is email communication. I have lost count of how often I have asked my doctoral students to email me once a month, no matter what they're doing, even if it's only to tell me 'I have read nothing'. No way, they're too busy. Add to this that some are not even nearby, either because originally they lived in Barcelona but then moved elsewhere or because they have never been able to move to Barcelona. That's a lesson I have learned and I have vowed to myself not to accept students who cannot meet me regularly.

Since most doctoral students work elsewhere full-time and they need to go wherever their jobs take them this means that embarking on supervising a doctoral dissertation is now quite an adventure. With BA and MA dissertations the time limit plays in our favour: we start in November, we finish in July. Telling PhD students you are only available for three years, however, makes no sense at all as you never know when they're going to finish. My most recent supervised PhD student took five years to complete her dissertation simply because she is overworked and had no time to do research. This would be a relative problem only if we could take in as many doctoral students as we wanted. My university, however, limits the number to six which means that you can easily miss the chance to tutor a good student because your oldest tutees cannot make progress despite their efforts. This is why I am going to try to accept as many students as I can: because I never know when they will finish, if at all.

The 4 students who have abandoned dissertations while under my supervision have done so for different reasons. One started but soon saw she could not combine work and study. A second one started working with me while in Italy thinking he would immediately move to Barcelona but this never happened and he eventually saw no

point in continuing with his work (in the fourth year...). A third one simply could not cope with the linguistic demands of writing the dissertation though this only became apparent in her third year. The fourth one came to me after not finishing her dissertation with another supervisor in four years and, as I feared, soon gave up because she needed a job. Now, here's the other issue: we supervisors get a paltry 52 hours in our teaching account for supervising a PhD dissertation (that's 3 ECTS or half a semestral subject) and only when the candidate passes his viva. If a candidate abandons half way through, whether this is in the first or the fourth year, we get nothing at all for our pains...

Supervising a PhD dissertation then has become a matter of trust and good faith: you try to do your best to set the student rolling, giving him/her the required conceptual and technical tools and then you meet very sporadically and do the bulk of the job when actually reading the final dissertation. This in my experience is usually very hard work, which needs plenty of editing and revision.

They once told me about a gentleman in Oviedo who was supervising 13 PhD students at the same time—in the Humanities, each with their own topic. I have heard stories of a famous supervisor in English Studies who would accept students only to order them not to bother him for three years and then contact him only with the finished dissertation. Perhaps the Oviedo gentleman uses this method, I don't know. In my infinite stupidity I thought I could work very smoothly by accepting one student per year as the oldest of my tutorees submitted their final work. I dreamed of a regular turnover, if you get my drift, which would constantly keep me supplied with my maximum of six students. No such luck! I can easily decide how many BA and MA dissertations I want to supervise each year but with PhD dissertations, as you can see, irregularity is the rule.

On the other hand, perhaps using two hours every two weeks for each of my current three doctoral students would be right now an excessive demand on my time. Of course, if they worked in the Department we could meet as frequently as we liked and do what tutors and tutorees should do: keep the conversation going... for three years. And then move on.

21 December 2015 / BARCELONA, CITY OF LITERATURE (ACCORDING TO UNESCO): A MANIFESTO FOR READING

Last 11 December, UNESCO officially designated Barcelona new City of Literature within the Creative Cities Network (http://cat.elpais.com/cat/2015/12/11/cultura/1449842212_437362.html). The first City of Literature was Edinburgh, awarded the title in 2004 (see their handsome website, <http://www.cityofliterature.com/>). 11 years later, the list extends to 20 Cities of Literature, some a bit surprising given their complicated political background: Edinburgh, Melbourne, Iowa City, Dublin, Reykjavik, Norwich, Krakow, Dunedin (New Zealand), Prague, Heidelberg, Granada, Ulyanovsk (Russia), Baghdad, Tartu (Estonia),

L'viv (Ukraine), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Barcelona, Nottingham, Óbidos (Portugal) and Montevideo. The idea, as you may guess, is to encourage international networking by promoting culture. Also, putting your own city on the world-wide map of culture.

Cities bid for the designation, as they bid for the Olympic Games and other titles and events. I have before me the dossier submitted by Barcelona's Town Council, in particular by its Institut de Cultura (ICUB) (see http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/ciutatdelaliteratura/sites/default/files/dossier_de_candidatura_es.pdf). Our first female mayor, Ada Colau, declares in her preface that "Barcelona is a city that lives literature and literature has always been part of its essence", a statement that surely should make any teacher of literature very happy to live here...

Some of the strongest points highlighted by Barcelona's application are that we are a city where two languages co-exist (indeed, the city is "the world's largest centre of publishing in the Spanish language, and the capital of the Catalan language"); we celebrate yearly Sant Jordi or "the day of books and roses"; we have a variety of literary festivals (among them Kosmopolis and BCN Negra, or the crime fiction week) and book fairs; we offer plenty of courses on creative writing; we are home to a long list of writers; we boast an excellent network of 40 public libraries (half my fellow citizens have a public library card); publishing is a major economic sector...

The plan is to turn Barcelona into an even more active city as regards Literature, with a variety of new activities, including the establishment of a new literary centre for dissemination and research, housed at Vil·la Joana, the former residence of Catalan local hero writer, Jacint Verdaguer. I'm very happy to see that the dossier even mentions Eurocon (<http://www.eurocon2016.org>), which I'm doing my bit to help organize, as a major event on the horizon. And, yes, I aim at furthering contacts with the council in charge of implementing the City of Literature programme to see what we can do from the university.

If you're an habitual reader of this blog, you know what's coming next: how does the distinction conferred on my city for its active literary life agree with the lack of enthusiasm for reading I perceive in my Literature classes? I myself and all my literary colleagues, mind you, possibly all over the (Western?) world. As I read the dossier yesterday a few of my students came in for tutorials, and I asked one of them—who had followed my course with, I think, interest—what the problem is. Can you confirm my impression that most students in your class have not read the books and do not generally read? Yes, she said, no doubt. Next question: why? Her answer was that her generation has a great reluctance to doing anything out of obligation and that our reading lists feel exactly like that, like an obligation.

Obviously, we both agreed that this is a very hard problem to solve for, unless students are given the chance to choose what they want to read for class, there is no way around the practice of having the teachers impose a reading list. I did explain that we consider very carefully what students may enjoy but it just happens that some authors need to be read, otherwise you cannot claim that your literary education is complete. I

don't see Mathematics students avoiding certain class of equations because they just don't like them. Also, and this is confirmed, my language colleagues complain that students don't read the texts they select for them, which suggests that the problem is not Literature per se, but reading generally.

All this clashes, as you can see, very negatively with the celebration of Barcelona as a City of Literature, unless I follow the student's argument to the end and conclude that, generally speaking, people love reading what they want, and hate reading what they need to read as students. My own solution to the problem, as a student, was to read what I had to read and then keep at hand something else to read for pleasure, yet those were other times.

The corridor conversations with my Literature colleagues always turn around the same topic: some students read plenty and enjoy it, but the majority avoid reading as much as they can. Teaching a text is fast becoming an absurdist exercise as you find yourself boring students who simply cannot follow you and, as I have already noted here, you also lose the incentive to improve your teaching methods. So, what can we do? I'm thinking of launching a manifesto and calling all my UAB literary colleagues to join me in doing something more active than simply complain among ourselves about why students don't read. So, here's the first draft.

A MANIFESTO FOR READING

As a student it is your duty to collaborate in your own education. No teacher can teach you anything unless you want to learn. The path to learning passes through plenty of autonomous study, for class time is limited. This means that whatever discipline you are studying, *you need to read*. Generally speaking, all university degrees require that students read as much as they can, no matter whether they study Sciences or Humanities. An attitude by which reading is perceived as an imposition is simply immature and in total contradiction with your own decision to give yourself a university education—it is the equivalent of an athlete refusing to train, and whoever has heard of a lazy athlete?

This need to read is even more evident in the degrees in which Literature plays a major role: Catalan, Spanish, English, French, Classical Languages and all their combinations, including minors in other languages, or in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature, as we offer you in the Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres at UAB. You cannot really claim that you know a language well unless you are familiar with its artistic expression, which is what we call Literature. There is at the same time, little sense in choosing a language and Literature degree if you do not enjoy reading. This applies to literary texts but also to texts on all aspects of language.

As Literature teachers we are asking you to bear in mind that we cannot work at the required university standard unless you read the texts we lecture on. We are well aware that few students fulfil this *basic* requirement, which is why Literature courses are increasingly harder to teach. We base all our methodology on teacher/student classroom interaction and on close reading and this simply cannot work if students do not read. It is boring for you and frustrating for us.

As your Literature teachers, we remind you, therefore that:

*you should buy a good edition of the books you need to read. Good does not necessarily mean expensive; many respectable editions of the classics and also of contemporary texts are available for little money. If you cannot afford new books, buy them second-hand but *read on paper* so that you can underline and make notes. Online editions can be a useful complement but none is up to the standard of paper editions, which usually contain an introduction by the editor and explanatory notes. Spending money on books is not only a logical thing to do for students but also an investment in your own education. This is, besides, the period in your life when you should start your own personal library.

*you should read the texts we discuss in class well in advance, making notes as you do so for class discussion. Take advantage of the syllabi or 'Guies Docents' (published in July) and read the set books in summer. Naturally, you should take part in class discussion, and make notes of what the teacher and your classmates say for further reflection at home.

*you should check any doubts and problems with your teacher; Literature teachers are always willing to discuss books, and will give you any help you may need. We also enjoy making suggestions for further reading, so do not hesitate to ask—this is what we are here for. You are always welcome.

*you should also read literary criticism for its content and as a model for your own writing. We do not simply ask you to read Literature but to be able to produce informed criticism on it. This is why it is important that you train yourself from the first year into understanding how academic literary criticism functions. Start by reading academic articles, then books (monographs, collective volumes).

*you should visit the Humanities library regularly, and borrow books. Our library is very well stocked both as regards literary texts and literary criticism. Take advantage of its excellent collection. And make suggestions if you think certain books are missing.

*you should train yourself into finding time for *reading every day*. If you are an habitual reader, you know that there is always time for reading. If you are not an habitual reader, then you need to avoid wasting time at other occupations that contribute nothing to your education. As long as you are a university student, your studies are your priority and your leisure time, although very necessary, should be reduced down to a minimum. We know that many of you work but, precisely, if you work to pay for your studies, then work should not be a major obstacle to study. If it is, you need to reconsider your situation.

To sum up: students must study, and study is based on reading. Above all, we teachers need you to contribute to your own education for we cannot educate you against your will.

Merry Christmas! And congratulations to all of us, Barcelona citizens, on our designation as City of Literature.

30 December 2015 / A CALL TO MAKE ROOM FOR GENDER IN THE SPANISH UNIVERSITY: THE 'MANIFIESTO POR LA INCLUSIÓN DE LOS ESTUDIOS FEMINISTAS, DE MUJERES Y DE GÉNERO EN LA UNIVERSIDAD'

Yesterday, I got via email news of the publication of a new manifesto, the 'Manifiesto por la inclusión de los Estudios Feministas, de Mujeres y de Género en la Universidad'. I signed it at once, wondering whether it is a good idea to launch this kind of initiative when most academics are off email because of the Christmas break. The whole text of the manifesto is available at http://portal.uc3m.es/portal/page/portal/inst_estudios_genero/manifiesto%20universidad.pdf; you can judge it for yourself and decide whether to sign it (here: http://portal.uc3m.es/portal/page/portal/inst_estudios_genero). As happens the text seems to have been published on 5 June and I cannot explain why it has taken so long to circulate, unless this is a matter of how different academic circuits work. The promoters are academics from all over Spain specializing above all in constitutional law, among them my UAB colleague Encarna Bodelón. The group is composed of 14 women and only 1 man. No comments required.

Apparently, the manifesto is the result of a second meeting in the Basque town of Oñati (the first one took place in 2005) to assess the evolution of gender-related issues in Spanish higher education. The first problem noted is that most degrees fail to meet the standards and obligations set by Spanish legislation, in particular L.O.1/2004 of 28 December, 'Medidas de Protección Integral contra la Violencia de Género'. This law decrees that Spanish universities have the duty to promote in all their areas training and research in gender equality (article 4.7). This is further supported by L.O.3/2007 of 22 March for the 'Igualdad efectiva de Mujeres y Hombres'.

In 2005 the same group agreed in their first meeting to demand that the new degrees included a BA ('grado') in Gender Studies to train 'equality agents', specific MAs specialised in this area, and a variety of courses within the diverse BA degrees to raise awareness on gender issues within each discipline. Also, the modification of already existing courses or subjects as necessary. Ten years later, they say, nothing much has changed and few universities if any in Spain have fulfilled the 2005 legal mandate.

This failure to comply, the manifesto claims, or, rather, denounces has resulted in, at least, two very serious problems: there have been no significant advances on equality in Spain in the last decade and official research assessment clearly punishes those who practice Gender Studies. What follows is a call for all political parties to sign a pact that supports a pro-feminist academic policy by which the dismal situation can be corrected. The manifesto urges universities to include compulsory training in 'gender perspectives' in all areas, the firm establishment of Gender Studies as a respectable

academic area and that the persons interested in becoming 'equality agents' receive university training, not just professional preparation ('formación profesional').

My own university has an active 'Observatori per la igualtat' (<https://www.uab.cat/observatori-igualtat/>) and offers a Minor in Gender Studies open to all degrees (<http://www.uab.cat/web/estudiar/minor-d-estudis-de-genere-1340778453143.html>). I myself took advantage of the establishment of this transversal Minor back in 2005 to establish an elective course, 'Gender Studies (in English)', which is also part of our degree in 'English Studies'. The pity is that since then I have only managed to teach it once, last year 2014-15. We also included in our MA Advanced English Studies a Gender Studies course very confusingly called 'Postmodernity: New Sexualities/New Textualities', a name chosen without asking for my opinion in order to complete the historically-oriented list of subjects. I have been trying to have the name changed for the last two years with no success as the MA coordinator—a woman—does not see this as a priority.

I have written a paper on the frustration I feel as a Gender Studies specialist, "Teaching gender studies as feminist activism: still struggling for recognition", which you may read at <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/126586>. This frustration branches out in many directions but three stand out: the patronizing attitude used by the persons (men and women) who think that doing Gender Studies and calling yourself a feminist is a gal's thing and not proper academic work, as noted by the manifesto; also, the difficulties to be critical of certain aspects of feminism as this creates unwanted divisions and, finally, the limitations to which one is subjected by declaring an interest in Gender Studies—by which I mean that I can lecture and write on many other things beyond feminism and gender but this is what people mainly associate with me...

I can see many people baulking at the idea of making Gender Studies compulsory in all university degrees. In my view, students should reach us already trained in gender equality, for this type of education in citizenship should be offered in primary and secondary school (and at home). This, of course, is not the case and despite some apparent advances everyone realizes that equality is not increasing in Spain—or just very, very slowly. In practical terms I'd rather students take in the first year 'Gender Studies' than 'Grans temes de la Història', yet I would defend the idea that the corresponding course operates with an even wider perspective than the manifesto proposes—the authors make no mention, for instance, of Masculinity Studies. This sub-discipline of Gender Studies, which I have been practising for years, seems to be indispensable to reach young male students, as I can see whenever I get the chance to read with them a text from this angle (say *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). As all my students know, I hope, my approach is always anti-patriarchal and gender-inclusive, as I have been preaching for years that equality can only be reached if men liberate themselves from the weight of patriarchy on masculinity.

Apart from teaching specific subjects, one very simple thing can be done within the specific area of Literature: combining men and women authors in the reading list. My oncoming course on SF includes 5 novels, 3 by men and 2 by women, and a list of 50 short stories, 25 by men and 25 by women. I am not saying that all reading lists should

include men and women in the same exact proportion, for then courses on women's Literature would be impossible. Yet, courses covering a genre, a period, a geographical area can easily attain some kind of gender balance. And one caveat: a course focused exclusively on male authors is only justified if what is to be explored is masculinity. This semester a new teacher in my Department has taught a course on contemporary American Literature with no women writers on his list, despite addressing himself to a class almost entirely of girl students. This simply makes no sense, as the list of authors does not reflect at all the nature of the Literature he has taught. And please consider that I am not taking into account the thorny matter of how minorities should be dealt with. In the case of my own Gender Studies elective, I decided to go for variety rather than focus on the binary men/women and explore other identities conditioned by gender and sexuality: gay, lesbian but also bisexual, transgender, intergender, you name it...

Now, brace yourself. I am writing this a couple of days after it was revealed that a male carer in a nursing home near Barcelona attacked on Christmas Eve nine elderly women, beating some and raping at least four of them, including a woman above 100 years of age. This 30-year-old man, a good professional with a university degree, unleashed his inner Mr. Hyde by using a combination of drugs and alcohol. All the news articles I have read stress how he preyed on the most defenceless victims but none discusses the obvious fact that his brutal conduct is an expression of pure misogyny and, indeed, part of the widespread violence against women. And this is one of the main problems: that we need to educate people to recognize what the real problems are. As for this monster's victims I can only say that the terror they have endured is proof that we women are not safe from violence ever in our lives, no matter how long they are.

Now, please, sign the manifesto...

5 January 2016 / MAY THE FORCE (NOT) BE WITH YOU: WHY WE CARE ABOUT STAR WARS

Yes, I finally saw yesterday *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. It has been very hard to avoid the spoilers for a couple of weeks (yet I must also marvel at the conspiracy of silence to conceal some major plot turns!). Harder to miss were the tepid reactions of most professional reviewers. Given their warnings, I cannot say I am disappointed in the film. I am disappointed, rather, by a Hollywood system that has simply abandoned innovative storytelling for mindless plot-driven action and that is currently in love with the ugly notion of the 'reboot' (for this is what this 'new' film amounts to, with the addition of a competent girl hero and her male sidekick).

Despite this, I'm not offering here a review, for there are already thousands which readers can check and also because fans will see the film no matter what others think of it and non-fans (?) will not see it no matter how persuasive positive opinions may be. I am not myself quite a *Star Wars* fan but I belong to the generation that was

mesmerized in their childhood (age 11 for me) by the absolutely mind-blowing image of the colossal Imperial cruiser crossing the screen at the very beginning of *Episode IV: A New Hope* back in 1977. Nothing will ever surpass the cinematic wonder of that moment. Ever.

I have contributed my bit to the surprisingly scant academic work on George Lucas' brainchild with an article on Anakin Skywalker, no doubt the most complete—and hateful—character even despite Hayden Christensen's appalling performance (See: "Shades of Evil: The Construction of White Patriarchal Villainy in the *Star Wars* Saga" in Josep M. Armengol (ed.), *Men in Color*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, 143-167). This new film arguably confirms my hunch that the main topic of the whole saga are the difficulties of raising teenage boys. As I age, I appreciate the good job that the overlooked Owen and Beru Lars did in raising their foster child Luke Skywalker, the quintessential good boy. No doubt *Star Wars* is a story about *men's* problems to control their own potential violence. I don't quite see a woman facing the same issue in the saga... hopefully.

Why do we care about *Star Wars*? I assume that the many millions in the world who do not care find the story silly and the space opera trappings just escapist fiction junk. Even those of us who care bemoan the many gaps and errors in the script—beginning with the erratic ways in which the Force operates. As for space opera, there's plenty of much higher quality in print. Please, don't say that the success of the *Star Wars* franchise is just due to Hollywood business acumen and its greedy marketing ploys, for these emerged only after the unexpected planetary success of the first film. Obviously, the money-grabbing, in-your-face strategies are easy to spot in the brief appearances of characters who are only in the movies to sell the corresponding figurine. There is, however, something that surpasses all the gadgetry, whether this is the elementary pleasure in the soap opera of the Skywalkers' depressing family saga, the need to explore the roots of male violence as I say, or the urge to renew the basic myth of the struggle between good and evil.

I am not familiar with the Expanded Universe, which extends to all the licensed products connected with the saga in a variety of media and which is itself complemented with the countless derivative products generated by the fans. You may be horrified to learn that back in 2014, after George Lucas sold Lucasfilm to Walt Disney (in 2012), this EU was re-named '*Star Wars Legends*' and declared non-canon, which is Disney's dubious attempt to keep a tighter grip on the links between the forthcoming films and the new secondary products. As the *Harry Potter* case proves, however, the struggle to keep under wraps the collective impulse to add new strands to key stories in the style of traditional folk tales and mythmaking cannot simply be won by capitalist corporations. So, here is for me a reason why we care: *Star Wars* has provided its audience with a vast canvas on which to add detail to a growing web of stories. We miss the old collective art of folk story-telling and the saga satisfies our nostalgia for it (as other cultural manifestations do).

Then, there's the Force. The possession of mystical powers by certain select individuals is a very old fantasy and Lucas borrowed from, among his most immediate

predecessors, the Bene Gesserit sisterhood of Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels. Actually, he took it away from the women to place it in the hands of the Jedi, a circle of so-called 'knights' that only recalled there were females among them in the 1990s ('lady Jedis?'). The saga's most glaring sexist turn is Yoda's decision not to train Princess Leia even though he acknowledges that the Force is strong in her (as it should be given her family connections). Before I ramble onto a feminist bypath, let me recap: a great deal of the appeal of the saga is based on the possibility that any humble individual can be in possession of the Force—this is what Luke embodies. It is not so different, as you can see, from magic in *Harry Potter*. Both sagas have this in common: they do have an individual hero but he belongs to a community of good-doers facing a community of evil-doers. Many others can join in, hence the appeal for the fans. Get the wand or the light-sabre and you're in.

The saga deals also with a major problem: the patriarchal lust for power. Ask yourself: if you were in possession of the Force how would you use it? The saga argues that you should have to overcome the temptation of falling into the Dark Side (capitalized, yes), for having 'powers' leads to craving 'power', and having excessive 'powers' and 'power' only leads to villainy. This is a patriarchal attitude best exemplified by Anakin Skywalker's supposition that he is entitled to a great deal of power just because he has powers. Luke, in contrast, and the Jedis in general, embody the difficulties of being good in a universe in which this position does not pay.

And this is our own struggle: since the 1970s, when the saga started, the villain is our hero but because we are secretly ashamed of wanting to be Darth Vader we pretend we are on the side of the Jedi. Yet, we enjoy following a story in which they fail again and again, for, being good guys, they are easily hoodwinked by the patriarchal monsters, call them Sith, Empire, or First Order. Luke Skywalker has never been a strong hero and we tend to prefer Han Solo, that rascal who cannot really commit. Let me recap the argument: Lucas' saga, in which there are neither gods nor God, places the burden of moral decision with the individual by focusing on the problem of avoiding the temptation of abusing our power/s. The Dark Side is just this: the individual's awakening to the advantages of doing evil (a concept that Lucas borrowed from *Heart of Darkness*—he was supposed to direct the film adaptation that later became *Apocalypse Now!*).

The key issue of why some individuals want to accrue power in order to do evil, and thus accrue even more power to do even more evil, can be discussed by an abstract philosophical treatise or by space opera with a silly melodramatic plotline. Like all the other stories about heroes and villains, *Star Wars* is, however, unable to imagine what the Jedi can do with their own power to do good. What I most missed in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is a political discussion of the kind of Republic the rebels had managed to build once the Empire had been destroyed in Episode VI. Instead, we are given the story of how a new bunch of evil guys have already built a fascist regime, thus actually becoming the resistance to the Jedi's Republican new order. Surely, the new trilogy will tell the story of how the Jedis rebuild their lost strength and once again defeat their opponents—yet the debate, as you can easily see on the internet, is already focused on whether the new villain Kylo Ren is charismatic enough. Not on Luke's

efforts. As for the new hero the debates are focused, rather, on her being too perfect, a Mary Sue none can identify with...

To sum up, the *Star Wars* saga deals with our increasing collective inability to root for the good heroes and our secret wish to be evil—if only we had Force enough. May the Force *not* be with you, then, unless you can imagine ways to do good with it.

10 January 2016 / 100 YEARS, 100 FILMS: AN EDUCATION IN CINEMA HISTORY

A while ago a colleague told me it would be nice to have a list of films for our students and for any interested colleague to educate themselves in cinema History. More than 100 years after the brothers Lumière set the foundations for the birth of a new art, cinema is not yet an integral part of everyone's education, as Literature is supposed to be. This means that in practice any cinema lover—every 'cinéfilo'—is self-taught.

Even so, as I have confirmed to myself by checking the fabulous *Filmsite* web, edited by Tim Dirks, there is an enormous difference between the generations born before and after the 1980s in Spain. Those of us whose childhood and youth were spent in the Spain of the then monopolistic Televisión Española were given a wonderful education in cinema History which those of you growing up in the 1990s and later have totally missed.

The emergence of private television, beginning with the infamous TeleCinco of its early stages, totally destroyed a way of enjoying cinema on tv. Gone were the films more than ten years old, anything filmed in black and white and whatever came from places other than Hollywood. Gone were the film cycles devoted to a period, genre or director. The film critics we were used to seeing on TV, gentlemen as intelligent but as little telegenic as Alfonso Sánchez, were replaced by idiotic announcers who clearly had no idea what they were presenting at all; one can still see them now and then. La2 continues the good practice of offering a more serious approach with a weekly hour devoted to good cinema, the programme *Días de Cine*. The rest just offer advertising for the new releases.

One of my projects for this Christmas break has been going through the list of films I remember seeing (I keep it at www.imdb.com) to find the most glaring gaps in my own cinema education. I must clarify that I'm not a film buff in the sense that I will not go out of my way to praise an obscure Iranian film instead of a reasonably good American production. I will see any new Iranian film that fits my interests and the same applies to any other nationality but I just don't feel the urge to give myself an education in their film History. Having exposed my philistinism and having warned my reader that I was looking for gaps in my Anglo-American filmography (I don't really like Spanish cinema much...), I'll praise again Dirks' Filmsite.

I found there a list of 'greatest films' for each year since 1902 (<http://www.filmsite.org/greatestfilms-byyear.html>) and went through it with much enjoyment. This was increased as I recalled having seen most films on Spanish television. I mean the films released up to the early 1980s, when I started going to the cinema with my friends and often on my own (as an undergrad student). Since then, and for the reasons concerning the private channels, television is by no means an important film source for me, with the only occasional exception of La2.

I want, however, to thank here publicly the film programmers of Televisión Española for having been such wonderful teachers to all kinds of audiences—both the audiences that preferred the more popular genres and the audiences that enjoyed the art-house orientation of the film cycles on what is now on La2. I happened to be a mixture of both and I'm sure I have these anonymous benefactors for this, something that private television will never be able to match.

Back to the list I never managed to make: you can make your own on the basis of Tim Dirks' selection (which goes beyond Anglo-American, I must say) or use my own selection of his selection. I have chosen the magic figure of 100 years, 100 films (check IMDB for any further information on them) and here's the list. There may be films in it I personally don't like but it is my intention to highlight a certain oblique canon, not even of the best but of the most often remembered or discussed by film aficionados. All films are American, except where the contrary is noted:

- 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith
- 1916 *Intolerance*, D. W. Griffith
- 1917 *The Unfortunate Marriage*, Ernest C. Warde [Dirk includes no film for 1917, I have chosen this one based on IMDB ratings]
- 1918 *Shifting Sands*, Albert Parker [ditto...]
- 1919 *Broken Blossoms*, D.W. Griffith
- 1920 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (original German title: *Das Kabinett Des Doktor Caligari*), Robert Wiene
- 1921 *The Kid*, Charles Chaplin
- 1922 *Nosferatu, A Symphony of Terror/Horror* (original German title: *Nosferatu, Eine Symphonie Des Grauens*), F.W. Murnau
- 1923 *Safety Last*, Fred Newmeyer and Sam Taylor
- 1924 *Greed*, Erich von Stroheim
- 1925 *Battleship Potemkin* (original Russian title: *Bronenosets Potyomkin*), Sergei Eisenstein
- 1926 *The Son of the Sheik*, George Fitzmaurice
- 1927 *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang [the sound period starts here in 1927 with *The Jazz Singer*]
- 1928 *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (original title: *La Passion De Jeanne D'Arc*), Carl Theodor Dreyer; silent film
- 1929 *Pandora's Box* (original German title: *Die Büchse der Pandora*), Georg W. Pabst
- 1930 *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Lewis Milestone
- 1931 *Frankenstein*, James Whale
- 1932 *Freaks*, Tod Browning
- 1933 *King Kong*, Merian C. Cooper

- 1934 *It Happened One Night*, Frank Capra
1935 *A Night at the Opera*, Sam Wood
1936 *Modern Times*, Charles Chaplin
1937 *Grand Illusion* (original French title: *La Grande Illusion*), Jean Renoir
1938 *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, Michael Curtiz, William Keighley
1939 *Gone With the Wind*, Victor Fleming, George Cukor, and Sam Wood
1940 *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Ford
1941 *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles
1942 *Casablanca*, Michael Curtiz
1943 *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (UK), Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
1944 *Double Indemnity*, Billy Wilder
1945 *The Children of Paradise* (original French title: *Les Enfants Du Paradis*), Marcel Carne
1946 *The Best Years of Our Lives*, William Wyler
1947 *Miracle on 34th Street*, George Seaton
1948 *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, John Huston
1949 *The Third Man* (UK), Carol Reed
1950 *All About Eve*, Joseph L. Mankiewicz
1951 *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Elia Kazan
1952 *Singin' in the Rain*, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen
1953 *From Here to Eternity*, Fred Zinnemann
1954 *On the Waterfront*, Elia Kazan
1955 *Rebel Without a Cause*, Nicholas Ray
1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Don Siegel
1957 *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, David Lean
1958 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Richard Brooks
1959 *Ben-Hur*, William Wyler
1960 *Psycho*, Alfred Hitchcock
1961 *West Side Story*, Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins
1962 *Lawrence of Arabia*, David Lean
1963 *The Leopard* (original Italian title: *Il Gattopardo*), Luchino Visconti
1964 *My Fair Lady*, George Cukor
1965 *The Sound of Music*, Robert Wise
1966 *Blow-Up* (UK), Michelangelo Antonioni
1967 *The Graduate*, Mike Nichols
1968 *2001: A Space Odyssey* (UK), Stanley Kubrick
1969 *Easy Rider*, Dennis Hopper
1970 *M*A*S*H*, Robert Altman
1971 *A Clockwork Orange* (UK), Stanley Kubrick
1972 *The Godfather*, Francis Ford Coppola
1973 *The Exorcist*, William Friedkin
1974 *Chinatown*, Roman Polanski
1975 *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (UK), Jim Sharman
1976 *Taxi Driver*, Martin Scorsese
1977 *Star Wars: Episode IV, A New Hope*, George Lucas
1978 *The Deer Hunter*, Michael Cimino
1979 *Alien*, Ridley Scott

- 1980 *The Elephant Man*, David Lynch
1981 *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Steven Spielberg
1982 *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott
1983 *Local Hero* (UK), Bill Forsyth
1984 *Amadeus*, Milos Forman
1985 *Brazil* (UK), Terry Gilliam
1986 *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Woody Allen
1987 *The Last Emperor* (UK/It./China/HK), Bernardo Bertolucci
1988 *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (Original Spanish title: *Mujeres al Borde de un Ataque de Nervios*), Pedro Almodóvar
1989 *Born on the Fourth of July*, Oliver Stone
1990 *Edward Scissorhands*, Tim Burton
1991 *Beauty and the Beast*, Kirk Wise
1992 *Basic Instinct*, Paul Verhoeven
1993 *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg
1994 *Pulp Fiction*, Quentin Tarantino
1995 *The Usual Suspects*, Bryan Singer
1996 *Trainspotting* (UK), Danny Boyle
1997 *Titanic*, James Cameron
1998 *Shakespeare in Love* (US/UK), John Madden
1999 *The Matrix*, Andy and Larry Wachowski
2000 *Billy Elliot* (UK), Stephen Daldry
2001 *Amelie* (original French title: *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*), Jean-Pierre Jeunet
2002 *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore
2003 *Lost in Translation* (US/Japan), Sofia Coppola
2004 *Downfall* (original German title: *Der Untergang*), Oliver Hirschbiegel
2005 *Brokeback Mountain*, Ang Lee
2006 *The Lives of Others* (original German title: *Das Leben der Anderen*), Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck
2007 *Into the Wilde*, Sean Penn
2008 *The Dark Knight*, Christopher Nolan
2009 *Up*, Pete Docter
2010 *The Social Network*, David Fincher
2011 *Drive*, Nicolas Winding Refn
2012 *Amour* (France), Michael Haneke
2013 *Gravity*, Alfonso Cuarón
2014 *Boyhood*, Richard Linklater
2015 *Carol* (UK/US), Todd Haynes

No, I have not seen all the 100 films yet... This list, I insist, is not meant to be anything but a starting point: it's not a list of the best, not even within the same year—how can one choose between *Lawrence of Arabia* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both 1962 films, or between *Schindler's List* and *Groundhog Day*, both released in 1993? Navigate it as you wish, but do give yourself an education in film History...

Enjoy!!

16 January 2016 / PRESENTISM: WHY THE PAST DOES NOT EXIST FOR YOUNG READERS

Marking the essays on Victorian Literature by my second-year students I'm puzzled by three which read the corresponding literary texts they analyze in terms of whether they are adequate for the present. One, in particular, focuses the paper almost entirely on why a recent film adaptation of Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is more apt for our times than the 'faulty' original text. I explain in a lengthy note why this approach is biased, noting that adaptations are particular readings of texts and not intended to be their replacements. Somehow or other, I recall the word 'presentism' which, I'm sure, I have read in some newspaper article I now forget about the current generation of students.

To my further puzzlement, Wikipedia informs me that 'presentism' is not just a feature of our undergrads' worldview but, attention, a philosophical current. According to its proponents, "events and entities that are wholly past or wholly future do not exist at all"; presentism "contrasts with eternalism and the growing block theory of time", currents which do defend the existence of past events and entities. I'm flabbergasted. Or possibly very poorly informed, for the consequence of this aberration is the denial of History and, hence, of tragedies like the Holocaust and any dictatorship you can think of.

When Hayden White argued back in 1973 that History is an agreed upon fiction (or a consensual hallucination, borrowing William Gibson's definition of hyperspace), he didn't mean that certain horrific events could be denied or were not 'true'. He meant that the way we narrate History is subjective and interested. Hence, in a second, more rational sense, in literary and historical analysis, "presentism is the anachronistic introduction of present-day ideas and perspectives into depictions or interpretations of the past". It seems that this word, first cited "in its historiographic sense" in 1916 according to the OED, may be dated back to the 1870s. This concept or label is behind the kind of trick by which historians with certain political interests read the past according to a supposed teleological drive that culminates in the present. You may think of Hitler's dream of building a Third Reich as one of the most disastrous applications of this type of presentism.

In the papers that so puzzled me, however, presentism was not "the anachronistic introduction of present-day ideas and perspectives into depictions or interpretations of the past", not even in the historiographic version. It was, rather, a belief that the past can be discarded because it does not measure up to the present in any sense. Of course, I am exaggerating the presence of this trend among my students' papers because I want to insist here on a point I have been struggling to make throughout the course: We all belong in a certain historical time and this is like any other time—everyone, therefore, needs to understand not only the nature of other historical periods but also that our own period will sooner or later be the past. A quaint one.

We may gaze at our navels thinking that all that came before us, Victorian Literature included, was a) important only because it led to us or b) irrelevant because we are all that matters on Earth. In this way, however, we limit very much our vision. And our empathy. I think you can only read well the Literature of the past if you do the mental exercise of imagining what life would be like for you if you lived at that time. This always reminds me of actors' saying that they only understand characters alive in other periods when they wear the right costumes. I am always joking, hence, that I need to teach Victorian Literature wearing the appropriate corset and crinoline—actually changing fashions as I move from the 1830s to the 1890s. I have proposed to my colleagues that once a year we celebrate the periods we teach in this way. So far the proposal has met with great theoretical acceptance which has not translated into practice... Since my colleague Joan Curbet seems certainly very keen on donning Medieval cloak, tunic, trousers, and leggings I have not lost hope...

I don't know what this is like for other people, as it not a subject I have ever discussed with anyone, but although I had excellent History teachers in secondary school, it was only when I became an undergrad that I became fully aware of my historical placement. To be honest, my young self was a bit disappointed to understand that the 1980s were not the culmination of world History, perhaps an impression enhanced by Spanish Transition and the death throes of the then still raging Cold War. Even Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of History had arrived in 1989 when the Berlin Wall collapsed.

So, imagine my disorientation when I finally did see that my generation is just one among many in the History of the world, perhaps only particularly gifted at complicating matters for everyone else, from the way we cannot stop the destruction of Earth to the way we have generalized the use of the digital technologies. The realisation of one's very modest place in the universe is, however, extremely liberating because it enables you to finally open up to other times and places, as I say. I'm not thinking here of the idiotic fantasy of imagining yourself alive in other times: people always imagine being in Pharaoh's court as a courtier but not being an abused Egyptian slave. Also, being a woman, only the future is preferable for me. I mean the kind of liberation that allows you to read the Literature of the past without being judgemental and finding fault with it all the time because it is old-fashioned.

The author of the paper worrying me is a very sweet young man now on the verge of losing the presentism which, as I'm arguing, affects anyone young of any generation. He is in this sense like anyone else, as I could see when I tried to rationalize in class what I am explaining here. The students looked at me very much at a loss about what I was talking about, or perhaps it was beginning to dawn on them that growing up entails precisely this, the process of abandoning the presentist cocoon to see yourself as just an individual among many others in the History of the world.

This humility, however, is increasingly harder to grasp in view of the narcissistic attitude encouraged by those who run the social media and to which the digital natives have taken with such gusto. The Silicon Valley white male patriarchs growing rich at

the expense of the general loss of privacy of the post 1990 generations have pounced on the natural narcissism of teenagers. They want to convince everyone young that they need to be different and special and, thus, that they must invest much effort in keeping their personal accounts lively and interesting. Encouraged to think that they are the centre of the world, at least to themselves, young people face a harder time accepting that they're not and thus shedding their presentism. Said like the Facebook-less, Twitter-incompetent, middle-aged woman I am...

Back to Victorian Literature, I wonder whether presentism of the kind I have described here is the root of the problem in relation to how little students read. Logically, if you believe that the past is totally irrelevant or just a prelude to your own time, it's much harder to engage with its Literature. If I think about it, perhaps I am guilty myself of an extended form of presentism by which I'm interested in anything from 1800 onwards because unconsciously I have decided that my own historical time are the last 200 odd years. I certainly find it much harder to feel attracted by pre-1800 texts, Shakespeare excluded. Yet, I felt great pleasure when reading 16th, 17th and 18th century texts at my teachers' request (or invitation). The same pleasure that, I hope, my own students feel when reading the Victorian texts—at least, those students who do read them.

I'll think again of the dress-in-the-costume-of-your-period teaching day... students included!

27 January 2016 / WHEN (SPANISH) WRITERS RETIRE: PENSIONS AND CREATIVITY

These days the Spanish press is abuzz with news of the harsh treatment which Spanish writers are receiving from Hacienda, our local tax revenue agency. I have already signed the corresponding Change.org campaign asking the Government to reconsider the regulations implemented back in 2013. I agree 100% that this yet another attack against the persons who work for the benefit of Spanish culture—in a wide-ranging sense. It is important to note that the situation affects not only writers but any artist in any field.

Let me summarise the changes. The legislation affecting retirement was modified by the right-wing PP Government back in 2013. Most of us paid attention, above all, to the fact that the retirement age has been raised from 65 to 67, following the directives of the European Union—they think we are too poor and our life expectancy too prolonged to balance numbers in our welfare system. What we missed was the article stating that retired workers risk losing their state pension if they engage in professional activities generating an amount above the yearly minimum wage, that is to say, 9172,80 euros for 2016.

Recently, we were all surprised by news that the retired persons who worked as extras in the film *Ocho apellidos catalanes*, earning 240 euros in four days, had been ordered by the Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social to refund 126,39 euros from their

pensions—which seems to contradict the legislation I am describing (see <http://www.lavanguardia.com/cine/20151207/30653878749/jubilados-pension-ocho-apellidos-vascos.html>). They had not been warned in advance. A retired woman teacher, who did check her situation with Hacienda, has been fined nonetheless 23000 euros for teaching a few weekly classes at 90 euros an hour (see: <http://www.laverdad.es/gente-estilo/201601/21/hacienda-multa-jubilada-clases-20160121110128.html>). That's all her savings.

Writers, then, are not quite an exception for Hacienda although their case, of course, has attracted more attention given their public exposure. One has been fined 100000 euros, another has lost his 30000 yearly pension after earning 15000 in royalties (http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2016/01/21/actualidad/1453404951_724842.html). And here is the main problem: Spanish legislation considers royalties for books published before retirement income from work, hence incompatible with the pensions. Royalties, Hacienda claims, are not the real question: they're after the contracts signed after retirement for publishing but also for other activities like lectures. Writers, let's clarify this, are usually divided into two categories: those who pay for their own pensions by declaring themselves 'autonomous' or self-employed workers and those who write while employed in other professions. Their enormously varied cases are hard to reduce to just one situation.

The writers themselves, organized in the Asociación Colegial de Escritores de España launched a manifesto on November 6 to protect their rights to remain creative after retirement. One of the strongest points of their protest is that in European countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, the United Kingdom, Sweden or Poland, state retirement pensions are compatible with any other activity with no income limits: you just need to pay the corresponding taxes (see <http://acescritores.com/pension-creacion-artistica-derechos-compatibles-la-union-europea/>). Other countries, such as Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Slovenia, Greece, Island, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Romania, however, have legislation similar to ours.

If you read the readers' comments to all the newspaper articles I am quoting from here, another picture emerges. Most readers defend the right of the producers of culture to go on making the most of their talent, invoking the argument that since eventually their work—at least in the case of writers—reverts to public ownership they contribute to society always in excess of the money they earn from a pension. Indeed. Just note, please, that the work of, say, painters is not subjected to similar legislation which is why certain pictures by dead authors are sold for obscene amounts of money. In contrast, the writers' heirs lose their rights 70 years after the death of the author.

Others readers, however, stress that writers want to be treated unfairly as a special, privileged category. After all, these readers claim, legislation should apply to all. They also point out that you may go on working after retirement by arranging to earn 50% of the pension and continuing to pay your 'autonomous' worker fees. Above all, and here is the main criticism, a handful of frankly annoyed readers clarify that writers are not being asked to stop writing, just to stop charging money for their work. If we all

pay a writer a pension collectively, then s/he is freed from market demands and can actually publish whatever they want. Any other position, an angry reader declares, is just mercenary, proving that what is at stake is not culture per se but the writers' participation in the cultural marketplace.

To be honest, I'm terribly confused by all this. To begin with, a retirement pension is no obstacle to earn rent from property, investments or savings. If we apply the law's rule of thumb taking into account these factors then many upper-middle-class persons retired from liberal professions would (should?) lose their pensions. In Spain pensions are not personal, in the sense that you do not receive at the end of your working life money coming from your personal account (as happens in private funds). You receive a quantity dependent on the years you have worked and the taxes generated by the younger workers. In the future it might well be that if these younger workers are too few to sustain the system nobody will get a pension. This is why it is very important to consider how the scant resources are being distributed, hence Hacienda's tough stance. Yet, I insist, the law punishes specifically work, allowing retired persons to enjoy other sources of income.

As a civil servant who earns a state-funded public salary any extra income I may generate is also tightly limited by legislation. In my case, as an A-class civil servant I am allowed to generate income up to 30% of my salary (from 'compatible' activities). I do not know whether a writer/university teacher faces then a problem is his/her books generate royalties surpassing that quantity but it seems to me that the situation is comparable to that of retired writers. The top retirement pension in Spain is 2567 euros and guess what?, 30% amounts to 9241 euros, just a bit above the 9172,80 euros limit.

As you can see, I cannot make up my mind. I certainly don't want anyone to stop producing culture when they retire—as I intend to go on writing when I retire. I very much disagree with the discrimination of income from work in relation to other types of income. And I am appalled by Hacienda's sneaky tactics. Yet, my socialist heart tells me that there is very little money to go by for pensions and that if you are active and generating income, then you are not retired, hence you have no right to a pension. If your pension is so low that you need the income from your books to make ends meet, then the problem is the pension, not the books. My rational head tells me that the obvious solution is taxing all extra income, just as property, investment and savings are taxed, and as the civilized countries are doing.

One thing I am sure of is that producing culture has nothing to do with receiving money for doing so. It is simply not the case that individuals only produce culture for gain now or in the past. This is, plainly, a capitalist idea.

It all boils down to this huge question: what kind of worker is a writer? You tell me...

**30 January 2016 / THE LITERATURE OF THE 'ROBOTIC MOMENT':
READING SHERRY TURKLE'S *ALONE TOGETHER***

Sherry Turkle, trained as a psychologist and an anthropologist, is developing her career at MIT as an observer of how technology impacts our daily lives. In her 2011 volume *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, she condenses the work of fifteen years, based on thousands of interviews particularly with young and old persons. Turkle considers two main aspects: how we relate to robots and how the social networks shape socializing. These two aspects might seem unrelated but she makes the point that in our time—the 'robotic moment'—we seek warmth and companionship from machines that cannot provide either because, despite being connected with more people than ever, we are alone and craving for real contact with people. What we call a paradox.

As I have written here often, my friend Carme Torras, a top robotic engineer at UPC, works not only building the robots of our near future but also warning us about the excessive emotional attachment we develop for machines that cannot correspond—particularly, as Turkle shows, the pet robots and the nursing robots already massively present in the environment of the most vulnerable: children and the elderly. I'll leave robots aside, though this is a topic I am passionate about, to focus on a few passages from the second part of the book, dealing with teen life and technology. As a teacher working with young people I feel progressively alienated from the world my students inhabit, particularly as regards the social networks. This is why I tend to read whatever can help me to get a picture of the daily lives of my students. In this sense Turkle's book is very useful, though I wonder how her conservative stance goes with the teens she studies (she ends up defending letter writing as an alternative to Skype). If they read her at all, for, well, can you really target the persons massively involved in the social networks by publishing a book, I wonder?

One thing that surprises me very much because I do not know how this fits my immediate national reality is that Turkle describes a situation affecting already two generations: American teenagers have been brought up by parents "who talked on their cell phones and scrolled through messages as they walked to the playground", picked their children from school, shared meals with them or watched films in their company. They are, then, in no position to curb down their children's use of the social networks. Actually, Turkle notes that teenagers resent their parent's inattention and that some have started demanding that the adults disconnect their cell phones at least during meals. If you get my drift, she is arguing that a turning point is already looming in the horizon by which the younger generation, the millennials, will soon start considering if so much connectivity is worth it. Either that, or she has biased her book to suggest that this is the case.

I recently shared a meal with some of my post-grad students and they gave me a similar picture. One explained that she and her mates, tired of meeting for drinks only to see that everyone round the table was texting someone else, decided to pile their

cell phone together: the first one to pick up his or hers, would pay for all the drinks. It seems to work. Another complained that her whatsapp family circle was nice and fulfilling but also time-consuming; all noted that whatsapp has very much complicated their lives, for it demands instant availability and response. If you refuse to join a whatsapp group or do not participate much, then you risk becoming a social pariah. The picture I got was of a certain reluctance to complying with all these demands and a wish that these trends soon peak out. This agrees with the panorama that Turkle offers. As a teacher, I was particularly concerned by her claim that many of the teens she has interviewed “send and receive six to eight thousand texts a month, spend hours a day on Facebook, and interleave instant messaging and Google searches”. This passage is part of a segment on how impossible it is to keep your teen life private and, what’s more important, without leaving potentially embarrassing traces for the future in a life “that generates its own electronic shadow”.

Yet, this colossal investment of time in just staying connected is not the sole province of the very young. Turkle presents the case of a fellow scholar who decides to leave his cell phone in the trunk of his car so that he can concentrate on writing a book, only to find himself going to his car many times a day to check if he’s got any messages. “Connectivity becomes a craving,” Turkle explains; “when we receive a text or an e-mail, our nervous system responds by giving us a shot of dopamine. We are stimulated by connectivity itself. We learn to require it, even as it depletes us. A new generation already suspects this is the case.”

Thinking as a Literature teacher, I am particularly astonished by Turkle’s announcement of the end of conversation. Remember those American 1980s movies in which teen girls spend hours glued to phones with very long cord extensions? Well, this is over: it seems that texting and IM has made conversation an embarrassment, for teens have got used to the idea of having time, if only a few seconds, before texting their thoughts. That might explain why you see in public places so many people texting rather than talking at each other. Perhaps Turkle exaggerates, but just think what a daunting task it’ll be for novelists, playwrights and screen writers, to represent human interaction in the near future... I grant that Shakespearean dialogue was never a reflection of daily practice, but fancy writing a story in which most communication happens through cell phones and computers. At the same time, how can you exclude this intensive craving for techno-mediated contact from the representation of our times?

I’m also struck by this passage: “One young man in his twenties says that the Internet is our new literature. It is an account of our times, not necessarily calling for each individual’s truth to be told.” She confuses here (or he, I’m not sure) all literature with fiction, which need not be literary. Yet the point is valid all the same: who would want to read/see made-up stories if you are busy writing your own life story through the social networks? Turkle gives the impression that many, if not most, teens are adapting their lives to a script that is, besides, closely monitored by everyone else. If you can do the mental experiment, please, think what Darcy and Elizabeth would do today and how impossible it would be not to include their Facebook accounts in their story. They

would probably tweet about each other. And thousands would follow their quarrels online.

If you remember, a crucial moment in *Pride and Prejudice* happens when Elizabeth receives a long letter from Darcy. The English novel, let's recall this, depends very much on the letter (*Pamela* is, of course, an epistolary novel) and, in general, on the characters' ability to sustain a continuous stream of introspection (which later becomes, yes, stream of consciousness). Now introspection is suspect—there is an add on TV for one of those comprehensive internet services, in which you see a young woman embarking on a long bus journey. The voiceover explains that she has now time to be alone with her thoughts but just after a few minutes, she decides to stop thinking and watch a TV series. And that's the main message: that time spent in thinking is boring, and so you need to fill it in with another stream, provided by the internet service. How, in view of this, can fiction be written in the future? Not to mention essays...

Let me go back to the letter. Turkle mentions a young man who has never sent or received a letter, even though he loves the idea. For him letters are part of a quaint past: "I miss those days even though I wasn't alive". He, however, cannot bring letter-writing back for fear of feeling "like a throwback to something you really didn't grow up with". Turkle, as I have noted, ends her book trying to establish a correspondence based on letters with her daughter, studying abroad in Ireland, which mirrors her own correspondence with her mother back in her student days. This shows that the past that the young man admires is just two decades away—it ended with the internet, and it is hard to imagine how letters can make a comeback in the reign of the text and the tweet.

Apart from all the difficulties that the current trends in interpersonal communication will soon bring to the representation of our times, I'd like to stress a point which is only implicit in Turkle's fascinating insight into the 'robotic moment'. This refers to numbers. Back in pre-internet times, a person would stay in touch with a much more limited number of persons, connecting through a) direct verbal interaction, b) phone calls, c) letters. The new media demand not only that we interact constantly but also that we interact with many more people than we can cope with. Of course I am happy that people read my blog but I could not spend a couple of hours every few days thinking here if I had to interact with all of you. We are expected to keep in touch in our professional and private lives with literally hundreds if not thousands of people, and this is just exhausting and even a mathematical impossibility. If you have, say, three very close friends, and a smallish family, you can find time for conversation. With three hundred friends, conversation is impossible and ends up being replaced with impersonal general tweets, Facebook posts and so on. A young man complains in Turkle's book that he learnt of his sister's wedding through Facebook, which she chose to announce the event rather than call him...

To conclude, how our lives change conditions how their representation evolves. We already have plenty of fiction about the interaction between humans and robots—indeed, since the 1950s when Isaac Asimov first imagined what is now our near future.

In contrast, it is very hard to imagine what kind of fiction the social networks will generate. There is, of course, already fiction about the men who are building them (Zuckerberg, Jobs), but still very little fiction that narrates life taking them fully into account. If, as Turkle argues, people are writing their lives rather than just live them (she mentions a scientist who is documenting every single moment of his life), then other forms of writing might be pushed out of the way.

Food for thought...

3 February 2016 / THE FUTURE OF THE HUMANITIES? I HOPE NOT: READING ROSI BRAIDOTTI'S *THE POSTHUMAN* (2013)

Readers: you're in for a rough ride today, as I'll be dealing with an essay on philosophy by Rosi Braidotti. No, I don't usually read philosophy but I simply had to read her volume *The Posthuman*, given my own interest in how posthumanism functions in science fiction (see "Posthumanismo y diplomacia: La serie de John Scalzi *La vieja guardia*" (2015), http://www.revistahelice.com/revista/Helice_5_vol_II.pdf). Braidotti's posthuman is not, nonetheless, my posthuman, so I'll start by clarifying the differences.

In her words: "I see three major strands in contemporary posthuman thought: the first comes from moral philosophy and develops a reactive form of the posthuman; the second, from science and technology studies, enforces an analytic form of the posthuman; and the third, from my own tradition of anti-humanist philosophies of subjectivity, proposes a critical post-humanism" (38). Translated into plain English this means that, very confusingly, posthuman refers both to the current state of Humanism and of the human species. Braidotti is mainly interested in how to overcome traditional Humanism (currents 1 and 3), whereas I'm more interested in how and when science and technology will bring the human species into a post-human state (current 2). She never mentions science-fiction (a glaring oversight if you ask me) and holds the strange opinion that the data-mining that Facebook is carrying out is "banal" (61) in comparison to the "data banks of bio-genetic, neural and mediatic information about individuals" which "are the true capital today" (61). Yet, our interests intersect as regards the fate of Humanities. So here we go...

Yes, you read well: she calls herself a critical post-humanist (I'm not sure when and where the hyphen should be used), rooted in an anti-humanist tradition. I got truly dizzy trying to navigate all the different concepts in which the prefix post- appears in Braidotti's volume but I think I have got it: sounding a bit hippy, Braidotti is calling for a post-anthropocentric future in which we, humans, very humbly see ourselves not as 'Man the measure of all things' (= traditional Humanism) but as one among a myriad animal many species linked by what she calls Zoe (=Life). Readers of SF are 100% familiar with this concept... I have already discussed here the beautiful *Memoirs of a Space Woman* (1962) by Scots writer Naomi Mitchison, a masterpiece. You may also have come across this idea in the writings by Donna Haraway. She wanted initially

everyone to become a cyborg in a constructive anti-patriarchal way but has now ended up praising the same Zoe-dominated view of interspecies relations. Can both views be combined? Um, no... the more cyborgian humans become, the less natural, therefore fewer chances for Zoe to dominate techno-science. As for animals, one thing is respecting their rights and another believing in a natural harmony which often sounds frankly patronizing and forgets how recent our, em, post-predator days are.

Back to the Humanities and to Braidotti's posthumanism (dizzy yet?). Posthumanism, she explains "is the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives" (37). Nothing to do, then, with choosing to apply to your body "the four horsemen of the posthuman apocalypse: nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science" (59), which is exactly what keeps us on our toes in Science Fiction Studies (we're trying to see how this will destroy or enhance the human in us). Waxing hippy again, Braidotti enthuses that "Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building" (49). In contrast, old-fashioned Humanism is selfish, based on total individualism and subjectivity, and placed above all types of accountability. Also male/white/class-privileged in the worst possible sense.

Thinking of Braidotti's impeccable feminist credentials and her insistence that her anti-humanism springs from her realization that for traditional Humanism women are not full human beings—for Man/man is the measure of everything—I must protest sternly against her not mentioning the obvious: Humanism has been so far the liberal intellectual branch of patriarchy. In this sense, we women and any anti-patriarchal man are right to call for a new post-humanism (with a hyphen) to replace traditional Humanism. However, I hate the labels chosen: I am a woman, I am a human being, therefore I can never be anti-humanist. I am willing to participate in the rebuilding of Humanism from a feminist position, as I think I have been doing for two decades and a half, but I refuse to call it posthumanism and myself posthumanist. If you want a label, then I'll call myself neo-Humanist. There. We really need to get urgently rid of this post- nomenclature (or nonsense): post-structuralist, post-modern, post-patriarchal, post-gender, post-feminist, post-human, post-humanist, post-anthropocentric... it is simply ridiculous. Our inability to find labels is truly pathetic... Even neo-Humanist sounds silly, I know... (but, well, 'neo' at least reminds me of Keanu Reeves in *Matrix*, what can I do?).

Second point: the Humanities (fancy a whole area of research re-named Post-Humanities...). Braidotti narrates the frontal attack carried out against us by the scientists in the 1990s; they, basically, accused us of having no universally valid research method. Braidotti protests against this, for, obviously, we need to take into account the "multi-lingual structure of research and thinking in the Humanities" and how "research practice differs considerably in terms of not only geo-graphical but also temporal locations across Europe and beyond". She asks, then, "Is it then fair to ask this rich and internally differentiated field to conform to a different research paradigm?" (157). The obvious answer is no: we are not and we'll never be scientists in

the sense of producing research following just one model (though the pressure of Anglo-American academia on us is almost succeeding in making us abandon any attempt to keep local traditions afloat). Braidotti worries, naturally, that “Considered more of a personal hobby than a professional research field, I believe that the Humanities are in serious danger of disappearing from the twenty-first-century European university curriculum” (10). And in other places—remember the Japanese Government’s attempt to do away with local Humanists? That would have made Japan the first truly posthuman/post-Humanist nation on Earth...

Now you’ll see why I am so annoyed with Braidotti, as it must be obvious by now. Here’s her solution to save our chosen field of research: “In a new outpour of intellectual creativity, posthuman Humanities in the global multiversity will include: Humanistic Informatics, or Digital Humanities; Cognitive or Neural humanities; Environmental or Sustainable Humanities; Bio-genetic and Global Humanities” (184). I am simply furious. To begin with, what kind of concept is ‘posthuman Humanities’?? No wonder the scientists despise us. Imagine them doing ‘postscience Sciences’.

If Braidotti means that we need to bring the Humanities closer to science and technology, I cannot agree more: this is why I am shouting to the four winds that we need to read SF. Now, closer does NOT mean subordinated. And I plainly refuse to abandon my post-Romantic (damn!) subjectivity. I don’t want, thank you very much, cognitive science telling me that when I read *Pride and Prejudice* Austen’s words activate my amygdala, if this is what they do. Yes, I want to wallow in my ignorance of that kind of applied science. This is no obstacle at all for telling everyone who can hear that if you’re not aware of the current state of research in robotics, then you have no idea about the kind of world you live in. Up to you.

Also, Prof. Braidotti, I’m willing to teach any of this crazy combined subjects only if my scientific peers reciprocate. I am currently writing an essay on SF in the Spanish university and I can tell you that this genre is widely used by scientists to illustrate their teachings—but just as that, as an illustration and usually with the purpose of criticising its mistakes. I’ll be very, very happy to teach Literature and Cultural Studies in a science school, which is not the same as abandoning the Humanities to make room for science. And, yes, by all means, let’s have the scientists come and visit. They might understand better that if what we do is a personal hobby then what they do is only became an institutional pursuit in the late 19th century—previously it used to be in the hands of idle gentlemen with odd hobbies. And, well literary and cultural criticism kills no one, at least directly, whereas not all science is about finding a cure for cancer. I dare any scientist working on building genetically modified foodstuff and weapons of mass destruction to tell me that the Humanities are useless. Wouldn’t it be convenient for them that we disappeared taking all our nagging cultural critique with us?...

Now that I’ve got that off my chest, I’ll suggest that we start a contest to find new labels for our time. Urgently. I have this feeling that if you start doubting what to call the Humanities, this is when we become not posthuman but posthumous...

7 February 2016 / THE ROAD TO LEGITIMATION: SF PhD DISSERTATIONS IN SPAIN (1979-2015)

I'm using my blog here to publish material that I need to add as an appendix to an article I'm working on. This is a piece on SF in the Spanish university, dealing with our difficulties to overcome what Brian Baker has called SF's 'crisis of legitimation'. Starting with Ángel Merelo's 2009 overview, "Ciencia ficción en la Universidad" (<http://librodenotas.com/cuadernosdecienciaficcio/15675/ciencia-ficcio-en-la-universidad>), I have added to his list of 17 dissertations others which I have found using the databases TESEO and TDX and the keyword 'ciencia ficción'. The list amounts to 45 dissertations and it is my intention to update it yearly.

Even if you're not interested in SF, the list is worth considering for what it says about the Spanish university. To begin with, the number of dissertations per decade indicates an opening up of the research fields in the Humanities, in particular in language and Literature departments. Even so, you can see that English Studies (with 12 dissertations, 5 of them is English) is leading the way ahead of Spanish Literature and Literary Theory (6 dissertations). Actually, texts originally in English are the object of a high number of dissertations outside departments of English: I find particularly confusing the situation by which a department of 'Filología Hispánica y Clásica' generates a dissertation called *La evolución del supervillano en el "comic book" norteamericano. De Superman a Watchmen...* The biggest surprise, however, is not that one but the fact that 6 dissertations come from architecture departments. There are more surprises, which I invite you to find.

Please, do let me know if I have missed any PhD dissertation I should have mentioned.

1980s (5)

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La actividad física y el deporte en la literatura de ciencia ficción. Abel Belenguer Garulo, 1981. Facultad de Ciencias de la Actividad Física y del Deporte (INEF), Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. Supervisor: Santiago Coca. <http://oa.upm.es/14313/>

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1990s (5)

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La configuración del espacio en la ciudad del futuro. Arquitectura y ciencia ficción, cine y cómic a partir de los años 70. Spyridon Papadopoulos, 1998. Departamento de Proyectos Arquitectónicos, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. Supervisor: M^a Teresa Muñoz Jiménez.

2000s (15)

La construcción social del futuro. Escenarios nucleares en el cine de ciencia ficción. Luis Pablo Francescutti Pérez, 2000. Departamento de Sociología I, Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Supervisor: ? <http://hdl.handle.net/10115/3107>

El platonismo en la fantasía de Clive Staples Lewis. Concepción Hernández Guerra, 2001. Departamento de Filología Moderna, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Supervisor: Carmen Martín Santana. <http://acceda.ulpgc.es/bitstream/10553/1947/1/1204.pdf>

El mundo de H. R. Giger. Javier Arenas Orient, 2004. Departamento de Historia del Arte, Universidad de Valencia. Supervisor: Pilar Pedraza Martínez & Carlos Plasencia Climent. <http://www.tdx.cat/bitstream/10803/9969/2/arenas.pdf>

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<https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/3381>

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2010-2015 (21)

Hombres de Steven Spielberg: Un análisis de la representación de masculinidades en los textos fílmicos "Duel", "Jaws", "Jurassic Park", "The Lost World: Jurassic Park" y "War of the Worlds". José Díaz-Cuesta Galián, 2010. Departamento de Filologías Modernas, Universidad de La Rioja. Supervisor: María del Mar Asensio Aróstegui, Bernardo Sánchez Salas & Jaime Carmelo Cunchillos.
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La tercera edad dorada de la televisión. Battlestar Galactica y las nuevas formas de pensar, hacer y consumir el drama televisivo norteamericano. Noor Yasmina Benchichah López, 2015. Departamento de Comunicación, Universidad Ramón Llull. Supervisor: Fernando de Felipe Allué & Iván Gómez García. <http://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/285053>

11 February 2016 / THE ROAD TO LEGITIMATION (II): TEACHING SF WITHIN ENGLISH STUDIES IN SPAIN

As part of the work I'm doing to write my current work-in-progress, the article "Science Fiction in the Spanish University: The Boundaries that Need to be Broken", I have sent a message to the very active e-mail list of AEDEAN (the Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos, www.aedean.org). In this message I have asked my colleagues in the field of English Studies in Spain who has taught SF and who has published on this genre.

I think that building a consistent bibliography is something I will have to postpone to another moment but, in the meantime, I'll comment here on the answers received regarding the teaching of SF in the English Departments of Spain. I have also asked a number of Spanish colleagues working in Departments of Spanish, Literary Theory and Humanities about their activities concerning SF, with the added problem that there is not a comprehensive list similar to the one that we, AEDEAN members, use (and enjoy!).

AEDEAN is quite a big association, with more than 1,000 members. Yet, I have received messages only from 9 (there are at least a dozen other members, as I know, who have produced doctoral dissertations and publications on SF but they have not contacted me, surely for lack of time). Of these 9 specialists, only 6 offer details of their teaching. I'm summarising these details here, as these colleagues have also emailed me syllabi which I have decided not to attach to this post for the sake of brevity.

Juanjo Bermudez de Castro, a part-time associate teacher at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Department of English) and the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Linguistics), teaches at UPM an SF course addressed to students of Engineering (Electronics, Chemistry, Electricity, Mechanics, Industrial Design). If I understand Juanjo correctly, he actually teaches English language but uses the course as an excuse to teach SF which, he tells me, students love. He uses *El Hombre Ilustrado* by Ray Bradbury, the films *Moon*, *Blade Runner*, and *I Robot*, the TV series *Black Mirror*, etc.

Pere Gallardo, now of Universitat Rovira i Virgili, formerly of the Universitat de Lleida is, no doubt the most experienced teacher of SF within English Studies in Spain. He taught 'Narrativa Utòpica' within 'Filologia Anglesa' between 1995-1996 and 2000-1, and is now teaching 'Literatura i Societat' (since 2013-14) within the new degree in 'English'. Pere has also taught a long list of seminars and tutored a long list of TFGs. However, he no longer teaches SF at MA level nor does he supervise any doctoral dissertations because the programmes at URV within which he used to do so have been suppressed. I had the chance to share with him back in 2009-2010 the course "Science Fiction and the Concept of Change" within the MA 'Cultural Studies in English: Texts and Contexts', for which I am infinitely grateful. Pere names no particular authors or texts because, as he tells me, the list is too extensive...

Alberto Lázaro, of the Universidad de Alcalá, tells me that he has used texts by the SF author he knows best as a researcher, H.G. Wells, in the third year survey course 'British Fiction'. The module on the Victorian novel includes segments from *The Time Machine*. The syllabus also includes in the contemporary fiction module a section called 'Trends towards fantasy: science fiction, the heroic fantasy and the horror story'.

Ángel Mateos Aparicio, of the Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha in Ciudad Real, is currently teaching a fourth-year elective, 'Literatura Anglonorteamericana y Canon'. The course is divided in two parts: detective fiction and SF. Ángel tells me that this is so in case students don't like SF or have no experience of the genre, as it is common. His reading list includes: Isaac Asimov's *On Science Fiction* (extracts), Brian Aldiss's "Out of the Gothic" from *Trillion Year Spree*, John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?", Byron Haskin's film *The War of the Worlds*, Ray Bradbury's "The Pedestrian", Philip K. Dick's "Impostor" and "Adjustment Team", William Gibson's "The Gernsback Continuum" and "Red Star, Winter Orbit" and, finally, Andy and Larry Wachowsky's *Matrix*.

Bill Phillips of the Universitat de Barcelona tells me that his course 'Literatura i Conflicte' (2011-14) included Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*. He claims that (I translate) "Considering the interest the students showed and the debates inspired by the novel, this is the most productive text I have ever taught". Apparently, students were also interested in Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (taught 2012-13) but found Ursula K. Leguin's *The Dispossessed* (taught 2014) boring... Bill mentions that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* used to be part of the syllabus for 'Literatures en anglès del ss XVIII i XIX'. Bill's colleague Prof. Jackie Hurtley seems to have taught perhaps as early as the 1980s a course on utopia.

Juan Antonio Prieto of the Universidad de Sevilla has emailed me the syllabus corresponding to the courses he used to teach, in English: "Héroes y monstruos en la literatura y en el cine de ciencia-ficción norteamericanos" (doctoral course 2007-8, 2008-9, with a second renewed edition in 2009-10), and "Narrativas apocalípticas en la ciencia-ficción norteamericana" (MA course, 2012-13). Regrettably a recent reform has eliminated this course.

Juan Antonio Suárez, of the Universidad de Murcia, pioneered the introduction of cyberpunk with the doctoral course "Postmodern Aesthetics and Society: Cyberpunk Fiction" (1996-7). His 'Licenciatura' survey course on contemporary American Literature included William Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic". He tells me that after years of not including SF in his teaching he has re-introduced the genre in his syllabus as a "symptom of the progression of the digital" (my translation). He uses one week to lecture on literature and computers: computer-generated literature, computer-mediated literature and literature about the digital environment.

Finally, myself. My 'Licenciatura' elective on short fiction, 'Narrativa Curta' 2005-6, was divided between Gothic and SF—I included in it Asimov's "The Bicentennial Man" and tales from *I, Robot*, also Dick's "Minority Report". In the same academic year I taught the doctoral seminar "Enemy Alien, Alien Enemy: Wars in Science Fiction and Film" which included Wells's *War of the Worlds*, Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* and Joe Haldeman's *Forever War*. I'm now teaching (2015-16) a third/fourth year elective, 'Prosa Anglesa: Considering SF as a Genre' with an ambitious reading list composed of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon*. Perhaps for the first and the last time, depending how the transformation of the four-year BAs into three-year BAs progresses.

What conclusions can we draw? Obviously, the position of SF is extremely fragile within English Studies in Spain despite the enormous importance of this genre for anglophone culture. If my information is correct and complete, I can safely say that only Pere Gallardo seems in a position to teach SF regularly, albeit limited to BA courses and not even using a label that clearly announces the contents of his course. This is typical. Ángel Mateos Aparicio's decision to split his course into detective fiction and SF, and my own decision to split 'Narrativa curta' between Gothic and SF is also symptomatic of a peculiar situation: our students, as I have found out first hand, are not SF readers. This is a classic paradox of the English Departments in Spain: what is

very popular among Anglophone individuals is often totally unknown for teachers and students. The name 'Terry Pratchett' for instance rings hardly any bells.

I believe that we will eventually find an audience though perhaps this will require using still for a long time to come other labels under which to teach SF. This will never be a case of students demanding to be taught SF (as they ask me to be taught *Harry Potter*). Perhaps, paradoxically, the teacher best positioned to reach a wide readership interested in SF is Juanjo Bermúdez, the colleague who teaches the future Engineers at UPM.

I hope this post is not read as a lament for what is not happening but as a call to do more for SF in English Studies within Spain... Why? Very simple: because this is a genre that matters enormously in the culture we teach and do research on. And because no other literary genre is as well-equipped to understand not just our future, but, mainly, our present.

16 February 2016 / AN INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR: CELEBRATING MARIANO MARTIN RODRIGUEZ

A couple of weeks ago I met a truly accomplished independent scholar: Mariano Martín Rodríguez. What is an independent scholar, you may ask? Wikipedia explains that "An independent scholar is anyone who conducts scholarly research outside universities and traditional academia". I find that this not 100% accurate, as an independent scholar, while not employed by a university, must accept the rules of 'traditional academia' or risk remaining unpublished. I'll rephrase, then, the definition: an independent scholar is a person who, though not working for a university, chooses to pursue an academic career based on doing research but excluding teaching.

I believe that there are two kinds of independent scholars: those who wish they could have a university job and those who do not care for one. By the way, the reason why they are (euphemistically) called 'independent' is that universities do not allow scholars to present themselves as affiliated researchers unless they are a) employees, b) students up to doctoral level. This, excuse me, is idiotic and counterproductive—I really fail to see the reason why a person with a doctoral degree from an institution cannot be affiliated for life, particularly when this person produces valid research that can even benefit the prestige of his or her alma mater.

I have met Mariano in relation to my current involvement in the organization of Barcelona's 2016 Eurocon though I had previously contacted him concerning an article I sent to *Hélice*. This is a quality online periodical publication (neither academic journal nor magazine), devoted to speculative fiction (their preferred label) and the fantastic, which Mariano edits together with Mikel Peregrina. As the section 'Nosotros' (see <http://www.revistahelice.com/>) announces *Hélice* intends to offer "serious, rigorous criticism" which, I'll add, bridges the gap between the scholar and the common reader—now that many of us with university degrees have the training to produce

informed essays on the popular genres we love. Mariano asked me to publicize *Hélice*, by the way, hence this paragraph... If you wish to send a piece, please do so (in Spanish or English).

If you recall, my post on Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* included some comments on her concern that the Humanities might be negatively seen by our scientist colleagues as a 'hobby' (to which I replied that just as recently as the 19th century science was in the hands of gentlemen scientists). Mariano actually proves that the Humanities can be both a hobby—no matter how embarrassed Braidotti and other humanists may feel—and a serious pursuit. Indeed, whereas independent scholars make little sense for the sciences (unless they can afford building their own labs!!), the Humanities still offer some room for independent research. Here's the recipe, as embodied by Mariano: first, find a reasonably well paid bureaucratic job which does not occupy your mental energies beyond the end of your working day; second, be willing to invest a good deal of your monthly wages in your research, as access to university-funded resources will be either limited or impossible; third, use your free time productively. Mariano is a translator at the European Commission, a job, as he explained to me, which fulfils the conditions named here. He is by the way, single, but I see no reason why a person with family obligations cannot be an independent scholar—it's a matter of time limits not of personal will.

I can imagine many of you, dear readers, raising your sceptical eyebrows... Does this work? Oh, yes, it does: you may check Mariano's CV at Academia.edu (<https://ubbcluj.academia.edu/MarianoMartinRodriguez>) and marvel at the long list of solid publications to his name... I am positive that many tenured teachers in many countries all over the world are by no means this accomplished... Seeing this impressive list, I need to scream: 'Shame on you, tenured teachers who waste your time and produce nothing!' And, please, do not give me the excuse that you have to teach and he does not, blah, blah, blah. These publications have been produced during busy evenings and weekends for, remember, Mariano has a full-time job. He is certainly much closer to our own overworked associates than to a tenured teacher. (By the way, I forgot: if he does not appear as an independent scholar at Academia.edu this is because the Rumanian university where he has done part of his research has kindly allowed him to become an associate member of one of its institutes... an example to follow).

I must say that Mariano has totally shocked me out of my assumption that independent scholars only put up with the many difficulties of maintaining an academic career for a few post-doctoral years until they give up in frustration. He has been active now for about 20 years and shows no signs of relenting... Actually he strikes me as the happiest scholar I have ever met, hence this post: to celebrate his career as an example that many others could follow.

A funny point in our long conversation—for Mariano is truly enthusiastic and a great talker—came when I asked Mariano whether he wished he was employed by a university. 'Not at all' was his reply. I think it's the first time in my life that I meet someone with a doctoral degree who does not care for the university. Mariano

elaborated: he is not interested in teaching (but, then, how many university teachers really like teaching?); above all, he will not waste his time with bureaucratic matters. Yes, the bane of our academic lives... I also found Mariano gleefully free from the obsession to calculate each step of his academic career with an eye on official research assessment, promotion, etc. If you think about it, his career is a singular example of total and absolute motivational purity, which is an elegant way of saying that he simply does as he wishes—an attitude hard to maintain within the university. I wish my career had the coherence that Mariano's own has.

This does not mean, mind you, that I would gladly abandon my current post for a routine job in combination with being an independent scholar on the side. Not at all, and much less so considering how hard getting tenure has been. The point I am trying to make is that Mariano's case proves that a successful academic career need not be tied to the university. Since I am a vocational teacher, I find it hard to separate research from teaching but I understand that not all scholars feel the need to deal with students. Also, there must be different kinds of academic careers, so why not choose one focused on research and publishing (with total freedom)? My celebration of Mariano's career is not intended to suggest, either, that since good research in the Humanities can be carried out outside the university, there is no reason for this institution to offer new jobs in this area. Not at all... Remember that he has made a choice. It would be unfair to force the same choice on others, though at the rate we are going our associates are in an even worse situation, for they have all the disadvantages and none of the advantages of working in a university.

The only downside, as this is something I am guessing, not something that Mariano has shown in any way to me, must be the personal insecurity. Very often I find myself emailing people I need to pester for one reason or another and, well, I know that the name of my university below my signature guarantees at least some form of attention. In contrast, I can very well imagine the patronizing sneers that independent scholars surely receive from our most snobbish colleagues. I wonder whether Mariano has ever been called an 'amateur' (in any of the six languages he speaks correctly...) or whether he has ever been treated without the respect he deserves. Personally, I prefer disrespecting the privileged tenured teachers who misuse their time and who fail to be both good researchers and good teachers.

Mariano: this one is for you—may the project we are now sharing becomes the first of many collaborations in the future. Please, receive all my admiration and respect.

21 February 2016 / NAVIGATING LITERATURE: A FEW POINTERS

The students in my new elective on SF have turned out to be mainly absolute beginners in this genre. I am, therefore, using the first weeks in the course to examine how we become familiarised with authors' names, titles, periods and even whole canons. Here are a few ideas that have come up for discussion and which extend

beyond the particularities of SF to any other genre and, certainly, to (English) Literature.

Nothing seems to have changed much from the year I graduated (1991) to last year when a student attending the course as an auditor graduated, as we both agreed that the task of making sense of authors and titles begins after graduation. As I studied for my 'Licenciatura', I read the then very popular *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature* (1982-1991) by Boris Ford—yes, the whole nine paperback volumes, still to be seen on my office shelves. I certainly was not the only student to go through so many study hours under Prof. Ford's tutelage, though I just cannot see current undergrads reading the bulky collection. I used Ford's elegant books to get a better hold on a History of English Literature which I was not being taught in chronological fashion (in my Department we start with the more accessible 20th century English and reach the Middle Ages in the third year). Even so, I recall reading quite a few introductions to English Literature in the year when I started teaching, right after graduation, for I needed a less detailed, more schematic, reliable mapping of the whole field of (canonical) English Literature. And making lists...

I started keeping a list of what I read and a list of what I should read around age 14. I still keep with strict discipline a record of all I read, a consequence of being unable to recall having read certain books... memory cannot be trusted. I have no idea what good this can be but the list seems to work well as an aid to fix names and titles in my scattered brain. I abandoned, however, long ago the list of what I should read (to fill in the endless gaps, you know...) because it made me feel terribly anxious that I was not reading enough. Self-defeating is the word.

Nevertheless, I know for certain that list-making is an indispensable tool in the process of learning Literature, whether the list in question is based on the general canon, or whether it explores the canon of a particular genre. Yes, the first thing I taught my students is that whereas a degree in English tends to focus on a certain literary canon, there are all types of canons in all genres, and sub-genres—some surprisingly specific. For instance: I was going with my students through the long list of SF sub-genres in the website BestScienceFiction.com and one of them was amazed that there is something called 'Christian SF'. Thinking we might find weird Christian fundamentalist stuff in it, we took a peek and soon saw this was a quite solid sub-sub-canon, with names such as C.S. Lewis at the forefront. This is always my point: you may think that by reading, for example, 'feminist utopian fiction' you are shattering the old-fashioned canon focused on dead, white, male, Western authors but you are actually participating in the formation of a sub-canon with Pamela Sargent and company as unavoidable top names.

To recap my argument here: there is no way around to making lists of names and authors to help you memorize and, yes, memorizing, old-fashioned as this may seem, is indispensable in Literary/Cultural Studies. Actually, in most disciplines (think Medicine). You may have noticed, by the way, that I refer to 'making' lists, not to 'reading' lists; my own experience suggests that while you may borrow someone else's

list this will only work for you if a) you make the effort of copying or editing it, b) you modify in your own way.

Of course, my students and I agreed that the best way to learn a national Literature, canon, sub-canon or sub-sub-canon is... reading. This is why we teachers focus courses on a selection of books supposed to be significant, introductory works, whether they are five plays by Shakespeare or five South-African novels. Time, alas, is always too short and not even keen readers can manage the feat of reading all they see named as worth reading. This is why, here we go again, you need some kind of list—if only to abandon it. I do this all the time: I start lists to teach myself a particular canon and then once I have read a few titles, I file them away. I need, so to speak, the lists as mental scaffolding for reading in a particular genre. Guides, like the one right now on my table, Miquel Barceló's *Ciencia ficción: Nueva guía de lectura*, are no doubt useful—mostly as instruments to expand my lists.

As I explained to my students, there is no way, at any rate, you can fix a canon, no matter how marginal to that of general English Literature, precisely because all genres evolve. In the case of general English Literature what evolves, of course, is the perception of what merits being included in the canon—Aphra Behn's plays, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In the case of a genre like SF, the problem is not so much the disputes that affect the erosion of the white, male, dead, Western A-list (though there is also some of that) but the proliferation of interesting texts. I have just gone through the canon/chronology of SF that Sawyer and Wright offer in their volume *Teaching Science Fiction* and you can quickly see how biased our choices are towards the more immediate decades. This causes works that were regarded as the 'best' in the 1930s, 40s or 50s (even 80s) to sink without a trace. One can always joyfully 'rediscover' them and wonder why on Earth they are not better known... (I'm thinking of all the post-apocalyptic 1940s and 1950s dystopias I read last summer). To recap my argument here: lists, guides and canons are always a testimonial documenting a particular stage in the history of Literature in any of its sub-genres. Always transient, never final.

Finally, a third problem I have considered with my students is how much is enough. I gave them a list of 100 SF films (95% in English), concocted using different sources, and a list of 50 great SF novels in English (borrowed from *Forbidden Planet's* website). I started with the films, as I assumed my students would be familiar with many of them since SF is currently one of the most popular Hollywood genres. Not at all!! Two of my students had seen only 4 of the 100 films and the ones who scored highest had seen at most around 40, if I recall correctly. This may have to do with other factors unaccounted for, such as a) my students' young age, b) the decreasing popularity of cinema among them (they prefer TV series), c) their habit of not seeing films other than the ones currently released (students tend not to watch films on TV, either).

Whatever the case, I spent the whole 90 minutes going through the list, to extrapolate from it the main topics in SF. I ended making a much shorter 15-film selection for them to give themselves the most basic education in film SF. The 50 novels were simply totally unknown for most of them... What a challenge for me! As I joked, I can give them whatever version I want to sell them of SF—just as, well, I was given the version

of English Literature which my own teachers preferred (one strongly biased in favour of Modernism...).

The basic question I am asking here boils down simply to: how do we acquire an education in Literature? The obvious answer is that by reading but, as we know, it just cannot work that way. With just 7 semestral core courses, and a maximum of 6 more electives in the third/fourth years, the numbers of texts a UAB graduate student interested in Literature is asked to read amounts to about 65 volumes (and I am assuming quite optimistically an average of 5 volumes per course). Compare this to the hundreds, even thousands, which Harold Bloom has listed in his *Western Canon* and you begin to see the problem. If for each of these 65 (ideal) volumes a student learned in addition, say, 5 titles, this would give us a nice figure of 365 authors who should ring a bell at the end of four years. Maybe we should ask them to take a graduation quiz... Just kidding!

I'm beginning to realize that for an elective course, a teacher should be extremely happy if, in addition to the 5 set books, students can name 25 other authors. 50 best novels? 100 best films?... I wonder.

26 February 2016 / WHY RESISTING EXCELLENCE IS (PARTLY) WRONG: RESPONDING TO AN INTERVIEW WITH INDOCENTIA

Have a look at this interview published in the online *El Diario.es*. The title is long but self-explanatory: "Disciplinar la investigación, devaluar la docencia: cuando la Universidad se vuelve empresa. Entrevista al colectivo de profesores y estudiantes Indocentia sobre la transformación neoliberal de la Universidad" (Amador Fernández-Savater, 19/02/2016, http://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/Disciplinar-investigacion-devaluar-docencia-Universidad_6_486161402.html).

Indocentia groups a number of Social Sciences professors and students at the Universitat de València (contact them at indocentia@gmail.com). Its name alludes to ANECA'S programme 'Docentia' (<http://www.aneca.es/Programas/DOCENTIA>), aimed at monitoring the excellence in teaching of the Spanish Universities. UAB's reference is DOC14UAB/07, and we have signed up to obtain a certificate for the period 15/10/2014 to 15/10/2019. I didn't know this—check the list at ANECA for your own university. I gather from the interview, though this is just implicit, that the application of Docentia at the UV appears to be quite unwelcome among the teachers there, hence Indocentia.

I feel an itch to play devil's advocate, you'll see why later on, so here we go.

Indocentia point out that the media critique of the Spanish university is outdated as it fails to understand how the traditional feudal system based on client networks has adapted to the new requirements of the (American-inspired) liberal university. We need, hence, they claim a "real-time critique" which surveys and questions new key

issues such as, I translate, the demand of hyperactivity, the subjection of knowledge to the market, the devaluation of teaching, the frailty of the precarious jobs. They criticize the complicity with the liberal programme of many researchers who, they say, appear to be selfishly obedient and who only care for their own CVs.

Whatever knowledge is generated ends up, Indocentia claim, locked up in closed circuits and measured with standards set up by ANECA and CNEAI following the directives of, they point out, “two private companies, Thomsom Reuters and Elsevier (owners respectively of databases WoS and Scopus)”. Indocentia strongly criticise the bias which this generates in favour of English-language publication, which they connect with a “colonial logic”. They strenuously complain, in addition, against the Government decree (or ‘ley Wert’) which has turned the ‘sexenio’ (or personal assessment exercise) into an instrument to discipline both research and teaching, to the detriment of the latter. Docentia is in particular criticized for trying to measure teaching using ruthless computer applications that simply are not adequate to the task (at UAB we are not using this... yet).

I am sure we all agree with the diagnosis. We must also be grateful to Indocentia for pointing out what we suffer in silence (or over coffee with other depressed colleagues): the constant anguish that we do not measure up, the psychosomatic complaints associated with the need to keep personal energies constantly available, the fear of mediocrity: “La excelencia mata, la competitividad enferma, decimos desde Indocentia”. Also the incomprehension—the look on my doctor’s face during my last visit a month ago regarding a scary, persistent headache. ‘So what do you do?’, the dialogue goes. ‘I’m a university teacher’. The raised eyebrow and the classic question: ‘And that’s stressful?’

The Indocentia interview, by the way, refers constantly to texts produced by the collective but they do not seem to be centralized in a single platform. You may want to read Carmen Montalba’s “El sueño de la excelencia: desvelarlo, desvelar-nos” (<http://roderic.uv.es/handle/10550/49036>) or Lucía Gómez and Francisco Jódar’s “Ética y política en la universidad española: la evaluación de la investigación como tecnología de la subjetividad” (<http://atheneadigital.net/article/view/1169-Gomez>).

Now, here’s my problem. The article ends with a bland declaration that, I translate, “Therefore, we cannot renounce the possibility of collectively producing new rules, new constituent praxis”. Check, if your wish, my own post of 18 April 2015 commenting on “The Academic Manifesto: From an Occupied to a Public University” published by Dutch professors Willem Halffman and Hans Radder (*Minerva: A Review of Science, Learning and Policy*, 3 April 2015, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11024-015-9270-9/fulltext.html>). I should say that this manifesto is much closer to what we need here in Spain in terms of including a programme of anti-liberal activities. Perhaps, as usual, even as regards the complaints against the liberal university we are lagging behind our European peers...

I do not want to go into the list of grievances and the list of proposals which our Dutch colleagues offer, for one year later I feel quite tired of going in circles and advancing

nothing. A few days ago, for instance, I found myself helping the Head of my Department to prepare the meeting she is to have with our Vice-Rector of Personnel. Here's the impossible situation: like everyone else, we have got no new full-time permanent positions for about eight years, not even to replace the many full-time positions we have lost to retirement and even early death. How you can run a Department of fast ageing teachers, with too many seniors past 60 and with associates past 40 who might have to wait 10 years for tenure..., is beyond anyone's understanding. The secret masterplan of neo-liberal policies is, clearly, the complete elimination of the public university.

What bothers me about the Indocentia interview is this: by throwing the idea of excellence away as the trademark of the liberal university we're throwing away the baby with the bathwater. I do aim at being an excellent researcher and teacher, hopefully a much better one than some of the personnel I had the misfortune to come across as a student in the 1980s Spanish university. I do not want this aim denied or criticized just because the instruments to measure it are downright wrong. I am entitled to being acknowledged as a researcher because I am doing my best—like many other of my peers. Also as a teacher.

I think we are missing one significant part of the History of the Spanish university—the time when my own generation (I was born in 1966) understood that we had to pull ourselves by our boot strings and do much better than our predecessors. 'Sexenios' were introduced back in 1983 and, please, remember, they were initially an incentive to pull out of their lethargy the many university teachers who simply published nothing—including full professors. Even with the 'sexenios' as an incentive many university teachers have managed to generate no publications at all, which means zero knowledge transfer (whether to open or closed circuits). The supposition that this is because they are devoted 100% to good teaching is simply a lie. I am also very tired of the assumption that a committed researcher can only succeed at the cost of being a poor teacher. Actually, among my colleagues the best researchers are also the best teachers. This does not mean that I know of no excellent teachers uninterested in research but, then, perhaps what we need in the university, and nobody is considering, are separate categories for teachers who wish to do no research and for teachers/researchers.

I can only agree with Indocentia's diagnosis of all the faults of the monstrously demanding system used to measure our activity and bemoan, like them, its consequences, for I suffer them first hand. What worries me is whether the resistance to being accountable for our task by the current dubious methods might conceal a certain backlash to the time when university teachers were not accountable at all. I remember that time very clearly, for I suffered it as a student—the arbitrary teaching methods, the unavailability of always absent teachers who did not keep office hours, the nepotism, the appalling textbooks forced on us, the provincial lack of international connections, the general backwardness...

I'll end, then, by repeating my warning: no matter how much you hate the methods to measure it, do not reject excellence itself—just fight to take it away from the hands of

our liberal oppressors back into our hands. We had the chance to construct a functional version of 'excellence' briefly there, perhaps for a few years in the 1990s, before we lost it. Consider also who is complicit with that loss, and name them. I have a suspicion that many of them are the people we proudly sent abroad to be trained in American universities and improve the state of our own university. Generally naming 'the liberal university' as the arch-villain does not seem to be helping us...

2 March 2016 / SOME ARCHEOLOGY: THE OLD 'LICENCIATURA' IN ENGLISH PHILOLOGY (THINKING OF THE 3+2 REFORM)

The student assembly at the Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres where I work have decided that the national student strike announced for tomorrow is not enough and so have extended it to yesterday, today and tomorrow. I have lost count of all the strikes I have witnessed in my 30 years at UAB, as student and teacher—one thing I know is that none of them have bothered the diverse Ministries of Education at all... I certainly am in favour of people struggling to defend their rights but I wonder why the methods have not adapted to the 21st century. Also, I fail to understand why suspending one's education for a few days may send the Ministry any message, as there is no way a students' strike can reproduce the effect which a workers' strike is supposed to have. Anyway... the same arguments all over again every few years if not every year.

I have already written here about the reasons for the protest: the new degree reform announced in 2014 (see my post for 19 October) and legislated in 2015 (see my post for 4 February). Although we have not yet started drafting the new syllabus and we are actually going through our first process of BA degree accreditation, it seems that the Catalan universities will go ahead with the plan to transform our degrees into the 3+2 model beginning in 2017-18 (some new degrees are starting in September). I was reminded yesterday that the Generalitat has not yet appointed a Secretary for the Universities; besides, there is currently only a provisional Spanish Government, with a most likely chance of new elections in June. How wise it is for any reform to begin at this point is for the reader to decide.

My own view, already expressed here again and again is that the 3+2 model might be acceptable for English Studies provided a) the 3-year BA is taught only in English, including possible common courses shared with other language and Literature degrees; b) the fees for the 2-year MA are the same as for the BA, so that all newly graduated students can have the option to complete the 3+2 model. This is pretty much the official position of my Department. I have observed also again and again that this apparently new 3+2 model reproduces that of the old 'Licenciatura', which consisted of a first cycle after which you could be granted a 'Diplomatura' degree and a second cycle, followed by a doctoral programme. Actually, the Spanish Parliament has recently determined that in legal terms possessing a 'Licenciatura' is the equivalent of possessing a 'Grado' and a Master's degree. So, why, many of us are wondering, not go back to the 'Licenciatura'.

I've done my digging at the website of the Boletín Oficial del Estado to find the syllabus (Plan de Estudios) implemented back in 1977, the first one after Franco's death, that is, the first university reform of our then young democracy. The 'Orden por la que se aprueba el Plan de estudios de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona' can be found at <https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-1977-27200> (16 November 1977, BOE 274). I had forgotten that the Facultat offered then 1 single degree in 'Filosofía y Letras' with specialities, but it is interesting to note that the decree speaks of students tailoring their degrees to suit their needs with the help of a tutor... (which I never had).

Credits were counted by classroom time, i.e., 1 hour = 2 credits. The first cycle amounted to 90 credits (15 annual subjects), of which only 18 credits had to be from another speciality; 60 had to be taken within the speciality. The decree gives the Facultat the choice not to organize a common first year syllabus. This sounds quite open in relation to what we have now, though my suspicion is that the freedom granted by the decree was actually diminished by internal regulations. Second cycle: 60 credits, 42 belonging to the speciality chosen, 18 to any other speciality (the word 'minor' was not part of the vocabulary). Now, this does contrast with the current limitations, as students' need to stick to a much more limited choice. Interestingly, the BOE speaks of 'transversal specialities' taught by different Departments—we could have had, for instance, a second cycle on Literature in different languages... never happened!!

Thus, until the 'Licenciatura' became a 4-year degree in 1992 (see <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/1993/01/28/pdfs/A02385-02388.pdf>), students of 'Filología Inglesa' at UAB took the following yearly courses: 'English language' (I, II and III), 'English Literature' (I and II), 'Anglo-Saxon Civilization', 'History of Language' (with the pompous name of 'Filología Germánica), and 'German language' (I, II and III). Students also had to take 'Lengua Española' (I and II), and 'Introduction to Literary Studies' (taught by the Spanish Department). In the second cycle, if I remember correctly, you could choose to specialize in English language or Literature, provided you chose a minimum of 5 semestral electives from the other branch. I haven't been able to find a list of subjects, though.

Seeing this information, I realize that little by little the 'Licenciatura' descendants have pushed German out of the syllabus, to make room for more English language courses beyond the instrumental; Literature has also expanded to include more American Literature. The number of courses outside the Department was back in 1977 the equivalent of 6 semesters, in comparison to the current 4, but still so, these 4 semesters are a bone of contention, for we feel they should be taught in English. Needless to say, this is going to be the main obstacle for our Department in the new reform. All in all, however, the impression that 'Licenciados' (pre-1992) had a better exit level than later students may have to do with their taking a five-year course of studies than with the actual training they received. Following this line of thought, the students receiving the worst training were the ones in the period 1992-2009, as they took a 4-year 'Licenciatura' with no option to take an MA (except abroad).

Beyond the crucial question of the fees (they were relatively lower for the 'Licenciatura' and the same for the five years), our specific problem—and I refer here to all English Studies in Spain—is our students' low command of the language we teach in. This is something we all know: the 1977 'Licenciatura' attracted mostly students who understood that their English had to be solid enough to face the demands of the degree; since 1992, however, and particularly since the implementation of LOGSE in 1994, we are attracting students who, mostly, want to learn English. I'm perhaps exaggerating and back in 1977 (or 1984 when I started the 'Licenciatura') there were also many students with an inadequate command of English. I recall, however, from my students' days a high rate of competitiveness among students to test who had the best accent, the largest vocabulary. This has been gradually vanishing from our classrooms. It makes for a certainly more relaxed atmosphere but the absence of peer pressure and the decreasing standards have also increased the time we need for pure instrumental language training. Hence the need to turn absolutely all subjects into English language practice.

That this is seen with a great deal of hostility became evident to me recently. I explained the idea that the common courses should also be taught in English, even when they are taught by teachers outside the Department, to a colleague in the Comparative Literature section (they teach the first year core course) and he was absolutely furious. Two things were striking in his overreaction: a) the idea that, we, English philologists, are not qualified to teach Linguistics and Literary Theory and b) a total incomprehension regarding the role that English plays in our classrooms. I understand the territorialism though, obviously, I disagree with it. What baffles me is the other matter. I tried to explain that if my students' English is too weak, there is no way I can teach them Dickens (for example) but I totally failed. Now, my students' English has been too weak for Dickens since, at least, I insist, 1994 and may never again be strong enough. Whether we limit the BA degrees to 3 years might make no difference at all, as I'll probably still be teaching Dickens in the second year but, surely, if we could use more time for English in the first year, that would make at least some difference. Why this is so hard to understand is beyond me...

I'll stop here. My master's students have democratically decided not to be on strike this afternoon so I'm off to the UAB, hoping the habitual picket lines and barricades will be no obstacle... But that's a topic for another post.

8 March 2016 / AFTER INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY: PROGRAMMING WOMEN WRITERS IN OUR SYLLABI

Once more we have 'celebrated' on the 8th of March, International Women's Day, and like last year (see my post) I only feel irritation. A main downside of ageing is that one accumulates a memory of past events long enough to understand that although many things change at the speed of light, others seem to take for ever. One of these is achieving gender equality (actually, dismantling patriarchy should be the real target).

What I am specially resenting today is the hypocrisy and the cant: you no longer hear anyone in the media openly declaring that women are inferior and should be discriminated on the basis of our possessing a vagina but it seems to me that the misogynists excluded from public view for reasons of political correctness are doing their best to do their job—you see plenty of them lurking, by the way, in the readers' comments sections of online newspapers or behind the masks of the many trolls aggressively policing women in the social networks. Even in courts of justice and I do not mean male judges. At a time when Spain already has more female than male judges, which should call for celebration, we have female judges harassing abuse victims with questions that come straight of pure sexism. I am simply appalled that the question 'did you try hard enough to close your legs?' addressed to a rape victim has been heard on a Spanish court and from a woman's lips in 2016.

I'll try to avoid the rant that I published here one year ago and strike a more positive note. I'll start by recommending 25 excellent science-fiction short stories by women that I have chosen for my elective course. This is part of a project to produce with my students a guide to reading short stories (which will also include 25 tales by men). Here they are (enjoy!); all authors are US-born, unless specified:

Bear, Elizabeth. "Tideline" (2007).
Brackett, Leigh. "No Man's Land in Space" (1941).
Cadigan, Pat. "Is There Life After Rehab?" (2005).
Cherry, C.J. "Cassandra" (1978).
Due, Tananarive. "Patient Zero" (2010).
Ermswiller, Carol. "Creature" (2002).
Fowler, Karen Joy. "Standing Room Only" (1997).
Goldstein, Lisa. "The Narcissus Plague" (1995).
Goonan, Kathleen Ann. "A Short History of the Twentieth Century" (2014).
Griffith, Nicola. "It Takes Two" (2010). British author (naturalized US citizen)
Gunn, Eileen. "Coming to Terms" (2004).
Hoffman, Nina Kiriki. "Futures in the Memory Market" (2010).
Hopkinson, Nalo. "The Easthound" (2013). Canadian author.
Johnson, Kij. "26 Monkeys also the Abyss" (2008).
Jones, Gwyneth. "The Tomb Wife" (2008). British author.
Kowal, Mary Robinette. "Evil Robot Monkey" (2012).
Kress, Nancy. "Out of all them Bright Stars" (1985).
Lee, Yoon Ha. "A Vector Alphabet of Interstellar Travel" (2011).
McCaffrey, Anne. "The Ship Who Sang" (1961)
Moore, C.L. "Shambleau" (1948).
Norton, André. "All Cats Are Grey" (1953).
Russ, Joanna. "When It Changed" (1972).
Tiptree jr., James. "The Women the Men Don't See" (1972).
Wilhelm, Kate. "Mrs. Bagley Goes to Mars" (1978).
Willis, Connie. "Daisy in the Sun" (1982).

Next, I'll refer to my title. An implicit rule in my Department is that syllabi must be balanced and contain an equal representation of men and women. This is not always

easy to accomplish, not because women have not produced excellent work but because much of that work is not as canonical as that of men. I have been reading with my class a very good piece by Adam Roberts (in *The Science Fiction Handbook* edited by Nick Hubble & Aris Mousoutzanis) on how canons are formed. In it he explains that Dale Spender changed back in 1986 the conditions for the upkeep of the canon for the English novel by claiming with her book *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Novelists Before Jane Austen* not only that at least 100 women novelists had been so far ignored but that they were *good*. The 18th century canon has, therefore, expanded to include many more women and it is quite possible to teach a course including a mixed selection of men and women. Whoever does this is, in practice, altering the old-fashioned canon for good if only for the benefit of a handful of students. Roberts presents the gender-inclusive transformation of the canon as a solid, generally accepted process and simply dismisses as 'not-the-done-thing' all-male reading lists in any university course. (He should have visited my Department last semester...).

The real challenge, however, does not lie just in finding a new balance in our classroom for the canon of the past but applying new strategies to the formation of the canon of the future. And this is done mainly in contemporary fiction courses.

This is why I want to praise here what a colleague in my Department has done for, precisely, our course on current British fiction. This teacher has selected six novels by six women novelists: Karen Joy Fowler's *We are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013), Poppy Adams' *The Behaviour of Moths* (2008), Maggie O'Farrell's *The Hand that First Held Mine* (2010), Emma Healey's *Elizabeth is Missing* (2014), Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and Marina Lewycka's *Two Caravans* (2007). The course objectives are, as described in the official syllabus, "to come to a fuller understanding of particular aspects of post-modern Britain (...) attempting to comprehend those concerns and leitmotifs that may be generally applicable in these novels to the culture as a whole, with the aim of attaining a closer conception of the cultural parameters currently at work in contemporary British society." Now, here is the best thing: my colleague is a man, David Owen.

And, yes, I'm extra happy that the course objectives do not refer at all to gender for this means that for David the writers chosen are, above all, high-quality writers and not principally women writers. When David confirmed this approach to me I joked whether the problem is that male British novelists are not up to the task of producing good fiction and he said that certainly the diverse new currents started back in the 1980s by Martin Amis and company have run their courses and now, I paraphrase, the novelists offering the more interesting proposals are women.

If one of my women colleagues had produced a similar syllabus I'm sure this would have been read as yet another feminist attempt at displacing the men, mere 'women's literature for women'. The idea of a woman teaching a reading list composed only of women writers faces inevitably this problem. This is why we need the men as allies, for with this list David is sending students the message that a) men do read and enjoy fiction written by women, b) men can certainly value women's work above the fiction men are currently writing and c) it is about time that the inclusion of women writers in

any syllabus stops being an act of feminist defiance to become the most habitual thing in the world... So, please, let's have more men teaching work written by women because they are *good* writers.

I asked nonetheless one of my women colleagues whether David's list is not a bit too much, an excessive reversal of the too often habitual exclusion of women. This colleague told that me she personally prefers mixing her writers (remember I am not mentioning other identities markers like race, ethnicity, etc) but she welcomed the idea of teaching only women. After all, she said, we have had only-men Literature courses for too long. And been told, besides, that the only principle of selection was their high quality, not, as it was always the case, their gender.

I am also particularly happy that there is no international writing women's day, for this means that women writers have no specific grievances to vent regarding their profession (or am I wrong and women writers are also paid less for their work than their male peers?). I am myself privileged in relation to most women in my country, the sixth one in Europe in the black list of nations where women are exploited for basic gender reasons (women are paid 20% less here than their male peers). This does not mean I forget the simple fact that women are still woefully under-represented in the ranks of the Spanish full professors (15% to 53% of female students).

I'll end as I started by wondering in irritation who International Women's Day addresses. The media were full yesterday of items celebrating women's achievements but also of many reports on the appalling conditions which women endure all over the world. We women already know about all these achievements and horrors and, seemingly, so do the anti-patriarchal men. The others, the patriarchal bastards that keep us tied to their sexism and misogyny were, I'm sure, mocking all the protests while enjoying the snug positions of power they occupy.

The European Commissioner responsible for gender equality, Vera Jurova, has declared that the European Union might reach equality in rights for all persons in 70 years. Two more generations?? I should say we have a serious problem if this is the best the EU can offer... Now think of the rest of the world. (And include more women in your Literature syllabi!!)

13 March 2016 / "RINGIL ESKIATH. FAGGOT DRAGONSLAYER": READY FOR A QUEER HERO? (RICHARD MORGAN'S A LAND FIT FOR HEROES)

I don't particularly enjoy reading fantasy of the type set in pseudo-medieval settings because of its more or less covert patriarchal inclinations. I have to interview, however, British author Richard Morgan at Eurocon and, hence, I've gone through his fantasy trilogy of tongue-in-cheek title *A Land Fit for Heroes*. This comprises *The Steel Remains* (2008), *The Cold Commands* (2011) and *The Dark Defiles* (2014) and it is clear from the misadventures of the heroic trio of protagonists that their land is anything but fit for heroes.

Morgan's trilogy is part of so-called 'grimdark', the currently popular trend in fantasy which aims at presenting readers with plots in which terrible things happen on the philosophical grounds that existence is a burden with or without a cool sword and magical powers. Generally speaking, Morgan's fans (like myself) prefer his science-fiction to his fantasy though I believe that his diverse imaginary worlds are not so distant, linked as they are by the angst of his male protagonists, always at odds with their environment. In this particular case, what disgusts Ringil Eskiath are the homophobic laws of Trelayne, the land where he holds a privileged position as a nobleman but which makes an outcast of him as a gay man.

Yes, Morgan does this: he challenges readers to accept oxymoronic characterizations for his male heroes that go beyond the very obvious. Ringil is an extremely original character not just because he is, for all I know, the first (or one of the first) gay heroes in sword-and-sorcery fantasy but also because, despite his victimization, he is also an extremely violent man and, hence, an amazingly effective warrior. Perhaps *because* of his victimization. Whether they enjoy or not the convoluted plot, beset by too many deus ex-machina turns, many readers claim to admire Ringil for his rebelliousness and defiance of rules. This is another peculiarity of Morgan's writing, as I know very well having devoted a long article to Carl Marsalis in *Black Man*: he charms readers with male characters who are extremely brutal and do unspeakable things but who are also burning with anger against the unfair systems of power that bind them. And you fall for them.

[Warning: spoilers ahead!]

In Ringil's case his rage combines his horror at the execution of a former lover decreed by his own father, following the rules of the realm (the method is impalement), and his abhorrence of slavery, resurrected and legalized after a devastating war that seemed to announce a better future. Morgan, however, may have gone a bit too far in the violence which Ringil inflicts on others. Not only is his 'hero' guilty of killing children (never mind that these children are far from innocent cherubs), he also allows his men to gang-rape a female slaver. Brit Mandelo suggests in the review of *The Cold Commands* (<http://www.tor.com/2011/10/12/a-hard-but-worthy-read-the-cold-commands-by-richard-k-morgan/>) that Ringil does feel guilt at this atrocity and that Morgan "makes it clear" that his "sanction of her rape (...) is not acceptable." There is something of that but, arguably, had he been heterosexual Ringil would have joined the other rapists—an ugly proposition for a so-called hero. Moving on, I found something else which gave me that icy punch in the guts you feel in the presence of evil. At one point in *The Dark Defiles* Ringil commits a horrifying act of violence against the man responsible for the brutal homophobic executions in his father's domain. Morgan again uses this moment to teach Ringil a lesson, making him feel jealous of the deep bond this man enjoys with his son—but I was too aghast to pay attention. Both at Ringil for committing that outrage and at Morgan for imagining it.

Other readers have been disturbed, or even disgusted, instead by the many gay sex scenes in the trilogy—you may read Morgan's fuming answer to one such complaint in

his own website (<http://www.richardkmorgan.com/2010/10/i-got-another-one/comment-page-1/>). Nobody, by the way, seems to have rejected Ringil as a homophobic representation of a gay man. I have no problem with the scenes, I just wonder where Morgan got his information from (and how his wife reacted to reading her husband's books...). What bothered me was how the scenes highlight, essentially, Ringil's inability to love any man he has sex with and a sexual behaviour that is not truly new in relation to your classic patriarchal hero. Gil's hard-boiled cynicism may be a novelty regarding the representation of gay characters, which might explain why *The Steel Remains* won the Gaylactic Spectrum Award, intended to "honor outstanding works of science fiction, fantasy and horror which include significant positive explorations of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered characters, themes, or issues" (<http://www.spectrumawards.org/whatis.htm>). I feel, nonetheless, trapped by the classic dilemma: have we reached a point in which a gay hero can also be a nasty man? Morgan says yes, for we need to accept all kinds of (gay) men; I have my doubts for I don't wish to glamorise any barbaric man. No matter how attractive (same problem in *Black Man*).

I think that Morgan is making the point that the evil patriarchal systems which his heroes fight are destructive even of heroism, which is why his men are as monstrous as they are rebellious. I feel, however, the same unease I felt when I finished *Black Man*: I would have loved to see Ringil take one step further and claim justice for gays and end slavery—in short, to become politically effective. Morgan, however, does not want to go in this direction. Fair enough. The irony is that this task falls eventually into the hands of his female protagonist—a story suggested by the end but that remains eventually untold.

As happens, *A Land Fit for Heroes* is also a tale of deep friendship among a peculiar trio brought together by the war (against the Scaled People, a dragon species): Ringil himself, his berserker male friend Egar and their common female friend, Archeth. You seldom see the three together but the point is that they share a solid camaraderie and loyalty despite their differences. The bond between the macho warrior Egar and Ringil is supposed to show that male friendship needn't be contaminated by homophobia, whereas the respect that the two men show for Archeth suggests that women can also bond with men... provided they are lesbians?

In a patriarchal land in which women only appear as either prostitutes (I lost count of how many times the word 'whore' is used) or slaves, whether within actual slavery or within marriage, Archeth manages to find a more or less secure political position as the main advisor of Yhelteh's obnoxious Emperor. Just look at what this requires: Archeth is an immortal half-breed born of the union of a human woman and an alien Kiriath man. Her Kiriath genes have given Archeth her ebony skin but do not make the mistake of thinking that she is respected for being a black lesbian—no, what saves Archeth from rape and slavery is her literally unique paternal heritage. Other readers have complained that Archeth behaves like a man, which I find to be totally wrong. She is a profoundly feminine character, always concerned not to make herself too prominent and—something I don't get—also extremely reluctant to assume any type of leadership. By the way, while Ringil enjoys encounters with many lovers, she agonizes about

whether to have sex or not with a more than willing slave girl... When the long-awaited lesbian scene happens this is not as enthusiastically described as Ringil's romps.

Since I am not a native speaker, the hero's jokey, in-your-face self-presentation at one point of the trilogy as "Ringil Eskiath. Faggot dragonslayer" is more confusing than challenging. I was under the impression that 'faggot' was old-fashioned British slang when all the sources I have checked confirm that this is a US term currently used to abuse gay men—similar in offensive potential to 'nigger' (check if you wish the wonderful Wikipedia list of slang terms for gay men at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_LGBT_slang_terms#Male). I do not know why an English writer would use an American term in a pseudo-medieval fantasy novel but, well, this is how limited my philological skills are. Perhaps Morgan is very specifically targeting American homophobia, which seems to be much more profound and widespread than British homophobia.

I have found myself, in conclusion, ready enough for a gay hero but, if you ask me, I'd chose Archeth over Ringil to protect me (Egar is the best choice in case dragons attack!). After all, Archeth appears to be the real queer hero in Morgan's trilogy—in all senses.

27 March 2016 / OF MEN... : MASCULINITIES STUDIES AND THE GRASSROOTS REALITY

I'll refer here to an article by Alejandra Agudo published in *El País* on March 18th: "Hablan los 'nuevos' hombres. Son feministas, igualitarios, cuidadores. Paco Abril, Octavio Salazar y José Ángel Lozoya defienden una sociedad más justa en la que ellos pierden poder" (http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/03/18/planeta_futuro/1458333179_184806.html).

These three men were participants in the conference celebrated at the Universidad de Deusto, Bilbao, *Paternidades que transforman* (<http://aitak.deusto.es/>), hence their joint interview. I know Paco Abril from the seminars held by the research group I have worked with in the last four years, 'Constructing New Masculinities' (<http://www.ub.edu/masculinities/>), and I have a great deal of respect for him. He is a sociologist and a teacher at the Universitat de Girona and, above all, a pro-feminist activist for equality, the president of the Catalan branch of AHIGE (Asociación de Hombres por la Igualdad de Género, <http://www.ahige.org/>). I had never heard of José Ángel Lozoya, a member of the Red de Hombres por la Igualdad (<http://www.redhombresigualdad.org/web/>) who defines himself as "househusband, sexologist and gender specialist". The name of Octavio Salazar, who teaches law at the Universidad de Córdoba, is more familiar, perhaps because he also writes for *El País*.

I find nothing particularly controversial in the article, which essentially confirms the impression that while the number of men who defend equality in their private lives is (slowly) increasing, men's public activism is extremely limited. Men like Abril, Lozoya and Salazar do not represent, then, a recognizable movement but appear to be, rather,

inhabitants of tiny islands of equality in a vast sea of inequality (excuse the corny metaphor). The sad, sad thing is that you needn't go very far to see the enormous resistance they face: you just have to read the readers' comments added to the article at the bottom of the webpage. Remember this is *El País*, supposedly a progressive newspaper read by liberal-minded persons.

There are very few positive comments, perhaps about 5 in a discussion amounting to 178 comments, and I must note that the most virulent opinions have been erased by whoever in *El País* monitors this kind of exchange. I have highlighted a few sentences, all by men, except where indicated; if you allow me, I'll leave them in the original Spanish version, for the 'castizo', 'machista' nuances not to be lost in translation:

*Teniendo en cuenta lo que significa hoy en día el término 'feminista', un hombre que se defina como 'feminista'... no es un hombre. (original ellipsis)

*Esos hombres no representan a los hombres ni a la igualdad. Son un instrumento al servicio del feminismo más radical. (...) En realidad, quienes defienden la igualdad de los hombres y los derechos de estos son los activistas por los derechos de los hombres o masculinistas.

*(...) Los retos de los nuevos tiempos nos deben de hacer reaccionar para no perder nuestro estatus y nuestra posición de privilegio en la sociedad. (...) ¿Nuevos hombres? no es mas que otra patraña de las que quieren desplazarnos de la esfera de poder para ser ocupada por ellas. (...)

*Y digo yo, ¿a Lozoya, las mujeres le endurecen la????

*[by a woman] (...) como mujer me gustan los varones hombres, sin cortapisas, ni melandros(*sic*)... la masculinidad es un valor en baja... Creo en la igualdad, no en la estupidez y lo digo como mujer que cada día lucha por ello, pero seriamente. (original ellipses)

*Lo que llegan a hacer algunos para ligar ...

*(...) si estos tíos quieren luchar por la igualdad de derechos, que se pongan a a luchar por una ley de divorcio justa para los hombres (...) no veo a los colectivos feministas protestar por esto, ni por las denuncias falsas de maltrato, más del 80% de los casos, ¡¡es increíble!! (...)

*Señores, déjense de feminismos y de odiarse a sí mismos. No necesitan expiar sus pecados de varón, ya son buenos hombres porque sí, no por la luz salvadora del feminismo.

*¿Están siendo los hombres lo que de verdad desean ser o es el feminismo el que decide lo que debe ser un hombre? Parece haber un sentimiento de culpa derivado de una reducción de los hombres a machistas, maltratadores, violadores... que no deja libertad de elección. Me parece igualmente triste esa representación de una masculinidad obediente, bondadosa y dulce, que vive más pendiente del reconocimiento de su buena conducta que de su verdad. (original ellipsis)

*La masculinidad nunca ha abusado ni de la mujer ni de nadie. La paternidad comprometida ha sido lo único que ha movido a los hombres de todas las generaciones. (...)

*¿Y éstos marcianos de que país vienen?

*Me parece muy respetable que estos señores sigan un 'modelo' de vida acorde a sus ideas. Yo defenderé el derecho que tienen a seguir ese modelo. También supongo, y

espero, que estos señores y los medios de comunicación desde donde se expande este ideario actuen con el mismo rasero y defiendan el derecho de los que no quieran seguir ese ideal.

These readers—and, please note that each passage corresponds to a different reader—might not represent all the Spanish defenders of patriarchy out there. It might well be, besides, that their in-your-face tone is deterrent enough for other men and women to express their anti-patriarchal views. I myself see no point in attracting plenty of negative energy by sending comments to this type of forum—yes, a bit cowardly of me. Yet I have come across the same or similar points in so many comments in different newspapers that I firmly believe they do represent our local reality too well. What is most disarming is the recalcitrance, by which I mean the impossibility of addressing these men in rational dialogue. I still have hopes that men like Abril, Lozoya and Salazar—and others like Luis Bonino and Miguel Lorente—can reach men in a way that feminist women cannot but I had not realized how much courage their task requires.

Recently, I tried to explain over a long coffee to a (male) colleague just arrived in the field of Masculinities Studies what these aim at and how little we have progressed. He was a bit alarmed, I must say, at my bleak panorama but I want nonetheless to reaffirm the (utopian?) ideas I am defending from my position. Unlike many other women who simply misunderstand what feminism is about—the struggle for equal rights—I have no problem to declare myself a feminist. I do not believe, however, that women can reach equality without men's participation in a wide-ranging anti-patriarchal struggle. I preach to whomever listens that the common enemy is not masculinity but patriarchy, a social organization based on hierarchy conditioned by the individual's degree of power and so insidious that its biggest triumph is making us believe there is no alternative to it. Yet, there is: a society based on equality among all citizens in which the will to help and not the will to power is the main aim. Sorry to sound so hippy.

I believe that we women have been thinking and doing for decades plenty to try to enjoy a better life but that we are facing enormous obstacles which have to do with women's own complicity with patriarchy but, above all, with men's lack of a clear anti-patriarchal agenda. In times when the patriarchal agenda is crystal clear and gaining adepts all over the world—think DAESH—the lack of a well-defined anti-patriarchal front is our worse enemy, both in the private and the public front. In the private front, it seems obvious to me that legislation is far from helping to stop the daily terrorist attacks committed against women and children by patriarchal abusers (I'm horrified to see that right here in my city the Maristas have chosen to defend rather than accuse the teachers who abused so many very young students in their schools). In the public front, it is simply not very clear on behalf of what we are fighting DAESH, for, if it's human rights, then the refugee crisis sweeping Europe from East to West shows that nobody really cares to defend these rights. For all these I am using a good deal of my academic energy to insist that men have to become not (just) feminists but anti-patriarchal activists. It is my belief that if men are made aware of how evil patriarchy is and they embrace an anti-patriarchal stance then, automatically, they also become defenders of equality (pro-feminist) and the bane of any abuser.

It's not, then, not only for me as a feminist to criticize and attack the men (and women) who have written the appalling comments I have reproduced here, nor for other women: men are the ones who should say 'enough is enough', patriarchy cannot and should not define masculinity for there are much better ways of being a man. Gentlemen: you are all invited to join the anti-patriarchal fight. Begin by freeing yourselves from the monster holding you down.

29 March 2016 / ...AND SUPERMEN: READING GRANT MORRISON'S SUPERGODS

[This is my 400th post and I want to thank all of you, readers. I feel very embarrassed when someone sends me a message or approaches me with a kind word but it is also a great pleasure. I do hope you also get a little bit of that from reading my raving and ranting. Thanks!!]

One of the most exciting perks of being a teacher is how much one learns from students. Until last January I had no idea who Grant Morrison was and then, suddenly, my doctoral students Angélica and Matteo decided to enlighten me from very different fronts and without even having met. You won't believe me but I heard the words 'Grant Morrison' from their lips on the very same day—serendipity! If you are a comic book lover, I'm sure you must be thinking that my ignorance of Morrison's *oeuvre* is simply appalling... and I would agree now that I know that he is one of the greatest new voices in the recent renewal of the superhero universe caused by the 'British invasion' (Morrison is a Glaswegian). The Brits, he explains, "dragged superhero comics out of the hands of archivists and sweaty fan boys and into the salons of hipsters. In our hands, the arrogant scientific champions of the Silver Age would be brought to account in a world of shifting realpolitik and imperial expansionist aggression."

I don't wish to comment here on Morrison's long career (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grant_Morrison) but on his essay *Supergods* (2011). This is an irregular volume both because there are more accomplished introductions to the superhero but also because Morrison's self-portrait of the artist is too sketchy. The insights into his own career range from down-to-earth financial aspects to his candid report of an out-of-earth crucial paranormal experience. All this, coming from the horse's mouth is fascinating but, as I say, not fulfilling enough. Guided by Matteo's interest in the mythopoesis of the superhero and Angélica's curiosity about Morrison's approach to scientific notions of the multiverse, I have, nonetheless, quite enjoyed *Supergods*.

This is the opening week for Zack Snyder's blockbuster *Superman vs. Batman: Dawn of Justice*, a box-office hit despite dismal reviews venting the same twin complaints: why do we take superheroes so seriously?, and why is Snyder's bleak film not fun? I have not seen the film yet (I find the idea of Ben Affleck as Batman quite repellent) but I should say that we have been taking superheroes seriously at least since Frank Miller

published *The Dark Knight Returns* back in 1986, thirty years ago... Here Morrison can help: "By offering role models whose heroism and transcendent qualities would once have been haloed and clothed in floaty robes, [superheroes] nurtured in me a sense of the cosmic and ineffable that the turgid, dogmatically stupid 'dad' religions could never match. I had no need for faith. My gods were real, made of paper and light, and they rolled up into my pocket like a superstring dimension." As 'supergods'.

As I have explained to Matteo, I believe that we are still missing a much needed explanation about why Western mythology (including Greek, Roman, Germanic, Nordic, etc.) has resurfaced of all places in the United States. As Morrison writes, "Like jazz and rock 'n' roll, the superhero is a uniquely American creation. This glorification of strength, health, and simple morality seems born of a corn-fed, plain-talking, fair-minded midwestern sensibility." Morrison points out that other countries have superheroes (the UK, France, Italy, Japan...) and offers the habitual explanation that Superman appeared as a fantasy aimed to compensate Americans for the ugly daily reality of the Depression Era and the horrors emerging in Nazi Germany. Still, I'm not convinced.

My husband, an habitual reader of comic books, suggests that I should explore the idea that, lacking the medieval tradition of the knight, America invented superheroes (Batman, remember, is the 'dark knight'). I quite like his thesis but it cannot explain why superpowers were added to the figure of the hero/knight. If you recall, classic heroes were the hybrid sons of couples formed by an ordinary human and a divine individual, hence technically they were demi-gods. I would agree that when the alien Superman lands on the cover of *Action Comics* in 1938 America generates a new version of the demi-god, though perhaps Morrison exaggerates by claiming that "Superman was Christ, an unkillable champion sent down by his heavenly father (Jor-El) to redeem us by example and teach us how to solve our problems without killing one another." In view of the dark night of the soul that many superheroes have been going through since Miller re-drew the campy Batman as a brooding Gothic icon, Morrison sounds certainly overoptimistic when he wonders whether the superhero could be "the best current representation of something we all might become, if we allow ourselves to feel worthy of a tomorrow where our best qualities are strong enough to overcome the destructive impulses that seek to undo the human project". I wish!

Perhaps because of my own atheism I feel far more intrigued by Morrison's declaration that the superheroes "may have their greatest value in a future where real superhuman beings are searching for role models." It had never occurred to me that superheroes are a prefiguration of what we call now 'post-human' and even 'transhuman' yet this is indeed what they are. Think X-Men, above all. Nonetheless, as you can see, my student Matteo will have plenty to do in order to explain why myth has resurfaced specifically in the early 20th century comics published in America and how exactly the mythopoesis of the superhero genre has evolved in the past 80 years. The connection with the post-human scientific paradigm might be the missing element...

This brings me to Angélica's focus on how Morrison's awareness of current theoretical physics shapes his narrative style (in case I forgot to say, Morrison is a writer, not an artist/draftsman). Here we face two different questions: one commercial, the other personal, as you will see.

In Morrison's words: "in place of time, comic-book universes offer something called 'continuity'". The many storylines owned by American comic book publisher DC "were slowly bolted together to create a mega-continuity involving multiple parallel worlds" aimed at integrating past periods in the life of re-booted superheroes (as we would say today) and new acquisitions. A singularity of superhero comics—possibly their main defining trait—is that DC and Marvel series have become "eternally recurring soap operas—where everything changed but always wound up in the same place". The problem of how to prolong ad infinitum a successful character or series was solved, in short, by appealing to the idea of multiple narrative universes. This happened just when "string theory, with its talk of enclosed infinite vaults, its hyperdimensional panoramas of baby universes budding in hyperspace" started theorizing the existence of a multiverse (or our 'multiversal' existence). In this way, a plain commercial strategy was given an unexpected philosophical depth (I'm really serious about this—just in case...).

Morrison embodies better than any other current writer in any genre the confluence of the mythical, the mystical and the scientific, with an added in-your-face flaunting of his dabbling in the occult. A turning point in his career happened, he claims, one night in Kathmandu when he had an intense vision, courtesy of what he described as "chrome angels". This experience introduced him to a new sense of time apprehended not as a linear event but as a total simultaneity "with every single detail having its own part to play in the life cycle of a slowly complexifying, increasingly self-aware super-organism". Morrison decided to explore this epiphany in his comic books as he tried to find an explanation for his own new superpower, an ability to see a 5-D perspective of objects and of life "as it wormed back from the present moment and forward into the future: a tendril, a branch on this immense, intricately writhing life tree".

What is most original about Morrison's neo-Blakean visionary capacity is that, without doubting its reality one iota, he grants that it could be due to a temporal lobe seizure ("would it not be in our own best interests to start pressing this button immediately and as often as we can?", he proposes), a lung infection that almost killed him, or his massive consumption of a variety of drugs for a long time. Never wavering for an instant, he concludes that "Superhero science has taught me this: Entire universes fit comfortably inside our skulls. (...) The real doorway to the fifth dimension was always right here. Inside. That infinite interior space contains all the divine, the alien, and the unworldly we'll ever need". Myth, mysticism and science coalesce, then, in the superhero mystique, at least according to Grant Morrison. And if you're willing to accept that writing fiction is opening the door to beings coming straight out of the universes in our skulls it all fits. After all, even the gods and God are creations of the human imagination.

I envy Morrison his happy, gleeful fusion of the rational and the irrational and his ability to have turned this exercise in tightrope walking into the very productive foundation of his career. I just simply do not know enough about comic books to test his claim that superheroes are channelling our simultaneous need to a) bring the old gods into a world increasingly sceptical about God, b) maintain our falling ethical standards, c) supply a template for future post-human behaviour, d) connect us with the multiverse and e) inspire us to connect with our inner superhero. A very tall order indeed! I'll trust Morrison, however, as he seems to know best.

After all, a world with no superheroes sounds, definitely, boring. And I don't mean that they're here to simply entertain us (this is just part of their truth) but also to re-connect us with parts of the 'infinite interior space' that our trivial daily lives are obscuring. Long live myth!

3 April 2016 / REMEMBERING KURT COBAIN (MUSIC AND ENGLISH STUDIES)

Channel-hopping a couple of Saturdays ago, I came across the documentary *Classic Albums: Nirvana – Nevermind* (2005) on BTV, the excellent local Barcelona TV channel (you may see the film here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lu48P8dZTk&list=RD2lu48P8dZTk>). BTV is, as far as I know, the only public channel I have access to which bothers to broadcast a weekly series on popular music, simply called *Música Moderna*. Amazing how music has disappeared from public TV in Spain... I think back to all the variety I could get as a young girl and I'm truly mystified (thank you, by the way, Paloma Chamorro, wherever you are, for *La edad de oro!*). Anyway, I digress (or not, as you'll see). The documentary stirred in me plenty of feelings, memories and impressions I had almost forgotten and I'm trying to make sense of them here.

Two years ago I attended the '16th International Culture & Power Conference' at the Universidad de Murcia and I had the great pleasure of listening to my colleague Rubén Valdés (U. Oviedo) deliver a paper on Joy Division. Finally!, I told everyone present, we start dealing with the aspects of anglophone culture that matter so much but that we dare not acknowledged in our academic work. After the ensuing exciting conversation, I came up with an idea for an article on the role of popular music in the awakening of English Studies scholarly vocations in Spain, thinking in particular of my generation, the ones born in the 1960s for whom Joy Division's music had been an undeniable inspiration. I even drafted a questionnaire which Juan Antonio Suárez kindly reviewed for me but I haven't been able to find the right moment to get down to work. Maybe after this post... My thesis, as you can see, is that popular music played a major role in leading many young aspiring scholars in the 1980s to choose 'Filología Inglesa', in combination with Literature and cinema (also TV). Many of us learned about Britain and the United States through their popular music: translating lyrics from English was, I'm sure, a favourite activity, as was attending concerts both in Spain and, with luck, in

the UK and the US. We knew that this would never be the subject of our ‘proper’ research but the music never stopped playing.

Or did it? In my own case ageing has brought an increasing intolerance of background sound, which means that I have progressively lost the ability to work as I listen to music—now I need total silence. My otolaryngologist has given me very strict instructions not to use earphones and to attend very loud pop and rock concerts only sparingly... And so I have little by little disconnected from that indie avant-garde I used to know all about, also because now I easily lose my way in the endless lists of new bands, emerging one day and gone the following week. Students have also changed. Years ago I could rely on their suggestions but the last time I used music in my classes (‘Literatura anglesa del s. XX’, 2012-13), I found that they didn’t know who Kasabian are... Now I myself don’t know what Kasabian are up to, if they’re still together at all.

Back in, I think, 1999 I visited Professor Simon Frith in Glasgow, no doubt the main anglophone academic specialist in pop and rock (<http://www.eca.ed.ac.uk/reid-school-of-music/simon-frith>). My students have heard about this visit countless times... I asked him how he had managed to develop his amazing career in this field and he gave me a golden recipe: use an impeccable scholarly methodology and nobody will be able to object. I soon wrote a piece on US 1990s Goth star Marilyn Manson (<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinalegre/files/Marilyn%20Manson%20Limits%20Challenge%20Sara%20Mart%C3%ADn.pdf>), and I have subsequently written on gender in music videos (<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinalegre/files/Sara%20Mart%C3%ADn%20El%20Cuerpo%20en%20el%20Videoclip%20Musical.pdf>), Scottish female singers (<https://ddd.uab.cat/record/112359>), Linkin Park (<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinalegre/files/Linkin%20Park%20AEDEAN%202010%20Sara%20Mart%C3%ADn.pdf>) and, my favourite piece, on Kylie Minogue (with Gerardo Rodríguez, <http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/sites/gent.uab.cat.saramartinalegre/files/Forget%20Madonna%20Rodriguez%20Mart%C3%ADn%20AEDEAN%20Cadiz.pdf>).

Year in, year out I promise myself that I will teach an elective on pop and rock but I don’t seem to find the moment, feeling a bit hampered too by not being sure about which methodology to use in order to assess students. Like many other teachers, I assume, I have used lyrics in introductory survey courses to complement poetry. I used to ask students to choose their own lyrics and it was funny to see how they offered quite conservative proposals thinking they would please me (Bon Jovi???). There was a girl absolutely surprised that I chose Linkin Park’s “Somewhere I belong” for class analysis... but that was so long ago. One of my fondest memories is a really hilarious first-year session in which we tried to make sense of Nirvana’s “Smells like teen spirit”—just give it a try, worse than *The Waste Land*...

The other fond memory connected with Nirvana —also a bitter-sweet one—belongs to 6th April 1994, the day after Kurt Cobain (b. 1967) shot himself dead. I was 28, still a doctoral student, and teaching somebody else’s syllabus for ‘Literatura Anglesa Moderna i Contemporània II’, the 19th century. I had to teach Walter Scott’s *Waverley*

(1814), a novel for which I have not yet managed to feel any enthusiasm. When I heard on the radio first thing in the morning that Cobain was dead this brought me back to the day when Ian Curtis, Joy Division's singer, killed himself (18th May 1980). I told myself, 'If that day was crucial for my generation, then today is crucial for my students' generation' and, so, I spent the whole 90 minutes talking about all the iconic pop and rock figures that had died too early and how this connected with the Romantic idea of suicide (poor things, my students!!). No mention of *Waverley*... except to say 'Who can care about Scott today? Not me...'

I did not intend then and do not intend now to support the idiotic cult around early suicide (or youth suicidal lifestyles). I soon became a New Order fan, which I remain to this day, and I can only say that I have a great deal of admiration for how the members of Joy Division decided to move on and become a new band, full of energy and preaching a radiant, hedonistic pleasure in life. The same applies to Dave Grohl's career after Nirvana. Courtney Love, Cobain's widow, called him many names, none of them nice, during the funeral; unlike her, I believe that suicides deserve compassion but I'd rather not turn them into cult figures. What the documentary on Nirvana's hit album *Nevermind* brought back (and perhaps *Amy*, this year's Oscar winner, also does that for the late Amy Winehouse) was the explosion of talent before the regrettable early death. Cobain's case is crystal clear: he simply could not cope with the sudden, massive success of his band. I know that there is a deep contradiction in choosing a career as a rock musician and not thinking of the consequences of success but if you read, as I have done, Bernard Sumner's recent memoirs *Chapter and Verse: New Order, Joy Division and Me*, you will see that this is a quite common contradiction.

Back to *Nevermind* (1991), what I most appreciated about the documentary was the insight into how inexplicable creativity of this very high quality is. The focus of the film is producer Butch Vig's narration of how the album was made, accompanied by interviews with Nirvana band members Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic. Vig gives many technical details about how he came up with the now classic Nirvana sound (the double voice tracks, and so on) and recalls beautiful accidents; the final version of "Lithium", a song that gave band and producer countless problems, came from Cobain singing softly to Vig to demonstrate what he was after. Yet nothing and nobody can explain how everything cohered into the making of that landmark in rock history.

I love the album with a fan's irrational passion and completely lack the musicological training to explain in scholarly terms why it is so potent—I can go on and on about male voices that transmit Romantic intensity (Curtis, Cobain, Chester Bennington...) but this is still an impressionistic approach based on a very personal preference. One thing the documentary seemed to highlight is that, as Michael Forsythe comments in the YouTube segment for the documentary, "The music scene today could sure use another Nirvana. I know there will never be another Nirvana but something to regenerate rock again and take it by storm before it dies".

This might be basic generational nostalgia though I think I'm not alone in feeling, like this person, that in the last 25 years since *Nevermind* no other main event has changed the course of pop and rock with the same power. New high-impact artists have

emerged (think Beyoncé) but they seem to be more about image-packaging than about the music. Kurt Cobain's dishevelled, grungy look couldn't be further from that... I could joke in very bad taste that if he started his career today, Cobain would anyway end up shooting himself rather than submit to the image manipulation that music artists routinely accept today. I have never seen a man with such a beautiful face make himself so ugly as a way to protect his music.

I'm thinking of the equivalent of BTV's *Música Moderna* in 25 years' time and wondering which classic albums will be revisited... By the way: has any PhD dissertation on popular music been submitted yet within English Studies in Spain? I had one in my hands but, you know what it's like these days, the author had a full time job, a family life... and abandoned it rather than, as he said, 'lose coherence'. You don't know how sorry I am...

Now enjoy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vabnZ9-ex7o>

8 April 2016 / HOW TV IS IMPLODING: SERIES, RATINGS AND NEW CONSUMER HABITS

This post is inspired by two sources: one, the article "The 2015–16 TV Season in One Really Depressing Chart" by Josef Adalian and Leslie Shapiro published online in *Vulture* (<http://www.vulture.com/2016/03/2015-2016-tv-season-in-one-depressing-chart.html#>); the other the collective non-academic volume *Yo soy más de series* (2015, <http://www.esdrujula.es/libro/yo-soy-mas-de-series/>) in which I have participated with, once more, an article on *The X-Files*. What these very diverse sources show implicitly is that the current boom around US TV series may well result soon in the destruction of television as we know it.

The article, quite brief, comments on the declining ratings for the "old-school broadcast networks" in the United States, or "Big Four", regarding their current star product, namely, fiction series. They have lost "about 7 percent" viewers for "first-run programming" since the 2014-15 season, "continuing a pattern of substantial decline" in the last few years. The problem is attributed mainly to "a paucity of breakout hits" even though what seems more worrying is that "audiences appear to be abandoning established shows", usually in the second or third season. You may next check the chart accompanying the article, which shows the ratings for a long list of series or, as they call them in the USA, 'shows'. The authors claim that audiences have stopped being loyal to their favourite shows: "Now, in the era of viewing on demand, it seems audiences are increasingly having sordid affairs with new shows and then quickly moving on". Of course, the problem for the broadcasters is that Nielsen rates connect directly to revenue for, remember, TV is basically one long ad interrupted by programmes. Streaming services have started competing for what the writers call "eyeballs" (the part for the whole, you know?) seemingly forgetting that the money business companies can spend on advertising is not unlimited.

Now let's turn to the really juicy part of the article. Yes, you guessed right: the readers' comments—far more relevant and informative than the article itself. Here are some highlights (see with how many opinions you identify):

*(...) there is such an over saturation of shows that it is forcing people to really pick and choose what they want to watch and thus people are ditching poorer quality shows that don't work for them anymore. Or ditching long running favourites that have run out of steam.

* [the lengths of US network seasons] 21-25 episodes is just ridiculous, it's not conducive to making a good product.

*(...) ad-based business models result in content that puts audiences into a soporific state conducive to being influenced by ads, while subscription-based models favour content that locks in passionate fan bases.

*Networks need to cultivate small, passionate audiences for their shows and recognize that the audience is now so splintered that huge audiences will be rare one-offs for special events.

*Cable and streaming services are investing in creativity, giving writers and creators more freedom to make interesting things. The Networks are sticking to the old formula, and seeing fewer and fewer returns. It's a losing game. They'll be gone in a few more years.

*By the time Nielsen's gets with the times, broadcast will be defunct anyway and all the shows will be on streaming services, which know exactly who is watching what and when, but has no motive to share that info with anyone else.

*Not only are networks competing with cool streaming shows that are new (...) but there's entire runs of old series to discover.

*I will never again watch a new network show. Why bother getting invested in a show that is likely going to get cancelled? I vastly prefer the Netflix way.

*Loyal viewers are going to be more important than massive numbers in the future.

*I have a lot of shows I love and a lot of shows I like. I don't care if they are on networks or not. I'm not depressed by this. Sorry.

And my favourite comment: "Thank God for books".

Look at the paradox: the networks have always broadcast series but something changed about 25 years ago (arguably) with ABC's *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), which proved that audiences were willing to enjoy new kinds of TV fiction series. Then the TV model changed radically with the introduction of new local and national channels (think Fox), satellite and cable TV. The current model also includes internet streaming services of which, obviously, Netflix is the most popular one right now. What all these diverse ways of watching fiction on a smaller screen (TV, computer, tablet, cell phone...) have in common is their trusting series to keep them afloat—logically, since series have that strange quality: they may last for years and keep an audience loyal to a channel/service (or so it was assumed). What broadcasters of any type don't seem to realize is that the personal viewing time of each spectator (eyeballs, argh!) cannot increase at the same pace, hence the new 'disloyalty'. Spectators feel that the market is indeed oversaturated and, so, navigate it as well as they can: some give up TV for good, others give up certain series. All tend towards the same goal: controlling their

viewing time regardless of network interests and desperately old-fashioned Nielsen ratings. What is at risk, in short, is not the fiction created to fill our smaller screens but any TV business based on advertising, even TV consumption itself.

Now to the book, *Yo soy más de series*, coordinated by Fernando Ángel Moreno. You will find in it articles dealing with 60 series, all of them American with a few British and Japanese exceptions (Spanish TV is represented by *El Ministerio del Tiempo*). The articles are very different, some are 100% academic, others 100% personal and informal, some (like mine) a combination. Having read its extremely appealing 472 pages, the impression I get is of a gigantic collective failure by American TV series' creators to produce truly solid work. Actually, this is my personal point of view and, of course, I have sought confirmation in the volume.

I have often voiced my post-*Lost* opinion that a narration that begins with no firm plans about its ending is not to be trusted, which is why I very much prefer mini-series. When you try to stretch a series beyond its natural run, when the series 'jumps the shark', then the series is doomed and what started as an exciting tale ends up as flat as a bottle of champagne left uncorked for a week. And this is what I see again and again in the articles of *Yo soy más de series*: with the exception of the mini-series (*I, Claudius*) or of the series planned for a limited number of seasons (*Babylon 5*) and a few honourable exceptions, most series outstay their welcome. The reasons may be that, as one of the comments I have reproduced notes, the number of episodes per season is too high, but whatever the reason is very few series can maintain the same level of interest and creativity for long. After the second season, which is when 'eyeballs' start looking elsewhere, the plot lines get more and more twisted as writers and producers run out of ideas struggling desperately to go on. The shows enter then a sort of entropic process of decadence that leads to their final, eventual implosion.

Funnily, I'm writing this at a time when *The Big Bang Theory* is keeping me glued to my sofa for hours at a stretch at least once a week. Typically, we decide to watch a couple of episodes and may end up watching eight in a row (they're 20 minute long). I am not following any other series and, frankly, after reading *Yo soy más de series* the only one truly tempting me is *Breaking Bad*; we'll see... An advantage of sit-coms like *Big Bang*, I find, is that it's somehow harder to feel disappointed for they do not make such high claims as drama series do to being avant-garde narrative, even better than novels... If there is an opinion I hate about TV series is that one. I feel, in short, refreshed by *Big Bang* but oversaturated by soap-opera products masquerading as great TV-like *Game of Thrones* or *Homeland*.

I'll finish with the story I tell in my own article for *Yo soy más de series*, a story I have already told many times: TV is paying in Spain a high price for having despised spectators in the past. If TeleCinco had not cancelled arbitrarily *The X-Files* just when the internet was entering Spain, we would not have rushed to become TV pirates. Once learned, the habit will not be unlearned. Illegal downloading is, simply, a central aspect of TV consumption in Spain, which does not seem to be the case in the USA. Here satellite, cable and streaming are, I'm 100% sure, second to piracy, while this no

doubt as popular as actual TV broadcasting if not more. I wonder how Nielsen is dealing with this when it counts Spanish 'eyeballs' for we all wear a pirate's eye patch.

Soon, if not tomorrow, 'TV' series will drop the 'TV' part of their name to be called something else, perhaps just 'series', for they will no longer be connected with watching television at all. Nielsen be warned.

12 April 2016 / PRESIDENT RAJOY AND THE STARSHIP THAT FAILED TO LAND ON NOU CAMP: 'ESPERPENTO', LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND CERVANTES

My doctoral student Josie Swarbrick, who is working on the representation of monstrous masculinity in SF cinema, visited last week my SF class to offer a presentation based on one of her dissertation's chapters, the one on *District 9*. In that film a massive alien starship reaches Johannesburg carrying thousands of refugees who have nowhere else to go. Their unenthusiastic South African hosts decide to lock them in an insalubrious township placed in, precisely, District 9, as they decide how to cope with these unwelcome, unsightly visitors. If you have seen the film you know that the central plot concerns the accidental transformation of a pathetic white man into one of the frankly disgusting 'prawns', a metamorphosis usually read in the context of post-Apartheid policies but that Josie is reading taking into account this man's strange fall out of the human species.

District 9 is exceptional, as any SF fan knows, because it changed the trope of the alien invasion in cinema by turning the extraterrestrial visitors into refugees and by setting the action outside the habitual US context. Its closest precedent is possibly *Alien Nation* (1988, TV series 1989-1990), in which the aliens are not invaders, either, but runaway slaves seeking refuge from their masters in the Los Angeles area. *Men in Black* (1997) included a scene showing the MIBs patrolling the Mexican border, trying to make sure that no illegal aliens would cross it. In the more recent *Monsters* (2010) the metaphorical link between the extraterrestrial alien and the illegal human migrant is emphasized: the monsters of the title have invaded most of Earth and only the USA remains a safe haven for humans—or so Americans think. Like real Americans today, the fictional Americans of *Monsters* seem to believe that migration can be stopped, which is never the case.

I started a conversation about the aliens in these films and I asked my students what kind of stories we could tell, taking into account the shameful humanitarian crisis affecting the poor refugees stranded in Turkey, Greece and Eastern Europe. Imagine, I said, that a spaceship similar to the one in *District 9* lands on Camp Nou, here in the middle of Barcelona... How does the story continue? And the students laughed. As Laia explained, one can easily imagine President Obama addressing visitors from outer space, but the idea of President Rajoy doing the same is simply hilarious (President Puigdemont seems to be slightly less hilarious, but still...). Laia herself added that if a

spaceship landed in Spain this would result in another episode of *Aquí no hay quien viva*, the popular TV sitcom about a group of raucous neighbours.

At the end of the 1960s, Carlo Fruttero, editor of the SF publication series *Urania*, the most important one in Italy of its kind, was asked why he never published Italian SF. Famously, he replied that it “was impossible to imagine a flying saucer landing in Lucca”, a controversial statement that, of course, only spurred the imagination of Italian SF authors. I’m not familiar with Italian SF, and not even that much with Spanish SF, and I don’t know whether a starship has ever landed in Lucca. I know that Spanish writer Tomás Salvador produced an absolute masterpiece, even translated into English, with his tale of a generation ship, *La nave* (1959). Of course, this ship never lands in Franco’s Spain, it has been already travelling in space for many years when the story begins.

The aliens, curiously, have trodden Catalan land in at least two very well-known novels. One is Manuel de Pedrolo’s *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (one alien at least is stranded after her companions manage to massacre practically all humans before abandoning their intended colonization project). The other is, there we go again, the hilarious *Sin noticias de Gurb* by Eduardo Mendoza (serialized 1990 in *El País*, published as a volume in 1991).

In this novel the eponymous Gurb, a metamorphic alien, takes the physical appearance of singer Marta Sánchez (!) and decides to explore Barcelona, going awol. Another alien, a shy fellow quite disturbed by his mate’s French leave, follows his tracks also using a variety of human disguises, each more outrageous than the previous one. My fellow citizens respond with total dead-pan indifference to the absurd situations in which the poor alien finds himself in the midst of the chaotic upheaval of the city which preceded the Olympic Games of 1992. This is the funniest book of any kind I have ever read, more than Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman’s *Good Omens*, more than Douglas Adams’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. I remember re-reading it once on the train and having to give up because I could not suppress my laughter. And, to be honest, I would have been very happy to have written *Gurb*.

Mendoza practices in *Gurb* the very Spanish literary genre of the ‘esperpento’; *Aquí no hay quien viva* is its television version. ‘Esperpento’, usually associated with writer Ramón María del Valle-Inclán is, supposedly, a deformed mirror of Spanish society which emphasizes with great irony its worst traits, among them its vulgarity, widespread ignorance, excessive pride, lazy habits and so on. It connects closely with the older genre of the picaresque novel but goes much further in highlighting the grotesque in local Spanish reality. Any Spanish literary critic will tell you that there is no consensus on whether ‘esperpento’ is a deformed or an exact mirror image of Spain (by the way, in Catalonia we also have ‘esperpento’ as seen in the popular TV political satire *Polònia*).

I believe that ‘esperpento’ is the reason why Laia and my other students laugh at the idea of President Rajoy welcoming the aliens. Unlike what is often believed, the inability to imagine the aliens landing on Camp Nou or in Lucca has nothing to do with

the alleged low technological level of Spanish and Italian societies, as both societies are like any other in the West in that sense. It's not, either, a matter of occupying secondary positions in the world order for *District 9* and *Monsters* show that being a world leader is no longer a requirement to the object of the aliens' attention in SF movies. I don't know how things work in Italy, but Spain is dominated by a terrifying low self-esteem which 'esperpento' tries to mask with humour. That might explain the lack of alien visitors.

I'm sure that many others have given far more satisfactory explanations of why Spaniards have generated 'esperpento' as a strategy to cope with Spanish reality. Also stuck in a similar post-Imperial decadence, England has reacted very differently—unless, that is, we come to the conclusion that *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and certainly Monty Python are also 'esperpento', and perhaps they are. Americans have also generated plenty of humour around the idea of the visiting alien. I'm thinking of some TV series: *Mork and Mindy* (1978-82) the sitcom that made Robin Williams a star, *Alf* (1986-1990) with its furry alien visitor or *Third Rock from the Sun* (1996-2001). In US culture, however, the humour at the expense of alien contact is perfectly compatible with the countless examples of fictional American Presidents facing alien visitors or invaders in far more dramatic circumstances. It must be, as I say, a matter of self-esteem. Theirs is so high that American cannot conceive of aliens visiting first other countries on Earth—I'm sure they would be flabbergasted if the aliens chose China.

One of the saddest films I have seen on the topic of alien contact is Óscar Aíbar's bitter-sweet *Platillos volantes* (2003). This movie tells the pathetic real-life story of José Félix Rodríguez Montero (47), a textile worker, and Juan Turu Vallés (21), an accountant in the same Terrassa factory, near Barcelona, who committed suicide on 20 June 1972. Following the supposed call of the aliens and believing that they had somehow mutated, the two men lay down their heads on the tracks of the Barcelona-Zaragoza railway line convinced that dying was a one-way ticket to Jupiter.

I'm not the only spectator to have seen in these two poor deluded men the shadow of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza, although they seem to have been both Quijotes. Aíbar's film is a singular portrait of a naïve, poorly educated Spain easily misled by fantasies of alien contact, as I remember from my own childhood (yes, I did believe in aliens then... now I want to believe). If this were an American film, of course, José Félix and Juan would have eventually met the aliens, proven everyone wrong, and been carried away by an breath-taking starship to Jupiter and beyond. Being Spanish, the film is dominated by Cervantes's legacy and, so, must punish those who dare fantasize—or, rather, since this is a real-life story, the director is conditioned by Cervantes' legacy to choose this sad tale, rather than a more uplifting fantasy, for his film. True, he made amends with *El bosc* (2012), but the damage is done.

To sum up, then, Cervantes + 'esperpento' + Spanish post-Imperial low self-esteem = no alien contact. And just in case you were thinking of this, yes, Rajoy with his inexistent English and his frequent gaffes seems to embody much of this inconvenient mixture. It is certainly easier to imagine Pedro Sánchez, Albert Rivera, Pablo Iglesias or

Alberto Garzón, perhaps even Soraya Saéz de Santamaría (?), engaging in elegant alien contact on behalf of Spain.

Perhaps a clear sign of the decadence of American world leadership is that soon we may have to imagine Donald Trump welcoming the aliens—now, that's 'esperpento'...

21 April 2016 / SO YOU WANT TO PUBLISH A BOOK...: AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS

The post today refers to three situations connected with publishing books. The first one is the presentation that two independent editors gave recently, to an audience mainly composed of my students, explaining how a small press works. The second is the publication of a collective book to which I have contributed an article. The third are my attempts to get an academic book in Spanish published. Actually, I'll add a fourth point having to do with desktop publishing programmes. It all connects, you'll see.

I have recently met Hugo Camacho, a young man with a degree in 'Filología Inglesa', who runs single-handedly Orciny Press (<http://www.orcinypress.com/>). A week ago he offered a presentation at the bookshop Gigamesh in Barcelona together with his colleague Ricard Millán, who runs another small press, Sven Jorgensen (<http://www.svenbooks.com/>). I had agreed with Hugo that I could ask as many questions as I wanted on behalf of my students and so I did. The result can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pS_Nnp6vqQ, an hour full of very interesting information about how the business of publishing books looks from the side of the (small) publisher.

I could comment on what Hugo and Ricard explained point by point and never be done, which is why I'll highlight just one issue: the mathematics. An independent publisher, they explained, self-distributes by selecting sympathetic booksellers. Small presses like theirs tend to be one-men (or one-woman) shows in which most of the tasks that occupy ten-person teams in middle-sized presses are done by just one person. The maths: they publish, generally speaking, from 7 to 10 books a year, perhaps 12 at the most. A typical print run is 150/250 books, though volumes are also offered through print-on-demand services, and as e-books. The habitual distribution of benefits works like this: 10% for the author, 30% for the distributor, 30% for the publisher, 30% for the bookseller. You need to deduce from all this taxes and costs (in the case of the publisher these include items such as translation, book design, text composition, style correction and proof reading). Small presses tend to cut the middleman off, that is to say the distributor, but even so if your 10 books sell 200 copies each at 20 euros—and that's supposing a lot—we're speaking about 40000 euros, of which 24000 would go to the small press. It's not much... By the way, the author of each of the books would get 400 euros (before taxes).

At least, authors are paid by small presses but (and this covers points two and three) for reasons I have never quite understood when you publish an article in a collective

volume you never get paid; I'm now finding out, besides, that when you try to publish an academic book in Spain you're expected to pay in more and more cases.

I have recently published, as I say, an article in a collective book. I'm very pleased with the volume and with the work of the editors, particularly because they commissioned me to write a piece which has pushed my research in interesting directions which I had only half-considered before. I don't wish to name the title of the volume, nor the publishing house because this is irrelevant for the point I'm trying to make, namely, that the volume (hardback, 250 pages) is on sale at the price of €99,00 (\$128.00). This is not exceptional at all. Xavier Aldana's excellent *Body Gothic*, which I have already mentioned here, is sold at £95.00 or \$160.00 (both hardback and e-book!). I ended up asking for a copy to write a review and that's how my institution's library got it (I won't say a word about the book being in the basement depot, out of sight).

If I, with my Senior Lecturer privileged salary, need to blink hard and think twice before spending €99,00 on a book, imagine what it's like for undergrad students. Or is the other way round? Are publishing houses demanding these fantastic prices because students (and teachers) have stopped buying academic paperbacks? More questions: how do young researchers writing their PhDs manage? And how many people will read our exciting collective volume? Can a €99,00 book make an impact? How many copies can be sold all together? 400 world-wide at the most? Can we really ask our Departments and university libraries to spend so much public money on high-priced books? Is this all part of the general trend to re-directed academic publishing in the Humanities towards journals? At least, we're not paying to be published in journals—or are we? A look at the Spanish market for university-produced books reveals that here the prices for volumes in the Humanities are not that high. Check <http://www.unebook.es/>, the bookshop of the Unión de Editoriales Universitarias Españolas, and you will see that our national university presses are still selling available paperbacks (most for under €25), some of them truly cheap in their e-book version.

I must at this point declare my incompetence, for I see colleagues announce on our AEDEAN list volumes published with major Anglo-american academic presses and I wonder why the impossible fifteen years ago has now become, if not exactly common, at least feasible. I'm mystified. We, Spanish English Studies specialists, tend to publish less in Spanish, which is why I decided to try to publish in this language a selection of works I have already published elsewhere in English. The first lesson I have learned is that when you ask for permission to reproduce articles published abroad in collective books, the publishers drag their feet. I've been given permission to translate myself and upload the resulting translation onto the digital repository of my university but not to use my own translated work in a Spanish book. Odd. Journals seem more flexible. The second lesson I'm learning is that publishers expect to be paid, in principle with money from research projects. I don't know how this works in other projects, but I've always been in large groups with limited funding, which has gone to a great extent into the collective books published by Spanish houses but not into books by individual researchers. When I asked my previous group whether they could help me to publish my projected volume they said no, on the grounds that if everyone else made the

same petition that would quickly exhaust our scant funding. I'm talking about a figure between 2500 and 6000 euros per book.

I have a bad experience of not being paid royalties for two of my books by a commercial publisher so it's not the case that I expect to get money from any volume. I'm not, however, willing to pay for publication out of my own pocket if I can help it, not only because I already invest a good deal of my salary in my career but because if you pay, then this is a vanity publication, which should not count for our CV. Funnily, Hugo and Ricard, the small press owners, were very proud to stress that they do not charge authors. I think that the book I'm working on is attractive enough to justify that a university press publishes it but I was told by the publishers I visited yesterday that my potential audience is actually limited to just a few hundred, with luck. Naturally, they are reluctant to invest money on my book and prefer that I finance it, or co-finance it. Now, my question is whether most of the many books I see on the UNE bookshop have been published in this way. I'm mystified, more and more so.

I told my potential publishers in what was, believe me, a very friendly conversation, that if there is no market for my product then I would be very happy to self-edit my volume and upload it as a .pdf onto UAB's repository. I already have more than 50 documents there, not including syllabi and the dissertations by my tutorees, with more than 15,000 downloads in total (talk about impact...). I was asked what my documents looked like and when I showed one example (an article) edited using Word, it was hinted to me that I would need professional services to publish an e-book. I felt so mortified that about five minutes later I was asking Hugo Camacho what do professional publishers use (Adobe InDesign) and my university whether we have a licence for that (no, too expensive, we don't even have one for Acrobat beyond Reader). A colleague has suggested Scribus, a free desktop publishing programme; I'll give it a try. So, there you are: now I intend to train myself in pseudo-professional desktop publishing to make my own e-books. The things we university teachers do...

So, here's my conundrum—and, yes, I think that I'm asking my readers a direct question. What should I do?

- A. Try to find a (hopefully prestige) commercial publisher outside the academic circuit and aim at a general readership (target: 800 copies?)
- B. Convince my potential academic publisher that my book is worth publishing, perhaps in co-edition with another university press (target: 400 copies?)
- C. Pay to be published by said academic publisher or another (target: 400 copies?)
- D. Produce my own professional-looking e-book and make it available for free on DDD (target: 1500/2000 copies, judging by previous volumes)
- E. Produce my own professional-looking e-book and make it available for money on Amazon.es (really?), or a specialized platform (is there one for academic work? Hugo and Ricard use Lektu and I could do so, but it's not academic)
- F. Persuade AEDEAN that we fund our own e-book platform for English Studies and that we give the books away for free as we do with the journal *Atlantis*
- G. Fund my own online academic small press and invite colleagues to publish with me for free, provided they produce their own e-books

You tell me... (and guess which options do not count as valid academic publications for the Ministry).

26 April 2016 / THE BIOLOGY OF CREATIVITY: A FIRST APPROACH

I keep on telling my students that nobody is doing research on what I call fabulation—the writer’s ability to string together an imaginary story—but it turns out I am partly wrong. My mistake lies in having supposed that this research should be a branch of psychology when it is actually also a branch of biology and, to be more specific, of neuroscience. If this is the case, then I am not surprised that I have missed its existence because I feel a certain mistrust for neuroscience. This is grounded on my totally bigoted belief that neuroscience is trying a bit too hard to explain human emotion as a set of biochemical reactions. Call me Romantic, but I do not look forward to the day when human nature (I was going to write ‘soul’ but then I recalled I am an atheist) is fully explained by rational science—a point I have already made here. But I digress, as usual.

I have been given a wonderful little book for Sant Jordi (book’s day here in Catalonia), a classic of American journalism: Joseph Mitchell’s *The Secret of Joe Gould* (1964). The book actually contains two pieces by Mitchell on Gould, a.k.a. Professor Seagull, written at two different moments of the relationship between the two men. Gould, a bohemian gentleman, very popular in New York’s Greenwich Village, managed to eke out a precarious living by convincing his sponsors that they were contributing as patrons to his writing of an American masterpiece: *An Oral History of Our Time*. Mitchell discovered the secret mentioned in the book’s title, which I am not going to reveal, and this rounds off a unique portrait of a unique personage. If you’re curious, read the book, or see the film adaptation with Stanley Tucci as Mitchell and Ian Holm as Gould. Furthermore: see for an alternative version which questions Mitchell’s conclusions the article by Jill Lepore (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/27/joe-goulds-teeth>).

Sorry about my ignorance of topics which, I’m sure, must be very well-known by my Americanist colleagues but it turns out that the book on Gould was Mitchell’s final volume: he suffered from one of the worst cases of writer’s block ever, and could not manage to write anything between 1964 and his death in 1996, even though he spent many hours every day in his *New Yorker* office. The words ‘writer’s block’ send chills down my spine because this is a mysterious condition which does affect all types of authors for reasons ultimately unknown (and we, academics, are also authors). In some situations, writer’s block is to be expected such as when a novelist who has published an immensely successful first novel simply cannot produce a second one. In other cases, such as Mitchell’s, there is no clear reason why writer’s block happens. My personal belief is that his case, as I am sure many other people have theorized, may have had to do with the impact of Gould’s work on *An Oral History of Our Time*, which perhaps unleashed deep-seated fears in Mitchell that he could not write at all. I simply

do not know whether Mitchell tried to be cured but the point is that his case is mentioned in *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain* a book by neurologist Alice W. Flaherty, which back in 2004 was a controversial pioneer in a new field. Funny how, despite the many volumes on Literary Theory which I have read in the last 10 years, none mentioned Flaherty nor any other volume remotely similar to hers.

I have not read Flaherty yet but I have learned from her a new word I had no idea existed until yesterday: hypergraphia, the opposite of writer's block. In a promotional interview

(http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/booksellers/press_release/flaherty/),

Flaherty explains that hypergraphia is “driven, compulsive writing” triggered by “known brain conditions” involving “the temporal lobes”; also, and this is a puzzling sentence, “hypergraphia seems to reflect a component of literary creativity, namely creative drive”. Ironically, one of the most hypergraphic authors, Stephen King, also became a most famous sufferer of writer's block after being hit by a truck. You'll see now why I distrust neuroscience: after diagnosing 70% of all poets as “manic depressive” individuals, Flaherty makes the classic claim that “in women, there's evidence that creative ability varies with the menstrual cycle. Plath illustrates this very vividly”. This, as we know, cuts both ways: some feminists will see the ebbs and flows of women's body as part or source of our creativity, others (like myself) will be horrified by yet another attempt at picturing us as poor things (animals?) tied to our menstruation. Really... Flaherty stresses that while the treatments for writer's block seem to work well and are much in demand from those afflicted with it—unsurprisingly... —those affected with hypergraphia do not seek professional medical help. “What right”, does Flaherty wonders, “do I have to give a medical name to a character trait that people value in themselves?” Indeed. By the way, Flaherty stresses that “talking about creative drive in neurological terms does not have to degrade the experience or value of creativity” and that “the medical terminology can coexist with the equally important, more subjective language that we are more comfortable with”. I'll stick to the ‘subjective’ language for the time being, being a Humanist and not a scientist.

The field beyond Flaherty is so big I do not know how to start wandering into it, for there is, of course, a whole discipline called ‘Creativity Studies’. To begin with, you may check the Tennenbaum Centre for the Biology of Creativity at UCLA (<https://www.semel.ucla.edu/creativity/references>), founded by the kind of eccentric tycoon that I had thought extinct since Orson Wells' Kane (Michael E. Tennenbaum even has a glass castle). As I should expect, many psychologists devote their research and practice to creativity. Division 10 of the American Psychology Association, which gathers them together, deals with “interdisciplinary scholarship, both theoretical and empirical, encompassing the visual arts, poetry, literature, music and dance” (see <http://www.apa.org/about/division/div10.aspx>). There is even a journal, *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts* (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/aca/index.aspx>). Many articles seemed informed by affect theory and deal with reception, but none, as far as I can see, with fabulation in the sense I am using it. Most likely, I need to search further.

I am particularly interested in the writer's fabulation in the field of the fantastic, in particular science-fiction, although I would certainly agree that realistic fabulation is equally important. So far, however, we, literary scholars, have failed to explain where *Madame Bovary* comes from in the same way we have failed to explain the origins of *Dracula*. We speculate endlessly on whether a certain biographical event or the impact of a text read by the author is connected with particular plots points or characters but the method thus far followed is full of errors. Biographical research often degenerates into mere gossip and intertextual connections are frequently vehemently denied by authors. The formalist rejection of the personal to focus on the textual seems in this context quite convenient but, of course, it is ultimately unsatisfactory as texts happen to emerge from people's brains.

There must be, however, a middle ground between the claim that Rose Maylie's near death in *Oliver Twist* was inspired by the real death of Dickens' young sister-in-law, and the claim that Rose Maylie emanates from a neurochemical reaction in Dickens' frontal lobe triggered by God knows what... This is where I would like to go and explore... If I found a writer patient enough, I would beg him or her to examine at the end of the day the process of fabulation they have followed. Writers love to talk about their technique even when they claim that it is all a bit nebulous and characters seem to follow their own paths (I've never read an article about this often repeated claim). I would end up this way with something similar to the ongoing director's comments in the Blue Ray or DVD edition of films. But, then, no writer, I'm sure, would want to have an academic looking over their shoulder as they write... Pity... If you know of any, let me know!

One day some scientist will discover that the predisposition to read and the predisposition to write and/or fabulate are genetic, perhaps a mutation, and we will finally understand why those of us who love Literature feel increasingly like freaks.

5 May 2016 / THE FIFTY-YEAR CRISIS: A PECULIAR TURNING POINT

(No, I'm not suffering from writer's block, which would be ironic given my last post. The problem is that every subject I've come up in the last ten days for raving and ranting about here is so problematic that I have given up all of them. The one I am dealing with here seems to be the safest one... Yes, there is a measure of self-censorship at work here.)

I'll be 50 in about one month, a figure I like. For women, 50 tends to be associated with the biological changes caused by the onset of menopause and although it would be tempting to write a post about the cultural readings of this natural transition this is not what I am up to today. Some other time.

In this strange time in which we seem to be stretching a whole decade into the next one, I am constantly being told by kind friends and relatives not to worry for, after all,

50 is the new 40. This confuses me very much because a) 50 is 50, as 40 is 40, b) since this chronological stretching manifests itself for all decades and everyone seems younger than people the same age did thirty years ago, 50-year-old women look distinctly like 50-year-old women.

Famously, Oscar Wilde declared that “The tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young” which, of course, means that one is not aware of one’s own ageing in the same way others are. I am not kidding myself that I am still 20 inside, however, for I am surrounded by 20-year-old female students and it would be foolish of me to pretend that I’m younger than I am. The young have an instinct for detecting that kind of phoniness... Also, generally speaking, I find myself enjoying my actual age and gleefully celebrating each new birthday. The only thing I certainly don’t care about is being addressed as ‘señora’ by strangers, a term I certainly prefer to the appalling ‘señorita’ used for young women but that is often used with a sneer or, at least, a clear wish to indicate ‘you’re old and I’m not’. Twice already, courteous young people have offered me their seat on the train, which I’ll attribute to my always carrying too many bags rather than to my ageing looks. Hopefully...

A few weeks ago a dear male friend whom I have known since we were both 14 hit 50. He is also an academic (mixing Sociology and Media Studies), though he has been a full professor for a few years already and, hence, as you will see, in a slightly different frame of mind. It’s always funny to discover that the processes one goes through regarding private matters—like how to face the next period of one’s life—turn out to be shared by many other people. And this is what happened with my friend which, surely, you can also attribute to our having parallel academic lives. We both agreed that when you turn 50 and you are a ‘privileged’ academic, secure in his or her job, the new buzzword looming on the horizon is ‘retirement’. This may sound callous and insensitive to the scholars still struggling for tenure (and at the rate we’re going now, this includes colleagues not much younger than myself) but it’s the truth.

I was hired by my Department aged 25, which means that next 15 September I’ll be celebrating another significant date: my 25th anniversary as a university teacher. Even if I retire at the ripe age of 70, as Spanish legislation allows, this means that my career can stretch for just 20 years at most. Naturally, it could stretch longer if I go on publishing academic work past retirement, for, essentially, retirement means for us that we stop teaching. If we can afford it. Precisely, we have started asking our Department colleagues about their plans for retirement, for it turns out that 6 of them are aged between 59 and 63. This is a bit awkward but we just need to know what we’re going to do with our fast ageing tenured staff in the next ten years. Their reactions were diverse but, from what I see, money is the main concern.

Until before the crisis civil servants (and tenured university teachers belong in that category) could draw a pension after only 30 years of service which means that, if you were willing to accept the reduced pay, you could retire before 60. The IP I have been working with in the past few years retired at 57, though she is still very much active in research. Under this rule, which no longer applies, I could have retired at 55, which sounds totally crazy to me. Provided I can afford it, then, I am planning for 65 or 67 at

the most because a) 40 years as a teacher will do, b) I don't see myself connecting with students almost 40 years younger than me and c) I see too many people dying around 60 to believe I'll reach 93, the age my grandmother was when she died last summer.

Sorry to sound so grim but I'm an extremely pragmatic person and in view of what I see happen every day, I need to take death into account. Yes, it's the fear of mortality that so much Literature talks about and it is certainly the hardest part of ageing. Funnily, I went through a very profound hypochondriac bout at 30 when I was writing my PhD dissertation, mortally afraid (ha, ha...) that I would die before finishing it. Realizing, once the thing was submitted, the silliness of it all, I decided to face life as it came in a kind of perpetual 'carpe diem' (highly recommended against hypochondria).

I am certainly digressing today... must be my ageing brain...

The conversation with my friend revealed that 50 is when you count your academic eggs in the basket and ponder what they are worth and whether you want to go on producing them at the same crazy rhythm. The answer is no. A relative no. In the Humanities 50 is still a rather young age, the time when you may turn out to be 'wise', if that word still makes any sense, after decades of reading. It is also the age in which you tell yourself that 'since what I love doing is reading, why don't I simply use all my time for it?'. It's very tempting. This is why the ages between 50 and 55 are, I'm sure, the time when many researchers start to slow down, not because they lose interest in their subjects (quite the opposite) but because they want to be let alone by a system that demands an absurd, stressful productivity offering very little reward.

At this point and after twenty-odd years of teaching my friend has decided to teach exclusively online, a possibility that his university offers; another dear male friend chose to transfer to UNED at a similar age. I have tried online teaching myself and I know that I need personal contact with my students, but I also know that this year for the first time I am teaching in a more detached, mechanical way, pretending I don't notice the students' disinterest (with few exceptions). My sociologist friend has run a diversity of research projects and is a well-known scholar, with an enviable h-index and all that. Possibly because he is already a full professor and, hence, lacks the enticement (carrot?) of becoming one I can see he is fast losing interest in accumulating more achievements. He is clearly aiming at pleasing himself in his research and this is what he advised me to do—a course for which I am certainly aiming. As my friend told me, the way we're valued should be a logical result of our academic career, meaning that if you go out of your way only to accrue merits you're heading for deep disappointment.

I have in my own Department and among the six most senior colleagues past 59 good examples of academic hyperactivity, one in particular who positively bloomed when reaching 50 or thereabouts. This is always an enticement. What drains the energy of any ageing scholar are the achievements of the very young, for this is when you start thinking that you've already missed the chance to do this or that. Perhaps one of the most glaringly overlooked aspects of our academic monitoring system is that its obsession for productivity is ageist, in that it requires an amount of energy impossible to sustain in the long run. Or not just impossible but also counterproductive, for past

certain age one starts losing the concern about what others may think and this is how academic careers dwindle and evaporate.

To sum up the argument here, while most people place the midlife crisis around 40 (at least the Spanish idiom is 'la crisis de los 40'), I find that for a Humanities teacher/researcher this happens, rather, at 50. It is not, however, a sad time in which you bemoan what will not be but a happy time when you start enjoying what I can only call, in the best sense, maturity.

10 May 2016 / LOSING THE BATTLE: THE VICTORY OF THE LECTURE OVER THE SEMINAR

Once, while still a second-year undergrad, I took a year-long course on 18th and 19th century Spanish fiction during which I never met the teacher face to face. No wonder I have forgotten her name. She was a brilliant lecturer and I recall fondly many of the books she lectured on, a selection which included some hard reading, such as Friar Benito Feijóo's *Cartas Eruditas*. I passed the corresponding final exam but, as I say, I never interacted with this teacher nor with any of my peers in class, as she never addressed us directly nor did she ask for our thoughts and opinions. I did go through her extensive reading list because I'm the kind of reader that reads even the information on cereal boxes. I can't say, however, whether my classmates read any of the texts or simply swallowed our abundant class notes to regurgitate them back to our teacher on exam day. Yes, she was brilliant, but was she a teacher? Not in my view...

There was another teacher whose lectures, the rumours suggested, hadn't changed in years. A kind, anonymous student had photocopied his or her class notes and these circulated among us, the new students, freely. We simply took said photocopies to class to underline the main points as the teacher lectured on—the notes were practically verbatim and we were amazed to see that she hadn't altered a single word for years, jokes included. This teacher eventually discovered the famous photocopies and, I'm told, published her own lecture notes as a book. If there was little point in attending her classes knowing how reliable the photocopied notes were, just imagine what the handbook must have done to students' interest in spending time listening to this teacher. My point being that classroom time must be used for interaction between teacher and students, for students can always read at home the corresponding handbook.

The Department of English at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, where I have spent my academic life since 1986, first as a student then as a teacher, simply does not believe in lecturing and it never has. My class notes as a student did not reflect what my teachers lectured on but what I found interesting as they read and commented on the texts with us (partly their ideas, partly my own); I did have pages and pages of notes but these came from my autonomous, independent reading of the set texts and of the background texts (handbooks or other secondary sources). And I was satisfied

with that. After going through the courses offered by the two teachers I have already mentioned, I found the interactive approach frankly refreshing; I spent the first semester at UAB marvelling that teachers actually admitted questions in class and welcomed students into their offices for even more questions.

Of course there were and there are lectures but they constitute just a small part of our teaching practice, perhaps around 20% or 25% at the most. I myself don't keep a formal set of notes for each course, but, rather, a class diary where I jot down the basic arguments for each single session. And if there is something I love about teaching Literature and Culture this is how open and flexible it can be. For instance: I started my class yesterday teaching my students the word 'propioception' (a 1890s word meaning the individual's ability to connect with his or her own body, which can be impaired by neurological disease). I had learned this word literally on my way to class, as I read on the train Oliver Sacks' best-selling *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. It turned out that 'propioception' explains wonderfully Richard Morgan's SF novel *Altered Carbon*, which I started teaching yesterday. The protagonist, Takeshi Kovacs, is used to switching from body to body, as in his world individual identity resides in a tiny device, the cortical stack, which records personality and which can be easily transferred to a new 'sleeve'. Kovacs has, in short, a very high proprioceptive ability to connect with his new sleeves. There you are: I love the improvisation that comes into teaching and could never limit myself to a lecture prepared in advance, and re-used year in and year out.

This must certainly sound strange to teachers working in the British system (or similar) which distinguishes between carefully planned lectures delivered before a crowded classroom and more open seminars shared with a small number of students. In my Department we simply prefer to turn ALL our classroom time into seminars, even when our classes are as big as 80 students. An important justification for this, of course, is that our second-language students need to practice English and, so, class participation is basic in our methodology. Students read the texts at home, prepare their notes, exercises, and remarks in advance. Classroom time consists of a lively exchange that makes the time fly by, for students are extremely interested in learning and love to engage in debate with us and their peers. We, teachers, feel fulfilled and offer our best, raising standards as our students demand, always happy to get such positive response to the many hours and hard work we put into our teaching.

This, of course, has never really happened and is not happening at all currently. Now, after 25 years of struggling to implement this healthy academic ideal I am about to give up and start lecturing. Our methodology, the methodology suggested by all the documentation about the new degrees established in 2009, and all the college-level pedagogues agree that lecturing, the famous 'lecturas magistrales', should not have a primary place in the university. We are expected to be, and we do want to be, Platonic teachers in constant academic dialogue with students keen on learning (remember? Plato's Athens school was called 'The Academy')— but it is simply NOT happening. Our students' passive resistance is simply colossal. And they are getting the upper hand.

I was teaching yesterday my session on Morgan's novel and I started hearing myself speak, a very uncomfortable feeling. This happens when even though you don't want to lecture, you find yourself lecturing because the students have not read the book (yet?) and, so, you need to cover much more basic ground than you expected. Then you start feeling disengaged. I saw my students taking notes and I felt uncomfortable because I was not delivering a formal lecture and I have no idea which points they are making a note of. Dialogue on a novel which has not been read soon grinds to a halt, and so I keep bringing into my 'stream of pseudo-lecturing' outside elements. This doesn't always help, quite the opposite: I was trying to explain that Morgan's protagonist is the high-tech, futuristic equivalent of the Navy SEALs that killed Osama Bin Laden five years ago—but neither of these two concepts rang a bell with my students. Of course I reacted in dismay, and of course they reacted to my reaction also in dismay... are we ever going to be on common ground? I get politely interested faces mostly, but also the teacher's worst kind of kryptonite: the glassy stare. This makes me lose my thread, start rambling and even mumbling... There are many moments when I feel like stopping to ask: if you tell me what interests you, perhaps I could lecture on this and we would all be so much happier. Perhaps.

I was going back to my office in quite low spirits when I came across a Language colleague who also looked dispirited. Some students in her class, she explained, have objected to some of her teaching methods finding them, basically, excessively interactive (meaning too demanding of students' attention in the classroom). She was anxious and concerned that students simply want us to lecture, providing them with the kind of neat classroom notes that, well, can be photocopied from year to year. She vehemently declared she would not offer that kind of teaching and I wholeheartedly agreed with her – no, I will never ever turn lecturing into the foundation of my teaching!!!! I can only call myself a teacher if I keep a dialogue with my students and lecturing is a monologue!!! Out with it!!!

When I finally reached my office I started considering how much easier my life would be if I taught the same course every year, using formal, written down lectures that I could upload at the end of each session, without altering a single comma from year to year. And how thankful students would be for that: notes to circulate, underline, regurgitate in exams and then forget. Final exams instead of continuous assessment, no papers in which you need to develop your *own* thesis, no contact whatsoever with the teachers, not even to greet them in the corridors. And so end the continuous pretence that students read, when they don't; and so end the gruelling task of engaging them in reluctant dialogue which only serves to stress the state of our miscommunication...

Some one said once that the tragedy of teaching is that it can never work, for we teach in the way we wished we had been taught and not in the way the younger generation in our classrooms prefers. I'm thinking that after almost 25 years as a teacher I should be wiser but I find that the effect which time has is the opposite: I simply don't know the young persons in class and what kind of teaching they do prefer. We, teachers, commiserate with each other in the Department corridors and I'm sure the students commiserate with each other at the bar. The result of all this, as I wrote in my previous

post, is that even vocational teachers reach a point in their careers in which they stop caring and I am worried sick that this is coming to me – for I still have at least 15 years more to teach. Teach, not lecture.

17 May 2016 / CLASS IN THE CLASSROOM: RE-STARTING THE CONVERSATION

A couple of days after publishing my previous post, I continued the conversation about the low level of students' participation in class with the colleagues who started it. This was, as usual, in the middle of the corridor and, taking advantage of the sudden emergence from her office of our emeritus professor I asked her what the situation was like in the 70s, when she started teaching.

This is the same professor who implanted the teaching methodology we use in our Literature classes, based on close reading and a (supposedly) lively interaction between teacher and students. Did students participate actively in class when you were a junior teacher?, I asked her. By no means, she answered vehemently: only when she prompted them and because groups were very small, under 10 students, and no one could escape her attention. She recalled fondly a class of mature students at the Universitat de Barcelona, composed mainly of women who, it seems, read avidly and were very keen on class participation. From what I gathered this was the only time throughout her long career in which the ideal matched the actual performance of students (my *Harry Potter* course...). To what, then, do you attribute current falling standards?, I asked. Her answer was 'class'.

She elaborated: our students at UAB come mostly from a working-class background and, besides, from the geographical area surrounding Barcelona, which is by no means as cosmopolitan (I add) as the city itself. The emeritus professor explained that English language and Literature (or our former 'Filología Inglesa') used to be a middle-class degree, which totally coincides with my first impressions as an aspiring university student back in the early 1980s. The first students of this 'Licenciatura' I had ever seen were, believe it or not, participants in Chicho Ibáñez Serrador's extremely popular TV contest *Un, dos, tres...* (season 2, 1976-78). They were, definitely, middle-class and very exotic birds to boot, individuals who could speak English in a backward Spain where the illiteracy rate was still too high. I recall from my first visit to UAB, in 1983, the many well-dressed students who got off at Sarrià from a train still divided in second and third class carriages, a distinction kept until 1991. As a working-class child attending a public secondary school placed in the middle-class neighbourhood of Sant Gervasi and with students from all ranks and areas, from blue-collar El Carmel to posh Sarrià, I was quite confused about class. I naively believed that education was the road to a middle-class life and that just by taking that train to UAB I would be one of the same kind with the students I had seen.

When my colleague and myself reminded this professor that we're both originally working-class, she insisted that things are nonetheless different in working-class

families, with less access to books and in which conversation is limited. Of course, she forgot about public libraries. I can't remember when I got my first library card, it must have been in 1976, aged 13, a time when in Barcelona a foundation run by a bank, La Caixa, maintained the local library service (my public primary school did have a library... off limits to us, children). The Barcelona libraries are now run by a public institution, la Diputació, and children get library cards much earlier –the beautiful public library in my neighbourhood boasts indeed an excellent children's section.

I do remember, however, feeling deep chagrin when my favourite teacher, Sara Freijido, described in class with a condescending smile (sneer?) the kind of books that could be found in a working-class home: a few illustrated volumes about the wonders of the world and volumes composed by abridged biographies published by Reader's Digest, a handful of best-selling novels purchased most likely from Círculo de Lectores, an encyclopaedia paid in monthly instalments. Exactly that. She neglected to mention the *bolsilibros* or *novelas de kiosco*, those cheap novelettes written by Spanish authors using anglophone pennames which started my education in genre fiction. I blushed, mightily mortified, hearing my teacher expose my family to public opprobrium, or so it felt, though she clearly confused possessing books with reading books. After all, my middle-class peers in secondary school, who had access to richer home libraries, were not more active readers than I; those who read (and who kindly passed me their books) belonged to the more bohemian segment. And I mean by this *one* girl.

Many of my class background and generation were the first ones in our families to attend university. I would say even to dream of attending university. Our teachers played in this a major role by steering surprised, indifferent or reluctant working-class families to making the effort of educating the strange children in their midst, children who took it for granted that if you had good grades, the university was where you should be. I don't know what percentage we amounted to, nor do we have reliable information about the social background to which our current students belong (do all middle-class children attend university??). My impression is that the upper and upper-middle classes are attending private universities either in Spain or abroad, with the Spanish public universities attracting mostly low-middle and working-class students. My own university, I grant this, might have a much higher percentage of working-class students than the Universitat de Barcelona given, precisely, their geographical provenance, as the emeritus professor highlighted. Still, we have no hard data and are quite in the dark about all this.

When I discussed this matter of the social background with other colleagues quite like me, they were quite offended, seeing themselves as examples that the working classes include many individuals of high academic ambition. They also made a point of noting that the middle-class children in our upwardly mobile families and in more traditional families are not distinguishing themselves academically and that the number of readers is fast declining in all classes. I often remind my classes that whereas many aristocrats were key participants in culture of the past centuries (think Sir Phillip Sydney or Lord Byron) now it's hard to see any very rich person producing culture – they just seem interested in purchasing it (or in sponsoring it in the best-case scenario). But just bear with me and let me propose for the sake of argumentation that

our emeritus professor is right and that the falling standards are the result of opening up university education to the working classes.

I'm mystified by her impression that conversation is more limited in working-class families. I confess that one of the main enticements that a university education offered to me as an 18-year-old was the chance to hold 'better' conversations, meaning more fulfilling intellectually. This fantasy was fuelled by countless pre-1980s novels and films which seemed to promise that the grass was greener on the other social side; yet, conversation, as we know, is fast disappearing from the novel and almost gone in films (and TV) and, as Sherry Turkle argues, it's also vanishing from our daily lives under the impact of the social networks. As Dani Mateo joked yesterday on *El Informal*, the Twitter generation cannot speak further than 140 characters, which quite limits dialogue.

Do middle- and upper-class families have 'better' conversations? Is, in short, intellectual exchange and intellectual curiosity stronger in more affluent families? I should say this is not the case at all. Furthermore, I actually make the upper and middle-classes responsible for the falling standards in our universities, on the grounds that if they had kept the conversation going on at the same pace as when they were alone in the Spanish university classrooms, the rest would have joined in. One can only feel spurred onto proving him or herself when their social betters (excuse me!) pose a challenge. In a society in which the upper and middle-classes have abjured the task of being active cultural leaders, conversation stagnates. Even worse, it starts dealing with the Kardashians (and I don't mean from a Cultural Studies point of view). This could also be a case of the conversation stopping in mid-sentence when us, the working-class interlopers, tried to join in back in the 1980s, and moving elsewhere. Or perhaps it just stopped for good when being a person of culture started being a synonym of being boring and, excuse the Americanism, unpopular.

One of my (middle-class) classmates in the first year used to carry a copy of *Ulysses* under her arm at all times, which certainly sounds extreme as a show of academic commitment. Funny to think I didn't find her ridiculous. I felt, rather, awed that she had the spunk to advertise herself in this way and sheepish that I had not read the book. Perhaps, poor thing, she was just looking for deep, intellectual conversation... without realizing she was scaring people away. Or perhaps her *Ulysses* was intended to be a gauntlet to slap her classmates into a literary duel that would put them in their right, proper place. What I wonder is: where has her type gone? Who would today come to class ready to challenge their peers in this in-your-face way?

Who could re-start the conversation?...

24 May 2016 / **PATOLOGÍAS DE LA REALIDAD VIRTUAL BY TERESA LÓPEZ-PELLISA: A REVIEW**

Patologías de la realidad virtual: Cibercultura y ciencia ficción (2015, Fondo de Cultura Económica) by Teresa López-Pellisa is a necessary book. As Naief Yehya writes in the Prologue, “Cada vez es más claro que en nuestro tiempo las relaciones sentimentales con los dispositivos tecnológicos materiales o inmateriales han dejado de ser una extraña perversión para volverse la nueva normalidad” (12). I’m reproducing these words here on the day when I’m meeting novelist and robotics engineer Carme Torras to start work on the English translation of her novel *La mutació sentimental*, an excellent SF novel which I have often mentioned here. *La mutació* deals, precisely, with this ‘new normality’ and warns us against the absurd sentimental attachment that we’re developing for, in this case, robots. Carme Torras’s novel is set in a near future when robots will be everybody’s domestic companions although the malaise diagnosed in it is by no means fantastic neither futuristic. Sherry Turkle, as I have also commented here, has analyzed brilliantly the strange bonds growing between children and elderly people and their robotic pets and how impossible it is to turn these bonds into something less irrational.

Teresa López-Pellisa diagnoses in her book five disorders concerning our relationship with cyberculture: “esquizofrenia nominal”, “metástasis de los simulacros”, “el síndrome del cuerpo fantasma”, “misticismo agudo” and “el síndrome de Pandora”. Before these ailments are described in detail she launches into quite a long digression about the confusing way in which we use the terminology associated with the digital domain. Following the nomenclature developed by Antonio Rodríguez de las Heras, she proposes that we correct the misuse of ‘virtual reality’. She asks us to distinguish between “espacio virtual”, “espacio digital” and “espacio real”. ‘Real space’ is more or less self-explanatory –‘more or less’ as the author herself realizes that all kinds of philosophical questions (and the *Matrix* trilogy...) must be left aside to accept that there is indeed a ‘natural’ space which we tread daily. In contrast, the concepts of “virtual space” and “digital space” require some radical reconfiguration of our vocabulary, for de las Heras and López-Pellisa claim that virtual space is, basically, the product of our imaginative capacities and cognitive system lodged in our brain, whereas digital space is a specific kind of virtual space generated by computers. She also asks us to refine the way we use the very concept of the digital space, distinguishing between cyberspace (i.e. digital space maintained online) and other types of digital space, not necessarily online. This reconceptualization is certainly appealing as it reminds us that our brain is a potent generator of virtual domains, both when we’re awake and, most particularly I would add, when we sleep. Yet, after three decades of using ‘virtual reality’ to actually mean ‘digital space’ it is unlikely that the vocabulary can be corrected in the short or the long term. Likewise, unless I am wrong, few digital spaces are off-line in this voraciously interconnective online world for which no digital device is off-limits.

The first section of the volume offers not only a (re)definition of virtual reality along the lines I have mentioned but also an extensive genealogy, which invites us to consider the predecessors of the 20th century technologies leading to the computer and the digital space. Beginning with Plato's cave, López-Pellisa includes in her historical overview the invention of pictorial perspective, the diverse automata, and the many visual spectacles developed in the 19th century, including cinema. Her survey of the 20th century runs from Vannevar Bush's Memex machine (1945) –the PC's greatest ancestor– to augmented reality, passing through William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the SF classic that made the words 'cyberpunk' and 'cyberspace' popular all over the world in the 1980s. The impression the reader gets reading this well-informed segment is that all the names, dates and data that López-Pellisa contributes should be part of our general culture. They're not. Alexander Graham Bell or Guglielmo Marconi are household names but Vannevar Bush is not –much less Jaron Lanier, to whom we owe the very concept of 'virtual reality'.

At the beginning of the second part of the volume, which describes the five pathologies previously named, López-Pellisa declares unambiguously that she considers virtual reality a sick patient, though by no means a terminal one. It is her purpose, she states, to classify the diverse ailments and to make the reader aware of their existence rather than offer or demand a 'cure'.

'Semantic schizophrenia', the first syndrome analyzed, refers to the imprecise, ambiguous way in which we use the vocabulary connected with computers. López-Pellisa expands in this segment on the basic warning against the misuse of the computer-related semantic field of the volume's first part, albeit also in other directions. Thus, she refers to 'Don Quijote's syndrome' (her own label) as the condition preventing the compulsive visitor to the diverse digital spaces from disconnecting. She does not mean that individuals no longer recognize the difference between reality and fantasy but that they choose digital virtuality as a refuge from reality –which offers incidentally an interesting re-reading of Alonso Quijano's madness. The author also gently reminds us that 'virtual reality' does exist, if only as software in very real computers without which it would not survive.

The second syndrome, or ailment, diagnosed is the 'metastasis of the simulacra', a certainly unnerving terminology used to name the condition of those fictional texts which not only offer "distintos niveles de virtualización al generar diversos entornos virtuales en el texto, sino que además nos proponen mundos artificiales digitales en el marco del espacio virtual del texto literario, con realidades virtuales que configuran el discurso metadiagético en el texto" (105). The main characters, whether they are the protagonists of a story by Bioy Casares or Neo in *Matrix*, are disconcerted by the discovery that reality is unstable and entering metastasis with a cannibalistic alternative virtual domain. The list of examples that López-Pellisa explores is quite impressive and has the great virtue of mixing Spanish-language and anglophone texts, with examples from other languages, which is not that usual. In the case of this syndrome the author warns that although we are very far from being console cowboys needing a daily fix of cyberspace surfing, like Case in *Neuromancer*, there's no need to fetishize Reality, with a capital R.

The 'phantom body syndrome' criticizes the radical transhuman aspiration to disconnect body and mind, supported by their claim that the organic human body can be replaced by computer hardware and also that the mind is akin to software. Following lines of thought that transhumanists call 'bioconservative' but that those concerned prefer to 'moderate posthumanism', López-Pellisa accepts our cyborg nature –already proclaimed by Donna Haraway in 1985: "Somos transhumanos ciborgianos y ciudadanos de un futuro en el que la convivencia entre lo natural y lo artificial estará tan normalizada que dejaremos de emplear estos términos como algo dicotómico" (137). She is, however, extremely critical of the radical transhumanist (or extropian) assault on the body: "Me resisto ante la afirmación de que el cuerpo está obsoleto, ya que supondría asumir la propia obsolescencia del cuerpo humano y aceptar que si el cuerpo desaparece, nos extinguiremos" (165). The fourth syndrome, 'acute mysticism' connects with the third one, as it merges the disembodied ideal of radical transhumanism with nebulous notions of what constitutes the soul and with a selfish longing for immortality. López-Pellisa does not hesitate to call this cultural disorder dangerously irrational and, hence, as damaging as a virus.

Finally, the section devoted to the 'Pandora syndrome' is, no doubt, the best one in the volume. Here the author's own voice is most clearly heard for –and this is really the only major objection to be made– in the rest of the book her argumentation is overwhelmed by a constant barrage of citations. This is habitual in PhD dissertations and it is indeed the case that *Patologías de la realidad virtual* is derived from López-Pellisa's own thesis. Yet, the heavy weight of the quotations is also to be blamed on the Spanish academic tradition, which still mistrusts the argumentative essay and in which authority is built on the basis of humbly accepting one's low position in the hierarchy of the many predecessors.

In this segment, in contrast, the author uses her predecessors in the field to reinforce a strong feminist voice, which is very critical of men's fantasies of female exploitation, centred on the figure of the artificial woman. The originality of her approach is that she rejects Galatea to focus on Pandora, for whereas Pygmalion lives happily with his statue turned into a compliant flesh-and-blood wife by no other than Venus, the male protagonists of the stories analyzed in this segment come to a bitter end when they try to control their rebellious Pandoras. The gamut runs from the classic tale by E.T.A. Hoffman, "The Sandman" (1817) to Craig Gillespie's film *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007) among many other examples focusing on ginoids, "maquiniféminas" and virtual women. A controversial point which López-Pellisa raises is that even though all these stories present dehumanized women, they actually reflect men's dehumanization and inability to deal with actual human peers. Misogyny, in short, backlashes to destroy its defenders.

To sum up, then, this is an absolutely recommended volume which contains in just 280 pages plenty of food for thought. Of a very necessary kind.

3 June 2016 / WORKING, STUDYING AND THE EVER RISING FEES: SOME UGLY THOUGHTS

[Just one sentence to say that while the activities I have been engaged in this week – exams (both oral and written), yearly doctoral interviews, last minute BA dissertation revisions– are absolutely necessary I hate how they use up the energy needed to write. With no writing (and I realize this is another sentence) it feels as if there is no point to a week, no matter how exhausting it has been... or how useful.]

Today I'm combining two items which have been waiting for attention for a while. One is an article from *La Vanguardia* and the other a report by the union Comisiones Obreras. I'm here interrupting myself to comment that one thing I learned while interviewing students for their oral exams this week is that students don't read papers (which I know) but just use Twitter to check on the day's trending topics (I guessed but didn't know for sure). This means that, among thousands of other relevant items of information, they may have missed the two I'll comment on. One, by the way, I found browsing the papers as I do at lunch break (I no longer read print papers... that's for retired people as a student said); the other reached me via email, a medium that students also find obsolete and that, I'm sure, only use with us, ageing teachers.

La Vanguardia sums up the main findings by Fundació Bofill's 125-page report *Via Universitària: Ser estudiant universitari avui* by Antonio Ariño Villarroya and Elena Sintés Pascual (http://www.fbofill.cat/sites/default/files/ViaUniversitaria_InformesBreus62_100516.pdf). This report is based on a survey run among 20,512 students in the 19 universities of the Catalan-speaking regions of Spain, within the network Vives. I confess I have not read the report and I refer only to the summary.

No surprises here: families are the main contributors to the cost of educating their children which, logically, puts children from impoverished social backgrounds at a serious disadvantage regarding their better-off peers. Nothing new, then, except that a matter such as taking a year abroad within the Erasmus programme is now practically compulsory, disregarding how this widens the gap between middle-class students and their poorer peers (the grants are a joke...). The report claims that 30% students finance their studies by working, part or full time; only 0.7% of the students surveyed have fallen into the trap which student loans are turning out to be. 13% enjoy some kind of grant; they are included within the 41% of students who study full time (um, the figures do not add up, do they?). More interesting findings: Mothers are crucial—it seems that the more educated a mother is, the more they invest in the education of their children (most of these mothers were themselves new in the Spanish university in relation to their family background). The report is clear: most students (above 40%) have an upper class or upper-middle class background and college-educated parents, yet many outside this group are upwardly mobile, coming from families with no college-educated members. I have never heard, however, of middle and upper-class children taking up professional training in a blue collar trade—though there must be some measure of downward social mobility even when both parents are college-educated and/or wealthy.

The Boffill report claims that combining work and study need not affect the student's marks, though it does affect class attendance. No student, they claim, uses more than 20 hours a week to study anyway... though I don't know whether they mean apart from attending classes. This is, excuse me, total bullshit. Along my own university years I went from being a full-time student (with my fees funded by the Government on the basis of my marks) to being a full-time worker, as my life became complicated by my father's total lack of interest in my university education and his constant pressure for me to work full time. I left home too early, married unwisely and found myself in the obligation of doing whatever it took to study –which, of course, meant working full time, as my father wanted. Not common, perhaps, but replace 'married unwisely' with 'started sharing a flat' and then the whole situation is not that odd. This means that in my last year I did what I could to attend classes and I suffered very much for missing them. It's true that in my first two years, when I just worked some hours a week as a private tutor to earn myself some very necessary pocket money, I had plenty of time to spare. Yet, I put it to good use, reading, visiting exhibitions, learning all I could beyond my courses. In my last year, I simply hated my life, as I didn't know whether I was a worker or a student. Would I have got better grades? Not necessarily. I recall, however, that time as a horrid, stressful period of my life. A student should be a student, period, and that means full time. A paid job is fine as a complement but when it starts draining away energies needed for study then it's a serious obstacle, not an aid.

The Comisiones Obreras report shows what families and students in Spain face up regarding the cost of study. This is a study of the evolution of university fees between 2011 and 2016 (see http://www.fe.ccoo.es/comunes/recursos/25/2227033-Estudio_de_precios_publicos_universitarios.pdf). No surprises here, either, though it's frightening to see the actual figures. The report shows, to begin with, that Spain is among the very few countries in Europe to have responded to the 2008 crisis (which coincided with the implementation of the new BA and MA system in 2009) by steeply raising the university fees. It's funny to see that the United Kingdom is neatly split between England/Wales/Northern Ireland, which decided to go as far as possible down this road with fees up to 9,000 pounds, and Scotland, where a university education costs the student very little. The report offers the figure of 6,460 euros as the average cost of the current 4+1 university education system in Spain, which is certainly nothing in comparison to the 54,728 euros the same costs in England; still, Spain has 4,000,000 unemployed people and one should think that state-funded free education should be the way out of that situation. The report reaches exactly that conclusion.

It is funny to see how different the tone is in the Boffill and the CCOO report: the former is descriptive of a situation contemplated with a certain scientific distance (the comment on upward social mobility discloses even a certain optimism), whereas the latter is clearly biased towards implementing better social policies regarding access to education. As usual, the more advanced European countries in this sense are the four Nordic ones: Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark –precisely the ones distinguished by a very different approach to social equality. Scotland is another interesting case, particularly for Catalonia, for its independentist aspirations have led to the realization

that it must invest on the development of its human capital (though Scots have a serious problem in that their best educated citizens tend to migrate elsewhere).

Spain, in short, is just a disaster: we are keeping away from the university talented people by not giving enough grants and forcing the few who manage nonetheless to prove their brilliancy to migrate, thus doing rich nations like Germany and the United States the favour of benefitting from our scant public money. And what can I say about Catalonia? The price per credit in 2011 was already the highest in Spain (at 20.11 euros) and it's now 33.52; the average 60 credits fee used to be 1,206 in 2011-12 but it's now 2,011 euros. The second most expensive average yearly fee, that of the community of Madrid, is just 1,638. The lowest is 713 (in Galicia). I won't even mention the fees for MAs, which have no explanation at all as the same staff is used to teach them with no extra cost added to our salaries.

It seems then clear that the 2008 crisis (still ongoing in Spain as Brussels knows and the Government wilfully denies) must have expelled many thousands from the Spanish university: those who suffered from some personal calamity like their parents or themselves losing their jobs, and those who could never afford the ever increasing university fees. The crisis, in case I have not insisted sufficiently on this here, has also done away with the full-time teaching jobs that allowed PhD candidates to complete their dissertations. And, yes, we all know that things are worse in Catalonia, for obscure political reasons that are never evident enough, whether they are national Spanish or national Catalan.

There are days when nothing makes sense. If the idea is going back to the smaller middle-class Spanish university of the 1970s, before Felipe González's Government opened up the classroom to us, working-class children, I wish they would tell us. The same applies to the even scarier impression that perhaps the plan is shutting down the public university for good. What cannot be sustained is this constant anxiety that we're not wanted: the students, the teachers, the research, the whole university. Why all this ill-treatment? How are we offending society?

Perhaps, just perhaps, what is feared, after all, is the downward mobility which I mentioned, for if the university is made accessible to the best students, no matter what class they come from, this means necessarily that the room at the top for the upper classes will shrink. After all, there are no good jobs for everyone with a university education, as we know, so why not make sure these are not available to working-class persons, beginning by making sure they never get the required university education?

Just an ugly thought, as who would jeopardise the future of a whole nation in this way, right?

5 June 2016 / THE BIOLOGY OF CREATIVITY: A SECOND APPROACH

I published a post back on 26 April in which I quoted from an interview with American neurologist Alice Weaver Flaherty, author of the book *The Midnight Disease* (2004), an essay on neurology and literary creativity. I have read now her volume and although I do not wish to offer here a formal review I certainly want to consider (or re-consider) a few ideas based on Flaherty's claims. I do not hesitate to recommend *The Midnight Disease* not so much for the rotundity of its arguments but for their many flaws, as they offer plenty of food for thought.

By the way, Flaherty finds it necessary to justify why she has written a book despite being a scientist, since her colleagues communicate with each other by publishing papers. "A melancholy fact," she writes, "is that in the sciences, the book has become as marginal a literary form as the sestina or the villanelle". Torn between her impression that academic books will soon disappear under pressure of online paper publication and her need to narrate "an unusual personal experience" (the sad death of her two premature twin boys), Flaherty tells supercilious scientists that "writing this book was something I could not stop myself from doing".

Flaherty, who has always written, went through a very serious post-partum depression which manifested itself, among other symptoms, through 'hypergraphia', "the medical term for an overpowering desire to write". This, she explains, is due habitually to alterations in particular brain areas and overlaps only partly with 'graphomania', or "the desire to be published". Hypergraphia, she speculates, seems connected with the temporal lobes, the brain areas in charge of facilitating our understanding of meaning. Many hypergraphic patients appear to have suffered temporal lobe epilepsy.

It is important to clarify that hypergraphic writers are dominated by a mania for writing, by an unstoppable drive to scribble, no matter what the results are in terms of quality for, remember, this is a pathology. The 'problem', as noted in my April post, is that this is a condition for which sufferers demand no treatment, as they derive pleasure from writing. If you're reading this and thinking 'oh, well, I am certainly not at risk of being labelled hypergraphic' you should be aware that many of us, readers, appear to be hyperlexic. Do you belong to the "subset of avid readers whose reading has an especially compulsive quality"? Do you need a book to prevent you from reading "the newspaper used to wrap the fish"? There you are: you're hyperlexic –the proud owner of a brain in thrall to an unruly bunch of print-mad neurons. I can see the t-shirt: 'Hyperlexia rules!'

Flaherty's sweeping statement that "A surprising proportion of writers are manic-depressive", is open to all kinds of jokes ('no wonder they're depressed seeing the state of the book market'... and so on). Surely, you can see for yourself that a) not ALL writers are manic-depressive (or have epileptic temporal lobe seizures like Dostoevsky), b) not all manic-depressives become published writers and c) if this were the case, creative writing courses should start by plunging their students into deep

misery at once. An additional problem that Flaherty simply hints at is whether writer's block, presented as a mental condition treatable with the right combination of pills and therapy, "may be culturally determined". The phrase 'writer's block', Flaherty explains, was coined by American psychiatrist Edmund Bergler and although many writers from other nations suffer from block, "there is a paradoxical sense in which suffering from writer's block is necessary to be an American writer". Flaherty names Russian-born, hypergraphic (=absurdly prolific) Isaac Asimov as an interesting exception but she seems confused by him; her list of writers "contains few genre writers because of the convention that genre writing isn't quite writing". It's just hypergraphia, you know?

Funnily, although I intended to keep the tone of this post as straight-faced as possible my repressed sneering is surfacing throughout... Perhaps this is because I'm scared that Flaherty is right in her main claim: that the mind has a material basis in the brain; hence, alterations in the brain result in abnormalities regarding the average mind. Basically, she speculates that the passion for writing and reading might fall within the gray area of the brain alterations that, while not being pathological, are uncommon and even exceptional (abnormal?). We write and read with glee because, in short, we have funny temporal lobes that connect in a funny way with our limbic system. She may be making a totally valid point: if Usain Bolt's body is worth studying for what it says about the abilities of record-breaking athletes, then perhaps Toni Morrison's talent as a writer stems from the subtle chemistry of her brain. As Flaherty writes, "By scanning people thinking creatively (with the usual caveat that judging creativity is difficult), researchers may soon be able to see which patterns of brain activity underlie creativity".

Flaherty softens the impact of her chilling scientific claims by stressing that "literature can also help us to understand science, the way it is both driven and sometimes misdirected by metaphors and emotion". No doubt. Her arguments, however, are distressing (I can't find another word). A point Flaherty stresses is that medication is advanced enough so that, for instance, bereaved people need not go through the intense pain of their grief by simply taking the corresponding helpful little pill. She understands why many grieving individuals reject this chemical aid, believing that lessening the intensity of grief amounts to betraying their lost beloved. To be clear about this: Flaherty claims that the more we know about our brain the better our chances will be to control emotion and mood. Like many others, I resist this idea because taking pills is for me too closely connected with taking illegal substances but, then, most people get by in this way (read Roberto Saviano's analysis of cocaine consumption in *Zero, zero, zero...*). Yet, going through a very black mood this week I caught myself thinking, 'oh, boy, my temporal lobe is misbehaving, I wish I had a little blue pill' to go on (happily) marking exams.

How does this connect with literary creativity? Patricia Highsmith once said that writers' favourite drug is coffee and, of course, there is a long list of literary and non-literary authors controlled by their chosen or unchosen addiction. In Flaherty's book writers are a bundle of brain and mind irregularities, as you can see, which ultimately begs the question of whether we prefer, as a society, happy individuals or unhappy

authors. That's the only conclusion I can reach after reading her book since the well-adjusted, happy author seems not to exist in her vision of literary creativity. I wonder whether this is why literary biography always insists on presenting literary genius as practically a pathology (yes, I've been reading Claire Tomalin's biography of bipolar, manic, hypergraphic Dickens). At least this is a pathology we admire.

As I read *The Midnight Disease* something else bothered me: the future of education. Education works on the principle that all children should start at the same point and be taught a little of everything, regardless of their abilities and preferences. Little by little, each child navigates their way into being an engineer or a star piano player (supply your own worst-case scenario). Primary and secondary education are, thus, a compound effort to teach children a common minimum denominator and to find out which particular abilities each child has. Now imagine a near future in which we will be able to scan the brain of a four-year-old while engaged in creative play and determine how his/her brain conditions his/her mind. This imaginary brain scan would have detected, for instance, my hyperlexia ('wow, this one is a Literature teacher!') and my limited ability to imagine space ('no stage designer, this one'). Flaherty never says that she wants to see this implemented. However, her view that our minds are our brains implicitly suggests that we will be eventually classified in this way, just as we will be soon classified according to our genetic make-up. Pass me the happiness pill...

From an extreme, alternative point of view one might argue that education works poorly precisely because we wrongly insist on the egalitarian approach. A timely brain scan would save the little ones many painful hours of mathematics or of English soon to be forgotten –which sounds tempting– and place the children with the most promising creative abilities on the fast track to... what exactly?? We are already hearing so much cant about the so-called 'exceptionally gifted' children that I shudder at what the further exploration of the human brain can do to human minds.

Clearly, neurology can help us to overcome the accidents of life caused by malfunctioning brains (and it's impressive to learn the myriad odd ways in which brains malfunction). Nonetheless, it may be overstepping its boundaries– like all medicine today, with its suspicious endless pressure to connect good health with joining expensive gyms when you're young and with taking absurd amounts of prescription drugs as you age. There is, however, a fundamental difference between, say, correcting the ravages of diabetes and forcing literary creativity into a sort of medical freak show.

There are also other dangers: if my students learn that I'm hyperlexic (am I?... show me that brain scan), then they may reject my preaching in favour of non-stop reading on the grounds that they're not hyperlexic themselves. Or, as the trend seems to be now, they may claim that their massive use of the social networks, the internet and videogames, has re-wired their brains in ways that my 1960s hyperlexic brain is not equipped to understand.

Pass me the little blue pill...

11 June 2016 / GONE LOVE: FROM ELIZABETH BENNET TO AMY DUNNE

I assumed that there would be already a handful of academic articles on Gillian Flynn's 2012 best-selling novel *Gone Girl*, adapted for the screen by David Fincher in 2014 from a script by the author herself. Not at all. My university's meta-searcher, Trobador, has returned 712 results, only 2 of which appear in the MLA database—both turned out to be journalistic pieces (a third piece is a biography of Flynn). Cultural Studies has always been accused of being merely academic journalism, too concerned with the contemporary—with the transient and the banal in the worst cases. I'm sure that pieces about the Spice Girls read now as terribly dated and as obscure as the analysis of a 16th century villanelle, yet I do believe that academics should react promptly to their surroundings and I'm quite surprised that *Gone Girl* has escaped our collective radar. Perhaps it's just too early and a flood of articles on Flynn's novel are now going through the sluggish process of peer reviewing... After all, I decided to read this novel (not quite my cup of tea...) only after listening to my UB colleague Cristina Alsina deliver an excellent paper during a recent seminar on crime fiction and the family, so there you are.

June 2016 is, of course, too late to review a book published four years ago and this is not what I intend to do here: I wish, rather, to consider why the trope of love and marriage is receiving such a degrading treatment in contemporary fiction. For this is the case in *Gone Girl* to an extent that is simply painful to read.

One of the best books I have read on romance is David Shumway's *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis* (2003), which I discovered only after the author finished a three-month stay in my Department, during which I found it impossible to connect with him at all... Shumway explains with great lucidity that what is destroying long relationships—at least in US society—is women's constant demand for total intimacy, inspired by the traditional romantic discourse originating in fiction. This may sound misogynistic in my simplified summary but it is not at all: Shumway is also adamant about American men's inability to respond to that demand for intimacy if only at a very basic level.

The main contribution, I believe, that *Gone Girl* makes to the fictional representation of love and marriage is turning intimacy into the most brutal form of hell one can imagine, a life sentence. The romantic ideology that women have incorporated into their relationships with men, Flynn argues, is fundamentally psychopathic, as her heroine Amy proves; men, like Amy's average husband Nick, try desperately to avoid needy women for, understandably, the stress of responding to a constant demand to be loved and to be fully understood is impossible to sustain. The joke in *Gone Girl*, however, is that Nick tries to escape his wife's extreme ideas of what constitutes a successful marriage only to find that his young mistress is as needy as Amy (though, of course, sexually more pliant). Ironically, Flynn does give Nick a perfect relationship with a woman, his twin Margo, perhaps suggesting that being siblings (free from twincest) is preferable for men and women to being married.

If you pare it down to a basic plot line, *Gone Girl* deals with the extreme measures to which a wife may resource in order to keep her cheating husband. Divorce is simply impossible because neither Nick nor Amy can go back to being the autonomous person they were before they met (if that's what they were). Second lesson about modern love, then: marriage annuls the capacity to be yourself, as many recently divorced people find out. *Gone Girl* is a horrifying novel, then, not just for how far Amy takes her radically sick romantic ideology (and for how Nick eventually responds to it), but for what it tells about marriage, particularly in American life and fiction. The acknowledgements turn *Gone Girl*, besides, into an even more bizarre product if that were possible, since Flynn thanks with total enthusiasm her husband for his support (and for having married her!). If I were her husband I would, however, worry: Flynn's grim novel was intended, as the author declared, to make couples consider each other with suspicion and wonder 'who are you?' Now: how does this connect with the author's own happy marriage, I wonder?

Why, then, the insistence on the marriage plot if all couples we know are actually unhappy? There seems to be a kind of circularity at work: the romantic idea of the happy marriage for life was constructed by the first novels and now the novel is deconstructing it. This, of course, is based on a misreading of the original fictional romance. Take *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and you will see that Elizabeth and Darcy are surrounded by unhappy married couples, beginning with her parents, the Bennets. Actually Austen plays a peculiar conjuring trick by placing the disagreements that eventually surface in most marriages at the beginning of the relationship between her heroine and hero. The fantasy of the happy-ever-after ending consists of supposing that in some magic way Elizabeth will avoid the pitfalls of her parents' union as she's marrying a man who shares her own idea of intimacy. In the 2005 film version of *Pride and Prejudice* with Keira Knightley as Elizabeth, English actress Rosamund Pike plays her demure elder sister Jane, a spider-woman patiently spinning her web to catch rich bachelor Charles Bingley (he and not Darcy is the "single man in possession of a good fortune" and "in want of a wife"). Pike also plays the patrician Amy Dunne in Fincher's adaptation, which links Austen and Flynn very conveniently for my argumentation here. Jane and Amy, after all, are not so different in wanting a nice husband but the intervening 200 years have turned this aspiration into something aberrant.

The pathology of the good marriage is extended in *Gone Girl* to Amy's parents, a couple of soul mates, as Amy describes them, who have cannibalized their daughter's childhood as material for a successful series of children's books, *Amazing Amy* (later, Amy calls her mendacious memoirs *Amazing*). Rand and Maryelizabeth Elliot appear to be truly committed to each other but also quite phony, no doubt because Amy, an only child, hates them for exploiting her economically and emotionally. If, then, the happy, long-lasting marriage is, as Amy claims, damaging for the children because it sets high romantic standards impossible to fulfil, than what should be the target for couples? Since Flynn's own happy private life contrasts so sharply with that of her heroine Amy, or so she claims, perhaps what we are witnessing is not so much the degradation of the marriage ideal, as it exists in actual social practice, but the inability of current (American?) fiction to narrate happiness. Even worse, rather than plain unhappiness

women novelists are offering a monstrously false form of happiness, twisted beyond all recognition. On the other side of the Atlantic, incidentally, Glynn's British peer E.L. James has refashioned happiness as sado-masochism in her Grey series, perhaps concurring more than we imagine with her American colleague.

Initially, I was going to use Michael Kimmel's controversial *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (2009) to comment on the current degradation of the romantic discourse. The need for mutual seduction, Kimmel hints, is vanishing, replaced by a predatory view of sex common among American young persons aged 18 to 25. I realized, however, that this is not yet the generation that Flynn is addressing but rather that of the thirtysomethings in need of abandoning guyland (and girlland). Flynn is suggesting in *Gone Girl* that marriage has become a fiction which both members of the couple embrace when the hedonistic lifestyle of the twentysomethings runs its course and individuals start feeling a vague need to settle down. The biggest gap in her novel is not connected, ultimately, with Amy's improbable masterminding of her elaborate final trap for Nick but with how and why Amy and Nick fall into the marriage trap of their own volition.

Amy offers quite a good diagnosis regarding Nick's self-deception: he falls for the 'cool girl' which she so proficiently impersonates. Yet since plain Nick is so easy to read for Amy, I wonder why she targets him as the object of the obsessive marriage plot which she builds for both. In Flynn's reading, indeed, marriage is a piece of fiction which we women write throughout our lives with men in secondary roles and if Amy is exceptional this is because she writes two versions: the one her diary captures, intended paradoxically for public consumption, and the private one she forces on Nick. Since Flynn makes Amy so exceptionally abusive, readers—like myself—who resist reading women's fiction about violent women may miss her main point: the idea that men are also addicted to the trashy marriage plot that women churn out (Fincher's film, in contrast, simply places Amy in the long line of dangerous blondes, a classic *femme fatale*, though married).

A reader called *Gone Girl* the story of "a jerk and a bitch" and even though Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation masterpiece *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) is there to remind us that mean, scheming wives have not been invented by Flynn, it is still shocking to see that Amy and Nick are presented as an extreme instance of modern love. Try, if you can, to call *Pride and Prejudice* the story of "a jerk and a bitch" and you will understand at once what I mean by the contemporary degradation of the romantic discourse on love and marriage. Or to put it the other way round: while I very much dislike Austen's novel as a dangerous fantasy about men's willing submission to women through love, I am appalled by Flynn's nasty little tale for, instead of denying Austen's daydream it claims that it works—on the basis of the most atrocious mutual dependence you may imagine. Never mind that this is not love at all as it should be felt, for it is love as we have been told it should feel by countless romantic novels.

Not the girl but love is gone, burnt out by the cynicism dictating that sentimentalism is tacky. Amy never tricks herself that she and Nick are like Elizabeth and Darcy yet she builds her own repulsive marriage plot because she does want that fiction to be her

life (and Nick's). This is both cynical and desperate, a decision born of her realization that modern love is hollow at the core and intimacy two-edged, for there are things you might not want to know about your spouse. Is *Gone Girl*, then, a good novel that will stand the test of time like *Pride and Prejudice*? Not at all but it is fascinating as a symptom of the malaise that is rotting the marriage plot in fiction and in life from the inside (no wonder that Flynn's background is also the economic decadence of Amy and Nick's America).

This malaise is not, however, as Flynn might believe, limited to her pathetic couple: her novel participates of the terrifyingly decadent imagination surfacing all over American fiction (think *The Hunger Games*). What made me gasp for fresh air when I closed the book was not Amy's wickedness but the sheer ugliness of Flynn's fabulation, the hours spent plotting the hideous details of how Amy plots her own life. Bret Easton Ellis did the same, and arguably even with more bravado, for contemporary American men 25 years ago in *American Psycho* (1991). It has taken American fiction, then, a quarter of a century to present us with the female version. To many people this might read as a healthy exercise in female sincerity, even as a feminist step forward. For me, however, the decision to focus on a psychopathic woman as an instance of the psychopathologies of a whole society is a setback, for I still believe that for a society to progress its fiction needs to provide it with role models. The kind of urge that Amy, the anti-role model, satisfies is a luxury that women cannot afford in our patriarchal times—I know the argument is not new but think of Hillary Clinton and now think of how little she needs Amy Dunne to exist.

I'll end, then, by bemoaning the way love has been dealt with in fiction: it deserves better than the implausible plotting that both Jane Austen and Gillian Flynn give it for drastically different reasons. I wish both Elizabeth Bennet and Amy Dunne were gone girls but I'm sorry to see that only love is gone.

21 June 2016 / RE-INVENTING EXAMS: AN EXPERIENCE

It's June and these days we're also busy marking exams. We're also busy wondering why we give our students exams and what use they are (the exams, not the students!). What use assessment is, in fact. I have just entered the final marks for the course I have taught this semester and they are exactly the same marks I would have awarded each student one week after meeting them. Funnily, their marks did not depend on just a final exam but on four different items, with their corresponding percentages, etc, all that requiring Excel to be worked out... I don't know what this says: that assessment only validates subjective impressions, that assessment that does not rate the exercises but the person, that I am such an experienced teacher that I know at first sight how students will perform (ehem!), that I could have saved myself a lot of hard work... Take your pick.

This was an elective course and I always prefer for assessing this type of course a paper rather than exams. This time, however, I decided to use exams for assessment, apart

from a short essay written at home and a class presentation. I hated exams as a student and do not particularly like them as a teacher. One of my colleagues claims that we should never ask students to write papers, for they plagiarize all the time—which is an exaggeration... though also a constant fact in teachers' lives. My position is quite the opposite: I do not see any equivalent situation in real life in which people would have to write a piece of academic work in a tightly limited time. I associate this, rather, with journalism and newspaper's daily deadlines. Otherwise, why would anyone produce a piece on Wordsworth's poetry, to name the first case that comes to my mind, in a very short time? It's simply ridiculous. I'm rather of the persuasion, then, that exams only measure people's ability to take exams. Or negative ability—I always performed well but only after bouts of nausea and vomiting that did nothing for my faith in the use of exams. I must have passed the last one in my doctoral days (I'm not counting vivas or oral examinations for tenure) and that surely was a happy day.

Accordingly, I play all kinds of tricks if I can manage to try to deconstruct exams. I believe that good academic work requires a reasonable time of preparation (not just of cramming) and I'm known to have given my students the exam questions in advance. I don't care very much for failing students and I find that the students who fail in my courses usually trip themselves up by not handing in exercises or not taking the exams. If I get the chance, however, to help my students to do well enough for me to pass them, I'm happy. This is not the same as saying that no matter how they perform I'll pass them, but rather that I don't want anyone vomiting before taking one of my exams. I just want them to have studied and, above all, to have planned their exam question at home. I found out, however, that students given the exam questions in advance got quite nervous for a reason I failed to anticipate: if you know the questions in advance then a good deal of the justification to fail vanishes. Who would have thought that Prof. Martín would ask such a devious question? That seems to be the kind of thinking that comforts students that do poorly. Now, if Prof. Martín puts her questions in your hands, thus eliminating the surprise factor (not necessarily the deviousness), that's another matter. Your inability to plan the answers is highlighted, which is, let's be honest, much more embarrassing than simply being unable to answer a question you could never have anticipated.

You might argue that surprise is the whole point of exams and the target that collective groan you can hear when students find the questions too hard. This just happens to be a sound I do not enjoy (my exams, in contrast, seem to be the source of much sighing...). Anyway, what happened when I gave students an exam to take home, consider and plan is that still a few failed. I certainly felt less responsible for their failing, if you know what I mean. What I noticed was that the effort done in the actual writing in class was similar: the same stream of sighs, the same flushed faces and always the lack of time (some students would run out of time even if given five hours instead of two, it seems). The pressure had eased, the quality increased, hopefully there had been no vomiting, but, then, it was still an exam written by Prof. Martín.

For my latest course, I have tried another tactic: have the students write their own exam. In hindsight, I realize that no exam questions could ever match the deviousness of this proposal but let me say that I was not acting wickedly but in good faith. The

group was small, only 15 students, and I explained that they should write a two-question exam using our habitual Department format: select a passage from the book we've studied (maximum 10 lines) and ask a question that can be developed in a short argumentative essay (maximum 500 words), referring both to the passage and to the book in question. It was clear to me that students would be very uncomfortable if I didn't check their questions, so I gave myself the task of validating each exam a few days before the corresponding exam date. What I found is that students wrote, on the whole, perfectly valid questions just badly phrased. Some of the questions were simply too big in scope for a short essay but could mostly be re-used; others came multiplied by two or three (students seemed insecure about which version to use). None of the questions was insultingly easy to answer, and here's where I noticed my own deviousness.

Imagine my students telling their peers in other courses 'Sara has allowed us to write our own exam questions'. The answer from said peers should be 'My!, you're lucky, now you can't fail!'. Now, most of my students probably replied at this point what one of them told me: 'No way! This is the hardest thing I've done in my life!' Why? Because they quickly realized that my proposal to let them write their own exams would not result in easier exams—no way I would validate shallow questions. Therefore, they had a twofold task: produce the kind of exam I would write myself and do it so that they could secure a pass. Lacking feedback from them (I have asked, and I'm waiting) I can only surmise that they told themselves: 'Ok, so I need to make things as easy as possible for me while writing the exam as if I were a teacher', demanding Sara Martín, in particular. Sure—only I had not gone that far in my own thinking when I proposed the experiment.

Exam one went well: nobody failed, though I believe that nobody performed either at a higher level than if I had written the exam myself. My guess (I need the feedback) is that students were more relaxed and confident about what they were doing, having got the annoying surprise element out of the equation. My colleagues say that written exams have the added bonus of offering exact information about the actual command of English each student has. Maybe. By giving students the questions or asking them to write their own questions, I also expect them to work on their English at home and produce far more polished exams (much easier to correct for me, too!). I don't know how they do this: if it were up to me, I would write the answers at home (using the dictionary, etc, etc), try to memorize as much as I could and then write them in class. It might well be, however, that they have memorized outlines, I don't know. I'm sure, though, that many language doubts and errors could be ironed out at home. This is fine by me for in this way they had to learn some English language in order to prepare the exam, in addition to the English Literature.

For the second exam I asked students to produce questions combining both a passage from the primary source and from a secondary source. I'm not sure whether this was my fault or not, but it seems that my instructions were a bit ambiguous about which secondary source to use. I had asked students to read one article for each novel and I expected they would use the ones I had selected for them. However, some students just chose other articles, which was a bit complicated to negotiate. I validated their

exams eventually. What I found, and this was both silly and funny, was that the most complicated thing to do was validating the exams in which my own article was quoted. I sensed a kind of mutual embarrassment: students seemed to feel a bit awkward writing 'As Martín claims', which was not the case when they wrote 'As Vint claims', or 'As Frelik claims', for they didn't know these academics personally. On my side, I found myself disagreeing with how students read my own article, even though their questions were perfectly valid. It felt very, very strange to be 'Martín' rather than 'Sara', as my students call me in our informal Department.

In both exams the contents reflected very accurately what was being discussed in class. The questions did refer with no significant exceptions to the issues we had discussed together though the passages chosen were not necessarily the ones I had selected for class discussion. The exams were, in short, more personal and less 'parasitical' of class discussion than I expected (this was my main fear). Some exams, particularly in the second series, were actually quite sophisticated. When marking them, I often marvelled that students who knew nothing about SF a few months back were confidently discussing artificial intelligence, genetic manipulation or post-humanism. Happy, then, as far as I'm concerned.

I failed, however, in just one thing. I decided to use exams because I wanted students to read the five novels in the course—if they wrote a paper, then they might read just one or two. What I failed to notice is that the second exam, covering three novels, should be much longer, perhaps two hours and a half, rather than one and a half. And we simply don't have that kind of time. In old times exams had a separate schedule, apart from teaching time. One of my own teachers was famous for giving us exams that could run for four hours or more. Since 2009, however, exams are part of our teaching time, which means that the more exams you introduce the less time you have for actual teaching; also that they need to fit our 90-minute slots. Either I introduced a third exam, or I let students choose two of the three novels for the second exam, which is what I finally did.

Was the experiment worth carrying out, then? Certainly. I think that the class size was ideal, as validating the questions—not an easy task!—could be done in a reasonably short time. Also, these were fourth year students. I don't see myself repeating the experiment with second-year students in my Victorian Literature course because a) they would panic, b) at about 50, the group is too big and validating the exams would consume too much time and energy. I believe that my experiment in tailor-made examination shows that asking everyone the same question is a bit of an absurdity for each student is motivated by different things in the same book. What we do when we ask all students in our class the same question, then, is just something convenient. We tend to ignore the fact that, beyond what each student has studied in preparation for the exam, some will automatically do well (or badly) because of the nature of the particular questions. I'm talking about Literature, not mathematics, of course...

Now, I would be really glad to get feedback from my students...

24 June 2016 / THE INCREDIBLY SHRINKING UNITED KINGDOM: ON BREXIT

This is a time-capsule post, of the kind that gets written with the author expecting to check in five-years time what really happened.

Like many people all over the world—as shown by the instantaneous collapse of the stock market—I expected Britons to have voted in favour of staying in the European Union. This is a people known (unless until today) for their pragmatism and common sense. Clearly, though, many things have gone the wrong way and we're witnessing today, with a sour taste in our mouths, the success of the Brexit campaign. 24 June 2016 has been hailed by *The Sun* and by UKIP leader Nigel Farage as 'independence day'... You know that something is bad when, in addition to this absurdity, Donald Trump claims that this is good (for the time capsule: Trump, who failed to be elected President of the United States by a landslide in 2016). 'May you live in interesting times', the Chinese curse goes.

I have titled this post 'The incredibly shrinking United Kingdom' because I see the UK even further diminished in its global position by this strange manoeuvre. Let me get a couple of ideas out of the way before I continue. To begin with, someone should change the rules of referendums, for in the end the percentual difference between the two options has been quite small: 52% to 48%. This is not a clear victory but a divided country. Now, if Brexit goes horribly wrong and throws the UK into the waste-basket of History (a phrase often used in Catalonia in the last year), can the overruled 48% demand any responsibility from the other 52%? Obviously not. This is why this kind of potentially very dangerous decision should be made by a much wider difference, at least 65/35. You need to be sure that your victory (or defeat) is final and this is not at all the case today. Second point: Brexit is, no doubt about it, a clear sign of the European Union's failure to constitute itself as little more than a commercial union. I cannot imagine Donald Trump celebrating the secession of, say, California; the fact that he's toasting today to Brexit means that the EU is not at all a union, as the United States are. I would not like as a Catalan to be left outside the EU, which is one of my main doubts considering a possible independent Catalonia. At the same time, the EU has utterly and completely failed to inspire in us, Europeans, the feeling that this is what we are, in the same way Californians feel that they are American.

I'll add a third point: that the UK leaves the EU is particularly poignant because, of course, it was one of its founding members back in 1957, when it was born as the European Economic Community—a name bearing all the seeds of trouble to come. British disaffection for Europe is an extremely complex issue, which many others have analyzed with better, finer tools. Nonetheless, this disaffection has its roots in the perception that the UK is contributing more than it is getting out of the EU; European solidarity is based, after all, on the idea that the richer states must help the poorer ones, which is why Brexit will certainly be a terrible blow for us, in Spain. Now, this suggests that Germany should be happier than any other nation to abandon the EU but the Germans do see that the union is needed if only because, let's be clear about this, cheap labour is to be found in its southern and eastern areas. The Britons are right

now too blinded by an oddly euphoric chauvinism that won't let them see that European migration is not the problem but the solution to their economy. I'm aware that much of Brexit has to do with Britain's wish to decide for herself which migrants to admit to its shores but the vision of an all-British workforce is not only treacherous but also downright silly.

If we accept the argument that staying in the EU brings more economic benefits than staying out of it –and I think this is a powerful argument because the previous arrangement of nations in Europe led to WWI and WWII– then we need to wonder what is being pursued with Brexit. It is not impossible to think of a future scenario in which Scotland will be an independent nation and a member of EU, and in which Northern Ireland might be unified with Ireland for the same reason (or Gibraltar decide to return to Spain). There is, then, a very real danger of national dismemberment with even England/Wales being sharply split between pro-EU London and the rest. How British (English?) economy can thrive even supposing the UK's split is prevented is beyond me. Norway is doing fine on its own without being a EU member (and so is Switzerland). However, part of their success has to do with their being very realistic about which role in the world they want to play: a marginal one (at least politically, I would not say the same about Switzerland and world finances). Oddly, Brexit supporters dream of a Britain which is not only free from EU restrictions (so they claim) but also a powerful nation in the world. Like in Victorian times.

This is the way in which Britain is shrinking: it has lost track of its dwindling importance both within Europe and in the world. In Spain we've gone through that: we used to be the biggest Empire in the world, remember? Being rich didn't suit our (or rather, the Castilian) temper very well, which is why we went downhill all the way into bankruptcy and even invasion by Napoleon. A series of independentist uprisings eroded little by little the Empire until this was finished off in 1898 by the United States pushing us out of Cuba. The Civil War (1936-9) happened when the Republic was getting Spain used to the idea that we should be a modern European country rather than an ex-Empire. Yet the band of ultra right-wing nostalgics headed by Franco fought its way into what the Brexit campaigners now want: autarchy (or total self-rule). I do know that the parallelism between backward, isolated Spain, which only joined the EU exactly 30 years ago, and Britain does not hold. Yet the lesson we learned after Franco is that imperial glory will not feed people; we very humbly accepted the crumbs at the table of the rich EU, briefly believing before the 2008 crisis that we were finally one of the diners. The UK went through its worst economic crisis back in the 1970s and that 52% who have voted 'out' today seem to feel confident enough that, no matter what, they will stand on their feet and do fantastically well in terms of economics, politics and general prestige. As an English Studies specialist I can only call this position neo-Victorian.

This is, naturally, an extremely false position to be in. Whereas those who want to stay in the EU have given a long list of reasons why leaving it would be negative, the Brexit campaigners have given no truly valid reason to leave the EU, other than wounded pride. Most likely, they imagined a Europe in which the UK would be the leading country and cannot simply accept that the leader is Germany, the hated enemy of the

past. Somehow, they have managed to convince themselves that the United States will play a crucial role in this post-Brexit British Renaissance, even though President Obama warned Britons against Brexit. As a Catalan I feel that the path taken is even much more uncertain than independence. Supposing the Scots voted to leave the UK, they should be doing so in the hopes that they would do much better on their own, including the possibility of joining the EU. But the UK has not voted for independence, no matter what UKIP says, but for *isolation*, which is a completely different matter. Britain was isolated in Victorian times, in the sense that it did not belong to any other international association, and was extremely powerful. Now the same solitary status wants to be recovered. But, then, what's next? Leaving the United Nations?

I'm flabbergasted—that's the word I was looking for. I simply don't understand how a civilized nation can make this very obvious (right-wing) mistake in the 21st century. It must be the influence of so much SF but I always imagined the world converging eventually into a world-wide federation, *Star-Trek* style. What I wonder today is not why the Britons (well, 52% of the 75% voters, that is to say, 34% of Britons over 18) want to leave the UK but where they think they are going.

Among the many questions about the future of the EU I heard this morning on TV, here's the one closest home, as an English Studies academic: will English still be an official European language? That's a good one... Everyone, start learning French and German as fast as you can...

29 June 2016 / THE BODY AND THE BODIES: AGAINST UNIVERSALISM (IN AFFECT THEORY AND IN HORROR FILM)

I have read with great pleasure Xavier Aldana Reyes's new volume, *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership* (Routledge). I'm very proud to see how he is fast progressing into being a truly first-rank academic, as it is always delightful for a teacher to see how someone who used to sit in her classes is now producing such excellent academic work. As happens, my review of Xavi's previous book, *Body Horror*, has just been published, long after I actually wrote (see: <http://atlantisjournal.org/index.php/atlantis/article/view/359>). This time, however, rather than write a review (the book is outstanding, believe me) I'll delve into my disagreements with Xavi's theorisation of the body in Horror (capitalized to mean the genre).

The model of viewership he offers is not just corporeal but, to be precise, corporeal-affective. As he puts it, "corporeal threat is by far the most common affective experience in Horror and (...) a more rounded understanding of how Horror seeks to make the viewer experience fear is necessary" (16). Certainly, I couldn't agree more: basically, when we see Horror films, we fear for our bodies because, as Xavi (sorry, I can't call him Aldana Reyes) argues very well, we connect with the threatened bodies on the screen through 'somatic empathy' (itself generated by 'sensation mimicry'). We do not really feel identified with the characters (actually in many cases we may feel no

sympathy at all) but we appear to feel with our bodies, as if these were their bodies. Correcting a generalized impression, Xavi argues that the Horror film viewer is not a sadist but a masochist, although here's my first disagreement: hearing viewers very vocally demand that this or that is perpetrated on a victim's body in the cinemas of Sitges during the popular fantastic film festival, I doubt very much that *all* viewers are masochists. Let's suppose for the sake of argumentation that these bullies are just 5% of the audience and that they are not the intended target audience of the filmmakers. Even so, the risk exists to activate affects that go in the sadistic direction.

Sorry, but I know besides that this kind of reaction is much more common among men when watching female bodies under attack in Horror films than among women seeing male bodies destroyed (women are generally more empathetic). Xavi's volume, however, is very clear regarding why he will not consider gender: "Arguing for the continued need for studies that highlight gendered representations, I propose instead that the body in Horror, as far as its affective powers are concerned (and here I mean their capacity to scare and horrify, not to titillate sexually, which is not a general intention of most Horror) is largely ungendered" (16). But how do you separate the horror from the sexual titillation, if only in that hypothetical 5%? I absolutely agree with Xavi that the feminist/psychoanalytical approach used by Barbara Creed in her seminal *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993)—based on Julia Kristeva's notions of the abject as discussed in *Powers of Horror* (1982)—is not useful to illuminate how Horror film works. I praise Xavi for his demolition job and for cutting the Gordian knot: very obviously, when you're seeing films like *The Thing* the fear you experience has nothing to do with "the primacy of the maternal body as principal guide or indicator of abjection" (29). It has everything to do, in contrast, with the state of special effects in the year that film was made, 1982, and with director John Carpenter's skills in mixing image, sound, music, etc. Xavi, therefore, proposes that we liberate Kristeva's abjection from the "psychoanalytical remit" (44), and re-conceptualize it as 'fearful disgust', which can be felt by any human being—any *body*.

Thus, he observes: "Because my approach entails a de-gendering of images of abjection, this means that the nature of affect needs to be theorised regardless of the gender or sexuality of the viewer and characters, and rather in terms of viewers' acquaintance, tolerance and enjoyment of images of abjection" (71). Fair enough. Or is it? Accepting the importance of the cultural factors associated with the production and enjoyment of Horror films, but refusing to produce sociological analysis, Xavi stresses that his study is "*theoretical* and wishes to look at the way Horror *ideally* affects viewers" (98, my emphasis). This is where I begin to object, and quite strongly.

Affect Theory cannot be pinned down with precision for it is rather quite a heterogeneous collection of conflicting currents. However, at the core of the area there seems to be a staunch belief that the universal body exists in the same way the body exists for Medicine. This is propounded on the basis of the neuro-scientific foundation on which Affect Theory rests. I have, however, very serious doubts that the body exists in the sense intended here.

Surely, we are all one singular body and at the same time part of the universal body, a construction without which Medicine could not work. This science relies on the assumption that all human bodies function in exactly the same way, which is why, naturally, its techniques (from medication to surgery) are universally valid. That must be also the reason why every time I visit a new doctor and see them look at my body without caring who I am, I feel so confused. Anyway, I digress. Affect Theory, and generally speaking, neurology and the ever expanding neuro-sciences, are also applying the universalist view to the delicate connection between brain and mind. You can see by my recent posts that the study of this connection is slowly creeping into the Humanities, with, arguably, little resistance. This is, I believe, due to our low self-esteem and to the generalized belief that 'scientists know best'. This new fashion is, however something that I dispute. As doctors know, Medicine is not mathematics and bodies respond differently both to disease and to treatment. If the condition of your heart and your clogging arteries is cultural (i.e. directly connected to your consumption of the toxic food on offer in your society), what is the ground to believe that affect is not also conditioned by culture? Meaning, in short, that I don't believe that a theoretical model of corporeal-affective viewership can ignore particular bodies.

This is not, by the way, sociology but Cultural Studies and, in particular, Reception Studies (and Theory, if you wish). As Xavi points out, one inconvenient of studying Horror film viewers in a laboratory situation is that the 'artificial' environment conditions their response. Fair enough: visit the Sitges film festival. There you'll notice a few interesting things. One is the age of audiences—you always find veterans who never lose their taste for Horror but the viewers are predominantly young (16-35). Also, let's be frank about this, of the type colloquially called 'nerd', which, yes, does call for some kind of sociological study. Among them, the presence of girls has been growing in recent decades and it is now not much lower than the presence of boys. Young women are certainly enjoying Horror films in a way unthinkable for, say, the generation born in the 1940s; you certainly don't see groups of nattily dressed elderly ladies queuing at the Sitges cinemas. If you asked the viewers why they enjoy Horror, you would absolutely get many incoherent answers, which is why academic theorisation is absolutely necessary. In this sense, my impression is that curiosity possibly plays a bigger role than we assume. Without leaving culture and personal identity aside at all, quite the opposite. Much less gender.

As I read *Horror Film and Affect*, I found myself considering whether I wanted to see some of the most extreme films analyzed there. As I have already noted here, Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005) meant the end of my interest in Gothic Studies, as my 'somatic empathy' was too high to allow for any kind of enjoyment (also I totally rejected being academically complicit in the success of a film based on torture). Yet, reading about Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008), which appears to be far more graphic in its depiction of torture than *Hostel*, I felt dominated by curiosity (academic or personal, I'm not sure). Funnily, my husband already had this notorious film in his list of Horror films to see. I don't think, however, that my curiosity will overcome my somatic empathy. I'll rely, then, on his report...

Now, this somatic empathy is an emotion provoked by the affects that participate in Horror films' effectiveness but also a cultural factor—a crucial one. It is what has made us reject the use of (legal?) torture universally, beyond our beliefs in human rights. It turns out, in the end, that the ideal body that enjoys seeing Horror film is by no means universal: not only because somatic empathy is absolutely personal (as personal as the taste for, I don't know, strawberry ice cream) but also because Horror film itself is the product of particular cultures. Yes, I respond to the startle effects (or shocks) of Japanese Horror cinema but its codes are very alien to me—and I wish I had never seen *Audition*. I marvel that my favourite startle effect (the face hugger jumping out of the egg in *Alien*) works every time I see it, whether I see the complete film or the isolated scene. But fancy showing that to a member of an Amazonian tribe who has never seen a Horror film. Yes, she would be shocked, but not at all in the same way I am—her shock might be massive or she would burst laughing, I'm not sure.

Sorry to use my own personal experience, but it's the only one I know. I love Horror films which suggest there is something else beyond humanity, whether this is the Devil or an alien monster, a supernatural or a natural threat. I realize, however, that I feel increasingly repelled by the Horror films in which evil is caused by a sadistic person—usually a man. When I presented my first paper ever, back in 1994, this dealt with Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), technically a thriller and not Horror, as the victims are killed off-screen (yes, Xavi, I agree). The feminists in the audience were horrified that I had enjoyed a film in which women were so savagely victimized; but, of course, the question was that you could not see this and I was (still am) fascinated by Clarice. As Hannibal Lecter moved, on, however, the franchise lost all its appeal for me, since it became a series about a guy hurting people. And I reject this... particularly if the victim is a woman. I have walked out of a cinema only once, my body totally overwhelmed by Steven Spielberg's ultra-realistic depiction of the Normandy landing in *Saving Private Ryan*. I have, however, left my husband alone on the sofa countless times whenever the Horror film we had chosen to see together eventually focused on cruelty against female bodies. Xavi avoids the issue of rape, which, as any woman will tell you, does make you very much aware that you're a different kind of viewer from a man. No way I could watch Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002), which might not be even Horror for a male viewer but is certainly Horror for a female one.

Let me focus on pain to finish. Xavi points out that “pain is normally either cast out or eradicated from public view” (176) and I'm wondering very seriously whether the fast advances in the special effects in Horror films (and in general in any film in which bodies are destroyed) has to do with this. I was watching a documentary on the Holy Grail on TV which argued that Saint Lawrence might have brought the relic with him to Huesca. The churches in this city abound in images of his martyrdom: the poor guy was... grilled. In public. Not only martyrdom but also other public events of bodily destruction come to mind: the spectacle provided by Roman arenas, Medieval executions (think William Wallace...). We have hidden the public spectacle of the broken body out of sight, as we hide disease and even surgery (how does a surgeon react to contemporary Horror film effects, I wonder?). And it might well be that, like Saint Thomas, we need to see in order to believe. We hear torture victims describe their ordeal and automatically we ask ourselves ‘but what was it really like?’. If porn

satisfies our curiosity about how people engage in sex, then 21st century Horror film most likely satisfies a similar curiosity about how bodies are broken in pain. I'm writing this on the day yet another terrorist attack (this time in Istanbul's airport) has caused a terrible massacre—bodies unseen on TV. The more we fear pain, in short, the more we need to face it vicariously and this is the urge that Horror film is satisfying. If you are already in pain or if this curiosity has never arisen, or is already satisfied, then there is no need for Horror movies.

I have many other questions to ask: after how many Horror films does an aficionado start losing the edge?; are the affects generated by Horror film different depending on the situation in which the viewer is placed? (alone/in company, at home/in a cinema, at night/at day); how do actors feel seeing their bodies used in this horrific way?; who provides the main innovations: directors or FX artists?; what about sound and music?

A theory, logically, is a proposition (a hypothesis) that needs to be tested and *Horror Film and Affect* is transparent about this: the volume is an invitation to go and ask. Forget psychoanalysis, ask filmmakers and everyone involved in Horror films how they pull the strings (and who they're thinking of when they envision their terrible images). I'm sure that the more we ask, the more blurred the universal body will become and the more visible particular bodies will be.

5 July 2016 / TYPESCRIPT OF THE SECOND ORIGIN: THE MASTERPIECE OF CATALAN SCIENCE FICTION

[Please, note: This is the prologue I have written for the trilingual edition of Manuel de Pedrolo's *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (1974). The text explains why and how it has been produced.]

When I joined the team in charge of organizing the Barcelona Eurocon, back in the autumn of 2015, little could I imagine that I would fulfil one of my dreams as a reader turned into English Studies specialist: translating into English the extremely popular novel by Manuel de Pedrolo *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (hereafter, *Typescript of the Second Origin*). Someone—apparently Cristina Macía—had come up with the brilliant idea of commemorating our Eurocon with a trilingual edition of the book (Catalan / Spanish / English); this would be given to the 800 participants of the event, thus helping to place Pedrolo on the map of the best European science fiction. When I learned about the project through fellow organizers Hugo Camacho and David Alcoy—with I whom I have collaborated in the task of producing it—I naively asked who would take care of the translation into English. This was one of those questions that one asks despite knowing that they will lead to unpredictable consequences (and much hard work). Of course, had I been given the name of another translator my disappointment would have been immense. I was fortunate, therefore, to be in the right place and at the right moment to fulfil, as I say, one of my dreams.

As Antoni Munné-Jordà explains [in his own foreword about Pedrolo] *Typescript* (1974) appeared just at the time when Catalan literature could finally be made part of secondary education (from 1976 onwards). I myself am one of the beneficiaries of this new breath of wind and of the collective decision by Catalan Literature teachers to trust Pedrolo to interest us, young students, in reading. The copy of *Typescript* that I have been using as the basis for the translation into English is the one I bought in 1980 for my first year in secondary school—already the ninth edition of the 1976 book in the series ‘El cangur’ of Edicions 62. The cover shows an image iconic for my entire generation: that of a young woman, her face half-covered by her black hair, riding a huge tractor and staring at the horizon. Alba starts on the road towards survival aged only 14, the age I myself was when my teachers invited us to read the book—I cannot vouch for the impact which Pedrolo’s story had among the boys but I can declare with no hesitation that brave Alba became for us 1980s Catalan girls a simply wonderful role model. This felt, at the same time, very natural. We were then so young that we just did not know about the many restrictions limiting girls in post-Franco Spain and Catalonia (and that still apply...). Alba was definitely what we needed as women: a born survivor. Hence my dream to share with the world her story in English.

Alba’s example still persists: just a few weeks ago one of my students, thirty years younger than me, told the class that *Typescript* is her favourite book. Quite perplexed, she also confessed that she had not realized that Pedrolo’s novel is science-fiction. This statement in turn caused great perplexity among the SF fans in class: after all, Pedrolo narrates a post-apocalyptic story of survival, prompted by the destruction by extraterrestrials of all mammals (both human and animal), with very few exceptions. The terrifying vision of Barcelona devastated by the lethal vibrations used by the visitors, and with most of its buildings collapsed, is unforgettable. At this point, however, I can only speculate about why the teachers who aroused such passion for *Typescript* in us young readers chose not to teach this novel as science fiction but as... literature. Perhaps this decision—if a decision was ever made, maybe our teachers simply were not aware of the codes of SF—was, after all, a wise one; at the time *Typescript* was too close for comfort to the still very popular pulp SF novelettes sold by newsagents.

Typescript of the Second Origin is the most widely read work in Catalan literature; however, since it is not read mainly as SF, this may have prevented Catalonia from becoming a powerful generator of works in this genre. This statement may seem very unfair in view of the extensive bibliography compiled by Munné-Jordà himself (see the Archive of the Science-Fiction and Fantasy Catalan Society at <http://www.sccff.cat/>) and the SF series he directs (for Pagès Editors). There is no doubt at all that Catalan SF is plentiful and of good quality but in no way can it be said to be popular, as *Typescript* certainly is. If we asked the thousands and thousands who have read Pedrolo’s novel to name another SF Catalan author, only a tiny minority would pass the test.

I confess that one of my fears when undertaking the translation of *Typescript* was that it would not measure up to my powerful memory of the book. I had actually re-read it at least twice in the past, finding it still as satisfactory as any other classic read in adolescence. However, my biggest fear was that the intense reading which translation

requires would reveal all its defects. In part this has been indeed the case: Pedrolo wrote very hurriedly and without many revisions, and I must confess that a couple of sentences have been absolutely impossible to understand. *Typescript*, in short, is not a literary masterpiece of the same rank as the perfect *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by R.L. Stevenson; yet it has the kind of imperfect charm that has turned other novels, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, into universal classics. That *Typescript* endures well the passage of time was for me proven by the capacity of its final segment still to move readers very deeply (at least those of us who love the book). Despite being concerned about the linguistic precision required to translate the book, Alba and Dídac's fate once more touched me to the core. I hope its new readers will be likewise moved.

Although the ideal age to read *Typescript*, as I have said, is 14, I would insist that Pedrolo's novel can find new readers among all ages. Adelais de Pedrolo, the author's daughter—possibly the inspiration for Alba, though she denies it—confirms that her father never intended *Typescript* to be fiction just for young readers. The novel did certainly find a large young readership, but, then, in 1974 when *Typescript* was published, there were no boundaries between young and adult fiction. The label 'young adult' (YA), so popular today, arose precisely in the 1970s and in the English-speaking world partly to appeal to those adolescents less interested in reading, selling them products mostly designed to accommodate their preferences. Today it might seem that *Typescript* is part of this trend, simply because it is a very accessible book that has very often been read in a school context. I think, however, that reducing *Typescript* to the any specific age readership is doing it a disservice.

One last word on the volume now in the hands of the reader: this book is a labour of love, a long-deserved homage to Manuel Pedrolo and to his *Typescript of the Second Origin*. The initial impulse could not have materialized without the generosity of the Fundació Pedrolo headed by Ms. Adelais de Pedrolo and of Group 62, which have allowed us to reproduce the Catalan original. Planeta has also given kind permission for the reproduction of the Spanish translation made by Domingo Santos in 1975. The inclusion of Santos's translation in our volume is also part of the homage that Barcelona's Eurocon wishes to pay to one of the main personalities of Spanish SF. On my side, I must explain that since English is not my native language I would not have dared to publish the translation of *Typescript* without first having it pass through the careful scrutiny of several English readers. I would like to express here my deepest gratitude to Josie Swarbrick, Felicity Hand, David Owen, Donna Scott, and especially to Ian Watson, who has taught me that the art of translation is the art of good writing (at least, the art of doing one's best). Of course, the mistakes—and I hope they are few—are my own responsibility.

Finally, on behalf of the whole Eurocon team and of the Societat Catalana de Ciència-Ficció i Fantasia, I would like to thank the Institut d'Estudis Ilerdencs of the Diputació de Lleida for the warmth, kindness and generosity with which they have supported our project. There was a time when the endeavour of publishing our dream trilingual volume seemed even more fantastic than the story Pedrolo narrates in *Typescript*. It is impossible to convey fully the joy we feel at the chance of making available to all

European readers Pedrolo's novel in this first English translation. We do hope that *Typescript* will soon be recognized as a universal classic.

[PS: my manuscript is currently in the hands of an American university press, Wesleyan, which hopefully will publish it. Please, keep your fingers crossed for me and, above all, for Pedrolo. And if you can in any way help, I'll be very, very grateful.]

7 July 2016 / FROM *MECANOSCRIT* TO *TYPESCRIPT*: TRANSLATING PEDROLO (AND THE QUIRKS OF INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL COMMUNICATION)

Allow me to take Manuel de Pedrolo (1918-1990) as the centre of the argumentation I want to develop here. Pedrolo is a key author of Catalan literature, to which he contributed about 100 works in all genres (poetry, drama, novel, journalism) and also his translations of first-rank international work by American and European novelists. He was also the author, as I explained in my previous post, of the best-selling Catalan novel ever, *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (1974). He worked, in addition, at all literary levels: from the popular (he made significant contributions to detective fiction and to science-fiction) to the post-modern experimental.

Now, if you check the very useful data base TRAC (Traduccions del català) available from the website of the Institut Ramon Lull (http://www.llull.cat/catala/quiesqui/trac_traduuccions.cfm), you will see that his name appears only 46 times –mostly translations of *Mecanoscrit*. This is the only book of his translated into French. Pedrolo has been translated into German only four times and in all cases within short story anthologies; once, in identical circumstances, into Russian. In English the only translations of Pedrolo's works are *Final trajectory* (trans. Albert M. Forcadas & Selley Quinn, New York, Carlton Press, 1985) and *Touched by fire* (trans. Peter Griffin, New York, Peter Lang, 1993). *Mecanoscrit*, by the way, has been translated into Castilian, Galician and Basque within Spain, and abroad into Dutch, French, Rumanian, Portuguese, Italian, Bulgarian, Estonian, and Macedonian.

As it is obvious from my previous post, I'm extremely happy to have had the chance to translate *Mecanoscrit* into English for the first time ever. Luckily for me, this is a shortish novel (45,000 words only), otherwise the task would have been absolutely daunting. Translating from one's own language into a second language one does not speak as a native is a complete nightmare, as you can never be sure of what you're doing in the same way natives are. Of course, native speakers also need to have a very deep knowledge of their own language but at least they have a clearer sense of what sounds 'correct'. I did consider working in tandem with a native speaker but finally decided to face the translation alone and rely on a good number of English readers for corrections and suggestions. I have only translated one book –the collection *Siete relatos góticos: Del papel a la pantalla*, which I myself edited, see <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116808> – and I must say that I have great admiration for translators, for their task is incredibly difficult. In the case of *Mecanoscrit* the main

obstacle for me turned out to be the most common words, those instances in which a second-language speaker is lost in a sea of get, have, do... I'm certainly happy that the work is done and that my translation will reach the 800 Eurocon participants, hopefully also American readers through Wesleyan UP. And, no, I have not received any fees yet; besides, I am embarrassed to apply for grants as, after all, I'm a tenured academic with a regular salary and not a self-employed translator. I would be actually happier to find a sponsor for Wesleyan.

Apart from the translation itself, and the edition of the trilingual volume this summer, I have produced a good number of shorter documents about Pedrolo and *Mecanoscrit*, including an entry for the *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*. It just turns out that the *ESF* does not have an entry on Catalan SF, and so I asked Antoni Munné-Jordà to write one, which I translated (our two entries are currently being edited by John Clute, who welcomed very warmly my offer to write them). To my infinite surprise, Antoni sent me an article longer than the corresponding *ESF* entry for Spanish SF, which opens up the chance to expand the Catalan presence in *ESF* with many other entries. The question is where I am going to find the contributors among the Catalan Literature specialists... I happen to be the board member in charge of academic contacts of the Societat Catalana de Ciència-Ficció i Fantasia and, well, that should be my main task. I'm also editing for the online academic journal *Alambique* the first monographic volume in any language on *Mecanoscrit* (to be published in August in 2017 in English, and then to be followed by the Catalan version).

But, wait a minute, you must be thinking: aren't you an *English Studies* specialist? Yep! Will all this work on *Catalan* fiction count for your CV? Nope! So... why do it? The obvious answer is that this is an academic labour of love, the kind you do because you love a certain book. The situation is, however, much more complicated than it seems at first sight.

To begin with, translations of any kind are not considered as proper academic work in Spain and, so, do not count for research assessment –even when they are critical editions. We, academics, produce them anyway because we think they are a relevant part of our jobs, particularly in the case of those of us working in second-language areas. 'English Literature', supposing you can imagine it as a single entity, can trust that we'll do the job of transferring to our languages its most relevant works. Nonetheless, as we know very well, not even the immensely important Anglophone Literature can be certain that it is fully represented in other languages. Think now of minor language Literatures, like Catalan, with a very restricted circle of academics preaching its beauties abroad and you'll see the problem. We, Catalan speakers, need to cross our fingers and hope that someone will choose to put their energy into doing us the favour of translating our works. And the money, of course.

Literary translation is, I'm trying to say, an extremely haphazard process. It would make perfect sense for each language to have a body of experts whose job would be to ensure that an agreed-upon list of works received translations into the major languages. No such body exists, as far as I know. In Catalonia the Institut Ramon Llull offers grants to translators and for the promotion of Catalan culture abroad but these

depend on the applicants. I might be wrong but, apparently, no Catalan organism is checking that our most prominent authors are indeed translated. The problem, as it is obvious, is that many relevant authors in one language are completely unknown in another. This, by the way, affects both the classics and the contemporary works for the root of the problem is finding a readership big enough to guarantee business.

After all, translations are published by companies that expect to make a profit and there is no way around this hurdle. Unless, that is, official institutions decide to invest money in making these translations available themselves (perhaps as ebooks). This might be expensive but, even so, relatively cheap thinking of the authors whose copyright has expired. In the case of writers whose copyright needs to be respected the problem, of course, is that local publishing houses expect to get foreign rights fees. There is, nonetheless, a world of difference between the benefits that a first-rank living author may bring and the very limited market open to someone living but less prominent or someone dead and little known abroad.

So, back to *Mecanoscrit*: no native English-speaking Catalan Studies specialist has offered to translate this book. Local native Catalan specialists may translate foreign works into Catalan but they do not translate Catalan literature into other languages; hence, nobody has volunteered, either. This is how I have found myself at this strange crossroads: I'm a Catalan native speaker with an English solid enough (excuse me!) to attempt the translation. The rules of the translation game, however, are limited as regards the circulation of the translation: we, the Eurocon team, are very lucky that we have permission from Planeta, who owns the rights on *Mecanoscrit*, to publish the trilingual volume, and, most crucially, a sponsor, the Institut d'Estudis Ilerdencs. Planeta is willing enough to have Wesleyan UP publish the translation but, logically, Wesleyan worries that there are not enough potential readers in the USA to cover the expenses. Since the commercial publishing houses I have contacted have not even replied to my emails, if Wesleyan rejects the translation *Typescript of the Second Origin* risks remaining in a limbo. I could try to convince somehow Planeta to let me find a public online platform to publish *Typescript* –like my university's repository or others– but, of course, they'll demand a fee. And who is to pay for that? So you see the conundrum. Now apply this to any other case you might know about and if you find a brilliant solution, do let me know.

To be continued...

13 July 2016 / JANE AUSTEN FOR BOYS?: ENJOYING MALE INTIMACY IN THE AUBREY-MATURIN SERIES BY PATRICK O'BRIAN

An important function of film adaptations is calling the attention of potential readers to works they would have missed otherwise. I am one of the many readers who became familiarized with the world of the Aubrey-Maturin series by English writer Patrick O'Brian thanks to Peter Weir's excellent film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003). Supposing I saw the film in 2004 this means that it has taken

me 12 long years to finally come round and start reading the novel series. Why? The obvious reason: there are 20 volumes (1969-2004). And I was busy in the meantime going through a similar number of volumes by Scottish crime writer Ian Rankin in his series on rebellious Detective Inspector John Rebus. This led, incidentally, to an article, "Aging in F(r)riendship: 'Big Ger' Cafferty and John Rebus" (*Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 29:2, 2011, 73-82, <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116052>), which might now be obsolete depending on events in *Even Dogs in the Wild*, which I have not read yet. Since O'Brian died in 2000 there is no danger, sorry to be so callous, of yet another Aubrey-Maturin novel unless, that is, someone decides to continue the series, left unfinished at the author's death.

Sooner or later English Literature specialists come across O'Brian's name as this is often coupled with that of Jane Austen. Even though two centuries separate both authors, O'Brian's saga is placed in the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), which are also the background of much of Austen's fiction. As every specialist knows, there is now an ongoing academic operation to claim that despite the scant references to historical and political events, Austen's novels are perfectly grounded in the public national reality of her time meaning that they are much more than just domestic fiction. I am personally quite irritated by this stance since it suggests that domestic fiction needs to be muscled up to be really 'serious' literature and, to be honest, I find the whole operation quite sexist. Austen is perfect at what she does and I see no need to distort it by pretending it is something else, whether political or feminist fiction. O'Brian does not have at all the kind of reputation that Austen enjoys, suffering from the opposite condition: his novels are too often seen as 'just' genre fiction, whether this is adventure or historical fiction and, even worse, as just pap aimed at unsophisticated male readers. Both opinions are quite wrong as a) O'Brian's work is the product of impressive philological research on the language of the early 19th century, which makes them, at least in my view, literary enough, b) check GoodReads and you will see that I'm far from being the only woman addicted to them.

Did I say addicted? Yes. I'm writing this post to try to explain to myself what on Earth I am doing devouring fiction dominated by naval battles of which I only understand a tiny part, as O'Brian's nautical vocabulary is colossal. Before I forget, let me say that the Aubrey-Maturin series deals primarily with the friendship between English Navy captain Jack Aubrey and his ship surgeon Stephen Maturin, an illegitimate child born to an Irish father and a Catalan mother who grows up to be a physician, keen naturalist and sly spy. If I recall correctly, the compound Irish-Catalan is never mentioned in the film, in which Paul Bettany plays an English-accented, much prettier version of Maturin. So, yes, here's one reason for my being hooked: Maturin is a fierce independentist in his two national identities and Catalan is one of his mother tongues. O'Brian was a resident of Colliure in Southern France (or Northern Catalonia) which is why he's very well informed about our tongue. Yet, the ones who are not paying attention are Catalans themselves, as I have found no article, academic or otherwise, analyzing 'Esteve' Maturin. He is, after all, the most prominent Catalan character at an international level so far.

However, I know that this is not the main reason behind my addiction. Let me backtrack. I have read so far three volumes and I'm into the fourth one. When I started *Master and Commander* (1969) I was so dismayed by the vocabulary that I decided to keep my cell phone at hand to check on the bits and pieces of each ship. I must have looked pretty desperate because this led my husband, concerned that I would spoil my eyesight, to buying me a tablet... I did the corresponding MLA search, found a few articles on O'Brian and Austen (an issue to which I'll return), and on the novels' genre but nothing on the Aubrey-Maturin friendship, nor a book covering the whole series. Asking around, I found out that there is indeed a dissertation written by none other than a dear colleague at URV, John Style: *Patrick O'Brian: Questions of Genre* (1998). I contacted John at once but, oh my!, he has no computer files of his thesis. A print copy is now waiting on my desk for me to read. There is here some kind of lesson about our undervaluing our own research...

So, anyway, I read *Post Captain* (1972) and that was it. *HMS Surprise* (1973) followed and seeing that I'm running the risk of losing track of any other fiction I should be reading, I told myself that I would alternate O'Brian with other books. The result was that I found myself rushing through Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* to return to Jack and Stephen. I'm now sailing towards the Pacific Ocean in *The Mauritius Command* (1977).

Leckie's space opera made me see that there is somehow little difference between the spaceships of the future and the tall ships of the past, which might be an advantage for me as a reader of the Aubrey-Maturin series. I'm used to coping with all kinds of weird neologisms in SF which is possibly why I'm quite patient with O'Brian's nautical lingo (more or less). Austen might also be a factor as, particularly in *Post Captain*, O'Brian does a wonderful job of showing the men's side in her time. In this novel Jack is the new neighbour in want of a wife soon beset by a widow with five marriageable daughters, a harpy who puts Mrs Bennett's feeble efforts to shame. In O'Brian's intensely masculine world men are very imperfect and, as captain, Jack struggles to discipline his unruly men taking it for granted that turning them into decent fellows must be his priority (he loves a 'happy ship'). He himself and Stephen are far from being Darcys in public and go to odd lengths in private that would scare away many women. I'm sure, though, that Austen would have enjoyed the humour: O'Brian puzzles Mrs Williams tremendously by having Jack employ his own seamen to run his house –she can't understand why there are no women there. Nor what role Stephen plays.

So here we go: the main attraction of the novels is the intimacy between the two friends. This is a word which O'Brian uses himself whenever he needs to explain how Jack and Stephen are friends and on what implicit rules their intimate bond relies. A female friend who disliked Weir's film told me she was annoyed they didn't clearly say that Jack and Stephen are gay. Well, they are not. As I have argued in my most recent publication ("The Loving Soldier: Vindicating Men's Friendship in Ernest Raymond's *Tell England: A Study in a Generation* (1922) and Wilfrid Ewart's *The Way of Revelation* (1921)", <http://www.brill.com/products/book/writings-persuasion-and-dissonance-great-war>) paradoxically the unmasking by Gay and Queer Studies of male affection as repressed desire has negatively affected the representation of male friendship. I have

no doubt that O'Brian was a homophobe as 'sodomites' are mocked in the novels but I simply do not think that we reach a deeper understanding of friendship by claiming that Jack and Stephen secretly desire each other. They do not. One can insist that Jack's paramour Sophie and Stephen's *femme fatale* Diana are inserted in the text precisely to dispel any hints of homosexuality. Again: this is missing the point, which is that (asexual) friendship (probably) is a far more important bond in the lives of many people than overrated love, not to mention extremely overrated sex. I wrote the article amazed by how the male characters in both novels express downright love for each other and although I still jump every time Stephen calls Jack 'joy', 'heart', 'soul' and I don't know what else, and Jack reciprocates in his own way, I'm getting used to the idea that not all human affection needs sex as an outlet.

This, in the end, is the reason why men and women love the Aubrey-Maturin series: as happened in WWI, which provided men with an excuse to express affection beyond the usual homophobic restrictions of ordinary life, the Napoleonic War sea battles provide male readers with an excuse to enjoy this extraordinary intimacy between these two disinhibited men. As for women, everyone knows we'll go to any lengths for a drop of intimacy –including having to read about extremely violent but also extremely boring naval engagements. Also, after Austen, I enjoy reading about men who are less than perfect, not at all good-looking, even coarse and, yet, good company to each other... and to the reader. Jack and Stephen are both extraordinary and incredibly real, and I think this is why I must praise O'Brian.

Um... 16 novels to enjoy...

4 August 2016 / WORKING FOR MEN'S CHANGE (I): LESSONS FROM BELL HOOKS

[I'm still enjoying my three-week summer break, which is why I feel today particularly rusty. In academic terms, my holidays consists of a) not answering work-related email and b) not thinking of my extremely busy agenda from next week onwards. Beyond this and as all academics do, I'm reading all I can manage between outings. Above all, I'm enjoying the luxury of thinking about what I read in leisure, which is why we academics should have much longer holidays... The holiday also explains why this post comes in two instalments.]

Today's post will turn out to be intensely personal for I wish to deal with the thorny topic of patriarchal man's recalcitrance in the face of necessary change and I know of no more recalcitrant patriarch than my father. His unwillingness to change despite the universal criticism and rejection of his appalling private and public behaviour is the colossal rock against which my own personal feelings and my training as a Masculinities Studies specialist crash again and again. This is why I always find some kind of comfort in reading about other Gender Studies male and female activists who also have the misfortune of having terrible, unmanageable, uncaring fathers. In this

case, the volume providing some solace this summer is bell hooks' *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004).

I find myself quite comfortable with bell hooks' ideas for I share many points in her own brand of feminism, which she calls, perhaps excessively, 'visionary'. To begin with, I do agree that 1970s radical feminism was too angry "to imagine a culture of reconciliation where women and men might meet and find common ground", based on forming a shared front against patriarchy. Like hooks, I stress all the time a most basic point: one thing is patriarchy and another masculinity—there's no reason at all for masculinity to be always patriarchal, and it is in men's interests as much as in women's to get rid of patriarchy, the ugliest system of social organization ever invented. Patriarchy needs to be outed and named again and again as our common enemy, for its most insidious piece of social engineering is pretending that it is simple human nature, thus pre-empting any possible alternatives.

Like hooks, I have often placed myself in the very uncomfortable position of telling other feminist women that hating men (that is, engaging in androphobia or misandria in response to misogyny) leads nowhere, for we happen to share the planet with them. Some radical feminist SF writers have imagined in many stories what life would be like without men and, tempting as some of these stories might be, I don't wish to participate in the extermination of the male half of the human species if only in our imagination. Like hooks, I'd rather build bridges among what often feels like separate alien species. At the same time, I do belong to the collective which wishes on a daily basis that particular men die so that the suffering they cause may end. This is our only hope in a situation in which patriarchal men simply refuse to change though, here's the downside, wishing that someone dies feels terrible—a black hole sucking into the void the positive energy required to build those necessary bridges.

"Men cannot change", hooks writes, "if there are no blueprints for change". Here's the question, though: who will provide the blueprints? We, the feminist women who believe in men, have been trying to help for decades now with an alarmingly low rate of success. hooks argues that, paradoxically, women love patriarchal men despite their not loving us back ("they would cease to be real 'men'") because our longing for "father love" overwhelms our better judgement. Also, I would add, because we believe against all evidence in the power of love to transform men—you see how cheesy this sounds. Thus, hooks plunges fearlessly into total sentimentalism when she argues that "the deep inner misery of men" springs from a "longing for love" that we, "feminist thinkers" must dare "to examine, explore, and talk about". Patriarchal culture "really does not care if men are unhappy", which is why it provides no outlets for the expression of feeling and, so, "The masculine pretence is that real men feel no pain". Quite provokingly, hooks accuses women of not wanting "to deal with male pain if it interferes with the satisfaction of female desire" for a 'real' man.

Her recipe, then, looks something like this: find unhappy men, listen to them, sympathise with their woes, explain how patriarchy works, offer comfort, provide the blueprint for change. Been there, done that, and quite often, since I was a teenager. However, and this is where I diverge from hooks, a woman needs to be careful when

choosing who to invest her sympathy on. As she notes, the only emotion that patriarchy values is anger and, as most victims of couple-related abuse can tell you, this often bursts out when the woman is offering emotional empathy: if there is a thing which recalcitrant patriarchs hate is being exposed as (in their view) weak men before 'inferior' women. Quite logically, then, "Fear keeps us from being close to the men in our lives; it keeps us from love" for too often our attempts to approach these men have been rebuked with violence, either verbal or physical.

Unlike hooks, then, I have learned to distinguish between deserving and non-deserving men, that is, between potential allies in the anti-patriarchal struggle and downright patriarchs. The former are the object of all my love, respect, interest and attention. The others I hate with the passion of 1,000 radical 1970s feminists for there is NOTHING to love in them. I have made mistakes in my life, like any other woman, but at the ripe age of 50 I am experienced enough to know when argument (whether emotional or rational) will make no inroads into patriarchal brains. I no longer speak, then, of 'men' in general but of two classes of men: 'patriarchal men' and (hopefully) 'anti-patriarchal men', or, simply, good men. To make my point clear, suppose you are an anti-Nazi person trying to survive in 1940s Germany: surely, you would try to find allies of your same ideology to build a common anti-Nazi front and would never make the mistake of trying to persuade Nazis that all they need is love. So, yes, hooks does sound quite naïve by proposing that we learn to love men in general...

"To create loving men", hooks writes, "we must love males". Obviously, as she highlights, this passes through loving boys, of which the highest measure is teaching them to avoid the patriarchal pitfalls as soon as possible. As things are now, families, including new-style fathers, have learned to love their boys much better; however, as everyone knows, patriarchal society is so all-pervading that an anti-patriarchal father's love provides hardly any protection against the bullies his boy will find at all levels. We women can love men as much as we can but if men still hate each other in order to prove their patriarchal credentials there is little we can contribute to changing their ways. It's really up to men... Like hooks, I'm aware that women contribute much to upholding patriarchy, whether as victims or as perpetrators and it is true that often sons who wish to free themselves from patriarchy have to fight both father and mother. Indeed, few fathers and mothers understand that their behaviour is conditioned by patriarchy's need to renew itself; this is why the monster needs to be named, exposed and destroyed. The point of the brutal patriarchal psychological violence parents inflict on children is to "reinforce a dominator model" of "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" which few see with as much clarity as hooks. So, yes, let's name it as often as we can.

I must also agree with hooks when she writes that patriarchy "promotes insanity". Patriarchal men lash out against children and women because they cannot get satisfaction out of their lives, having been promised a degree of power and respect they never earned nor deserved. "The patriarchal manhood that was supposed to satisfy does not", hooks sentences, adding that "by the time this awareness emerges, most patriarchal men are isolated and alienated". Rage serves "as the perfect cover, masking feelings of fear and failure"; anger, she observes, "often hides depression and

profound sorrow". It is also a formidable barrier. My own father appears to be a textbook case: nothing any member of my family can say to help him out of his rage resonates with him; he sees himself, rather, as a deeply misunderstood man, a victim of our collective ill-will against him.

"To this day," hooks writes, "I hear individual feminist women express their concern for the plight of men within patriarchy, even as they share that they are unwilling to give their energy to help educate and change men". I close this post with the same thought I closed her book: a man can only wish to be educated and change if a) he understands what patriarchy is, b) he is willing to abandon it. Yet this is a classic example of tail biting: a man dazzled by patriarchy will reject all attempts to be re-educated and, as patriarchy works now, already baby boys are too stepped in its mystique to embrace an alternative. So, when exactly are we to save boys from patriarchy? And how does hooks expect to establish any kind of conversation with the adult patriarchs? Going back to Nazi Germany, this is charging the Jews with the task of convincing Hitler and company to abandon their evil ways.

It seems to me that we, feminist women, can help to educate the good men we come across into our anti-patriarchal stance. Then it's up to them to take the front line in the fight against the patriarchal aggressors. Turn now to my next post to see what happens in this case...

4 August 2016 / WORKING FOR MEN'S CHANGE (II): LESSONS FROM JOHN STOLTENBERG

John Stoltenberg calls himself a 'radical feminist' activist, though in my view he appears to be one of the few genuine anti-patriarchal male fighters. There are two reasons, however, why he prefers using 'feminist', as I deduce.

One is that feminism made him aware of patriarchal injustice. As he writes in his main work, *Refusing to Be a Man* (1989)—the volume on which I'll comment here—"In various ways, feminism has blown like a gust of fresh air through a lifetime spent agonizing and anguishing about the place of other men in our lives". I'm hesitating to provide this piece of information but the case is that Stoltenberg, who identifies as gay, learned his feminism from Andrea Dworkin, his partner and wife for a total 31 years. His is, then, a classic case of a man learning to defend anti-patriarchal justice from a woman he loves, though I'd rather leave aside the gossip about the actual arrangements in their marriage (I assume everyone knows that Dworkin was a leading American radical feminist). On the other hand, unlike hooks (and myself), Stoltenberg prefers calling the enemy 'male supremacy' rather than 'patriarchy'. For him, all masculinity is tainted by patriarchy, which is why he calls for men to reject being a man and embrace feminism; likewise, he believes that racism can only be eliminated if white people reject whiteness. Now, if you're a white man and you are wondering what you can call yourself if you reject these main features in your identity, the answer is 'person'.

Reading Stoltenberg's complaints against how Elizabeth Badinter misrepresented his position as 'male self-hate' in her book *XY: On Masculine Identity* (1992), I realised that she may have prejudiced me against his work, which is why I have taken so long to read him. However, I have found *Refusing to Be a Man* (which is actually a collection of essays), an extremely lucid, well-argued and sensible book, deserving to be much better known. Badinter, of course, is not to be blamed for Stoltenberg's marginal position as an author but, rather, the immense resistance which his critique of male supremacy elicited from patriarchal men—as it was to be expected. Stoltenberg refers to “a mass retrenchment, a counter-refusal, as it were, refusing to refuse to be a man” including the “earnestly liberal academics” in Masculinities Studies. In his view, which I share in part, this discipline “does not get at the problem” of how the blatant lies upholding male supremacy survive from generation to generation. He claims that our academic approach “serves theoretically only to deceive another generation yet one more time” though I'd argue that progress is slow because there is not a male anti-patriarchal civil rights movement similar to feminism. Unlike Stoltenberg, I don't believe that men should join feminism: rather, my view is that both women feminists and men in need of liberation should join in their common anti-patriarchal fight.

“Male supremacy”, Stoltenberg explains, “is the honest term for what is sometimes hedgingly called patriarchy” (which he limits, rather, to the father). Stoltenberg places the material penis rather than the symbolic phallus at the centre of male supremacy, complicating in this way women's contribution to this noxious social system (see bell hooks). The biology of sex is, thus, central in his view although he stresses that both the sex itself and male supremacy are constructions. For Stoltenberg even penile sensations are socially constructed, that is to say, men do not feel during sex anything we might call natural but what male supremacists tell them they should feel (mainly, the pleasure of domination). He even denies that sex exists as a class of individuals: “The penises exist; the male sex does not”. Of course, he worries that the 'male sex' does exist for those who maintain it as a social construction, since this is “a political entity that flourishes only through acts of force and sexual terrorism”. In Stoltenberg's view of male supremacy, individuals accept the “values and interests of the class”, for which the “habit” of “sexual objectification” of women is essential: “Male sexual objectifying is not simply a response to male supremacy; it functions to enforce male supremacy as well”. What perhaps surprised me most in his argumentation is the idea that “male supremacy requires homophobia in order to keep men safe from the sexual aggression of men”; without homophobia, he claims, men would be raped as often as women (think of what happens in jails).

Stoltenberg's volume is so varied in the topics it touches that it's truly hard to summarize his main points. I'll have to skip, then, aspects as important as how male supremacist fathers terrorize their boys into accepting the rules of patriarchal manhood. Also the shocking idea (for me) that the penile erection which confirms male supremacy is not limited to sexual arousal but to many other mundane experiences like feeling danger. I left unfinished a complicated article in which I tried to explain terrorist bombings (including Hiroshima and Nagasaki) as the ultimate patriarchal orgasms but, if I credit Stoltenberg, I was not really wide off the mark... Let

me turn then to two central topics in *Refusing to Be a Man*: pornography and, of course, change.

It comes as no surprise that Stoltenberg's views on pornography are very close to those of Andrea Dworkin in her best-known volume *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981). Dworkin, together with Catharine MacKinnon, defended the view that pornography should be outlawed not depending on vague obscenity legislation but because it attacks women's civil rights. Dworkin's views generated a massive confrontation between feminists who decried pornography and those who defended women's rights to choose in any matter connected with sex. She and Stoltenberg describe in their works the kind of hard-core pornography based on humiliating women that any right-thinking feminist should reject; they do not even contemplate, however, the possibility now defended by many young feminists that women may create and enjoy their own kind of pro-feminist porn. When Stoltenberg claims that "Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice" or that "Pornography tells lies about women. But pornography tells the truth about men" I tend to agree simply because like him I don't believe that real sexual freedom, accompanied by what he calls sexual justice, exists. "Essentially", he writes, "sexual freedom has been about preserving a sexuality that preserves male supremacy" and in which porn is central. With true equality, if that ever comes, sex will not be at the service of male supremacy and only then will we find out whether porn can be dissociated from domination, humiliation and hatred. In the meantime, yes, by all means, let's persecute abusive porn which infringes civil and human rights. And let's question whether we need porn at all, pro-feminist or otherwise.

Another very important point which Stoltenberg also disputes is the widespread idea that men can't express their feelings. As a "class", men "have always expressed their feelings, eloquently and extensively", he observes, through religion, nationalism, militarism, the diverse social institutions and even sciences such as psychiatry: "whether or not a particular man is feeling the feeling at a particular time, the feeling is being expressed through the institutions men have made". Logically, only if the number of "men of conscience" ready to face these institutions rises can we hope male supremacy to be shaken to its foundations. Stoltenberg, is, however, quite pessimistic about the 'man of conscience', for "he won't do anything until it is clear to him how it affects him and his brethren as men". Thinking of the men of the 1990s (the men in the decade after the book's publication), Stoltenberg makes a series of very negative predictions, which can be summarised this way: they will do nothing but will claim this is because they don't know what is politically correct, and will feel good nonetheless for at last discussing their feelings. I'm sorry to say that this describes very well Masculinities Studies... though to be fair the current men of conscience are still facing an extremely recalcitrant male supremacy (see my post of 27 March).

I am currently reading an excellent book by American historian Adam Hochschild focused on WWI: *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918* (2011). In this volume Hochschild examines how a variety of male and female activists opposed this brutal war in Britain (feminist Emmeline Pankhurst, let's recall this, sided with the Government). Hochschild gives very many examples of how the patriarchal

institutions behind the war were opposed at a very high personal cost, and thus pays homage to the individuals who changed the private and public view of the Great War. When Stoltenberg writes that “The core of one’s being must love justice more than manhood” or that “The pride to which we aspire is not in being men but in being men who...—men who are living their lives in a way that will make a difference. We must be transformers of selfhood—our own and others”, then, what is missing is a specific programme of acts of resistance that can bring about this transformation, in imitation of other movements in other historical periods.

We might argue that the liberation movements that crystallized around the time of WWI (feminism, pacifism, anti-imperialism, communism) have failed in many ways but at least they have succeeded in others. The same can be said about the anti-racist civil rights movement of the 1950s. 27 years after the publication of Stoltenberg’s denunciation of ‘male supremacy’, however, there is not yet a visible public movement engaged in its destruction with men’s massive participation—the very existence of male supremacy or of patriarchy is still denied on a daily basis despite the evidence that links couple-related abuse and widespread military terrorism. Women are certainly divided between feminists and patriarchal collaborators but at least feminism has made us aware of the division and of who our enemy is. In men’s case, patriarchy totally prevails thanks to having convinced men that there is no possible collective action against it; I even suspect that the figure of the outsider has been glamourised to pre-empt, precisely, any collective anti-patriarchal reaction. Patriarchy tolerates the partial erosion of some of its main tenets (misogyny, homophobia, racism, slavery, militarism, capitalism) at particular points but has so far managed to survive by pretending it’s not open to change because it is basic human nature. How long for we are going to accept this appalling lie is really up to us.

Refuse being a man, and refuse being a woman. Let’s all be persons.

14 August 2016 / PHILOSOPHISING ABOUT GARDENING: A SINGULARITY OF BRITISH CULTURE

Although this is a short volume, it has taken me a while to read David E. Cooper’s *A Philosophy of Gardens* (2006), which my philosopher friend Marta Tafalla recommended to me. I had assumed that reading post-structuralist criticism had prepared me to deal with most kinds of abstract thinking in the Humanities. I was wrong. Before passages such as “The meaning of The Garden, if there is one, is what exemplary gardens exemplify. The Garden is appropriate to what it means through exemplifying it” (129), I was still baffled... Also, Cooper insists again and again that he aims to discuss ‘The Garden’ as an ideal concept, beyond its socio-cultural material realities and his is a position that I found myself resisting as a Cultural Studies specialist. I ended up eventually combining my reading of Cooper’s book with the delicious documentary mini-series presented by Monty Don, *The Secret History of the British Garden* (BBC, four episodes, available from YouTube).

Both Cooper, emeritus professor of Philosophy at Durham University, and Don, a popularizer of horticulture famous for presenting the BBC television series *Gardeners' World* (started in 1968...), are very British in their taste for gardens. This doesn't mean that other nations do not care for gardening (just think of Japan, or see Don's series *Around the World in 80 Gardens*). What I mean is that a foreign student of British culture is often mystified by the intensity of the British devotion to gardens and gardening. When I started reading English Literature in its original version one thing I noticed is that flowers and plants were very often mentioned, of types I could by no means identify in my own two languages. I marvel at how many times I have come across the word 'nasturtium' in fiction. As for the famous poem with the daffodils, I learned when first reading it and trying to understand all its words that the flowers are called 'narciso' in Spanish (I first saw one in England...).

The Spanish gardens most often named and praised are those of la Alhambra in Granada, the royal palace at Aranjuez, the Reales Alcázares in Seville—and that's about it (I know the list of notable gardens is much longer, but here I mean popular). The city where I live, Barcelona, is a disaster when it comes to gardens and parks. Madrid boasts of the extensive El Retiro park next door to the botanical gardens, all downtown and easily accessible. Yes, we have Ciutadella, the equivalent of Retiro in Barcelona but, discounting the zoo, it's not as big nor as popular. The mountain of Montjuïc has several gardens (one even specialising in cactuses) but, well, it's a mountain, which means it's not particularly accessible, no matter what the Town Council preaches. One needs absolute determination to visit the botanical gardens there... I see park Güell from my window but, leaving the crowds of tourists aside, I find no aesthetic pleasure of the kind Cooper praises in its so-called gardens, too dusty, too unkempt.

Having enjoyed daily evening strolls in the central park of the small Spanish city where I have spent my holidays I wonder what is wrong with Barcelona and its gardens. Turó Parc, a very pretty little garden which I love, designed by the city's most revered gardener—Nicolau Maria Rubió I Tudurí—is now in a pathetic state which is hard to believe. Something then, having to do perhaps with the merciless heat of summertime, which kills so many plants and demands constant watering, has made us, Barcelona citizens, less than keen on gardening. I see the wilting plants in the few window sills adorned with plants at all and I positively want to scream... particularly when I think of what you can see in Andalucía (extremely hot, remember?) and the north of Spain, where even the palm trees imported by the nostalgic 'indianos' thrive.

I don't have a garden, that is to say, a plot of land to grow plants in, but I do have (rent...) a bigish terrace, where I battle daily with stubborn plants that refuse to stay healthy and survive the season. This is why I have read Cooper's book with a bit of scepticism, perhaps because he does not care for the down-to-earth details of actually growing a garden. I think he makes a wonderfully valid point of remarking that the pleasure we take in gardens is distinctive, and not at all a mixed pleasure derived from our parallel enjoyments of the artistic and natural values of gardens. A garden is a garden is a garden. Now, his main philosophical argument, once the rules of appreciation have been established is that "The Garden, then, is an epiphany—a symbol, in the Romantic sense—of the relation between the source of the world and

ourselves" (150). He himself jokes that you might be "liable to draw a blank" (132) if you approach you neighbour with that kind of sophisticated thought. Nonetheless, he is really in earnest when he insists that The Garden (the ideal place, not any specific garden) exemplifies "a co-dependence between human endeavour and the natural world" and is "an epiphany of man's relationship to mystery. This relationship is its meaning" (145). In gardening, we strive to achieve the "good life (...) led 'in the truth'"; in tending to our plants we learn "care, humility, and hope", informed "by a sensibility towards a fundamental truth of the human condition" (157). If in tune with The Garden, we engage in an "appreciation of the place of human beings in the way of things" (157).

I see you, dear reader, raising an eyebrow, as I did, and thinking that this is overdoing it and that although parts of Cooper's ideas ring true the whole argument is overblown. In taking care of one's garden and in appreciating the beauty of someone else's garden, private or public, we engage in a unique aesthetic pleasure, I grant that. Yet, I fail to see the epiphanic quality of that experience and I feel that it is a much more direct kind of pleasure, attuned to our love of being in places where you can relax and feel in peace with yourself and the world. Um, or is this what he means all in all?

Monty Don's mini-series provided me with what I was missing in Cooper: a history of how the aristocratic privilege of owning a park and garden is in our times combined with the privilege of owning a few square metres to grow your own garden. Yes, *privilege*. As a working-class city dweller raised in a flat with just windows (and not even flowers in the windowsills much less fresh cut flowers in vases), I have always felt truly envious of people who could grow plants at home. As a little girl I felt envy of my grandmothers because they had each a tiny balcony to grow flowers in (to this day, I love hydrangeas because one grandma preferred them). Whenever we visited relatives in my mum's village or saw some house with a garden outside the city, no matter how modest, I grew really moody and resentful. Just by chance I got my terrace, and now one of the main problems in my life is that I cannot afford to buy a bigger flat with an equivalent-sized terrace in absurdly overpriced Barcelona. Terraces, by the way, are often called 'solariums' by local real-estate agents, which gives you a clear idea of what people prefer doing with them: sunbathing.

The thought of giving up my terrace is simply unacceptable to me. Why? Because no matter how much effort municipalities may put in designing public gardens and parks for their citizens, the real privilege is not having to leave home to relax surrounded by bits of green. This is the privilege that neither Cooper nor Don address. The difference between Britain and Spain (or Catalonia) is that suburban sprawling gave the privilege of owning a garden to low-middle-class and even working-class British persons. In Catalonia geography is our enemy, for the terrain is mostly hilly and you see even in expensive 'urbanizaciones' houses placed in steep inclines, occupying plots in which there is hardly any room for a strip of grass. Having said that, I think that even when we have the space, either in a terrace or a proper garden, we in Spain lack the cultural background that makes gardening a rewarding activity, as it is in Britain or other countries. Perhaps, just perhaps, gardening is too close for comfort to the

backbreaking agricultural work many of our grandparents fled as migrants to the city and we want no soil to dirt our hands.

Watching another documentary, I learned that the major British newspapers have 'gardening correspondents'. Also that Prince Charles is a much more respected figure than you might think in the gardening world, which, by the way, has its long list of celebrities (Monty Don is one). I'm even beginning to worry that there might be already a discipline called 'Garden Studies' which I have completely missed (wait for Routledge to notice the gap...). The list of resources connected with gardening in Britain available online is simply staggering and has by no means an equivalent in Spanish (though I recommend the lengthy Wikipedia article on gardening in Spain, https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historia_de_la_jardiner%C3%ADa_en_Espa%C3%B1a). You might think that gardens make a small cultural difference, and one quite easy to overcome as everyone enjoys a beautiful garden. Yet, my impression is that this is a deeper cultural difference than it seems. Just think of how unlikely the existence of a 'corresponsal de jardinería' for *El País* or *La Vanguardia* is and you'll see my point. Or try to imagine Queen Letizia showing an interest in gardens beyond the ones at la Zarzuela Palace.

One last word (or not). Here are three beautiful spots with gardens: El 'señorío de Bértiz' in Navarra (an extensive natural park and gardens), El Habana (a hotel with a lovely garden in La Pereda, near Llanes in Asturias) and the Casa Sorolla in Madrid, which will give you a very clear idea of the kind of privileged urban seclusion which a wealthy Spanish person might aim at in the 20th century.

May you enjoy an epiphanic moment in them.

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