THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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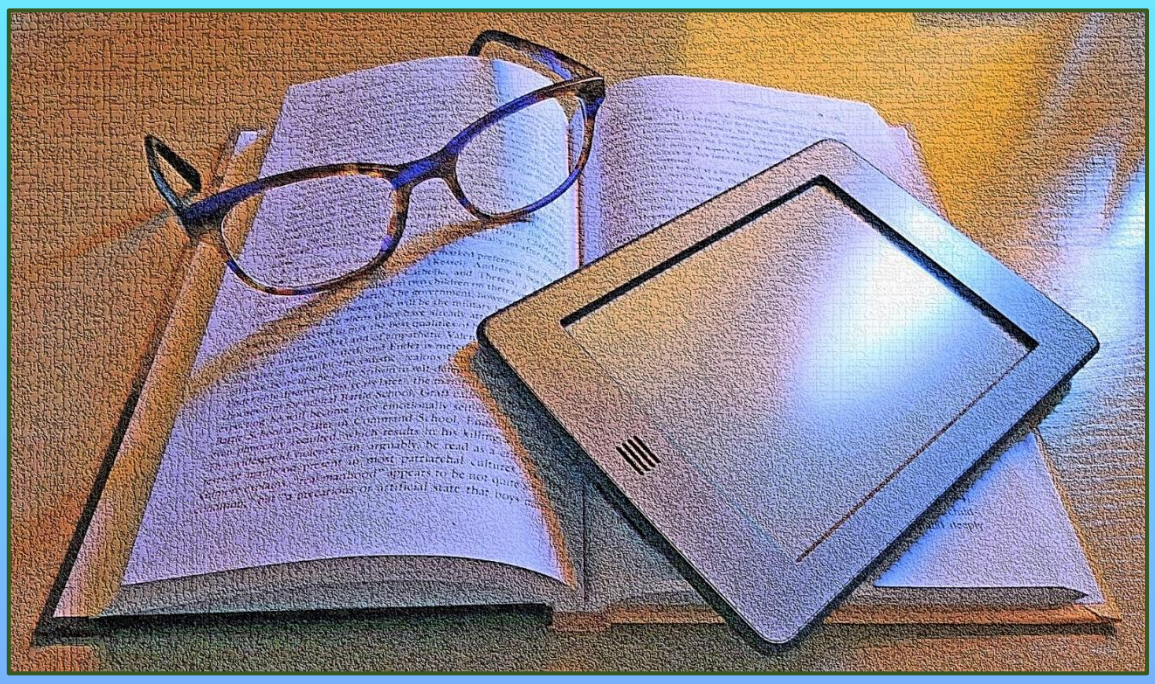

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PLEASE, NOTE

These are the posts published between September 2021 and August 2022 in my blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature*, which I started writing in September 2010, (blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/). The eleven previous volumes are also available from UAB's digital repository at http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328. There is a version in Spanish of this volume, available from the same link.

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6 September 2021 / STILL NO JOY IN TEACHING LITERATURE THIS YEAR: ON COVID-19'S SECOND YEAR AND RETURNING TO CLASS

I am re-reading my post for 7 September 2020 in which I express my fears about returning to face-to-face teaching and I marvel at how little things have changed. I wrote then that I was in the grip of "Fear that the return to class next week means being infected with Covid-19, with who knows what consequences, and fear that I might infect those who live with me and endanger lives I love even more than mine". I also wrote that I hoped those fears would soon be over and the return to normality a matter of six months. We are now eighteen months into the pandemic and although it seems that with 70% of the Spanish population already vaccinated matters have improved very much that is only part of the story.

We now know that doubly-vaccinated persons may still suffer from Covid-19, either in its mildest or in its most lethal form, and we are getting from the scientists worrying information about the serious waning of the vaccine protection only after four months. If this is true, we will go back to square one in December, two years–two years!–after the onset of the pandemic in Wuhan. There are rumours that British PM Boris Johnson has privately declared he is willing to accept a situation in which 50000 persons die of Covid-16 yearly in the UK. This sounded monstrous to me until I realized that we are already there and above, with more than 150 daily deaths in Spain's fifth wave, close to 200 on some days. If a terrorist group massacred 150/200 Spaniards every day we would be angrily filling the streets. However, in this summer's cruel normality, the streets have only been filled with people anxious to party as hard as possible. Many of them are young people soon to be in our classrooms.

University classrooms have not really been a focus of contagion even though many have been full beyond the 50% norm and very few teachers were already vaccinated when presential teaching partially re-started last Spring. The Spanish Government considered primary and secondary school teachers a priority, but told us to our face that since we were mostly teaching online vaccination was not urgent for us. I would agree in my own case, as I have indeed remained home, but I must protest that the lives of many of my colleagues were unnecessarily endangered and that if the damage has remained low this has been just a case of sheer good luck. Most, if not all of us, were vaccinated between April and July, but please recall that vaccines are only 90-95% effective and that not all our students will have been vaccinated next week (nor some anti-vaxxer teachers). Besides, local news outlet Betevé explained last week that street parties are growing, since newly vaccinated young people who had refrained from attending them so far, do so now believing that they are safe. No one is safe because, please let's remember this, the vaccines do not stop contagion, they only diminish the chances of Covid-19 being lethal.

All in all, then, I am bracing myself for a semester that will be, to say the least, complicated. Last year we taught in the flesh for about four weeks before being sent home. We were so optimistic back then that we even started teaching without masks (for the teachers, students had to wear them at all times). We teachers were soon masked, with all the discomfort this entails when you need to project your voice, but at least we were spared the cold winter of open windows that primary and secondary schools have heroically gone through. Not this time. My university regulations require that lectures are shortened by fifteen minutes so that classrooms can be ventilated, but (like last year) the authorities fail to explain where students will be in the meantime, making our crowded corridors again a risk. Classrooms will be filled to 70% capacity, which means that in classrooms for 100 students you will get 70 students, who will be unable to keep the minimum social distance (three feet or two meters, depending on the system you use).

We all know from our experience last year that interaction with masked students seating at a considerable distance from teachers to maximize social distancing is a nightmare. At least, I simply could not understand my students' muffled words. Then there is the matter of streaming if your university cannot find a classroom big enough for your group (in my university groups can be as big as 140 students). This year my university has decided that streaming classes for students who cannot physically be in the classroom is a free choice for teachers. Some may have been happy with the bimodal arrangement, but most teachers and students have concluded that one cannot teach well addressing both those in the classroom and those elsewhere.

Yes, what I am saying is that we are hurrying back to crowded buildings quite recklessly. This push back to classroom rather than online teaching is part of the same trigger-happy dynamic by which many companies are forcing employees back to the office, disregarding the danger and the discomfort. We seem to be operating internationally under the illusion that the pandemic is over, when in fact our hurry to put it in the past tense is prolonging it. No lessons have been learned at all, and we are just travelling, socializing and working as if things were normal. I am not saying that we need to be permanently trapped by the virus, and react hysterically to any bout; what I am saying is that I am appalled that the whole world is pretending that this is 2019, when it is 2021 and the virus is still on the rampage. We are taking for granted not only the death toll (under the wrong impression that only the very old are dying) but also the whole health system, whose workers must be hating every single one of us who ends up in hospital out of imprudence.

The impatience to go back to the classroom or the office has nothing to do, then, with the desirability of traditional models of teaching and working but with a general inability to have benefitted from the new ways brought in by the pandemic. I was truly convinced that the advantages of online learning and working would be appreciated and maintained beyond the end of the pandemic, but this has not happened. Parents of young children who had found a solution to the problem of how to conciliate family needs and working schedules are being deprived of that solution for reasons that are not clearly explained; surely, the cost for companies of keeping offices open is always higher than subsidizing the expenses of at home employees. As regards teaching, even though little is gained right now by gathering masses of students in classrooms to listen to lectures in which they need not participate, this is preferred to online teaching regulated by one's own weekly schedule. Clearly, everyone hates online teaching and learning and this is an important factor but I will insist again and again that a major problem is that what we have been doing during the pandemic is not online teaching but using online resources to continue traditional teaching.

What is worrying me is that a situation in which teachers and students are afraid of returning to the classroom (I am very much afraid!) is not normal. I would not go to class if I had a gunman pointing at me every day, but I am asked to take health risks that are still pretty serious, vaccine or no vaccine. One need not be top virologist Margarita del Val to understand that by mid-October at the latest, we will have a sixth wave of contagions, now when we are still going through the tail-end of the fifth one. I do not understand the logic of this, particularly because the situation is not accompanied at all by clear legislation from the national Government and a better sense of responsibility from each citizen. When I read that people skip vaccine appointments and that many of the 30% still not vaccinated are anti-vaxxers, negationists, and plain covidiots I simply hate the human species.

In my own teaching practice I am going to keep going what I did online last year with my in-person teaching, that is to say, I will open online forums for discussion beyond the classroom, I will have students who do class presentations upload narrated PowerPoints to our virtual classroom for further discussion, and I will try to use my tutorial

time for open online sessions, book-club style. I very much want face-to-face teaching to be less fundamental to my courses, so that students see that learning is not something that happens on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:30 to 10:00 but a continuous process that weaves in and out of our online and live meetings. I will, of course, try to make my presence in the classroom as productive as possible but, unlike what I have recently doing, I will stop checking attendance and will allow students more freedom to learn as they wish, as long as they follow the course. I intend, in short, classroom interaction to be a resource with the same importance as others online and not the very core of teaching. We'll see if anything really changes.

Let me finish by sharing something else that worries me. I have not stepped into a classroom in the last 330 days, more or less, and I keep having these nightmares in which I see myself going back to teaching but being rejected by students. They don't listen to me, or leave the classroom in the middle of my lectures… On the day I return to class I will have been a university teacher for thirty years, and that I have these nightmares says all I need to say about how vulnerable Covid-19 makes me feel. Should make us all feel.

Hopefully, by September next year this pandemic will have died out… only by then Barcelona might be gone, flooded by the effect of climate change. The future is, definitely, not what it used to be.

13 September 2021 / THIRTY YEARS AS A TEACHER: THINKING OF ASSESSMENT

In a couple of days I will be celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of my career as a university teacher. I was hired as a youthful 25-year-old and time passes that fast. I believe it is an important anniversary, though I am not sure yet what sort of watershed this is. Until the 2008 crisis (I think), university teachers with 30 years' experience were allowed to retire with a full pension, provided they were at least 55. This privilege is now long gone and since retirement for my baby-boomer cohort will most likely be at 70, this means that I am only two thirds into my career, which may extend up to 45 years. This is a daunting thought. If I think 15 years into the past, then I go back to 2006, the pre-crisis world that belongs to another era. This is when I realize that 15 more years—climate change willing—are still very many to go.

Having got rid of these melancholy thoughts, I must say that I do not wish to use this post to reminisce about the first 30 years in my career. This is not an uncommon figure for my demographic or older and I am sure that the recollections of other persons are juicier. I would like to consider instead the devaluation of experience and the overvaluation of innovation, though, as you will see, I will though, as you will see, I will soon enter into other matters, the main one being assessment.

I am certainly an experienced teacher but students—who, as a friend said, get younger and younger as we teachers age though they are always the same age—are a constant reminder that teaching experience is only relatively valuable. A long experience means that each session—seminar, lecture—takes less to prepare but since our audience is different each year experience does little for the finetuning of mutual communication. Students are in some sense eternally the same, and in many others very different, as corresponds to members of different generations. My first students are now nearing 50, the ones I'll start teaching tomorrow are about 19. When I started I was only 7 years older than my second-year students, I am now 36 years older, and the time might come when I am 50 years older than my ever young students. My case, which is absolutely very common, means then that the more experienced teachers of my age group are, the more disconnected we grow from our students. Teaching innovation is

supposed to bridge that gap though no doubt the greatest innovation would be going back to hiring full-time 25-year-old to teach undergrads. Currently, the average age of Spanish university teachers is my age, 55.

The problem with the concept of innovation is that it does not really address the nature of education in depth. I think that I am entitled to say after 30 years that what is wrong with education is assessment. I don't know how Aristotle or Socrates taught their students but, somehow, I don't see them marking papers. Or worrying about whether a disciple was copying from another disciple's exercise. Everyone understands that a romantic relationship in which one of the partners never loses from sight the possibility of cheating is unhealthy. In contrast, higher education assumes that students will and do cheat. This is supposed to be in the nature of students, those devious creatures!, but it is actually part of the nature of education as it is now. In romantic relationships monogamy tends to be a hurdle if one of the partners does not believe in it (I read in the paper that a surge in infidelity is expected, now that employees are going back to the offices after the worst of Covid-19 is over). Likewise, assessment is an open invitation to cheating because who can really agree to being assessed all the time?

Assessment is the opposite of education for the very simple reason that it is not a mechanism to check the advance of learning but to prevent students from cheating (= doing as they like). Let me give you an example. In my Cultural Studies course I want my students to read and study independently David Walton's extremely informative *Introduction to Cultural Studies: Learning through Practice*. This is the only book they need to read, as we will be working with pop songs, and texts such as opinion articles, reviews and interviews. To make sure that students do read Walton's book, I have valued this part of the course with a hefty 25% of the final grade. For me to assess that students have studied the book, they need to submit a 500-word essay based on the passage they prefer from the whole text. Well, I have already had a student ask me whether they need to read the whole book, in an attempt to open a negotiation about how much really they need to read. I am simply not interested in this kind of negotiation and I have, therefore, decided to avoid assessment and make students responsible for their self-assessment (using a rubric I will provide) for the whole subject.

This is not the first time I leave assessment in the students' hands. In the past academic year I invited my MA students to self-assess, also on the basis of a rubric, and this worked very well in the sense that nobody cheated and gave themselves a higher grade than they deserved (in my view). The tension always affecting this aspect of teaching evaporated and we could focus on what really mattered, which was producing a book together. As I return again to project-oriented learning with this new BA class, it makes more and more sense for me to educate students into being responsible for their own work. If a student decides to resist my efforts to educate them, then they should be responsible for awarding themselves a fail, not I. I do not think a person is led onto the path of adulthood by teachers' assuming the burden of assessing students who refuse to do their best. I want my students to blossom into responsible adults and this should begin by their understanding that trying to cheat on me or any other teacher either through actual academic offence or simply by not being sufficiently involved is immature and, well, childish. Not what undergrads should do.

In the last ten or eleven years I've had second-year BA student self-assess their grade for classroom participation (meaning actual involvement, not just attendance), which usually amounts to 10% of the final grade. This has worked well and in the last five years, more or less, I have hardly ever altered any of the grades. I must explain that rubrics are essential for self-assessment. A student may believe that they deserve, say, an 8/B+ but when faced with the description of the learning results actually deserving of an 8/B+ they will think twice. I've had students having to painfully acknowledge they deserve a 0 (is that an F?) and others proudly claiming they did wonderfully, but I have

never had a student question this practice and tell me that my job consists of assessing them. Actually, the time I don't waste in assessment is time they gain in other types of attention from me (for instance, last year I made myself available online one hour a week just for chatting about the books we were reading— I loved those sessions!). I do not know if I am going too far this year by having third/fourth year students self-assess all their exercises, maybe I am, but I just don't want assessment to interfere with teaching.

I am well aware that what I am saying here cannot work with all degrees or subjects, and works best when the whole class is involved in a common project. My worry right now is not who will pass and who will fail but whether I will be able to convince my 27 students in Cultural Studies that our common aim is not filling in 6 credits but producing a book. None of my students can fail, for all need to be good enough writers to participate in our project, which means that I will use most of my time to correct and edit their work in at least two versions (I use rewriting all the time). This method, of course, has nothing to do with cramming in, say, Medicine or Law Studies and with the need to constantly test whether the future doctor or lawyer has advanced enough to be able to engage in increasingly specialized knowledge. I have a woefully poor knowledge of how other disciplines work, including the Linguistics area in my own Department, but I have this total certainty, based on my experience, that assessment is too important in higher education and needs to be either limited, or altered, or abandoned for ever.

Suppressing assessment possibly sounds wonderful to the laziest students (and teachers!) but I am not speaking of a free-for-all by which you end up earning a degree by doing nothing except registering. No, what I mean is the opposite: assessment has all this protagonism because we don't trust our students to really want to learn, and need to push them around so that they learn enough stuff to at least pass assessment. Carrot and stick, stick and carrot. As I know, both as a former student who did well at exams and as a teacher who hates exams, assessment is not learning. I am still assessed regularly as a teacher and as a researcher, and I can say for good than the highest pleasure of learning usually come to me when I work on activities which escape assessment—including this blog. Perhaps for you, dear readers, the conclusion is that I have learned nothing in 30 years of teaching and that resisting education is part of education, which makes assessment necessary. The way society is structured, assessment operates at all levels to weed out slackers and incompetent employees, and to reward the most brilliant minds with money for their research or prizes, yet this only replicates what we face from day one in kindergarten. Isn't it time we change tack?

I wonder what students think about this— or are they the first ones to defend assessment?

27 September 2021 / CELEBRATING A LIFE WELL LIVED: *IN MEMORIAM* LOIS RUDNICK

The Fulbright Commission has been sending visiting scholars to Spain since the academic year 1958-59 (according to its directory, Howard Floan was the first visitor, to the University of Zaragoza). My Department received a steady flow of visitors, shared with the Department of English of the Universitat de Barcelona, between the mid-1980s (as far as I can tell) and 2013. The modest financial aid we could contribute towards our visitors' expenses could never compete with potent private universities, like Deusto, and although we still welcome visitors, none has materialized in the last eight years. The last one was poet John Poch. I was recently approached by another possible visitor, so hope has not died out that we'll get back in stride.

I met our Fulbright visitors first as a student (undergraduate and doctoral) and later as the person in charge of running the applications from our side, which included socializing with them, sometimes minimally, sometimes more regularly. I do not recall all our visitors but some made an important impression both among us as a Department and personally in my career and life. Thus, I learned to work in depth and at speed with the wonderful Bonnie Lyons who taught us, doctoral students, about Jewish American Literature. Russell Goodman, who specialized in philosophy and Literature, welcomed a quite crazy essay I perpetrated on Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, my first academic writing on sf. Another very generous visitor, Connie L. Richards, persuaded me to send my paper for her course on turn-of-the century American Literature to a Texan journal she co-edited, which—to my immense surprise—accepted it. That was my first publication ever at a time, besides, when my teachers in the doctoral programme of my Department were telling us that no pre-doctor should dare publish anything. How things have changed!

On a personal front, visiting professor Tiffany Lopez (2004-5) and I shared great moments. She had a guide by a Californian publisher to the best patisseries in Barcelona, and we would visit a different one every week. Our sweet tour culminated in a most memorable dinner at Espai Sucre, a restaurant which serves an awesome set menu only composed of desserts. Academic life and its pleasures… Yet, the visitor that left the most indelible impression was Lois Rudnick, who jokingly called herself 'the Queen', and was indeed a marvellous woman, a real queen. For the few months in 1994 when I had the privilege of enjoying her friendship, my life was very much enriched. I have heard the same praise from the many persons celebrating her life a couple of days ago in the online memorial held to gather her friends together. Sadly, Lois passed away in June aged 76, too early, when she still had much to do and say, the victim of a devastating cancer.

I last met Lois, after too many years, in October 2018. I wrote next a post about her book *The Suppressed Memoirs of Mabel Dodge Luhan: Sex, Syphilis, and Psychoanalysis in the Making of Modern American Culture* (2012). What I never told Lois but can finally say now that she's gone is that I find it unfair that Luhan got so much attention from her because I doubt that someone will one day write about Lois herself. Literary Studies and, in general, the Humanities disciplines devoted to studying artistic production are implicitly biographical since we put ourselves in the background to celebrate the work done by others. Some will say that we are parasites living off the achievements of persons whose monthly wages have been never guaranteed as ours are (if we have tenure, that is). There is a little bit of that, I grant it, but also much of selfless caring for what talented persons have done and we wish to preserve. This should be plain common sense, yet whenever I have read Lois' outstanding work on Luhan, I have always resented the situation, thinking that extraordinary persons like Lois will never find their biographer because academics have a lower status than artists. Obituaries, memorials, and texts like this post will have to suffice and, of course, Lois' academic publications— her ten books and dozens of articles.

We know, however, don't we?, that academic lives are not limited to what we publish. In fact, now that I think about the matter, unless one is extra careful in giving instructions to perpetuate one's work beyond retirement or death, my impression is that whole careers can be scattered to the winds and either totally disappear or persist just in the randomness of who cites whom. We scholars do not seem to care much what happens to our writings so that, thinking of the case at hand, I've had trouble finding online the complete list of what Lois published in book form, and had to check GoodReads and Amazon. On the other hand, the legacy of good teachers and researchers lives on for generations, sometimes anonymously and in ways no academic authorities can quantify. For instance, Lois coached me about how to deliver my first paper in an academic conference and I have coached my doctoral students applying

what she taught me. Hearing her ex-students and colleagues a few days ago in the memorial I understood that we have no instruments (happily!) to measure true impact of this kind. This has nothing to do with publication metrics, performance assessment in teaching, awards or distinctions, but with that much bigger impact good scholars make through being kind and caring.

Perhaps because of this in the middle of the memorial, when so many persons had already described Lois' academic achievements, a person complained in the chat: stop, she wrote, and give us your personal memories. For it is in the personal memories, either fully personal or professional, that a real imprint is left. So, here we go. I saw *Schindler's List* with Lois when it was released in Spain and we both left the cinema in tears; Lois was Jewish and when some idiot tells me that Spielberg sentimentalized the Holocaust excessively, I recall her distress and her tears and let stupidity pass. Lois loved contemporary dance and we saw together all the performances of that already long gone Spring of 1994 in Barcelona. There was a small theatre, L'Espai (1992-2005) run by the Catalan Government, which kept us supplied with a constant stream of great dancing. We were lucky that public money was used then in that way. Incidentally, my funniest personal memory of Lois, 'the Queen', came when I told her that Queen Sofía in person would be at the ceremony to award the LaCaixa grants, of which I was a recipient. Her surprised expression that actual Queens could be met will always stay with me.

To sum up, I have not wanted to commemorate here Lois Rudnick as someone who is gone for good but as someone who will always remain in the memories of friends and colleagues. This is the same for everyone who passes away but it's been my intention to highlight here how unexpected academic encounters lead to the greatest benefits and pleasures. An underside of academic life is that attachments that can be very intense for the three days a conference lasts or the few months a visitor remains cannot be integrated in one's regular life easily. I do not mean that persons we meet in academic gatherings cannot remain friends for many years and stay regularly in touch; we all have important relationships of that kind. What I mean is that as a human collective we are used to long-distance friendships that we wished were much closer. I feel that way about Lois but also immensely happy that she was in my neighbourhood for a while.

On the other hand, I have also wanted to make the point that good scholars who, like Lois, are warm persons leave behind a powerful trace that fortunately the academic system cannot measure. I think that, on the whole, we are missing the chance to enliven and increase this other, much more personal, aspect of academic life. The pandemic has made much worse our tendency to work and live in academic isolation, or at least that's how I feel. Of course we are in touch through the networks we work for, or through the personal relationships established within Departments, but I have the impression that we are not doing enough to truly talk to each other. I'm sorry, as you can see, that I did not speak more with Lois; somehow I assumed we would meet again, but that chance to enjoy friendship anew is gone. Don't let other chances pass you by.

And Lois, my queen, just let me say this planet has been made much brighter by your walking on it. Thanks for that.

4 October 2021 / A MINI-HISTORY OF WOMEN'S SINGING (IN ENGLISH): THE 20TH CENTURY

This is, no doubt, the strangest post I have ever published, but pending the transformation by my students of this list into a Spotify list (as they promised), here is my selection of 20th century songs by women (in English). I am currently teaching a Cultural Studies course on women in pop, and instead of lecturing to my students on names and titles

corresponding to ninety years of women's music, I produced this list and invited them to spend part of three sessions sampling the goods. In that way I managed, besides, to find an interesting use for the cellphones in class!

Please, don't think that the list is ready-made and available elsewhere, or that it was easily compiled. I went through lots of websites claiming to offer the best of specific decades and came up with a selection that while surely very imperfect hopefully serves well as an introduction. As you may see, I have placed the women singers in order by date of birth. They appear in the decade when they had their first hit, with some exceptions (for instance, Tina Turner, though famous in the 1960s, appears here in the 1980s when she made her glorious comeback). The list ends in 1999 because my students are working on a collective e-book about 21st century women's songs (in English), to be published next January. Finally, all the songs can be found on YouTube, which has the advantage of having you see the women in question to better learn (or remember) what wonderful artists they all are.

The 1920s: Blues to jazz

- Marion Harris (1896–1944), 'I Ain't Got Nobody' (1916)
- Mamie Smith (1883–1946), 'Crazy Blues' (1920)
- Ethel Waters (1896–1977), 'Stormy Weather' (1933)
- Ida Cox (1896–1967), 'Wild Women Don't Have The Blues' (1924)
- Gertrude Pridgett Rainey, a.k.a. Ma Rainey (1886–1939), 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom' (1927), 'Deep Moaning Blues' (1928)
- Bessie Smith (1892–1937), 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out' (1929)
- Clara Smith (1894–1935), 'Troublesome Blues' (1927)
- Bertha "Chippie" Hill (1905–1950), 'Trouble in Mind' (1926)
- Annette Hanshaw (1901–1985), 'Am I Blue' (1929)
- Victoria Spivey (1906–1976), 'How Do You Do It that Way?' (1929)

The 1930s: Big band, jazz, songs from movies

- Sippie Wallace (1898–1986), 'I'm a Mighty Tight Woman' (1937)
- Jeanette MacDonald (1903–1965), 'San Francisco' (1936)
- Blanche Calloway and her Boys (1904–1978), 'I Need Loving' (1934)
- The Boswell Sisters: Martha (1905–1958), Connee (1907—1976), and Helvetia "Vet" (1911–1988), 'Cheek to Cheek' (1934–5)
- Martha Tilton (1915–2006), 'And the Angels Sing' (1939)
- Billie Holiday (1915–1959), 'Strange Fruit' (1939)
- Ella Fitzgerald (1917–1996), 'Dream a Little Dream of Me' (1931, cover version 1956)
- Bea Wain (1917–2017), 'Heart and Soul' (1939)
- Judy Garland (1922–1969), 'Over the Rainbow' (1939)

The 1940s: More blues, swing and vocal melody

- Alberta Hunter (1895–1984), 'The Love I Have for You' (1940)
- Mahalia Jackson (1911–1972), 'Move On Up A Little Higher' (1947)
- The Andrews Sisters: LaVerne Sophia (1911–1967), Maxene Anglyn (1916–1995), and Patricia Marie "Patty" (1918–2013), 'Rum and Coca–Cola' (1944)
- Lena Horne (1917–2010), 'Mad about the Boy' (1941)
- Helen Forrest (1918–1999), big band singer, 'Skylark' (1942)
- Vera Lynn (1917–2020), 'We'll Meet Again' (1943)
- Anita O'Day (1919–2006), 'Let Me Off Uptown' (1941)
- June Christy (1925–1990), 'Tampico' (1945)

The 1950s: Beginnings of pop

- Dinah Shore (1916–1994), 'Love and Marriage' (1955)
- Georgia Gibbs (1918–2006), 'Kiss of Fire' (1952)
- Peggy Lee (1920–2002). 'Fever' (1958)
- Sarah Lois Vaughan (1924–1990), 'Misty' (1959)
- Doris Day (1922–2019), 'Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be Will Be)' (1956)
- Dinah Washington (1924–1963), 'What a Diff'rence a Day Makes!' (1959)
- Lita Roza (1926–2008), 'Secret Love' (1954)
- Julie London (1926–2000), 'Cry Me a River' (1953, 1955)
- Eartha Kitt (1927–2008), 'Santa Baby' (1953)
- Patti Page (1927–2013), 'How much is that doggie in the window?' (1952)
- Rosemary Clooney (1928–2002), 'Tenderly' (1952)
- Connie Francis (1937—), 'Lipstick on your collar' (1959)
- Patsy Cline (1932–1963), 'Walking after Midnight' (1957)
- Debbie Reynolds (1932–2016), 'Tammy' (1957)

1950s to 1960s: Motown and the girl group

- The Supremes 1959–1977 (Diana Ross, Mary Wilson, Florence Ballard), 'Where Did your Love Go?' (1964)
- The Ronettes 1950–1966 (Veronica Bennett (Ronnie Spector), Estelle Bennett, Nedra Talley), 'Be My Baby'
- Mary Wells (1943–1999), 'My Guy' (1964)

The 1960s: Pop, rock, folk and beyond

- Petula Clark (1932–), 'Downtown' (1965)
- Shirley Bassey (UK, 1937–), 'Goldfinger' (1965)
- Etta James (1938–2012), 'I'd Rather Go Blind' (1965)
- Nico (1938–1988), with the Velvet Underground, 'Sunday Morning' (1967)
- Dusty Springfield (1939–1999), 'I Only Wanna Be with You' (1964)
- Grace Slick (1939–) (with Jefferson Starplane), 'White Rabbit' (1967)
- Dionne Warwick (1940—), 'Do You Know the Way to San Jose?' (1968)
- Cass Elliot (1941–1974), with The Mamas & the Papas, 'California Dreaming' (1966)
- Aretha Franklin (1942–2018), 'Respect' (1967)
- Janis Joplin (1943–1970), 'Me and Bobby Mc Gee' (1970)
- Brenda Lee (1944–), 'I'm Sorry' (1960)
- Cher (1946–), with Sonny 'I Got You Baby' (1965)
- Brenda Holloway (1946–), 'Every Little Bit Hurts' (1962)
- Lesley Gore (1946–2015), 'It's My Party' (1963)
- Nina Simone (1933–2003), 'Mississippi Goddam' (1964)
- Cilla Black (1943–2015), 'You're my World' (1965)
- Sandie Shaw (1947–), 'Girl Don't Come' (1969)
- Lulu (1948–), 'To Sir with Love' (1967)

The 1970s: Folk, pop, rock, disco…

- Joan Baez (1941–), 'Diamond and Rust' (1975)
- Carole King (1942–), 'You've Got a Friend' (1971)
- Barbra Streisand (1942–), 'The Way We Were' (1974)
- Joni Mitchell (1943–), 'Big Yellow Taxi' (1971)
- Debbie Harry (frontwoman Blondie) (1945–), 'Heart of Glass' (1978)
- Anni–Frid Lyngstad (1945–) and Agnetha Fältskog (1950–) (with ABBA), 'Waterloo' (1974)
- Carly Simon (1945–), 'You're So Vain' (1971)

- Linda Rondstadt (1945–), 'Blue Bayou' (1977)
- Patti Smith (1946), 'Because the Night' (1978)
- Dolly Parton (1946–), 'I Will Always Love You' (1974)
- Emmylou Harris (1947–), 'If I Could Only Win Your Love' (1975)
- Olivia Newton–John (1948–), 'Hoplessly Devoted to You`(1979)
- Donna Summer (1948–2012), 'I Feel Love' (1977)
- Stevie Nicks (1948–) (with Fleetwood Mac), 'Dreams' (1977)
- Bonnie Tyler (1951–), 'It's a Heartache' (1977)
- Kate Bush (1958–), 'Wuthering Heights' (1978)

The 1980s: the MTV age begins

- Tina Turner (1939–), 'The Best' (1988)
- Grace Jones (1948–), 'Slave to the Rhythm' (1985)
- Pat Benatar (1953–), 'Love is a Battlefield' (1984)
- Cyndi Lauper (1953–), 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' (1979, 1983)
- Annie Lennox (1954–), (with Eurythmics), 'Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)' (1983)
- Chaka Khan (1954–), 'Through the Fire' (1984)
- Gloria Stefan (1957–), 'Conga' (1988)
- Siouxie Sioux (1957–) (frontwoman Siouxie and the Banshees), 'Happy House' (1980)
- Madonna (1958–), 'Like a Virgin' (1984)
- Belinda Carlyle (1958–) (lead singer The Go–Gos), 'Heaven is a Place on Earth' (1987)
- Sade Adu (1959–), 'Smooth Operator' (1984)
- Suzanne Vega (1959–), 'Luka' (1987)
- Alison Moyet (1961–) (with Yazoo), 'Only You' (1982)
- Whitney Houston (1963–2012), 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody' (1987)
- Tracy Chapman (1964–), 'Fast Car' (1988)
- Janet Jackson (1966–), 'Rhythm Nation' (1989)
- Kylie Minogue (1968–), 'I Should Be So Lucky' (1987)

The 1990s: Before social media

- Marie Fredriksson (1958–2019) (with Roxette), 'It Must Have Been Love' (1990)
- P.J. Harvey (1959–), 'Down by the Water' (1995)
- Melissa Etheridge (1961–), 'Come to my Window' (1993)
- Björk (1965–), 'Venus as a Boy' (1993)
- Sheryl Crow (1962–), 'All I Wanna Do' (1994)
- Shania Twain (1965–), 'That Don't Impress me Much' (1997)
- Sinead O'Connor (1966–), 'Nothing Compares 2U' (1990)
- Liz Phair (1967–), 'Supernova' (1994)
- Toni Braxton (1967–), 'Unbreak my Heart' (1966)
- Tori Amos (1967–), 'Tear in Your Hand' (1992)
- Sarah McLachlan (1968–), 'Angel' (1999)
- Anastacia (1968–), 'I'm Outta Love' (1999)
- Lisa Loeb (1968–), 'I Do' (1997)
- Celine Dion (1968–), 'My Heart Will Go On' (1997)
- Gwen Stefani (1969–) (with No Doubt), 'Just a Girl' (1995)
- Mariah Carey (1969–), 'Hero' (1993)
- Jennifer Lopez (1969–), 'If You Had my Love' (1999)
- Missy Elliot (1971–), 'Sock It 2 Me' (1997)
- Alanis Morrisette (1974–), 'You Oughta Know' (1995)
- Aaliyah (1979–2001), 'You Are Love' (1994)

- Brandy (1979–), 'I Wanna Be Down' (1994)
- Christina Aguilera (1980–), 'Come On Over (All I Want is You') (1999)
- Britney Spears (1981–), 'Baby One More Time' (1998)

Enjoy!

11 October 2021 / A CONFERENCE ON TEACHING INNOVATION: SOME NOTES

I do not know if you have noticed this but there seems to be here in Spain a certain proliferation of teaching innovation conferences recently, by which I mean about the last four years. Some conferences have been around for much longer than that (and I have been running the Department workshop Teaching English Language, Literature, and Culture TELLC for seven years now), but suddenly a new crop is materializing, with acronyms such as CIDICO or CIVINEDU, perhaps in imitation of the more veteran CIDUI. I am not in the habit of attending teaching innovation events because I usually find them too general to be of application to my own teaching–hence my setting up TELLC with my Department colleagues–though possibly this is the wrong stance. I decided, then, to correct my prejudiced view by attending two weeks ago the fifth CIVINEDU Virtual Conference on Educational Research and Innovation.

Before I sum up what I learned, which was plenty, I'd like to defend virtual conferences; they, it must be noted, pre-date Covid-19. For those of us who do not particularly like travelling for professional reasons and who find the cost of attending a conference quite steep (particularly international conferences), virtual conferences are always a good idea. I do know the social aspect is missing but debate is far more intense. In an in-person conference you're lucky if you get two or three questions from the audience, after travelling hundreds of miles and spending hundreds of euros. In, for instance, the CIVINEDU conference (cost 80 euros for speakers, 45 for attendees), some speakers got dozens of comments and questions, as online debate was kept open for a few days, not just the 90 minutes of the specific session. I am not saying with this that all conferences should be virtual, but that it would be very useful to keep virtual conferences alive even after Covid-19 is over for good. Virtual conferences are, besides, far kinder to the planet than the events that require very high mobility and that leave a high carbon footprint, a matter we, the academic community, must also consider.

At CIVINEDU I attended the three plenary talks and saw the video presentations by 21 speakers in two days, pretty intense I should say. I mostly selected presentations dealing with university teaching in the Humanities (the conference covered all levels and all areas), but made the point of attending at least a couple of presentations about Science degrees, which was interesting, too. There was a total agreement in all I saw that the students' learning should always be the main focus of teaching, and that teachers should be, above all, guides and by no means the protagonists of what happens in the classroom. I totally agree with that view.

As happens in all conferences, my view is very partial and another set of papers would lead to different conclusions, but the presentations I attended showed a preoccupation with the emotional stability of students, how to keep their attention engaged, and using social networks skills for improved teaching. I marvel at how often the word 'gamification' could be seen in the titles of papers offering the most varied advice about how to turn boredom into excitement. I have already expressed here my prejudice against this concept. In my modest view, we are going in the wrong direction by trying to have students feel excited all the time in class, when actually we should train them in accepting that learning cannot always be exciting. I attended an excellent

presentation which defended the creativity of boredom but, beyond that, I think that modern pedagogy is too invested in the idea of excitement. My impression is that a student who expects excitement from classroom activities will be twice bored if classes happen to be less exciting than expected. I do not know enough, in any case, about gamification to radically disregard the whole trend, but I am asking for caution.

Something that worried me very much in the presentations addressing the emotional wellbeing of students, very much affected as we all know by Covid-19, is the underlying assumption that we, teachers, are perfectly stable persons. We are not. I do not mean that the profession is full of whacky characters, though we possibly have a higher ratio than most professional sectors. What I mean is that it is somehow implied that we can transmit knowledge about our area, train students in it *and* contribute to their emotional health as if we were robotic machines. I try to do my best not to cause unnecessary distress and keep my students as happy as possibly, but I am a highly stressed, often unhappy person and I do not see anyone worrying about that. By this I mean that I am pretty average, and I think that possibly 99% of my peers are subjected to human emotions that impact their teaching. A teacher can only be an efficient guide for students if s/he is reasonably stable in emotional terms when stepping into a classroom, a position increasingly harder to sustain with all the pressure put on us to perform at all levels, not to mention the job instability of the associate teachers. A presentation, I must note, did comment on emotional coaching for teachers, but my impression was that this is right now a luxury few universities can afford.

Another presentation commented on the mismatch between the competences employers sought in new graduates and the competences students had actually acquired. The same speaker offered a second presentation about whether talent was missing or had been made harder to spot with the implementation of the competence system. We started introducing the new degrees back in 2009 and since then we have been describing what we do, both to the Ministry and to students, in lists of competences. I doubt, however, that any of our graduates pays much attention to that. We should check, but my guess is that at the end of their studies no graduate is thinking of competences but of knowledge acquired. The most absurd aspect of the competences, however, is that we were never allowed to use the verb 'to know' in them because the corresponding committees agreed that acquiring knowledge was secondary to learning how to do something. You should have seen, though, my students' faces when I told them that the main mission of 'Victorian Literature' was not just to have them acquire knowledge about this area of the Humanities, but guiding them to produce basic academic writing. What the competences of the course describe is for them secondary to the fact that they need to read and *know* about authors and texts, as in traditional teaching. Haven't we forgotten, I ask, to tell students about how we actually teach and they are supposed to learn?

It occurs to me that this is a major problem. A presenter described how she established a weekly encounter with her students during lockdown to discuss how they were coping with the situation brought about by online teaching and so on. I found it a wonderful idea because we speak too little about teaching with our students. When we do, great things happen. For instance, in one of the TELLC workshops, two students expressed their view that our instrumental subjects were a waste of 24 credits for students who already had the B2-B1 entrance level our degree requires. They suggested replacing them with language courses focused on academic writing, and this is what we have started doing. I have kept the TELLC workshops open to students but I realize that we need another type of forum. I am sure students do have many more ideas about how to teach and learn, but they have no mechanism to discuss them with us, for fear of offending teachers and jeopardizing assessment. And, yes, I have indeed thought of an anonymous mailbox for suggestions, but I still hope the conversation can be started face-to-face. In the end, if you think about it, perhaps the main problem of any teachers' forum

is that we speak to each other of what we think students feel or might welcome, but do not ask them directly. This is like discussing with your best friend how to have better sex with your couple, without ever asking your couple.

There was a paper that drew particularly good criticism and many positive comments. Did it offer a ground-breaking teaching technique? Perhaps the solution to keep students gleefully entertained and the teachers happily engaged in class? No… The presenter simply drew attention to the design of our classrooms. Eleven years after the start of the new degrees, which supposedly eschew lectures for more collaborative teaching, we still work mostly in classrooms designed for a large audience to face a speaker. See the problem I have now, for instance: I have 65 students in my Victorian Literature class sitting in benches, in rows of eight seats (I think). My platform is placed to the left, and I stand about two metres from the closest student. The ones at the back must be about ten to twelve metres away from me. With their facemasks on, I can't understand them, which forces me to teach less than thrilling lectures, shouting like I'm possessed (I refuse to use a microphone, the last thing I need!). If, instead of the compact sitting arrangements, students were in individual chairs, I could have them work in small groups and I could move around talking to them. Yet this is a luxury we only have in the smaller classrooms. Why the benches have stayed put is easy to understand: in the last ten years, the school where I work has only had money to keep us going, not to consider any major investment. If you ask me, the whole building should have to be redesigned, but that is as impossible as demanding that university classes have a maximum of 30 students.

Oh, yes, I had forgotten about that. The most frequent comment to papers that called for better guidance of students was, 'yes, I love the idea, but with one hundred in my group, how do I do that?' I know that in smaller universities classes of 30 students may be the norm, but in big universities like my own, we may have up to 140 students per group. This is insane. Yet, there is a complete taboo around discussing the issue of group size for the simple reason that if we took it seriously many universities should double their staff. And, as things are, we have trouble enough trying to secure tenure for those who have been around for ages as associates. I will insist again and again that in my time both in primary and secondary schools the habitual class size was 40-45, and little by little 25 became the ideal. I don't know whether this is the actual size of most primary and secondary classes but a class of 40 kids, we all know, is an aberration. In contrast, nobody remarks on the number of students in university classrooms, or if we do it, this is only in terms of the teachers' workload. Beyond that–how can anyone guide efficiently groups of more than 30?–there is the matter of students' rights. I think that a fundamental right is that your teacher knows your name in, let's say, the first two weeks of the course, and can accordingly pay attention to you as an individual person. With more than 30, this cannot happen (or happens at the cost of a great effort).

The main lesson learned at the conference, in short, is that there is plenty of good will and good ideas to make teaching and learning better, but that, as long as the universities keep their old architecture, limited staff, and big groups of students, there is little that can be actually done. What most speakers proposed, from gamification strategies to flipped classes, passing through small group tutorials and so on, involved an increased workload, which perhaps some of us, tenured teachers, can assume but not so our associates, who make up now more than 50% of our teaching staff. I do not mean that the bottle is half empty and nothing can be done, but that the very concept of innovation must refer to what can be done, not mostly to what could be done if only things were better.

Now tell me what it's like for you, whether you're a teacher or a student.

19 October 2021 / THE CYBERATTACK AGAINST MY UNIVERSITY AND WHAT IT IS DOING TO TEACHING

I'm starting this post with a bit of despair. As I wrote my post last week, I noticed there was something wrong with my university's website, where the blog is hosted, among all our online services. I quickly suspected a cyberattack and that was it: we have been offline for a week now, with no date yet set for a return to normality. I could not publish last week's post and I could have skipped my weekly post today, but I have decided to write on, no matter how long this situation lasts for and, hopefully, upload whatever I may have written when normality returns. It might be, we are told, a matter of one month or more. A reminder of how frail all things digital are.

I have nothing to say about the cyberattack itself, except that I am amazed at how little attention it has received in the media and the social networks. This is a very serious situation, not only because of the inconveniences it brings on, but also because plenty of research funded with public money might be lost. We all work increasingly keeping our data and findings in the cloud(s), and this is what we cannot access now. Our research might be, besides, either gone or corrupted by the virus when we manage to reach it. Webmail is also off-limits, and so are all our institutional and personal websites. It feels very odd, believe me, particularly because this comes on top of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the week when classes were returning to 100% capacity.

Since the attack happened on a Monday before a holiday, I have only been to class once and tomorrow will be my second teaching day offline. A friend told me I need to take this wretched situation as an experiment in teaching, and this is what I am doing, though the worst thing is being unable to plan ahead. There are three main aspects of teaching affected directly: we have been told not to use the classroom computers even offline (who knows what may be transferred to the home computers via pendrive), our Virtual Campus is not accessible, and we need to use an alternative email for communication with students and colleagues (which is, actually, barely legal for privacy reasons). Of my two courses, 'Victorian Literature' is less affected, but I was running 'Cultural Studies' on the basis of students' presentations in class followed by online interaction, and I am at a loss about how to proceed without destroying much of what the course is about.

As happens, my 'Victorian Literature' students have a first assignment to hand in tomorrow, which for the first time in possibly fifteen years I'll collect printed on paper instead of by e-mail. My employment at the online Universitat Oberta de Catalunya for sixteen years (1998-2014) resulted in my avoiding any printed exercises from students. I habitually correct and mark exercises online using Word revision tools, which is often time-consuming, as I go through papers down to the last comma, but also more elegant than smearing printed text with marginalia inked in ugly red (I use green or lilac instead if I must correct in that way). Tomorrow, then, I will be taking home 65 exercises the old-fashioned way: in my bag. I don't know what it'll be like to actually write by hand, it's been a while!, but I hope to get used to this soon enough.

Also tomorrow my students will get a mini-lesson on the meaning of the word 'deadline', which has an interesting etymology and everyone misunderstands. Since our Virtual Campus is down and many teachers get students' exercises that way, UAB authorities decided to delay all deadlines of this kind. This seems to be totally absurd, as deadlines are planned weeks in advance and how you hand in an exercise should be no excuse to delay producing it. The word 'deadline', allow me to explain, has apparently two simultaneous origins, which became mixed. On the one hand, it is a US Civil War word which refers to the zone right outside prisons in which escaping prisoners might be killed legally. On the other hand, it was once used meaning the set type that might not be seen when printed (a dead line). By the beginning of the 20th century 'deadline' came

to mean in journalistic jargon the final moment in which a text could be handed in and set to type, from which its use was extended to mean any limit before which an action needs to be done. What students and most academics misunderstand is this: the deadline is NOT the moment when something needs to be done BUT the last possible moment. It it perfectly possible to hand in exercises BEFORE the deadline, without being punished for it. So, what has happened to the students in my class who operate following the wrong meaning of deadline is that they could not access the sample exercise I posted to Virtual Campus about three weeks ago… nor could they email me to get it. The lesson to be learned here is that you need to download at once anything that might be of interest to you, whether this is in a learning context or otherwise. Second lesson: plan your deadlines, make sure the exercise is done a week before so that you can revise it, not a day before for, who knows?, a cyberattack might happen. Stranger things…

What has most surprised me, in any case, about these first days offline is not the bizarre feeling of being cut off from email, but students' absence from class. For the last year and a half we have been putting up either with online teaching or with bi-modal teaching (part of the class in-person, part of the class online). I understand that our Virtual Campus facilitates skipping class, for students can know more or less what is going on. I no longer check attendance but in view of the collapse of that tool, and of email, I would have thought that 100% students would have attended class to check with teachers how to proceed next. This is not what happened, which is ironic considering this was our first week, as I have noted, with 100% in-person attendance (no social distance, all masked). I assume that students are so used to finding teachers' instructions online that they did not realize that classroom interaction is now required. This is how classes used to work pre-internet, back in 1995: the teacher would give instructions for assessment exclusively in class, and either you attended, or you made friends to make sure you could have access to that information and to lesson notes.

Funnily, as I prepared my lectures two weeks ago, I was wondering whether I rely too much on PowerPoint and to what extend this is really working. Last year I recorded many narrated PowerPoints for Virtual Campus, and I believe they were useful, but I am getting more and more uncomfortable with the PowerPoints I use in class. I really feel like saying 'ok, here's what you need to learn— take a look, I have nothing to add'. Last Thursday, with no PowerPoint, I went back to making notes on the blackboard (well, whiteboard), which felt quite dirty (not sexy dirty, but dirty-dirty because of the eraser). I had to think then about what really PowerPoint contributes. When I was a student, I missed very much the visual aspect of learning about Literature, from seeing the faces of writers to understanding fashion, architecture, painting and other cultural manifestations and the socio-historical context. My PowerPoints are, therefore, mainly my notes with lots of illustrations but I'm not sure students are interested in the visuals. Once, after showing my PowerPoint on Victorian painting I overheard a student protest 'this is the Literature class, why is she showing us paintings?!' A colleague of mine says that for students PowerPoint has the effect of TV: it has turned lessons into something one watches, not something one listens to. So, yes, it was odd and awkward to go back to 1995 and teach a lecture without illustrations. Of course, the old projectors we used before computers were available are gone. It's back to our voices, then, and the black/whiteboard. Perhaps this is the part of the 'experiment' I will enjoy best. The other part, let's be honest, is being free from email except of the most urgent kind.

As I walked down the corridor back to my office last week, I noticed that most of my peers had risked taking a pendrive to class with their presentations, but then I saw one sitting at the table, teaching from what looked like handwritten notes. In a little corner of academic Gaul, there are still teachers resisting the pull of the digital empire, I thought. There must be some who have possibly managed to stay in 1995, and not use email, PowerPoint or Virtual Campus, though I have no idea how they manage these days. What

I am beginning to believe is that if they exist, these teachers are possibly the happiest in the world. They won't have even noticed that we are suffering the consequences of the cyberattack. I am not at all of that easy-going type, but I wonder whether the cyberattack will make us rethink the loss of other ways of teaching, which were not always bad but just different. I fear, though, that this temporary breakdown will ultimately be like Covid-19: it seemed to be a catalyser for major change but it has only made some things even worse.

I hope to get back to normal next week, though what normal means lost its meaning at some point in 2019.

26 October 2021 / GENDER ISSUES AND DOCTORAL STUDENTS: THE QUESTION OF MOTHERHOOD

The impact of the cyberattack my university suffered on October 11 is still being assessed and we, UAB bloggers, remain silenced since accessing our WordPress accounts through the university's portal is not yet possible. In the meantime, as I decide whether this blog will temporarily migrate to a provisional site, here is an excerpt of the talk I gave the doctoral students in our programme yesterday, 26 October 2021. The talk, intended to be of interest for both language and Literature/culture students, is called "The Long March Toward Equality and Why We Can't Get Rid of Gender Studies" and in normal circumstances, I would have uploaded it onto our digital repository but that is also inaccessible, as are the personal and institutional websites.

I have called this brief talk 'The long march towards equality and why we can't get rid of Gender Studies' because I am here to call attention to two matters: one, that gender equality has not been achieved yet after 230 hundred years of feminism (if we count from Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792); the other, that for that reason the academic disciplines invented to address this issue are still necessary, though I wish they were not. In an ideal world, Gender Studies would not be necessary because gender would not be an issue. People are not divided into lovers and non-lovers of chocolate and discriminated on that basis, and for that reason we don't see the need to have Chocolate Studies. But as long as those other than cis-gender, heterosexual men are not treated as full citizens, we need Gender Studies. Regrettably.

Gender Studies has a long history as an academic discipline, though it started with another name, Women's Studies in the 1970s, and in California, in imitation of Chicano Studies. Next came Lesbian and Gay Studies, and from the 1990s onwards Gender Studies, Queer Studies and Masculinities Studies. The labels are still very problematic, and so we have many degree programs calling themselves 'Women and Gender Studies', and other problems, such as the fact that Gay and Queer Studies co-exist but do not overlap, or that Masculinities Studies not always has room for gay or queer men. In case you are wondering, Gay and Lesbian Studies tend to follow an essentialist approach, based on the idea that a homosexual identity exists as such, whereas 'queer', a word appropriated by academia from slang, refers to the fluidity in sexual identity, though within limits. Queer heterosexuality, which I myself defend as a sign that we heterosexuals are not always normative, has never been really accepted. Here at UAB, by the way, we have a BA in Sociocultural Gender Studies, and an inter-university MA and PhD program called, precisely, Women and Gender Studies. We also offer a postgraduate degree in 'Male Chauvinist Violence' (or 'Violencias Machistas'), which as I have told the organizers urgently needs a new title.

For those of you who are confused about issues now causing plenty of confusion, allow me to say that gender refers to the cultural construction of identity habitually based on sex, which is part of the biological nature of our bodies. In essentialist models, dominant until the 1950s and still in the most traditional view of gender, there is a total correspondence between sex and gender, so that a female is a woman and a male is a man. Today we are in the middle of an immense revolution which has destroyed this model to replace it with a constructionist approach, which denies not only that there are two genders but also that sex is binary. The turmoil is immense as gender identity is combined with gender expression, biological sex and sexual orientation, adding to this mix the advances in medicine that make bodily transition if not easy at least quite possible to a great extent. You will have learned of the new laws now guaranteeing, for instance in Scotland and soon in Spain, that a person may legally claim a gender identity different from that of her body; that is to say, I might be able soon to legally register myself as a man but keep intact my female body. This has opened an immense debate, which is overlapping with a growing homophobia even in countries like ours where homosexual marriage has been legal for almost two decades. Many things happening at the same time, creating much confusion.

Apart from my own research, I must note that in my teaching I am following a project-oriented methodology and I have published with the BA and the MA students several e-books on gender (all available from the digital repository of UAB). The two most recent are *Gender in 21st Century SF Cinema: 50 Titles* of 2019 and *Gender in 21st Century Animated Children's Cinema* of 2020, both by the MA students. Now I am at work on yet another volume with the fourth-year BA students in my Cultural Studies course, which is provisionally called *Songs and Women in 21st Century Pop*. A number of interesting things are happening there: last Thursday a student presented a song by Demi Lovato, who has recently come out as gender-fluid, and she used all the time the pronoun 'they' to refer to the singer. The student, Andrea Hernández, asked me whether a gender-fluid person has a place in a book about women, and I had to think hard about this, before I replied that Lovato's presence will enhance what we are doing together. Students are very savvy about gender and sex, and are far ahead of me in the use of the new vocabulary. Two of them, currently transitioning, have informed me they no longer want me to use their dead name (that is to say, their legal name). Another uses her gender-fluid name, which has made me think of whether calling myself Sare would define me much better than my name Sara. I don't know yet.

Gender issues affect everyone, including doctoral students. Here are some interesting figures. In 2017-18 there were in Spain 79.386 doctoral students, of whom 39.886 were men and 39.500 women. Good! Spain was, besides, the third country in Europe with the highest number of doctoral students, after Germany and the United Kingdom, but with a much better balance in gender terms. Now, here's the problem which these figures conceal: the average age for new doctors in Spain is 35 for men and 33 for women (the figures are for 2010, but I don't think they have changed). The average age for new mothers in Spain is 31,1 (for 2019); it used to be 25,8 in 1985, the first year when statistics were kept. This means that most female doctoral students must be struggling with the decision to be mothers, whereas male students do not face the same problem. In Spain 95% of men under 30 are not yet fathers and there is no data about when men become fathers for the first time on average, but come sense and mundane experience suggest that paternity need not interrupt a man's doctoral studies in the same way maternity may affect women.

Current statistics, common sense and personal experience, indicate that motherhood is a major obstacle in any professional career. BA and MA women students have often told me that they do not need feminism because they are guaranteed equality by the educational system, and this is basically true. Most BA students in Spain are

women, even though it must be noted that some degrees have a big majority of women (85% in English Studies, 70% in Medicine) whereas women's interest in STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) is waning. I recently met my good friend Carme Torras, a major robotics engineer (and a science fiction writer), and she told me that in her research group of 60 only 8 are women, despite her example and mentorship. Anyway, the point I was making is that young women are under the impression that there are no boundaries limiting their education but they tend to become aware that the boundaries are there indeed the moment motherhood becomes a possibility. One of my female doctoral students recently told me all her friends are getting married and having children, which makes her feel very odd. Her thesis has become not only something she very much wants to write but a key factor in her private life, which is hardly the case with male students. I myself don't have children (just for personal reasons, not because I thought they would be an obstacle in my academic life) but I have seen my women colleagues bravely combine motherhood and excellence in professional achievement in ways I can only admire. It must be very hard.

If you are wondering about the Spanish university and what happens once you have a doctoral degree, this is the situation: at the top level, there are fewer women than men who are full professors (around 20%), most likely as a consequence of the difficulties in combining being a mother with being a top academic; at the bottom level, more women than men are being hired but this is happening just when university jobs are at their lowest point in terms of pay and stability. A university full of underpaid and overworked young associates is always a disgrace, but if being a mother in a full-time job is hard enough, imagine what it is like when you are combining two jobs *and* writing a doctoral dissertation. Sorry if I sound too unfair to the young men writing doctoral dissertations and trying to start an academic career, but even if you are committed fathers, the truth is that pregnancy is still carried out by biological women. There is a certain pretence that this is no obstacle and any woman can carry on doing research until she goes into labour, but this is rather callous and oblivious of what it really means to have a baby grow in one's body. As I say, I have never had a child but it only needs a bit of empathy to understand that the process must be intense physically and mentally, and not always compatible with a PhD. Of course, universities are not totally blind to this issue and UAB has made the provision of allowing pregnant doctoral students and/or recent mothers to take a break (I'm not sure about recent fathers). This is fine, but still a partial solution since the arrival of a baby will necessarily disrupt the life of any PhD student and perhaps what would be needed is a crèche for these cases. I know that I am sounding more and more utopian, but this is what feminism is for.

It is in a way very positive that the problem I am discussing is how motherhood and doctoral studies combine, for this means we need to think of the almost 40000 women pursuing a PhD in Spain as an established collective and not as isolated cases, as it used to be in the not too distant past. Perhaps a matter we are not discussing in all this debate is why, if a person may obtain a master's degree by the age of 23, doctoral dissertations take on average ten more years to complete for women, twelve for men. We could have much younger doctors easily if the system offered more grants and in this way both men and women could complete their dissertations before hitting thirty and being ready to embark on parenthood if they wish. There would always be persons who start their doctoral studies past thirty but it would be desirable that they were exceptions. Younger doctors might be intellectually less mature (sorry!) but since having a doctoral degree has become just the minimum requirement to start an academic career, this is an option we need to consider. I know that as academic careers work today, the problem of when to become a mother would be just pushed onto the next post-doctoral phase but that is the stuff of another debate. Or of the same one: all we need are more grants, and a crèche for each university and adjusting to the reality that the persons embarking on

doctoral studies and academic careers are adults also embarking on the project of forming families.

1 November 2021 / *SQUID GAME* AND THE DANGERS OF MACHINE TRANSLATION: A WARNING

I am not following Netflix's South Korean mega-hit *Squid Game*, being currently off the platform, but I have noticed that the series has attracted much controversy about an issue few people really care about: the quality of the subtitles. What is remarkable is how different the controversies are depending on the linguistic area. For English speakers the problem seems to be whether the subtitles are truly accurate and how much is lost in translation. For Spanish speakers that was also the issue until the audiovisual professional translators called attention, a couple of weeks ago, to the use of automatic translation for the subtitles. I find the problem of accuracy far less urgent right now than the matter of automatic translation, which is not being properly addressed and will have huge consequences in the near future. See how.

As we all know, English is the dominant audiovisual language but the immense popularity of some foreign-language series on the streaming platforms, and the generally low quality of dubbing into English, has forced many spectators to use subtitles. I'm following a CNET article, "Still watching *Squid Game* on Netflix? Change this subtitle setting immediately" by Jennifer Bisset to present the problem affecting the spectators using English subtitles to follow the series' original Korean-language dialogue. All was more or less well until Korean Tik-Tok and Twitter users started protesting about how much the English subtitles missed, from glaring errors to matters of nuance. Bisset warns, like others have done, that although perfect accuracy cannot be achieved, the English subtitles option works much better than the English Closed Captions option for the deaf and hard of hearing, which most spectators use. The English CC subtitles, she explains, are "often autogenerated" and, in *Squid Game* apparently "a closer match to the English dub than the English subtitles". The English subtitles which she recommends are not, unlike the English dub, forced to adapt translation to lip-synching, and are, thus, more accurate, though not necessarily error-free, as many Korean speakers have also pointed out. It's, then, a case, of choosing between the bad and the worse, but not an experience exclusive to this series or to the English-speaking world. As I know from having watched thousands of English-language movies and series with Spanish subtitles the errors are many. They often show that this kind of translation is done in a hurry by underpaid translators lacking sufficient experience (apologies to the ones who are experienced but anyway underpaid).

For the Spanish case, I'm following the article by Héctor Llanos Martínez, "Los traductores españoles protestan por los 'mediocres' subtítulos de *El juego del calamar*, hechos por una máquina" [Spanish translators protest against the machine-made 'mediocre' subtitles of *Squid Game*] for *El País*. Llanos reports that ATRAE, the Asociación de Traducción y Adaptación Audiovisual de España, has complained that Netflix employs a multinational company specializing in automatic translation, Iyuno, which produces subtitles later edited by a person working at a third of the translators' habitual rate. This technique, called post-edition, is what we all use when automatically translating a text that we later revise. According to ATRAE, a translator receives 60 to 100 euros for supervising a 100-minute film, which is awfully low, though getting 300 euros for translating the whole movie doesn't look too good, either. The ATRAE spokespersons have noted that the AIs generating automatic translation do not understand context, subtext, or wordplay and miss many nuances that a human translator

would not miss (though, as I have noted, subtitling is not at all the most accurate type of translation). ATRAE suggests that Netflix may have been unaware of the controversial methods used to translate *Squid Game*, apparently the first series using post-edition, in view of the care it put into the correct translation of *La casa de papel* (*Money Heist*). Llanos comments that Audiovisual Translators Europe (AVTE) had already blacklisted Iyuno in 2020. He also notes that Netflix has declined to make any comments.

AVTE, precisely, released last September an 18-page long *Manifesto on Machine Translation* decrying the practice. The 10 points of the summary include the following declarations: "We do not believe that fully automated localization processes are likely to happen anytime soon", "Although proponents of MT claim that efficiency gains are guaranteed, fixing a poor translation can take longer than translating the same text from scratch", "To reinforce sustainability, translators' working conditions need to be improved", and "Translators are often not aware that their work is used to train MT engines, nor are they remunerated for this". This only shows how desperate the situation is beginning to be for professional human translators. We all know, having the experience of using Google Translate, Word's own translation feature, or other automatic translators such as DeepL that MT has improved enormously in the last five years. In fact, we have all contributed to that, for the AIs are learning from the texts we ask them to translate, constantly improving with practice. I have no idea what I am saying here but Google Translate, which launched in 2006, switched in 2016 to Google Neural Machine Translation (GNMT), MT which uses an AI-powered neural machine translation algorithm capable of processing contextual meaning (much closer to a human brain, then). That explains the dramatic improvement.

My own use of MT means that what would take me 90 minutes to translate from scratch can be ready for uploading in 20 minutes, or less, of revision, which is a great advantage. So, sorry ATRAE and AVTE but in five more years, MT might be as accurate as any human translator, if not more, being already incredibly faster. "Fixing a poor translation" might be by then a concept entirely of the past. I have nothing against translators, quite the opposite: they are professionals I admire profoundly. Yet, it would be naïve to think that any manifestos can stop the march of technology and, above all, the march of greedy, mean capitalism in its search for the lowest-priced acceptable translation. *Squid Game*'s post-edition methods are just the first sign of what is soon coming. I am not sounding a death knell for professional translation but being realistic.

To my immense surprise, two friends who work as professional translators in public institutions (not as literary or film translations), acknowledged to me recently that the use of MT is common, and that their job consists now of revising rather than translating from scratch. I assume this is the same in many other professional and business environments, and I also assume that many academics with little money to spare from their research projects might choose post-edition translation over the far more expensive translation from scratch. One thing we must be clear about is that MT cannot work without revision: you may take Google Translate and have your academic article translated into Mandarin Chinese believing it to be accurate, but only a native speaker of the target language can determine accuracy. It might well be, then, that translators are sought in the future mainly as revisors. This is the part that scares me very much, not just because the wages of professional translators might be drastically cut and their extremely important task undermined but because if the profession is so badly hit that no young person wants to train as a translator, we run the risk of losing translation altogether as a human pursuit. The vision of a world in which *all* translators are AI is a frightening dystopia, as it would put a most important tool of human communication outside human reach. Many people believe that a native bilingual person, or someone who learns a second language, can easily translate but becoming a translator requires serious professional training. Who, however, would think of investing long years in that

kind of training to compete with super-efficient AIs? And how many people really understand the long-term danger of trusting all translation to AIs?

On the other hand, MT opens up new possibilities worth considering that might enrich the cultural field. Suppose you are an author seeking international publication but failing to find interested foreign publishers. You are being told that the cost of translating and revising your book is too steep, and that expected sales make taking risks of this kind pure gamble. Well, you could self-translate using MT, pay for a professional revision and market your book directly in, say, five foreign languages, through Amazon, or similar platforms, or your own website. Just to give an example, this week I will be interviewing for the new Festival 42 British author Richard Morgan, a relatively well-known SF author whose novels *Altered Carbon*, *Broken Angels* and *Woken Furies* have been adapted by Netflix using the title of the first book. Both *Woken Furies* and *Black Man* (known as *Th3rteen* in the USA), Morgan's own favourite novel among his production, remain untranslated into Spanish because his publisher lacks the resources. Why shouldn't Morgan pay for MT plus revision (by a professional translator or an academic like yours truly) and have the novels published as he chooses? He owns copyright, after all. I am well aware that this may sound as anathema to professional translators, but I am contemplating the same process to translate into Spanish my own book *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in British Fiction: From Hitler to Voldemort*, in view of the dozen Spanish publishers that have rejected it. And, yes, MT has a downside for authors, as you will see if you check MT and copyright on Google: the generation of illegal translations of foreign-language work which do not respect author's copyright. You might find your own book on Amazon translated into another language, but let it be known that this is illegal, as copyright always belongs to you. So, get there before others do…

A last matter worries me: if I use a translation tool to translate this post, the copyright is still mine, in the same way the copyright of the original text belongs to me and not to Microsoft's Word, which I use to write it. The software to write and translate is a tool, and not an entity which can own copyright. However, being an avid reader of SF I am familiar with the trope of the AI which becomes sentient and demands to be seen as a full person. If AIs are eventually granted a legal status as persons (as some animals are being granted now), this means that whatever they do, including translation, will be subjected to copyright laws (human translators retain copyright over their translations). The singularity so often announced might happen in 2099 rather than 2022, but it will certainly happen, unless of course climate change wipes us all out. So, brace yourselves for a very strange world in which literary translations, to name the ones closest to my heart, will be signed by AIs bearing personal names. Brave new world… though not for professional translators and, as much as like the idea of AIs, for human cross-language communication.

8 November 2021 / THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATIONS (AND A COUPLE OF PROBLEMATIC SOLUTIONS). PART 1: THE SELECTION OF ORIGINALS

This is the English translation of the article in two parts originally in Catalan, which I published in the web *El Biblionauta* (November 2021).

It is common to celebrate from time to time the novelty of the publication in Catalan of foreign works of science fiction or fantasy, but it is not so common to reflect on the dynamics that make it possible for these works to reach our language. And on the contrary: although not so often, we are happy when we receive news of the translation of a work of the fantastic in Catalan into a foreign language, despite not even knowing

how these little miracles happen. I therefore open a reflection on this topic that will lead, as will be seen, to two bold proposals described in two different articles, one of which is sure to create controversy (see part 2).

So far, things work as follows: publishers decide independently which authors and books they want to translate into Catalan, buy the rights, commission a translation, have it corrected, publish it, and sell it to the reading public with more or less success. However, there is no committee that carries a list of works which would be interesting to translate into Catalan (or from Catalan to other languages), so that in the set of translated works there are always important shortcomings of both classics and novelties. Some works were translated a long time ago but are out of print, others were not translated at the time of their highest popularity and it seems that they will never be translated, and current authors do not find anyone to publish them in Catalan even when they are known. in their language and, why not say it, in Spanish.

The first proposal I make, then, is to make El Biblionauta the headquarters of a committee of science fiction, fantasy and horror readers in Catalan that can advise local publishers and turn the market for books translated into Catalan into an environment. much more consistent than it is now. I'm well aware that readers are volatile and that we don't always buy the books we want to read (which is why there are libraries, friends, and various illegal resources). I would say, however, that if between 100 and 300 people express the opinion that it would be desirable to translate certain foreign titles, Catalan publishers would so do more confidently than simply relying on their own intuition, or sales in the original language.

The committee's idea is also applicable to the translation of Catalan into other languages. When I translated *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* into English, a novel that had already been translated into fourteen other languages but incredibly not into English, I realized that neither the publishers nor the institutions (whether the Institut Ramon Llull or directly the Conselleria de Cultura) monitor which Catalan books are translated into other languages. To be fair, the IRL does offer a database of books in Catalan that could be of interest to translate but this is not specific enough in relation in science fiction, fantasy and horror. I don't see why the readers of El Biblionauta shouldn't be in charge of managing a list of Catalan works in these genres that would be desirable to publish in other languages. Obviously, it would be easier for Catalan publishers to look at the list of foreign works recommended by readers than for foreign publishers to look at a list of Catalan works, but it's all about getting started.

In the middle of writing this article I had the pleasure of being a spectator at the new Festival 42 of the round table 'New genre classics in Catalan: A boom with Adams, Dick, Le Guin, Butler, Matheson, King, Poe, Bradbury, Lovecraft and those who will soon follow…', moderated by Miquel Codony and with the participation of Jordi Casals, Jordi Llavoré, Antoni Munné-Jordà, Martí Sales and Isabel del Río. The table was a celebration of the work that publishers such as Males Herbes, Mai Més Llibres, Chronos, Laertes, Raig Verd, L'Altra, Periscopi, Pagès, Kalandraka and Edicions SECC, among others, have been doing for about ten years in two ways: expanding the list of Catalan translations of foreign science fiction, fantasy and horror classics and recovering out-of-print editions, updating them. This is a very laudable job, without a doubt, but I myself was in charge of questioning a very important point in a brief intervention, when I protested, as an English philologist, that English is too important in this boom. The word 'classic' can't be limited to English-language science fiction, I insisted, but that's what's happening right now.

This is not a new opinion in my thinking but it's true that a conversation during the festival with Italian publisher and novelist Francesco Verso opened my eyes a little bit more. Verso commented to me that, as the University of Rochester's *Three Percent* website warns, only 3% of all books published in the United States is a translation, including books of all genres. Rachel Cordasco, a friend of Verso, has an impressive

database of speculative fiction works translated into English on her website *SF in Translation* and has just published *Out of This World: Speculative Fiction in Translation from the Cold War to the New Millennium* (2021), described as a guide. Verso himself is pursuing a truly international language policy as a publisher, looking for translators of all possible languages, as he told me, and remunerating them in the same way as English translators to encourage them to do more work. The website of his publishing project includes a world map where many authors can be found outside the Anglo-American sphere.

A very important problem, then, is that neither readers nor publishers of genre fiction in Catalan know enough about other languages. To be better informed you can use resources such as Francesco Verso's map, Rachel Cordasco's website and guide, or academic books such as Dale Knickerbocker's, *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction from around the World* (2018). This book is part of the growing wave of interest in the Anglo-American academic world for speculative fiction in other languages, of which the new book *Science Fiction in Translation: Perspectives on the Global Theory and Practice of Translation*, edited by Ian Campbell and in which I myself participate, is also part. In my review of Knickerbocker's volume I complained about how frustrating it is to read a book of this kind full of very attractive reading suggestions lacking translations. The editor, on the other hand, complained about the lack of academic specialists in speculative fiction written in languages other than English or in non-Anglo-American territories (there is, for example, African science fiction in English).

It is easy to understand why the current translation boom is basically linked to the Anglo-American classics since they are the ones we all know, but I think there is an important contradiction between the status of Catalan as a small language among those spoken in world, and the little attention we pay to science fiction in languages similar to ours. This leads me to think that the committee of wise readers I was talking about should be polyglot, if not individually at least as a whole. Both Francesco Verso and my co-editor at *Hélice* magazine, Mariano Martín, are admirable polyglots, and their mastery of diverse languages gives them a comparative knowledge of the space of international science fiction that is simply incomparable. Hearing them engage in a conversation about Bulgarian science fiction a few days ago was a pleasure but, again, a frustration because no text is translated into Catalan.

So I get to the point where I have to express a very strange feeling: I miss the Catalan translation of genre books (science fiction, fantasy, horror) from other languages whose existence I am unaware of. As Francesco Verso told me, we have reached a situation in which not only first-class classics but also second- and third-rate works in English are being translated because they reach us through the powerful Anglo-American distribution machinery. Meanwhile, first-rank works in other languages—both classics and novelties, in large or small languages—go unnoticed, just as Catalan works go unnoticed among international readers. I understand that it is too much to ask that Catalan readers and publishers suddenly become polyglots aware of the current state of the science fiction published abroad, beyond the English language, but that is what we need. Either we do this or we look for bilingual or polyglot people who can inform us and, above all, who can translate into Catalan other traditions yet to be discovered.

In the second part of this article, I explain the role that artificial intelligence could play in this process. Keep reading ...

15 November 2021 / THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATIONS (AND A COUPLE OF PROBLEMATIC SOLUTIONS). PART 1: THE ROLE OF MACHINE TRANSLATION

In Douglas Adams' humorous novel *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy* (1978), a small, yellow animal known as a Babel fish is used, inserted into one's ear, as the solution to the problems of universal interlinguistic communication. We've all dreamed of a device that fulfils a similar function without the inconvenience of having a living creature near the brain, and a lot of effort is being put into that. Google, it seems, is working to build a universal interpreter inspired by *Star Trek*, an app (I suppose) easily installable on cellphones. While finding a way to translate live speech, as we all know Google Translate, other services like DeepL and Word itself (in an often overlooked menu option), help us translate written texts from one language to another with an increasing degree of efficiency.

Five years ago, Google Translate, launched in 2006, was in fact transformed into Google Neural Machine Translation (GNMT), a service that uses an AI-managed neural machine algorithm capable of processing contextual meaning, a feature that partly explains the drastic improvement of machine translation. I guess DeepL works the same way. In recent weeks, as I have already written here, there has been a heated debate about the use of this type of translation in the Spanish subtitles of the Netflix mega-success, the South Korean series *Squid Game*. As ATRAE (Asociación de Traducción y Adaptación Audiovisual de España) has complained, the multinational Iyuno, of which Netflix is a client, has used automatically generated subtitles for the first time, later revised by a human translator, charging a third of the usual fee (that is, between 60 to 100 euros for a 100-minute film). Post-edition (as this practice is called), ATRAE protests, threatens to destroy many jobs and lower the quality of subtitling. AVTE (Audiovisual Translators Europe) already published last September the *Manifesto on Machine Translation* where it warned of the deep damage that machine translation will do in the short and long term in the audiovisual field and where it defends the need to achieve better collaboration between human translators and companies that offer powerful machine-based machine translation services.

This debate has not reached the literary world, but I want to start it by taking science fiction and the Catalan language as a case in point. I do not have a clear idea of the fees charged by translators but I understand that a novel of 300 pages in English can cost a few thousand euros (between 2000 and 4000?) to translate. If we think of a sales figure between 100 and 500 copies, we already see that business is limited, even impossible. I don't quite understand, if I think about it, why there is a certain secrecy around the money it costs to publish a science-fiction book in Catalan, but when I asked several publishers what volume of business they hoped to generate I only got elusive answers. I was going to write that this is a topic for another debate but it is quite the opposite: it is a matter for this one. If we do not know clearly what a translation costs, it is difficult to solve the problem of how to fill the gaps in the publishing market for science fiction in Catalan. I leave aside the delicate issue of subsidies, which is perhaps the real focus of the debate.

The proposal I make below will not please anyone and could even shock many. I take as a case study the English author Richard K. Morgan, whom I just interviewed at Festival 42 and whose work I know entirely in the original English. Morgan has published nine novels, six of which have been translated into Spanish (one of them, *Altered Carbon*, twice due to the author's disagreement with the first translation and the subsequent breach of contract with the publisher). His trilogy about super-soldier Takeshi Kovacs, recently adapted by Netflix, is about to be completed in Spanish, the language in which you can read the first novel (*Carbono modificado*), the second, *Ángeles rotos*, and soon the third, *Furias desatadas*. Also translated are his first novel, *Leyes de mercado*, and the

fantasy trilogy *Sólo el acero*, *El gélido mando*, and *La impía oscuridad*. In contrast, the author's favorite novel among all the ones he has written and, for me, the best, *Black Man* (known in the United States as *Th3rteen*) will probably never be translated into Spanish (unless, of course, Netflix also adapts it). When I insisted to his publisher in Spanish that this was a good work, he replied that he had no doubt that it was, but that it is a novel too long and too little known to be translated. I understand that. It could always be the case that a larger publisher takes over *Black Man* but assuming that this does not happen I make here a controversial proposal: I would recommend Morgan, and all authors in a similar situation, to subscribe to a machine translation service, pay a translator to review the generated text, and self-publish, either on their own website or on platforms like Amazon (or Lektu ... or El Biblionauta).

If no publisher is interested in paying for a translation into Catalan and publishing it, or has no resources, I think Morgan (or any other author in a similar situation) could follow the same method and self-publish in our language. I anticipate the furious protests of publishers and translators, but in all honesty, what should an author do who wants to find a new market in a new language but cannot find a publisher? Is it fair for a work to go unpublished in another language because it's too expensive to translate or publish? The authors have so far accepted the rules of the game according to which a foreign publisher is the one who chooses to buy the rights and commission the translations, and surely they already have enough work to write for them to embark on new and strange adventures in the world of self-publication. As far as I know, authors never commission translations but expect foreign publishers to do so because it is logically cheaper for them. It's all a matter, however, of working out expenses. If authors conclude that it is worthwhile to self-publish a translation managed by himself (or his agent), whether using human translators or revised machine translation, there is no obstacle for them to move forward. It all depends, as I say, on what expenses they care to assume.

I have no intention of antagonizing translators, a professional guild that deserves all my respect, nor publishers, but, perhaps because of the imagination of science fiction authors, many things are changing in the field of translation. I had the impression that the use of machine translation was much less widespread than it is in institutions, business and professional fields, but friends who are professional translators have frankly acknowledged to me that they are now basically engaged in revising texts translated by AIs. It could be argued that machine translation is too little advanced and requires deep revisions as expensive as a translation from scratch but this is a diminishing hurdle, as those of us who use machine translation know (I mean in non-literary tasks).

The vision of a world where only AIs are translators and there are no human beings trained in the profession should frighten us all, and it frightens me very deeply, yet I must make the problem of where translation is heading visible. It would be somewhat ironic that science fiction becomes the genre in which revised automatic translations into Catalan could proliferate, but it would be an irony consistent with the very nature of this genre. Perhaps rules can be set, so that only works that no publisher wants to publish, or for which there is no human translator into Catalan, are translated by combining the work of AIs with human work, but it is truly a pity that we cannot access works in other languages because the laws of the publishing market hinder it. If there is no market for some works in some languages (I'm not just talking about English) it would be logical to look for other strategies. These, by the way, should always be legal, no translation can ever be made disrespecting the rights of authors on their work. Thinking of the authors, I think, as I say, that revised machine translation and self-publishing are the most appropriate paths.

If you find this proposal unacceptable, we can focus for the time being on the first proposal (see the first part of this article) and turn El Biblionauta into the seat of a polyglot council of wise readers that can help publishers make beneficial choices for everyone,

relating to what science fiction could be translated into Catalan, using human translators and beyond the English language.

22 November 2021 / FESTIVALS AND THE ART OF INTERVIEWING AN AUTHOR

Two weeks ago I participated in the new Barcelona festival devoted to the fantastic, understood as science fiction, horror/gothic and fantasy in all the media, not just print fiction. The event is called Festival 42 in celebration of the answer that Arthur Dent, the protagonist of Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker Guide's to the Galaxy*, gets from super-computer Deep Thought to his question about the meaning of life. Coordinated by author and creative writing teacher Ricard Ruiz Garzón, the festival has been finally celebrated five years after Eurocon 2016, and two years after the I Seminar on the Genres of the Fantastic, also curated by Ruiz Garzón. It could have been celebrated earlier if it weren't for Covid-19, but better late than never.

Barcelona, a UNESCO City of Literature, has quite a good number of literary festivals, some directly organized by the town council. Among the latter, BCNegra, devoted to detective fiction and held every February is no doubt the biggest one, as corresponds to the popularity of the genre and the efforts of the festival's founder, the late Paco Camarasa, to publicize it. I myself took some timid steps after Eurocon 2016 to set the ball rolling and start a festival devoted to the fantastic but, lacking the contacts and the energy, I let the project go. Fortunately, Ricard Ruiz Garzón was available to offer Barcelona his own project, brilliantly culminated in five intense days at cultural centre Fabra i Coats.

I have been unfortunately too busy to see all of the festival, but I intend to catch up this weekend, seeing some of the videos online. I have already written here about the matter of the dearth of fantasy translations from other foreign languages apart from English into Catalan, a topic inspired by what I saw in the festival, and I would say that this is my only objection: Festival 42 had too many English-language writers, and too few authors from other foreign languages. I believe that the Spanish fantastic was well represented (I'm told that Edmundo Paz Soldán is the man to follow, and I have his novel *El delirio de Turing* already in my hands), and of course, so were the Catalan authors (please do check Víctor García Tur). Yet, I wonder why debutante Naomi Gibson, author of *Every Line of You*, deserved an invitation (despite her international success) while authors in other languages with longer careers did not get one. This is, in any case, a very minor critique of a festival that has been born with terrific ambition and that has announced with its long programme that it is here to stay. I'm not sure that the name, which only the *cognoscenti* will get and which lacks a direct reference to the fantastic, is the best possible choice, but starting the festival is in itself a triumph.

Ruiz Garzón contacted me last summer to be the interviewer of British author Richard K. Morgan for Festival 42, which both made me happy and dismayed me a bit. I interviewed Morgan back in 2016 for Eurocon, and that was a satisfying but also quite intense experience, coming after a previous written interview with this interesting British author. I subsequently published an article on his novel *Black Man* in the journal *Science Fiction Studies*, and interviewed Morgan again in writing on his most recent novel, *Thin Air* (2018) for the journal I co-edit, *Hélice* (Autumn-Winter 2019 issue). The Festival 42 interview has been, therefore, my fourth encounter with Morgan. It is always a pleasure to be able to talk with a writer, being myself a non-writer (at least of fiction), but I must say that live interviews are quite a chore. I am, besides, quite uncomfortable seeing myself online, but there am I.

My experience of interviewing authors live before an audience is reduced to the two encounters with Morgan and one with Ian McDonald and I cannot, therefore, say that I am a practised interviewer. I have also interviewed Roddy Doyle, Patricia Anthony, and Nick Hornby in writing but the point is the same. Interviews in writing are not, in any case, as stressful experiences for me as live interviews because no audience is there watching you bungle your English out of sheer nervousness, and I can go over the interview with the interviewee to iron out inconsistencies or misunderstandings. In a live interview, there is no second chance: whatever is said, stays said, and on video universally available. Then, there is the matter of translation. In the interviews with Morgan we used English (also Spanish for the Q&A with the audience) and I needn't worry about translation– except for how awkwardly simultaneous translation works on the online videos. In the interview with McDonald, however, we had no money for any interpreters and since I couldn't see myself interviewing and translating, I used a PowerPoint in which you could see the Catalan version of the questions, and two of my students took turns offering consecutive translation from English into Catalan. A bit odd, yes, but I think it worked.

The hardest part of a live interview is understanding your audience and keeping track of time. I have interviewed Morgan and McDonald in the context of festivals attended by readers familiar with science fiction, horror and fantasy. Morgan is now, after the success of the two-season Netflix series based on his novel *Altered Carbon* (2002) much better known than he was in 2016, but even so the audience was in the hundreds for the Eurocon interview and about fifty for Festival 42. All, though, had seen the series, except myself and I was worried that this might show… For the McDonald interview, the audience was also about fifty but possibly only a handful had read his works. Problem number one, then, is that there must be a balance between presenting the writer's career in a general and in a detailed way. I saw some interviews in Festival 42 that went straight to discussing a particular novel, but, being a teacher and not a journalist, I did give an overview of Morgan's career (as I did for McDonald) in the same didactic way I would use in class. In both cases, I did ask as many questions as I could about the craft of writing, and not just about specific novels, because that's what I personally enjoy in live interviews with authors. My impression is that authors enjoy discussing technical matters and I am always curious about issues such as whether they plan or improvise, if characters ever take the lead, why certain scenes are necessary, how locations are chosen, and so on.

As for keeping track of time, this totally kills me. Before interviewing Morgan, I attended with him Desiré de Fez's interview session with Carmen María Machado, and to my horror and consternation I saw de Fez keep the conversation going with no notes and never glancing at her watch. That's when I got really nervous. That's the difference, of course, between an experienced journalist and an amateur like myself. Or not, I'm not sure. In the session before Machado's, experienced interviewer Borja Bilbao had to start the Q&A question, as he sheepishly granted, before he had even asked half the questions he had prepared for Stuart Turton. He had simply prepared too many, though the worst-case scenario must be one in which the author gives very short replies and the interviewer runs out of questions, ooops. In my case, I had written thirty questions, the same number I used for the Eurocon interview, but this time Morgan, very relaxed, gave such long answers that I had to skip also about half of my questions. I must confess that I didn't even hear some of his words, so anxious was I to cover all the main angles and not exceed my 45 minutes. To be honest, I think I only truly enjoyed the conversation when I saw it online. This does not mean that was my last live interview, just that I admire journalists now more than ever for being able to do interviews days after day.

In the two cases, with Morgan and McDonald, I have had the chance to socialise over a meal before the interview, and that is the truly fun part of doing interviews: conversation. The live interview is not for oneself but for the audience, but when

socializing I can ask my own questions and learn. Morgan told me privately basically the same things he explained in the interview about his involvement in the Netflix series but I learned more in conversation since I could ask more nuanced questions without worrying whether someone else would be interested. Selfish, I know! But if I think about it, I'm not sure I will ever accept doing another interview without that perk.

To conclude, I have written this post sharing my experience because interviews are not experiences we usually discuss as scholars, much less live interviews. Of course, writers' interviews are common in print (I see that the *Paris Review* continues its marvellous task) and in video online: you can see interviews with practically any writer you want. What is less common is for scholars to interview writers live. This may happen in the context of conferences, but in festivals and other events such as book presentations, it is more common to have journalists or other authors play that role. I have often been annoyed by that situation, as I believe we scholars are underused in these public occasions, and I am just saying with my post today that we are here, and available. Just a little nervous, perhaps.

29 November 2021 / TOWARDS A NEUROEDUCATION (AND SOME MARXIST MUSINGS)

Today's post is written in reaction to Francisco Mora's volume *Neuroeducación: Sólo se Puede Aprender Aquello que se Ama* (2013). Mora is a doctor in Medicine and Neuroscience, not a pedagogue, but he has been working for years on 'neuroeducation', that is to say, the field proposing that education could be much more effective if we understood more precisely how the human brain works. This sounds appropriate, in the same way that one supposes that coaching in sports improves the more the coach knows about the trainees' anatomical features and capabilities. However, I was disappointed by this particular volume since it seems that we are still very far away from adapting education to the stirring of particular areas of the brain. Mora offers, in short, no recipe to remake education so that exercises can be devised to stimulate, as I say, key brain areas. Proof of this is that when dealing with the major problem of how to turn on students' curiosity he offers the following advice (I'm paraphrasing):

1) Begin with something provoking.
2) Present a mundane question based on everyday experiences that the student can relate to.
3) Create a relaxed atmosphere, so that students feel comfortable; never judge their contributions as being below standard or inadequate.
4) Give time enough for all students to accomplish tasks.
5) In a seminar context, avoid asking direct questions; elicit questions from students themselves.
6) During lectures insert elements that are shocking, surprising, disruptive and so on…
7) … making sure they don't cause anxiety.
8) In a seminar context, invite students to participate actively.
9) Reward with praise good contributions by students (questions, comments).
10) Help students find the answer to a question, rather than give it to them.

Deep sigh… For this we don't need neuroscience but plain pedagogical common sense. Of course, if you are the kind of teacher who thinks that transmitting information through lectures in which students needn't intervene is the best pedagogical method, Mora's advice must be knew to you. But I do hope you are not that kind of teacher.

Let me go back to the subtitle of Mora's book, *Sólo se puede aprender aquello que se ama*, that is 'you can only learn what you love'. In theory, the best teachers are those who make you love those matters you were initially indifferent to, or even hostile. Yet, I believe there is a limit to that kind of miracle, and this sudden falling in love with some matter possibly corresponds to the teacher tickling an area of the brain so far dormant. I do not think, however, that in my thirty years as a Literature teacher I have turned any non-readers into readers, though it might be the case that I have interested some students into certain texts. Likewise, even though in my days as an undergrad a good teacher who is now my colleague (Mireia Llinàs) got me very much interested in Linguistics that was not enough to sustain a firm vocation in this area of knowledge, and I ended up embracing what appears to be my natural area of interest, Literature.

I have thought plenty about why some persons, like myself, love reading while others never get the habit. My provisional neuroscientific conclusion is that our brains are wired so that we get pleasure out of that, in the same way the brains of persons who enjoy practising sports get pleasure out of exercising. Education, as we understand it today, supposes that mind and body can be trained to read and to exercise as basic skills that humans require to lead productive lives. Yet, I remember with glee the day at the end of secondary school when I was finally free from the physical education class which had made me so awfully uncomfortable since the age of six. Why this discomfort? Because I was measured against what my colleagues could do, not what I could myself do—none bothered to check, for instance, that I was much better at dancing than at running. I assume, therefore, that many of our students in the English Studies BA feel the same glee when they pass the last compulsory Literature class. For, your see?, 'you can only learn what you love', and you cannot learn the beauties of Anglophone Literature if you don't love reading to begin with. And that, it appears, has to do with your brain's nature.

So here's the catch: the neuroeducators like Mora use a general model for the human brain but are possibly missing the nuances of each individual human brain. As education works, we teach children up to the age of 16 the same contents, supposing that this is what they all need to become responsible citizens and persons mature enough to embark on the next stage of their education. The system, however, is producing students who are either so uninterested that they quit, or students who learn to navigate the system even though they never really care about a great deal of what they are being taught. I don't think there has been ever any single student in primary and secondary education who has enjoyed learning all the subjects, not even those children with the highest grades. Neuroeducators are telling us that if we knew how children's brains work we could iron out everyone's difficulties in learning and teach kids with less mutual embarrassment the current curriculum, designed, let's be honest, with little care for truly awakening a love for learning.

Perhaps it's the other way round. If we understood well the leanings of each human brain, we could adapt education to each child's abilities and thus engage this child in his/her education from the beginning. Suppose, for the sake of argumentation, that neurologists find there is an area of the brain that indicates a person has great mechanical skills, perhaps even of an engineering type. Why would this person spend his/her complete childhood never developing those skills, being fed instead a dry diet of matters they will never care for? Same with any other kind of skill, and always supposing a correspondence could be found between certain folds in the brain and certain skills. Try to think of this: those of us with scholarly inclinations adapt more or less well to the current type of education, which is based on producing exercises; but if we were subjected to an education based on working with our hands, we would be probably do poorly. However, few of the persons appalled by the fact of so many children are quitting

secondary school ever consider whether the problem is the rigidity of the scholarly model of education.

Am I saying that this should be *Brave New World* and people should be educated according to a neurological analysis of their brains taken at age three, before school begins? Not really, though I think that any perceptive teacher can see that teaching, for instance, mathematics to certain kids (like me) is a waste of time for teacher and student; or that short kids will never make basketball players. What we do instead when a child does not care for a subject, or for education on the whole, is to dismiss that child as a born loser in the worst case scenario and as an educational failure in the slightly less worse. If we go down the path which Mora's rumination opens, then, there is no failure on the side of the child but on the side of the system which has failed to understand his/her abilities and provide him/her with the best possible education (particularly at a secondary school level).

As the system works now, in the cheapest possible way, all children are forced into the same mould. It cannot escape anyone's attention that children from richer backgrounds do better, not because they are more intelligent but because they receive more personalised attention that can bring out their best skills. There are the same number of potential future doctors or designers in each social group, or of crane operators and short-order cooks, but whereas kids from wealthier backgrounds are always being monitored for their skills to bloom, kids in poorer backgrounds are told that they can only do well under exceptional circumstances that require extraordinary commitment either from the individual or from the family. And that hard, low-skilled work is to be their lot.

I am sure you are all horrified by the possibility of that brain scan that will show at age three how each individual should be educated to make the most of their abilities. But perhaps what might be truly scary for the upper echelons is that the scan might show that the brains of little kids show little differences across social classes. I don't think this is where neuroscience and neuroeducation are going but, as you can see, they may have revolutionary consequences not even Marx could dream of. Yes, some people's utopia is other people's dystopia.

6 December 2021 / MUSINGS ON WOMEN'S SINGERS: BETWEEN POP AND ROCK

This semester I am teaching, as I have been narrating, a course on Cultural Studies based on analysing a selection of 60 songs by currently active women singers. Each student works on two singers, and I myself chose to work on Kylie Minogue and, after some hesitation between other options, Shirley Manson from Garbage. I offered my first presentation on Minogue's "Spinning Around" without any glitch, except, as I could see, that students were a bit dismayed that I had chosen a bubbly pop song and a music video focused on Ms. Minogue's display of her fabulous derriere in her iconic golden hot pants. The reception of my presentation of Garbage's much more aggressively feminist "The Men Who Rule the World", with lyrics by Manson and part of their most recent album, *No Gods No Masters* (2021), was, however, far more tepid, not to say cold.

I am sure that I used the same enthusiasm as for Minogue, and that the song and the video are no worse than many others we have enjoyed in class. It seems, though that I made a mistake in using a quotation to describe Manson's reputation. Here it is (this comes from an article by Dayna Evans published in 2017, so please add four years to the ages mentioned). Manson states that

"[Debbie Harry and I] are some of the few women left who do what we do in the way that we do it. We're getting rarer and rarer. I think people understand that this breed is dying." She pauses, and adds, "*Literally* dying". Harry and Manson belong to a generation of women musicians who, as she puts it, "write their own music and aren't chasing pop success," but Manson worries that the bloodline is thinning. Patti Smith is 70. Chrissie Hynde, 65. Courtney Love, 52". (…) For Manson, many of the music industry's current megastars fail to pass her rock litmus test. "Rihanna is the closest thing we have in the pop world to a rockstar", she muses, adding that she's a huge fan of pop music. "If Rihanna wanted to make rock music, I'm sure she could. But unless you're playing rock music, you're not a rockstar".

This elicited some comments in class about Manson's patronizing attitude towards pop stars, triggered, I assume, by the perception that the much younger Rihanna (33 to Manson's 55) is a much bigger figure than Manson herself. My students are around 20-22, so it is not surprising that they had never heard of Garbage, formed in 1993 and most popular between 1995 and 2007, when they disbanded (they reunited in 2010). Perhaps I didn't help matters very much by stressing that Manson is my own age and that I admire her for a cool I will never acquire (but, then, the same goes for Minogue, aged 53). The question is that, clearly, if asked to choose between Manson and Rihanna, my students would opt for Rihanna. To my chagrin, they did not even like that much Chilean artist Javiera Garcia-Huidobro's video for "The Men Who Rule the World", with its clever cut-out artwork and its merger of the images of Manson and *Metropolis'* Maria. A student found its anti-patriarchal imagery too overtly phallic. I'm miffed, most of all with myself for not being able to transmit Manson's appeal.

The Shirley Manson fiasco started a conversation in class about why pop is more appealing than rock for women. I grant that I introduced the wrong bias in the course by focusing on solo singers, which has limited the presence of frontwomen in rock bands (I was more worried about excluding girl bands, which I am not really interested in). This means that we are more focused on pop than I originally conceived, though at the same time this has made the course (and the future e-book we are writing) more coherent.

In the notes I sent my students after class, I referred to some passages in the article by Joanca of November 2021 for *Spinditty*, "Why Did Rock Music Decline, and Can It Make a Comeback?". Joanca writes that "Girls and women 40 and under mainly purchase pop music. Despite the success of some later female rockers like 10,000 Maniacs and Alanis Morissette, modern rock still seems to have a problem attracting female buyers". Joanca grants they doesn't know why women and girls are much less interested in rock music, "but perhaps the feminist movement is one reason. The overt sexism and masculine nature of rock may have been a turn-off to girls raised with ideas of female empowerment. The rise of strong women in pop music, like Madonna, may have made it more appealing to girls and women as both listeners and artists." I find that this is a good point, and in fact I ended up arguing in class that Madonna's legacy is right now much bigger than Mick Jagger's, whose most obvious male successors I fail to spot.

This other article, of March 2021 by Dorian Lynski, "Why Bands Are Disappearing: 'Young People Aren't Excited by Them'" considers the gradual fall of rock from another perspective, less focused on gender. The article was sparked by a comment from Maroon 5's lead singer Adam Levine in the sense that there are no rock bands left—to which Shirley Manson angrily replied "What are we? CATS!?" What Levine meant is that there are no new rock bands making it to the charts; he was in fact issuing the same complaint Manson had voiced in the quotation about the ageing generation of women in rock. Several arguments are considered regarding the problem of the dwindling number of bands, most boiling down to the impact of the digital technologies: equipping a band to play live and funding their records is expensive in comparison to working with a laptop

alone in your bedroom; social media seem better geared towards solo pop stardom. I believe that the popularity of Korean and Japanese boy bands contradicts the impression that watching guys together on the stage has lost its appeal, as another argument goes, but I do believe that what has gone is the sexual appeal of the rock music instruments, above all the electric guitar. Somehow, heterosexual women no longer fall for that (is there anything more pathetic than a rock groupie today?), whereas they never mastered the art of appropriating the electric guitar for themselves. I don't mean by this that women can't play rock, what I mean is that they have not generated an appealing iconography—or one as appealing as that of pop stars. Women rock singers may have fared better (I still believe that cool Manson is a case in point) but with very few exceptions like the ones she names, and others like Sharleen Spiteri of Texas, female rockstars are not rocking. Could it be, allow me to be flippant, that electric guitars don't go well with dresses?

This does not mean that there is an insurmountable divide between rock and pop, or that each genre is gendered, with rock being male territory and pop, female. What it means is that none knows very well what the white guys that used to be the most visible fans of rock music are consuming. Possibly, Spotify has the key to the mystery. My students claim that the women pop singers we are studying have an audience composed of other women and of LGTBIQ+ persons, with, perhaps, a tiny minority of cis-hetero men. They say that, most likely, white men are listening to non-white men in the rap and reggaeton territories, unless music's best-kept secret is that they are indeed following mostly women pop singers. I don't think the audience for rock is lost for good, but I don't think either that young men are pouring their energies into playing rock music. Maybe here is the key: rock needs a certain type of energy that you don't see young white guys possessing today, and that young women are applying to pop (rap included). Perhaps what we are seeing is an extension of the listlessness that has young men do worse than young women in school and university to the world of music, but that's just speculation. After all, black men seem to be doing fine as rap musicians, having never been truly interested in rock.

Manson might be right, then, to worry that popstars are not rockstars, being a rockstar herself in her mid-fifties, with no obvious female disciples. Perhaps they are to be found in the indie labels, and the problem is that it takes too much effort for rock lovers to find them given the dominion of the charts and of the Spotify pop lists (though I assume that Spotify might have a list of women indie rockstars). Manson is wrong, though, in assuming that there is a hierarchy in which rockstars are placed above popstars, which is what annoyed my students. I could imagine Rihanna patronizingly say that "If Manson wanted to make pop music, I'm sure she could. But unless you're playing pop music, you're not a popstar". I hope Manson has not fallen in the classic patriarchal trap of pitting talented women against each other so that we fail to build the solidarity and sorority that should help all women singer march forward.

13 December 2021 / THE BEST BOOK ON SECONDARY CHARACTERS: ALEX WOLOCH'S *THE ONE VS. THE MANY*

As far as I know, Alex Woloch's *The One Vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003) is the only book attempting to theorize the secondary character (note that he calls them 'minor'). I have found books on secondary characters in specific authors (for instance, *Wisdom of Eccentric Old Men: A Study of Type and Secondary Character in Galdós's Social Novels, 1870-1897* by Peter Anthony Bly of 2004) and a volume studying how secondary characters have become protagonists in, for instance, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (*Minor Characters Have*

Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace by Jeremy Rosen of 2016). Not, however, any other monograph on the concept of the minor character.

After writing about some secondary characters (Sirius Black in *Harry Potter*, Anabella Wilmott in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*), I have come to the conclusion that quite often the conceptual centre of fiction can be found in their characterization. We tend to pour our critical energies into the study of the protagonists, but not only is there plenty to say about the secondary characters—just think of Romeo's friend Mercutio–; it is also the case that in literary criticism we don't know how to distinguish between the near-protagonist secondary character (Samwise in *The Lord of the Rings*) and the basic 'spear-carrier' with one line. We don't have a theorization that helps us say with certainty what type each character is and perhaps it is about time we develop a classification into levels that can determine whether a character is secondary, tertiary, quaternary, quinary, senary, septenary, octonary, nonary, or denary, if there are indeed only ten levels.

Woloch is not interested in this classification but he tries hard to move beyond E.M. Forster's division in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) of all characters into flat and round. It is possibly not at all Forster's fault but literary theorists have spectacularly failed to elaborate a more nuanced categorization, seemingly satisfied that, after all, flat characters do not require literary analysis. Woloch demonstrates quite the opposite by offering fascinating readings of the minor characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations* and *Le Père Goriot*, among other texts such as *King Lear*, proving that the development of the protagonists cannot be understood without them (think of Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas), that the space of the major characters is conditioned by the space minor characters occupy in the novel (think of Pip and Abel Magwitch), or that it is not always easy to decide who is the protagonist and who the secondary (think of Goriot and Rastignac). Woloch does not answer questions that have always baffled me—how do writers know when a secondary is needed and how many are required for a plot to work–but he comes up with a number of intriguing ideas and concepts, certainly worth considering.

Thus, he refers to character-space as "that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole" (14), making characterization mostly a matter of narrative structural needs. In his view, the character-system results from the combination of all the character-spaces into a "unified" narrative world, though he clarifies that by character-system he means specifically "the combination of different character-spaces or various modes *through which* specific human figures are inflected into the narrative" (32, original italics). In this way, Woloch discards romantic views of the character as a pseudo-person colonizing the writer's imagination (the view mostly sustained by writers who claim that characters come 'whole' to them as if they were people), and foregrounds the idea that a novel is always a construction in which different elements must be balanced.

Woloch understands novels as spaces in which the characters vie for attention, with the protagonist assuming most of it in tension with the minor characters. This works well for *Pride and Prejudice*, in which the first chapter does not immediately present Elizabeth Bennet as the protagonist, portraying instead her family nucleus (parents and sisters). Yet, there is no doubt in *Great Expectations*, dominated by Pip's first-person narrative voice, that the six-year-old scared out of his wits by Magwitch in the first chapter is indeed the protagonist. We do notice, as Woloch does, that he is a 'weak' protagonist, that is to say, a first-rank character excessively shaped by his minor companions, but, still, he is the focus of the novel. What I don't quite see is why Woloch gives potential protagonism to, at least, the first circle of secondary characters. There are novels in which Miss Havisham and Estella are the protagonists; even Austen's dull Mary has a novel to herself. Yet, we are in no doubt ever that the protagonist is distinguished from the rest because the plot is focalized through her or him, whereas in the case of the minor

character this doesn't happen, or only very occasionally. I wish we could see the bizarre proposal scene in *Pride and Prejudice* through Mr. Collins' stubbornly biased perspective, and it would be great if novels could be written in this multi-angle way but the asymmetric structure of characterization is just a fact of fiction. Quite another matter, of course, is that we find minor characters so attractive that we are not satisfied with their limitations (hence their becoming protagonists in other novels, as Rosen has studied).

What puzzles me most about Woloch's theorization is that despite taking great pains to detach characterization from cultural concerns and placing it squarely in the field of literary theory, he ends up invoking a labour theory of character to explain how nineteen century novels work. Here is a key passage: "The nineteenth-century novel's configuration of *narrative* work–within the context of omniscient, asymmetrical character-systems–creates a formal structure that can imaginatively comprehend the dynamics of alienated labor, and the class structure that underlies this labor. In terms of their essential formal position (the subordinate beings who are delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else), *minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*; and the realist novel–with its intense class-consciousness and attention toward social inequality–makes much of such formal processes" (27, original emphasis). Woloch is interested in tracing a connection between the abundant cast of characters in 19th century fiction and the new class awareness resulting from the emergence of a working-class because of the Industrial Revolution. Just as in life, he seems to argue, the upper classes rely on the alienated labour of the working classes, in the 19th century novel the protagonist holds that status by 'exploiting' the services of the minor characters. When the Modernist novel was introduced, the social panoramas of the realist 19th century novel were reduced down to the protagonist's individual consciousness, though we might say that the readers' preferences have always favoured the larger cast of characters which survives in popular fiction (think of a Ken Follett novel). It is mostly true that 20th century literary novels are far less comprehensive in their approach to society, with authors being far less ambitious than Balzac in trying to depict the whole 'human comedy'. Yet, I remain unconvinced by the connection traced between class issues and narrative needs in Woloch's argumentation, particularly because the 19th century novel is so blatantly middle-class and so resistant to opening up to the working classes except for melodramatic reasons (Gaskell included). Or maybe I misunderstand Woloch.

After teaching *Great Expectations* for so many years, I have been thinking for a while of writing an article about it taking into account the secondary characters. I was about to embark on a piece about Joe Gargery as an abused husband, when I came across John Gordon's essay in the *Dickens Quarterly* arguing that Dickens is misogynistic in characterizing Joe's wife Mrs. Gargery as an abuser. I have no idea why a man wants to defend an abusive female character just because she is a woman, when in fact Dickens builds very persuasively the case presenting Joe as a victim of abuse in his childhood (by his father) who, like many victims, later marries an abuser confusing abuse and love. The lesson I am drawing from this is that I should focus, following Woloch on structural needs and character-space examining another key secondary character.

In fact, I have read Woloch in search of a theoretical framework to analyse a minor character I had already chosen after discarding Joe: the lawyer Jaggers. The idea I will be defending is that minor characters play a role without which the plot collapses, whether tertiary and beyond can be dispensed with. Thus, Biddy, it seems to me, is not essential to *Great Expectations* which can well be imagined without her, no matter how much she enriches it, whereas Jaggers is the narrative fulcrum on which the whole plot hinges. Jaggers, I have noticed in my umpteenth reading of the novel, makes a crucial decision that he only very reluctantly acknowledges when Pip discloses he knows who Estella's biological parents are. A man who shows no feelings whatsoever, Jaggers tells Pip, referring to himself in the third person:

"Put the case that he lived in an atmosphere of evil, and that all he saw of children was their being generated in great numbers for certain destruction. Put the case that he often saw children solemnly tried at a criminal bar, where they were held up to be seen; put the case that he habitually knew of their being imprisoned, whipped, transported, neglected, cast out, qualified in all ways for the hangman, and growing up to be hanged. Put the case that pretty nigh all the children he saw in his daily business life he had reason to look upon as so much spawn, to develop into the fish that were to come to his net,—to be prosecuted, defended, forsworn, made orphans, bedevilled somehow."

The 'confession' follows: "Put the case, Pip, that here was one pretty little child out of the heap who could be saved". Knowing that the father believed the girl to be dead, Jaggers bargains with the mother, his murderous client, to give him her daughter as the price for his services, not knowing yet where he will place the girl. Dickens needs to link Jaggers to Miss Havisham at the right moment and so she eventually tells Pip: "I had been shut up in these rooms a long time (I don't know how long; you know what time the clocks keep here), when I told [Jaggers] that I wanted a little girl to rear and love, and save from my fate. I had first seen him when I sent for him to lay this place waste for me; having read of him in the newspapers before I and the world parted. He told me that he would look about him for such an orphan child. One night he brought her here asleep, and I called her Estella".

Everything that happens in *Great Expectations* follows from Jaggers' decision to save one little girl "out of the heap"—doesn't this deserve an article? So, yes, I'll make sure to write it, and then will start thinking about teaching a course on the most attractive secondary characters—what a challenge to find them!

20 December 2021 / LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: WRITING INSIDE SOMEONE ELSE'S BORDERS

I'm borrowing for this post the famous phrase "location, location, location", coined by Harold Samuel to describe the three things that matter most in the real estate market. I won't be dealing with property, however, but with the limits in the choice of settings for fiction, inspired by a film and a novel. The film is Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel* (2021) and the novel Víctor García Tur's *L'Aigua que Vols* [The water you want] also of 2021. Though vastly different, both are incursions into a community by a foreign storyteller who might not be best qualified to tell the story precisely by reason of his being an outsider. I question here the assumption that authors are free to tell any tale they please regardless of where it is located, with some caveats about nationalism and national history.

When he made in 1992 the truly horrendous *1492: The Conquest of Paradise*, with Gerard Depardieu playing Christopher Columbus, English director Ridley Scott was asked many times why he had wanted to make this film instead of leaving the matter to Spaniards. He always replied, increasingly annoyed, that no Spanish director had showed any interest in commemorating Columbus as a national hero in the 500th anniversary of his first American landing and, so, the story was his to tell. This elicits two immediate contradictory reactions: a) fair enough, b) did Scott personally ask all Spanish directors about their intentions? Actually three reactions, the third one of dismay, since a variety of Spanish directors have indeed told the story of Cristóbal Colón; Scott was clearly not familiar with them nor interested in their films.

The Last Duel seems affected by a similar situation: since no French director had bothered to tell this notorious rape revenge story, set in 14th century France, why

shouldn't Scott tell it? The answer is that, as many reviewers and spectators have noticed, we may be no longer willing to accept films in which the original languages and national cultures are replaced by English and by a generically Anglo-American approach. There have been thousands of Anglophone films set in non-Anglophone locations, of course, but somehow *The Last Duel* makes this artifice particularly annoying. Imagine a French film set in the American west in which all the characters speak French simply because that is the language of the film producers, and you will quickly understand how wrong Scott's film is. Add to this the socio-cultural distance between the 14th and the 21st century, and between Scott's post #MeToo context and his historical material, and you have the explanation for why *The Last Duel* has failed at the box office.

I know that the point I am making is close to pure nonsense if we think of the long tradition of telling stories set in other lands which proliferates in Anglophones cultures. Although Italian by birth, Romeo and Juliet have always spoken English, even in the film version by Italian director Franco Zeffirelli. Shakespeare's blatant cultural appropriation is not usually disputed by Italians, just as Danes don't bother to complain that the characters in *Hamlet* should be speaking Danish. I think, however, that this type of cultural colonialism is suspect, to say the least. I am imagining now what it would be like to have Ridley Scott come to Catalonia to make a film about, for instance, the execution of Lluís Companys—the President of the Catalan Government murdered by Franco's regime in 1940 with the Gestapo's collaboration—in which not a word of Catalan was heard because the whole cast spoke in English (would Edward Norton play Companys?). No matter how that would help to publicize Companys' tragedy internationally, I would be mightily annoyed as a Catalan native. If, supposing, Scott were interested in Companys (after all, the subject matter of *The Last Duel* is far more remote), then the best thing he could do would be to put his production machinery at the service of a Catalan director, such as Manuel Huerga who has already worked on a film on Companys, or put himself at the head of a Catalan team, including a Catalan cast, so that the film's credibility would be enhanced as much as possible. In *The Last Duel* any credibility the film might have is thoroughly destroyed by the American accents and American body language of actors (and film screenwriters) Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, totally impossible to accept as feudal French aristocrats.

Am I saying that a 'to-each-their-own' approach is the only narrative possibility? Not quite. What I am saying is that even though in many cases it makes sense to accept the artifice and conventions of filmmaking, the structure of feeling regarding this matter may be changing. It was easier for Ridley Scott to convince us in 2000 that New Zealander-Australian actor Russell Crowe was a Roman general than it is now to propose that we accept Matt Damon as a medieval French warrior, and not just because the Roman civilization is long gone whereas France is very much alive. The principle that Quentin Tarantino established in *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) by which film characters should speak realistically in their own languages or with an accent if they spoke another language has never caught on, nor has the idea that cultural-linguistic barriers need to be acknowledged. Watching the truly bad *Encanto* this Christmas, I was really appalled by Disney's insistence that using accented English for Colombian characters who logically should only use Spanish makes sense. It does not, and it should not.

Now for the novel by Víctor García Tur, *L'Aigua que Vols*, a text written in Catalan but set in Québec. Again, I acknowledge that I am defending an almost non-sensical argumentation if I think that my favourite Catalan author, Marc Pastor, has set some of his novels (like *Bioko* or *Farishta*) in exotic locations, using only Catalan as the language for all his characters; the same goes for Albert Sánchez Piñol's *La Pell Freda*, in which the main protagonist is Irish. That did bother me (why couldn't this guy be Catalan, I wondered?), but less than I am bothered by the Quebecois family in García Tur's novel, perhaps because Pastor and Piñol write in the tradition of the exotic novel inherited from

the Anglophone nations, whereas García Tur is writing in the realist tradition that is prevalent in Catalan. Funnily, I had a conversation with the author at the time when he was writing *L'Aigua que Vols*, and he was very much surprised by my point of view. Even more funnily, he writes in the postface that he understands the dangers of writing about a foreign community which he does not know first-hand, and promises not to do it again. He then proceeds to announce that his next novel will be science fiction, a genre in which writers are far freer to choose who they write about.

L'Aigua que Vols tells the simple story of a family reunion called by the matriarch, 76-year-old Marie, a widow and former theatre actor. The four siblings—JP, Helène, Laura, Anne-Sophie—visit the downtrodden house by the lake, bought by their late father, and get updated about the state of each other's lives. They speak plenty but cannot be really said to communicate, and nothing terribly dramatic happens until the end of the novel, though in a rather subdued way. As I read the text, written in a beautifully flowing Catalan, I was thinking of those enjoyable French films, such as Guillaume Canet's *Les Petits Mouchoirs* (2010) and its sequel, which always make me wonder why we don't have any movie that effective in Spanish or Catalan. At the same time, I was always wondering at each turn of the page, why García Tur's characters were not Catalan, and why their ramshackle home was not located by a Catalan lake. As I read, I was all the time under the very uncomfortable impression that they were dubbed, which was very much complicated by the author's note presenting the Catalan text as a translation of a French-language Quebecois novel published in 1996. What a complicated pirouette…

It took me a while to understand why *L'Aigua que Vols* is not set in Catalonia, though at the same time I hope I am totally wrong. The novel is set in 1995, the date of the second (failed) referendum for independence in Québec; the first one was held in 1980. The siblings discuss their preferences, with Laura being very much in favour of independence and even attempting to buy her brother JP's vote for the cause, though this is not centrally a political novel. At one point, however, JP gives a rather long speech about how tired he is of the whole independence debate, and how he envies Parisians because they don't wake up in the morning thinking of their nation. They just go on with their life. JP also argues that it must be nice for people in ordinary countries unencumbered by independentist issues to complain about their nation. In contrast, he says, the Quebecois can never criticize their nation because it feels disloyal. My impression is that this is how García Tur feels about Catalan independence but he chose a roundabout route to express himself, putting his own feelings and opinions in the mouth of a Quebecois character. His novel is, then, a sort of *roman-à-clef* where everything Quebecois stands for something secretly Catalan. I just wish this was not the case, and the novel was overtly about Catalonia. It just would feel more authentic.

To conclude, what I propose is that each storyteller carefully considers their choice of location, beyond their first impulse. If tempted to set a story elsewhere, within someone else's borders, the question to ask should be why this is necessary. Can a local person tell the story better? Why is the foreign location necessary if the tale can be set within one's own borders? And always consider the opposite possibility: would Ridley Scott be happy with a French-language film about Queen Victoria?, would García Tur enjoy a novel in Quebecois French with a cast of all-Catalan characters set in Catalonia? I may be limiting the scope of much fiction, historical or contemporary, but I believe these are questions that need to be addressed. Location, location, location…

10 January 2022 / THE RISK OF ERASING AUTHORSHIP: THE STRANGE CASE OF J.K. ROWLING

The streaming on New Year's Day of the show *Harry Potter 20th Anniversary: Return to Hogwarts* (HBO Max) may have brought back many sweet memories to the original Potterheads, but was no doubt marred by a conspicuous absence: that of J.K. Rowling. Warner Bros., the franchise owner, explained that Rowling had been invited but declined appearing; others noted that what was being celebrated was the film series, not the novels, and, hence, Rowling's participation was not required. I have not seen the reunion show, precisely because I believe that there is no point to it without Rowling's presence. Not only is she the author of the original book series but, as it is well known, she also guided adapter Steve Kloves in his task; let's not forget that Rowling wrote part of her series (1997-2011) as the films (2001-2014) progressed. Having Kloves and Rowling sit down together to discuss how this overlapping process worked should have been a must for the show.

What irks me most about Rowling's absence is the hypocrisy: everyone knows she is now a hindrance in the path of the franchise because of her controversial tweets against the Scottish legislation allowing transgender individuals to choose their gender identity regardless of their biology (a similar law has been submitted in Spain by Minister for Equality Irene Montero). Rowling has been branded a TERF (a Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist), harassed on social media and at her own doorstep, cancelled by the same fans who used to treat her as almost a goddess. Articles about how Rowling has become Voldemort abound, which I am sure would amuse her villain could he read them. Far from apologizing for her transphobic remarks, Rowling has insisted on presenting her views whenever a controversial issue connected with transgender individuals arises, which has only worsened the situation. I don't wish to discuss here, however, Rowling's views but the impossible situation in which the Potterheads have placed themselves by reacting negatively to them. My thesis is quite straightforward: you may wish to cancel an author for their opinions, even when they are not expressed in their texts, but if you take that step, you also need to stop finding pleasure in reading their work. The alternative that is now emerging—erasing Rowling's authorship but still celebrating *Harry Potter*—is, I insist, hypocritical and downright wrong.

I read in the article by Fatemeh Mirjalilli "Harry Potter Needs to Move on without J.K. Rowling" that Roland Barthes's 'death of the author' theory applies to Rowling's case. If you recall, Barthes (1915-1980) argued in his 1967 short essay (originally published in English in the avant-garde American journal *Aspen*) that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author". He meant, in agreement with other French theorists like Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault (in a way all descendants of the Russian formalists), that literary criticism had been paying excessive attention to the person behind the text, when actually only the text matters. Certainly, the analysis of Literature had been bogged down by the Romantic biographical approach that views texts through the lens of the author's biography to an absurd, often brutally gossipy extent. Yet, I have always believed that Barthes *et al.* were great double-dealers attempting to shift the authorial spotlight from the Author to the Critic. I don't think Barthes would have quietly accepted the death of his own authorship. Unfortunately, his school succeeded and then went too far, so that it is now habitual to read literary criticism (or by analogy film criticism) in which the text appears to have magicked itself into existence with no actual author. Or articles like Mirjalili's.

The 'death of the author' theory has been applied to Rowling already in academic literary criticism, which tends to ignore her biography and reads the *Harry Potter* series mainly in the absence of the Author, as Barthes suggested. Quite another matter is fandom. What Mirjalili means is that Barthes had given us permission to cancel authors

and erase their authorship, which is not the case at all. One thing is saying that Charles Dickens's texts are open to interpretation beyond what he intended them to mean, and quite another to claim that we are free to take his novels into our hands and deny he had an essential role in writing them because we don't like his misogynistic views. This is what seemingly is being done to Rowling. There has always been fan fiction about the *Harry Potter* series (that is, fiction based on Rowling's characters but prevented from being commercialized to respect her copyright), but Mirjalili is proposing that she hands over her work to the fans for them to do as they wish with it, even eventually erasing her authorship. I am sure this is how the classic author we know as 'Homer' was constructed, but this is the 21st century and we have strict views about authorship, beginning with the fact that the law prevents you from stealing it, regardless of the opinions which the authors may voice in their social media. No matter how great a fan you might be, you will never be the author.

Going down a truly dark path, 'the death of the author' may be taking a very grim meaning in the *Harry Potter* case. Rowling does not want to relent, that seems clear enough, and will go on tweeting for as long as Twitter allows her. It is very unlikely that she will accept the erasure of her name from the credits of the films based on her work, or the ones she is herself writing (for the *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* franchise), since she enjoys internationally acknowledged legal rights protecting her work. I don't see any judge granting an association of Potterheads the right to do with Rowling's work as they please, to develop new fiction or, God forbid, rewrite her original novels to include more diverse characters, on the grounds that they feel offended by her tweets. This means, literally, that the only hope for those who think that Rowling should be kept apart from the *Harry Potter* franchise is that she literally disappears, even though, naturally, in the event of her demise her heirs would want to defend their own legal rights over her legacy. Talking about 'the death of the author' does have this sickening underside: that it runs the risk of becoming too literal, if only as morbid wishful thinking.

The Potterheads who still love anything connected with *Harry Potter* but hate Rowling's TERF persona are thus stuck in a no-win situation, complicated by the specific nature of *Harry Potter* as children's and young adult fiction. The series is too closely connected to their personal emotions and growth for them to abandon it with no regret; one can renounce rather easily an author read in adulthood but the impressions formed in childhood are quite another matter. Much more so when the text itself is not the actual problem but the opinions which the author has voiced about other issues decades after the beginning of its publication. I am serious when I say that the process of cancelling Rowling must be appallingly hurtful for many Potterheads, for she is not just one among many authors read in childhood and adolescence, but an astonishing exception among them. I have not heard any of my students referring to her as a personal idol, or a kind of surrogate parent, but Rowling created a world in which many young readers felt they were truly themselves. Discovering that this beloved, trusted woman has actually very different opinions from what is now common sense among most Potterheads must be, I insist, devastating. If she is not Voldemort, she feels at least like Dolores Umbridge. This massive generational disappointment must be also hurting Rowling, no doubt, and possibly threatening her emotional wellbeing and sense of personal safety, yet here she has the upper hand, for whereas she may have been emotionally invested in the process of creating the wizarding world, she created it at the margins of the fans and can do without them. The Potterheads, in contrast, depended on Rowling for their emotional fulfilment, hence the sense of betrayal once they have reached an age in which they understand that she defends politically incorrect opinions.

At this point, my impression is that the *Harry Potter* franchise is starting its decadence and J.K. Rowling will not survive its fall as a writer, though I guess that she is rich enough to live off benefits of her brainchild to a very old age even without her fans'

support. I leave it in the hands of sociologists to research what percentage of her readers will be cancelling her in the short and the long term, and in the hands of her publishers to report the slump in sales that is already possibly happening. I don't think that the confrontation over the transgender rights she is disputing will abate; this is no storm in a teacup, but an unfolding process with deep ramifications we are very far from understanding (but that could be better understood with more dialogue). I have tried here to separate the novels from the author but the fact is that because of her transphobic tweets many now see the *Harry Potter* heptalogy as too homogenous in racial, sexual and class terms to be acceptable any more. Not everyone has been charmed by the series, but what is now happening is possibly unique in the annals of literary history: when has a writer ever been abandoned by their readers, like Rowling is being abandoned, but not his/her world?

Fans cannot, I insist, deprive Rowling of her legal rights over her work, pretend that she is disconnected from the franchise, wish that the author's death did really apply to her case if only in Barthes's metaphorical sense. *Harry Potter* belongs to J.K. Rowling to the day her heart stops beating, and until then she needs to be acknowledged for her merits. Criticism of her demerits as an author is also part of the literary game she accepted playing when publishing her work but Potterheads cannot call themselves by that name and reject Rowling's authorship at the same time. For good or for bad, this is inescapable. Fans can imagine a more diverse, politically updated version of *Harry Potter*, and negotiate with her in which directions the franchise can evolve, but the original text will always be hers. That's a way in which an author, *pace* Barthes, can never be killed unless we cancel copyright when we cancel authors. Perish the thought.

21 February 2022 / SONGS OF EMPOWERMENT: WOMEN IN 21ST CENTURY POPULAR MUSIC

First, a note. This is the first post I publish on the date it has been written after four months of silence, caused by the cyberattack that affected the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona on 11 October 2021 (the blog is hosted by UAB). I was confident that the texts were not lost, as I keep separate copies, but at one point I did believe that I would have to rebuild the whole blog from scratch (eleven years posting, more than 500 posts). This didn't happen, but I learned an important lesson about the fragility of digital media and its ephemerality. Last week I posted the twelve posts I wrote between 11 October 2021 and 10 January 2022. The ensuing five weeks of silence between that date and today are due to my finally losing the impulse to write without imagining an audience. I don't know who reads me, and I have never checked statistics, but I realize that every blog needs an audience, if only an imaginary one. So, thank you for being there.

In those five weeks I have been extremely busy editing the tenth e-book I have published with UAB students (see the complete list here). The book is called *Songs of Empowerment: Women in 21st Century Popular Music*) and it can be downloaded for free (in .pdf and .epub) from the digital repository of UAB. In its more than 300 very entertaining pages, the reader can find the students' analyses of a selection of more than 60 songs by currently active women artists using English in their lyrics. Each short essay consists of a biographical presentation of the artist, followed by a commentary on the song, mainly focused on the lyrics, and of the music video. The songs run from 2000 (Kylie Minogue's "Spinning Around") to 2021 (Charli XCX's "Good Ones"). The book is not, however, a history of women singers in the 21st century, but a selection based on the students' preferences. It is a sort of snapshot of what music by women sounded like

in the Autumn of 2021, when I taught the subject from which the e-book derives. And, yes, it comes with a Spotify list, compiled by one of the students.

This is the first time I have ever taught a course on music, and this requires some kind of justification being, as I am, a Literature teacher. It is obvious to me that most of us, born in the 1960s and later, who choose to study for a degree in English did (or do) so out of an interest in Anglophone music. I have always been a keen reader but my initiation into English was through the songs which I would try to translate painstakingly as soon as I bought any new album. Music, however, meaning basically pop and rock, has never been an integral part of English Studies degrees in Spain, and although I constantly told myself that I should teach a course on this topic, I procrastinated until I lost the ability to work while listening to music. With the time devoted to music reduced practically down to zero, I decided that the chance was gone to present myself before students pretending I knew about current trends. This changed last year when I supervised a marvellous BA dissertation by Andrea Delgado López on Childish Gambino's music video "This is America". Andrea also did a research internship with me that we used for her to produce a booklet called *American Music Videos 2000-2020: Lessons about the Nation*. Andrea wrote for each of the twenty-five videos analyzed a short essay presenting the singer(s), the song, and the video, and this gave me the idea for the e-book.

I told my students in the 'Cultural Studies' elective (2021-22) about the projected e-book, candidly confessing I had no idea about what was going on in the world of popular music in 2021. They would have to teach me. Since I believed that we could not cover everything of relevance in one single volume, we focused on the women artists for the new e-book, and I will focus next year on the male artists with my MA students in a similar project. I brought to class a very long list of about one hundred women singers, all of them active, and asked students to choose two each, which they did, adding some new suggestions. I gave them, then, as much freedom of choice as possible, though I made sure that the main names got due attention (some, like St Vincent or Kacey Musgraves, will be probably missed, though, perhaps also Alanis Morrissette). I extended this freedom of choice to the songs, which students selected on the basis of their preferences and also thinking of whether the song and video combination would be productive enough for their essays. In a feedback session which I held at the end of the course, some told me that had been a major difficulty, since many favourite songs had no music video, or because they found the videos less interesting than the songs. I happen to like music videos very much as a strange bastard child of cinema and advertising, so there was never a question of focusing only on a song. Given, besides, our lack of training in music, I feared that students would be unable to write even a few hundred words on lyrics which are often very basic at a poetic or literary level.

Something quite peculiar has happened in relation to the main thesis behind the e-book. I originally announced that we would organize the class presentations of the songs and videos (used as a rehearsal or pre-draft of the essays) around the question of whether the songs women pop singers sing today are empowering. Little by little, we lost track of that question, as we worried mainly about how to continue the presentations with no internet in the classroom because of the cyberattack. We became so interested by the particularities of each singer—from mainstream Jennifer Lopez to indie Mitski, and so many others—that the notion of empowerment lost focus. We did discuss it all the time indirectly, mainly by commenting on the artists' self-presentation and whether their choices could be called feminist and other issues such as race or class; it seemed to us that depression and abuse, a constant in most singers' biographies, were somehow antagonists to any notion of empowerment. However, as I went through the second final draft of the essays, I noticed that the students had not missed at all the notion of empowerment, and had in fact addressed their essays mostly to explain how this is not

in contradiction with women having been radically disempowered by patriarchy. That is to say, the common thread in the e-book is how women singers, despite being in some cases quite powerful, are constantly subjected to abuse (mental, physical, even commercial) and must send each other a message in favour of self-empowerment. This message is not sent, as I assumed, by songs that celebrate natural strength but by songs that candidly admit that strength is often born of vulnerability. In that sense Madonna, though still the Queen of Pop, is not representative but, rather, Rihanna, whose battered face we all remember and, indeed, Lady Gaga.

Although with variations, most of the songs in the e-book (and, believe me, they are a very representative selection) hold the same discourse: the singer describes how she fell in love with a man who turned out to be either abusive or simply disappointing, next how hard it was to break up with this man because of the strong hold of love on her mind and body; and, finally, how this experience brought empowerment by teaching the woman that she, and not a man, should be the centre of her own life. I found that with few exceptions (such as Shania Twain's "I'm Gonna Getcha Good!" and perhaps Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's "WAP"), the expression of female heterosexual desire for men had been replaced by the expression of a constant disillusion with heterosexual love and masculinity. With the songs women not only express their personal feelings but aim at giving other women support, inviting them to discuss their own views of love. The classic love song with the triad "I love you", "I want you", "I need you" has been replaced by "I once loved and wanted you, but now I don't need you anymore"; "I will survive" is now "Of course I will survive, why shouldn't I?" Secondarily, there is also a parallel discourse on femininity, which on the one hand expresses great admiration for women's superiority (Ariana Grande's "God is a Woman", Halsey's "I Am not a Woman, I'm a God") and at the same time a certain acknowledgement of imperfections (as in Celine Dion's eponymous song), which must be accepted as they are. I have no room here to comment on each of the sixty plus songs—please, read the book—but I think these are the main lines.

In class another topic that came up recurrently is how much pressure these women singers must endure from the social media. Since music videos became popular after the establishment of MTV in the mid-1980s, women singers have had to accept a constant exposure of their bodies to the public gaze. Videos, photoshoots and even performances are subjected, however, to a limited time frame. Social media are not, which means that female singers must now be posting on a daily basis about their activities, their looks, and their private lives trying to please fans but also battling haters. Just a week ago Charlie XCX announced on Twitter that she is taking a break from social media, tired of the endless monitoring and the angry comments by her own fans: "I've been grappling quite a lot with my mental health the past few months and obviously it makes negativity and criticism harder to handle when I come across it—and of course, I know this is a common struggle for most people in this day and age." So it is, indeed, but because of how the lines between being a celebrity and being a pop artist have been blurred, many women singers like Charlie XCX are bearing a brunt that few other professional must endure. It seems to me that the pressure is much lighter on the male singers.

Next year, as I have noted, I will be dealing with the men in current popular music. I do have a list already of bigger and lesser names, and I'm bracing myself for the barrage of sexist, misogynistic lyrics, particularly those coming from rap. I am telling myself, though, that these lyrics must be analysed, also the music videos, from a perspective as constructive as possible. I don't know, however, what the resulting e-book will tell us. I just hope it is not called *Songs of Entitlement*, though my deepest fear is that it will.

1 March 2022 / ON BULLIES, TYRANTS, AND THEIR SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT: STOP THEM NOW

As I write, the Russian nuclear armament is ready to strike anywhere in, probably, the whole world and both the media and the social media are debating whether Russian President Vladimir Putin might eventually order a strike, and against whom. To the world's amazement, the Ukrainians are still resisting and Kyiv has not fallen down after six days of fighting. Conventional invasion tactics are being deployed by the Russians less successfully than they expected but, at the same time, Putin has not yet directly threatened Ukraine with nuclear devastation. In this extremely volatile situation, as he loses the respect of the Russian people and of most persons in the world, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a comedian who won the 2019 elections vowing to end corruption, has emerged as a great leader, choosing to stay in Kyiv, rather than accept the rescue which the Americans offered.

I want to use my post today to read the Russian assault on Ukraine in gendered terms, since I am a feminist who does research in Gender Studies. The contrast between Putin and Zelenskyy is the contrast between two types of men, showing that whereas masculinity in general is not to blame for the brutal type of violence that war is, patriarchal masculinity is indeed guilty of the worst crimes against humanity. Putin is being compared these days to Adolf Hitler and since I am the author of a book called *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in British Fiction: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2019), I also have a few ideas to share about the Russian tyrant. The point I made in the book is that Hitler's atrocious behaviour was the culmination of a pattern linking the fictional and the real-life villain as representatives of patriarchal masculinity. I defined that as the type of male-supremacist, sexist, misogynistic, LGTBIQ+ phobic, racist and generally prejudiced masculinity, only interested in accruing as much power as possible to prove itself.

Patriarchy which is *not* the same as masculinity but a hegemonic subset, as Raewyn Connell and Michael Kimmel have theorized, attracts men by promising them a share of the power hegemonic men have. Although this is a hollow promise, many men fall for it, believing that they have a right to patriarchal power but finding themselves usually disempowered, or less empowered than they wished to be. If their feeling of disempowerment runs high, Kimmel has explained, this results in their lashing out against others less empowered than themselves, a behaviour that explains bullying, couple-related abuse, random criminality from serial killing to terrorism, and so on. Usually, the mechanisms of control, from peer pressure to judicial intervention work, and the would-be-tyrants are one way or another disempowered. In a number of cases, though, the tyrants in the making grow strong in power using sheer violence, within criminal or political circles, until they simply cannot be stopped; or it takes a massive effort—like WWII, perhaps WWIII—to stop them.

For the chapter on Hitler in my book I followed Kimmel but also Hitler's British biographer Ian Kershaw, to leave aside biographical trivia and read the Führer not as an exceptional individual but as an exceptional case of patriarchal villainy overcoming all controls against excessive empowerment. Hitler, an obscure man with many personal issues, could have failed in his plans to empower himself if German society had been able to impose the necessary checks on him. The situation, however, was so fragile—after the German defeat in WWI, the 1929 crisis, the rise of fascism in Italy and so on—that instead of being stopped, Hitler was endorsed. Recall that he won a legitimate democratic election in 1933 before staging the coup that made him the total dictator of Germany. This is a mechanism we have seen at work recently in the USA, where American democracy almost died on 6 January 2021, after the Capitol was stormed by pro-Trump fascists. Hitler, Trump, or Putin, as you can see, are not important as

individuals, as men. What matters here is that the democratic mechanisms are in place so that no tyrant can rise. These men are proof that the mechanism to stop villains from empowering themselves too much often fail, much more so when, as it happens in Russia, they have never really been in place.

In the normal run of things, the men and women rising to power in democratic political systems are motivated by a sense of service mingled with personal ambition to make their mark in History. Of course, they wish to empower themselves and act following their own principles and ideas with no check, but the opposition and the voters are supposed to curb down that instinct. Most politicians in the world, at any level, understand that there are red lines that cannot be crossed, though, obviously, many cross them on a daily basis to enrich themselves through corruption.

J.R.R. Tolkien speaks in *The Silmarillion* and in *The Lord of the Rings* of two kinds of power: the power of creation and the power of domination. The first kind is chased by persons who think they can do good on an individual or a collective basis, whereas as it is transparent through the Tolkienian examples of Morgoth and Sauron, the power of domination needs to express itself through oppression, exploitation, and violent submission. It takes an alliance of divine beings and elves to put Morgoth in prison forever (he is immortal) and it takes a second alliance of elves, men, dwarves and hobbits to expel Sauron (another immortal) from Mordor. Tolkien had fought in WWI and he understood very well how patriarchal masculinity proceeds: its need for empowerment is a need for domination, and this is based, here is the main key, on a sense of entitlement.

Everyone feels entitled to something. Whether this is happiness or ruling the whole world depends on the share of power we have. A person with no power at all, a slave, cannot even contemplate feeling entitled to anything, whereas a person with a strong sense of entitlement to power will do anything to quash his/her enemies and rivals. We are seeing this at work in the national Spanish right-wing parties, with the sudden fall out of grace of PP's President Pablo Casado for daring to interfere with Madrid's regional President Isabel Ayuso, and in Vox, which is promising empowerment to men and women who feel they are being mistreated by progressive popular opinion and the left-wing parties.

Women, as you can see, feel as much sense of entitlement to power as men, but sexism has so far prevented them from enacting that need beyond a certain level (that of Margaret Thatcher as Britain's Prime Minister, 1979-1990). If men and women had always been treated equally, I would not be speaking of patriarchal masculinity but of oligarchical humanity. Yet, the fact is that women's sense of entitlement has been harshly suppressed throughout History. Feminism has liberated many women from their shackles but it may have created monsters by inviting all women to defend their choices, which regrettably also include, as we know now, being fascists aspiring to ruling their territory.

If sexism had not been a major factor in History, then, there is no reason to suppose that there could never have been an Isolde Hitler, a Charlotte Trump, or a Natalia Putina playing the same role as their real-life male counterparts. The prehistoric bullies, however, soon discovered that violent males always got the upper hand, whether they were themselves directly violent, or ordered others to be violent, and started in the Iron Age the patriarchal regime that is now leading to climate change and nuclear holocaust. This male supremacist regime based on satisfying the sense of entitlement and the need of power for domination of a select cadre of villainous men is still ruling the world, despite the existence of many peaceful nations, mostly ruled by men and women who understand that wars of conquest and expansion have brought nothing positive in the last thousands of years. If only hypocritically, given their record in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, the USA made their world reputation on the basis that no other war of conquest should be tolerated. They exposed their argument by massacring the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear monstrosities because they felt entitled to ending their lives, but

they still hold the argument that no one else should be allowed to enact a similar sense of entitlement over the lives of others.

This leads back to President Putin, whose sense of entitlement to the Ukraine and possibly other nations in Europe—he has directly threatened Finland and Sweden—has suddenly awakened, at a point when his power over Russia seems uncontested and after decades presenting himself internationally as a despot with no imperial ambitions. I can speculate whether Putin, now 69, is going through a personal crisis connected with his ageing as a man, given his ultra-masculine self-presentation—I believe this is the case—but I'm more interested in how the mechanisms to check his rogue behaviour are working. The war scenario in Ukraine is accompanied by other non-military measures elsewhere: massive demonstrations, financial exclusion, pressure to China to stop endorsing the war and so on. Both NATO and the EU have discarded military confrontation, though we'll see what happens if Putin sets foot in Poland. Inside Russia, anti-Putin protesters are risking detention and worse, influencers are posting anti-war messages constantly, and billionaires beginning to grumble. There are, however, no signs (yet?) of a possible coup—a lonely MP, of the Communist Party, was the only one to oppose the war in Russia's crowded Parliament. What is at stake, I insist, is not really how Putin should be stopped but how any villain of his kind should be stopped. Tomorrow, it could be Kim Jong-Un deciding next to invade South Korea and launch a volley of nuclear missiles. This is, however, where things get scary because right now, unless an honourable Russian man gets close enough to stop Putin, no strong check is in place.

As things are now, Ukraine and perhaps the world are being sacrificed to the personal needs of an ageing white patriarchal man who cannot be satisfied with ruling Russia. A German general was dismissed for arguing in public that Putin's fears about Russia not being safe enough if Ukraine joins NATO or the EU should be addressed. I agree that his fears should be addressed, but not those concerning Ukraine. It is urgent to understand why one of the most powerful men on Earth feels suddenly so disempowered that he needs to lash out, perhaps ending the planet. What made me cry rivers last Sunday, when I heard Putin's announcement about getting his nuclear arsenal ready, was not only pure fear but anger against the reluctance to learn lessons from Gender Studies and from the past, instead presenting monsters like Hitler as a mystifying aberrations when they are transparent and easy to understand. Now, here we are, with some idiots lashing out against the allegedly low profile that feminists are keeping in this war (like TikToker @notpoliticalspeaking, see his ranting) while we close our eyes to the nature of patriarchal masculinity. Fight it in the streets, or fight it online, but stop it by any means or that patriarchal man in Russia will destroy all the other persons on Earth. This is now much more serious than Hitler ever was, and much more urgent. The genocide he committed, absolutely appalling as it was, may pale beside the planetary genocide we might soon witness—if anyone survives.

7 March 2022 / MORE ON NON-FICTION: HOW ABOUT FACTUAL PROSE?

I wrote almost eleven years ago—time does fly indeed—a post almost identical to what I was planning to write today: "The Other Books: The Problem of Non-Fiction". Good thing that I checked before I started writing today. This is proof that I may be beginning to repeat myself after so many years blogging (I started in September 2010), or, alternatively, that each of us has a set of fixed interests and ideas that do not really vary along the years although we might have the impression that constant reading must have an impact on our thinking.

Eleven years ago I mentioned my growing allergy to novels (still increasing), that I find the label 'non-fiction' lazy (I find it now irritating), and that Lee Gutkind seems to be responsible for the slightly less lazy label 'creative non-fiction', used to distinguish non-fiction with literary aspirations from the more pedestrian purely journalistic type (see the eponymous journal he founded). I mentioned back then some lists—'100 best non-fiction books' is still available on the Modern Library website—to which I will add now Robert Crum's ambitious list for *The Guardian* covering five centuries and the 'Must Read Non-Fiction' list on GoodReads. Wikipedia still has an entry for 'nonfiction' with a bewildering array of sub-genres, which even includes 'factual television', that is to say TV documentaries.

I have been thinking about non-fiction again these days after reading Patrick R. Keefe's captivating books *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland* (2020) and *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* (2021), but failing to finish Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019), which is, as happens, a key volume to understand the 21st century and the originator of the indispensable label 'surveillance capitalism'. Checking readers' comments on GoodReads in the hopes that I would find some enticement to plod on (I still haven't given up), I came across many complaints against Zuboff's unfriendly prose—"The unnecessarily ornate writing style makes the content harder to comprehend and retain," Lucy tersely wrote—with a person noting that this is typical of non-fiction. Hannah Cook specified that Zuboff's volume is like "someone's Phd thesis" with its avalanche of data, which is unsurprising, Cook added, since the author is a Harvard academic. "Not that everything should be dumbed down," Cook concluded, "but this feels like it is purposefully trying to be hyper intellectual and the result is a giant yawn fest". There is a lesson in all this about how non-fiction based on massive research, whether this is journalistic (Keefe's case) or academic (Zuboff's case), must result in books that can be consumed with no supplementary effort.

I remain, however, confused by why non-fiction encompasses such a wide-ranging territory, at least as the label is used by readers, publishing houses and even authors. Keefe's mentions in his author's note that he writes 'narrative non-fiction' and it is certainly the case that the two books I have read do tell a story accompanied by a massive influx of information. His non-fiction is quality journalism about individuals in key historical and social circumstances extended to book-size, and he uses narrative to sugar-coat, I think, the reading of the denser passages. It works very well. I was wondering, however, how this is different from Dave Eggers's *The Monk of Mokha* (2018), a volume that kept me interested in the world of coffee in Yemen through the story of American-Yemini entrepreneur Mokhtar Alkhanshali, and I came to the conclusion that not that much, even though Egger's book is closer to being a memoir written by someone else at many points. The memoirs I have read recently—Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* (2021) and Deborah Feldman's *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of my Hasidic Roots* (2012)—are also narrative non-fiction, but, of course, they are a first-person narrative, which is not common in the type of books that Keefe and other journalists write. As you can see, I remain confused by the gradation from journalism to the memoir since, to a certain extent, journalistic non-fiction can be personal without being exactly a memoir. From Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), which arguably inaugurates the current cycle of modern non-fiction to, for instance, Mary Roach's *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* (2003)—another fascinating recent read—the author of non-fiction is often present in the text even when this is presented as pure reportage.

I remain, as I was 11 years ago, puzzled by the general absence of non-fiction from academia. Autobiography and memoir, what might be called 'life writing', have attracted much attention and it is common to find courses and publications, though not

presenting these types of texts as non-fiction. I doubt, however, that anyone is teaching in any English degree other sub-genres of non-fiction. Perhaps someone might be teaching travel writing (the 'travelogue' is the label on the Wikipedia list); after all, Bruce Chatwin is already a canonical writer, and one can include on the reading list volumes as delicious as R.L. Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), or the many written by Victorian travelling women. Yet, I see no scholar devoting any efforts to teach, choosing again from Wikipedia's list, handbooks, popular science or even academic writing in English courses. Creative non-fiction is taught through handbooks and courses, but it is not taught as a literary category in English degrees, at least not that I know of.

And, yes, I have been thinking for a while of teaching narrative non-fiction. I was, however, taken aback when I mentioned this in my subject on documentary films (2019-20), and a student observed it would be a very boring subject. Documentary films (for TV, cinema, streaming platforms, or YouTube) are the audiovisual branch of non-fiction, as I explained, so plainly what worried this student was that *reading* non-fiction would be boring. I don't think he said so because he knew the genre first-hand but because he imagined a boring long read of a book full of data (yes, in the style of Zuboff). Funnily, he contributed to our e-book *Focus on the USA: Representing the Nation in Early 21st Century Documentary Films* a wonderful essay on Charles Ferguson's quite demanding documentary *Inside Job* (2020), actually an adaptation of his own non-fiction volume *Inside Job: The Financiers Who Pulled off the Heist of the Century* (2012). Perhaps the difference is that while the film takes 110 minutes to watch reading the 371 pages of the book takes considerably longer. I am, however, still very keen on teaching narrative non-fiction, and hope to do so in 2023-24, in one of my project-oriented electives: I won't work with a closed set of four or five texts, but will invite students to discover a set they might enjoy and will publish the corresponding e-book.

This, I'm not kidding you, might be the first academic introduction to narrative non-fiction, at least as far as I now. Cambridge UP and Oxford UP, which publish companions for the obscurest corner of English Literature do not have one for non-fiction. I would love to volunteer to edit an introductory volume but I have never published on non-fiction, and I don't think I am qualified. I don't see, however, that there is a specialist possibly because the territory is so vast that this is like calling yourself a specialist in the novel. I will be extremely happy to be corrected, and flooded with bibliography on non-fiction but so far my search for bibliography has led to scattered articles on specific works, and just three volumes. Barbara Lounsberry's *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction* (Greenwood, 1990) offers chapters on Guy Talese, Tom Wolfe, John McPhee, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer; it can be borrowed from Archive Org. I thought that Lee Gutkind's *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality* (Wiley, 1997), would have gone through many reprints now but it does not even have a second edition. Gutkind's more successful task is the edition for Norton of a three-volume anthology, *The Best Creative Nonfiction* (2007-09), which I assume is possibly being used in courses. My Google search has led to a variety of creative writing courses, but, I insist, not to English Literature courses.

Perhaps, you may be thinking, this is right since practically no prose except the novel has a central place in English Literature or English Studies degrees with the noted exceptions of the autobiography and the memoir. The lists I have mentioned earlier prove, however, that there are many quality volumes to choose from both for courses and for research. Like the student in my documentary film class, however, we teaching scholars seem to believe collectively that non-fiction is dull and might only lead to dull courses in comparison to teaching fiction. I find this is a misperception, having been thrilled much more by well-researched, well-written non-fiction in comparison to many dull novels of any genre published in recent years. I really believe that liming literature to the novel, and secondarily to drama and poetry, is a serious error that has deprived

students of an education in prose works which are often not only much more sophisticated but also a major source of learning. I am not saying that we should stop reading novels but that human experience is also portrayed in other kinds of non-fictional narrative and non-narrative texts.

I wrote in my post of 2011 that calling a book 'non-fiction' is like calling men 'non-women', which is an aberration and would certainly cause much offence (just stop using the adjective 'non-white', please). I'll offer 'factual prose' as an alternative, such as Wikipedia offers 'factual television', since the opposite of fiction is fact, not non-fiction. One Walter Blair already used the label back in 1963 for a book called *Factual Prose: Introduction to Explanatory and Persuasive Writing* (Scott & Foresman, 1963), so maybe that's worth rescuing. It's not very sexy, but at least it is more accurate than non-fiction. Let me know if you have other suggestions.

14 March 2022 / BEING ASSESSED AS A TEACHER: CAN WE PLEASE IMPROVE HOW WE DO IT?

I have spent several days recently writing the report for my assessment as a teacher by the regional Catalan authorities, an exercise that takes place every five years. Funnily, the Spanish authorities only ask that we apply to be assessed, also every five years, and I have not done any further paperwork towards that. In contrast, the Catalan authorities require a long report (mine extends to 18 pages), followed by as many certificates as you can add, for as we know here in Spain nobody trusts that university teachers have actually done what we claim to have done. As I put together the final 65 pages (thanks Manuel for teaching me about I Love PDF! and how to mix different documents), I wondered about which bureaucrat will go through them. My impression is that someone will use reading my report (perhaps just taking a cursory glance) to justify their working time, not really to take my assessment seriously. Yes, we work for the bureaucrats.

Writing this type of report is immensely annoying because we are supposed to enter all our information in the EGRETA application, so in theory the application itself should generate whatever documentation we need. Instead, we need to keep track of every single thing we do by constantly updating our CV in our home computer and even so, we always lose track of some thing or other. I forgot, for instance, that the yearly assessment interviews with doctoral students also count for assessment. My impression is that everything counts except what actually happens in the classroom. I have compiled for my examiners lists of courses taught, dissertations supervised, tribunals I have been a member of, admin positions, and have written a lengthy essay on my view of teaching in the last five years. Yet, the weakest segment has been the one connected with teaching itself, because, guess what?, the students' surveys of my work were not sufficient in number for that section of the report to be acceptable with no further evidence.

I must clarify that students' assessment of us, teachers, used to be done in class on paper by taking a few minutes off each subject. This was time-consuming and expensive and so UAB opted for moving the surveys online. The problem is that students are just not interested in filling them in, which I totally understand. I myself would only bother to complete a survey if I wanted to say something very positive or very negative about the teacher.

I don't run surveys among my students at the end of the semester, in which I am possibly wrong, but going through the ones they did fill in, I started wondering whether I should. One thing I would like to do, after this catastrophic academic year in which I have not managed to learn much about students because of the (literal) distance Covid-19 has imposed, is starting each subject with a short questionnaire to learn who each student is

as an individual with their own interests and expectations. A young member of the staff who was once my student reminded me that I had already done that years ago, but I have forgotten I did so. The problem about running a survey asking for feedback at the end of the subject is that it is by then too late to correct any problems, so I'm not so sure that this is useful. Perhaps the really useful thing is running surveys (or feedback sessions) periodically, but I have never done that and simply do not have the time.

The survey results we receive at UAB consist mainly of numbers on a scale of 0-4 (I don't know why, since we use 0-10 with students). If you get, for instance, a 3 in relation to how you deliver your lessons, you know that there is room for improvement, though the problem is that you still don't know how. In surveys students are not asked this type of nuanced question, but only offered the chance to offer open comments. In my own assessment, there were not many comments, but in general the problem is that I don't know what to change or how to improve what I do from reading them. I believe that my general mark was good enough, and some students seemed pleased with my work, but, then, others clearly were not. I ran a feedback session at the end of my fourth year elective subject in January, and I found that far more useful since I could ask direct questions and I valued very much that students gave me very direct constructive criticism. With the official surveys, I just don't see it.

There were two comments that have stuck, for different reasons, both come from second year students. One student wrote in a negative comment that "the teacher is very proud", a description I have a hard time identifying with and that set me thinking in earnest about when I had been 'proud' in class and what is the meaning of that adjective. Did the student mean 'demanding'? Well, yes, I am very demanding but I have a pass rate of 90%. Did the student mean that I somehow despise students? That would be a first in my 30 year long career. I wish, with all my heart, that I could ask this student 'what do you mean?', 'was I having a bad day?', 'do you mean generally every lecture?' The comment hurt me very much, as you can see, and I still feel perplexed by it.

About the other comment, I just don't know what to do. Someone complained that I include too many comments on painting and architecture, and not enough on general background, in the Victorian Literature course. As happens, I have one PowerPoint presentation for painting and one for architecture, and around seven or eight for social, political, and cultural background, leaving aside the ones for specific authors. I use, therefore, about *one* hour for painting and architecture in a fifty-hour course. I do recall overhearing a student complaining at the end of the corresponding session that painting and architecture were out of place in a Victorian Literature course, so I assume the comment was his (I can't recall who he is). I'm still flabbergasted. I bring to class as many images as I can of the Victorian Age, and you can be sure I am not going to suppress the tiny segment on painting and architecture just because it annoys *one* student in five years of teaching.

It would have been far more useful to me if the student in question had protested in class when I was doing my presentation about its use, because then I would have been able to explain myself. This leads me to what I am really thinking about the students' surveys, not what they say in them but how they are organized. Imagine you're having sex with someone, and you think you're communicating well in bed, but when it's over this person goes go to a public rating board and comments on your performance—and only then do you find out that the sex was bad. What is the point of telling a third person about your lover's shortcomings? How does this help your lover improve? That's what I feel. The relationship between a teacher and the students should not work on the principle of sending teachers messages about their performance through a third party (or a public website such as *Rate my Professor*), but directly. I don't assess my students by asking a colleague to please tell them how they are doing; I assess them personally and if there is any problem I call them for a tutorial. I believe we should have the same

system between students and teachers: if I am not doing well in class, I need to know as soon as possible and as openly as possible.

Obviously, the main snag in this is that students can hardly offer candid views about the teachers' performance to their faces for fear of being punished with a lower grade if these are negative. So we need to work out a system that excludes that fear. A possibility is inviting students to channel their worries through the class delegate, or to drop anonymous notes in the teacher's mailbox. Of course, this is awfully awkward. I can see a student dropping a note protesting the uselessness of my painting and architecture PowerPoints but I would not know how to address the issue in class without outing the anonymous student. At least, though, I would get some kind of hint. You need a very special group of students for them to be able to tell their teacher how things can work better, particularly if any of them perceives the teacher as 'proud'. Deep sigh. My fourth year students seemed far more comfortable telling me what to improve because they know me better, so I am making a mental note to talk as early as possible with second-year students to receive feedback, and to explain better at each point what I am doing and why.

As you can see, I am not concerned about getting a 4/4, though I'm very curious to know who has the highest rating in the Department (I can imagine), the School, and UAB; the ratings can only be accessed by the teachers assessed and the Degree Coordinator. I think that there will always be dissatisfied students, with inevitably some hating my guts and others enjoying my (supposed) cleverness, possibly in a similar proportion. Once a formidable teacher we used to have in the Department told me and a colleague that we worried too much about the students' ratings, whereas she got very low ratings and still did not care to change her teaching. I'll write here what I told her then: I don't care for the ratings, I care to do my job well. In that sense my favourite rating is the 90% pass rate, I have never understood teachers who are proud of failing almost the whole class.

It turns out that I am a 'proud' teacher, after all, hopefully not in the problematic sense that student complained about. I am 'proud' of losing very few students along the semester, and of raising the standards so that the pass really means they have done great work. I'll think hard about how to talk to them more fluently and more frequently about what we do together, though there is little I can do to convince UAB to improve the way students' surveys are carried out. A pity, really.

21 March 2022 / BACK TO BASICS, WITH A CALL TO RENEW SELF-IMPROVEMENT IN LEARNING

I'm now in the middle of reading the essay by the philosopher and pedagogue Gregorio Luri, *La escuela no es un parque de atracciones: Una defensa del conocimiento poderoso* [*School is not a Theme Park: In Defence of Powerful Knowledge*, 2020], which, of course, I chose because I agree with the title. I guess this is how the author is weeding out the readers that might disagree with his views.

In essence, Luri disapproves of all the current pedagogical theories that, applied to actual teaching in school, have resulted in the very wrong view that learning should be fun and effortless. He is particularly critical of how competences have eroded the importance of knowledge; this is the reason why he finds the notion of 'learning to learn' meaningless; as he argues, unless you know about something (meaning that your memory retains information on the subject) there is no way you can truly learn, much less 'learn to learn'. If, say, my Victorian Literature students have not memorized the names of authors, the titles of books, the basics of Victorian History, they won't be able

to learn how to write a paper on any of these aspects. Or, rather, they will, but their papers will be very poor. Luri's argumentation is plain as daylight: the accumulation of knowledge has been wrongly derided by a pedagogy set on teaching skills, a pedagogy that forgets that nobody can teach or use skills without previous knowledge.

I read yesterday on thew newspaper *Nius* (yes, believe it or not) that Alexandre Sotelinos of the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, has won the Abanca competition for best university teacher in Spain (the award is based on students' votes combined with those of a jury). Sotelinos, a pedagogue by training, teaches in the BA in Pedagogy and the BA in Primary School Teacher Training. The article does not say on what merits he has won that competition; he himself just says that "I try to reinvent myself, learn plenty from other colleagues who have amazing projects and try to apply that to my classroom", the classic endorsement of teaching innovation. What called my attention, once I got over my deep envy of this Galician colleague, is how he reads the saying "Education through head, hand, and heart" by Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827): "In the end, what this idea means is that beyond knowledge, we have to learn skills and how to manage emotions. And that to learn some things or others, all is related. That is to say, we can never learn if our emotional state is not adequate". To begin with, I really doubt that 18th century pedagogy connects so neatly with its 21st century descendant; in the second place, Sotelinos's view of education is precisely what Luri condemns as the failed strategy that has wrongly turned schools into unmanageable institutions where learning happens only patchily, depending on students' decisions to engage or disconnect. And that's not my envy speaking.

Reading Luri I have found myself questioning my own conservatism as an educator. Some of his proposals do sound conservative but, then, perhaps I need to accept that I am a conservative teacher. I agree with him that the classroom is not a place for students to be entertained, but for them to be focused and make an effort to learn. I am myself making the effort to teach them. Students at all levels of education should accept a basic discipline. Teachers must be respected and their lessons absorbed in attentive silence unless students are asked specifically to speak. In my view, the students' body language and facial expression should show that they are listening and actively participating in their own education and respecting the teachers' work in the classroom.

Furthermore, students need to accept that learning entails making a constant effort; studying is necessary, which includes making notes, memorizing data, developing work using the knowledge and skills acquired in class. Students must also know that, whether we like it or not (and I don't), they are being assessed, which means that they need to make the best possible impression (for their sake, not the teacher's). Attitude does count for assessment, as we all know. Learning, Luri says and I agree, must be a process of constantly meeting challenges, in which students tests themselves to the maximum of their abilities. Instead of this, we have at least 20% of students who are not interested in learning, and the problem is that we are making a long series of efforts to engage those students in an education they don't really care for while we neglect the needs and abilities of the better students, who are actually the majority.

Luri mentions as one of the pedagogues that most firmly attacked the traditional school, the American John Holt (1923-1985), author among other books of *The Underachieving School* (1969), known in Spanish translation as *El fracaso de la escuela*. As happens, I had an Ethics teacher in secondary school who asked us to read this book, when we were 15. I can't remember his name but I recall that he looked as if he was being forced at gun-point to teach us, second-year students; perpetually embittered and aloof, he had a strangely mixed pedagogy, both very loose and very demanding intellectually. Part of his rebelliousness against the school was that we were allowed to seat as we pleased, which means we ended up on the tables until we saw that the chairs were more comfortable. His true rebelliousness, of course, consisted of making us read

Holt (and Orwell, among others) and teaching us that school was not run thinking truly of us; yet, he was unable to establish any kind of dialogue with us.

This man was simultaneously one of the best and one of the worst teachers I have ever had. He gave me a deep shock lasting until today by asking me to absorb Holt's deconstruction of the (American) school, a deconstruction so deep that Holt ended up promoting home-schooling. And this teacher was the first to ask me to freely express my views, for which I thank him. I learned much more, though, from the teachers who believed that the true rebellion against school consisted of making us become deeply learned students. I have never ever been in the hands of a teacher that saw their job as simply passing on information. I was always taught by imitation, by which I mean that my best teachers were so good I just wanted to be like them. I admired them, and I my own work was a way to express my admiration. I learned to love learning because they were wise and I wanted to be just as wise.

Logically, not all my teachers were wise, and some were rather poor but in the pedagogy that came before the current one, that didn't matter because what mattered was the students' abilities, and responsibilities. I was always told at home that I was responsible for my studies, just as my father was responsible for his job. Studying was my job, and I had to do it well, regardless of my teachers, as he did his, regardless of his bosses. If my teachers were good, then I was lucky; if they were bad, I had to compensate for that. No excuses. Getting an education was regarded as a tough task: I would have never dreamed of saying that I was bored, for the adults around me would have replied that recess was for fun, not the rest of school. I just don't recall any problems of discipline among my fellow students at any level, with few exceptions that we all understood to be a minority and very special cases. Teachers were respected, even when disliked, and school generally accepted, even when abhorred. Teachers did not spend, as they do now, especially in secondary school, a good portion of their time (Luri says 20%) trying to have students sit down and listen. We just did, as we walk in the street rather than skip and jump all over the place.

I think I am trying to say that there is currently a wrong impression that education used to work on the basis of the teacher's authoritarianism and the institution's implementation of a strong discipline. This is not my impression of my own education in public primary and secondary schools. They worked well because, I insist, teachers were respected, parents would not dream of undermining their authority and children generally behaved well, understanding that they were responsible for their own progression. Because of Holt and many other pedagogues that rebelled against traditional teaching, however, we have a now the chance to make learning truly thrilling but have lost the necessary personal discipline required to engage in studying. Perhaps I should blame Pink Floyd. I hate with all my soul their idiotic 1979 anthem "Another Brick in the Wall" and its chorus of kids singing "We don't need to education / We don't need no thought control / No dark sarcasm in the classroom / Teacher, leave them kids alone", not only because I wanted very much an education, but because in my experience teaching had been about freeing my thinking and I had never encountered sarcasm, just encouragement.

Sotolino is optimistic and thinks that primary school teachers in particular are now beginning to be better valued, following the information we get on the news about the Finnish system. I am not so sure, but in any case my impression is that the secondary school remains the most problematic part of current education. In my time primary education ended at 14, with the less scholarly-minded students choosing to train for jobs. The extension of secondary school to 16 in most countries means that teachers face everyday a huge wave of adolescent resistance and rebellion, far different from my own secondary school, in which the kids aged 14-18 were struggling to go on to college and, thus, less prone to resisting education. I find, returning to Sotolino and to Pestalozzi's

"Education through head, hand, and heart", that the heart has been overemphasized and the hand most neglected, with actual skills to do things with our hands instead of our brains being woefully neglected.

Yes, what I am saying is diversify education, make the compulsory segment shorter, give professional training the same status as academic training, make the university again a place for generating knowledge and not for training and, above all, respect teachers. The solution is not trying to entertain disaffected teenagers but building a better commitment to serious learning at all stages of education. This does not mean returning back to an authoritarian model but celebrating the main reason why education was demanded and extended: it is called self-improvement and consists of going as far as you can in the development of your abilities, no matter of what kind they. Head, hand, and heart will follow if you are set on making the most of yourself, not beyond knowledge but beyond what is required and expected of you. After all, how you are taught is in the end far less important than how you learn. Just don't forget this.

29 March 2022 / WRITERS WRITING ON BOOKS: READING JAVIER CERCAS' *EL PUNTO CIEGO / THE BLIND SPOT*

I made a mistake when I borrowed Javier Cercas' *El punto ciego* from the library, wrongly believing it was a volume by Javier Marías. I read the summary—the book gathers together five lectures delivered by the author when he was appointed Weidenfeld Chair of European Literature at St Anne's College at Oxford in 2015—and I just thought that was the kind of appointment the illustrious Marías is used to receiving. In the prologue a humble Cercas shows himself very surprised to have deserved that honour, seeing himself as a player in a lower league than his predecessors (his admired Mario Vargas Llosa among them). Cercas (b. 1962) became an instant celebrity with his fourth novel, *Soldados de Salamina / Soldiers of Salamis* (2001), which tells the story based on real-life facts of how a fascist politician saved his life in the middle of the Spanish Civil War thanks to an extraordinary act of human empathy by an anonymous Republican soldier. Cercas retired then from teaching (he was a lecturer in Spanish Literature at the Universitat de Girona), and has so far published eight more novels and received many accolades. The last novel by Cercas I have read, Planeta Award winner *Terra Alta* (2019)—the first in a crime fiction trilogy—did not particularly impress me, hence my difficulties to connect him with the Weidenfeld Chair. I grant, though, that *Soldiers of Salamis* is superb.

I have also enjoyed very much *El punto ciego*, wishing as I read that more writers found the time and energies to discuss their craft. There is a slew of books by professional authors offering notes on their professional experience and advice to aspiring writers (here's a list of 100 volumes of this kind) but not so many essays by writers on what makes quality novels tick. Reading Cercas I often thought of Stephen King's splendid *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000), a book everyone mentions at the top of their list of best books about the profession. I like it so much that I even pestered King's agent, trying to have him persuade the author to write a second part… to no avail! Anyway, Cercas' book is very different, more general literary analysis rather than memoir, perhaps closer to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature* (1980)—which I have not read—or similar volumes. It is, in short, a series of lessons on fiction, rather than a series of pointers on how to write it.

Cercas considers a limited number of canonical classics (very few by women…) and his own novels—in particular *Anatomía de un instante / Anatomy of an instant* (2009), on the 1981 failed coup by Tejero—to offer a theorization of the novel that, plainly, suits

him. What he calls 'el punto ciego' (the blind spot) is the resistance of the ambitious novel to offer closure, though he uses other words: "nada contribuye tanto como el punto ciego a cebar de sentido una novela o relato, a incrementar el volumen de significado que es capaz de generar" ("nothing contributes as much as the blind spot to fatten up the novel or short story, to increase the volume of meaning it can generate"). Cercas does not mean that fiction should be open-ended but that it should contain some fundamental "ambiguity", which is not the same, he says, as "indefinition". I know what he means: we return to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* again and again for the conundrum that the whole novel is, and how it resists any easy interpretation. The simpler novels are up for inspection, warts and all, with no ambiguity, just to offer an experience of reading that while pleasing enough is not necessarily fulfilling (this describes Cercas' own *Terra Alta*).

Fiction, Cercas claims, need not "proponer nada, no debe transmitir certezas ni dar respuestas ni prescribir soluciones" ("propose anything, must not transmit certainties or give answers or prescribe solutions") yet, at the same time, he argues, "toda literatura auténtica es literatura comprometida" ("all authentic literature is committed literature"). I hesitate about how to translate 'comprometida', tempted to use 'compromised', a false friend which, of course, means 'at risk'. What is quality fiction if not fiction on the constant brink of disaster, though? But I deviate from Cercas' meaning, which is clear enough, even a bit clichéd: "toda literatura auténtica aspira a cambiar el mundo cambiando la percepción del mundo del lector" ("all authentic literature aspires to altering the world by altering the perception of the world by the reader")—though perhaps he means "of the reader's world", I don't know. I love it when writers use these high-sounding words, rather than speak of sales and awards and all the accoutrements of literary fame, but then I recall this is a guy with a Planeta under his belt, the most commercialized award in the world and I wonder how he tells himself now that he is a 'committed' writer. Perhaps the money has freed him from this and other burdens.

Cercas maintains that fully realist novels have no blind spot, which means that he is praising a type of fiction that refuses to be fully accessible, either by accident (pioneers like Miguel de Cervantes' *El Quijote*) or willingly (name your favourite post-modern novel here—Joyce's Modernist *Ulysses* is even going too far down that road). At the same time, he warns about a matter we are all aware of: in literature there is no evolution, and in fact most readers (he claims and I agree) are perfectly happy with the modern descendants of 19th century realist fiction. I say the 'modern descendants' because if readers were happy with actual 19th century novels then Dickens and company would still be best-selling authors, which is not the case. Cercas points out, quite rightly, that despite the efforts of many Modernist and post-modern authors to shake 19th century novelistic conventions out of their complacency with countless narrative experiments, we read novels for what they say about the human condition, and not for what the authors can do with form. The model Jane Austen used (though she was a writer with more ambiguities than it might seem at first sight) is still good, if not best, for us since it seems that, despite what some experimental authors believe, readers want no narrative frills—just the illusion that the characters exist and that their lives matter.

This is where the novel and I as a reader are parting ways: I find very few current novels that interest me as expressions of human experience. I find now, as I have been noting here repeatedly, memoirs more interesting than novels. In fact, I possibly enjoy them not only because people who choose to narrate their lives usually have interesting trajectories to explore, but also because Cercas' sense of ambiguity is possibly stronger in memoirs. Just to mention an example, I have just finished reading *The Meaning of Mariah Carey* (2020) by the artist herself with Michaela Angela Davis. I am not a Lamb, as Carey's fans are known, and chose the book for the mostly positive reviews and because, as I say, suddenly I find memoirs more appealing than novels—even as fiction. By this I mean that memoirs are interested constructions in which a flesh-and-blood

person turns him/herself into a character in a narrative of their own, turning his/her circle into secondary characters. I think Cercas would love *The Meaning of Mariah Carey* for its constant use of an almost Jamesian ambiguity, so radical that I think I know less about the diva than before I read her memoirs. I'm joking, as you can see, but I found more blind spots in Carey's odd volume than in all the canonical novels Cercas mentions.

So, you see?, the danger of all literary theories, including Cercas' on the blind spots that make great novels great, is that they can apply to texts created with no idea of the literary. Yet, if the blind spot is not enough to characterize great fiction, and it's not a question of experimenting with form but of dealing with singular human experience, then many other types of narrative texts do the same, even reality shows. What makes us admire novelists and not essayists even when novelists are very close to being essayists—as is Cercas' case—is the power of inventing a simulacrum of human life. The biographer and the auto-biographer also narrate human experience but no matter how solid their narrative skills are, there is something in pure invention that dazzles us.

Cercas and many others may take persons from real life as foundations for their novels but what we enjoy is how they fantasize about them, even preferring their fictional version to the strictly historical. Cercas does more or less say that he was not interested in the three men that never flinched when Tejero came into the Spanish Parliament and his troops unleashed volley after volley of bullets: he is interested in why they did not flinch. Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez, his Minister of Defence Teniente General Gutiérrez Mellado and Communist opposition leader Santiago Carrillo, Cercas explains, are not in his novel *Anatomía de un instante* a portrait of the actual historical figures but characters of his own invention.

For me, that is the real blind spot in novels: the elusive difference between the essayist's power to offer an approximation to reality and the novelist's power to invent what appears to be real. No novelist, though, seems interested to take a good look into that power, perhaps because it is a mystery and I have this feeling that it is a bit scary, something out of control and impossible to understand. But, then, if writers are not well equipped to explore this mystery of the fictionalizing mind, who is? Just don't say the word 'neuroscientists'… Enjoy instead the mystery of great fiction and great writers. And do read *Soldiers of Salamis*.

4 April 2022 / STUPIDITY: THE FORBIDDEN WORD IN THE CLASSROOM

I whole-heartedly recommend the delicious collective volume edited by psychologist Jean-François Marmion, *The Psychology of Stupidity* (2020; originally *Psychologie de la Connerie*, 2018; trans. Liesl Schillinger) for its truly glorious outing of all types of thoughtlessness. It is really thought-provoking! Marmion's volume warns that stupidity is hard to define and explore because it has multiple facets. It is easy to recognize assholes like Donald Trump, his contributors explain, but it is much harder to understand why people daily showing their intelligence professionally can say and do truly foolish things.

One thing that I should note is that persons are never wholly intelligent. Whenever uber-computers Deep Blue and Alpha Go are mentioned, AI detractors make a point of noting that they lack general intelligence and are only good at performing specific tasks. I think that a common mistake is believing that intelligent human beings possess general intelligence, which is not at all the case. To avoid offending other persons, I'll mention that in my own case, I appear to have a certain talent for language, but my alleged intelligence evaporates the moment I need to apply it to other disciplines (yes, maths) and I have certainly made appalling, stupid mistakes in my life. I am also totally talentless for sports, which means that I would always get a basic pass for Physical Education. I am

stupid, then, on many more fronts than I am intelligent, but because I am hard-working, my primary school teachers got the impression that I am mostly intelligent. As I grew up, I kept up the pretence by shedding the subjects at which I am stupid until I got in the niche where I seem to excel, more or less (let's not exaggerate).

Among the many paragraphs I ended up underlining in Marmion's book, I'll reproduce here one from Jean-François Dortier's chapter "A Taxonomy of Morons" which provides us with an insight into how school and intelligence (or stupidity) originally connected: "When, at the end of the nineteenth century [in 1881-2], Jules Ferry made primary education compulsory in France, it appeared that certain students were incapable of absorbing routine instruction. Two psychologists, Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon, were asked to create an intelligence test in order to identify such children so that they could receive an adapted education. This test formed the basis of what would later become the famous 'IQ'—the Intelligence Quotient". Today, Dortier adds, we use euphemisms ('learning disabilities') to avoid referring to children once commonly described as 'retarded', just as we don't speak of 'gifted' children but of "children with 'high potential'".

I have never taken an IQ test, an instrument which I find of very little use. In fact, I think it is totally ridiculous, since having a high score does not mean a person is particularly useful to the welfare of humankind. If you are interested in this matter, I have just learned searching information for this post that there is something called Mensa International, a non-profit association that gathers together 134000 persons all over the world with IQs "at the 98th percentile or higher on a standardised, supervised IQ or other approved intelligence test". What these persons are doing to stop climate change, or end the war in Ukraine, is not known, hence my mistrust of this kind of classification. What Dortier's passage suggests, nonetheless, is that there was a moment in history when it might have been possible to organize all schools on the principle of IQ scoring, which is as frightening to me as the idea of eugenics. Happily, public schools were organized on the basis of providing students with the same education, though it is true that some students were horribly discriminated because of ableist prejudice and that others with special needs were awfully neglected. We were saved, at least, from carrying our IQ emblazoned on the school uniform, which is a relief.

This does not mean that there are no differences in learning capability among children, or that the school does not emphasize them through assessment, which I have opposed here recently. Reading Marmion's *Psychology of Stupidity* it seems obvious that there must be a direct correspondence between the number of adults that show remarkable intelligence and those who enjoy wallowing in stupidity, and the number of children in both categories despite the current pretence that all children are equally capable and will demonstrate it if given the right kind of education. I have been defending the idea that education should make the most of each person's abilities and I hate any kind of classification that separates children according to academic performance—I still shudder to recall a fourth-grade teacher who had us shift seats at the end of each week (or was it day?) depending on how we had done, placing the best students at the front and the worst ones at the back. It is ugly to do this to children, but we all know cases of adults whose learning abilities are limited and who were already like that as kids. I am not speaking here of children with manifest problems, but children who could not and would not be educated and who have become adults that despise intelligence and learning. Thousands are displaying on social media each day what can only be called a profound stupidity, and, as we are seeing, the phenomenon begins as soon as children are given a smartphone, around age ten.

As I have noted, the supposition today is that no child is stupid but also that children's self-esteem can be damaged if they are in any way told that their performance is below par. This has turned assessment into a minefield. In 2016 the local Catalan

authorities decided to eliminate for that reason the 0-10 scale that we still use at the university to rate students' performance, replacing it with another system which while apparently more lenient, still classifies children by performance. The new score system is 'excellent achievement' (assoliment excel·lent), 'notable achievement' (assoliment notable), 'satisfactory achievement' (assoliment satisfactory) and 'no achievement' (no assoliment). These are the old Sobresaliente (A), Notable (B), Aprobado (C), and Suspenso (D) but with an emphasis on learning outcome rather than assessment, or so did the authorities claim. This year the Catalan Education Councillor Josep González-Cambray has tried to replace 'no achievement' with the more optimistic 'achievement in process' (en procés d'assoliment) but teachers have argued that this would confuse families, and the 'no achievement' nomenclature for fails remains in place.

The struggle to find replacements for the traditional assessment categories is plainly manifesting that the school does not know how to handle the children who are not learning, despite being fully able to do so. It is feared, as I have noted, that they will feel abused if told openly that they have failed, but perhaps what is undermining the respect for intelligence and endorsing the reign of stupidity is, precisely, the supposition that children can be measured by the same system. If I am a child constantly told that my school activities lead to 'no achievement', I will do my best to bring the world down to my own level, beginning as soon as I can and with the help of social media. There, the more intelligent people are being mercilessly abused by those who feel free, thanks to the anonymity the media allow but also under their own names, to impose their aggressively stupid views. It's a sort of revenge of the underachiever that is eating up any authority teachers or the school once had. They are winning the war, as the school can do nothing to revalue intelligence as what it used to be: not something a handful of children have, but something many children can show.

If, in short, all children are treated as equally capable and worthy of attention, which I am sure they are, where do stupid adults come from? The politically incorrect suggestion is that some people are born stupid, by which I mean congenitally incapable of benefitting from an education, even at its primary stage. The politically correct assumption is that the school produces stupidity by insisting on assessment and on presenting the more capable children as children of 'high potential', instead of selling intelligence as the more desirable model for all. As I have insisted, nobody is generally intelligent or totally stupid, and it is a question, then, of finding out in which areas each person is most capable. It is also a question of valuing in school other aspects. There might be children whose performance is not particularly outstanding but who are caring and generous. Others might be able to pass solid moral judgement and promote mutual respect. Some could be genius with their hands, rather than their brains. The school, in short, needs to be more intelligent in curbing down a system that, as I see it, produces excess adult stupidity.

The other institution that needs to be more intelligent are the social media. Back in the early 1990s, when I joined the pre-internet BBS (Bulletin Boards System) such as Fidonet, trolls would be shouted down as the disrespectful creatures they are. I had intense conversations of all kinds with a variety of persons all over Spain and we could certainly disagree without insulting each other. Then the internet came on in 1994, and later the social media (Facebook was launched in 2004). They attracted not necessarily less intelligent people but more permissive business models, based on the premise that the more users a network has, the higher income it receives from announcers. Trolls were for that reason welcome, if not directly more welcome than people who could join in intelligent debate. Add to this anonymity and the populist rule of the like, and the recipe for the growth of worldwide stupidity is ready.

Please, recall that the guy who started the ball rolling, Mark Zuckerberg, was a Harvard University student at the time, showing how close intelligence and assholery

often are. His cleverness has led to the massive exploitation of stupidity and the downfall of intelligence as a respected value all over the world. Food for thought.

25 April 2022 / YOUR OWN BRAND: THE (IN)VISIBILITY OF ACADEMICS

To my surprise, my school invited me to attend a seminar by writer and coach Neus Arquès addressed to making our personal brands more solid and visible. Having turned herself into a self-employed consultor, Arquès claims that she was one of the introducers in Spain of the idea of the personal brand, beyond, I assume, the world of show business and celebrity. She helps her clients to turn their skills into recognizable personal brands as a first step to publicize professional projects and attract, in their turn, clients. I was invited to join her seminar, it seems, for my efforts to make academic life visible with this blog, my e-books with students, and my collaborations with non-academic fandom associations.

In the end, I didn't learn from Arquès's seminar what I wanted to learn: how I can break the barrier that is preventing me from publishing books in Spanish, and by that I mean both academic volumes and essays for a general readership in one of the Planeta publishing houses. Arquès herself issues her books through a publishing house attached to Planeta, so why not I? However, the advice she gave me was that I need to be patient and try as many publishers as possible (I have gone through fifteen already trying to publish my book on villainy in Spanish) and, perhaps, disguise the academic nature of my work. Deep sigh.

At some point I apparently missed the train, because even though my first two books were in Spanish (with a publisher whose name I won't even mention), I have been unable to secure the attentions of other more serious Spanish publishers (I mean without paying to be published). In contrast, many of us in English Studies in Spain are publishing regularly with top academic publishers Routledge, Palgrave, Brill and other Anglophone university presses (not Penguin Random House but, well, good enough). I see, besides, that most books currently popular in Spain within my own field of research, Masculinity Studies, are not written by scholars but by journalists with a significant media profile (see *La nueva masculinidad de siempre: Capitalismo, deseo y falofobias* by Antonio J. Rodríguez). It's tremendously frustrating. A friend tells me that first-rank academics are now self-publishing in Spain even on Amazon, which is certainly something I have been considering. In fact, I have just self-published a new book in my university's digital repository, of which more next week.

I digress, though. My theme today is how academic life forces all academics to turn into personal brands even when they don't know this is how things work. Arquès explained to us that you may understand the value of your personal brand by checking how you are mentioned on the internet; this is what she called 'reputation', warning this is a word few like. I happen to like it. Reputation used to be the prestige attached to outstanding scholars usually thanks to a well-known book (I'm talking about the Humanities). Reputation used to be what made others scholars and even some illustrated students exclaim 'oh, yes…!' when a name was mentioned. It still is the cause by which one gets invitations to lecture. Reputation, however, is now being destroyed, if it has not been already destroyed, by metrics, accreditation processes, and other types of measuring standards (I am amazed by how people insist on winning awards and prizes, when its sheer abundance devalues them to much). At any rate, since competition is so fierce in academia, a basic tenet is that you need to build your reputation (new or old style), which is why every academic is indeed a personal brand, whether they know it or not.

A brand, in case I am not explaining myself well, is what makes a business publicly recognizable as a concept. Please, don't confuse this with a logo, though of course they are related. Apple, as a brand, is the concept that Steve Jobs developed to identify a set of technological products and the strategies to develop them; the logo is the famous bitten apple (Jobs used to work picking apples in his hippie youth, hence the fixation). Brand and logo connect in a rather awful way: 'to brand' means to mark with a burning iron a symbol on the hide of cattle, so that the owner can be identified. Slaves and criminals also used to be branded. The brand burnt into animals and persons is the originator of the logo which companies use to identify themselves, so next time you proudly wear a t-shirt with any commercial logo on it, consider how you contribute to your own enslavement and feel treated like cattle. Harsh, I know. Particularly if you think that even universities are brands and have logos. I am attending these days a course on how to maintain the Department's website and you can be sure that the matter of the correct UAB logo to use has already been raised.

So, even though we may not have individual logos (hey, that's an idea…), we scholars are personal brands since we must put a great deal of effort on the constant promotion of our talents and work. This comes quite as a shock when rookie teachers are hired, for not all have the skills that self-promotion requires. I have seen some individuals progress from being doctoral students to full professors in a little more than a decade, on the basis of what you might call unbounded ambition, whereas others initially enjoying the same scholarship have even failed to complete their PhD dissertation, soon losing their bearings.

Nobody tells you openly what the rules are, so you need to grasp them as you work on. You are generally told that you need to make your work known through conferences and publications, that you need to join a research group, that you should join Academia.edu and ResearchGate, but these is general advice. It is then up to each scholar to work out how to engage in effective networking, what publishing houses and journals give you more visibility (i.e. citations), and how to position yourself strategically in relation to the job category you aspire to, vying with others in the same Department or elsewhere. Even so, obstacles arise or errors are committed in the plan. You may have dreamed of being a *catedrático* in your favourite city only to become a *catedrático* but in a city you hate and be stranded there for decades until you retire.

I referred in another post, years ago, to the figure of the obscure professor and the difficulties of being visible and my impression is that nothing much has changed. I dutifully joined Academia.edu and ResearchGate and this has generated a variety of problems: I need to keep track of my publications in both sites apart from my own website and the UAB's Research Portal, I keep on getting requests for publications which are copyrighted and I'm not supposed to circulate, and I don't have time to keep up with all my colleagues upload. I don't know if my presence in these networks has really increased the number of my citations, but one thing I can say is that even though I am doing all I can to make my work visible, in a recent application for a group research grant my impact was calculated on the basis of Scopus, for which I hardly exist since I am not a scientist. I felt so deeply humiliated… How Scopus and academic reputation combine is beyond me.

A quite intriguing aspect of Arquès's seminar is that she insisted that being visible does not necessarily mean being present in social media. I agree: you can have a Twitter account, as I do, and keep a very low profile, as I do. I have never got the hang of social media and I am not really making any efforts to learn because of the immense amount of noise they generate. It certainly makes more sense to publicize academic work in Academia.edu or ResearchGate than on Instagram. I know that some primary and secondary school teachers are very popular TikTokers, but I don't see my academic peers or myself capable of generating much interest in that way— perhaps I should try

to have my students work with me on a Victorian Literature TikTok channel… Yes, I know, not really… So basically, Arquès meant using personal websites wisely and making sure you release information in your social media (academic or otherwise) that enhances your impact. Always considering that this takes time stolen to research.

I am thinking, to conclude, that whereas Neus Arquès's seminar did help me to understand in which ways I already operate as a brand and in which other ways I don't (can't, won't), I would like to be in a seminar with a really big academic name who could teach me how they have gained their visibility. On the other hand, as matters stand now, with Elon Musk about to buy Twitter and erase its already extremely limited rules of engagement to express opinion, being visible only means being vulnerable. I like passing on information and ideas to share in debate, that's all, as I assume most scholars do. Any other ambition in the Humanities is just quite silly (fame, money… come on!). It just annoys me that others passing on information and ideas are not academically as qualified, though they are certainly clever at making themselves visible. Perhaps the key word in all my ranting today is not, after all, reputation but recognition and, why not?, envy.

2 May 2022 / READING MEMOIRS: EDITING LIFE

I am currently reading the memoirs by British pianist James Rhodes, *Instrumental* (2014), which caused quite a stir at the time of publication for his straightforward description of the horrifying sexual abuse to which he was subjected between the ages of 6 and 10 (and its aftermath). This is the sixteenth book of memoirs I read this year, and it is only May 2nd. I must clarify that up to now I have not been much interested in memoirs, finding them always a bit too gossipy for my taste, which has been no doubt conditioned by the tenets of a Catholic upbringing dictating that confession must be private, only for the priest's ears. In Protestant Anglophone countries, confession, in contrast, is public. Memoirs actually come, or so I was taught, from the texts that Protestant believers composed to narrate how they had found grace after sinning. The idea behind memoirs was that they would help other sinners to lead an honest life, guided by example. Evidently, little remains today of that initial impulse, even though volumes like Rhodes's always carry a bit of an exemplary intention, in this case to guide others in how to survive abuse (or, as he has the courage to call it, rape). On the other hand, the worst kind of memoir is that type which is basically a long list of trivial minor recollections, punctuated by constant name dropping. 'I am important and I matter' these vainglorious memoirs scream on each page.

Rhodes begins *Instrumental* by wondering whether, at age thirty-eight, he is too young to write his memoirs. This a common misconception: he is too young to write his autobiography, a text intended to cover the author's whole life usually written at an advanced age, but not his memoirs. Any person at any point in their life can write a memoir as long as they have something worth telling. In fact, the pity about memoirs is that they need to be written when the subject is minimally mature to make sense of their recollections, which means that we are missing memoirs by children and by teens (I don't mean memoirs of childhood and adolescence by adults, but texts written by minors). It is true, in any case, that memoirs usually contain plenty of autobiography of the classic Dickensian kind, mostly narrating the beginnings of the subject's life. Usually, the first chapters of memoirs are for that reason rather more synthetic and better ordered than the rest. As the memoir progresses, more and more information and events are weeded out, which opens many gaps. Debbie Harry, former frontwoman of popular band Blondie,

writes in her memoirs *Face It* (what a great title!) that this is because in memoirs life needs to be 'edited', so I'm borrowing her phrase for my title today.

Memoirs are, then, usually more partial accounts than autobiographies, which are supposed to be more comprehensive, though I would not want to be too dogmatic. What I find most intriguing about memoirs, and possibly this is the reason why I have resisted their appeal for so long, is that most are written by non-writers. Besides, we all know that in fact many memoirs have been penned by ghost writers (not all incurring the dangers of Roman Polanski's protagonist in his thriller *The Ghost Writer* (2010)!). Being far less politically correct, in Spanish we call ghost writers 'negros', which is a way of stressing the enslavement of that kind of writer to the will of the master subject. The existence of ghost writers and of acknowledged collaborators (the name following the preposition 'with' after the name of the main author) is nonetheless a factor that interferes in my reading of memoirs. Whenever I come across a great sentence, I always wonder whose turn of phrase that is. The same applies to the 'editing' that Harry alludes to; one thing is who makes the decision to narrate what, and another very different matter is who structures the book and how. Even when there is no ghost writer, the usually long lists of names of editors in the acknowledgements section makes me wonder what kind of Frankenstein's monster text I am reading. This would not matter if it weren't for the obsession with authorial integrity that we borrow from the novel and apply to the memoir, but it does ultimately matter.

The current fashion for memoirs is to be candid and sincere, even when they expose the author in a less than favourable light. This can be unwitting. In Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994), a memoir of depression that has taken me ages to read because it is so painful, the author paints a most negative portrait of herself, revealing shortcomings that were not strictly speaking part of her illness. In contrast, I struggled with Anna Wienner's *Uncanny Valley* (2019) because her indictment of Silicon Valley's sexism totally lacked any self-criticism. I don't mean that she is in any way guilty of provoking her own discrimination, but that she seemed unable to explain why she chose to be employed by that obviously sexist industry. Adam Kay, once a young doctor employed by the British public health system, is extremely critical of his work environment in *This is Going to Hurt: Secret Diaries of a Medical Resident* (2022), but he is also candid about his own misguided idealism and the errors he committed in choosing Medicine as a profession. Memoirs are always partial but they should not be so in a way that raises more questions than answers. Mariah Carey's narrative of her enslavement by her former husband and Sony recording company CEO Tommy Mottola in *The Meaning of Mariah Carey* (2020) is perplexing because she never acknowledges that she did benefit professionally from their marriage. I don't mean that she is disrespecting the truth, what I mean is that her account has gaps which make the reader ask 'but…?', which should not happen. Naturally, perhaps not even Mariah Carey fully understands why her life went through certain turns, but, then, that is the danger of the memoir: one must be in control, if not of life, at least of the narrative shaping its account.

Not all memoirs are obvious memoirs. One of the most beautiful books I have read in a long time is Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain: A Celebration of the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland* (1977). This cannot be really called a memoir since Shepherd is not there narrating her life but paying homage to this feature of the Scottish landscape. Nor is this travel writing since this is not a text about a specific journey but a recollection of many trips along the years into the hills. Yet, Shepherd herself is there in each page of the short book, loving the mountains, enjoying them alone or in company, first as a girl and later as a mature woman. Shepherd, the author of three well received novels—*The Quarry Wood* (1928), *The Weatherhouse* (1930), and *A Pass in the Grampians* (1933)—wrote *The Living Mountain* in 1944, but abandoned the idea of publishing it when one of her literary mentors (a man whose name I forget) told her it was

not really worth issuing. She decided thirty years later that, after all, her slim volume should see the light, and the result is a prose poem of rare beauty in which Shepherd is an enchanted onlooker, enjoying in body and mind a total Romantic communion with the hills of her land. "On the mountain, I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy… I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. That is the final grace accorded from the mountain". Her admirer, landscape writer Robert MacFarlane, wrote that "This is Shepherd's version of Descartes's cogito—I walk therefore I am. She celebrates the metaphysical rhythm of the pedestrian, the iamb of the 'I am', the beat of the placed and lifted foot". Pure poetry, as I say, coming from a writer who needs no ghost writer in a text that almost became a ghost.

I do not mean with this praise of Shepherd's unique memoir that more standard memoirs are lacking in literary ambitions, for what is remarkable about this genre is how protean it can be. Memoirs can be written by fine professional writers and by less gifted amateurs, and that is the beauty of their kind. Novels are read for the insight they provide into human experience but novels are not alone in providing that; besides, novels tend to focus on invented characters. Memoirs complement that search for human experience by presenting readers with recollections of life lived by persons who are in one way or another interesting. I never thought, for instance, that I would be attracted by what professional rock climber Alex Honnold has to say, but I found his memoir *Alone on the Wall* (2015) truly engaging (collaborator David Roberts claimed that he had worked very little on it, mostly as an editor). Memoirs require being a very open-minded reader and trusting that gems can be found amongst the most unlikely authors. One never knows.

Perhaps the secret reason why I admire memoir writers is that it takes courage to narrate your life, even when you do it out of sheer vanity. The woman professor whose courses on autobiography and memoirs I took as a doctoral student used to say when I raised this point that in the end human experience is not so dissimilar in terms of the general narrative arc of life, and so there is no reason to feel embarrassment. I believe that there is good reason to feel embarrassed about the specifics of each life, no matter how similar they can be. Memoir writers have crossed the boundary of embarrassment, with some, like Trevor Noah (do read please *Born in Crime*) making the most of rather painful recollections.

Privacy is not much valued these days but it still matters to many of us, which is why reading memoirs is so paradoxical: because they are the most private of texts (apart from diaries, yes). I thank, then, the authors that are giving themselves up for inspection, revealing big and small corners of human experience which go beyond fiction to connect with actual life.

9 May 2022 / DEFENDING ACADEMIC SELF-PUBLISHING: THE PROBLEM OF BOOKS (AND A NEW ONE)

I have recently published a new book, but I don't know whether it is really a book because it is self-published and, as such, it does not exist for the authorities that assess my research, the Ministry and ANECA. My new book is called *Entre muchos mundos: en torno a la ciencia ficción*, and it can be downloaded for free from the digital repository of my university. This is by no means the first book I publish at the DDD if I count the e-book versions of other books I have published in print or the 10 e-books with my students, but the novelty is that this is the first time I use the digital platform to publish a new book. 'New' relatively, since *Entre muchos mundos* gathers together a selection of 21 articles and book chapters on science fiction which I have published between 2000 and 2021. My intention was not only to put them together but also to make them all available in

Spanish. As the credits show, most of these pieces had been originally published in English, but there is so very little on science fiction in Spanish that I decided to self-translate. The volume is quite long, around 340 pages, but I had already self-translated some of the pieces, and in case you don't know, Word offers a translation tool (right-hand mouse button) which, as far as I'm concerned, works as proficiently as Google Translate or Deep-L. It still requires revision, logically, much not as much as you might think.

My collection is organized in three sections, Part I— Science fiction, genre and texts; Part II— Masculinity and Science Fiction, and Part III— Science fiction, women and feminism. Each section has 7 articles, with the first section being necessarily more miscellaneous. One of the hardest parts of organizing any book, particularly if it is an anthology of previously published work, is making it seem coherent. Another hindrance is getting over the embarrassment of re-reading work published fifteen or twenty years ago. What I have discovered in the process is that even though constant reading and studying brings new ideas all the time, one's mind still spins around the same insistent notions. We are (or I am) rather stubborn creatures in what we think and believe. The matter that has surprised me more is that I wasn't aware that I had already written so much on science fiction; in the end, I had to leave out some articles. This is not the kind of book I would have written if I had started from scratch but at the same time it is a more consistent sample of my work than I initially believed.

The focus of my post is not, however, the contents of the book, which the reader is invited to sample as more than other 100 readers have already done. I would like to discuss why this book exists and why it is in an academic limbo. In the process of trying to have my book *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2020, Routledge) published in Spanish, in self-translation, I have contacted 20 prospective publishers. Of these 7 declined to publish my book, usually invoking the excuse that their catalogue was full for two more years but never giving me the chance to consider if this was convenient for me. One, by the way, stopped replying to my e-mails at a point when I had already sent the contract with Routledge for them to check the matter of the language rights (which Routledge has granted me for Spanish). To my dismay, 11 publishers have never even replied to my proposal, accompanied by a rather complete dossier, and samples of my self-translation. Of the three who did reply showing some interest, I have finally been fortunate to be invited by one to publish the translation. In contrast, I had only contacted Palgrave and Routledge to publish the English original. I came to the conclusion that if publishing the translation of a book accepted by a top international academic publisher had been such a long, complicated process, there was no way anyone would accept a collection of already published articles on science fiction. In fact, I haven't even tried to find a publisher. Why bother?

The market for academic books collapsed possibly a decade ago when students stopped buying books (I always speak of the Humanities, where handbooks are not as habitual as in science degrees). Reading Javier Pérez Andújar's delicious *Paseos con mi madre*, I came across a reference to *Dos obras maestras españolas: El Libro de buen amor y La Celestina* (1962) by Maria Rosa Lida de Malkiel, a book that all students of Philology like him (and I) read photocopied. The academic market survived for as long as copies had to be paid for but when digitalization resulted in the rampant piracy in which we all participate, publishers reacted by increasing the price of volumes so steeply that not even well-paid tenured professors can afford them. In the recent order I have passed to the library, some of my colleagues have asked for books priced 120-160 euros; paperbacks start now at around 30 euros, which is still expensive. As for e-book editions, I wonder who is buying them because they are that expensive if not more. I believe that if e-books were in the 5-10 euros range, piracy would diminish but of course this is incongruous in an academic market in which articles are priced around 35 euros (and

please recall that authors are paid royalties for books but not for articles, or, for that matter, book chapters).

It makes, then, sense to self-publish, which as I noted in my previous post, some first-rank figures are already doing through platforms such as Amazon. If we want knowledge to circulate, this is an attractive possibility, though of course everything has a cost. Surfing the internet seeking publishers, one soon comes across businesses offering help with self-publication, including a concern by Planeta. They value the editing and proof-reading of a standard volume (200-350 pages) at more than 2500 euros. I don't know if this is cheap or expensive, but I realize that not all academics have the skills to produce a correctly edited e-book that looks minimally nice. I hope this fits the description of my new book, but I must say that even though I am very far from being a professional book designer, I have 30 years' experience in editing and proof-reading my own texts (like most of us do), and more than 10 years' experience in publishing online at UAB's DDD. Actually, I love the process of choosing fonts, designing covers and so on, but I am aware that not all academics enjoy it. Self-publishing, then, has that: it requires either money or skills, and of course time. If I recall correctly, I have used about six weeks to edit my new book, combined with other duties, though I am not teaching this semester.

Once the e-book is edited (and I say e-book because self-publication on paper makes no sense at all), and it is uploaded online, what remains is making it visible. We believe that publishing on paper with an academic publisher is more practical since the book enters a catalogue and the publicity machinery of the publisher. Just consider this: books have a shelf-life of a few weeks, even when they are published by big commercial houses; possibly, university libraries extend that shelf-life since the idea of academic novelty is not so limiting (most journals accepts reviews of books published in the last two years). Even so, my Routledge book has sold about 150 copies in the first year, which was enough for it to become a paperback, whereas *Entre muchos mundos* already has 123 readers in one month. I have not even announced its publication, except for a tweet. If you're thinking, 'fine, but you're not making any money out of this book', consider that I have made no money whatsoever with the articles and book chapters included in it.

So, supposing you have the skills (or the money) to produce a legible e-book as a .pdf (Calibre can help you transform it into .epub and .mobi), and supposing your university has a digital platform where you can upload it (as Academia.edu and ResearchGate have, too), why do we insist on publishing academic books on paper, even paying thousands of euros for the privilege? Because of the Ministry and the assessment agencies, whether they are ANECA or the regional ones. Books are an uncomfortable grey area in assessment because they do not follow strictly the same peer reviewing system as the journals, and because they are not ranked according to the same metrics. In Spain, a research group of the Universidad de Granada build a few years ago SPI (Scholarly Publishers Indicators) on the basis of a survey asking us, researchers, about the prestige of the publishers in our area. This oddly subjective method created a series of distortions which has resulted in a rather singular list. SPI, besides, mixes Language and Literature, which means that the list is rather useless for either area. The Ministry and ANECA are so unsure about how to judge academic books that they give full volumes the same value as single articles in our personal assessment exercises. I stupidly believed that, with 9 chapters, the Routledge book should be sufficient to pass the next assessment until an ANECA bureaucrat corrected me. I still need to submit 5 more items, ideally from peer-reviewed A-list journals. Given the importance of peer-reviewing, and the treatment which academic books receive as suspect vanity publications unless they have the seal of a SPI top publishers, it is no wonder that self-publishing academic e-books has attracted so few people.

In the end, though, you need to ask yourself how you want to organize your academic publishing. I myself have led for many years now a dual career: I publish in

what the Ministry and ANECA consider valuable publishers and journals for assessment, and I self-publish online for free at UAB's repository what I want to circulate with no limits at all, even if it does not count for assessment. Hence, my new book. Would I publish a full monograph in this way? The answer is not yet because I still need to be assessed every five years (perhaps when I retire). So, yes, I understand that there are few advantages in self-publishing e-books that do not count for assessment, except that knowledge circulates for free, which is a gigantic bonus. If, in short, academic publishers instead of digital repositories are issuing our work, this is because the Ministry and ANECA require it, not because this is the best way in which knowledge is enhanced. Open Access, in fact, currently consists of making available what was once published not what is being self-published (and could be also peer-reviewed if required).

I hope you enjoy my book, but I also hope you think of publishing your own collections and of self-translating. It is extra work, I know, but perhaps not as hard as you assume. Stick to the Ministry/ANECA rules for assessment if you have to, but look beyond them, and circulate your academic work in as many ways as possible. I believe it is worth it and satisfactory.

16 May 2022 / ASSHOLES, VILLAINS, AND THE CURRENT WAR IN UKRAINE

One of experts interviewed in the collective volume edited by psychologist Jean-François Marmion, *The Psychology of Stupidity* (2020; originally *Psychologie de la Connerie*, 2018; trans. Liesl Schillinger), to which I devoted my post of 4 March, was moral philosopher Aaron James. Having now read his splendid monograph *Assholes: A Theory* (2012), I would like to use my post today for a reflection on the asshole as a gradation in what I am calling patriarchal villainy (we are here within Masculinities Studies). James notes that most assholes are men in the same way I note that most villains are men, and we both coincide that there are female assholes and villains (villainess is, like heroine, a feminized narrative role and not a moral category). James and I also coincide on the reason why assholes and villains are mainly male: both types are characterized by a strong sense of entitlement only encouraged in men by patriarchy; some women who enjoy or take power in their hands also allow themselves to behave as assholes or villains, but they are a tiny minority.

First, some etymology and a caveat on linguistic differences. Even though we are used to hearing the word 'asshole' invoked many times in films and series to insult or describe a guy behaving obnoxiously, this is an American corruption of the original word, 'arsehole', meaning, of course, 'anus'. British speakers understand the 'ass' in 'asshole' to mean a donkey, which makes no sense to them. Calling someone an 'ass' meaning that they are stupid, as donkeys are supposed to be (they are not), is pure speciesm, but this is just not related to the word 'asshole'. When an American says 'kiss my ass', they don't mean 'kiss my donkey', they mean 'arse'. Although the word 'asshole' emerged as a vulgar synonym for 'anus' in the 14th century, its usage as a personal insult dates back only to the 20th century, when it became truly popular in American slang (around the 1970s).

Films and TV, as I have noted, have carried 'asshole' all over the planet, once the resistance against swearwords was eroded in the 1980s. Incidentally, Brits tend to prefer 'cunt' as a strong personal insult against obnoxious men, which is an example of particularly detestable misogyny (fancy insulting a woman by calling her 'dick' or 'cock'). In Spanish, we use 'gilipollas' but this is a word that I find quite weak in comparison. Apparently, 'gilipollas' comes from caló 'jili' or 'gilis' meaning idiot, whereas 'polla' as we know is a vulgarism for the penis. 'Gilipollas' means thus something such as 'idiot man

who thinks with his dick/cock', though 'tonto del culo' (which roughly translates as 'arseidiot') is perhaps closer to 'asshole'. Many articles carry an improbable story borrowed from a blog post by which 'gilipollas' comes from one Don Baltasar Gil Imón (1545-1629), the Fiscal del Consejo de Hacienda (or Ministry of Finances) under the Spanish King Carlos IV. This man had two allegedly ugly daughters, whom he would parade in search of a suitor. 'Polla' was used in the past a synonym for a young girl (as 'pollo' was for boys) and so, apparently, sneers against 'Gil' and his 'pollas' became the sneer 'gilipolla', which sounds to me as a misogynistic explanation. Having said that, 'polla' (and in English 'cock') is apparently used for the penis because it sits brooding the testicles ('huevos') like a hen; 'chick' is another word for girl in English, whereas in Spanish we call chickens 'pollos', hence the use of the word in the past for young boys. I have seen 'pollita' rather than 'polla' for girls in old texts. And I have no idea when 'polla' became everyone's favourite vulgar synonym for penis.

So what is an asshole (or a 'gilipollas')? Let me use James's spot-on definition "a person counts as an *asshole* when, and only when, he systematically allows himself to enjoy special advantages in interpersonal relationships out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that immunizes him against the complaints of other people". James, who took inspiration for his academic analysis of the asshole from the asshole surfers that do not respect the codes of behaviour in this sport, sees the asshole as someone who does as he pleases regardless of the consequences in social situations that call for restraint, such as being on a queue, driving in the motorway, interacting with one's peers or subordinates at work, being with one's family and so on. The asshole, then, is a man whose obnoxious behaviour cannot be stopped because he will not listen to reason and he will not be reformed. "The asshole", James argues, "refuses to listen to our legitimate complaints, and so he poses a challenge to the idea that we are to be recognized as moral equals". We fight assholes "for moral recognition in his eyes", which may makes us unusually aggressive out of frustration.

I know plenty about assholes because, unfortunately, I grew up with one: my father. James is right to say that assholes believe they are special but he is very wrong to say that "the material costs many assholes impose upon others (…) are often by comparison [with actual criminals] moderate or very small". I am sure he has corrected his own position after publishing *Assholes: A Theory of Donald Trump* (2016). We know now that assholes may even cause the loss of democracy in the USA (please, remember that Trump will run for President again in 2024), whereas assholes like Putin may cause the world to be plunged into a nuclear World War III. My own personal experience of enduring my father also shows that assholes cause widespread misery every minute they are awake. Our family life has been destroyed by the relentless assholery of this man, who can only be called a black hole in his total destruction of anything positive. My father is not a criminal and he cannot be called legally an abuser but he has made my mother's life miserable. James warns that assholes cannot be reformed or defeated, and that the only solution is to keep a distance from them. Easier said than done, indeed. My siblings and I carry with us the weight of my father's assholery at all times. In the letter James addresses to the asshole, he writes that "many who know you will find your death relieving. There will be a quiet celebration". Quiet?

The whole world is right now waiting for the news that Vladimir Putin is ill to be confirmed. Imagine the reaction to his possible death. Now, Putin is useful to explain the difference between an asshole and a villain, both, as I am arguing, figures of male patriarchal empowerment. James claims that calling men like Hitler or Stalin assholes is not enough, as they did major harm to humankind, but at the same time there is no doubt that these men were assholes of a superlative category. What I argued in my book on villainy about Hitler is that there are many potential villains of his kind because patriarchy generates them all the time by allowing men to act on their sense of entitlement to power.

Usually this begins within unbearable family dynamics or with school bullying, and progresses until villainy is checked by a stronger individual, the rules of the community or the law. Some assholes, however, are not checked and they are even encouraged, so that they go on empowering themselves until they break the barriers implicit in patriarchy. Then, a hero needs to act to limit the villain's power, stop the widespread destruction he is causing, and return patriarchy to its *status quo*. This is what is happening now with Putin: the asshole, who was already giving many signs of villainy, is now expressing himself in full as a villain. Hence the war in Ukraine, the threat of nuclear violence (sent through his minion Lavrov), and the generalized wish that Putin is terminally ill. For here's the problem: we have a hero (Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people) and a circle of Allies (NATO), but there is not a coordinated international offensive against Putin that can stop him for good. It took six years to defeat Hitler, let's see how long it will take to defeat Putin.

James observes that assholes are now harder to defeat because they do not represent a particular ideology even when they present themselves as political figures. Trump has nothing to do with Abraham Lincoln, another Republican, but is, in fact, a figure expressing a personal brand of assholery under cover of the GOP. Why is he still so successful? Or Putin, for that matter, leaving aside the machinery of terror he operates in Russia. Because, James argues, we live in times in which narcissism is encouraged and we respond to any figure who frees himself (or herself) from social and moral rules to do as he pleases. I would not hesitate to call many of the influencers who think the world spins around them total assholes, for, unlike those of us who truly want to share knowledge and debate, they want to put their usually uninformed opinion above anyone else's. Yesterday, an eighteen-year-old white male killed ten fellow Americans, all of them black, convinced that there is a conspiracy to outnumber the white race in his nation. Guess where that idiotic idea comes from? Indeed, assholes cause plenty of damage personally and also because they sanction minion assholes.

If, despite the efforts we are making in academia and in the serious segments of the media, the existence of assholes and villains cannot be prevented, how can we curb down their impact? James, as I have noted, warns that assholes cannot be reformed, whereas I myself argued that villains must be contained for the common good. Rowling gives us a wonderful lesson in *Harry Potter* when she has the titular hero fight Voldemort in a way that the villain ends up killing himself with the very wand he thought would kill Harry. Her villain, in short, is killed by his own power. Wishing anyone's death is ugly, but, one cannot see Voldemort in handcuffs facing trial for his crimes against humanity. Hitler could not see himself, either, in that position, hence his suicide in the style of the scorpion surrounded by flames. These days every time a lovely person dies before their time, the whole planet wishes 'that asshole' (add the name you prefer) would have died instead. For me, this is the worst thing about assholes and villains: they turn even good people into murderers, if only in their fantasies. For, you see, a pacifist society that does not believe in the death penalty (or in war) does not go about exterminating its members, no matter how obnoxious they can be. We can discuss that self-defeating position, but I'll conclude by declaring that the asshole's worst punishment is total ostracism: one can hardly express any entitlement in isolation, for entitlement is always over something or someone.

So, next time your neighbour bothers you, think of how although most assholes are only guilty of assholery occasionally, some assholes may escalate into full villains, if no check is put on their empowerment. Ask Zelensky how he feels about his asshole neighbour and do help Ukraine.

23 May 2022 / SCIENCE FICTION BEYOND THE ANGLOPHONE TERRITORY: THE CATALAN CASE

This weekend I have been participating in the IV CatCon or Catalan convention on science fiction and fantasy, celebrated like the first three in the lovely seaside town of Vilanova i la Geltrú, about 50 kms south of Barcelona. CatCon gathers together fans and writers and is also the event during which the Ictineu prize is awarded. CatCon is organized by the Societat Catalana de Ciència-Ficció i Fantasia, founded in 1997, and had its first, zero edition during Eurocon 2016, held here in Barcelona.

For this edition, I proposed a round table on the current state of Catalan science fiction, to try to find out whether this is case of a half full or half empty bottle. During my intervention in the 2018 CatCon I made some comments on a text by an author, Montserrat Segura, who happened to be in the room, and this sparked a conversation about what the university could do for the Catalan authors of science fiction. I managed to convince my colleague at the Catalan Department of UAB, Víctor Martínez-Gil, that we had to legitimize academically a literary tradition which started back in the 1870s and which is now at a particularly rich moment. We decided to publish a monographic issue in a journal that would serve to present the currently indispensable authors, for which we made a selection of seven: Antoni Munné-Jordà, Jordi de Manuel, Montserrat Galícia, Carme Torras, Marc Pastor and Enric Herce (I'm now very, very sorry we did not include Salvador Macip). Then Víctor recruited four more specialists in Catalan Literature (Francesc Foguet, Maria Dasca, Jordi Marrugat and Toni Maestre), and we wrote a proposal. A bit rashly, we decided to contact first the top academic journal for Catalan Studies, the *Catalan Review*, and to our relief and happiness its editor Bill Viestenz welcomed our proposal. He was familiar with my translation into English of Manuel de Pedrolo's *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (1974) as *Typescript of the Second Origin* (2018); every little thing helps, as you can see.

The proofs for the monographic issue arrived last week (it is to be published in July), and so it seemed the perfect moment to have the round table. For this, I invited Antoni Munné-Jordà, Carme Torras, Eloi Puig and Jordi Marrugat. Munné-Jordà is not only a great author of science fiction but also the person who knows most about this genre and fantasy in Catalan. He was the director of two key sf collections (for publishers Pleniluni and Pagès), was also one of the co-founders of the Societat Catalana de Ciència Ficció i Fantasia, and maintains the amazing bibliography of works (1873-2021) which can be downloaded from the Societat's website. He has published more than twenty volumes, among which I'll mention *Michelíada* (2015), an Ictineu winner. Carme Torras, is an internationally renowned researcher in the field of assistive robotics and a leading author known for her Ictineu award-winning novels *La mutació sentimental* (2007) and *Enxarxats* (2017). Eloi Puig is the current president of the SCCFF, the promoter of the Ictineu award and also of a series of fan meetings all over Catalonia known as Ter-Cat. I invited him as the author of the more than 1000 reviews published since 2003 in his website La Biblioteca del Kraken, which he runs in Catalan and Spanish. Last but not least, Jordi Marrugat teaches Contemporary Catalan Literature at the Universitat de Barcelona, and is the author, among others, of *Narrativa catalana de la postmodernitat: històries, formes i motius* (2014).

My own introduction made the point that whereas Anglophone sf can rely on a complete academic circuit, there is nothing similar to support and publicize the work of Catalan authors of sf and fantasy. The Science Fiction Research Association, founded in 1970, has been celebrating regular conferences since then; the peer-reviewed journals *Extrapolation* (founded in 1959), *Foundation* (1972), and *Science Fiction Studies* (1973), provide a wonderful forum of discussion. Although there are no full degrees in sf studies, there are courses in a variety of universities and also a notable research hub at Liverpool,

which is also home to the key collection of monographs Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies. All this is lacking in Catalan, with the exception of Víctor Martínez-Gil's indispensable collection *Els altres mons de la literatura catalana* (2005), a couple of dissertations (one BA, the other MA), and the work I myself have done on *Mecanoscrit del segon origen*. Without bibliography, as we know, there cannot be research. Indeed, one of the reviewers of my article for the *Catalan Review* complained loudly that I could not publish a piece with no academic secondary sources; since there are none in Catalan, I included in a few crowded lines references to half a dozen academic books… in English.

I cannot reproduce here all that was commented in the hour-long round table, but I'll try to highlight a few ideas. Today, Catalan sf and fantasy interest a remarkable number of independent publishers (mostly established in the last ten years) and fandom is active in the Ter-Cat and CatCon meetings, whereas websites such as La Biblioteca del Kraken, El Biblionauta and Les Rades Grises provide specialized reviews and criticism. This appears to be positive in all senses but, as Eloi Puig noted, the impression is that the field is growing very slowly and there seems to be no generational replacement so far (this is something I add considering the average age of the CatCon attendees, with a clear absence of persons under 30).

While the number of authors is growing, the market is not strong enough for any of them to be professional writers, a situation which extends to all Catalan authors with very few exceptions. Munné-Jordà and Torras do not see this as a problem, since they believe that in this way authors are freer to write as they wish. The size of the market with, possibly, 300-400 copies sold for each moderately successful novel, suggests that professionalization is hardly going to happen in the near future, but I do agree that this is not necessarily a negative situation. Similarly, reviewing and criticism is in the hands of committed fans. Eloi Puig explained that the task he has been doing at La Biblioteca del Kraken started as a way to share his impressions with friends. He does not see his role as the main reviewer of Catalan sf and fantasy (both original and translated) as a main referent. I myself believe he is doing a superb job which is a foundation for any academic work that could be done in the future. In fact, I would like to see a Catalan university volunteering to publish a selection of his reviews to commemorate the web's 20th anniversary next year.

Puig and Munné-Jordà have done, then, plenty but they are not academics in Departments of Catalan Philology. Jordi Marrugat explained that even though it should be in the hands of academics to write a history of Catalan sf and fantasy, to do research and teach courses, the reality is that we are very much limited. He himself is the only specialist in contemporary Catalan literature of the Universitat de Barcelona, and with a BA syllabus concentrating in a just one subject all the 20th century and part of the 21st there no room for sf and fantasy. The canon and its insistence on celebrating Modernism takes priority. It seems to me, however, unlikely that readers, no matter how passionate, can make up for this lack. Munné-Jordà's splendid bibliography and his recent donation to Library Armand Cardona Torrandell de Vilanova i la Geltrú of his own personal collection of books and other materials aims at building a legacy that needs to find committed readers. But where, I wonder, can they be found? Shouldn't they be the students of Catalan at university?

Perhaps what baffled me most was the idea that the authors of sf and fantasy value their themes above the quality of their writing, at least this is what I understood from Carme Torras's intervention when I asked her about MIT's translation of *La mutació sentimental* by Josie Swarbrick as *The Vestigial Heart*, published accompanied by classroom materials to encourage the discussion of robotics and ethics. Puig explained that he proposed the creation of the Ictineu award because after reading this novel he thought that this kind of effort should get recognition. I do believe that Torras has a distinctive style, and I very much appreciate Catalan sf and fantasy writers not only as

contributors to current discussions on technoscience, but also for the passion they put in writing works that, as I have noted, can only reach a limited circle. I find this year's Ictineu winner, Enric Herce's cyberpunk yarn *L'estrange miratge* [*The strange mirage*], much more engaging as narrative than many novels now winning Hugos and Nebulas. I did ask the participants at the round table what they thought about how few the translations from Catalan are in comparison to the translations into our language, and only Munné-Jordà was bold enough to say out loud that some of the translated books are no good. He played around with the words 'cannon' and 'canon' to suggest that who is translated often is a matter of who has the power.

The round table was, I think, extremely enlightening and illustrative of the current situation of sf and fantasy in Catalan. I see the bottle half full if I think of the display of activity among publishers, authors and the most committed fans, but I see it half empty if I think of where the young are. More and more children educated in Catalan are reading in Catalan than ever but, as happens in other linguistic areas including English, the allure of social media is robbing them of precious time to read starting around age 10-12, as soon as they get their smartphones. Their love of screens does not extend to e-books (I was told that only 5% of all readers of all ages use them in Spain, 20% in the USA) and with books around 15-20 euros it is hard to see how the numbers of readers is going to grow. In the case of Catalan sf and fantasy I also miss good adaptations that can attract a bigger audience, but with TV3 in dire straits this is unlikely to happen. Hence the half-empty bottle.

More on this when the *Catalan Review* monographic issue in July. In the meantime, check La Biblioteca del Kraken for lots of amazing books to read.

13 June 2022 / A PHANTOM GENRE: THE STRANGE CASE OF THE TECHNOTHRILLER

The one who should be writing this post today is my PhD student Pascal Lemaire since he has chosen to deal with the technothriller as his topic of research. However, I am myself curious about some of the points he is raising about this genre, so here I am.

Back in 2014 Pascal published in *Hélice* an excellent article which is the basis of his dissertation, started this academic year. In "Ain't no Technothriller in Here, Sir!" (II.3, March 2014, 50-71) he dealt with the fact that both authors and critics deny that the technothriller really exists as a genre, despite the fact that this is a label most readers of popular fiction are familiar with. Pascal tests the hypothesis in his article that "The Techno-Thriller (sic) is narrative fiction set in the near past or the near future about violence in a political context exerted with advanced technologies", and though, as it happens with any genre definition, soon the exceptions crop up, he manages to name a substantial list of authors and novels connected with the genre and establish some key sub-genres (submarine warfare, WWW III fiction, the Commander's story and the Commando's novel). His conclusion is that the technothriller exists at the same level as, for instance, chick-lit exists, that is to say both as a commercial label and a set of features coalescing into a genre most readers can identify. He also claims that "the whole package" survives and should be studied as "a testimony for some of the cultural aspects of the last quarter of the twentieth century up to the present day". As he explained to his examining board last week, despite being a keen reader of the genre he is approaching it critically; he does not wish to vindicate all its values but to make sure that current scholarship no longer overlooks the existence of the technothriller.

As we discussed these matters in our last tutorial, I was reminded of the revolutionary work that Janice Radway did in the early 1980s, when her reader-response

approach to the romance resulted in her indispensable study *Reading the Romance* (1984). Until then romance fiction was the dirty secret in women's writing and reading, since feminist criticism regarded the genre as a scion of patriarchal ideology (which it is). Radway, however, proved that romance readers understand quite well how the texts they enjoy are positioned in relation to patriarchy, knowing how the romantic fantasy and sexist submission connect. Their preferences have gradually reshaped the genre towards a more open discussion of the contexts in which feminism offers women hope and comfort as romance seems to offer. Today, in short, no feminist critic treats romance readers in the patronizing way they used to be treated in the past and, the other way around, many authors have incorporated narratives of empowerment in their work which can certainly be called feminist.

The contradiction Pascal will be exploring, then, is why the technothriller, a genre that has been climbing to the top of the best-selling lists for decades, is being ignored by all scholars whereas romance, a genre that used to be marginalized, has received so much attention. The answer, as you can see, in my own sentence: because genres regarded as marginal and that address non-mainstream audiences are seen now as proper objects of academic study but we still don't know what to do with best-selling authors addressing mainstream audiences (in any genre). Now you may find books such as Deborah Philips's *Women's Fiction, 1945-2005: Writing Romance* (2014), but as far as I know nobody has written a dissertation on Danielle Steel, possibly the genre's most popular author together with Barbara Cartland. There is plenty of bibliography on romance and plenty of resources for scholars but we still understand very poorly the phenomenon of the best-selling author and do not know how to argue that authors can be key contributors to a genre or to all of fiction despite lacking literary merit. It will be easier for Pascal to write about the whole genre of the technothriller, in short, than to justify writing a dissertation only on Tom Clancy, the genre's best-known author after its founding father, Michael Crichton.

Other matters complicate the approach to the technothriller. Supposing Pascal chose to follow on Janice Radway's footsteps and carry out field work among readers of technothrillers, his work would not be equally welcome for the simple reason that most readers of this genre are cisgender heterosexual white men. This is not a very popular demographic these days among scholars. Just a few days ago I had to explain for the umpteenth time to a feminist colleague that I write about that type of male author because I want to know what they are up to. I find women's progression in all areas of literature marvellous, and I am happy to see how the more inclusive approach is resulting in the celebration of many trans and non-binary authors, but I still want to know about traditionally binary men because they are producing massive quantities of fiction read mainly by men, and thus generating gendered ideology I want to be aware of. You may ignore all that only at your own risk. Likewise, the technothriller needs to be explored because its plot-driven narratives celebrating technology appeal mostly to cisgender, heterosexual, white men and, guess what?, this is the category of person holding power today in the genre's home, the United States, and in many other key nations of the world. When former President Ronald Reagan claimed that a novel by Tom Clancy had given him better information than the CIA reports someone in academia should have listened and start paying attention to the genre. This was no joke.

Apart from the low popularity of the technothriller's target readership among scholars today, the genre is also treated as a bastard outshoot by the SF community, which is somehow harder to explain. I'll take it for granted that technothrillers begin with Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) and leave to Pascal a more nuanced explanation of the genre's origins. This novel narrates the frantic efforts of a group of American scientists to halt the spread of a deadly extraterrestrial virus which reaches Earth together with the debris of a military satellite. The Wikipedia page claims that

"Reviews for *The Andromeda Strain* were overwhelmingly positive, and the novel was an American bestseller, establishing Michael Crichton as a respected novelist and science-fiction writer". This is not true as regards his being a respected SF writer. Crichton was never nominated for a Hugo, and his only nomination for a Nebula was for the film *Westworld* (1973), which he wrote and directed.

Possibly, Crichton's bestsellerdom alienated him from most SF fans and from fellow authors struggling to make an impact and also contributed to the alienation of other technothriller writers from SF's fandom and awards circuit, even though it seems clear enough that the technothriller is a sub-genre of SF, particularly close to military SF. Beyond this matter (bestselling authors need no fandom or genre awards), there is another problem. I once considered writing a book on Crichton and found it an impossible task after noting that his ideological values are now obsolete in many ways, especially as regards gender; the project collapsed after my reading *Prey* (2002). Joking a bit with his other best-known title, *Jurassic Park* (1990), I would say that Crichton is now a dinosaur; if you notice, nobody mentions him any more in relation to the film franchise started by Spielberg's 1993 film, a sure sign that he is no longer respected. Elizabeth Trembley published back in 1996 *Michael Crichton: A Critical Companion* but I just don't see anyone updating this volume.

Now, if Crichton is too hot to handle, imagine what it is like to deal with a list of authors mainly interested in technology connected with the military and turning that interest into the stuff of, well, thrilling tales for grown-up white boys. I must say that I am not a reader of technothrillers (though I have seen tons of films based on them, or that are technothrillers in their own right) and perhaps I am wrongly assuming like most of my academic peers that their stance is technophiliac and right-wing, hence not worth discussing and much less defending. Yet, supposing this is the case (even though Crichton himself was very critical about the misuse of science and the impact of techno-corporations), and the brothers and sons of Tom Clancy are indeed in the worst case scenario white supremacists and staunch militarists, shouldn't we all be aware of what they are writing? There is something else. As I am learning from Pascal, technothriller writers have a very good awareness of geopolitical issues whereas realist mainstream writers insist on depicting the personal lives of middle-class people as if conflict never happened. I am guessing that many readers find technothrillers didactic and, like Ronald Reagan, are learning from them lessons no other writers are providing. Perhaps, and this is for Pascal to say, some of these lessons might be worth learning and not just bilge, as we are now assuming.

If a genre manages to survive in the absence of fandom, specialized awards and scholarly attention, and even still appear on the best-sellers' list after decades, this means that it is worth considering. Speaking as a scholar who writes about science fiction by men whose values I do not always share, I find it absolutely necessary to explore what interests most male readers. It is simply not true that most are reading now as much fiction by men as by women, or that gender ideology has impacted the writing by men (and their reading) as much as it has impacted women's. We might have the impression that the world of fiction is now accommodating with no hitch the deep changes in gender ideology that we have seen in the last decades, but I believe this is not the case at all and that just as some women passionately love romance fiction of the more traditional kind, some men must certainly be still addicted to technothrillers, but being very quiet about their addiction simply because nobody is asking them about their preferences. I am glad, then, that Pascal Lemaire cares out of a truly academic interest in fiction by men who are in their shared ideology very different indeed from him. I am very much interested in what he is finding out and I hope many others will be, too.

20 June 2022 / DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY: THE MAIN ACADEMIC KEYWORDS TODAY

In a recent teachers' meeting the pressing issue of students' low attendance this last semester came up. I have not been teaching but my colleagues tell me less than 50% of the students have attended classes, which is even lower than what I saw in the first semester, when we were all still wearing facemasks and enduring the discomfort of the windows open in winter for ventilation to protect us against Covid-19.

The causes for the students' absence from the classrooms, for this is a general problem not limited to a particular degree, are hard to pinpoint since, logically, you cannot speak with persons who are not there and asking their peers about their absence is useless. Those whose job is to speak to students claim that the missing students are generally disinterested in classroom activities; they find lectures and listening to their peers' oral presentations boring, which, anyway, is not a new phenomenon. What is new is that about 20% of all the students in my university have notified to the corresponding office that they are unable to attend classes because they are suffering from mental health issues connected with depression and anxiety. These two words have become in this way the most important keywords in our academic life.

Teachers are also depressed and suffering from anxiety, though arguably age and experience give us a resilience the younger generation might lack, at least among the ranks of the more privileged tenured teachers. The younger staff, employed mostly as part-time, temporary adjuncts even when they are doctors embarked in serious academic careers, are also suffering from depression and anxiety caused by the same factor that overwhelms the students: lack of prospects. As things are now, students are being asked to make an effort to train for their professional future by staff who are themselves trapped in a career limbo which is not being dissolved fast enough. My university is boasting these days that they are offering between 50 and 70 new full-time positions every year (most with a five-year contract) but even though my Department has been allocated three for 2022-23, two have come to give adjuncts with an academic career spanning about twenty years the chance to be tenured (of course, somebody else might win the positions after the public examination). As for the colleague who has retired, her full time position has been transformed into a set of three associates, thus saving the institution about half her salary. Depression and anxiety indeed.

Among the older staff, those of us who have been around for thirty years or more, I see mostly disappointment and tiredness. We, lucky tenured, full-time teachers can retire after the age of 60 provided we have been active for 30 years and taking into account that our pension will be reduced in relation to the full-pension which is only earned at 67. The colleague who has retired in my Department is precisely in that situation. I've heard of many others who have taken early retirement at a notable economic loss because they could cope no longer with teaching the depressed, anxious students now in our classes and with the pressures put on us by the bureaucratization of the university. I was under the impression that only the teachers less interested in research were retiring or thinking of doing so, but this week a dear friend who has published a marvellous stream of excellent research told me that he is considering retirement, too. He is tired, a word I hear among the older staff with monotonous regularity. I myself feel very tired, and if I am coping this is because I have a low teaching workload and can finally write books. I still have a decade to go, at least, and there are days when that feels a very tall order. At the same time, I look forward to continue publishing once retired, in, hopefully, peace and quiet.

The causes for the general depression and anxiety are transparent: neoliberalism has created a low-pay service economy which only offers bad jobs to the young; climate change threatens to wipe off life on Earth in about fifteen years at the most, and fascism

is rising everywhere, undoing human rights which have taken more than 200 years to secure. As if Covid-19 was not enough, Ukraine has been suffering a horrifying invasion for almost four months which, besides, might result in the death by famine of millions in Africa and Asia who depend on Ukrainian grain to survive. Vladimir Putin declared last week that the reign of the West is over, to be replaced by a new era, which I would not mind at all if this was an era of true international democracy and cooperation. I don't think he meant that. These days I have found myself encouraging my eldest niece along the three days which her university entrance examination has lasted, and while I did that I was feeling horribly anxious about the kind of future she and her generation will find. I know that many of us in our fifties and sixties are thinking that we've had a relatively good life (I won't mention the constant fear of illness or that we'll never get a pension) but we tremble for what the future might bring to the young, at least I do. So, yes, I understand that they are feeling depressed and anxious, and that they see no point in education, even though they know that without attending university their prospects will be even lower.

The situation is objectively bad but I am also wondering whether it feels subjectively bad because our ability to cope (our resilience) has been undermined by a philosophy of happiness that requires being constantly satisfied. I myself have no personal or professional reasons to feel dejected, but this is how I would describe my state of mind since at least 2008 when the financial crisis erupted. I am not clinically depressed but, like many other of my fellow citizens, I find it increasingly difficult to watch the news (not because I don't care for the others but because I do care) and even to cope with minor personal crises that are not really that important. I am, besides, as a Gender Studies scholar, sick and tired of the pressures from the left and from the right, to the point that I am considering giving up altogether and writing about other matters, once I'm done with my next book. I am, therefore, trying to understand whether beyond the actual problems the widespread depression and anxiety have to do with the disappointment of a promise of personal and collective happiness, made perhaps in the 1960s, that has failed to materialize.

Trying to understand if that is the case, I've read back-to-back, quite by chance, two books that are in deep dialogue with each other. For reasons I cannot explain, I had not read yet Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), originally titled *Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*. Possibly, I was under the wrong impression that this would be a dry philosophical book, when it is a memoir of Frankl's harrowing experience of being a prisoner of the Nazis in diverse camps. The other book is *Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control our Lives* (2018) by Eva Illouz and Eric Cabanas, originally published in French in the same year as *Happycratie: comment l'industrie du bonheur a pris le contrôle de nos vies*. I was reading this book and thinking of how it connected with the other when I came across a quotation from Frankl, which stressed the connection.

Frankl (1905-1997) was a prestigious neuropsychiatrist in Vienna, when in 1942 he and his family were imprisoned and eventually separated. During the three years of his imprisonment, he managed to make notes about his mental condition and that of his fellow prisoners, finding solace in the hope of meeting his young wife again without knowing she had already died. Frankl's memoirs are different from those of other Holocaust survivors precisely because he has an extremely lucid understanding of resilience, a word that is now trending as much as depression and anxiety. It would be obscene to speak of happiness in the context of the camps and what Frankl describes is a situation in which the Jewish prisoners adapted as well as they could to the erosion of their humanity because they placed resilience before any other value. Their thoughts, so to speak, whether neither positive (that would be foolish) nor negative (that would be suicidal) but focused on surviving one step at a time. Frankl claims that the most resilient

prisoners were motivated by the idea of something left behind which needed to be continued, whether this was a career and a marriage as in his own case, or other questions. This is why he explains that for many the darkest period came after their release when they found that the life whose memories had been sustaining them in the camp no longer existed. Many also suffered, I will add, because their accounts of extreme suffering were not believed. Frankl's volume was translated into English in 1959, which suggests that for about fifteen years survivors' accounts were of little interest at least in the Anglophone area of the world.

Illouz and Cabanas cite Frankl as part of their efforts to demolish positive psychology, the American school of thought claiming that psychology should not be limited to treating the mentally ill but should provide everyone with tools to feel mentally stable, and, ideally, happy. They complain, very rightly, that neoliberalism has turned positive psychology with the acquiescence of their inventors into a tool to make individuals responsible for their welfare, thus avoiding the structural issues which are at the root of much human suffering. Within the parameters established by the neoliberal 'happicracy', the students are not depressed and anxious because the present and the future are bleak, but because they are mismanaging their mental health. Many of the 'happicratic' gurus base their careers on teaching persons who are not mentally ill to feel bad because they are not working adequately towards happiness. This would be the equivalent of telling the Jewish prisoners that the problem is not the camp but their negative approach to the situation. Resilience is in many ways part of positive thinking, but the difference is that whereas true resilience refers to the ability to cope with negative situations, of which life has many, resilience is now being sold as a tool to secure personal happiness against all odds, which is not. At the same time, if the absurd promise that you can lead a life free of care (for this is what happiness is about) had never been made, depression and anxiety would not be so widespread.

For me the main conundrum is why so many whose lives are quite good in comparison to the lives of the many disenfranchised persons in the world, in the West and everywhere else, suffer from depression and anxiety. I am a confirmed atheist but I tend to agree with the Christian view that life is to be endured, not enjoyed (or only enjoyed in special moments). Life needs not be a valley of tears and, certainly, what angers me most is that it could be much more satisfactory if we respected human rights and did away with the patriarchal hunger for power. Yet, I find the declaration in the American constitution that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" not only hypocritical but also a poor foundation for a communal life of peace and justice. Perhaps if all the negative energy consumed by depression and anxiety could be channelled towards a demand for social and personal justice we would feel better, but as Illouz and Cabanas suggest, that's the whole point of neoliberalism: making us focus on our personal happiness (or lack of it) as the world remains in the hands of the few that are destroying it for their own personal gain. And, presumably, happiness.

26 June 2022 / MEROPE GAUNT, VOLDEMORT'S MOTHER: NARRATIVE AS A HOUSE OF CARDS

The first novel about Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, was published by Bloomsbury on 26 June 1997, already 25 years ago today. This post looks back to that date, to celebrate it, and forward to next November, when Barcelona's Witch Market will finally return and all of us, local Potterheads, will have the

chance to meet again after a two-year hiatus caused by Covid-19. I have chosen to lecture on Voldemort's mother, Merope Gaunt, because she is an example of that type of secondary character who seems very minor but whose actions are indispensable for a story to start moving. If poor Merope had not fallen in love with the Muggle Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort would have never been born. The villain, not the hero, sets the events in motion and, so, without He Who Must not Be Named young Harry Potter would have enjoyed just a normal wizard's adolescence.

Merope (pronounced 'mɛrəpi:) is named after a star in the Pleiades which borrows its moniker from one of the seven daughters of the Oceanid nymph Pleione and the Titan Atlas. She only appears in the sixth book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), published eight years after the first novel, which suggests that Rowling may have thought of Voldemort's back story relatively late in the process of writing, not necessarily from the beginning. Merope's sad story is narrated in Chapter 10, "The House of Gaunt" (184-204, Bloomsbury 2005 hardback edition), and in Chapter 13, "The Secret Riddle" (242-260), though neither of the two chapters focus on her. Her name is mentioned a total of 32 times, very few in the context of the sprawling narrative that the whole series is, and she is never in dialogue with any other character. We know about Merope because Professor Dumbledore proceeds to recall scenes from the past sharing his Pensieve with Harry, having decided, as he tells the boy, "that it is time, now that you know what prompted Lord Voldemort to try and kill you fifteen years ago, for you to be given certain information" (186).

Dumbledore has no direct memories of Merope, so he uses instead the memories of the late Bob Ogden, a Department of Magical Law Enforcement official. Harry witnesses Odgen's visit to the village of Little Hangleton, where the Gaunts live: the middle-aged father Marvolo, the son Morfin (possible in his mid-twenties), and the daughter Merope, who is eighteen as we eventually learn. The Gaunts are presented as the English equivalent of the American hillbillies, and Morfin, indeed, gives a rather violent welcome to their unwelcome visitor, sent by Slughorn to investigate a breach of magical law committed by the young man.

When Merope first appears, in a corner of their very poor dwelling, Rowling describes her focalizing the narration through Harry as "a girl whose ragged gray dress was the exact color of the dirty stone wall behind her. She was standing beside a steaming pot on a grimy black stove, and was fiddling around with the shelf of squalid-looking pots and pans above it. Her hair was lank and dull and she had a plain, pale, rather heavy face. Her eyes, like her brother's, stared in opposite directions. She looked a little cleaner than the two men, but Harry thought *he had never seen a more defeated-looking person*" (194, my italics). When the nervous, mousy Merope drops a pot, her father upbraids her as he has done many times before: "That's it, grub on the floor like some filthy Muggle, what's your wand for, you useless sack of muck?" (194). She, however, cannot manage to repair the pot, which Odgen does, wishing to end the scene as quickly as possible.

When the visitor declares that Morfin has been summoned to the Ministry because he has attacked a Muggle, Marvolo reacts by yelling that his family are direct descendants of Salazar Slytherin, one of Hogwarts' founders, and owed more respect. As proof he pushes Merope violently, so that Odgen can see the locket she's wearing. This family heirloom, which she later sells to avoid starvation, is the same one that her adult son Tom, then in his early thirties, finds in the hands of rich collector Hepzibah Smith. When he murders her in a fit of rage (his first murder after he wiped out his father and grandparents, aged sixteen), he needs to flee, hence starting his path towards becoming Lord Voldemort.

Back in Chapter 10, a group of fashionable Muggle passers-by who mock the Gaunts' derelict home startles Merope. She grows deadly pale when handsome Tom

Riddle mocks Morfin and both siblings hear him call her companion Cecilia "darling". Brutally, Morfin tells Merope (who has not said a word yet), "So he wouldn't have you anyway" (198) and discloses to their angry father that "*She likes looking at that Muggle*" (199, original italics). This appals the old man, and even though Merope, still speechless, denies Morfin's accusation, only Ogden's providential intervention saves her from being strangled by her father. Then she does utter the first sounds coming from her mouth, though these are screams. Handsome Tom Riddle, as it is easy to guess, is the very same Muggle Morfin has assaulted, mistakenly believing he corresponded her sister's interest.

Dumbledore tells Harry that both Morfin and Marvolo were apprehended at once and sent to Azkaban, a time of freedom for Merope during which her so far repressed magic flourished. Using, as Harry guesses, a love potion which, Dumbledore speculates, "would have seemed more romantic to her" (202) than an Imperious Curse, Merope seduces Tom Riddle and both elope together, to their village's great scandal. The father, returned from Azkaban after six months, eventually dies of shock. As Dumbledore further gossips, Merope had lied to Riddle pretending she was pregnant, which she only became three months after their wedding. Riddle, however, returned soon home without his wife, claiming he had been "hoodwinked" (202) and Dumbledore continues his "guesswork" (203) suggesting that Merope "who was deeply in love with her husband, could not bear to continue enslaving him by magical means. I believe that she made the choice to stop giving him the potion. Perhaps, besotted as she was, she had convinced herself that he would by now have fallen in love with her in return. Perhaps she thought he would stay for the baby's sake. If so, she was wrong on both counts. He left her, never saw her again, and never troubled to discover what became of his son" (203). This marks the ends of Merope's presence in Chapter 10 and explains why the boy Tom grew to hate his Muggle father so intensely, though he never truly loved his pure-blood mother.

In Chapter 13 Dumbledore returns to the Pensieve to narrate Merope's troubles once in London. Through the memories of one Caractacus Burke, Harry sees Merope selling the locket; she was "Covered in rags and pretty far along…", meaning about to give birth (245). If this was not Dickensian enough, Rowling adds a date for the memories: before Christmas (supposedly of 1926). When Harry asks why the desperate Merope did not use magic, Dumbledore speculates that "when her husband abandoned her, Merope stopped using magic. I do not think that she wanted to be a witch any longer. Of course, it is also possible that her unrequited love and the attendant despair sapped her of her powers; that can happen. In any case, as you are about to see, Merope refused to raise her wand even to save her own life" (246).

Mysteriously (and a bit like *Star Wars*' Amidala), Merope lets herself die after her baby's birth. Harry is aghast that Merope would not choose to "live for her son" (246) and Dumbledore replies that, unlike Lily Potter who died to save her son Harry from Voldemort, "Yes, Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but do not judge her too harshly, Harry. She was greatly weakened by long suffering and she never had your mother's courage" (246). When Dumbledore recalls his first memory of eleven-year-old Tom Riddle, Rowling writes focalizing through him that "There was no trace of the Gaunts in Tom Riddle's face. Merope had got her dying wish: He was his handsome father in miniature, tall for eleven years old, dark-haired, and pale" (249). He can only know this from Mrs. Cole, the orphanage's director, who reports that Merope arrived on New Year's Eve "staggering up the front steps" on a "nasty night" of cold and snow (249). She "had the baby within the hour. And she was dead in another hour" (249). Mrs. Cole confirms that Merope, who was "no beauty", had just time to say "I hope he looks like his papa" (249), the only words she is reported to have pronounced, and to ask that the baby be named Tom Marvolo Riddle. Mrs Cole assumes that "she came from a circus" (249) because of the strange name; the surname Riddle, by the way, does exist.

Many commentators have expressed their surprise that Rowling uses *Oliver Twist* "not as the model for her hero but for the villain—creating, in essence, an Oliver twisted" in the Dark Lord (see James Washick, "Oliver Twisted: The Origins of Lord Voldemort in the Dickensian Orphan", *Looking Glass* 13.3 (2009), http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/ojs/index.php/tlg/article/view/165/164). In Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) baby Oliver is born to young Agnes Fleming, who dies in childbirth, at a workhouse, where he is raised as an orphan. Agnes, the seventeen-year-old daughter of a Navy officer is made pregnant by Edwin Leeford, a man possibly twice her age on the run from the older, rich woman his father had forced him to marry. Leeford dies with no time to pass onto Agnes and their yet unborn baby the fortune inherited from his father, a death which is supposed to characterize him as a good guy trapped between his late father's patriarchal power and sheer bad luck. Yet, I find his liaison with the innocent daughter of the man harbouring him short of criminal. When Agnes dies, she is wearing a wedding band, which has always made me suspect that Leeford tricked her into believing he was free to marry her. Whatever the case, though Merope and Agnes are connected, Dickens ends his novel vindicating Agnes, with Oliver visiting her no longer anonymous grave, whereas psychopathic Tom Riddle never cares for Merope.

Just as *Oliver Twist* depends on the sexual attraction that Leeford feels for Agnes, all of *Harry Potter* depends on ugly Merope's passion for her handsome Muggle neighbour Tom Riddle. I do not discard that this passion may have been awakened by Merope's sexual abuse by both her father and her brother (Morfin's assault of Tom hints at some type of unbrotherly jealousy), though only Rowling knows whether there are grounds for this speculation. If Merope had been beautiful, Riddle might have fallen naturally in love with her and perhaps even staid by her side. This would not have necessarily resulted in a different personality for their baby boy, for who knows why some men grow up to be horrendous villains, but the fact is that the whole house of cards that the *Harry Potter* heptalogy is depends on Merope's attraction for Riddle. I am not calling it love, because considering how Merope has lived her life so far, she cannot know the meaning of love. In the absence of a mother who could have loved her, she cannot understand, either, the meaning of motherhood, hence her inability to bond with her baby, and her death, which is a sort of suicide.

Rowling could have invented a very different back story for Voldemort, but she came up with the pathetic romance between Merope Gaunt and Tom Riddle, using a curious type of indirect characterization and narrative for the couple, who are never seen (or heard) together. They are in many ways the counterpart of Lily and James Potter, Harry's loving parents, though, above all, Merope is Lily's opposite. Both James and Lily die protecting Harry from Voldemort, but Lily's death gives the boy the extra magical protection that saves his life. In contrast, young Tom's bitterest moment comes when he is sixteen and learns the truth about his origins from his uncle Morfin. This literally breaks his soul as he proceeds, as I have noted, to kill the father that abandoned him and his grandparents. Tellingly, he commits these crimes not because the Riddles scorned Merope, for whom he never cares, but because their Muggle blood taints his own blood.

Poor Merope, unloved daughter, sister, wife and mother. Let's not forget, though, that the worst sons may come from the best mothers, and that if little Tom Riddle turns out to be evil this is not her fault. It seems to me that the fault lies, rather, with the callous father, but this is the topic for another post…

4 July 2022 / EVOLVING GENRES: THE (PARTIAL) RACIALIZATION OF SCIENCE FICTION

Genres are never static, this is a basic truth of literary theory. They may appear at a given time, no matter how hard it usually is to pinpoint exactly when, and fade away as readers become less interested. Each genre has its history, whether this is the larger narrative arc of a genre as gigantic as the novel or of a specific literary manifestation, such as absurdist theatre.

I am thinking of these matters after spending five days attending the international conference of the Science Fiction Research Association, organized this time by the CoFutures collective of Oslo. The conference, titled 'Futures from the Margins', called for papers that would consider how "the issues of those from the margins, including Indigenous groups, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, and any people whose stakes in the global order of envisioning futures are generally constrained due to the mechanics of our contemporary world". This also called for considering how SF is changing because of the arrival of new authors different from those who shaped the central canon many decades ago. SF, of course, can no longer be the same in the 21st century and this needs to be understood and studied.

For me, the cfp was a challenge because I do not belong to any of these marginal groups whose sense of their future is 'constrained' by external Western values. Add to this that I usually write (critically) about white men, the demographic category implicitly excluded by the cfp. I ended up submitting a paper on a stimulating short story collection in Catalan, *Barcelona 2059: Ciutat de posthumans* (MaiMes 2021), edited by Judith Tarradelles and Sergi López, with contributions by Roser Cabré-Verdiel, Ivan Ledesma, Salvador Macip, Jordi Nopca, Bel Olid, Ricard Ruiz Garzón, Laura Tomàs Mora, Carme Torras, and Susana Vallejo. The editors, who also run the publishing house, had the happy idea of inviting the authors back in 2019 to consider what Barcelona could be like 40 years into the future, taking as a departure point the existence of an artificial island called Nova Icària off the coast of the city.

This island, the authors explain in their stories, is a utopia which the citizens of the future Barcelona (a degraded place beset by climate change, recurring pandemics, and terrorism) can enjoy in exchange for full access to their bodies and minds, (ab)used in ruthless posthumanist experimentation developed for capitalistic gain. My thesis was that even though Barcelona might seem right now a privileged place, part of the Western world and universally known because of its tourist attractions, no city is safe from suddenly becoming marginal. Besides, we are all subjected to the whims of the handful of male billionaires (mostly white, but not all) currently running the world, West, East and the rest. I designed the paper to provoke a debate about what this entity we call the West amounts to, and whether white, European communities and citizens can also be marginal(ized), but nobody challenged me.

With three sessions running simultaneously, I must admit that I have only attended one third of the SFRA conference. What I have seen, however, was quite homogeneous and worrying because of the uniformity of the discourse and, I insist, the lack of debate. Nobody has challenged anyone else, which should be part of ongoing discussion. Or everyone was quietly avoiding confrontation. The conference organizers did a very good job of inviting keynote speakers representing planetary diversity (Sami author from Norway Sigbjørn Skåden, Chinese scholar Dai Jinhua, authors Indrapramit Das from India, Chinelo Onwualu from Nigeria, Laura Ponce from Argentina, and 'chameleon' artist from Egypy Ganzeer) but this diversity was not as visible among the participants, mostly white scholars. In a session about what the SFRA should take into account for the future, I mentioned that I had seen too many white scholars discuss non-white cultures, a comment greeted with what at first I assumed to be sniggers. In fact, everyone had the

same impression but dared not voice it; I was thanked for raising the issue and was told that the SFRA would make an effort to promote SF among young non-white scholars. That was not quite my point, but thank you, this is very important.

As I have noted, I write about men despite not being one and I do think that scholars should never limit their field of action to the demographic category they belong to. What worries me is the lack of reciprocity. Today many white, Western scholars do research on non-white, non-Western authors in an effort to lessen racism. The number of non-white, non-Western scholars is growing, too. They, however, choose to discuss authors of their own demographic category, so that we don't have (or have very few) discussions of white authors that, besides, might go beyond the issue of race.

You might think that this is fine because non-white scholars should put all their energy into promoting the authors so far ignored by white prejudice. Yet, at the same time, as more and more white scholars choose to ignore the whiteness of white authors, and since this is an issue also mostly ignored in current research by non-white scholars, the result is a heavily racialized academic environment that, while trying to avoid racism, practises a strange kind of illustrated racism by supposing that only non-white authors and scholars are conditioned by race. To be plain: if you are going to discuss how Indigenous writers produce SF today, you need to explore how whiteness conditions the SF produced by mainstream writers. I am not speaking here about what Isaac Asimov or Robert Heinlein did in the past, which shaped the SF canon whether we like it or not, but what white authors John Scalzi or Ann Leckie are doing today.

I worry about the lack of reciprocity because as a woman writing about SF I am annoyed about the expectations built around what issues interest me. Recently, I have been invited to participate in a series of six lectures on SF for a general audience and I been asked specifically to address the issue of women in SF (I'm the only woman). The organizer told me this is because I have been writing about women and SF, which is true, but I must also explain that although I am more interested in robotics and artificial intelligence, I keep on writing about gender in SF because I am a woman, and the male scholars are not interested in these issues. That is to say: if more men wrote about gender, I would not feel compelled as a woman scholar to write about these issues. I worry, therefore, that many non-white scholars are writing about race not because this is what they really prefer but because this is what they feel needs to be done and because this is expected of them. If race was not an issue (or gender), then more time and energy could be invested in exploring the central theme of SF: how science and technology are shaping our world.

A major problem, of course, is that the technophilia which Golden Age SF used to celebrate is gone, though I must emphasize that the genre was started by Mary Shelley's technophobic *Frankenstein* (1818) two hundred years ago. Whereas Mary already claimed that the science developed by men would ruin the world of *Homo Sapiens*, today the claim is more nuanced and the 'mad' scientist is described as white, Western, heterosexual, cis-gender and, in a nutshell, patriarchal, even though many persons who are not in these categories participate in science and technology. My impression of the conference was that, in the face of rampant climate change and other man-made disasters such as war, fascism and capitalism, there are high hopes that SF from the margins can offer healing narratives that point the way forward by looking at the Indigenous past. In a way, this goes back to Ursula K. Le Guin's complex text *Always Coming Home* (1985), in which she built "an entire ethnography of a future society, the Kesh, living in a post-apocalyptic Napa Valley". Today, Le Guin's efforts might be read as cultural appropriation, and what would be expected is for Indigenous authors to renovate SF in culturally authentic ways, though this smacks in my view of a worrying worship of pre-modern primitivism, which is implicitly racist. There you go.

My doubt is whether this approach is not curtailing the right of Indigenous authors to write as they want, just as feminism has been telling women authors that their first allegiance should be, precisely, to feminism. I am saying this as a feminist woman who does think that all women should contribute to the cause of feminism (if more women had voted for Hillary Clinton, the USA would not be the patriarchal dystopia it is fast becoming). Grace L. Dillons's edited short story collection *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Arizona UP, 2012) has had an enormous impact, so that it is now common to find lists of Indigenous SF online, or more specific books such as *Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction* (edited by Joshua Whitehead, 2020, Arsenal Pulp Press). The phenomenon is by no means new, and it is indeed a descendant of collections such as Pamela Sargent's *Women of Wonder* series (1975-1996). The idea is that if you call attention to a specific category of writers, then readers and academics become curious about their presence and the whole field blooms. This is fine, but, I insist, it still categorizes authors within marginal groups and since there are no equivalent collections that emphasize the category 'white, male, cis-gender, heterosexual, Western, etc.' this category still constitutes the hidden norm against which the rest of groups are measured.

This is why I like much more what Judith Tarradelles and Sergi López have done in *Barcelona 2059: Ciutat de Posthumans*. Here what matters is the use of a common language and the exploration of a common situation, with no allusion to identity politics (or not as a main theme). If I were to edit a SF short story collection, I would propose a theme and invite a selection of representative writers, including those white men nobody likes in academia but that still sell plenty. My view is that the future is being destroyed by a minority of patriarchal individuals that need to be outed as monstrous villains, and we need to hear as many voices as possible to find alternatives, and hear them together, not compartmentalized in increasingly smaller categories. The way forward, I think, should be comparative and cross-cultural but, for that, as the SFRA conference implicitly showed, the main obstacle is not racism but linguistic diversity. As happens, despite the many allusions to Indigenous writing and so on, most papers dealt with Anglophone SF and, secondarily, Chinese. My paper was one of the very few dealing with SF written in a language spoken by just a few millions. So much for margins…

15 July 2022 / THE FAILURE TO ENGINEER THE STUDENTS' CHOICE OF BA DEGREES: THE AUSTRALIAN CASE

I have an immensely talented doctoral student from Australia, and when I asked her whether she has considered applying for a job at a university back home, I got all confused because she started telling me that fees have gone up dramatically, and this makes things complicated. Sure, I replied, but I meant applying for a job, not to take another degree. What she meant, however, is that fees have gone up so steeply for Humanities degrees that many jobs are being lost because of lower demand (as you will see, this is not general all over the country). The Australian fee hike reminds me of what happened a few years ago when the British Government allowed English universities to start charging fees of around £9,000 for BAs. The Australian case, however, has an even worse sting in its tail, for the fees went up just for some degrees but not for others, following a twisted logic which corresponded to a blatant but failed attempt at social engineering.

A few days ago the Spanish universities published their BA grade point cutoffs and, as happens every year, the newspapers were full of articles about why some degrees are so popular and others less attractive. The grade point cutoff for each BA

degree depends on the ratio between offer and demand and, so, the combined degree Mathematics and Physics does not justify its amazing top-raking grade because it attracts a crowd of students, but because it only offers 20 places for a demand possibly only five times bigger. If it offered 500 places, its grade point cutoff would be low because I don't think there is that big a demand for it. For many years, UAB's BA degree in Translation and Interpretation has been amongst the most demanded, even though chances of getting employment as an interpreter or translator are quite low, forget about being well paid. It's just a fashionable degree, for mysterious reasons. In other cases, such as Medicine, the degree has an enormous demand which seems justified by the high demand for doctors, yet Spanish universities are not offering more places in Medicine BAs because apparently Spanish hospitals lack sufficient positions to train resident doctors.

In Spain, in short, there is not an adequate match between the BA degrees which students choose and the prospective jobs, nor between the places offered and the demand. Our main problem, however, is not so much that mismatch but that 15%-35% students abandon the BA of their choice between the first and the third year (our BAs run to four years), in many cases because that was not their first option. Needless to say, this is very costly for public universities, which must invest much effort and resources on students who often will never finish their degree. Consider that our registration fees are rather low (1.202,32 € for the first year in the BA in English Studies at UAB) but only cover around 15% of the real cost of tuition.

Now for the Australian case. In 2020, Dan Tehan, Minister of Education in the conservative cabinet of Prime Minister Scott Morrison (Liberal Party of Australia, 2018-2022), came up with a plan to redistribute university costs. Claiming that Australia needed workers trained in STEM degrees, education, construction, and health care in the next five years, Tehan lowered the fees for those degrees by 20% (with top discounts of 62% for mathematics and agriculture), and increased the fees for humanities, social sciences or law, up to 113%. In a speech quoted many times in the Australian media, Tehan argued that "Universities must teach Australians the skills needed to succeed in the jobs of the future". He added that since the fees were fixed at 'unit' (subject) and not degree level, "students studying Arts can still reduce their total student contribution by choosing electives in subjects like mathematics, English, science and IT within their degree". Peculiar, to say the least.

One year later, in 2021, it was already clear that, as higher education expert of the Australian National University Andrew Norton noted, the Government's policies and the fee hike had not had a "dramatic" impact on students' choices. By June of 2022, the state of New South Wales was even reporting an increase of 9% in the demand for Humanities degrees relative to 2020, even much higher in specific degrees.

A girl student declares in *The Boar*'s article that "Most people I know didn't choose subjects based on fee costs, we picked our subjects based on interest or future career, but I know that does come from a bit of a privilege though". This is very worrying because it suggests that the students who can afford to take degrees in the Humanities are the ones more capable of sustaining the burden of a substantial student's loan. On the other hand, Professor Catharine Coleborne, president of the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, noted in the same piece that "the fee hikes had also created problems for funding" STEM courses since lower fees also mean a lower income for universities. The new Education Minister Jason Clare has promised to review the "job-ready graduates" policy of his predecessor, as Tehan called the bizarre scheme.

As the reader signing as *voiceinthewilderness* comments, "Only an inhumane government would not want people to study the Humanities". I can only agree, but I am also going to play Devil's advocate today by arguing that Humanities degrees should be

much more elitist. Intellectually, not financially. Perhaps all degrees. Supposing Minister Tehan was perfectly honest in his wish to supply Australia with well-trained workers in the areas his nation will need in the near future, he was still making the mistake of associating degree choice to price. If you want to engineer the make-up of the work force, however, you need to attract vocational talent and this has nothing to do with fees. If you want to improve nursing, you need students with a talent for it, for which you need to award grants, not lower the fees. Keep all fees moderate, so that anyone who wants to study can pursue a degree, but make degrees much more competitive, so that the best students are given grants. You don't want more students in one area or another, you want better students in all.

Gabriel Plaza, the student with the highest grade for the university access test (or Selectividad) in the community of Madrid (13,964 out of 14) has chosen to pursue a BA in Classical Philology, a decision which unleashed an astonishing tweetstorm. He replied to those who mocked him or accused him of wasting his talents that "I prefer happiness to success", as if he could not be both happy and successful in this field of knowledge. The negative reaction to Gabriel's choice connects with the general impression that Humanities degrees are useless, and full of students with limited talents who could not enter more demanding degrees. In fact, I think that Humanities degrees should have much higher grade point cutoffs so that only students with an average B- grade would be admitted. I believe that Tehan was wrong in increasing fees, he should have made the Humanities more selective by entrance grade if, that is, there is a real need to reduce the number of students. I'm sure that a rich country like Australia can afford them.

We can discuss endlessly the problem of how many Humanities students a society should educate, but this still leaves us with the problem of why, as we are seeing, so many traditional professional areas have no generational replacement whereas newer professions are failing to attract employees despite offering high salaries. Perhaps what the Australian case is revealing is something else: that university students see primarily themselves as students and cannot (or will not) see themselves as professionals. Possibly, the Humanities remain popular against all odds precisely because they are not intended to professionalize but to further educate students, offering a space for personal growth that more practical degrees lack. What seems clear in any case is that no national system of education can make full sense of how personal vocation and the job market combine, and it seems likely that things will continue in the current haphazard way for a long time. Here or in Australia.

19 July 2022 / READING *MOBY-DICK* WITHOUT HAVING A WHALE OF A TIME

Michael Quinion explains in his beautiful online dictionary of idioms *World Wide Words* the origin of the expression 'having a whale of a time', meaning enjoying yourself enormously. The idiom originates, as it easy to surmise, in the idea that whales are big animals to which big things can be compared. Apparently, Quinion informs his readers, turn-of-the-century US student slang was prolific in its many references to whales. The article by Willard C. Gore, "Student Slang" for *The Inlander, a Monthly Magazine of the Students of Michigan University* (December 1895), defines 'whale' as 1. A person who is a prodigy either physically or intellectually ("He's a whale at tennis") and 2. Something exceptionally large, severe or jolly, hence the idiom having "a whale of a time". By 1901, Quinion notes, the idiom was fully consolidated and "It has never gone away".

This prologue is my introduction to the problem I have suffered as a reader these last few weeks: I haven't had a whale of a time reading Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale* (1851). This has been, if I recall correctly, my third attempt at reading this

famed American classic and if this time I have persevered it is only because I had announced to two colleagues who specialize in Melville that I was finally reading the book. As happens, I am co-editing a book called *Detoxing Masculinity* for which one of my two colleagues (Rodrigo Andrés) has contributed a chapter on *Moby-Dick* and I just thought the time had come to fill in that woeful gap in my reading. Besides, my doctoral student Xiana Vázquez is working on the concept of humans as prey, and it seems to me that Melville's novel is fundamental for her dissertation. Please, note that *Moby-Dick* is a sperm whale, a toothed predator unlike the even larger blue whale, a filter feeder that eats tiny krill. No humans have been eaten by a sperm whale (or there are no reports), and despite constant speculation that the whale that swallowed Jonah could have been a sperm whale, the scientific studies indicate the prophet would have been crushed in the event.

The problem with *Moby-Dick* is not its length (539 pages in its Project Gutenberg edition) but the problematic merger in the text of, essentially, two books: one, a seaman's yarn dealing with how Captain Ahab obsesses about the white whale that took his leg away; the other, a non-fiction report (I would not call it essay) on whaling and whales, in particular sperm whales. Nam Peruge claims in a blog post that readers can skip the 100 non-narrative chapters of the novel and just focus on the remaining 35 that are narrative, which, indeed, can be done, *Rayuela*-style. The problem, as you can see, is that if you only read the 35 narrative chapters you cannot claim to have read *Moby-Dick*, this so-called novel which is more non-fiction than fiction. The other major problem is that whereas the narrative chapters are proficient enough as adventure, the long list of non-narrative chapters are quite dull as non-fiction. I would call myself a rather patient reader but despite my love of non-fiction and my being used to academic prose, which is usually a pretty dry affair (including mine), I had many difficulties to read for more than thirty minutes at a time Melville's too detailed informative chapters. The day I read one hour of *Moby-Dick* I was on a train with nothing else to do (or read).

In fact, I have used with *Moby-Dick* an old trick from my student days, which consisted of combining the books I had to read for class but didn't like with one book I loved. If I read a good chunk of the compulsory set text, then I would allow myself to read a bit from the one I preferred. Quite by accident, my choice of companion for *Moby-Dick* turned out to be a perfect match. John Vaillant's *The Tiger: A True Story of Vengeance and Survival* (2010)—which you should hurry to borrow from the Internet Archive before they close it down, as it might soon happen—is a thrilling non-fiction narrative volume about the hunting of a man-eating Siberian tiger, which tells, besides, the story of this species and of how the collapse of the Soviet Union led to its desperate situation. It is so close to *Moby-Dick* in so many ways that Vaillant even chooses an epigraph from Melville for one of the chapters. The two books differ, however, in one important point: even though *The Tiger* is the perfect mixture of the informative and the narrative Melville was aiming at it will never compete with *Moby-Dick* because non-fiction books still suffer from the absurd prejudice of being considered inferior to fiction.

This is due to the modern worship of authorial imagination. The irony is that although Melville invented Captain Ahab and had the idea of making his sperm whale an albino (see how popular the white humpback Migaloo is today), he took his inspiration from a very well-known historical episode, that of the sinking of the whaleship *Essex* in 1820 by a sperm whale. The first mate Owen Chase published the following year his *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex*, which inspired Melville to write his novel 30 years later. The *Essex* tragedy inspired as well American author Nathaniel Philbrick to write a truly admirable non-fiction volume, one of the best books I have ever read, in any genre: *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (2000), which won the National Book Award for Nonfiction. In

2015 Ron Howard released the film adaptation, a fiction film (not a documentary) with Chris Hemsworth playing Chase (who was not *that* handsome…).

Many readers who share their problems with *Moby-Dick* on Goodreads (see the very thorough discussion by 'Matt', mention Philbrick's masterpiece as a volume which, unlike Melville's, gave them a whale of a time. My colleague Nick Spengler, who wants to teach *Moby-Dick* in an elective, semestral course tells me that Melville's novel needs to be approached as a singular construction rather than a standard novel. He told me that the illustrious Francisco Rico and Gonzalo Pontón once shared at UAB a similar elective subject on *El Quijote*, which is also a composite text, and not what we know now as a novel. My impression is that our students will have a hard time reading Melville, though I trust that if anyone can make *Moby-Dick* attractive, this is Nick. I would myself join his class… As I told him, I am planning to teach a non-fiction course in 2023-24, which will certainly include *In the Heart of the Sea*, so it might well be that students will read the two books simultaneously. That will be an interesting experiment!

The other major problem which Melville's (alleged) masterpiece faces today is its insensitive approach to whales and whaling, as many other commentators have noticed. A passage from Chapter 41 encompasses everything that makes contemporary readers cringe before this novel's appalling approach to animals; I refer to the lines describing Ahab's dismemberment. The captain is attacking Moby-Dick with a "six inch blade" when the animal "reaped away Ahab's leg", in an action that can only be called self-defence but that Ahab reads as pure "malice". Since losing his leg Ahab "had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale" as "the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them". Melville writes that Ahab identifies the "intangible malignity which has been from the beginning" with the "abhorred white whale", and sentences that "He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down".

Melville is subtle enough for us to be able to read Ahab as a madman unfairly pursuing an animal that must feel terrified and that tries, accordingly, to flee his foe and, later, to save his own life for good [SPOILERS ALERT] by destroying Ahab's whaling ship, the *Pequod*. Yet, in Chapter 105 Melville dismisses the account of how 18th and 19th century whaling almost exterminated these fellow mammals with the rather absurd observation that since other species hunted in bigger numbers still survive (such as elephants), "we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality". Perhaps because of the negative reaction all this provokes in contemporary readers, *Moby-Dick* may be functioning today as a potent defender of animal rights. I am sure that many readers cheer when [SPOILER ALERT] the whale carries Ahab away (presumably to drown, not eat, him).

I wish, finally, to praise Ray Bradbury, for being one of Herman Melville's best readers. John Huston commissioned Bradbury to write the screenplay for the film eventually released in 1956. Bradbury was then rather well-known but he was not familiar with *Moby-Dick*, and he found the double task of adapting the book and putting up with Huston's ill-treatment barely bearable. He narrated his ordeal in *Green Shadows, White Whale* (1992), which is his lightly fictionalized memoir of the almost two years spent in Ireland writing the screenplay, while Huston drank, led a hectic social life, and enjoyed horse racing. Huston, by the way, stole a writing credit from Bradbury as he was by no means the screenplay's co-author. It appears that Steven Spielberg wanted to show in *Jaws* (1975) his fisherman Quint (Robert Shaw) watching Huston's *Moby-Dick*, to stress the character's similarities with the obsessive Ahab, but actor Gregory Peck, who played the captain, did not allow it. Peck, imposed by Warner Bros. against Huston's criteria though the actor was not aware of this, was always unhappy with a role that came to him aged only 38 (Ahab is 58). I saw the film (again) right after finishing the novel and I must say that for me Peck still is the perfect Ahab. There are many other adaptations, but this

one has a quaint charm that makes it unique. Incidentally, Russell Crowe, currently 58, might be a great Ahab.

I don't have room here to comment on whether Melville was aware of the obvious queer elements in the relationship between the narrator Ishmael and his Polynesian harpooner pal Queequeg, but I marvel that the original readers didn't see anything… queer… in their friendship. I just wish that their part of the story was longer, and that the couple [SPOILER ALERT] could have survived happily ever after on a lush tropical desert island with Moby-Dick as their companion, all three having a whale of a time.

25 July 2022 / LOOKING BEYOND THE NOVEL: THE OTHER PROSE

My post today continues from the last one in the sense that I want to consider here why the novel occupies the first position in the ranks of all the literary texts. In fact, I want to consider how come we have confused narrative with literature, additionally reducing fiction only to the novel, the novella, and the short story (and forgetting that drama and poetry can also be narrative). As I maintained in my last post, narrative non-fiction cannot compete in general public esteem with the novel because of the general fixation with narrative fiction, which to me is harder and harder to explain, particularly if we take into account than often narrative fiction is based on real-life facts (as *Moby-Dick* is) whereas narrative non-fiction borrows plenty of narrative techniques from fiction, including the novel, the novella, and the short story.

I'll begin with a very basic observation regarding an issue that we often take for granted. Whenever someone is described as a 'writer', we immediately assume that this person must be a novelist. Whenever someone claims they like reading, they usually mean that they enjoy reading novels. Yet, not all writers are novelists and not all reading consists of reading novels. When I first saw myself referred to as a 'university lecturer and writer', I was mystified, for I don't call myself a writer even though at this point I have authored 8 books, apart from editing a longish list of volumes, and even doing some translation. Emily Brontë, let's recall this, only published *Wuthering Heights* (1848). However, the reason why she is universally regarded as a writer and I am not (not even in my own personal regard) is that she wrote a novel (and beautiful poetry) and I write essays.

Ms. Brontë was not a professional writer, and nor am I, yet that is immaterial, for what counts towards being a 'writer' is not an ability to commercialize one's writing, but following a vocation that is supposedly artistic (I appear to be a vocational writer, but not of the artistic type). Ms. Brontë did certainly produce literary art in her novel, but the vast majority of novelists active today are not at all capable of writing artistic prose, being mostly proficient in the craft of storytelling. There is nothing wrong in producing and enjoying a tale well told written in functional prose, but that kind of novel should be enjoyed and studied as narrative, not as literature. Before I get lost in my own argumentation, I must make the point that not only are authors of essays (academic or otherwise) also writers, but some of them are capable of writing literary prose of a much higher quality than most novelists. As an example, read any of Robert Macfarlane's exquisite essays on nature, and then read any recent Booker Prize winner and tell me where the better literary prose can be found.

An even more basic point than the ones I have raised is that all writing is produced either in verse or in prose. We now identify verse with poetry, and all poetry with lyrical poetry, but in fact poetry can be used in any kind of writing. I could be writing this blog in verse rather than prose. Verse has been used in narrative, from ballads to epic poems running to many pages, and indeed in novels. Verse used to be of common usage in

drama, but, if I'm not wrong, T.S. Eliot was the last major author to write plays in verse, setting them besides in contemporaneous times. We associate verse to centuries old plays, like the ones by Shakespeare and company, but tend to forget that nobody has ever spoken in verse, and that poetry (especially blank verse) was of great mnemotechnic use to actors. To sum up this point, writing in verse is far more time-consuming than writing in prose but there is actually no reason why verse should not dominate over prose. Please, note that not all verse is literary, that is to say, successful in creating an artistic impression, even though we accept that poetry (the texts purposefully created to use verse artistically) is part of literature. Not all poetry, of course, manages to be artistically pleasing, hence literary.

So, whatever is not written in verse is prose, a style of writing in which rhythm is secondary and rhyme not used (even though the blank verse mostly used in Elizabethan drama, and by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, has no rhyme, either). Prose can be a very blunt instrument (read any set of instructions) or a very sophisticated tool, capable of sustaining from a witty tweet to all of Wikipedia. Here is where the word 'creative' complicates matters. Nobody would expect a newspaper or a journal article to use prose in a creative fashion, for the main purpose of the prose in those types of texts is transmitting information and ideas. The more creative segment of prose writing is to be found in literary texts which include, let me stress this again, drama (for the stage for also for the screen) and what we stubbornly call fiction, as if fiction could not be found in narrative poetry and in plays. Once Eliot's experiment in writing verse plays was over, I should say that any literary impulse was lost in drama. By this I mean that authors from Beckett onward saw no point in cultivating creative prose of the kind that tickles the brain with the genius in stringing words together, preferring instead to focus on the situational, whether narrative or non-narrative. Thinking of the best 20th and 21st century plays I have seen, it strikes me that I love them either for the story they tell or the experience they offer, but one would hardly quote them as examples of linguistic art as we still quote Shakespeare (both his verse and his prose).

It would be absurd for me to claim that the prose used in short stories, novellas, and novels is no longer artistic but I certainly believe that most novels are appreciated for their plot rather than for the quality of their prose. I have recently read Thomas Savage's *The Power of the Dog* (1967), which Jane Campion adapted so amazingly well for the screen, both as screenplay writer and director. This novel has been my most pleasing experience in reading this kind of book of the whole year (so, the best novel in 20 I have read so far) and as I read it I was wondering why it worked so well. I believe it is due to a happy overlapping of total narrative control (Savage knows when to provide apparently trivial details that later are seen to be crucial) with a prose that is above the basic needs of the story. There are no poetic flights but Savage's prose is precise and insightful in its descriptions, and in its dialogue. Does this mean that *The Power of the Dog* is great literature? The answer is that it is great narrative, superior to many other novels, though it does not necessarily provide a better reading experience that some great non-fiction books I have read. But is Savage's novel literature? No, if we think that the author was not particularly interested in writing artistic prose. Yes, if we use the concept 'literature' as a synonym of narrative, as it is done today.

There is an intriguing possibility that literature is dead with the exception of poetry if we regard literature as the artistic use of language. Both in drama (stage and audiovisual) and in prose fiction (novel, novella, shot story) any attempts to call attention to language itself are perceived as obstacles, and regardless of the degree of fantasy in the plot all works use functional dialogue, description, and authorial comment. No narrative writer is now making an effort (or just very few) to make the most of the possibilities of language, preferring instead to put their energies on situation (characterization is dying or almost dead). Whether we go to the theatre, watch the latest

Netflix series, or lie down on the sofa with a novel in our hands, we don't want to be offered bursts of elaborated language but narrative that flows well and is cleverly built, and dialogue that is as close to possible to real life (no verse please!) even when the work in question is set on 24th century Mars.

If, as I am arguing, the novel is not really a repository of artistic prose there is, therefore, no reason to give it so much room in Literature degrees, criticism, reviewing and reading. If novelists are not more capable than, say, scientists, to write the kind of prose that makes you wonder about the artistic flexibility of language, then why are they so highly valued? If we claim to love literature and not just fiction, how come so very few people enjoy poetry and hardly nobody reads plays? In our English Literature degrees, poetry and drama occupy just a small corner, and if the presence of short fiction is more or less stable, this is because the students bingeing on TV series for hours no longer have patience for novels. Much less for other genres. The course on Victorian Literature that I teach focuses on four novels. It used to be called Genres of Victorian Literature and last for two semesters. When it was reduced to one semester, we lost the play (Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*), the poetry and the selection of passages from Victorian essays. I still give students the booklets with the poems and the essay selections but the time I need to help them read the novels has reduced the time I could use for the other genres to nothing. Here's the joke: the true best-sellers of Victorian times were the religious books. Victorian readers love sermons, it seems.

To sum up my argumentation, I wish we could acknowledge that what we call literature is actually narrative, and that the novel is no better than narrative non-fiction in offering interesting stories told in prose of similar quality. Essays, as Robert Macfarlane shows, can be of higher literary quality than novels if we look at the beauty of his prose, whereas the increasing pull of realism is making it harder and harder for all kinds of fiction to use literary language. I am not engaging here in the old debate of whether popular and so-called literary creative novelists are all part of the canon and so on. I am calling attention to the extraordinary amount of commitment that novels receive even in Literature degrees in comparison to other genres which do care for literary artistry (such as poetry) and other genres written in prose of similar quality and by authors as competent as novelists or even more.

If you disagree with me, please send me examples of beautifully crafted prose in recent fiction and we'll continue the conversation. Thanks.

9 August 2022 / CHRONICLING THE DEATH OF LITERATURE (I): THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL AND THE RISE OF THE INFLUENCER

In my last post I argued that highly creative literature is practically dead, and that part of this foretold death is due to the dominance of the novel written by authors who do not care for literary prose. A few days later, Domingo Ródenas de Moya published in the culture supplement of *El País*, *Babelia*, an article called "¿Quién teme a la literatura experimental?" [Who fears the experimental novel?] in which he basically argued that the confluence of commercial interests and the readers' disinterest had killed experimental fiction. By experimental he meant in essence the Modernist fiction culminating in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), now the object of a centennial celebration.

Ródenas's notion of the experimental was criticized in the readers' comments as an elitist position which did not take into account the scant interest that Modernist novels elicited at the time of publication, nor the fact that experimentalism can be found in other texts, including the popular ones. This is indeed the case. Gothic novels, for instance, were often experimental narratives because the authors needed to maintain the illusion

that the preposterous events they narrated had actually happened. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), for instance, is a prodigy in that sense, consisting of an assemblage of documents from the phonographic recordings of Dr. Seward's diary to newspapers cuttings. R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), a novella rather than a novel, also astonishes for how the tale is built, from the outside to the inside, beginning with the observations of the good doctor's friends and ending with his own record of the catastrophe that engulfs him.

Stoker and Stevenson were very different kinds of writers, but their shared popularity shows that common readers are open to experimentation as long as the story narrated is engaging, which is not at all the case in *Ulysses*. This is, on the other hand, a much purer literary text since Joyce was not writing primarily as a narrator, or as a novelist, but as a literary experimentalist trying to create a new kind of artefact. He succeeded mightily in that endeavour but, of course, nobody approaching him as a narrator or a novelist can be satisfied with his storytelling skills (I won't even mention *Finnegan's Wake*, 1939, which almost killed the literary novel for good).

Among the comments to Ródenas's text, one signed by a person calling themselves 'Lola Montes' caught my attention. 'She' showed a peculiar misunderstanding of the role of computers in writing ("Today books are written in batches like 'churros' thanks to computers, which demands little effort and scarce meditation on what is written"), a *boutade* suggesting 'she' must be either a technophobe or an elderly person, or both. However, I found another passage by 'her' absolutely relevant: "The difficulty of a reading is directly proportional to the relationship between the cognitive level of the author and the reality and context that it presents. And that requires also high cognitive levels in readers. It's not a question of experimenting with just the semicolons. Today, Great Classical Literature should be considered experimental because very few address and understand it"). This comment can be tackled in two ways: no, Lola, very sophisticated readers of high cognitive skills can find experimental and/or classical fiction tedious, too and, yes, Lola, the more basic readers' skills are, the less likely they are to choose fiction beyond the basic binge-in-a-few-hours standard.

A question that is not habitually addressed in relation to reading habits is leisure. The novel was born in the 18th century as a genre designed to fill in the spare time of leisured women of middle and upper-class backgrounds, who had received no formal education beyond mere literacy. Gentlemen also read novels (even the Prince Regent had read Jane Austen's novels) but being associated with novel writing and novel reading was frowned upon as a lowly 'feminine' pursuit. When in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), the servant Rachel tries to warn her mistress Helen about her husband's misbehaviour, Helen upbraids her: "What then, Rachel? Have you been reading novels?"

The idea that the novel could be a vehicle for high intellectual reflexion and for creative literary expression aimed at better educated readers came much later, in a 50-year process that ran from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) to *Ulysses* (1922). This process overlaps with the establishment (in the UK) of state-funded primary and secondary education and, thus, with the idea that reading the classics had to be part of the education of all persons. Please, note that novels were still treated in that context as texts for leisure and they were not proclaimed officially part of a desirable education until F.R. Leavis published *The Great Tradition* (1948).

The novel, then, has occupied diverse niches in leisure, from the more basic need for entertainment on the beach, while travelling, to fill in a boring afternoon, to the more elaborate need to understand life. Those who read *Ulysses* originally had time in their hands for this type of demanding text, for this is not at all a text that you read to relax at the end of a bone-tiring working day. You don't even read *Middlemarch* to relax, nor any novel by the major Russian and French novelists, but because you are curious about

them. Readers endowed with a literary curiosity always find time to read demanding texts, but even so, they read them during their leisure time (unless they are literary professionals in reviewing and academia, or captive readers like students).

Guidance to fill in that productive leisure time, apart from education, used to come from the newspapers, magazines, and journals and in cultivated nations like France or Germany from TV shows devoted to reading. Literary critic Bernard Pivot, a former journalist, would tell French readers who to read in his weekly Friday evening talk show *Apostrophes* (1974-1989) and they would pay heed. When Oprah Winfrey started her book club (in 1996, as a segment of her own talk show), this was no longer about literary curiosity. As Scott Tossel wrote in *The Atlantic*, during the height of the controversy unleashed by author Jonathan Franzen's refusal to be publicised by Oprah, "Modernism (and postmodernism) taught us that the true rewards of art and literature are not easily gained, but must be attained only through difficulty and struggle. Getting your culture from Oprah, in this view, is like getting it from Cliffs Notes—a cheaper, cheating method, one that withholds a work of art's full rewards". Tossel did not consider, of course, why Oprah had to fill in a gap left by education, nor when exactly workers employed 40 or more hours a week can find the energy to reap the rewards of hard reading.

Oprah was acting as what would be later called, beginning in 2015, an 'influencer'. This is where the real battle is happening. German critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki's well-known talk show on German public television, *Literarisches Quartett* (1988-2001), which somehow bridges the gap between Pivot and Winfrey, is now unthinkable, with its in-depth interviews and its committed discussion of literature. Winfrey's book club ended in 2011, with the end of her talk show. Its newer version launched in 2012, *Oprah's Book Club 2.0*, which acknowledges the rise of the interactive social media, has never had the same impact. Those who, like Tossel, were appalled by how fine, creative literature had fallen into the middlebrow, plebeian hands of Oprah Winfrey, must be now suicidal, seeing how literature is perishing, drowned by reviews of undemanding narrative first by booktubers, now by booktokers. Readers are still following the lead of others but whereas Pivot and Reich-Ranicki, and to a great extent Winfrey, acted out of a genuine concern to educate readers using the mass media, this is gone from the social media, with a few exceptions that do not reach, anyway, the high number of spectators those proto literary influencers reached. Or that influencers like the Kardashians command.

In principle, nothing prevents booktubers and booktokers from championing extremely demanding Modernist, post-modernist and post-post-modernist fiction, or any other literary genre (poetry, drama). The Kardashians could indeed helped to publicize Joyce as they are publicizing so many fashion brands. The problem, as I see it, is that those who are present in social media as book reviewers are usually very young persons whose literary taste has not been formed yet and who are, besides, in the grip of this malady which is young adult fiction. Excuse me for my ageist snobbery, but although the idea of young persons recommending books to each other is beautiful, the idea of their mostly recommending novels designed to please junior readers is not.

I was recently reading Jorge Semprún's *La escritura o la vida* (1994, originally *L'écriture ou la vie*), a deeply moving memoir of his return to ordinary life after Buchenwald, and I was astonished by the scenes in which he, then 20, comments on poems with an American officer, as young as he is. Both men have read enormously and quote an amazing variety of poetry. They were clearly under other influences (and influencers). As for young adult fiction, I am not disputing the quality of its texts, as I would never dispute the quality of children's literature. What I am saying is that it has had the unfortunate (or tragic) side effect of convincing most teen readers, of which the vast majority are girls, that there is something called 'adult' literature which is dull to death and should only be read when white hairs start sprouting in your head.

I'll continue my ranting in the following post…

9 August 2022 / CHRONICLING THE DEATH OF LITERATURE (II): THE WRITER AS INFLUENCER

The other article that has interested me and, in this case, appalled me is Laura Miller's "The Unlikely Author Who's Absolutely Dominating the Bestseller List" for *Slate* on the current US top best-selling novelist: Colleen Hoover. Miller's analysis led me to Stephanie McNeal's similar piece, "How Colleen Hoover Became The Queen Of BookTok" for *BuzzFeed*, published a few weeks before.

"CoHo is fans' nickname for the beloved romance and thriller author Colleen Hoover", McNeal writes. "Hoover, a 42-year-old mom of three from Texas, has published more than 20 novels and novellas over the past decade, capturing the hearts of book bloggers, #bookstagram, and more recently, #BookTok". Indeed, both journalists describe Hoover as a social-media savvy person who has mistress-minded her rise to the best-selling lists thanks to an astonishingly clever use of social media. Miller and McNeal stress that Hoover's current popularity is not a product of TikTok book reviewing (or booktoking) but the result of a decade of the author's relentless cultivation of each successive social network, as they rose and fell.

I had never heard of Hoover but this is unsurprising as I have given up trying to make sense of the constant flood of novelties and, besides, I don't use social media, except Twitter (mainly to announce this blog's new posts). If Hoover is more astute than any other writer at publicising her work, then kudos to her. Her success, it must be noted, is very different from the word of mouth recommendations that propelled J.K. Rowling to the top of the best-selling lists worldwide, a phenomenon on which she had no direct influence and that came very much as a surprise for her publishers, Bloomsbury. Hoover started self-publishing until Atria offered her a home, generating in the process immense revenues for both. Again, if author and publisher understand their business so thoroughly, then they deserve their windfall. What worries me is the impact writers like Hoover are having on the reading habits of their admirers. And no, I have not read any of her novels nor do I intend to do so.

My argument might make no sense, but I'll mention another woman writer of supposedly very high impact to establish a comparison. This is not based on sales, or on TikTok reviews, but on GoodReads comments. Nigerian-American author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is very well-known as the author of the novel *Americanah* (2013) and the essay *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014). In GoodReads, Adichie's novel has today 4'31 stars out of 5, with 329,795 ratings and 27,308 reviews; her essay is valued with 4'42 stars (246,407 ratings and 24,421 reviews). I will stress that books above 4 stars are, in my experience of using GoodReads, usually excellent and that anything below 3'70 is dubious. Now, let's turn to Hoover. Her novels are, except for a couple of duds, rated above 4, with the readers' favourite, *It Ends with Us* (2016) rated 4'40, on the basis of, attention!, 1,406,095 ratings and 139,103 reviews. Sally Rooney's allegedly ground-breaking *Normal People* (2019) only rates 3'83 with 899,160 ratings and 84,780 reviews.

A rule of GoodReads and any other website rating texts of any type is that voters tend to dissent, so that works with close to five stars still find detractors. I always read first the worst reviews, since the five-star reviews are bound to be predictable ('this is a masterpiece' and so on). Almost 16,000 readers rated *It Ends with Us* with one star. I forgot to say that this is a romance novel and among the best-liked reviewers, Alissa Patrick complains about its clichéd plotline ("a story about a guy who apparently has the magical penis to make you throw your convictions out the window just because he's hot and wearing hospital scrubs"), whereas Olivia's criticism goes further, accusing Hoover of reducing "domestic abuse to a lovers quarrel and present[ing] a tactless caricature of the realities of abuse. I can acknowledge this may not have been the intention, but the elaboration in the author's note does not absolve this book of its reckless and

irresponsible marketing". In contrast, the 5-star best-liked review by Aesta begins with "*It Ends With Us* is one of the most powerful books of 2016 and one of the most raw, honest, inspiring, and profoundly beautiful stories I've ever read. (…) This is the kind of book that I want to give to every woman and just be like… READ THIS BOOK. NOW". Sorry but no, thanks.

I have been thinking about why Colleen Hoover's success annoys me so profoundly, not being myself an (envious) novelist and being quite open to reading anyone and everything. It is, besides, almost impossible to express an opinion without attacking the genres which she practices (romance, YA, thriller, women's fiction and paranormal romance) or her readers (mostly young women). I run the risk of being seen as an aged elitist feminist hag, which perhaps is what I am, but is not what I would like to be seen as. I believe that what depresses me is that, given how terminal the whole world of reading is—with more people than ever reading, but with those who read not choosing the better options available—so much readerly energy is being wasted. It is this nagging feeling that all those young readers would be much better off reading better books since, presumably, they do like reading.

I am not as naïve as to believe that the solution lies in reading the classics (I complained against *Moby-Dick*'s dullness just two posts ago) or that reading fiction for entertainment should be banned (I myself read science fiction for that purpose). What is depressing me is this tide coming mainly from America, but also widespread in Europe, by which you get in the more popular novels, or rather in the popular genres, a flat view of reality. Popular fiction has always been criticized for that, but somehow there came a point when romance, detective fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and so on could compete with the non-genre fiction in the depth with which they portrayed society (also because non-genre or mainstream fiction got shallower).

I must conclude that what is concerning me is how in the absence of a better kind of writing, a less proficient type of writing is attracting all the interest. Both in genre and in non-genre narrative, the books promise in the blurbs and the enthusiastic reviews much more than they can give, most likely because the authors of the present are not themselves as well-read as the authors of the past. Since the readers are not well-read, either, the standards are being eroded and what passes now for a masterpiece (the words used by many GoodRead reviewers for Hoover's books) is really just a reasonably well-crafted, cliché-ridden novel of the kind that used to be called middle-brow and even low-brow.

Perhaps I envy Hoover's readers because they describe very intense reading experiences in which they have been swept off their feet. I only get this feeling very rarely, finding myself putting up with books rather than enjoying them. Possibly, the more one reads, the more one sees any book's seams and the less one is willing to enjoy the ride. I still think, though, that the reading world is upside down (arguably, it has always been so) and that there are out there many other novelists worth reading and promoting. Or perhaps not, and ours is the era of the Colleen Hoovers and of the writer as influencer. It used to be the case that authors became public figures on the strength of their publications, and I believe that this is now the opposite: first you build yourself as a wannabe influencer and then you build a fanbase before you're really ready to produce any solid work.

Commenting these days with one of my nieces (she's 13) on her books for the summer, she introduced me to Joana Marcús, a twenty-two-year old author from Majorca, who started her career by giving away her first novel online and cultivating a fanbase on Wattpad. Wattpad, the web where you share your fiction and receive feedback from readers, is a wonderful idea, but although it connects new writers to readers and publishers, it is hardly a platform to encourage the renewal of narrative clichés, as it thrives like all social media on likes and popularity. Wattpad Studios

promises now to turn stories into smashing film and TV adaptations. So, social media are indeed killing literature by having not only taken away from young people the leisure time that many used to invest on more creative pursuits, but also by turning writers into influencers that care more about monetizing talent than about developing it.

I do not know how this might work, but I am (almost) sure that if we compare a novel by, say, romance queen Danielle Steele to one by Colleen Hoover, we might notice a significant difference in quality, in favour of the former. I am beginning to sound like George Eliot when she launched her ferociously misogynistic attack "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856) (published anonymously in the *Westminster Review*), which is not my intention. Nonetheless, I will borrow from her essay the idea that the "greatest deficiencies" not only of women writers but of all authors writing today "are due hardly more to the want of intellectual power than to the want of those moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence—patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer's art". Instead, we find "that kind of facility which springs from the absence of any high standard" and plenty of "futile authorship" fuelled by vanity—that deeply human quality which those who developed the social media exploit so well.

As for the sacredness of the writer's art, and the art itself, I'm afraid nobody knows any longer what it really consists of.

16 August 2022 / LIVING IN FEAR: SLAVES TO (PATRIARCHAL) TERRORISM, FROM SALMAN RUSHDIE TO AFGHANISTAN

At the end of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) replicant Roy Batty shows his humanity shortly before dying by recalling all he has lived and concluding that, with his death, "All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain", a moving line which actor Rutger Hauer contributed to the film, ignoring the script. This is one of the most famous speeches in the history of cinema, but the line from the same scene I recall far more strongly is "Quite an experience to feel fear. That's what it's like to be a slave" which the enslaved replicant addresses to the man chasing him, detective Deckard (Harrison Ford), at a moment when his life is in Batty's hands. I assume that the line was written by scriptwriter David Peoples, and I salute him for encapsulating in it the reason why we act as cowards in the face of rampant abuse: we are all enslaved by fear, and this fear has its roots in violence.

It is inevitable to mention this week the brutal attack suffered by Indian-born author Salman Rushdie, thirty-three years after the *fatwa* that Ayatollah Khomeini endorsed against him for having allegedly mocked Islam in his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1989). I live in a country where the Inquisition caused 1346 persons to be executed in horrid ways between 1478 and 1834, including the occupied territories of Central and South America, so I am quite familiar with the brutality to which radicalized religious belief can lead. Precisely because of that, I am, like many other persons, shocked to see that religious fanaticism is still alive and causing so much damage, when it should be just a matter of the historical past.

Fanaticism is the basis not just of the attack against Rushdie, but also of the terrorism that altered so viciously the peace in Barcelona one afternoon in August five years ago, and of the new captivity of *all* the women in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime established in 2021. I'm not forgetting the victims in Palestine, nor the American women prevented from aborting by the fundamentalist bigots at the US Supreme Court. To those who wonder why the Jewish Holocaust was never stopped, I would reply that the answer is clear, since we are seeing similar examples today: we're just slaves who

can be easily cowed into submission by fear. And when we are afraid, we just don't care, and don't act.

I do not know whether there ever was a time when humans lived with no violence, but for the sake of argumentation I am going to suppose that did happen. I have often argued that patriarchy is not fundamentally about sexism but about dominance and power. Dominance, however, is maintained by means of violence and my guess is that patriarchy started when one of the male hunters in a tribal hunting party understood that the violence used against animals could be used against fellow humans to gain ascendancy. The first patriarch was most likely a bully who saw that his ability to use violence could be turned into the foundation for power, and who usurped from women the power to give life by placing the phallus at the centre of social life.

The tribal chieftain need not be a bully or a villain, but the system of terror imposed using violence (obey me or else…) is the very foundation of patriarchal civilization, the authoritarian regime in which we all live, including democracies. The other system of patriarchal control was established through religion. I read not so long ago in a text by someone whose name I have forgotten that religion appeared as a system to impose obedience when tribes grew large. The chieftain and his warriors can only control through direct violence a limited amount of individuals, but if you instil in the tribe the fear of the gods or of god though persons presented as a cast of sacred beings (either wizards or priests) then the number of individuals you can control can grow into billions, as Catholicism and Islam show.

I don't know about Islam, but I can say for sure that Catholicism has controlled personal behaviour by means of the fear of hell, and social ostracism, and whenever this failed, by the violent means which the Inquisition backed. The hold of Catholicism is now much weakened, and the Pope no longer excommunicates any believers for their transgressions or for blasphemy, but in historical terms, this church is not so different from the rampant fanaticism we see today in other religions.

The supposition is that History progresses toward a future in which all human rights will be respected and the authoritarian regime we know as patriarchy will be transformed into a democracy run by fully participative citizens. When Hadi Matar plunged his knife ten times into the unprotected body of Salman Rushdie he not only put the clock back to 1989, but also confirmed that progress is halting. The rights of Afghan women and LGTBIQ+ persons have evaporated, and the same is happening in the USA. Putin, Trump, Bolsonaro, and the many other patriarchs menacing democracy are pulling us back into the darker times we thought were just part of History, sorry to repeat my argument. Talk of nuclear warfare is becoming normalized in the hottest summer on record, which indicates that climate change might not have time to kill us because a nuclear winter will. The fanaticism and the fascism we believe were dead are coming back, like the psychotic killer of the increasingly bad sequels, and although no other group of six million people have been exterminated as systematically as the European Jews were killed, immense human collectives are being victimized, with women at the top of the list, even though we are actually the 52% majority in the world.

A question often asked of African-American slaves is why they never staged a collective rebellion and mass-murdered their owners, since these were clearly a minority in comparison to the number of enslaved persons. Well, replicant Roy Batty gave us the answer: being a slave is living in fear, and living in fear makes you a slave. I'll add that you possibly need just 10% of truly brutal bullies to enslave the rest, though from what I see in the votes of those who support extreme right-wing policies, between 25% and 30% of the population are slaves who long for a tough master and who think that the rest should be enslaved.

As a woman, I am terrified. By this trend, by the onslaught against women's rights, by the hatred against LGTBIQ+ persons even in countries like Spain where gay marriage

is a right, and by the inability of the world community to stop beasts like Putin. We are going backwards so fast it will take us centuries to regain the future. Think of what J.K. Rowling must be feeling now, trapped as she is between the fury of the trans activists who have branded her a TERF, and the hatred of the radical Muslim man who announced to her on Twitter after Rushdie was attacked "you're next". And I am not forgetting Catalan Muslim rapper Miss Raisa, a defender of the LGTBI community. A man was arrested just a few days ago, having not only threatened to behead her but apparently preparing to do so.

My personal freedom of speech and our collective freedom of speech is jeopardised by the fear and hatred poured on us, both by long-lived institutions like organized religion and new ones, like the social media. Salman Rushdie thought he was free from the *fatwa* and was travelling with no escort, tired of the years he spent secluded like a prisoner. His attack by a young man who was not even born when the *fatwa* was issued, and who most likely acted as a lone wolf might be just the work of an isolated fanatic individual, but this man represents something deeper.

The freedom of speech of the radicalized, undemocratic others, whether they are the Taliban or Donald Trump, has not been curved down, whereas ours has been limited by their violence. Twitter expelled Trump, but that was in the end a token gesture. Among the barrage of tweets reacting to the attack on Rushdie with love and compassion, you could see a river of tweets celebrating and justifying it. I do not deny that *The Satanic Verses* may have offended some Islamic believers, but this is a matter to be argued using words, not a knife. In fact, the attack is going to have the opposite effect, as sales of the novel instantly boomed. I am just very sorry for the peaceful Muslims, the immense majority, who will have to bear the brunt of this man's cruel and idiotic criminal action.

I don't care, in any case, as much for Rushdie as I care for the 14.2 million women and girls in Afghanistan, enslaved by the Taliban. I don't know how many of the 15 million men are part of the regime, or complicit with it, but I fear above all that this is a blueprint for the spread of anti-democratic patriarchy all over the world. See what Amnesty International has to say.

I personally no longer feel free, if I ever have, and indeed have stopped believing in the freedom of speech. Popular actor Tom Holland has just announced that he is closing temporarily his social media to protect his mental health from the constant criticism. I understand his decision, but the problem is that as things are now, the only way to protect one's mental health is to totally disconnect from the world, and protect whatever privileges you may have. If you want to be minimally connected to life today, particularly if you're a woman, you need to accept the mental distress, the anxiety, and the fear. And try to perpetuate the illusion of freedom despite knowing that, even under the best circumstances, you're nothing but a slave to greed, authoritarianism, hatred, and lust for power, in short, of patriarchy. The freer you think you are, the less you will understand your own enslavement.

22 August 2022 / AN HOMAGE TO MINISERIES

It's evening, after dinner, time to relax and choose a film to watch from whatever platform you subscribe. This means employing about two hours on consuming a story, leaving aside the fifteen minutes (or more) it may take to select a minimally enticing movie, unless you have preselected and placed some on your list. If you know of a film which you really want to see, that's fine; if you don't, at this point you start wondering whether you have the stamina to sit through one hundred and twenty minutes of a possibly mediocre script with perfunctory direction and performances, the typical film rated 6 to 6'5 on IMDB. So

why not watch one episode from a series? Sixty minutes at most and then early to bed, perhaps to read for a while; or stay on the sofa and play a videogame. Four hours and four episodes later, you wonder where time has gone and whether you'll wake up on time when the alarm sounds…

Why is it easier to watch four episodes from a show rather than a much shorter feature film? For the same reason that it is easier to read sixty pages from a novel than a twenty-page short story. All self-contained narratives require an effort to master the rules of a fictional world, whether this narrative is a micro short story or a sprawling twenty-season series (serial?). With a shorter text this effort is not productive because it is spent in a short time. With a longer text, the opposite happens: once the basic narrative rules are grasped, the narrative itself can go on for many pages or many hours, with no additional effort. When we choose a series over a film, or a novel over a short story, we're choosing to maximize the usefulness of the effort to engage with the worldbuilding. When the two-hour film ends, we need to begin the process of engagement again with another film. With a series, the same effort stretches for hours, days, weeks, and longer, with no extra investment. Besides, watching a series also solves the problem of what to watch the following days, until the series ends or its appeal diminishes for the viewer. In short, a person watching a different film every day, or reading a different short story daily, must be willing to spend much imaginative energy, whereas someone using two hours a day to watch the same series for a month, or read the same novel, is just engaging with one story, no matter how complex the plot and the subplots can be.

I don't like series for the same reason that I don't like novels of more than 400 pages: there must be a limit, I believe, to the time I am willing to invest on just one story. For the reasons that I have explained, I am not too keen on short stories, which generally make me impatient even when they are just a few pages long. I do like movies, but I am finding it increasingly difficult to find scripts that interest me and, so, I am becoming far less willing to invest two hours of my time on watching a movie, particularly if I am reading an attractive book. Unless I am travelling on a train, plane or bus, or reading for work, I don't really read more than two hours at a stretch for leisure, which means that for me the evening film is in direct competition with whatever book I may be reading. Usually, the book wins.

A solution for those who, like me, don't like series and are beginning to hate films is watching miniseries. The difference between a series and a miniseries is not that easy to establish, though. In principle, a miniseries is limited to one season; in fact, the word 'season' should not even apply to this kind of narrative as a series only has 'seasons' if it is properly speaking a series, not a miniseries. To confuse matters even more, it is not easy to distinguish between miniseries and series by number of episodes: to give an example, the brilliant miniseries *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980) consists of fourteen episodes, whereas the not less brilliant series *Sherlock* (2010-2017) consists of fifteen episodes distributed in four seasons. Perhaps rather than 'miniseries', we should use the label 'one-season series', even though this contradicts my previous argumentation. The Academy of Television Arts & Sciences of the USA, which awards the Emmys, prefers the label 'limited series', and it appears than in the UK the word series is used both for minis and for longer series.

As for the length of the episodes, there are miniseries of just two episodes which are shorter than Steven Spielberg's magnificent film *Schindler's List* (1993), which stretches to 195 minutes. The upper limit is marked by the maximum a season can last, though I should think that fifteen episodes is enough. Of course, episodes may last from twenty to ninety minutes, with most lasting forty-five to sixty minutes, so that the number of episodes is no indication of the actual length of a miniseries. *War and Remembrance* (1988-1989) is said to be the longest miniseries, with its 27 hours (in 12 episodes); its first episode lasts for 150 minutes! To add more data, the two highest-ranking fiction

miniseries on IMDB, rated with a 9,4 (I'm here ignoring the documentary miniseries), are vastly different in length: *Band of Brothers* (2001) lasts for 594 minutes, *Chernobyl* (2019) only 330.

The miniseries was born long before the word itself, which appeared in the early 1960s (1963 according to *Merriam Webster*), with the serialized adaptation of novels. In *The Classic Serial on Television and Radio* (2001), Robert Giddings and Keith Selby attribute to John Reith, the British inventor of public service broadcasting, the idea of using BBC radio to stage plays in the 1930s. Radio drama, and the previous 1920s dramatic readings, inspired the idea of the serialized adaptation of novels for this means of communication, which started a fashion focused on 19th century literary and popular classics. The fashion moved later on to TV. Giddings and Selby note (p. 19) that BBC Television's 1951 adaptation of Anthony Trollope's novel *The Warden* in six episodes was the first miniseries; this was followed in 1952 by *Pride and Prejudice*. According to Francis Wheen's *Television* (1985), the immense success in the USA, in 1960-1970, of British serial *The Forsyte Saga* (1967), from the novels by John Galsworthy, "inspired the American mini-series", also often based on novels, both classics and best-sellers.

Sorry to use my personal memories, but, as happens, my childhood and adolescence overlap with the period in which the American and the British miniseries boomed. The key year was 1976. Then, the BBC's adaptation of Robert Graves's novels *I, Claudius* (1934) and *Claudius the God* (1935) as *I, Claudius*, and ABC's version of Irvin Shaw's best-seller *Rich Man, Poor Man* (1969) hit the TV screen with a hurricane force that I perfectly recall. I was ten when *Hombre rico, hombre pobre* was broadcast by TVE, in 1977, and twelve when *Yo, Claudio* was finally seen in Spain in 1978, and I do recall their impact with all clarity. I don't remember having seen Anglo-Italian hit miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977, directed by Franco Zefirelli), broadcast by TVE in 1979, but I certainly remember the huge phenomenon that *Roots* (1977), based on Alex Hailey's novel (1976), became in that same year of 1979. Next came other BBC adaptations (I was blown over by the BBC's 1978 version of *Wuthering Heights*, which I watched aged thirteen, before reading the novel by Emily Brontë) and the 1980s hits: *Shōgun* (1980), adapted from the novel by James Clavell; *The Thorn Birds* (1983) based on Colleen McCullough's romance; and the *North and South* trilogy of miniseries (1985, 1986, 1994), based on the novels by John Jakes.

The miniseries that possibly altered most profoundly how literary adaptation should be handled for TV was Granada Television/ITV's elegant *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) based on the 1945 novel by Evelyn Waugh. The eleven-episode miniseries, which launched the career of Jeremy Irons, was broadcast in Spain in 1983. I was sixteen then and I recall being completely enchanted with everything in it. Curiously, Spanish television originally broadcast *Brideshead* on its second channel, which only reached a minority of viewers and then gave it a second chance on its main channel in 1984. Those were the times before the onset of the private channels (in 1990s) and long before the streaming platforms, when everyone watched the same series. *Brideshead Revisited* has little to do with all the other miniseries I have mentioned, being a rather subtle exploration of the mismatch between Charles Ryder and the rich but decadent family of his friend Sebastian Flyte. It is also a rather nostalgic chronicle of the end of the big British country houses (the magnificent Castle Howard was the main location), and as such a forerunner of Kazuo Ishiguro's far more critical novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989). I was then an easily impressionable teen and got the very wrong impression that English culture was that smart and refined all the time, which is not the case. I also missed the deep classism, which I saw in all starkness when I taught the book a decade later to uninterested first-year students.

Going these days through lists of the best current miniseries, by which I mean of the last ten years, it seems to me that this kind of narrative is now flourishing, though it is

also possibly overhyped. I did enjoy enormously *The Queen's Gambit* (2020), from the novel by Walter Tevis (1983), but I found *The Night Manager* (2016), from the novel by John le Carré (1993), much overrated. An important problem affecting miniseries is that the platforms do not distinguish between them and the multi-season series, which means that it is easy to miss the less publicised. The impossibility of subscribing to all the streaming services also means that viewers are constantly missing what they might enjoy. This was going to be originally a post with a list of great recent miniseries to watch, but I myself have access to a very limited selection. This is a topic for another post, of course, but I wonder whether the proliferation of platforms is making piracy grow again, once computer-savvy spectators have come to the conclusion that there is no way to keep up with the ceaseless flow of appealing audiovisual products.

I'll finish by suggesting that the miniseries might end up killing the film adaptation of novels, which is probably good news. A two-hour film can never accommodate the events of an average-length novel, much less so of any novel over 400 pages. The more flexible miniseries appears to be, therefore, a much more suitable vehicle to adapt novels, as the BBC's beautiful version of *Pride and Prejudice* already demonstrated in 1995. The bad news attached to this trend is the temptation to prolong the miniseries for a second season and further, in the hope of turning it into a long-running series based on the attractive of a character or a plotline. An example is *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) now in its fifth season, far beyond the original novel by Margaret Atwood. Showrunners try to exploit the appeal of all the popular series but it's good to know when to stop, and this is what I appreciate best about miniseries.

I hope you enjoy them, too.

24 August 2022 / HOW TO READ 100 BOOKS A YEAR (AND WHY IT ELICITS REJECTION)

The article by Héctor García Barnés published in *El Confidencial*, "There are people in Spain who read 80, 150 or 300 books a year, and it is not as difficult as it sounds", draws powerful attention both for the cases it presents of constant readers and for the rather negative comments they receive. According to García Barnés, the survey on reading habits and book purchases of 2021, carried out by the Federation of Publishers' Guilds of Spain, indicates that "those over 18 years of age read on average 10.2 books per year, but there are 36% of people who do not read even one", according to half of them due to lack of time. On the other hand, the "super readers", according to the journalist's nomenclature "those fans of literature who read the same number of books a year as entire towns", always find time to indulge in their favorite vice. Engineer Mariano Hortal, who reads about 300 books a year as reflected in his blog Lectura y locura, is surely an extraordinary case, but according to García Barnés it is not so strange to find in Spain readers who consume 80 to 150 books per year among the ranks of teachers, publishers, and journalists. Hopefully, others too.

Although I consider myself simply a reader, I am one of those 'super readers', with an annual average of around 100 books. I began to keep the list of everything I read at the age of fourteen so as not to forget anything, and I continue to religiously write down the volumes I pass through, not out of an effort to meet a quota but out of pure curiosity about how my annual walk among books is developing. And, as I said, out of sheer necessity, to keep memories alive. I understand that the readers whom García Barnés has interviewed correspond to a similar profile: neither they nor I compete with other readers, we do not expect to be awarded any prizes for reading, and we do not read to inflate our respective lists; they simply grow every year.

The number of books read does not indicate the hours spent on each volume and so for a while I also used to write down the pages of each book, a habit I lost. Yes, there have been cases in which I have hesitated to add a book to my list because it was only around 100 pages, although in other cases I have read books of 800 or 900 pages (like the one I am now reading, *Fall; or Dodge in Hell* by Neal Stephenson). One thing to understand is that the more you read, the more the reading speed increases, and the more comprehension improves, without a doubt. My usual reading speed is around 50-60 pages per hour, although as I said in the previous post, I rarely read more than two hours in a row unless it is for work. I never force myself to read every day, nor do I tend to finish books I do not like; actually, I should add to the 100 books per year something like 10 or 12 more per number of pages read in books eventually abandoned.

Neither the super readers of the article nor I myself narrate this experience with a desire for prestige or fame. In fact, García Barnés offers the article to those who claim they lack time to read as a lesson on how this can be found. The readers interviewed explain something more than obvious: time is always limited but if you find three and a half hours a day to watch TV (the national average in Spain in 2021), or waste time on the social networks, you can find one hour for reading. In fact, it is increasingly important to acquire that habit since various studies indicate that just as regular physical exercise keeps the heart healthy, reading helps maintain brain health.

Leaving aside this issue, it is clear that those of us who read books non-stop possibly get some kind of endorphin from reading similar to the one that encourages athletes to make further efforts. I do practice any sports, although I am aware that I should, and therefore I understand that there are many people who dislike reading, but I would never despise the sporting achievements of amateur athletes. If I stumbled upon an article in which a series of gentlemen and ladies told me that they run a marathon a week because they love it, it would not cross my mind to denigrate them; however, what the comments to García Barnés' article reflect is distrust and contempt, and a very mistaken impression that super readers are arrogant.

Here are some of those comments. Mr. Puterfull states that "Reading cannot be taken as a challenge or a competition. We're just going crazy," though nothing in the article suggests that super readers set up challenges or compete. Stuart Carter stresses that "reading cannot be an obligation", observing that "The important thing is to read and enjoy what is read", without noticing that this is what the interviewees defend. Alberto Martín thinks (in capital letters) that "100 BOOKS A YEAR? IT IS BARBARIC", next doubting that the super readers have understood at all what they read. Another reader, Weyland Yutani (the name of the diabolical corporation in the *Alien* saga), concludes that "He who reads 300 books a year does not read but flips through. It is not the same", though he has no basis to justify his argument (nor to insinuate that Mariano Hortal is lying). Philip Buster (sic) supports this unfounded thesis with a resounding "I can consume a lot of reading and not read anything". Maria Benjumea categorically denies that anyone can read 50 or 60 pages in one hour. In her opinion, "more than 30 pages in an hour means skipping paragraphs or reading garbage". One Maximón insists that "if I read by the 'weight' I am literally wasting my time", despite the fact that the super readers interviewed mention in all cases quality books. According to her, "the ideal is to select very well what is going to be read and why", so that "I, with 10/12 books in a year I am satisfied".

Other comments attack super readers on the flank of time rather than on the flank of comprehension ability. Daniel Monleón, who claims to be a reader depending on each period of his life, comments that "reading is enjoyment" like other pleasures, without it being "a choice (...) better or worse than others", though it is "more lonely". Reacting to the estimate by one of the super readers who has decided not to waste time with bad books because he only has time to read about 3500 if he hits old age, Felipe García writes

that "I have no interest in reading 80 books a year, nor in reading 3500 in the rest of my life. Nor in watching 50 seasons of series per year or watching 200 games of the year", thus putting at the same level the reading and consumption of television, which most super readers despise. Finally, Jorge Valdecasas writes that "If someone tells me that he has an 8-hour job, 3 children and reads a book every 2 days of the caliber of the three volumes of the lord of the rings (sic), I would ask that they lose custody of their children". He forgets that reading habits are usually born by imitation of the parents who read.

As I said, I can't imagine similar comments in response to an article about how to find time to run marathons, and the obvious question is why the super readers interviewed ruffle so many feathers. There is no comment appreciating the advice given (take books whenever you go on a trip even on the subway, look for shorter periods throughout the day if you cannot dedicate an hour to reading, use public libraries to experiment with different types of books), but a set of attacks. Spain is a tremendously uneducated country and perhaps therein lies the root of the hostility. While one comment indicates that the reading index is rising as indicated by the opening of large new bookstores in the major cities, another quips that if it were so there would be a bookstore on each street as there are bars.

Given this situation, it is not so surprising that super readers are looked down upon as people too clever for their own good who think they are superior to others. On the other hand, it is true that the interviewees do not hesitate to criticize the massive consumption of series and of gossipy talk shows as scourges that prevent maximizing the time that could be spent reading, and I understand that this position may be offensive. I have to clarify that in my own academic environment not everyone reads wildly, and that many teachers of Literature read less than they should because of being hooked on to series. I wouldn't be surprised the way things are going that thirty years from now books will no longer be taught in our English Studies degrees, but only series (I think cinema is dying before it can reach our classrooms).

As I wrote in my previous post, when the night comes and I have some leisure time, the question always arises as to whether I will opt for a movie or the book I am reading those days. As Daniel Monleón noted in his comment, reading is a lonely pursuit and normally if I opt for a film it is because I want to keep my partner company (he just loves movies, all of them). The problem is that if the film does not interest me too much I squirm restlessly on the sofa thinking about the book I could be reading, a situation that is difficult to understand (I know) for a non-reader. If you think about it, the habit of constantly reading is extremely strange, and perhaps somewhat selfish as some of the comments cited suggest. Certainly, it cannot be shared, despite social networks such as GoodReads or the many book clubs, unless, as many families did in the 19th century, one reads aloud and the others listen. Watching TV or using social networks is not really a more sociable act, as can be seen in those groups of teenagers who do not talk to each other because they are checking their smartphones. Yet, only readers carry the stigma of being too abstracted, too immersed in other worlds. Nerds, in short.

Since I know that he will never run a marathon, whatever the athletes may say, I know that it is useless to recommend reading if not 80 at least more than 12 books a year. I will just drop the suggestion in case anyone feels inspired by it.

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