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‘ “Roving with a Compass”; Digression, the Novel and the Creative Imagination in

Javier Marías’

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I

As regards a novelist’s approach to his or her work, that is, the method of writing or process of creation of a work, there seem to be two classes of novelists: on the one hand, those who form a more or less clear plan of their novels in advance of their writing them and then execute their plan in the course of it; and, on the other hand, those who devise no such plan and work not on the basis of any great number of preconceived ideas, but, rather, proceed irregularly, as Samuel Richardson put it in 1751. The former, he wrote, conceive ‘an agreeable plan, write within its circle, and go on step by step with delight, knowing what they drive at. Execution is all they have to concern themselves about’ (Richardson quoted by Allott 1959: 144). The latter, with whom Richardson aligned himself, have no such plan, know not (or not entirely) what they drive at and proceed rather errantly, feeling about in the darkness that envelops them, so to speak.

Amongst this latter class of writer is the contemporary Spanish novelist Javier Marías, widely acknowledged as one of the finest living writers worldwide, who on repeated occasions has explained that he has no interest in knowing in advance what his novels will be about. As he expounds in a short but revealing piece entitled ‘Roving with a Compass’ (‘Errar con brújula’, also translatable as ‘Erring with a Compass’), he lacks a vision of the future and an aim:

Not only do I not know what I want to write, nor where I would like to get to, nor do I have a narrative project that I can formulate before or after my novels have come to exist, but I do not even know, when I begin one, what it will be about or what will happen in it, or how many characters there will be, not to mention how it will end [...] The truth of the matter is that nowadays I still continue to write without much purpose and without an objective worth mentioning (Marías 1993: 91).

There are writers, he adds, who know from the outset what they want their text to be like and what they will write about; they are novelists who ‘work with a map, and before setting out are already familiar with the territory they have to traverse: they confine themselves to covering this ground, secure in the knowledge of possessing the means by which they are to do so’ (Marías 1993: 92). On the rare occasion when Marías has seen the route in advance, in the case of the odd short story, he has admitted to having the feeling of merely transcribing, writing out something, and he has found this tiresome (Marías 1993: 92). That is why he prefers, instead, to work with a compass, as he puts it:

Not only do I not know what my purpose is and what I would like to or will write about on each occasion, but I am also entirely ignorant of the representation, to employ a term that can encompass both what one calls ‘plot’, ‘storyline’ or ‘story’ and its formal, stylistic, or rhythmical appearance, as well as its structure (1993: 92).

Moreover, writing blindly or in the dark ('escribir a tientas') and this 'not knowing' ('no saber') allow him to install himself in digressiveness or errancy ('errabundia'), something that critics frown upon, according to Marías, 'granting great importance to what is 'pertinent' or 'essential' to the story, as if everything that appears in a narrative should be useful information and directed at one and the same end' (Marías 1993: 92-3).¹ Furthermore, as he has said elsewhere, 'sometimes in literature as in life, one does not know what is part of a story until the story takes shape and is complete and finished' (Marías 2008: 125). This makes eminent sense: unless one is already in possession of all the facts, of the whole story, before actually writing the story, how can one know what will turn out to be related (to it) and what not? As Marías puts it, Cervantes, Sterne, Proust, Nabokov, Bernhard or Benet 'have been masters of this errancy of texts or of the art of drifting, digression, the aside, the lyrical interpolation, the prolonged and autonomous affront and metaphor, respectively'; however, it cannot be said, he adds in defence of digression in literature, that this tendency is gratuitous in any of their cases, or that it is not pertinent or essential to the story; what is more, it is precisely such digressive dispositions that actually make narrative possible in each case (Marías 1993: 93). And he concludes, with reference to the novel he had just finished at the time, *A Heart So White* (1992), that the reason he found out what this novel of his was about — but only after he had completed it — was that,

¹ Marías is probably thinking here of Spanish critics, though there also seems to be a tradition of disregard for the digressive and episodic element in English literature, the most notable and extreme example perhaps being Anthony Trollope's assertion that 'there should be no episodes in a novel. Every sentence, every word, through all those pages, should tend to the telling of the story. Such episodes distract the attention of the reader, and always do so disagreeably' (Trollope quoted by Allott 1959: 233). Apart from Sterne, as Judith Hawley reminds us in her essay in the present book, and also Cervantes, Fielding, too, seems regularly to have attracted much criticism, notably for the episode of 'The Man of the Hill' in *The History of Tom Jones* (for instances of such criticism, see Allott 1959: 227-55).

as happens when reading the authors mentioned, whilst I was writing I found myself obliged to stop due to an aside, a digression or an interpolation: my interest as a writer is not very different to my interest as a reader: as such, I want to be forced to stop and think, and as long as this is the case I don't really mind what story I am being told. At the end of the day, what is *narratable* in a novel is only what can also be said in a few and interchangeable words. Novels, however, tend to consist of many words and precisely these are not interchangeable (Marías 1993: 93; original italics).

So, in the case of Marías, the significance of this errant process of creating a novel, this need to feel his way in the darkness that is the unmapped novel, to find his way in uncharted territory, is threefold: it sheds light on the processes of the creative imagination; it is this errant process that facilitates a formal digressiveness, a digressive style of writing;² and it is ultimately related to the freedom of the novel *per se*.

If a work is already complete before being written, before being created in written language, then written language and the imaginative and inventive processes

² If Marías's work is begun without premeditation and 'becomes' as he writes, then this is also true of his style — that is, it also applies at the level of his sentence — which is a 'loose style' of writing very much along the lines described by Morris Croll in his study of the Baroque style in prose (in Sir Thomas Browne and other seventeenth-century writers): 'Its purpose is to express, as far as may be, the order in which an idea presents itself when it is first experienced. It begins, therefore, *without premeditation*, stating its idea in the first form that occurs; the second member is determined by the situation in which the mind finds itself after the first has been spoken; and so on throughout the period, each member being an *emergency* of the situation. *The period — in theory, at least — is not made; it becomes. It completes and takes on form in the course of the motion of the mind which it expresses*' (Croll 1972: 111; my italics). And it is the movements of such a mind that we are invited to follow as readers, more than the realities presented or the topic at hand; the primary focus of such an errant, 'loose' and 'free' prose style will always be on the course of the motion of the mind perceiving the world. For reasons of space, I cannot elaborate on this intricate way in which style and creative imagination are interwoven; I have, however, discussed this in more length elsewhere (Grohmann 2002).

become inessential.³ Instead, through the method or approach adopted, the process of the novel's unfolding, its becoming whilst he writes, is what ensues and what appeals to Marías (Marías 1989: 26). The work cannot be preconceived, planned or forecast — it can only become. What this errant process allows him to do — by resisting a mapping of the way, a plotting of the work, an imposition of a structure in advance and by preferring the uncertainty of not knowing what it will be about — is to suppress a natural human tendency to impose pattern that, according to Anton Ehrenzweig's study of the psychology of the creative imagination, is so detrimental to the creative effort; this errancy thus breaks what Ehrenzweig calls the 'pernicious rule of preconceived design' (1967: 49).

As he says in his discussion of the functioning of the creative ego and the role, within that, of the differentiated and undifferentiated modes in the creative search (for an image or an idea), such a search involves the scrutiny of 'an astronomical number of possibilities', and the correct choice cannot be made 'by a conscious weighing up of each single possibility'; 'if we could map out the entire way ahead, no further search would be needed. As it is, the creative thinker has to make a decision about his route without having the full information needed for his choice' (Ehrenzweig 1967: 35-7). This is a dilemma, he adds, that belongs to the essence of creativity. Marías's errant writing process flows in just this way, abandoning exact visualization or mapping, since that would only lead one entirely astray (Ehrenzweig 1967: 36). This errant operation effects just what Ehrenzweig says is necessary in the creative process: the

³ As Maurice Blanchot put it once, 'if the work is already present in its entirety in the writer's mind and if this presence is what is the essence of the work (the words being here considered as inessential), then why should there be, any longer, a need for him to produce it? Either the work is, as an interior project, all that it will ever be, and the writer, from that moment onwards, knows everything he can ever hope to learn from it and will let it lie in its twilight, without translating it into words, without writing it — but then he will not write it, he will not be a writer; or, becoming aware that the work cannot be projected but only realised, that it has no value, no truth and reality other than through the words that develop it in time and inscribe it in space, he will set to writing it, but starting at nothing and with a view to nothing — and, paraphrasing Hegel, like a nothingness working in nothingness' (Blanchot 1949: 296).

‘clouding’ of consciousness in order to make the right decision (1967: 38). This points to the ‘yielding’ of reason that is necessary in the work of the creative imagination, a way of ascertaining that reason does not constrain the imagination, because it is ‘a bad thing and detrimental to the creative work of the mind if Reason makes too close an examination of the ideas as they come pouring in — at the very gateway as it were’, as Freud affirms in *The Interpretation of Dreams* by quoting Friedrich Schiller (1976: 177).⁴

The errant method of Marías allows him to ‘move and make interim decisions without being able to visualize the precise relationship with the end product’, which, according to Ehrenzweig, is exactly what the creative artist has to do (1967: 47). Each stage of the process imposes new choices and decisions that could not have been foreseen at an earlier stage; it is not that the writer is unconcerned about the effect of the interim decisions taken on the end product or about the final outcome as a whole; it is just that ‘he must be able to bear the suspense’ (Ehrenzweig 1967: 48).

Marías’s errant way of proceeding enables him to do just that. The value of the interim choices, the motifs, fragments, episodes or digressions pursued, the value of every element opted for, is discovered errantly in the (digressive) process of writing and is only revealed at the end, when everything gradually becomes associated and acquires significance as part of an interrelated whole (even if the literary work can never really be wholly and properly elucidated); the structure has to be imperfect and the artist needs to resist the ‘law of closure’ that will strive to ‘round off the work

⁴ It has long been argued that the workings of the imagination are based, to a significant extent, on unconscious, inspired, intuitive, dream-like, spontaneous, or other, analogous processes of association that make it a unifying force; these processes of association are not generally deemed to be governed by the intellect, reason or the conscious mind and the imagination is therefore taken to operate, to a certain degree, independently of reason and rational, conscious thought; hence, the imagination entails freedom (from practical considerations and purpose) and is determined in the act of perception and free in aesthetic creativity, as Kant sought to demonstrate (see Kant 1924, especially section 43; see also Starobinski 1970, for an overview).

prematurely’.⁵ The errant method in particular is very well suited to preventing such closure, and allowing the writer to work with the incoherent fragment, the disruptive form element — what is a digression if not precisely such a disruptive form element in writing? — since, not least, such disruptive, unruly devices break hold of mannered formulae and stem the rush to predetermined solutions (Ehrenzweig 1967: 48-53). Too deliberate a handling of elements would be detrimental for the creative process and there is a real need to frustrate preconceived intentions and an over-precise visualization, says Ehrenzweig (1967: 56), something which Marías’s creative errancy and his digressiveness permit him to achieve fairly ‘naturally’, since this way of proceeding is part of the normal technique employed, his way of writing, a method that allows the mature artist that is Marías to keep his intentions flexible enough, and it is also ‘natural’, for that matter, in that the digressive mode appears to be no less than the mind’s primary, inherent, instinctive, spontaneous way of operating.⁶

⁵ ‘The ‘law of closure’ postulated by the gestalt theory will always tend to round off and simplify the images and concepts of conscious thought. It makes it difficult, if not impossible, for rational thought to handle ‘open’ material without rounding it off prematurely. A second revision will tend to impart to such material a greater precision and compactness than it actually possesses. This can lead to wrong results’ (Ehrenzweig 1967: 39). In a sense, the errant processes and the digressive form of the writing naturally, that is, through their very nature, by diverting attention through the accidental or to the seemingly insignificant detail, say, tend to disrupt and destroy ‘the good gestalt’ of the material and stem the processes of secondary revision or elaboration, thus allowing for an exploration of the complexities radiating across the work.

⁶ On the one hand, digression represents a continuity of thought through the processes of association that lead from one element to the next, whether by way of contiguity or resemblance between the elements, as Pierre Bayard concludes in his study of digression in Proust (Bayard 1996: 23). But, as Bayard also suggests, it is reasonable to assume that the natural tendency of the mind is to create such links in general (Bayard 1996: 124); and this is substantiated time and again in studies of digression and the processes of association. This is why, for example, Ross Chambers speaks of the ‘naturalness of loiterature’, maintaining, for instance, that a digressive style of writing ‘seems somehow *natural* — or at least more natural than disciplined argument or the tightly controlled narratives that we nevertheless tend to get so caught up in. It’s more in tune with the complexity of things and the tangled relations that join them’ (1999: 31; original italics). And Arthur Koestler, in his fascinating study of the creative process, explains that conscious controls and reason are necessary to maintain the disciplined routines of thought but that they become an impediment to creativity because they block more primitive and natural levels of mental organization and functioning, which are digressive (1964); ‘during strenuous effort to concentrate’, he says, ‘one seems literally to ‘feel’ inside one’s head the expenditure of energy needed to suppress diversionary thoughts which keep popping up like jacks-in-the-box’, and he goes on to quote the Scottish scientist James Clerk Maxwell, who once remarked that ‘“A great part of our fatigue often arises, not from those mental efforts by which we obtain the mastery of the subject, but from those which are spent in recalling our wandering thoughts” ’; all this seems to

The creative errancy and the concomitant formal digressiveness (the digressiveness of the form, of his writing, that is) provide Mariás with the (welcome) ‘accident-inviting’ means necessary, according to Ehrenzweig, to disrupt the flexible planning of the artist, in the conversation between the writer and the medium that the process of creation and writing can become, especially in the case of a mature artist (who will be less inclined to view the unruly element as unwelcome); ‘true craftsmanship does not impose its will on the medium but explores its varying responses’ in the conversation between equals that the process of creation thus develops into (Ehrenzweig 1967: 58). An excessive preoccupation with pattern, structure or plot, with an individual element, episode, even an aside or digression and a need for fully conscious control of the medium would blind the writer to the transformations taking place as all the various elements coming to make up the work evolve into a more complex total structure, a growth that cannot be foreseen or predicted in any way from the nature of the particular. The number of possible choices open to the artist are not limited in the creative work, unlike in a game played in which choices are limited strictly by the rules of that particular game; there are no limiting rules in creative work, argues Ehrenzweig, since the work, as Mariás shows, ‘creates its own rules which may only be known after the work is finished’ (1967: 39).

II

indicate that these are ‘our preferential matrices of ideation’, concludes Koestler, that is, in lay terms, that this is our natural, uninhibited way of thinking (Koestler 1964: 645-6).

This is particularly so in the case of Javier Marías's *Dark Back of Time* [*Negra espalda del tiempo*] (1998). Presented by the author as a 'false novel', it seems to have created its own rules that have allowed it to take the 'irregular' form it has. That is one of the reasons why Marías called it a 'false novel', because it is not to be construed as a novel in the mould of previous ones.

A generically errant text, part-memoir, part-biographical narrative, part-essay, with an element of fiction, *Dark Back of Time* proposes or pretends — as the first-person narrator, who bears the name 'Javier Marías' and appears to be the author himself (in as far as narrator and author of a literary work can be 'the same'), explains in the opening section or chapter — to

tell what happened, or was ascertained or simply known — what happened in my experience or in my fabulation or in my knowledge — or perhaps all of it is only consciousness that never ceases — as a result of the composition and circulation of a novel, a work of fiction (Marías 2001: 8-9).⁷

The novel referred to here is Marías's *All Souls* [*Todas las almas*] (1989), set in Oxford and inspired by, and drawing on, Marías's own experiences in the city where he worked as *Lector* in the Sub-Faculty of Spanish at the University in the early 1980s. It was read by many as a *roman à clef*, and fiction and reality were often conflated to such an extent that the fiction ended up having a considerable effect on the empirical reality of the author, which is what he sets out to recount in *Dark Back*

⁷ Most subsequent quotations are of this 2001 English translation of the novel, unless I have provided my own for the purposes of greater precision.

of Time. And he proposed to do this, despite the profound distrust of certainty that all of Mariás's narratives evince and the extreme scepticism regarding the possibility of representing the world through writing that is expressed in the first two pages of *Dark Back of Time*:

Language can't reproduce events and shouldn't attempt to [...] Words — even when spoken, even at their crudest — are in and of themselves metaphorical and therefore imprecise, and cannot be imagined without ornament, though it is often involuntary [...] Fiction creeps into the narration of what happened, altering or falsifying it. The time-honoured aspiration of any chronicler or survivor — to tell what happened, give an account of what took place [...] — is, in fact, a mere illusion or chimera, or, rather, the phrase and concept themselves are already metaphorical and partake of fiction. 'To tell what happened' is inconceivable and futile, or possible only as invention. The idea of testimony is also futile and there has never been a witness who could truly fulfill his duty (8).

This notwithstanding, Mariás places himself in *Dark Back of Time* 'on the side of those who have sometimes claimed to be telling what really happened or pretended to succeed in doing so' (8).

But he does his telling through an errant creative process and a digressive form. His narrative holds for him 'the diversion of risk, the risk of narrating something for no reason and in almost no order, without making an outline or trying to be coherent' (9). His story is profoundly digressive, so much so that this time he

not only purports to wander without any compass in the process of its creation, but the story he discovers has no beginning nor any ending and may, indeed, not even be a story at all:

The elements of the story I am now embarking upon are entirely capricious, determined by chance, merely episodic and cumulative — all of them irrelevant by the elementary rule of criticism, none of them requiring any of the others — because in the end no author is guiding them, though I am relating them; they correspond to no blueprint, they are steered by no compass, most of them are external in origin and devoid of intention and therefore have no reason to make any kind of sense or to constitute an argument or plot or answer to some hidden harmony, and no lesson should be extracted from them (nor should any such thing be sought from real novels; above all, the novels themselves should not want it) — not even a story with its beginning and suspense and final silence. I don't believe this is a story, though, not knowing how it ends, I may be mistaken. I do know that the beginning of this tale lies outside it, in a novel I wrote some time ago, or before that (in which case it's even more amorphous), in the two years I spent as an impostor in the city of Oxford, teaching entertaining but on the whole quite useless subjects at its University [...]. Its ending must also lie outside it, and will surely coincide with my own, some years from now, or so I hope. Or it may happen that the ending survives me (9-10).

It is true that both its beginning and ending lie outside of *Dark Back of Time*, and the work ends with the promise of more to come: ‘A great deal has yet to be told, some of it recent and some still to come, and I need time [...] I am going to stop now and say no more for a while’ (335-6). It seems unlikely, though, that this promise will be kept, and, consequently, the tale remains fittingly imperfect.

So, *Dark Back of Time* is not really a true novel, a true fiction (11), only a ‘false’ one at best; it tells a story with no real ending or beginning, a story which, in truth, may not be a story at all, and attempts to recount what really happened, though the narrator acknowledges readily this is not possible. (Marías’s literature is governed by paradox.) As a matter of fact, at one point the narrator goes as far as admitting: ‘I don’t know what it is that I am doing nor why’.⁸ What, then, is he doing? Well, he speaks, ‘among other things, of several dead men, real ones’, among them the now obscure poet and former King of Redonda John Gawsworth (whose Kingdom Marías eventually reveals he has inherited), the ill-fated writer Wilfrid Ewart, killed by a stray bullet in Mexico, or the adventurer Hugh Oloff de Wet, men whom he never knew, ‘thereby becoming a kind of unexpected and distant posterity for them’, their ‘memory’; ‘I will be their ghost’, he concludes (12). As a ghost, then, Marías proceeds to tell us of these ‘wanderer[s] into nothingness’ [‘errabundos hacia la nada’], as de Wet is described (284), and he does so appropriately digressively: ‘I must make a digression’, he announces at the very beginning of the fifth section, ‘— this is a book of digressions, a book that proceeds by digression —’, he immediately interpolates in a metanarrative echo of Tristram Shandy’s famous analysis of the two ‘contrary motions’ of his art of writing (‘In a word, my work is digressive, and it is

⁸ Here, too, the English translation of the Spanish is a bit too vague for our purposes and I have slightly modified it (‘no sé qué es lo que estoy haciendo ni por qué lo hago’ is what is said [Marías 1998: 73]).

progressive too, —and at the same time’ [Sterne 1967: 95]).⁹ And he also tells of a particular conception of time, a time ‘that must be different for someone who began writing and reading in reverse’ (being left-handed, he started writing from right to left [300]), a perception of moving through ‘the other side of time, its dark back’, a time that has not existed, that awaits us and ‘also the time that does not await us and therefore does not happen, or happens only in a sphere that isn’t precisely temporal, a sphere in which writing, or perhaps only fiction, may — who knows — be found’, a time in which, also, ‘the living and the dead, can speak to each other and communicate’, the only dimension they have in common (301).

Dark Back of Time, through its irregular nature, through the creative errancy and digressiveness it lays bare, is in many ways a fairly novel form that pays tribute to the genre of the novel, a celebration of the freedom of the form that is the novel, a freedom that characterizes some of the best novels in the history of the genre, from Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* or *Persiles*, through Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, to Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. This freedom is directly related to their digressiveness. Javier Marías has said that Sterne’s work also taught him that ‘everything could be made to fit into this flexible genre called novel, provided it was done gracefully’ (2009). *Dark Back of Time* is indeed *sui generis*, generically and otherwise, and, to draw a parallel with an equally magnificently ‘irregular’ work from another continent and century, in formal terms very much like Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, in that

⁹ As it happens, the allusion to Sterne is not entirely accidental: Marías translated literature in English for many years (among others, prose texts by Sir Thomas Browne, Joseph Conrad, Isak Dinesen, Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats and poetry by Robert Louis Stevenson, Vladimir Nabokov, William Faulkner and John Ashbery), and also Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* into Spanish (which won him Spain’s National Prize for Translation in 1979), and he has repeatedly declared that the latter is his favourite work and the work that has had the most profound influence on his own writing (mainly as a result of the act of ‘re-writing’ that translation represents), because, apart from Sterne being for Marías the most genuine inheritor of Cervantes (more so than any Spanish author), Sterne taught him ‘the freedom and daring’ of writing and how ‘to expand or delay time or, in other words, how to contrive to give existence in the novel to that time that in real life never has the time to exist’ (Marías 2009).

Dark Back, too, is an ‘odd book, professing to be a novel; wantonly eccentric; outrageously bombastic; in places charmingly and vividly descriptive’, as was said of Melville’s work at the time.¹⁰ And just as Ishmael was said to be, the narrator Mariás is carefully ‘careless about ‘narrative’, offhand about consistency, resistant to completion or closure’ (yes, ‘carefully careless’, the oxymoron must stand since the carelessness is, as we have had the occasion to observe, the result of a *modus operandi*), and ‘does not care to approach his writing task “methodically”’, opting, instead, to wander with — or even without — a compass. And if *Dark Back of Time* is indeed ‘wild, unconnected, all episode’, digressive and lacking ‘cohesion’, as Melville’s work was described, even though it does ultimately show, like the most truly free and digressive novels, how everything in the world is interconnected in one way or another, then, like Melville’s work,¹¹ Mariás’s, too, is therefore no different to the world, and so, as the narrator of *Dark Back of Time* explains,

if the reader should wonder what on earth is being recounted here or where this text is heading, the only proper answer, I fear, would be that it is simply running its course and heading toward its ending, just like anything else that passes through or happens in the world (287).

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¹⁰ This is what one of the first reviewers of *The Whale* said, quoted by Tony Tanner in his ‘Introduction’ to the Oxford World Classics edition of *Moby Dick* (in Melville 1998: vii).

¹¹ See Tanner (in Melville 1998: xxv-xxvi).

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