

BOMB

Javier Marías

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Source: *BOMB*, No. 73 (Fall, 2000), pp. 80-85

Published by: [New Art Publications](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40426123>

Accessed: 21/06/2014 20:38

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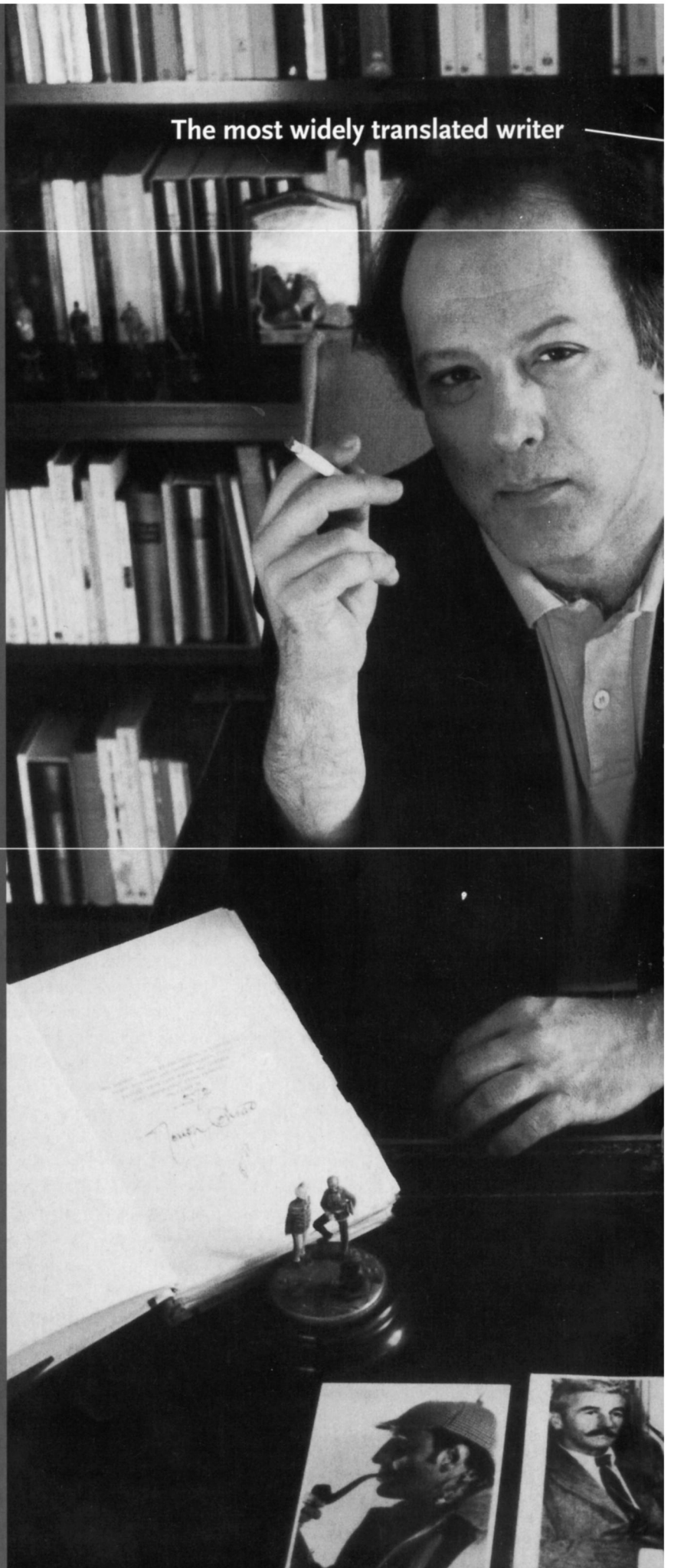


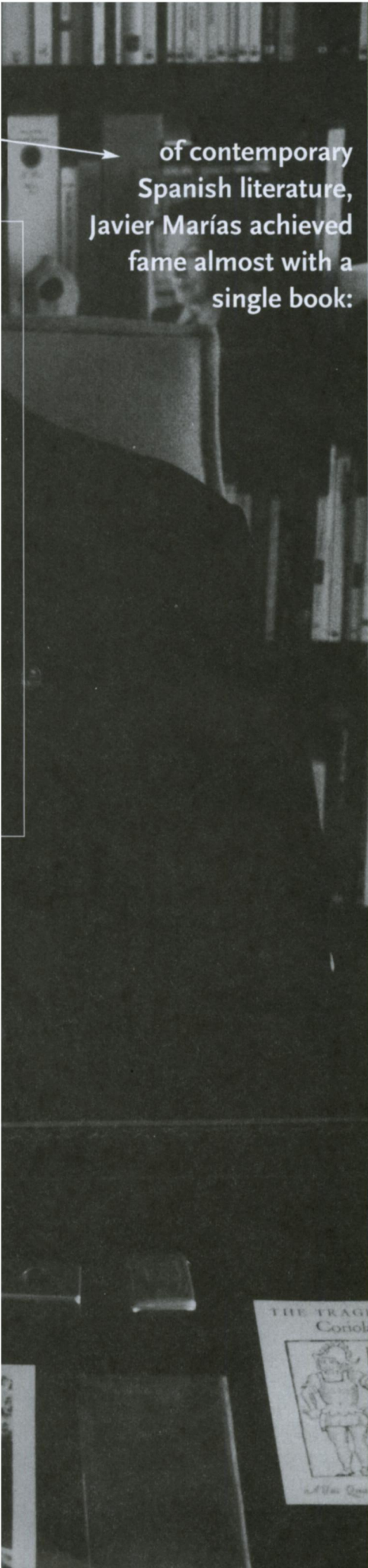
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The most widely translated writer

JAVIER MARÍAS





of contemporary Spanish literature, Javier Marías achieved fame almost with a single book:

→ *A Heart So White*, originally published in 1992, converted an author branded “difficult” into the most notable European literary phenomenon of recent years. Since then, novels like *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* and *Dark Back of Time* have confirmed Mr Marías’s status as Spain’s leading writer of fiction. His is the rare case of a skillful mix between stylistic elegance and a breathtaking narrative pace, between the uncanny and the detached, between criminal plots and complex literary devices.

There’s a certain justice in the author’s tremendous success abroad, for you couldn’t point to anything specifically “Spanish” in his writing or subject matter. What is more, Mr. Marías, born in 1951 in Madrid, has

PAUL INGENDAAY

published a number of acclaimed translations, including *Tristram Shandy*, which won the National Award for Translation in Spain in 1979; prose by Joseph Conrad and Robert Louis Stevenson; and poems by Nabokov, Faulkner, and Wallace Stevens, among others. He has taught at Wellesley College, Oxford University (whence he derived the material for his novel *All Souls*), and the University Complutense in Madrid. All of his five last novels, which include *A Man of Feeling*, have won important literary awards in Spain, France, Italy, or Germany. Javier Marías, who lives in Madrid, is also the author of various collections of stories and essays, along with his most recent publication, a book of essays on soccer.

Javier Marías. Photo by Gloria Rodriguez. Courtesy of Mercedes Casanova.

paul ingendaay The obvious question first: How do you account for your extraordinary success? You make a lot of claims on the reader, and yet your books sell millions of copies.

javier marías I was as surprised as anyone. I published my first book when I was nineteen, in 1971, and since then there have been very different phases in my writing. But success came gradually. It started in the 1980s, with my fifth novel, *The Man of Feeling* (*El hombre sentimental*), and went on with the next, *All Souls* (*Todas las almas*). But perhaps the big thing was the one after that, *A Heart So White* (*Corazón tan blanco*), published in Spanish in 1992. When I finished the book I had various offers. One publisher offered to pay me 12 percent (instead of the usual ten) once the book had sold 20,000 copies. That sounded like a chimera to me. By now it has sold more than one and a half million copies. Back then I never expected that, so I didn't publish with that house, which gives you a hint as to what I thought about my own writing. I've always written what I've felt like writing. Of course it's pleasant to have success, meaning more readers—but it's something I've never looked for. As you said, my books are, if not difficult, not exactly easy reading. But some of my novels aim to satisfy very demanding readers and less educated readers at the same time. I like the possibility of a book having different readings, and appealing to different kinds of readers. If that has happened with any of my books, it's a real blessing. *A Heart So White* deals with several issues—secrecy, suspicion, persuasion, instigation, marriage and in an oblique way, love. Those issues are likely to interest anyone, because we all have secrets, we all suffer from other people's secrets, we are all deceived sometime in life, or we deceive. We do not know anyone entirely, not even ourselves. If you were to try to tell your own story, you would find out soon enough that you cannot really tell it because there are so many elements having to do with other people whom you do not actually know, be it your wife, or your children—you never have complete knowledge of anyone, including yourself. Part of that is due to what I call secrecy, in the sense that we don't show ourselves to two different people in the same way.

pi That partly explains why there are so many characters in your fiction who are translators, interpreters, and carriers of messages where the message gets warped in the transmitting.

jm Yes.

pi There are comical scenes in your books making fun of those warped messages.

jm Yes. The narrators of my four, maybe five latest novels are very much related, like cousins. The narrator of *All Souls* is someone who is just passing through, and he knows he's not going to leave any trace. So he's a rather ghostly figure. In *A Heart So White* the narrator is an interpreter, conveying what others say, translating from one language to another. He lacks a voice of his own. And in *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* the narrator is a ghost writer, someone who puts his talents at the service of others. You could even say that the narrator in *The Man of Feeling*, who is an opera singer, is an interpreter, someone who is just reciting somebody else's creation. They are messengers, they are no one.

They are ghosts. At the same time, they love their own voices, which is what they mainly exist as.

pi Ghosts are, surprisingly, recurring subjects of your fiction.

jm I love literary ghosts. The concept of the ghost in literature supplies you with a point of view for telling your story: writing from the perspective of someone who has passed away. Nothing else can happen to them, because everything that could happen to them has already happened, and they are dead. But at the same time, they are not indifferent, which is precisely why a ghost comes back to haunt—to help the people he loves, to punish the people he hates or who did him harm. So a ghost is not indifferent and at the same time he's objective, because he knows the end of the story.

pi Because he's not part of the action anymore.

jm Yes. You could say that that's the kind of voice I have tried to achieve in my latest novels. Someone implicated and concerned about what happens, who can't do anything about it anymore.

pi When you were born, in 1951, Spain was an isolated country within postwar Europe. Your father, a philosopher and a Republican, was lucky to not have been shot after the Spanish Civil War, in 1939. And your first novels were published in the early seventies, with Franco still alive. How did you develop as a writer under those circumstances? There couldn't have been much to attract you in the way of that Spanish tradition, the leftovers of a terrible war and the presence of a dictatorship.

jm My case is a rather privileged one, except for the fact that my father was a Republican during the Civil War and was arrested when it was over. He was tried at a time when a mere accusation was enough to be condemned and found guilty—of anything. For example, he was accused of having been during the war, as Franco's accusers put it, the "voluntary companion" of the bandit, the Dean of Canterbury, who was in Spain conducting some exploits for the Republicans. My father never met him, nor was he a companion to his exploits. And he was accused of having written for *Pravda*, which he had never done. He had just been a Republican soldier who didn't fight. He was in Madrid the whole time and Madrid had been sieged and bombed, but there was no trench fighting. So he was put into prison and tried, and was lucky enough to be acquitted after a few months' jail time. Of course, there were other repercussions. He was not allowed to teach at the university, which for him would have been the obvious thing to do. He was one of the main disciples of Ortega y Gasset, the famous Spanish philosopher, and he was forbidden to write in Spanish newspapers up through the late fifties. He didn't have much money, and one of the reasons for that was that he didn't want to go into exile in order to work. He thought he should be in his own country, though he did go to the United States and to Puerto Rico to teach. In fact, I was almost born in the United States—just a month after having been born in Madrid I was taken to the States, and the first year of my life I spent at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. I was called the

UNLIKE PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING, —→ which demands an argument without logical flaws and contradictions, —→ LITERARY THINKING allows you to contradict yourself. A CHARACTER ←—— within a book can say two totally contradictory things, yet both can be true.

SHAKESPEARE DOES THAT ALL THE TIME.

"American baby." I went to the States again when I was five, to New Haven, Connecticut, where my father taught for a year at Yale. He was always very in touch with the United States and with foreign people in general, so I didn't feel as isolated as other Spanish boys my age probably did. Because my father and mother were Republicans and anti-Francoists, I went to a school which was very special for the time; it was coed, which was prohibited in those years. When the inspectors came, boys and girls had to run to different classrooms and pretend they were not taught together. It sounds unbelievable nowadays. We lived under a dictatorship. There were no political parties, no freedom of the press, there was censorship and you could go to jail for *anything*. The difference between my generation of writers and the previous one was that we made a distinction between our writing and our duties as citizens. We were as anti-Francoist as they were, but they had been working on something that has been called *Realismo Social*.

pi Social Realism.

jm Yes. It was a well-intentioned movement, but an extraliterary one. They thought that writing "engagée" books was going to help bring down the dictatorship, which was very naive. To begin with, because of the censorship, they had to write in code, romans à clef, which led to ludicrous results. Juan Benet, for instance, whom I regard as a literary master, was told by the censor that on a specific page in one of his novels he shouldn't use the word *thigh*.

pi Because it was considered obscene?

jm Yes, or too tempting. Another time, there was a scene with a woman sitting on a bed, naked. And they said, "This can't go in." So he decided the woman would be sitting on the bed, dressed, which to him actually seemed much more tempting than if she were naked.

pi Benet had to change it?

jm Yes, of course. There's an example in my own family. My mother was also a writer, though she didn't write much because she devoted herself more to her children. But she published an anthology titled *España como preocupación* (*Spain as a Preoccupation*), with the subtitle Literary Anthology. Her name was Dolores Franco—her surname, which is rather common, being the same as the dictator's. Dolores, or Lolita, in Spanish means literally *pain*, or *pains*. The censorship argued that *Spain as a Preoccupation*, plus Dolores Franco, meaning "pains Franco," wouldn't be accepted. Which was ludicrous.

pi She changed it?

jm She had to. Those were difficult times. It has often been said that Franco was dead long before he died, and that's true. The dictatorship was not as severe in the sixties or in the early seventies as it had been in the forties and fifties. And Spanish society was much more alive and progressive than the regime allowed. One of the few good things about my country is that people talk a lot, and it's difficult to keep people from talking. People live very much in the streets in Spain. You can't enforce censorship in cafés.

pi Let's take a look at your first novel. It was started when you were 17, finished when you were 18, and published at the age of 19. The plot is largely drawn from classic American movies. In At that time, you watched a lot of movies and you wrote, if I may say so, from existing artistic material.

jm Sure.

pi I think that's taking the "literary" approach a step further. You not only avoided the obvious social subject matter, you didn't even write about what you saw around you in Spain. Your first book seems an artifice in its own right.

jm I wrote my first novel, *Los dominios del lobo* (*The Domains of the Wolf*), from a feeling of total irresponsibility. I started writing my own things when I was 12, 13, and I know why I did it—mainly because I had finished all the adventure novels, musketeer novels, and Dumas that I was reading at the time. Then I found out I could write them myself. Of course it was just mimicry, but I really started writing in order to read more of what I liked. That first novel of mine still responds to that same spirit: it's a pastiche, it's parody and also a tribute to the golden age of American cinema in the 1930s and forties. It takes place in the United States, and the prose is completely different from how I write now. It's very quick, there are many many different stories and all of them have to do with cinema, and also with American literature. By then, I had read Faulkner and John O'Hara. When the book came out in 1971, Spanish critics said, "Well, this is a good novel in some respects, but why does this young writer talk about all that instead of his own environment?" Of course I'm happy that it was not autobiographical. If I had talked about the real Spain I am convinced I would hate that novel today. Afterwards I realized that I was undoubtedly talking about Spain, because American movies, for Spanish people my age, were among the few things that were not mediocre and sad. Don't forget, the dictatorship had turned

Spain into a mediocre and sad country. So it's perhaps not by accident that I first wrote a novel like this.

pi One could claim as much from the early translations you did, being immersed in the world of Laurence Sterne. You translated *Tristram Shandy* at the age of 25, along with a large number of other writers, from Conrad, Stevenson and Faulkner to Nabokov.

jm Some poetry, too: Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery.

pi Do all those writers and poets outside your own country form part of your literary ancestry?

jm Absolutely. People say that a translator is a privileged reader, because he reads very carefully. Well he is, but he's more than that. He is also a privileged writer because he rewrites every word of what may be a great work, as is the case with Laurence Sterne, or Joseph Conrad's *The Mirror of the Sea*. If you rewrite high literature in an acceptable way you've done a lot. Your instrument is more resilient than it was. You can say that you're capable of renouncing your own style, adopting someone else's, yet the wording is always yours. The common idea is that the translator is a slave to the original text. But that's not true at all in the sense that there is not one sentence in any language that allows just one translation. You always have to choose. Every single word in my Spanish translation of *Tristram Shandy* was thought of by me, was meditated on and chosen. In that sense I can say it is my best text. Because I wrote each and every word of it, and of course it is much better than anything I've written myself, originally.

pi Or, for that matter, anybody else these days.

jm I would certainly say so. But that's part of my literary education. Borges said that it was one of the big mysteries in the world. How is it possible, he said, that a text, having been translated, has lost everything it possessed, everything that made it possible—sounds, rhythm, alliterations, if it's poetry? How can it still be the same text? But it is. Only pedantic people, or specialists, scholars, would say they haven't read *Anna Karenina* because they never read it in Russian.

pi Your work has been widely translated. Into how many languages?

jm Twenty-nine by now. The last one is Hindi.

pi Hindi?

jm Yes, they're going to translate *All Souls*. I'm sure it will be much better in Hindi than in Spanish.

pi That success notwithstanding, you suffer constant attacks in Spain for your alleged lack of Spanishness.

jm And for other reasons.

pi Where does the story begin with the polemics surrounding your Spanishness?

jm I'm afraid it started in the very beginning, when I published my first novel. One of the things I didn't want to be was what they call a "real Spanish writer." In the 1980s, when my later books were

more successful than the earlier ones and started being translated into different languages, still many Italian publishers, surprisingly, turned my books down. They said they were "not Spanish enough." I asked myself, what do they mean by that? And I am afraid they expected Spanish literature to be like Lorca, or something resembling that, to include Gypsies, women with knives in their stockings, dressed in black, and a lot of passion and violence. That's Spanish folklore, for foreigners mainly. And I'm sorry to say that many painters, or even filmmakers, have exploited that side of Spanish folklore tremendously. Of course that kind of thing exists. But it's only a small part of Spanish life. Spain has also been a very normal country in many respects. The characters in my novels are ordinary people, similar to the ones you could find in Milan or Dublin, or in Paris. They belong to our middle class—modest, educated people. So my novels don't have bullfighting, no passionate women like Carmen. Lacking those ingredients of Spanishness, my books were said to sound like translations. Obviously to me that was praise, but they meant it as an insult. It's not that my literary background is foreign, not at all. I know the literature of my own country. But the Spanish novel, unlike Spanish poetry, is just not a great tradition. We do have *Don Quijote*, of course, which appeared in the early 17th century and is the origin of what we know as the modern novel form. But it seems as if the tradition that *Don Quijote* might have inaugurated didn't continue among Spanish writers, perhaps because of the exhaustion of the form brought about by Cervantes himself. The tradition was continued in the 18th century by English writers, then by German, Russian, and French writers. And you could say that the two great centuries of the novel form, the 18th and 19th centuries, didn't produce much significant work in Spain. When I pointed that out to my fellow countrymen it was taken as an insult. But it's the truth, and I am sorry. We didn't have our Herman Melville or Henry James. Being a translator myself, however, I don't think the language in which you write is that important.

pi Your best-selling novel, *A Heart So White*, has an amazing beginning. The reader is carried through an intense scene with a young woman shooting herself, and later on, spying and secrecy pervade the novel and carry the action along. At the same time, I think the book is a veritable meditation on our capacity to imagine, which brings me to a term you coined, *pensamiento literario*. Can you describe your attraction to that term, *literary thinking*?

jm Sometimes I am asked whether my novels are philosophical. I've always said no. To me, philosophy is a very different thing. What is true, though, is that in my books there is not only the action, the characters, the story and so forth; there is reflection as well, and often the action stops. The narrator then makes a series of considerations and meditations. There is a tradition within the novel form, almost forgotten now, which embodies what I call literary thinking or literary thought. It's a way of thinking which takes place only in literature—the things you never think of or hit upon unless you are writing fiction. Unlike philosophical thinking, which demands an argument without logical flaws and contradictions, literary thinking allows you to contradict yourself. A character within a book can say two totally contradictory things,

yet both can be true. Shakespeare does that all the time. You read Shakespeare and generally you understand everything easily. But when you stop and reread a bit, often you begin to ask, What's he saying? What is this? I give an example of this in my latest novel, or "false novel," as I have called it, *Dark Back of Time (Negra espalda del tiempo)*. It's the beginning of the famous monologue in *Othello*, in which Othello, before he kills Desdemona, says something like, "It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause. Let me not name it. You chased stars. It is the cause." You read that, you've listened to it a hundred times, you've seen it in films and generally you say, Okay. But then you stop and ask yourself, What's this? What does he mean? Which cause? What is the cause? You come upon things you apparently understood on first reading, but you haven't really—they are mysterious or even contradictory. That's literary thinking: something producing itself in flashes. It's less a form of knowledge than of recognition, at least in the kind of novel I like most, which would include Proust, Faulkner and Conrad. Reading them, you recognize things you didn't know you knew. And sometimes I try to create the same effect in my books.

pi We could tie the idea of recognition to a formal device in *A Heart So White*, namely, the recurring motifs and images, even phrases and words, which appear again and again, thus establishing a web of ideas and references. These recurrences literally haunt the book.

jm Yes, I guess that's become a feature of my writing. In fact, it is not exactly a repetition of sentences or images, it works more like musical motifs. I try to achieve what musicians do. There is a tune, or a theme. The first time you hear it, it is played just by the piano, then, a little later, you hear the same tune played with a slight variation, then played by the whole orchestra. And you recognize the motif, which is moving. My books have a system of echoes or resonances, to use musical terms, and I try to make each reappearance of those motifs—be it a sentence, or an image—slightly different from the previous one. Every new appearance illuminates the previous, the sentences work backwards, not only forwards. Things which seemed anecdotal and random the first time you read them take on a different significance when you encounter them the next time.

pi Your last novel, or "false novel," as you called it, which will come out in America sometime next year, takes up many of the characters and motifs from *All Souls*. That book, *Dark Back of Time*, however, is not a sequel in the ordinary sense of the word. What did you try to achieve when you embarked upon the strange project of writing a novel that's not really a novel?

jm To begin with, it's not really a novel in the sense that Javier Mariás, the person and writer, is the narrator of the book. Obviously, I'm not a fictional character. Let's say the narrator is someone with my own name, and some of the things I am telling are true, or all of them are true and presented as such: they happened. But it's not a memoir, it works more like *fiction*, as I am not the subject of the book. One of the reasons I wrote it is that I felt very free with the novel form. Not that my previous novels are traditional, but they still have what most novels are supposed to

have: a plot, a beginning, development, an ending. *Dark Back of Time* works a little like life itself, where you don't usually have events woven together so as to make sense. Here they are woven together in a different fashion, just by writing them down in a certain order they have taken on new meanings. This book is probably the one that owes the most to *Tristram Shandy*. I learned a lot from translating Sterne's novel, about how to use and shape time. In fact, time is all important in novels, much more so than in other art forms. In the novel, you can play with it, change it, make it go slower or faster, you can even make it stop altogether if you want. Both *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quijote* are erratic, digressive books playing against linear time.

pi Let's switch to the Spanish literary scene. It is common for writers in Spain to publish in newspapers and magazines, often on a regular basis. You are a regular columnist with *El País*, the largest and most respected Spanish newspaper, and also with a Sunday magazine that sells over four million copies every week. That seems a lot of work to me. And yet, I see a clear distinction between the opinionated, at times polemical author of essays and articles, and Javier Mariás the novelist. In my view, you keep the novels free from much of the subject matter that drives you to your journalistic writing.

jm I try to be coherent in what I do. Publishing articles has a long tradition among intellectuals in Spain, it's been fairly common, at least since the 19th century. Writing this type of article, I can voice my opinion as a citizen, talk about present problems, and sometimes I am found to be controversial. All of that is left out when I'm writing a novel, which is the way it should be. In fiction, I generally think my opinions about present-day problems or controversies are of no interest.

pi The distinction you make gets somewhat blurred when we look at how other writers handle it. What we have today, especially in Europe—less so in America—is a powerful connection between literature and moral attitude, with the moralistic fervor spilling over into poems and novels. What I'm driving at is that many people, writers and nonwriters, have some difficulty accepting art without a message, the humanitarian touch, what have you.

jm Well, I loathe that. I think it's one of the worst possible things to have intruded upon literature, and the arts in general in the 20th century. Add to that the desire to be original. You happen to be original or not. But during the 20th century, too many writers have wanted to be original as a premise, which is awful. The idea that literature should carry a message and strive to make us better human beings—I don't think literature has anything to do with that. One of the things that separates literature from the law is that judges only listen to facts, then find people guilty or not guilty. They don't get the whole story of what happened before, or how things came about, whereas in literature, you do see why things happened, regardless of their moral value. And when you are witness to something, well, it may not make a forgivable crime, but you realize how it came to happen, and maybe you understand its significance. That's what a novel should do, if it should do anything. ☺