

# “No pensar”, or Does the Contemporary Spanish Novel of Memory Really Want to Know?: *Tiempo de silencio*, *Corazón tan blanco*, *Soldados de Salamina* and Beyond

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The final silence described in Luis Martín Santos's contemporary classic, *Tiempo de silencio* (1961), is the silence of thought. Success for the failed medical researcher, Pedro, depends on the cessation of brain activity, numbing the pain of a necessary submission to a hot-handed executioner (“dame la vuelta que por este lado ya estoy tostado” [295]). Play the country doctor, hunt pheasant, set up the chess board, bide your time, marry a pretty village girl, multiply and replenish the Spanish earth. In a time of silence, Pedro has learned, “todo consiste en estar callado” (293). Listen only to the rhythmic “tracatracatraca” of the train (292). Let it carry you away. To think in the era of Franco, Pedro concludes, is folly.

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This time of silence came to an official end for Spain when Franco died in November of 1975. With the dictator gone, the plans and pains of four decades could at last be spoken. Political parties could be legalized, the marginalized and regionalized could be given voice, and truth could be restored. In the late 1970s and 1980s, *destapes*, *movidas*, and democracies followed, private memories becoming public histories, and dangerous ideologies transforming into absolute political majorities. Satisfying the cravings of a long-starved intellectual body, Spaniards devoured home-grown novels that gave voice to familiar local realities. These stories, “hechos en España,” surprised the pundits, crawling their way up best-seller lists during the 1980s. Spaniards read themselves, dressed themselves, and with the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar, watched the world watch them do so—and at last, they enjoyed it.

As Spain sped toward 1992, the magical year when Olympics, World Expos, museum openings, and the like would ceremonially confirm the state's arrival in the community of the West—that world of open, transparent, and boisterous democracy—it appeared that Spain's time of silence was, indeed, over. Around that time, Rosa Montero wrote, “Spain has successfully extricated itself from centuries of isolation and boarded the train of history” (315). It appeared that the locomotives of Spain's contemporary Pedros would be heading to noisier climes—and at a faster pace.

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But that same year of so much noise, the much anticipated 1992, another novel invited its readers to re-think the speed of Spanish change and especially the nature of the noise that accompanied it. “No he querido saber pero he sabido,” begins Javier Marías’s *Corazón tan blanco*, a novel about a mid-life discovery of a dark family secret (11). Translated by Margaret Jull Costa as “I did not want to know but I have since come to know,” the text in Spanish, set unusually in the present progressive, gives a more immediate and anxious feel to the question of knowledge at the heart of this novel (3). In a work that goes on to reveal a truth that finally never needed to be known, the value of knowledge is not only questioned, but so too the very process of its acquisition—that process, significantly, in which readers of the work are presently engaged. Beginning, “I have not wanted to know but I have known,” it presents itself to readers as an act that can still be forestalled. Why would he—or we—wish to know? What do we hope to gain? The strangely tensed invitation to (not) know is merely prelude to a narrative in which knowledge will prove dangerous, grotesque, paranoid, pornographic, even fatal.

The scene that unfolds following this opening statement presents a tragic, enigmatic suicide:

No he querido saber, pero he sabido que una de las niñas, cuando ya no era niña y no hacía mucho que había regresado de su viaje de bodas, entró en el cuarto de baño, se puso frente al espejo, se abrió la blusa, se quitó el sostén y se buscó el corazón con la punta de la pistola de su propio padre, que estaba en el comedor con parte de la familia y tres invitados. (11)

Marías’s stylized narration of the event underscores the horror of knowing as it meanders towards final truth. Before we have any idea what has happened we are told to fear what is coming (“no he querido saber pero he sabido que. . .”) and then, before it comes, given a brief, fragmented, and very subjective history of the victim of the story (“. . . una de las niñas, cuando ya no era niña. . .”). The first words of the story fall from the lips as seen through the eyes of a homodiegetic narrator. But quickly, knowing becomes an uncomfortable, shared activity. With the second sentence the narrator shifts focalization to the eyes of the girl’s father. A third sentence clarifies that we only know of *him* through the eyes of his guests who, despite the gruesome scene on the bathroom floor, fixate on their host’s digestive activities (“los que lo siguieron vieron cómo mientras descubría el cuerpo ensangrentado de su hija y se echaba las manos a la cabeza iba pasando el bocado de carne de un lado a otro de la boca. . .” [11]). The next several pages will reveal this group, in turn, as seen through the eyes of a family cook, then through the ears of an indifferent and perhaps diffident servant girl, and finally through the carefree and careless ignorance of a delivery boy (“Eché un vistazo fugaz a su izquierda, hacia donde estaba el grupo” [16]; “y una falda subida y manchada—unos muslos manchados—, pues desde su posición era cuanto de la hija caída se alcanzaba a ver” [14]). A terrible family tragedy, in order to be known, is driven through a series of looking glasses, each one casting the already bloody scene in increasingly esperpentic distortion: knowledge is of blood and fear; this filtered through images of chewed and later vomited meat; and then a white bra that moments before had covered the maternal and white and still firm breast; and of melted cake and seemingly self-emptying wine

glasses, and blood-soaked hand towels. Knowledge, then, is more grotesque, even absurd, than informative. The narrator, he who would not know, and his reader, end up knowing far too much without yet understanding that which is essential. Indeed, by the end of the chapter readers understand that so much melting cake, blasted breast, and chewed meat are mere preludes to a deeper knowledge still to come.

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From this horrible scene, the narrative downshifts to a slow meandering accumulation of information. Information, readers learn, is the narrator-protagonist's business. In his daily life, this narrator-who-would-not-know, is the quintessential post-silence Spaniard. Both he and his wife work as interpreters, a field he describes as dedicated above all to the production of noise. Representative of Spain's growing international importance, both spouses carry out a large part of their labor abroad, lending service at conferences and summits of global significance. The scenes the narrator paints of his work at the U.N. and other international fora underscore his role in noise production: interpreters he has learned are mere media for information transfer ("Los traductores e intérpretes traducimos e interpretamos continuamente, sin discriminación ni apenas descanso durante nuestros periodos laborales, las más de las veces sin que nadie sepa muy bien para qué se traduce ni para quién se interpreta" [74]). He and his colleagues listen and repeat, repeat and listen, remembering little to nothing of what passes through their ears, minds, and lips.

His on-the-job discoveries parallel his own extra-laboral life. The protagonist's marriage stems from inaccurate translation; the happiness of his wedding day is marred by a cryptic conversation with his father; and misunderstood looks and the half-heard words of others invite the couple's first moment of marital tension. The protagonist's gradual discovery of the truth concerning his father's past is similarly a result of purportedly significant events whose actual significance neither the narrator nor readers ever fully grasp; the narration moves forward driven by such events as the evening presence outside his window of an uninvited acquaintance; the existence of a would-be lover that a friend meets through the *New York Times* personals; or the memory of his father's work to salvage a threatened Velazquez from the flames of a madman in the Prado. The narrator's obsessive recounting of these events, which often interrupts completely unrelated narrations, lends these events a form of significance without any final substance to sustain them. Otherwise anodyne phrases work similarly throughout the novel: "Yo la respaldo", "nariz, ojo y boca", or "eres mío. . .yo te mato," and others—all phrases the narrator picks up through the various recounted events of the novel—repeatedly find their way back into his narration. Again, the narrator's recounting of these events, images, and phrases lends to them an impression of deep meaning. To be sure, it is the very nature of language that with each reiteration these anodyne phrases acquire a poetic weight stemming from their reappearance in various and varied contexts that grows their potential significance exponentially. Readers, however, can never be certain what these phrases—like the grotesque wads of chewed meat and melted cake of the novel's first chapter—mean. With each repetition we stare all the harder and with each refocused gaze we believe ourselves on the cusp of some great reward. Sound knowledge, however, repeatedly eludes the reader.

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Eventually, the narrator does discover the point to which so many images, phrases, sights, and thoughts have led. In the novel's climactic scene, the narrator, hidden away in a back room, overhears a conversation wherein he discovers the truth about his father: that for love of a woman, he has murdered; that for the desire to express that love, he has provoked suicide; and that for the need to continue loving, he has instilled fear. One would expect such a revelation to overwhelm the narrator. And yet, by the time he discovers these secrets, this protagonist of the information society understands their effects to be so temporally distant that they really hardly matter, have perhaps even ceased to exist:

Como aquella primera mujer a la que he bautizado Gloria y que parece no haber existido o no haber existido mucho, sólo para su casamentera madre, una suegra, que ya habrá muerto desolada en Cuba, viuda y sin hija, se la tragó la serpiente. . . Dejará de existir del todo muy pronto. . . cuando a Ranz le llegue la hora y Luisa y yo no seamos capaces de recordar más. (367-68)

Indeed, he wonders at their very existence:

A veces tengo la sensación de que nada de lo que sucede sucede, de que todo ocurrió y a la vez no ha ocurrido. . . A veces tengo la sensación de que lo que se da es idéntico a lo que no se da, lo que descartamos o dejamos pasar idéntico a lo que tomamos y asimos, lo que experimentamos idéntico a lo que no probamos. . Jamás hay conjunto, o acaso es que nunca hubo nada. (368-69)

The victims have long since slept as have those who cared for them or might even have known in order to care.

Tellingly, the denouement, following such a startling revelation, is understated. The narrator reflects on so much knowledge, as his wife, the interlocutor who eventually pruned the truth from his father, prims herself for an evening out. From the other room, the narrator listens to his wife's distracted humming: "Luisa tararea a veces en el cuarto de baño, mientras yo la miro arreglarse apoyado en el quicio de una puerta" (377). She emits not to be "escuchado ni menos aún interpretado ni traducido" but sings a, "tarareo insignificante sin voluntad ni destinatario que se oye y se aprende y ya no se olvida" (377). While knowledge in the contemporary Spain inhabited by and represented in the narrator and his wife is now readily—and abundantly—available (producing noise that will be learned and never again forgotten), its utility is limited: "Poco importa, todo es pasado y no ha sucedido y además no se sabe" (374).

Reflecting on his newfound knowledge, the narrator ponders the value of so much telling, wondering if perhaps there never was anything to tell, if everything ultimately becomes the same over time, or, in short, if anything productive has come from so much noise:

Volcamos toda nuestra inteligencia y nuestros sentidos y nuestro afán en la tarea de discernir lo que será nivelado, o ya lo está, y por eso estamos llenos de arrepentimientos y de ocasiones perdidas, de confirmaciones y reafirmaciones y ocasiones aprovechadas, cuando lo cierto es que nada se afirma y todo se va perdiendo. O acaso es que nunca hubo nada. (44)

So much knowledge is reduced ultimately to a “tarareo insignificante,” like Pedro lulling himself into numbness with the “tracatracatrac” of the rural-bound train. What is the ultimate difference, the novel asks, between this contemporary, cosmopolitan, global time of noise, and that earlier time of silence? Certainly, we now may know—of blasted breasts, chewed meat, melting cake, naked and crippled limbs, of smothered and charred bodies, and of tears that will never again go away—but why and at what cost?

*Corazón tan blanco* asked these questions at the beginning of a sea-change in contemporary Spanish narrative. One of the clearest indications of this change was the return of the past in national letters. Hinted at earlier with the critical and popular successes of Luis Landero's *Juegos de la edad tardía* (1989), and Antonio Muñoz Molina's *Beatus Ille* (1985) and *El jinete polaco* (1991), Spanish novels in the 1990s began rummaging about in the disremembered spaces and times of things past—specifically, its civil war and the decades of authoritarian rule that followed. The triumph of democratic Spain on the world stage in the 1980s (beginning with the failed coup of 23-F, subsequent military reforms, the election and then reelection of a previously anathema socialist government, Spain's admission into NATO and the European Economic Community, and a temporary cooling of nationalist-related violence) relieved the pressures that had led to the pact of “olvido,” or “desememoria,” that had shaped the post-Franco culture of *destapes*, *pasotismo*, and *movidas*. In the 1990s the triumph of global book-publishing plus the return of Spain's conservatives to political majority at mid-decade gave economic and political incentive to authors to re-engage the national past. As the decade progressed, Felix Azúa (*Cambio de bandera*), Rafael Chirbes (*La larga marcha*), Rosa Montero (*La hija del Caníbal*), Isaac Montero (*Ladrón de lunas*), and Antonio Soler (*El nombre que ahora digo*) joined a conversation that would finally explode into popular consciousness with the surprise mass market triumph in 2001 of Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina*. The next years saw more reflections on war, dictatorship, and transition from Manuel Longanares (*Romanticismo*), Belén Gopeguí (*Lo real*), Isaac Rosa (*El vano ayer*), Suso de Toro (*Hombre sin nombre*), Manuel Rivas (*Los libros arden mal*), Ignacio Martínez de Pisón (*El tiempo de las mujeres, Dientes de leche*), Bernardo Atxaga (*El hijo del acordeonista*), Dulce Chacón (*La voz dormida*), Carme Riera (*La mitad del alma*) Almudena Grandes (*El corazón helado*), and the aforementioned Azúa (*Momentos decisivos*), Muñoz Molina (*La noche de los tiempos*), and Chirbes (*La caída de Madrid, Los viejos amigos*, and *Crematorio*). The sense of market saturation is marked in 2007 with the publication of Isaac Rosa's *¡Otra maldita novela sobre la guerra civil!* In the decade 2000-09 remembering became not simply a trend but *the* trend; Jo Labanyi writes: “memory has become an industry generating public interest for economic ends” (119). One writes a novel of the Spanish civil war, therefore one is a Spanish novelist—or at least a remunerated one.

Again, such an outpouring suggests the end of Spain's "time of silence." Nevertheless, in light of Marías's message in *Corazón tan blanco*, the efficacy and value of various forms of memory recovery need to be reconsidered across a wide range of Spanish narrative. *Soldados de Salamina*, which because of its unexpected popularity has become the most visible and arguably most representative of these novels, is an appropriate place to begin. With its metafictional play and historiographical reflections—not to mention its lack of car chases, sex, drugs, rock and roll, or even decent romance—Cercas's novel was not written with the masses in mind and yet eventually attracted a wide and diverse readership. The single-minded goal of protagonist, narrator, and author—all wrapped into a single persona named Javier Cercas—was to uncover the truth about an episode in Spain's civil war and, in turn, to understand a series of greater truths about the Spanish nation if not human nature in general. Hence, the surprising success of the novel would once again suggest that while the protagonist of Marías's *Corazón tan blanco* may not have wanted to know, Spanish readers in general did. That the popular success of the novel coincided chronologically with the first exhumation of civil war graves in Spain (2001)—an event that served as catalyst for the "Ley de la Memoria Histórica"—gives the novel greater weight as a register of, if not an active agent in, a decade that by appearance would seem the very opposite of Franco's time of silence.

To be sure, Cercas's novel digs into Spain's civil war past as few earlier novels had dared. It takes seriously the motivation of soldiers and ideologues on both sides of the conflict. It gives balanced accounts of their overlapping experiences and offers these accounts both from a variety of perspectives and with unusual transparency, the narrator taking care, for example, to signal when he quotes, when he summarizes, and when he speculates. Most importantly, *Soldados* withholds judgement. While acknowledging injustice and atrocity, neither its Republican nor Nationalist characters read as overly heroic nor demonic. Perhaps what all have in common is a quiet sense of disillusionment, a sense of the futility of their respective enterprises, and a kind of childlike wonder at the post-conflict peace they share. In sum, *Soldados* deserves credit for providing the Spanish reading public with a fresh take on a war that in so many previous novels seemed to be yet ongoing.

This original content is shaped, in turn, by a narrative form that "wants to know." That is, Cercas's self-named protagonist-narrator is himself the very model of civil-war curiosity. Unlike Pedro at the end of *Tiempo de silencio* or *Corazón tan blanco*'s reluctant narrator, Javier Cercas (protagonist, narrator, and finally author) appears to want to know so badly that he cannot keep quiet about it. The first-person narrator is so thrilled by his search (working with "un empuje y una constancia que ignoraba que poseía" [143]) that he narrates not only what he finds but recounts with similar detail the often belabored process of finding it. Cercas shares with his readers the experience of knowledge discovery, from the earliest seeds stimulating first questions to the final process of connecting dots and beyond. It is as if *Soldados* were not only offering, but promoting, a model for the obsessive search of the past—that which would transform itself over the next few years into Labanyi's "industry."

To be sure, the enterprise clearly bore specific “noise-making” fruit. In addition to the atypical representation of a common shared humanity during Spain’s great twentieth century conflict, the success of the novel resurrected the literary legacy of Falangist intellectual Rafael Sánchez Mazas, who, as Cercas’s narrator notes in the early pages of the novel, had, at the time of writing, nearly disappeared from cultural memory. The renewed interest in Sánchez Mazas, paved the way, in turn, for a more widespread rediscovery of many forgotten (because previously politically incorrect) falangist authors, thereby giving balance to the available civil war legacy on contemporary Spanish bookshelves. These rediscoveries coincide chronologically with the premier of the popular TVE drama, “Cuéntame como pasó” and the widely discussed political intrigues surrounding the passage of Spain’s “Ley de Memoria Histórica.” In sum, at first glance, evidence suggests that *Soldados de Salamina* not only registers, but simultaneously records, encourages, and even facilitates among contemporary Spanish readers a popular desire to know, a final end to silence.

Nevertheless, critics have been more cautious in their praise of *Soldados*. Some, like Ana Luengo, find the work, for all its intellectual trappings, lacking in real political teeth: *Soldados*, she argues, is a novel meant only to be “una historia amena . . . de unos héroes puros que puedan servir como monumento conmemorativo, para ensalzar a determinados combatientes sin ninguna relectura política crítica” (270). In defense of Cercas, Robert Spires grants him a privileged place among a “grupo ético” of Spanish authors who, Spires argues, counterbalance the nihilism of Generación X writers like Ray Loriga and José Ángel Mañas who, at least at the time of the *Soldados* triumph, were more popular with Spanish readers. For Spires, the power of Cercas’s novel comes in its mixture of historical detail with historiographic thinking, a combination that challenges readers to accompany the author-narrator-protagonist on his exploration of a shared past. Samuel Amago concurs, describing *Soldados* as an exercise whereby the narrator works “to come to terms with the complexities of historiography and approach a new understanding of the larger importance of narrative to the human experience” (144). Jorge Saval praises Cercas for “lying about the story, in terms of its particularities, in order to tell the truth in terms of its essence” (70). David Richter explains the ethical relationship between author, novel, and reader, arguing that in blurring the traditional boundaries between fiction and history, the novel encourages its readers to reflect on the processes by which they themselves supposedly recover memory (285).

The question may rest then, on how ultimately effective this blurring of fiction and history is. Alexis Grohmann, while recognizing the blurring, places it in the context of other similar narrative projects. In doing so she concludes that *Soldados* remains “una novela más o menos tradicional” (318). The appearance of historiographic exploration is just that—an appearance, a veneer borrowed from more intellectually and artistically courageous novels that Cercas employs to give his work a bit more of a political sheen (318). Grohmann’s contrasting example is the novel *Negra espalda del tiempo*, the work of no less than Javier Marías, author of *Corazón tan blanco*. Both *Negra espalda* and *Soldados de Salamina*, she points out, purport to be honest explorations of reality: they both draw explicit attention to the process of their writing, to the intellectual and physical wanderings of their author-narrator-protagonists in piecing together the information that

takes form before readers' eyes as the novel-in-hand; and they both provide details that challenge readers' ability to distinguish between the fictional and factual aspects of their accounts. By looking carefully at the structures of the two works, Grohmann shows, however, that Mariás's wrestle with reality is much more honest. For Grohman, the truly rambling form of *Negra espalda* when compared to the carefully planned structure of *Soldados* belies in the latter an a priori plan. Cercas's novel knows what it wants to know, whereas *Negra espalda* truly explores.

Grohmann's analysis returns us to the question of knowing. Does *Soldados de Salamina* really want to know? Depending on the answer to this first question, we must then ask what the novel's success tells us about the supposed time of knowledge, information, or noise that Spanish readers and citizens currently inhabit. A careful reading of Cercas's novel indicates that the answer to the first question—does *Soldados* really want to know?—is “no.” To be sure, *Soldados* purports to be about the discovery of knowledge. The protagonist's obsession leads him to the heart of the very “why” and “how” of Spain's civil war. Rafael Sánchez Mazas, the novel repeatedly informs its reader, was the man who caused the war (“y en los años treinta poca gente empenó tanta inteligencia, tanto esfuerzo y tanto talento como él en conseguir que en España estallara una guerra” [83; see also 107, 143, 192]). He was the dreamer, the one who brought fascism to Spain, who most eloquently promoted it. He was at the heart of that “pelotón de soldados” who, the falangists liked to boast, would one day end save civilization (86, 136, 143).

Sánchez Mazas's principal ideological opposition during that handful of days in the forest, Pere Figueras, neatly embodies the contrasting ideals of Republican thought. A humble, autodidact, Figueras spends the few days he shares with Sánchez Mazas engaged in deep conversation that if not intellectual—considering the different backgrounds of the two men—must at least turn on the ideas that until this point had so motivated them.

Of course, it “must,” because readers are never actually told the content of their conversation. While the novel tells us plenty of Sánchez Mazas's official ideas, once the conflagration that he purportedly begins gets underway, his thoughts remain hidden; Cercas can only speculate (“Es probable que para entonces ya no creyera nada” [138]; “Quizá no era otra cosa que un superviviente” [139]). So when he and Pere talk, we imagine something important is being said. But what is actually said remains a mystery (“Nunca supo de qué hablaban” [118]). Other than one occasion in which Sánchez Mazas recounts the story of his escape—a story already told several times in the novel—readers have only silence.

What we do know, however, is that following these few shared days in the forest, neither the previously ideological Figueras nor the great intellectual mastermind of Falangist doctrine, Sánchez Mazas, ever again engage in serious political activity. Figueras returns to his rural village to farm the land. Sánchez Mazas, the great intellectual engine of the Falange, in even greater contrast, dies in near oblivion, writing decidedly apolitical fiction (132-40). A street, Cercas dryly remarks, is named after him.



And so it is that by the end of the novel's second section, the eponymous "Soldados de Salamina," we've actually learned nothing of what the novel purportedly sets out to discover. This second section, written in a style that approximates historical writing—the most widely accepted vehicle in our current moment for laying bare the hidden truths of times past—finally reveals nothing. Pere Figueras moves on. Sánchez Mazas is a street name. Nothing more.

But the novel is not yet over, and its third and final section appears at last to provide some answers. If we can't know what motivated the various bands of heroes to kill and be killed, perhaps we can know what motivated another hero to refrain from such barbarism. As part of an assignment for his local newspaper to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the end of civil war conflict, the narrator-protagonist begins the novel seeking a literary/historical equivalent to Antonio Machado. But as his girlfriend of more plebian tastes, Conchi, likes to remind him, what he really needs is a García Lorca, or in other words, a hero.

In Antoni Miralles, long after writing that original article, he at last finds his fantasmal hero. Miralles, now living out his old age in a French retirement home, spent the prime of his youth defending the Republic in nearly every major battle of the Spanish civil war and then fighting for the broader cause of democracy, freedom, and ultimately—with the revelation of the Nazi Holocaust—moral good, across Africa and Europe in some of the most extraordinary campaigns of WWII. A badly scarred dead man walking, Miralles makes a perfect contemporary hero: both national and international, ideologically-driven and yet humanistic in his living, reluctant to share and yet ultimately holding the key to understanding. This ideal hero, Cercas's narrator-protagonist happily discovers, is the key to his story. Miralles alone can explain the episode of reconciliation, of unexpected and inexplicable forgiveness between a hardened soldier and the man he *knows* to be the intellectual force behind the last three years of carnage. This is the episode that might allow we readers to understand, reconcile, and move on ourselves. If we cannot know what the soldiers in the forest thought in their moment of spoken reconciliation, at least we can know what the soldier of the prison thought in his moment of silent pardon. And if we can know this, perhaps we can understand the civil war, draw from it after all these years some deeper and redeeming meaning.

Miralles's answer to this question—what was he thinking with his escaped prisoner caught helpless in the crosshairs—is both perfect and perfectly telling. "Nada," he responds when Cercas's narrator-protagonist insists on an answer. What passed through that soldier's mind as he stood there, gun drawn on his prey, pressed by his military superior to reveal his discovery? "Nada," insists Miralles.

The great hero, the one who solves the problem of Cercas's so far hero-less story, offers nothing. One would think that such an answer would not prove any kind of solution at all. And yet, the protagonist, the narrator, and the author intuit that such is enough.

Indeed, readers—specifically the popular reader that made Cercas’s novel into a surprise best seller—apparently, decided that such an answer was not only enough but precisely *the* answer they wanted. Perhaps it was the only answer they could accept.

The hero, Miralles, who fought for everything while thinking nothing is the perfect twenty-first century would-be romantic global cypher: he appears to embody past beauty, but confesses to actually revel in a present state of mindless excess. Slowly rotting away in his rest home he celebrates cheap television and imaginary sexual exploits (184). Comfort is what ultimately matters to him, though such opinions can be forgiven since his past is, of course, exemplary (184). And though the scope of his activities was extraordinary, saving among other things civilization, he takes credit for none of it, distributing instead honor freely among a handful of forgotten youth, who in their anonymity function as perfect cyphers for any potential ideological or biological progenitor readers might like to imagine. Miralles is easy, convenient, heroic, and, perhaps most importantly, demands nothing of us.

This last point is truer than we originally think if we briefly step back from the text to consider that this man who thought nothing is himself very likely nothing; that is, he does not actually exist. Miralles, we recall, only appears following a conversation wherein fellow writer Roberto Bolaño advises Cercas, frustrated at his failure to locate a hero for his story, to invent himself one. Just a moment later, the name of Miralles conveniently crops up in Bolaños’s conversation with Cercas. If we readers would be suspicious, we are quickly assuaged by Bolaño’s recollection of Miralles dancing one night outside his camper to an old pasodoble. The anecdote encourages the protagonist and his readers to connect Miralles with the soldier who forgave, a soldier who danced alone in the rain to “Suspiros de España” only hours before he was to think “nothing” as he lowered his gun from his Falangist target.

The connection, however, is all smoke and mirrors. If it is not enough that the song to which he dances, “Suspiros de España,” is the most evident cultural light motif of the novel—yet another iteration of a soundtrack that runs through readers’ heads from the novel’s first pages—the connection that the protagonist establishes between the soldier and Miralles through the song is completely imagined: Bolaño never actually says that Miralles danced to “Suspiros” outside his camper. Bolaño only recalls “en la música, un pasodoble muy triste y muy antiguo. . . que muchas veces le había oído tararear entre dientes a Miralles” (162). Cercas adds in fact a disclaimer: “o eso es lo que entonces le pareció a Bolaño” (162). Nowhere does Bolaño identify the song as the otherwise ubiquitous “Suspiros.” But it is a connection too perfect, too infused with the romanticism with which we might hope to uncover past secrets, to resist.

Ironically, on the novel’s final page, as the story becomes its own novel-in-process, all this nothing-ness (nothing in the conversation between the two forest thinkers; nothing in the mind of the pardoning executioner; nothing to the supposed reality of the latter) starts to feel not only like something, but indeed like the perfect answer to all those questions about who and how and why regarding the civil war and Franco and the rest:

Allí vi de golpe mi libro, el libro que desde hacía años venía persiguiendo, lo vi entero, acabado, desde el principio hasta el final, desde la primera hasta la última línea, allí supe que, aunque en ningún lugar de ninguna ciudad de ninguna mierda de país fuera a haber nunca una calle que llevara el nombre de Miralles, mientras yo contase su historia Miralles seguía de algún modo viviendo y seguirían viviendo también, siempre que yo hablase de ellos, los hermanos García Segués—Joan y Lela—y Miquel Cardos y Gabi Baldrich y Pipo Canal y el Gordo Odena y Santi Brugada y Jordi Gudayol, seguirán viviendo aunque llevaran muchos años muertos . . . Vi mi libro entero y verdadero, mi relato real completo, y supe que ya sólo tenía que escribirlo, pasarlo a limpio, porque estaba en mi cabeza desde el principio (<<Fue en el verano de 1994, hace ahora más de seis años, cuando oí hablar por primera vez del fusilamiento de Rafael Sánchez Mazas>>) hasta el final, un final en el que un viejo periodista fracasado y feliz fuma y bebe whisky en un vagón restaurante de un tren nocturno que viaja por la campiña francesa entre gente que cena y es feliz y camareros con pajarita negra, mientras piensa en un hombre acabado que tuvo el coraje y el instinto de la virtud y por eso no se equivocó nunca o no se equivocó en el único momento en que de veras importaba no equivocarse, piensa en un hombre que fue limpio y valiente y puro en lo puro y en el libro hipotético que lo resucitará cuando esté muerto. (208-09)

Cercas achieves the perfect ending even as he exposes its artifice. By acknowledging the significant role he plays in the story of this handful of unlikely heroes, he turns himself into the final and most significant member of the bunch. His honesty, wrapped up in the poetry of the moment, is disarming. We are almost forced to agree with him that he has indeed written into being the perfect hero. The writing-in-process technique Cercas employs here doubles the impact; we readers become fellow-travellers in this hero-making journey. We hold our breathe—and suspend our collective sense of disbelief—for a few final moments as Cercas finishes off what has suddenly become the perfect narrative. Indeed, in suspending disbelief, are we not co-authors of this significant moment of overcoming? After all, it requires little fact-checking to bring down Cercas's house of cards. But we would rather enjoy the truth of beauty than of fact.

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In conclusion, what the mass reading public consumed when they read and praised *Soldados de Salamina* was no deep exploration of Spanish history or of the historiographic issues that would surround a legitimate enterprise of memory recuperation. Rather, they consumed a fiction about fiction, about heroes who thought nothing and who recognized in each other an ultimate nothingness and so who spent sleepless nights saying nothing. Civilization is not finally saved by a falangist slogan, a socialist ideal, or a “pelotón de hombres valientes.” What saved it then—for Sánchez Mazas, for Pere Figueras, and for Miralles—and what saves it now—for the readers—is the intuition that here there is nothing, even nobody: “Aquí no hay nadie.” And therefore there is everyone and anyone who we can imagine fitting into what is at long last a palatable civil-war narrative.



the second, narrating the protagonist's fall for a beautiful younger woman, equates the process of memory recovery with the reckless abandon displayed by naive fifteen-year olds feeling the first tugs of adolescent desire. Not a felicitous comparison for over-anxious grave-diggers.

The conclusions are similar in novels that focus on contemporary Spanish social dynamics as they play themselves out in the shadow of the past. Rafael Chirbes's critically acclaimed oeuvre spanning from *La larga marcha* (1996) to *Crematorio* (2007) takes its readers from early postwar optimism to late Franco political idealism and finally to contemporary postmodern malaise. Over the course of four novels, former youthful idealists, once writing, painting, designing, and marching in the name of a better Spain, now drown their regrets in drink, drugs, and, if necessary, murder. Most of their money is a consequence of real estate speculation—an activity that evolves seamlessly with national political and economic transformations. Democracy as much as dictatorship has silenced Chirbes's handful of would-have-been activists. Belén Gopeguí's *La conquista del aire* (1998) features similarly disheartened protagonists ultimately unable to resist the seductions of postmodern capital. Her 2001 novel *Lo real* is a study in the amoral, contrived, and false life of a young man who knew too soon the truth of Franco-era hypocrisy. These novels serve as sober confirmation that the nihilistic sex-drugs-and-rock-and-roll novels of the Generación X, for all the silly market bluster that surrounded them, were perhaps a more accurate reflection—if unethical (per Spire)—of political culture in Spain today than their coetaneous novels of memory recovery. Too many Spaniards excavating graves today may not be digging from a proper angle.

Finally, if we turn back to that first identification of a “time of silence” in Martín Santos's novel and survey forward through a provisional canon of the Spanish novel, we find work after work deconstructing notions of historical understanding, not to mention pretensions of knowing the truth about some ideologically favorable Spanish past. Juan Goytisolo's so-called “trilogy of treason,” especially its central work, *Don Julián* reads as a first discovery, post-Martín Santos, that the time of silence has given way to not so much a time of information as one of inescapable noise. Its protagonist, while beginning his day cleverly assaulting official Spanish history through its literary works, soon finds himself so engulfed in cultural discourse that any and every attack on the despised madre patria ends up doubling back on itself. History in a rapidly postmodernizing world is too much. Similar stories unfold in Eduardo Mendoza's *La verdad sobre el caso Savolta* (1975), Carmen Martín Gaité's *El cuarto de atrás* (1977), and Antonio Muñoz Molina's *Beltenebros* (1989). Each of these works play with the Spanish past but their mode of engagement would qualify them much more as works of historiographic metafiction than memory recovery, let alone historical fiction. Their status as contemporary classics, indeed, rests upon their greater interest in Nietzschean/Foucauldian genealogy than in traditional Von Rankean historical explorations of the past. Their self-conscious excavation of the dynamics of power and knowledge that have shaped and forever complicated twentieth century Spanish history should have disabused Spanish readers of simplistic political games of truth recovery.

In this light, the current wave of civil war novels should be read, again, in the same light as the over-the-top boom of interest in youth writers and especially their pose as Gen Xers. Both phenomenon, as well as the triumph of the “smart” best sellers of Arturo Pérez-Reverte and Carlos Ruiz Safón, coincide with the tremendous growth of the Spanish book industry in the early 1990s. Memory recovery through culture, all too often, really belongs in the same shopping cart as literary prizes, superstar authors, and media superstores.

To conclude, the Spanish novels we have most read, studied, and shared with our students over time, have long warned, through the stories they tell and their manner of telling, against the very culture that some are reading as a new significant shift in the direction of the Spanish novel and a subsequent boon to Spanish political culture. The truth about the Spanish novel—at least those that time and our own publications have validated—is less exciting, but perhaps more heartening for those interested in breaking out of the provincialism that has long plagued the field. It is that the heart of a contemporary canon, from Martín Santos to Marías is really right in line with broader trends in what has been variously called “world literature” or “the world republic of letters.” For all the apparent interest in local politics, what really interests the best of Spanish narrative are broader questions of genealogies and post-histories which do little to advance the manichean politics of setting the record straight and righting past wrongs.

Novelist Isaac Rosa warns in the final lines of his own novel of remembrance, *Otra maldita novela sobre la guerra civil española*:

Y a todo esto, ¿qué queda de esa mala memoria contra la que se alzaban las armas de la literatura? ¿Y qué queda de las víctimas? ¿Y de la guerra? ¿Qué queda de las intenciones vindicativas del autor? Nos tememos que, una vez más, la guerra, la memoria, las víctimas, se convierten en pretexto narrativo, y lo que se pretendía una novela revulsiva se conforma con una historia entretenida, un ejercicio de estilo, una convencional trama de autoconocimiento y, por supuesto, de amor. . . . Novelas como ésta pueden hacer más daño que bien en la construcción del discurso sobre el pasado, por muy buenas intenciones que se declaren. (444)

That the novel of memory may actually damage the project of memory recuperation may be stretching the case. What appears to be clear, however, is that we can hope for few solutions for a better world or a better Spain through the average Spanish civil war novel. It doesn't want to know. It is not sure it can know. And it shows little confidence in its reader's desire to know. For all the noise, silence, suggest key contemporary Spanish novels, may be as golden to postmodern democracy as to postwar dictatorship.

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