

FACTUAL FICTIONS: SPAIN AND THE POLITICS OF FAITH
VERSUS NARRATIVES OF INCERTITUDE

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The alliteration at the beginning of my title is designed to underscore not only what some would consider an oxymoron, but the multiple paradoxes inherent in the relationship between faith and documentation, fact and fiction, truth and illusion, past and present, objectivity and subjectivity. Although existing since the beginning of the spoken and written word, the current expression of this type of incongruity challenges the security of conventional views of reality. It invites us to consider the possibility that faith can be used to subvert the existence of documented evidence, that facts are merely verbal representations that masquerade as reality, that truth is relative to context and offers only an illusion of absolutism, that the present actually defines the past, and that all narrative is subjective since the narrator's position cannot be detached from the world about which he or she is narrating. Perhaps literature serves best to showcase these somewhat radical departures from accepted wisdom, and stories that authors write about themselves have surged to the forefront as the favored mode of expression for these latest readings of reality¹. Whether consciously or intuitively, many Span-

¹ When these concepts are discussed and debated within the literary work itself many label the text meta-fiction, theater, poetry, or film as the case may be. But the current autobiographical brand of expression is quite different from the metafictional examples prevailing in the period of the 1960s-1970s. Then the Latin roots linking author and authority were underscored and the reader was offered the fantasy that he or she was witnessing, or even participating in, the author's process of creating

ish writers rely on the widely accepted premise that all autobiography is to one degree or another fictional and all fiction to one degree or another autobiographical as a strategy to project their non-conformist views. They exploit the inherent contradiction of this literary mode as a strategy to express the unconventional—and politically incorrect—concepts noted above. I propose to speculate on how this Spanish narrative strategy emerging just before and after the millennium relates to current and recent sociopolitical circumstances, specifically to George W. Bush on the one hand, and José María Aznar on the other, and their respective political administrations.

An amplification and documentation of the concepts noted above may be in order, and the philosopher Gianni Vattimo serves as a useful theoretical point of departure. According to Jon R. Snyder in his introduction to *The End of Modernity*, Vattimo argues that truth cannot be appropriated and given absolute form since it is an event «constantly being reinterpreted, rewritten, and remade» (xx). In another essay Vattimo himself insists that «there are no facts, only interpretations; and this too is an interpretation» (*Beyond Interpretation* 12)².

Vattimo's implication that what we call reality is really representation is echoed by many others. In a Paris lecture delivered by Jorge Luis Borges, he stated that his father once told him that every time he remembered something he was really remembering the last time

the text at hand. The latest versions or revisions, on the other hand, tend to de-authorize the creator; the authors question their own jurisdiction, the degree to which they can claim to have accurately authored even their own life story, let alone someone else's. In short, as opposed to the previous group in which the creative process itself was the focus, the current versions utilize the metafictional mode to confuse even further the distinction between reality and illusion, candor and deception. Finally, I will be arguing that these de-authorized autobiographies can be considered a parody of or diatribe against those current politicians who claim to have privy to absolute truth, and insist that their decisions are divinely inspired to save civilization from diabolical forces.

² I think it should be noted that, at least as I read Vattimo and the others whose ideas I will be examining here, they do not deny the reality of objects and events, they merely question the connections drawn between them and the human subject. Those connections, they insist, are always interpretations, not reality itself. By way of an example that I hope is not too simplistic: if two people see a book in a room, the book is real but its human meaning may be different for each observer. Even if they reach an agreement upon the significance, the process of reaching agreement is real, but the agreed-upon explanation cannot be considered definitive. It is merely another interpretation.

he remembered the same thing; he was remembering his last memory of the thing in question. Jorge Luis Borges then added: «Intento no pensar en cosas pasadas porque si lo hago, sé que lo estoy haciendo sobre recuerdos, no sobre las primeras imágenes»³. By recounting the story about his father, Borges seemed to be saying that we transform all referents into language, and are left with the linguistic expression as the only link to reality⁴. When we read or hear about history, we are not witnessing a resurrection of the past, but receiving someone's interpretation of what happened. Or in the words of N. Katherine Hayles, «what we see is always and only a representation, never reality itself» (*Chaos* 224). Perhaps all this is what Vattimo had in mind when he claimed that in a postmodern world no longer able to distinguish in definitive terms between fact and fiction, our only access to truth is «as an experience of art» (*Modernity* xxvii). Since the essence of all art is to create experiences for the reader/spectator, Vattimo seems to imply that truth is feeling or sensation rather than a reified concept.

Linda Hutcheon, as if accepting the baton passed on by Vattimo, focuses on art as the key to the reality/representation relationship. First she addresses the issue of what was: «Knowing the past becomes a question of representing, that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording» (74). She then goes on to explain: «The past really did exist, but we can only know it today through its textual traces, its often complex and indirect representations in the present: documents, archives, but also photographs, paintings, architecture, films, and literature» (78). By placing the emphasis on artistic text rather than linguistic sign, she reinforces Vattimo's thesis that humans cannot «know» reality, they can only experience it, an experience that occurs most obviously in art. What often passes for reality in the form of historical document, political

³ Enrique Vila-Matas, the author of the novel I will be analyzing in this essay, attended the lecture and offers this anecdote in his autobiographical work, *París no se acaba nunca* (147-48).

⁴ To exemplify the power of language over our being, it may be useful to consider the effects of aphasia on stroke victims. The patients not only lose their speech, but often the ability to reason, or even to dream. They must relearn language in order to regain these powers. Even those who fail to speak again because of physical or psychological damage, in most cases once they regain basic linguistic principles they are also able to reason and dream again. Math, technical, and painting skills are generally unaffected for these people since these capacities are controlled by another section of the brain (Sacks 46-53).

pronouncement, or scriptural passage is merely a represented interpretation.

Not only interpretations but social norms are in constant flux, and as a result our understanding of what is real is subject to almost constant change. Indeed, what we now consider unreal may constitute the reality of the future. In one of the more dramatic examples of that possibility, Hayles and Nicholas Gessler quote Simon Penny who, on addressing the impact of the new cybernetic technology, confidently and somewhat disturbingly predicts: «Our children will not call it virtual reality. They will call it reality» (482).

The instability of reality also responds to the mutability of the modes of representation. Peter Middleton and Tim Woods stress the latter under the label constructions:

Commonsense would seem to say that although history, memory and the institutions which maintain continuity and manage transformations of the past certainly alter, the past itself is altogether beyond alteration, so that what's done is done and however much our knowledge of a specific past might change, it is only our constructions that alter. (25)

In short, the stability of the past is negated by the instability of our strategies for representing it.

The narrator of Javier Cercas's *El vientre de la ballena* (1997), expresses a related if more radical concept: «Inventamos constantemente el presente; más aún el pasado. Recordar es inventar» (204). If there is a stable past, this speaker insists that we must resort to inventing it, because not only history but also our current existence are inaccessible to us; according to Cercas, we must concoct both. And physics helps explain the need to invent the present. Since, as Hayles argues, the world is an interconnected whole in constant flux, «there is no such thing as observing this interactive whole from a frame of reference removed from it. Relativity implies that we cannot observe the universe from an Olympian perspective. Necessarily and irrevocably we are within it, part of the cosmic web» (*The Cosmic Web* 49). Cercas and Hayles seem to agree that past and present fixity, the supposed cornerstones of what is called reality, are merely illusory representations. These two commentators imply that the only constant is alteration.

Movement and change constitute the essence of the world we inhabit, in the opinion of those cited, and that thesis points directly

to autobiography as an art form. According to James Olney, the essence of autobiography is metaphor because it mediates between «a past and a present, between, one might say, ourselves formed and ourselves becoming» (36). Olney clearly equates «ourselves formed» with a stable past, and «ourselves becoming» with an evolving present. But since the dynamic present determines how we understand what Middleton and Woods refer to as the inalterable past, the autobiographical subject, the current «ourselves», imposes its vicissitudinous essence onto the past. To expand on Olney's thesis, I would add that in addition to serving as mediator between past and present, metaphor is an example par excellence of how the language we employ in the present displaces past reality.

Paul De Man takes an even more radical stance concerning an individual's own life story vis-a-vis reality when he speculates that the autobiographical mode itself may in fact determine the represented subject:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? [...] It appears, then, that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable. (920-21)

Echoing the thesis that everything is interpretation and the interpreter defines the reality de jour, De Man then reverses the subject/object equation; the subject may also be the object and vice versa. As speech theorists have noted, in conversation the speaking subject alternately becomes the listening object when the interlocutor begins to talk and changes from object to subject, a role change that continues ad infinitum in our existence. Yet De Man's act of voicing that reversal totally challenges the conventional concept of reality. From all the above, one is tempted to argue that the word «relativity» may serve us better than the word «reality» as we attempt to understand our being as it relates to our circumstances.

Whereas the scholars quoted up to this point illuminate the force of the present over how we interpret the past —on the relativity of reality— and help us define the illusive concept of being by reference to language, texts, modes, and art, they say little or nothing

about our sociopolitical circumstances. Without denigrating the importance of forms of expression, I think we should also recognize that we live in societies governed by institutions and the individuals who administer them. I propose, therefore, to complement the concepts noted above with an interpretation of some of the political contexts in which the new form of writing occurs. First I will direct the focus to the United States and the Bush administration (although England and several other countries feature similar political ideologies), since to the pride of some and the dismay of others, the U.S.'s actions tend to have a direct impact on the rest of the world. Then, I will focus on Spain and the Aznar government, the political context for the literary works I will be discussing.

In a recent *New Yorker* article, the political commentator Seymour M. Hersh made the following observation:

Bush's closest advisers have long been aware of the religious nature of his policy commitments. In recent interviews, one former senior official, who served in Bush's first term, spoke extensively about the connection between the President's religious faith and his view of the war in Iraq. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the former official said, he was told that Bush felt that «God put me here» to deal with the war on terror. The President's belief was fortified by the Republican sweep in the 2002 congressional elections; Bush saw the victory as a purposeful message from God that «he's the man», the former official said. Publicly, Bush depicted his reelection as a referendum on the war; privately, he spoke of it as another manifestation of divine purpose [...] «Bush is a believer in the adage 'People may suffer and die, but the Church advances'». He said that the President had become more detached, leaving more issues to Karl Rove and Vice-President Cheney. «They keep him in the gray world of religious idealism, where he wants to be anyway», the former defense official said. (43-44)

Since the passage makes clear that Bush feels he is God's emissary, by implication he is asking the people to place their faith in him, their president; he is confident that he forms the bridge between the secular and the sacred. And because in his own mind he is guided by divine inspiration, he apparently feels no compunction when he ignores concrete evidence and bases his actions on faith. Of course Bush is but one of a long list of world leaders over time who have defied the majority of the civilized world in the name of celestial enlightenment. Hersh's analysis, in summary, lends important in-

sight into the present administration, but he is not the only person who has noted Bush's obsession with spiritual belief at the expense of concrete data.

In an important essay that preceded the *New Yorker* article and in effect places Hersh's observations into a much wider context, the Hispanist Juli Highfill, speaking of the current Bush administration, notes its concerted effort to change the discourse from an emphasis on deductible reason and verifiable evidence to blind faith and selective examples, which change, she argues, constitutes a rejection of Enlightenment ideals on which the United States was founded. Highfill goes on to point out that the extreme right and left have changed discursive positions. Whereas just a few years ago conservatives claimed to be anchored in reality and accused the left of engaging in utopian dreams, now the social conservatives and the religious right reject liberals' and moderates' appeals for a return to analytic logic, which they label as atheistic rationalizations; they insist the country was founded on spiritual values rather than syllogistic reasoning.

Whereas Highfill limits herself to how the administration has based its Iraq policy on this appeal to faith as opposed to evidential data, one could easily add a plethora of other examples of Bush appealing to fundamentalist convictions rather than deliberative ratiocinations. Because of the administration's attempts to separate truth from factual evidence, the television comedian Stephen Colbert reputedly coined the noun, «truthiness», which has now been added to the dictionary, to define certain pronouncements that convey «concepts one wishes or believes to be true rather than the facts.» The etymologist Michael Adams warns in the article cited: «The national argument right now is, one, who's got the truth and, two, who's got the facts. [...] Until we can manage to get the two of them back together again, we're not going to make much progress» (A2). Adams's comment suggests a basic contradiction in the social conservatives' agenda: in their attempt to impose fundamentalist values, they are creating valueless apocrypha. I will be arguing that the autobiographical fiction under discussion serves ironically as a register of this atmosphere in which faith masquerades as fact, and reality is fused with fantasy to accommodate political expediency.

Those of the religious right who advocate the teaching of «intelligent design» in the biological sciences of public schools as

opposed to Darwinian evolution manifest the faith-versus-facts or dogma-versus-documentation conflict. Bush actively entered this theological-pedagogical debate by stating publicly that he felt both sides should be given their due. In saying that, he confused the distinction between religious principle and scientific exposition, or between desired truth and verifiable evidence.

Appeals to faith (including a prayer service in his honor at the White House) were also made in defense of the leader of the House, Tom DeLay, indicted on federal charges for laundering illegal political contributions, and of the leader of the Senate, Bill Frist, faced with a possible indictment for insider trading. A similar strategy of appealing to the Christian values of the accused to counteract criminal allegations is emerging with the indictment of vice presidential chief of staff Lewis Libby, who is charged with lying under oath in the case of CIA operative Valerie Plame. When the news of this scandal broke, Bush announced that he would prosecute anyone in his administration responsible for the breach of security. Libby, however, has filed sworn testimony that vice president Chaney told him that Bush himself had authorized the accused to leak the classified information to the press. The implicit justification for all these accusations of corruption can be seen as a Machiavellian ploy of arguing that illegal means for the enhancement of evangelical or homeland security ends do not violate the law⁵. Perhaps these rationalizations echo Barry Goldwater's famous pronouncement in his acceptance speech as the 1964 Republican presidential candidate: «extremism in the defense of liberty is not a vice», (Goldwater himself, however, opposed the incorporation of the religious right into the Republican Party).

The chief strategy for defending questionable actions involves the administration's «spin doctors», who almost routinely characterize scandals concerning its representatives as liberal smears, obviously still banking on the faithful's willingness to believe in their leaders' moral rectitude, even in the face of overwhelming evidence

⁵ A recent Supreme Court ruling against the use of tribunals for selected prisoners of Guantánamo Prison seemed to reject the Bush administration argument that in a war situation the president is not bound by conventional laws. Shortly after the judgment the administration did an about-face and announced that henceforth all prisoners would be treated according to the Geneva Convention. Later the Bush people seemed to hedge on that announcement.

to the contrary⁶. Yet the believers, who have enjoyed the unchallenged position of power brokers since the 9/11 attacks, now find themselves under siege with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina⁷.

A pattern somewhat similar to the one in the U.S. outlined above occurred in Spain. In 1982 the Spanish Party of Socialist Workers (PSOE) won at the polls and held a majority in the congress for over a decade. But the socialists were plagued by a series of scandals involving political corruption⁸. José María Aznar of the conserva-

⁶ A dramatic example of this strategy of faith as opposed to evidence occurred with the presidential pre-election scandal involving John Kerry and the swift boat he commanded during the Vietnam war. A group of former military men challenged Kerry's heroism and claimed he was undeserving of the medals he received. An article in the *New York Times* by a Kate Zernike and Tim Rutenberg exposed the charges as clearly politically and economically motivated. In spite of the overwhelming evidence against the accusations, polls indicated that Kerry's opponents continued to believe the charges against him. Apparently his anti-Vietnam war activities after he was discharged from military service, continually cited by his opponents, played a role in many voters' willingness to give credence to what evidence indicated was patently untrue.

⁷ Opinion polls, as a result of recent events, show that Bush's popularity has plunged to an all-time low, and even more significantly his trustworthiness has dropped as well. His troubles center on Iraq and the public's disenchantment with events there, but also include gasoline prices, legal scandals involving members of his party and even of his own staff, and the aforementioned fiasco of the response to hurricane Katrina in September 2005. As an example of the latter, an administration video appeared on national TV news programs of the head of FEMA relaying to the president, before the hurricane struck, his fears that the levees of New Orleans would fail, contradicting Bush's claims after the disaster that no one anticipated that they would not hold—his apologists insist the president was referring to the time *before* the FEMA director spoke about his fears. In addition, there was an uproar by members of both parties over the alleged illegal eavesdropping on American citizens by the National Security Agency (a policy authorized by Bush himself), as there was of the attempt to turn over management authority of five U.S. ports to an Arab country. Up until these events, the indictments of DeLay and Libby almost certainly would have inspired major protests affirming their innocence. That did not happen, and in fact many now consider their criminal convictions a *fait accompli* (DeLay finally had to resign from his leadership of the House after his multimillionaire friend Jack Abramoff began identifying those who accepted his gifts in exchange for special favors). In response, it appears that the administration has launched an intensive discursive campaign to reestablish faith as its ideological cornerstone. It now refers to the war in Iraq as a *crusade* against terrorism (and the NSA spying as its antiterrorist espionage program, or by implication part of the *crusade*), and Bush continues to affirm his *faith* in his indicted colleagues (in addition to those still under investigation). Of course Bush speaks often of religious values and alludes to his access to divine guidance when he boasts that he prays before making every major decision. The mid-term elections in which the democrats took control of both Houses of Congress suggest that his campaign has not been very successful.

⁸ The most publicized scandal involved the younger brother of Felipe González's deputy prime minister, Alfonso Guerra. Juan, the brother, was granted an office in

tive Popular Party (PP) was elected in 1996 on a platform to restore integrity to the government, revive the economy, and restore Christian values. On the latter score, one observer notes the global revival of doctrinal extremism and draws a connection between the Bush and Aznar administrations vis-à-vis the role of religion in national policy:

En el ámbito internacional pocas cuestiones han alcanzado mayor protagonismo. La principal fuente de conflictos se atribuye a los movimientos islámicos que, por su parte, aseguran buscar el retorno a las verdaderas enseñanzas del Corán. El presidente de EE.UU. habla del Bien y del Mal y centra su esfuerzo bélico en una reedición de la lucha contra el demonio. [...] El Opus Dei, como movimiento de poder clásico, y los Legionarios de Cristo, como nuevo referente del inmovilismo, abruman al Estado con su poder y su influencia sobre las grandes decisiones políticas⁹.

La explotación de los medios de comunicación ha potenciado el negocio de la religión hasta límites inesperados por economistas y sociólogos. La influencia de lo religioso en políticos de pocas luces y mucho poder puede generar una mezcla explosiva. (Belloch 204-05)

Without question the author, Santiago Belloch who lived in the United States several years, is alluding to both a world-wide and a Spanish/American faith versus fact conflict somewhat similar to what Highfill examines in her article on Bush. As Belloch makes clear in his references to the American president, he believes there is an analogy between the Aznar policy and the Bush model of tying politics to religious convictions.

Of course the Spanish leader was able to draw on several centuries precedent of the Church and the state being essentially the same

the PSOE headquarters in Seville, even though he had no official position in the party. Eventually he was convicted for peddling influence from that office, a ploy that enabled him to amass a fortune. Finally Alfonso was forced to resign his position in the government, but he continued to serve as general secretary of PSOE.

⁹ Opus Dei is an ultra-conservative Catholic lay organization, founded by the pontiff Escrivá de Balaguer in 1928. During the Franco regime the society managed to have several members named as ministers, and they helped fashion the so-called Spanish economic miracle of the 1960s. According to Santiago Belloch, Opus Dei spearheaded the PP's savage opposition to the socialists during Aznar's administration (291). The Legionarios de Cristo, a much less renowned society but also with an ultraconservative philosophy that reportedly claims as one of its members Aznar's wife, Ana Botella, was created in the 1940s by the Mexican, Father Marcial Maciel.

institution in Spain. With history on his side, Aznar could direct his campaign to restoring rather than creating the fusion. Bush, on the other hand, had to counter an American tradition of separation between politics and theology, and so he must receive credit (and blame) for creating a new coalition. But again unlike Spain with its union between the federal government and the Catholic Church, Bush was uniting the state to a certain brand of religion professed by many denominations.

As he turns the focus more squarely to the Aznar administration, Belloch cites the privileges granted the Church by the 1953 concordat between Spain and the Vatican that, according to him, violates the new Spanish constitution. Although Felipe González, the PSOE prime minister from 1982 until 1996, also recognized the concordat, Belloch argues that the privileges granted the Church became much more prominent during the Aznar administration. Referring to Spanish history in general and the Aznar years in particular, Guillem Martínez comments with bitter sarcasm: «España tiene teléfono rojo con Dios, con quien habla de su Destino. Lo *española* es casi una experiencia religiosa que dota de sentido irracional y colectivo actitudes místicas fachas» (27). For his first term, however, the new conservative prime minister focused his attention primarily on economic issues, and in general he was successful in revitalizing the economy.

With his second term, ushered in by a landslide victory at the polls in 2000, Aznar expanded his emphasis from almost exclusively economic policies during his initial tenure to include social concerns. In addition to becoming more militant in his opposition to regional nationalism, he assumed a stronger stance in church-state relations. Almost from the beginning, the new democracy that followed Franco's death set out to sever many of the bonds between the government and the Catholic Church, and several of the reforms challenged papist doctrine (including laws legalizing the sale of birth-control products in 1978, granting divorce in 1981, and allowing limited access to abortion in 1985)¹⁰. After his election, Aznar appointed Esperanza Aguirre, a staunch opponent of socialists and regional nationalists, as Minister of Education and culture. Her primary efforts were directed at reforming education, specifically in

¹⁰ For more details on these reforms see Rosa Montero, «The Silent Revolution: The Social and Cultural Advances of Women in Democratic Spain», in *Spanish Cultural Studies*.

reference to the role of Catholicism in public schools, and she relied on the Church hierarchy to guide her in policy proposals. In the second Aznar term, Aguirre's sponsorship of a highly controversial law for compulsory religious education in public schools was approved by congress—the second term began in 2000 and in January 1999 Aguirre had assumed a new post as President of the Senate (see Pilar Cernuda and Fernando Jáuregui for cabinet changes at the beginning of the second term, 345). Also in 1999 the PP had granted the church the privilege of selecting and dismissing religion instructors, with the guarantee that this catechism staff would receive the same salaries as academic faculty. As Tusell comments: «Toda esta suma de circunstancias—incluida la subvención a la educación prescolar— dibuja una realidad claramente favorable a la Iglesia católica» (262, see also Almunia 180). The bishops had placed top priority on inserting religion in public schools—during the Franco years all schools were under the control of the Church (see Alicia Alted, «Education and Political Control» in *Spanish Cultural Studies*)—, and the neoconservatives made that addition to the curriculum a key plank of their political platform.

The church-state alliance did not go smoothly in all cases, however. When the PP in 2001 proposed an anti-terrorist pact directed against the radical Basque separatist party, ETA, Mariano Rajoy, the PP's second in command, complained that the Catholic bishops had failed to endorse the proposal, and in an editorial the newspaper ABC supported Rajoy's criticism of the Church hierarchy: «tenemos derecho, como ciudadanos católicos que no matamos, que no coaccionamos, que queremos vivir en libertad y paz, a exigirles [a los obispos], al margen de cálculos políticos, que traduzcan en hechos la prédica evangélica y absoluta del 'No matarás' y del 'Amarás al prójimo como a ti mismo'» (Tusell 244). Apparently embarrassed by the party usurping the Church's role as moral shepherd, the bishops responded by claiming that they had not been invited formally to endorse the pact, which in fact they claimed to support. Obviously the conservatives felt betrayed by the Church leadership and correctly calculated that public pressure would force the bishops to endorse the proposed legislation. But the incident also reflected how the PP had maneuvered itself into a position in which its political agenda was increasingly dependent on Church support.

Despite glitches of the type noted above, and public opposition to Spain's participation in the U.S. war against Iraq (plus general

discontent with the government's response to the November 19, 2002 oil spillage of the tanker *Prestige* off the Galician coast), the PP prospered politically, thanks in large part to the Church. Then, on March 11, 2004 terrorists bombed the commuter trains in Madrid just days before the national election. Up until the attacks polls showed the PP winning handily. Aznar's response to the terrorism was to blame ETA, apparently since his war against these internal terrorists had enjoyed such strong public support. He miscalculated the power of the internet and of the foreign press, however, which from the beginning insisted that evidence pointed to Al-Qaeda as the source of the slaughter in Madrid. The discrepancy between the PP's righteous claims of a Basque plot, and the overwhelming evidence presented by sources outside of Spain of the guilt of radical Muslims, led to an upset victory by the PSOE in the 2004 elections¹¹.

The new socialist government quickly reenacted more liberal policies by eliminating the mandatory religious classes in public schools championed by Aguirre, and loosening restrictions on abortion and divorce, legalizing homosexual marriages, and granting to gay couples the right to adopt children. Pope John Paul II then accused the new socialist prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, of «promoting disdain towards religion», and vowed that the

¹¹ Guillem Martínez claims that Aznar and the PP attempted to fuse the concept of democracy with «neofrancoism» (15-16). Until the terrorist attack, the conservatives enjoyed voter success by claiming that the new democracy was an updated version of the former dictatorship. Martínez argues that the PP also characterized the constitution as one of Moses's tablets (22), a religious document written in stone and not open to interpretation (another echo of the neoconservatives in the U.S. and their insistence that judges should not read our constitution within the current context, but as an unalterable Christian affirmation penned by our forefathers). The philosophers and theorists cited in the first part of this essay certainly would reject the possibility of a definitive reconstruction of past meaning, and in fact very likely would argue that those who try to resurrect the past and speak of absolute meaning in reality are guilty of interpreting historical documents on the basis of certain current ideologies. Whereas at first glance one might find a similarity between the recent focus on faith over facts and the aforementioned philosophers and theorists and their questioning of absolute truth, Bush's and Aznar's belief-doctrine has virtually no similarity to what Vattimo *et al* advocate. The latter group rejects the concept of absolutes and insists on relativity, while the two political leaders named insist on definitive answers—perhaps Foucault can be considered the most immediate forefather of this emphasis on relativity (see his for example «The Original and the Regular» and «Contradictions», 141-56, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and «Truth and Power», 109-33 in *Power/Knowledge*. For Bush and Aznar, Truth and Reality are analogous to an ultimate Being, whose sanction of righteous acts frees such acts from the need for verifiable justification.

Catholic Church in Spain would not remain silent (Anderson A14). In a 2006 visit to Valencia, Pope Benedict XVI publicly criticized the new socialist government for the implicit anti-family attitude in the recently approved laws concerning homosexual marriages and adoption privileges. Papal authorities also expressed outrage that Rodríguez Zapatero failed to attend the outdoor Mass celebrated by the pope in Valencia. The conflict has divided further a country where, as Anderson notes, although four out of five citizens classify themselves as Catholic, only half of those so defined profess to practicing their religion. Indeed, one could argue that the United States has been up until very recently and perhaps continues to be even today more faith oriented than traditionally Catholic Spain.

The preceding interpretation of the American and Spanish sociopolitical context at the beginning of the 21st century indicates marked similarities, but also significant differences. As noted, Spanish faith tends to be tied directly to Catholic dogma, whereas in the United States there is no single sect identified with the new spirituality. The common denominator in the U.S. is conservatism, be it protestant evangelicalism or Catholic, Jewish, and non-Christian traditionalism. Some denominations define themselves as ultraconservative and their membership is homologous, but within those less rigidly coded there are divisions similar to what is found in society of conservatives versus liberals, with the latter in some cases accusing the former of anti-Christian attitudes, and vice versa. That division also exists within the Spanish Catholic church, but perhaps because the more liberal members tend to be non-practicing, it appears most often among the clergy, and the church has its own means for disciplining renegade priests. Differences aside, José María Aznar counted himself as an admirer and disciple of George W. Bush, and he attempted to recreate in Spain a faith-oriented politics modeled on the American version. Perhaps at least in part for the reasons outlined above, the strategy finally failed in Spain, and although the jury is still out, recent events suggest that the United States is headed down a similar road where faith alone can not negate the force of documented evidence¹².

¹² I think it is important to distinguish between evidence and facts in these matters. Whereas facts connote absolutes, all too often they turn out to be anything but factual. Evidence incorporates the possibility of error or even misrepresentation, but reflects what data indicates to that point. Until counter evidence emerges, researchers abide by what information they have. Science works on that principle, which

I now intend to argue that there is a connection between the Bush/Aznar versions of faith and politics, and recent Spanish literary expression. As noted above when, as during the conservative Aznar administration (and of course the same applies to the Bush years), evidence conflicted with what the political leaders wanted the people to believe, routinely the data were dismissed and citizens were asked to trust the government's version of reality. Also when politicians lied only to be forgiven for their prevarications under the guise of religious conviction or national security, and when industrial and political corruption became a norm, little wonder that writers expanded a linguistic mode of expression, factual fiction, into a novelistic genre as they strove to convey the current sociopolitical context¹³.

Even a cursory look at the recent writings of contemporary Spanish novelists reveals a type of representation based on relativity, evident most notably in works that blend autobiography, fiction, and essay. Memoirs such as *Cosas que ya no existen* (2000) by Cristina Fernández Cubas, *Correspondencia privada* (2001) by Esther Tusquets, and *París no se acaba nunca* (2003) by Enrique Vila-Matas are classified as autobiographies. Yet David K. Herzberger's remarks in reference to the fragmented story line of *Cosas que ya no existen* and the speaker's confessed inability to distinguish between what is real and unreal (as she admits near the beginning of her account: «Me propuse así contar únicamente 'la verdad' sobre unos hechos que, curiosamente, tenían mucho que ver con la mentira» 12), also apply to the other two, as does Herzberger's statement that Fernández Cubas «eschews perhaps the most critical element of autobiographical narrative: the teleogenic plotting of the story that enables the narrator to move through time from 'then' to 'now'» (202). Tusquets's speaker expresses just such an a-chronological strategy when

allows it constantly to challenge and attempt to refine prevailing hypotheses, even those labeled scientific laws. If evidence can convince people to the contrary, the «laws» become obsolete theories.

¹³ For a theoretical discussion of the distinction between genre and mode see Gérard Genette. The Frenchman argues that whereas genre refers to literary movements or types (the pastoral versus the picaresque novel, for example), mode is a linguistic term and defines artistic expression. In the words of Ulrich Wicks: «Modes do not specifically impose a form and are thus pre-novelistic: they are applicable to fiction anytime, anywhere» (241). According to Genette's thesis the *Quijote* offers multiple examples of the metafictional mode, but metafiction as a genre or a literary movement did not assert itself until after the midpoint of the 20th century.

she notes: «Dejé de vivir historias y empezaron a sucederme simplemente cosas» (180). In his fragmented autobiographical account of his life in Paris as he was struggling with the process of becoming a writer, the speaker of Vila-Matas's *París no se acaba nunca* recalls how seeing Orson Wells's film *F for Fake* (a movie reflecting the influence of Borges), made him as an aspiring writer aware of the need for invented reality:

La película, aunque en ella nunca se nombraba a Borges, me descubrió tramas, fraudes y laberintos sobre los que podía escribir si continuaba queriendo llegar a ser un escritor de verdad. Para serlo tenía que saludar la invención de lo verdadero, del mismo modo que tenía que inventarme a mí mismo si de verdad quería ser escritor. *F for Fake* hizo que aumentara mi pasión por los libros apócrifos, por las reseñas de libros falsos, por el mundo de los grandes impostores, por el de los hombres que se hacen pasar por otro, por el de los hombres que son alguien y por el de los que no son nadie. (195)

There can be no stable past of what Olney calls «ourselves formed» if the speaker cannot trust his or her memory, if he or she is continually betrayed by the dynamics of what Olney labels «ourselves becoming.» In lieu of facts and other absolutes, therefore, the writer must create his or her reality, along with that of the reader. These autobiographical writers self-consciously flaunt their inability to know what of the world and of their own lives is fact; they admit that invention itself may be the only verifiable reality. Of course politicians also depend on invented reality, but they seldom if ever admit that their version is an invention.

A twist of the strategy of unreliable autobiographies can be detected in fictions intertwined with historical and personal facts. In Spanish letters the most apparent precursors of the current movement are Bernardo Atxaga's 1989 *Obarakoak*, which blends invention, autobiography, and essay, and Luis Goytisolo's 1992 *Estatua con palomas*, in which the author weaves his own family history into a story about ancient Romans. Javier Marías followed Atxaga's and Goytisolo's models with *Negra espalda del tiempo* (1998), a blend of certain critics' autobiographical reading of his earlier novel, *Todas las almas* (1989), with a series of clearly fantastic episodes. More recently we have Javier Cercas's celebrated novel, *Soldados de Salamina* (2002), in which the narrator seamlessly commingles imaginary and historical events to create an allegorical story about one of

the fascist protagonists of the Spanish civil war. Another recent although more conventional example, Carme Riera's *La mitad del alma* (2005), presents a fictitious autobiographical story in which a daughter strives futilely to discover the facts surrounding the disappearance of her mother some 44 years earlier—in addition to a first-person narrator, historical, personal, and geographical references help create the illusion of an authentic story. Virtually all the Generation X-labeled novels could also be included in this category, since their distinguishing characteristics are said to be first-person narration and mimetic representation of the current Spanish youth society, which leads many readers to consider the works autobiographical. In an informative essay Nathan Richardson examines how Ray Loriga in *Lo peor de todo* (1995) offers inaccurate information concerning real people, events, and practices (see particularly 213-14 of Richardson's article). As the critic notes, the supposed realistic element of the novel «is in fact its most insidious fiction» (214)¹⁴. Again, these novelistic strategies in themselves are not new, but their proliferation within the last two decades has sociopolitical implications. I contend that the current writers of autobiography and fiction flauntingly fuse and confuse the two genres as a strategy designed to call attention to political leaders who fraudulently fuse and confuse facts and fantasies as a means of furthering ideological, economic, and partisan objectives. As an example of this contemporary version of allegory, I will now analyze one of the more celebrated recent Peninsular novels expressing the factual-fictional paradox, Enrique Vila-Matas's *El mal de Montano* (2002)¹⁵.

The story concerns a father who travels to Nantes, France to help his son, who after writing a novel about authors who abandon their craft, himself has become a victim of the very writer's

¹⁴ Richardson perceptively notes the similarity between this type of deceiving realism and the Spanish hit T.V. reality program, *Gran Hermano*. Whereas Richardson emphasizes the cult of mediocrity inherent in the characters who appear in the television show as well as those of the Generation X novels, I want to argue that the show was a scripted program masquerading as reality (as did several other programs of the same ilk, which apparently inspired Álvaro Pombo's 1995 novel, *Telepena de Celia Cecilia Villalobo*). Of course *Gran Hermano* was exported to the U.S. as *Big Brother*, and was followed by an inundation of scripted reality shows here. In a sense, Vila-Matas's «autoficticio» genre can be considered a natural index of popular global culture. In addition to its relationship to politics, it makes a mockery of the T.V. version of «reality» so popular now.

¹⁵ The work was awarded Spain's 2002 prestigious Premio Herralde de Novela.

block upon which he based his novel. The father, supposedly Enrique Vila-Matas himself, suffers from his own crisis: he is a critic who believes literature is dying, and apparently to compensate equates everything in his life to a literary text. The visit to Nantes does not solve either the son's or the father's dilemma, and the speaker, shortly after returning to Barcelona, leaves his film director companion Rosa in Spain and goes to Chile to welcome the new millennium with Margot Valerí, an eighty-year old aviator, and her friend Felipe Tongoy, an actor in French films. Rosa encourages the protagonist to make the trip with the hope that the journey will cure his obsessive references to literary models, but her goal is not realized. After his return to Barcelona, he, Rosa, and Tongoy go to the Azores where he says that Rosa is making a pseudo-documentary on whalers (Tongoy is going to play the lead role). The speaker's next journey is to Budapest for conference on diaries as a narrative form. As he muses about the paper he is presenting at the conference he in effect defines *El mal de Montano*, the novel we are reading: a mixture of essay, personal memories, diary (including journey logs), and fiction. Next he attends a conference in Granada, followed by another in Cuenca, where at the latter the focus falls on the reader's participation in a work such as the novel at hand. Finally, he takes part in an open-air conference on Mount Matz, Switzerland, where he reads from his diary, which of course is *El mal de Montano*.

The line separating historical fact and fictional story in the novel is often hard to determine, but at times the protagonist makes it glaringly clear. For example, the trip he took to Nantes at the beginning of the novel seems to be real, but if so it was not to see his son. After narrating about one third of the novel, he confesses that Rosa is a literary agent and not a movie director, and although they have lived together several years they never married, and neither has ever had children. «De modo que Montano no existe» (106). A bit later he expands on his ruse as he recounts his visit to the bookstore Coiffard in Nantes:

Allí en la Coiffard, mientras hojeaba distraídamente una edición francesa de *El Aleph* de Borges, me inventé un hijo que se llamaría Montano —acababa de ver una traducción al francés de un libro de Arias Montano, el consejero secreto de Felipe II de España—, un hijo que viviría en Nantes y sufriría un bloqueo literario muy serio, un bloqueo del que un padre dotado de ciertos atributos —de los que el pobre Montano care-

cería— intentaría desatascarle. El hijo regentaría una librería en Nantes, posiblemente la Coiffard misma. Y recibiría la visita de su padre, que desde Barcelona viajaría a Nantes para tratar de que superara la condición de ágrafo trágico en la que había quedado sumido tras publicar un libro sobre los escritores que renuncian a escribir. (115)

This confession effectively destroys any reader's suspension of disbelief. If he invented his son Montano, he also invented «el mal de Montano»—the son's psychological crisis and indeed the whole story to which the title refers. So, as he explains: «Hay en *El mal de Montano* bastante de autobiográfico pero también mucha invención» (106). In a sense all his explanations add to rather than clarify the incertitude. Whereas Montano is fictitious (as is the aviator Margot Valerí, whom he supposedly visited in Valparaíso, Chile,) Tongoy, whose authentic name is Felipe Kertesz, according to the speaker, is real and a well known actor in France and Italy¹⁶. Also the trip by Rosa, Kertesz-Tongoy, and the speaker to the Azores did occur, he says, but they went there on vacation and not to make a documentary on whalers. In short, factual and fictional circumstances fuse to create a new genre he calls «autoficticio» rather than «autobiográfico» (124), or a literary expression of the concept that truth and reality are always relative, and merely reflect the speaking subject's (and the reading object's) interpretations at a given time—I should note that in the process of reading and interpreting, the reader becomes the creative subject and transforms the author into the object of his or her interpretation, similar in nature to speech acts in which speaker and listener continually change roles.

As author and reader vie for the status of speaker, the problems are compounded. Several of the theorists discussed at the beginning of this essay note that instability forms the essence of all speaking subjects because their being is not really their own, as this narrator underlines:

Me propongo trabajar discretamente en el interior de diarios ajenos y lograr que éstos colaboren en la reconstrucción de mi precaria autobiografía, que naturalmente será fragmentada o

¹⁶ Although Felipe Kertesz may be the name of a real person, I was unable to find him listed in any of the works I consulted on French and Italian actors. But even if such a person exists or existed, the Kertesz of *El mal de Montano* is a novelistic or fictitious character by virtue of appearing in a work of fiction, a reality underscored by his novelistic name (Tongoy).

no será, se presentará tan fraccionada como mi personalidad, que es plural y ambigua y mestiza y básicamente es una combinación de experiencias (mías y de otros) y de lecturas. (107)

In the conventional sense, to write one's autobiography implies self-knowledge and stability; only a person who claims to know him-or herself should undertake the task of revealing that «formed self» to others. But by implication self-knowledge involves recognition that all selves are in a constant state of becoming: «No es la revelación de una verdad lo que mi diario anda buscando, sino información sobre mis constantes mutaciones» (239). He suffers perpetual alterations because, just as the readers, he is the unstable product of infinite discursive currents. Fragmentation, equivocation, and contradiction are but some of the writing strategies designed to represent the instability of the individual¹⁷. By virtue of such representations, readers are able to experience perhaps the key paradox for Vila-Matas and his ilk, the authenticity inherent in a genre he labels «autoficticio.» Of course, that genre also implicitly underscores the deception inherent in pronouncements by some politicians and ecclesiastics of ideological and theological absolutes.

The plurality of being, a result of the multiplicity of discourses with which individuals are constantly bombarded, manifests itself dramatically in the form of doubles. Every writer of an autobiography invents his or her double to serve as speaker, and the result often leads to plagiarism and a confusion of identity. For example, the speaker in the work at hand once pretended to be Justo Navarro, a Peruvian poet: «me llevó el otro día a recordar cuando firmé yo una entrevista a Justo Navarro que en realidad se había hecho él a sí mismo, del mismo modo que en la página de al lado podía leerse una entrevista que me había hecho yo a mí mismo pero que firmaba Justo Navarro» (17). In short, «escribir es hacerse pasar por otro» (18). In *El mal de Montano* the speaker claims to be Rosario Giron-do, which was the name of his mother, and with whom he shared an intriguing interest: «Ella llevaba un diario en riguroso secreto, nunca nadie supo que anotaba su vida en unos cuadernos cuadriculados, que a su muerte yo encontré y leí» (125). Later in his narra-

¹⁷ Perhaps it would not be too much of a stretch to connect these novelistic strategies to contemporary scientific theory, beginning of course with Einstein and relativity. But quantum mechanics (probability rather than certitude), field theory, chaos theory, and string theory all seem more closely aligned to the non-linear, even contradictory relationships that these novelists seem intent on representing.

tive he feels compelled to clarify identities when he says, «Rosario Gironde, por ejemplo —yo, no mi madre [...]» (183). The clarification ironically calls attention to his dual identity. He is and is not who he claims to be. How much of what we are reading is his, and how much his mother's, or others'? And even assuming it is his, the narrative intrusion raises the issue of literary models or influences. Each utterance is multi-voiced just as each individual is multi-engendered, the product of a potentially infinite list of others.

As the speaker sees it, the influence of others enriches rather than threatens the individual's being, and for that reason he extols the virtues of memoirs. At the Budapest conference on diaries as a literary genre, he declares: «creo que todo el mundo debería llevar el diario de otro. Es un ejercicio enormemente sano» (223). He confesses that over the years he has read numerous personal confessions because he believed that «me ayudarían a componer un retrato más amplio y curiosamente más fiel de mi verdadera personalidad, hecha en parte a base de los diarios íntimos de los demás [...]» (107). Recognition that each of us is the product of others should inspire the textual search for the discourses that have helped form us and continue to do so: «Las memorias de escritores infiltradas en las memorias de otros» (35). This dynamic process of discovery, of becoming, stands in stark contrast to those who strive to reify truth, being, and freedom, whether in the name of Christian, Islamic, Judaic, or Hindu fundamentalism, psychoanalytic classifications, or homeland security.

Literary works by definition convey pluralities of existence. They can enable us to experience not only present and future freedom, but how the past could have been different: «Precisamente porque la literatura nos permite comprender la vida, nos habla de lo que puede ser pero también de lo que pudo haber sido. No hay nada a veces más alejado de la realidad que la literatura, que nos está recordando todo momento que la vida es así y el mundo ha sido organizado así, pero podría ser de otra forma» (302). Whereas historians impose their current views on the past and thereby change it, the speaker advocates inventing a past so as to expand consciously the reality of what was. Again, the idea is not merely to document (which is problematic at best), but also to create a new version of the real.

Since linguistic and plastic signs indicate the absence rather than the presence of the referent, even so-called documentary represen-

tations are illusionary. As readers we must recognize that «el narrador —que no había que confundir conmigo [...]» (191), is merely a verbal construct, an invention. But the act of inventing is real. By virtue of this announced representational strategy, readers experience a fictional reality with undeniable ties to everyday existence: «Quizá la literatura sea esto: inventar otra vida que bien pudiera ser la nuestra, inventar un doble» (16). The current genre of fictitious autobiography flaunts its inventive function in an effort to engage the reader in the infinite creative possibilities inherent in the literary text. Literature tends to liberate individuals; fundamentalism (religious or political) tends to subjugate them.

The speaker of *El mal de Montano* believes that verbal art forms, despite their indispensable role as a liberating force, are under siege and in danger of disappearing. His apprehension has led to a personal crisis, evident in his penchant for equating everything with a literary text, a practice that led to Rosa's concern for and frustration with him¹⁸. At least twice he insists: «soy un manuscrito» (72, 95). Perhaps with echoes of De Man, his statement suggests that he is the product of his own autobiographical project, that the verbal image he has invented is more real than the corporeal being he has inherited. Later he seems to corroborate that interpretation upon confessing that the pages he is writing in the diary constitute «la creación de mí mismo» (181). But that is only a partial explanation. He is obsessed with rescuing literature itself: «se me ocurrió de pronto [...] convertirme en la memoria completa de la historia de la literatura, ser yo mismo la literatura, encarnarla en mi modesta persona para poder así intentar preservarla de su extinción, para defenderla [...]» (189). According to N. Katherine Hayles (*How We Became Posthuman*, see especially 20-24), literary texts are our most embodied form of discourse; they allow us to experience as opposed merely to analyze scientific, philosophical, and ideological concepts. But the speaker of *El mal de Montano* wants to go a significant step further and become himself a literary text, notwith-

¹⁸ It is difficult to ignore the possibility of a certain sexist attitude in reference to Rosa. She is characterized as a stereotypical harping wife—even though apparently they are not formally married—and she displays little if any understanding of and compassion for the speaker's crisis. In effect, as her role evolves one could argue that she seems to be the only character in the novel embodying the forces that threaten literature.

standing the inherent danger of evolving into an ambulatory dictionary of literary quotes (181). But on the other hand he recalls the words of one of our leading contemporary thinkers: «Decía Walter Benjamin que en nuestro tiempo la única obra realmente dotada de sentido—de sentido crítico también —debería ser un collage de citas, fragmentos, ecos de otras obras» (124). Since according to Benjamin among others total originality is impossible, the speaker decides he has no recourse but to embody the belles-lettres, for despite the impossibility of writing original texts, «sin la literatura, la vida no tiene sentido» (301). In the real world dominated by illusory absolutes, there is little tolerance for fictional texts foregrounding inexorable relativity. Yet this very relativity, this polysemic essence of the literary text indicates that —according to Snyder’s reading of Vattimo— «the work of art is the place, or site, where truth occurs in the post-modern, post-metaphysical era» (*The End of Modernity* xxxii). Art enables us to experience existence as a dynamic coming-into-being, an antidote to the goal of certain representatives of the sacred and the secular to create inert entities, obedient and passive objects. Apparently the rebellion against such theological and ideological despotism (the two often coalesce into a type of religious patriotism) defines the project entitled *El mal de Montano*.

Vila-Matas’s creation certainly does not conform to the conventional work we label a novel. *El mal de Montano* is a hybrid text in which several literary genres converge. The effect, and one suspects the intent, is to underscore the polysemic essence of literature, and ultimately of reality: existence is always in flux and cannot be reduced to a fixed body or idea, the distinction between subject and object is temporary and therefore arbitrary, linguistic signs point to the absent presence of the referent, literal meaning is an oxymoron, the only reality within a literary text is the fiction it creates —extra-textual claims to define reality are also fictions—, and finally truth is an invention that can be experienced but not possessed. One suspects that the fundamentalists and the extreme right would object most vehemently to the emphasis on the relative nature of truth, to the negation of a definitive reality. They want and need absolutes, which they inevitably invent, or circumvent, by actions that lead to neologisms such as «truthiness.» But according to at least one school of thought, reality and truth defy reification. They are dynamic phenomena constantly contradicting whatever meaning has

been assigned to them. I think one could easily accuse my philosophical sources here of the crime of overkill, but again I believe their excesses serve as registers of the world in which we live. I would argue that factual fictions such as *El mal de Montano* convey these perhaps exaggerated contradictions as a means of ridiculing or impugning the discourses of those who insist on the univocal nature of reality, who oppose multiplicity and alterity by appealing to nationalism and fundamentalism.

The excesses of the Bush and Aznar administrations are not unique to political history. After all, kings used to claim divine right as the foundation of their sovereignty. But with the advent of democracy that type of spiritual authority fell from grace, and leaders for the most part were held personally accountable for their actions. Bush set out to resurrect a version of divine right within a democratic context by foregrounding blind faith at the expense of evidential data. That is how he justified the erroneous, perhaps deceitful, evidence that led to the invasion of Iraq. Aznar (along with Tony Blair and others) followed his model, and not only supported the war but attempted to impose a similar political philosophy in their respective countries. Those programs seem to be on the wane as the force of contradictory evidence increasingly reasserts itself. Whether the type of fiction represented by *El mal de Montano*, with its parodic, at times acerbic, implications contributed to that demise is very much open to debate. But I am prepared to continue to argue that factual fiction, or the type of life story the speaker calls «autoficticio», did not occur in a vacuum. These works, foregrounding dynamic skepticism as opposed to rigid dogmatism, introspective incertitude as opposed to blind faith, respond to their philosophical and political context. Critics of a relativity approach possibly would label the interpretation of truth and reality summarized here as sophistic rationalizations, while those opposed to the political atmosphere predominating after 9/11 may well characterize it as a period of dogmatism and rampant opportunism. My vocabulary and selection of sources clearly defines my position vis-à-vis these opposing attitudes.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Vila-Matas's *El mal de Montano* has enabled me to experience the freedom of artistic irresolution as an anecdote to the tyranny of political self-righteousness. Even if what I feel is not identical to what Vila-Matas meant to express (just as his *mal* is not identical to that of the fictitious

Montano), he re-convincing me that without literature, life today indeed makes no sense.

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