

ESTUDIOS

THE INTERNATIONAL SELF: THE SPANISH CASE OF THE KRONEN GENERATION

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In two striking short stories that seem to confirm the modernist maxim embraced by Mies van der Rohe, «less is more», Borges expressed the inconvenience of total recall and the boring horror of immortality, ultimately celebrating in «El inmortal» and «Funes, el memorioso» the benefits of forgetting and death. Yet we are well aware of the postmodernist retort by Robert Venturi, «less is a bore,» and know the inexhaustible desire to transgress already inscribed in the *plus ultra* motto of Charles V. In fact, in a Robert Browning poem of 1855 in which «less is more» appears in the mouth of the painter Andrea del Sarto talking to his wife, del Sarto concludes, «Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?» A border, then, can be seen as the safeguarding of the regional, of home and the *Sabor de la tierruca* [The Taste of the Homeland], as captured in the title of Pereda's novel, or an enticement to go on the road and find out if *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* [Broad and Alien is the World], as Ciro Alegría put it, or if it can actually allow for a life that is perceived as more authentic and fulfilling. If we find this tension between restraint and transgression as a constant in culture it may be in part because the self needs some sort of frame in which to project itself, so that it can trace itself within a grander design. This zone of the limit, though, which also can appear as the paradigm of a discipline, tends to be disquieting, iridescent, and its uncomfortable nature may be captured in the Spanish expression of «ser

borde,» that the Royal Academy's dictionary defines as to be «esquinado, impertinente, antipático,» «aggressive, impertinent, disagreeable.»

I will explore here only one particular aspect of this polarity and liminality as it affects our institutional structure of literary studies. In brief, the mind wants to find patterns, patterns acquire a persistence that is simultaneously revealing and blinding. Since the process of growing up is one in which these societal structures I will be discussing are encountered and accepted or rejected, a time also of passage out of adolescence into adulthood, I will use as a case study José Ángel Mañas' 1994 novel *Historias del Kronen*. I hope to show that we need to urgently transform our approach to at least part of contemporary literature at the risk of missing much of what is actually going on today.

The mind has a tendency to complete open structures: in some well-known optical illusions one sees triangles and circles that are not there; in others, lines that appear to diverge from each other are in fact parallel, and yet come to acquire a reality of sorts. The nation is similar in that it is a perimeter traced on a terrain that is boundless and yet it appears so solid and real that people die to defend its territory. In 1994, Juan Bonilla published a book of stories, *El que apaga la luz* (The Last One in Leaving Turns Off the Lights), in which one of them, «El terrorista pasivo» (The Passive Terrorist), describes a common experience:

Each time I go through a national border I remember the darkest disappointment of my childhood. It happened as I went by train from Spain to Portugal. I was astounded to see the landscapes go past my window. My father said: We have entered Portugal. And then, with that impertinent candor that makes children's questions impossible to answer, I wanted to know why if we had gone from Spain into Portugal the color of the earth had not changed. I was expecting, trusting the truth of maps, that the color of Portuguese soil would be pale blue as its surface appeared in my geography book, in the same way that the ocher assigned to the Spanish territory corresponded to the land we had just left behind. If the earth was of the same color at either side of the border, why had they placed the border where it did not separate different colored lands? My father found nothing better to say than books sometimes lie, that they need to lie to make reality fit into a pattern and thus make it more evident and

understandable. I responded... that books and parents are very similar...¹

We would like to think, similarly, that novels that belong to Spanish literature have an indelible watermark of Spanishness in red and yellow. This temptation is, of course, not exclusive to Hispanism. In an excellent essay, the Uruguayan Fernando Aínsa writes:

The tension between the particular and the universal, the conflictive relation between literary creation and the expression of national identity is, without a doubt, the most urgent problem that the literary critic must face when dealing with the narrative of any country of Latin America. Even when one does not wish to fall into the temptation of nationalism, analyzing works and authors exclusively under the perspective of the geographical limits of where they were born and educated, it is not possible to avoid the terms of this opposition that divides and polarizes all critical approaches.²

It may appear evident to us what the flaw of this paradigm, archive, or *Gestalt* is, at a time in which most of us hear with auto-

¹ «Siempre que cruzo una frontera recuerdo la decepción más sombría de mi infancia. Sucedió al pasar en tren de España a Portugal. Miraba atónito cómo los paisajes desfilaban por la ventana. Mi padre dijo: ya hemos entrado en Portugal. Y entonces, con esa impertinente ingenuidad que convierten en imposibles de responder las preguntas que formulan los niños, quise saber por qué si habíamos pasado de España a Portugal, no había cambiado el color de la tierra. Yo esperaba, confiando en la veracidad de los mapas, que el color de la tierra portuguesa fuese del celeste que pintaba la superficie del territorio correspondiente en mi libro de geografía, de la misma manera que el ocre asignado al territorio español se correspondía con el color de la tierra que habíamos ido dejando atrás. Si la tierra permanecía de idéntico color a uno y otro lado de la frontera, ¿por qué razón habían colocado la frontera en un lugar que no diferenciaba tierras de colores distintos? A mi padre sólo se le ocurrió argüir que los libros a veces mienten, necesitan mentir para amoldar la realidad y hacérsola más clara y comprensible. A mí se me ocurrió responder, insistiendo en esa perversa ingenuidad impertinente con que la infancia fiscaliza los abusos justificativos de los mayores, que entonces los libros y los padres se parecen mucho...» (9-10).

² «La tensión entre lo particular y lo universal, la conflictiva relación entre creación literaria y expresión de identidad nacional es, sin lugar a dudas, el problema más acuciante al que debe hacer frente el crítico literario cuando aborda la narrativa de cualquier país de América Latina. Aun cuando no se quiera caer en la tentación del nacionalismo, analizando obras y autores en la exclusiva perspectiva de los límites geográficos del país donde nacen y se generan, no es posible evitar los términos de una antinomia que divide y polariza toda aproximación crítica» (Aínsa 13).

matic distrust the term «universal»: we do not believe we can convince everyone about the validity of any statement, not even of this one I have just made, that is, there are people who believe you can convince everyone of at least a few statements even if these people are not many. We have fortunately ceased, in general, defending canons, proclaiming one writer the best, and so on. Is Mañas' novel better than Almudena Grandes' *Malena es un nombre de tango*, or Muñoz Molina's *El dueño del secreto* published in the same year or Marsé's *El embrujo de Shangai*, published the year before? We do not see ourselves in the ranking business, so these are not discussions we like getting into, except in our less guarded moments with friends at a dinner party. It is true that we don't as a profession object to the news that on May 7, 2002, it was reported that around 100 well-known authors from 54 countries in a poll organized by editors of the Norwegian Book Clubs in Oslo had declared that the most meaningful book of all time was *Don Quixote*. (Of Spanish-speaking authors, Borges, García Lorca, García Márquez, and Rulfo made it to the top 100.) But the other side of the opposition employed by Aínsa is the one that interests me today, the particular, since as a comparatist I don't believe any cultural element exists on its own, that is, nothing in culture is truly *apart*, because everything is actually a *part* of multiple networks, in plural. (Yet this does not mean a collapse into an undifferentiated unity, since we do perceive differences and are able to distinguish trends and transitions. We must simultaneously set apart, separate, and integrate, restore the part to the whole.)

In how a novel fits into Spanish culture and into the life of the nation is where the greatest change has taken place in the last thirty or so years. Being connected to beyond the national borders and having roots in a bookish international culture is nothing new. There is no doubt that the pilgrims coming into Spain in the Middle Ages created a frail network around the Jacobean road, or that the military expeditions of the Golden Age brought close connections with Italy and America; or that the periodicals of the eighteenth century bridged the distance between Enlightened England, France, and Switzerland, and a monastery in Oviedo where Feijoo sat, apparently isolated; or that the travels of Ortega to Germany, García Lorca to New York, Goytisolo to France, and so on, energized connections that we can easily graph and whose power was significant. Nor can we deny that Erasmus, Voltaire, Mon-

taigne, Cervantes, Calderón, Dante, and so on, became in Spain and Latin America permanently active nodes of a large and ever growing network of inspiration and commentary. A whole new science, though, has emerged in the last twenty years among scientists, connectivity, from which we can learn a few tricks.

The world, we all know this, has become not only more tightly networked, but the flow of information, goods, capital, ideas, sound and images has reached unprecedented proportions that have simply altered the way we go about living our lives every day. In a recent article in *El País*, Juan R. Lodaes discussed with some patriotic worry the way in which languages were trying to establish areas of control in the internet, referring to «what some have called Ciberhispania, a territory as new as it is productive» [«lo que algunos han llamado Ciberhispania, un territorio tan novedoso como productivo» June 2, 2004]. This internet and the new cultural webs it allows cannot just be considered the privilege of a few. As Thomas Friedman brilliantly described in his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, the traditional societies for which property, agriculture, roots, and distinct traditions are a long term core, have been ceding part of their existence to an increasingly global experience of outsourcing, instant communication and therefore collapse of distance. Can literature and its paradigms be immune to this increasing porosity of all borders?

It may be useful to contemplate for a moment a series of real borders, such as the one close to me in the US, the border with Canada, where a truck crosses every two and a half seconds, adding up to 45,000 a day. Over 45 million trucks and cars were predicted to cross between the two countries last year. Illegal aliens from as many as 60 nations are caught trying to enter the US every year. This is a nightmare for the newly created Department of Homeland Security that began operating in 2003 with a budget of \$37 billion and more than 170,000 employees. There are 150 ports of entry in a 4,121-mile border with Canada. This is not, though, an exclusively American preoccupation. An essay by Peter Andreas published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and MIT in the fall of 2003 affirmed that «the most heavily policed southern point of the EU's external border is the Strait of Gibraltar—labeled the 'Moat of Fortress Europe.' The strait separates wealthy Europe from impoverished Africa and is only fourteen kilometers across at its narrowest point... Immigrant advoca-

cy groups in Spain estimate that 4,000 people drowned trying to cross the strait between 1997 and 2002» (18). But this is in a sense a twentieth-century problem. In Henry O'Shea's *Guide to Spain & Portugal* of 1869, we read that «According to a decree of December 17, 1862, no passport is required from foreigners entering Spain, or from Spaniards going to England or France» (xiv-xv).³ Bodies today —perhaps one should add «again», since it has happened many times before, yet has been conveniently forgotten or covered up under foundational myths— cross real borders and appear in unexpected spaces, increasing their presence until they become visible not as individuals and transient workers, but as a group of alternative population and citizens, a reality that we can observe in any large city of the world today. In *Historias del Kronen* the maid is from the Philippines; a group of rogue taxi drivers in Carlos Saura's movie of 1996, *Taxi*, tries to single-handedly and brutally eradicate a marginal population that they see as a threat to the soul of the nation; Goytisolo brilliantly imagined the Arabic population taking over Paris in his 1982 *Paisajes después de la batalla*, and he began his 1993 *La saga de los Marx* with a recreation of the true arrival of a ship loaded with East European refugees to the elegant beaches of the Italian Adriatic. We can remember here, with sadness and respect, that of the people who died in the recent terrorist attack in Madrid, 43 were immigrants, eight of them of the Muslim faith. The attacks on airlines in the United States and on trains in Spain were such a psychological blow because they revealed the frailty of the most visible network of the modern nation. But, of course, anyone observing how the news was immediately conveyed to the whole world, to the point that so many of us observed «live» the collapse of the Twin Towers, knows that from satellites high above the Earth a tighter network has been created where images and sound are constantly appearing practically simultaneously, thanks to the magic of electronics, all over the world. As a curious consequence, though, the local has faded, and many people live in small cultural cocoons that are global (not even international), and in which the references are eas-

³ The quote continues: «Foreigners are, however, liable to be called upon by local Spanish authorities to declare their nationality, and object of their journey. Any document establishing the identity, or a declaration signed by two witnesses, residents at the place where it may be required, and purporting their knowledge of the traveler's name, will suffice. These are scarcely ever required» (xv).

ily understood across all nations. It is not the Greek myths, Ovid or Horace any longer, though, or the Bible, or the great epic poems, which constitute the common thread of discourse which can be assumed to be common knowledge between a growing number of young novelists, but a music that grew strong in the fifties, as the world precisely accelerated its globalization: rock and roll. As the liturgical music of the Middle Ages had the benefit of using Latin and therefore being easily understood by a vast community, and later on Italian opera or the French chanson enjoyed the prestige of their respective languages, and Spanish, with its vast population of Spanish speakers, had made the tango and the bolero jump over national boundaries, rock benefited from coming of age at a time in which English was becoming the lingua franca of the world. New forms of distribution —radio, television, film, records, the computer— as well as new modes of production —the more accessible recording studios, electronic instruments— helped propel us into a new age. This we easily recognize, and yet we may not have understood all its consequences. It may be prudent to state at this point that I am definitely not advocating giving up the study of Ovid or Virgil to understand the literature of the past, but I am claiming that unless we do study rock music we will miss much of the background and many of the references of the contemporary novel. Beyond that, though, we must incorporate rock music (and later rap, and so on), as forms of creation that are an important part of contemporary literature, not only as a reference in poems and novels, but in itself, as we study the French troubadours, the German minnesingers, the Spanish creators of the *romancero*, and so on.

The characters of *Historias del Kronen*, a novel so important within the recent Spanish history that many people refer to the nineties as the time of the Kronen generation, are constantly hearing music and use lines of rock lyrics as shorthand. The world in which the young characters of this novel live is where the controlling forces of family, educational institutions, police, and so on, have collapsed. The aimless wanderings during the summer by the main character, Carlos, are punctuated by the search for drugs, almost random sex, and roaming the streets of Madrid; the models are found in the sacred lyrics of international rock, in Nirvana, the Ramones, The The, and so on. The epigraph is part of a 1983 song called «Giant» from the album *Soul Mining* of The The, in

which Matt Johnson sings «I am stranger to myself / And nobody knows I am here,» which clearly identifies Carlos's experience as he tries to make sense of his aimless life of privilege and idleness. We are far removed here from *La colmena*, Cela's novel which also defined a generation, the one that grew up after the Civil War, suffocated by poverty and dictatorship, in which hunger is pervasive. The Kronen bar, where Carlos and his friends meet, is affluent, liberated, drenched in alcohol and its patrons have their noses bloodied by excessive cocaine. It is an unstable, small world of fleeting contacts more than real friendships or love. And in spite of its speed, both mechanical as they race intentionally in the wrong direction of a one-way street just for the kick of it, and chemical, it seems unsatisfactory, in need of a resolution that can only come from the ultimate thrill of a murder and its shared complicit silence. While the traditional Madrid of Galdós can still reside in some of the corners of the city evoked by Soledad Puértolas in her 1995 *Días del Arenal* or in José María Merino's 1994 *Cuentos del Barrio del Refugio*, in *Historias del Kronen* we are in touch with an international beat, with a network that is much more closely linked to the Chilean Alberto Fuguet's *Mala onda* of 1991, whose epigraph is the great song by Mike Patton of *Faith no More* in the album *Live at the Brixton Academy*, «Falling to Pieces,» in which he sings:

Sometimes I think I'm blind
 Or maybe just paralyzed
 Because the plot thickens every day
 And the pieces of my puzzle keep crumblin' away
 But I know, there's a picture beneath.
 Indecision clouds my vision
 No one listens...
 Because I am somewhere in between,
 My life is falling to pieces
 Somebody put me together...

Matías, the hero or antihero of Fuguet's novel, just like Carlos of *Historias del Kronen*, has too much time on his hands, inexhaustible amounts of alcohol and cocaine, easy sex, endless car rides crisscrossing the city, and his cultural icons are fundamentally those that come from rock music. The picture beneath, the vital paradigm, is no longer provided for them by the classic tradition, but comes from guitars, drums, and ear-splitting vibrations

that carry often forgettable lyrics, but from time to time words that have deep wisdom.

Allow me here a brief excursus. We tend to group novelists in heaps, so to say, using as classifying principles a variety of categories. For a Spanish author we would usually expect the use of the Spanish language, a topic related to Spanish life, that she or he is born in Spain, and so on. Around 2500 years ago a Greek philosopher came up with a rather intriguing question that still is intriguing and has been «solved» in many different and unsatisfactory ways by each succeeding generation of philosophers. It is called the sorites paradox, for the word for heap in Greek. It goes like this. Say that you have a heap of a million grains of sand, and you remove one, do you still have a heap? Of course. Another little grain? Why, still a heap. One more? Go ahead. Then, to make it easy, we can have a formula: A heap minus one grain is still a heap. At some point, certainly when we have only one grain left, we would say, no, it is no longer a heap, the formula fails us. Say then that an author is born in Barcelona, lives in Barcelona, writes about Barcelona, and writes in Catalan, is her work part of Catalan literature? Sure. The same goes for the same formula for Madrid. What if we remove one grain? Let's take away the place of birth. Would it matter? Not much, I believe. But what if he writes in Spanish, and not Catalan? Philosophers tend to divide here: some will say there is a borderline that vague ideas, such as nationalism, have, in which these works could uneasily exist, others would say that while we do not perceive it, there is a limit, a point in which the true essence, whatever that would be, is lost.

My point here is that we should add to the categories that define the heaps with which we study cultural references, the network with which these novels identify. Clearly, Mañas and Loriga's novels are much closer to Fuguet's (a Chilean writing about Santiago) than to Puértolas' (a fellow Spaniard writing, as Mañas, about Madrid). We have to learn to trace a cultural space that is international and defined by the youth culture of the eighties and nineties, flowing into the ciberculture of today within a networked global village, where close contacts take place not necessarily with the neighbor in the next apartment, but with the fellow fan of Nirvana in California. This takes us to the novel that would appear to close the gap between Mañas and Fuguet, dissolving the geographical distance, but opening a new sense of internal dis-

tance within the regional culture: this novel is the masterful *Less than Zero*, written by Bret Easton Ellis before he was twenty and that has as epigraphs one-line quotes from songs of X, the art-punk group formed in LA in 1977, and of Led Zeppelin, the British group formed in London in the fabled 1968. The quote from X is «This is the game that moves as you play» from the song «The Have Nots,» which speaks about the working class at a bar, quite the opposite of Clay, the antihero of *Less than Zero*, who lives among Ferraris, unending booze and cocaine, sex and rock, and is on vacation at home in LA from his posh college in New Hampshire. The dizzying quality of this novel, the constant search for bigger thrills, the experience of degradation, the randomness of events, and the background of rock make it a soul mate of the later novels by Fuguet and Mañas. My point, though, is not that Ellis' novel is the model and the other two are derivative, because they are not, even if almost certainly *Less than Zero* was the liberating force that allowed the other two to come into being. They are all similar and all different, as a novel of Galdós may be similar to and different from a novel by Balzac or Baroja. My point is that they are in the same heap, that culture today has different and flexible borders, that the local worlds evoked in the 1996 collection of short stories by Manuel Rivas *Qué me quieres, amor?* coexist with the strikingly different world of Mañas or Loriga. We should learn to respect the simultaneous, perhaps even contradictory, existence of the regional at different levels, regional as geography, regional as cultural niche, regional as linked to a vast or small network, immersed in multiple allegiances. As a consequence, of course, I believe that studying Mañas's important novel without reference to Fuguet's and Ellis's, and beyond that to *The Catcher in the Rye*, that inspired Ellis and Fuguet, and even beyond, to Nirvana, is a sort of forgetfulness, while connecting them in the grand sphere of an international culture may be, for these novels, for this group, for this heap, in a limited but important way, truly illuminating.

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