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Other Lives: rock, memory and oblivion in post-Franco fiction

MAARTEN STEENMEIJER

Abstract

*The functions and meanings of the global discourse of American and British rock in national literatures have hardly been studied so far. This article focuses on the very interesting case of Spanish literature after Franco. The central question is: How has rock functioned in the literature of the new Spain, both as intertext and as cultural memory? To be more specific, the main purpose of this contribution is to study the presence, functions and meanings of rock in the narratives of two leading authors of two generations of post-Franco novelists: Antonio Muñoz Molina (1956) and Ray Loriga (1967). Particular attention will be paid to the complicated processes of memory and oblivion articulated by explicit and implicit references to rock in the pivotal novels *El jinete polaco* (Muñoz Molina 1991) and *Héroes* (Loriga 1993), and to their functions and meanings in the historical-cultural process of memory and trauma in post-Franco Spain.*

Fed up with Spain

Much as Franco would have liked things to turn out differently, in 1975 he left a country which, after having been inundated with patriotic propaganda of the worst kind for forty years, had come to be thoroughly fed up with itself. Younger generations, in particular, identified Spain with the sort of country the dictator would have liked to create: withdrawn, anti-modern, ultra-reactionary. Hence, Spain was perhaps even more susceptible to the revolution and revelation of rock 'n' roll than other West-European countries. As a matter of fact, in Spain the cultural phenomenon of American and British rock music of the 1960s and 1970s was closely entwined with a social, political and mental process of change that was much more radical than in any other West-European country. Rock music symbolised everything the Generalísimo had gagged, muzzled and had even tried to eradicate root and branch: hedonism, hybridity, change, freedom; in short, everything Franco considered to be non-Spanish.

Jim Morrison versus Rembrandt

One of the main authors who fictionalised this radical process of change was Antonio Muñoz Molina (1956). In novels such as *Beatus Ille*, *Beltenebros* ('Prince of Shadows') and *Plenilunio* ('Full Moon') he discusses the complex relationship between the old Spain and the new. This subject is also a major theme of *Ardor guerrero* ('War Fever'), which records the Andalusian author's memories of his disconcerting

experiences during his military service in the Basque Country. This was a period when, theoretically, Spain was supposed to be a full-grown democracy, but had yet to become one in practice.

Muñoz Molina's magnum opus, *El jinete polaco* ('The Polish Rider'), was published in 1991 and named after a painting attributed to Rembrandt. The title of the second part of the novel ('Rider on the Storm') refers to a completely different kind of work of art: a rock song. Both the painting and the song play a major part in the recollections of Manuel, the main character, and, in many respects, Muñoz Molina's alter ego. In the course of the novel, Manuel's story merges with three other stories: that of his brand-new lover Nadia, that of his hometown Mágina and that of his native country, Spain. As is disclosed towards the end of the novel, this entanglement takes place 'in a flat in East 52nd Street in New York, during eight or ten days in January 1991' (Molina 1991, p. 495). Manuel is then thirty-six, Nadia somewhat older. There, in the centre of the modern world, the two lovers passionately explore and annex not only each other's bodies, but also each other's histories, both of which did not take place in the centre of the modern world, but on its periphery.

Both lovers could be seen as exiles of recent Spanish history: Nadia because she is the daughter of a fascist soldier who went over to the republicans and who, after the Spanish civil war, had to take refuge abroad; and Manuel because he swapped life in Spain for the unsettled existence of an interpreter. As Herzberger puts it,

Manuel sees the decision to abandon his hometown eighteen years earlier as an unavoidable entailment. In a general way, the historical context of his youth in Mágina provided the impetus for his felt need to rid himself of the past. The burden of Francoism (both as tradition and story) and the emptiness of the transition to democracy define for him the parameters of a double-edged dissent: he renounces the spent meaning of history shaped by the old regime and also scorns the meaningless present (. . .) (Herzberger 2000, p. 128)

Manuel does not remember much of the second half of his life, his 'eighteen years of calculated amnesia' (Molina 1991, p. 133). The cities, congresses, hotels, lovers: they have coagulated into a series of sterile, mutually interchangeable impressions, images and experiences which have filled him with an existential fear equal in intensity to the dream-like passion with which he embraces Nadia and his own Spanish roots in the seclusion of her New York flat. More and more he finds himself plagued by the feeling that he is losing his identity, that he, after all, has 'one language and one native country only (. . .) and perhaps even just one town and one landscape' (*ibid.*, p. 401). He flings everything into the fray in order to retrieve the feeling that he belongs somewhere: his love for the exile's daughter, her memories, his own memories and, finally, the collective memories of his home town, which the two lovers get a grip on due to an extensive collection of photographs.

This collection of photographs, together with Manuel's passionate love for Nadia, is the main catalyst of the first part of *El jinete polaco*, in which Manuel remembers (that is, constructs) the stories of his parents, grandparents and their environment. Together they form a sort of history of Mágina, unmistakably modelled on Úbeda, a town in the interior of Andalusia, where Antonio Muñoz Molina was born and bred. In this process of remembrance, truth is less important than longing: Manuel's longing for roots, for history, for place, for identity.

The same longing lies at the root of the search for the lost past of the two lovers: the forgotten or even unconscious encounters between Nadia and Manuel eighteen

years before, which they recapture, little by little, during their passionate sessions of remembrance. At that time, Nadia, raised in America, was, for the first time of her life, visiting the town her father had been forced to leave thirty years before. Contrary to Nadia, Manuel was all too familiar with life in Mágina, which is why he wishes for nothing better than to exchange it for another, more adventurous and free life. Still, even then Nadia and Manuel had something in common as well: both were suffering from a broken heart, Nadia because she had been abandoned by her politically correct, but morally hypocritical lover, and Manuel because the girl he adored did not even look at him.

In Nadia's flat in New York, Manuel seeks and finds what he longs for so much, both literally and metaphorically: a common past. Through her he finds out that eighteen years before he had spent a night in her house in Mágina and that she, on the spur of the moment, had tried to kiss him, but that he, stoned and dead drunk, was unable to realise what was happening, let alone to remember it afterwards.

Now, in her New York flat, Nadia remembers that there is a song associated with that particular encounter, 'You've Got a Friend', the famous Carole King version of the James Taylor song. It is Nadia's song, Nadia's music. But it is Manuel's song and music as well. At least, that is what Nadia insinuates when she tells Manuel that the Carole King song had moved him deeply at the time, 'because you understood each and every line of the lyrics' (*ibid.*, p. 480). She also claims that he told her then that he had heard it on the juke-box in the Martos, a place where he and his friends used to go to drink, smoke, talk and dream, but most of all to listen to records imported from Britain and America. These records were the perfect expression of everything he longed for: a new, exciting life, far from his parents, far from his town, far from Franco's Spain.

Nadia's memories of the Carole King night are recorded in 'The Polish Rider', the third part of Muñoz Molina's novel. Manuel's own memories of this troublesome period are at the core of part two, 'Rider on the Storm'. This part is replete with song titles and names of rock stars, but Carole King and 'You've Got a Friend' are not among them. This is not very surprising, since the singer and the song would not have felt at home among rock icons such as John Lennon, Jimi Hendrix and Eric Burdon and among rock classics such as 'Break on Through' and 'The End' by The Doors, 'Fly, Fly Away' and 'Take a Walk on the Wild Side' by Lou Reed, 'Brown Sugar' and 'It's Only Rock 'n' Roll' by the Rolling Stones, 'Whole Lotta Love' by Led Zeppelin and 'Summertime' by Janis Joplin.

These stars and songs are all part of the canon of progressive rock of the second half of the 1960s and the first part of the 1970s. For Manuel they embody nothing less than a 'revelation of something which was completely out of range for me, which I could never reach and which nevertheless had been born with me' (*ibid.*, p. 195). Somewhat less abstract was Manuel's fervent wish to have long hair and a rugged face like Eric Burdon's or Lou Reed's, to wear worn jeans with hippie-slogans on them and a Jim Morrison T-shirt, to use drugs, to hitchhike 'to the other end of the world and to the close of night' (*ibid.*, p. 203). To quote Manuel's hero, Jim Morrison: he wanted the world and he wanted it now.

In 'Rider on the Storm', rock music embodies the promise of freedom, excitement, adventure, bohemianism. It also embodies, quite emphatically, the promise of change, of movement in a linear direction. Manuel's longing is at right angles to the traditional life his father wished to pass on to him: the life of a simple, hardworking farm labourer, who owns a couple of cows and a few olive trees, who

lives his whole life in one and the same place and who would end his life just a little less poor than he started it.

Listening to rock songs or singing along with them allows Manuel, at least in his imagination, to temporarily escape the old, traditional Spain of his parents and grandparents and its repressive dictatorship:

there [in my room] I could almost experience the blissful state of being alone, I put a record on, turned the volume up and laid down on my bed with a novel and a cigarette, convinced that nobody would come upstairs and surprise me while I was smoking, and in no time I found myself in my attic room in Paris or in that hotel on the Mexican border of which Eric Burdon sang in one of his songs (. . .) (*ibid.*, p. 260)

Some songs recur fairly often in Manuel's memories and thus develop into a kind of mantra which temporarily transforms his world into another place: 'I am walking along Pozo Street as if I were walking, lazy and reckless, on a New York sidewalk, softly imitating Lou Reed's accent, *take a walk on the wild side* (. . .)' (*ibid.*, p. 316; emphasis in the original). It is just as well that Manuel does not understand half of what Lou Reed is singing:

the mystery is nearly always lost in a translation, because what those voices are telling us, is not so much in them, but in us, in our despair and enthusiasm and because of that, when we have drunk and smoked a lot, it is often best to listen to a song with little or no words, one of Jimi Hendrix' songs for example, the guitar lashing out furiously and that far-off voice that always sounds as if it is being lost in a hurricane, that rhythm which stirs us up and makes us close our eyes and forget ourselves, as well as the town we were born in and to where this music gets across miraculously, this music which came into being so far away, at the other end of a sea I never crossed, that I never even saw. (*ibid.*, pp. 222–3)

Also in the case of the 'title song' of the second part, 'Riders on the Storm', it is the music, rather than the lyrics, that creates ecstasy: '(I) could hear far-off thunderbolts and the howling noise of a storm and the sound of hoofs, while Jim Morrison's voice came out of nowhere singing "Riders on the Storm" as if it were a promise and a litany' (*ibid.*, p. 261).

So, apart from the fact that the Carole King song is definitely not part of Manuel's rock canon, there is another reason to suspect that the memory of that song is not 'authentic', but an 'experience' which is either borrowed from or forced on him by his lover Nadia: after all, in the case of 'You've Got a Friend', Manuel did not lose himself in the *music*, but in the *lyrics*. But maybe Manuel had really been moved very deeply by this pop song after all. Maybe it marked the beginning of the *rite de passage* which would eventually, after a long detour, lead him (back) to Nadia.

Be that as it may, after his departure from Mágina, Manuel's life has little to do with his youthful rock fantasies. He may have become a wanderer who can go wherever he pleases, but this freedom proves to be nothing more than an empty shell. The metamorphosis heralded by the rock songs he used to cherish – which did bring about a temporary change during his adolescence when imagination and reality were still two separate worlds – did not take place. This is underlined by his profession. Manuel is an interpreter, an intermediary, a bridge between two languages, two worlds, two cultures. He is situated in the no man's land between two identities where rock music no longer has any existential significance, except for those rare moments when, among the sterile, mutually exchangeable McDonalds, he stumbles across, for example, an Irish pub where they play a record by Aretha Franklin. When that happens he is 'back' for a while.

Manuel's disillusionment not only has to do with his personal temperament and the universal process of growing up, but also with his particular place and time of origin: Spain during the last years of the Franco dictatorship, an anomaly in post-war Europe, a country where the urge for freedom and youth rebellion symbolised and triggered by rock songs was anachronistic as well. Manuel realises many years later that when he dreamt of travelling to pop Meccas such as San Francisco around 1972, the hippie movement in San Francisco and the Isle of Wight Festival were already over and done with. The future he dreamt of then was already dead, as were many of the rock stars he listened to expectantly: Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Otis Redding.

Up to his first visit to Madrid, the launching pad from which he is to enter the world, Manuel remains unacquainted with the music of his own day and age. There, at his cousin's home, he does not hear the 'progressive' but, in fact, outdated sound of the Doors, but the heavy racket of the festive glam rock band Slade, which could be considered as a foreboding of the hedonistic Spain that would rise from the ashes of fascist Spain. It is not without significance that Manuel does not seem to like this kind of music: it could very well mark the beginning of the existential detachment so characteristic of his life as an interpreter, not only from the new, noisy Spain after Franco, but also from rock music.

It is only after eighteen years that popular music finally seems to regain a prominent place in Manuel's life: his passionate encounter with Nadia in her flat is framed by songs by Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke and the Beatles. But this is not 'his' music primarily, but Nadia's, who plays the records. For her, however, music never had the existential urgency it had for Manuel and, what's more, she has a much more general taste for music than he has. This explains why Manuel has now started to listen to songs by Miguel de Molina and Conchita Piquer, music of his parents' and grandparents' generation, which he did not used to care for at all. He even enjoys Bach now, although he used to abhor classical music of any kind.

In short, Manuel's taste for music has become much broader. Where he used to look down on girls who enjoyed Demis Roussos's music, he now joins in his lover's musical preferences all too gladly. His taste has outgrown the sect of what was then called 'progressive rock' and has become more open, 'global'. However, it has also become mainstream and predictable, while his experience of music lacks the intensity of former years. The musical context in which the process of memory and reconciliation takes place in the last part of Antonio Muñoz Molina's novel is, therefore, rather conventional.

In the second part of *El jinete polaco*, the songs of rock rebels such as Lou Reed, Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix also have a rather traditional role. In a certain phase of life – adolescence – their existential value can hardly be overrated, but after that they are meaningful as memory only; they have become, so to speak, the soundtrack to an important part of the past. As can be deduced from the extracts quoted above, Muñoz Molina deals with rock music, rock lyrics and rock myths in a fairly traditional way. The choice for these particular rock stars is fairly standard as well, since they belong to the generation who 'helped choreograph a cultural revolution that turned rock and roll from a disparaged music for kids into a widely watched, frequently praised mode of serious cultural expression', as James Miller states in his unconventional history of rock, *Flowers in the Dustbin. The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947–1977* (Miller 1999, p. 16). It is important to add, however, that in Muñoz Molina's novel, this 'revolutionary' rock music does not get the status of high art as an independent cultural expression, but only as the building material of the modernist story that Manuel creates from his

own and 'borrowed' memories. In this respect it is revealing that in part three the Polish Rider of the painting attributed to Rembrandt takes over the symbolic and existential role which Morrison's Riders on the Storm played in part two: that of guide, comfort, intoxication, and mystery.

The fact that Jim Morrison and his music do not have a major part in Manuel's adult life is underscored by the title Muñoz Molina gave to the novel, *El jinete polaco* ('The Polish Rider'). The fact that 'Riders on the Storm' is not only the last song on the last Doors' album (*L.A. Woman*), but also the last song Jim Morrison ever recorded, is also quite meaningful. Shortly afterwards, the singer would leave for Paris to become the poet he had always wanted to be. However, after about six months he died of rock 'n' roll and would be remembered as one of the most legendary and controversial rock singers of the 1960s, nicknamed 'King of Acid Rock', 'Mickey Mouse de Sade' or, even worse, 'the ultimate Barbie doll' (Sugerman 2001, p. 15). Only his most fervent admirers classed him among the artists and authors Morrison liked to identify with: Nietzsche, Van Gogh, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Poe, Blake, Artaud, Nijinsky, Byron, Coleridge, Dylan Thomas. His being buried in the cemetery of Père-Lachaise among great artists and authors such as Eugène Delacroix, Oscar Wilde, Gérard de Nerval and Alfred de Musset should be regarded as the irony of fate rather than posthumous justice: in the cemetery's 'liste de résidents', Morrison is listed as 'chanteur', and not as 'poet' or 'writer'.

In Manuel's life, rock 'n' roll died an even earlier death. From its ashes rose the groping, tentative story of a mind disillusioned by the (post)modern world, which, through words fed by passion, tries to take root in the history of his home town in the full awareness that this activity is as urgent as it is temporary and illusory. In this respect as well, *El jinete polaco* keeps to the beaten track of modern and post-modern twentieth-century literature, just as it keeps to the beaten track of rock myths that turned out to be an anachronism in an anachronistic country.

Dialogue with David Bowie

The narrator of Ray Loriga's *Héroes* (Loriga 1993) also seems to be reporting his rise against the standards, values, ambitions and opinions forced on him, this time not in the context of the old Spain but in that of the new Spain. However, this narrative structure is much less prominent in Ray Loriga's novel than it is in *El jinete polaco*, *Héroes* being free from the narrative or even teleological coherence which is crystallised in the course of Muñoz Molina's novel. The amalgamation of the (ultra)short texts *Héroes* is comprised of, remains a series of separate fragments, between which there are no connecting bridges, essential for the construction of a logical and 'complete' story. In contrast to *El jinete polaco*, in *Héroes* there is no recognisable time scheme and it is impossible to arrive at an unambiguous identification of various persons (I, you, he, they) and levels of reality ('real' events, memory, fuddle, fantasy, dream, nightmare). It is not impossible, though, to surmise that there is one narrator in the entire novel. The main argument is that all fragments express a similar kind of mood, a mix of anger, rebellion, insecurity, loneliness, grief and longing. More than anything else the narrator resembles an unguided missile, racing up and down in the no man's land between the childhood he has left behind and the adult world, from where manuals for life are being handed to him or forced upon him. The fact that he remains nameless and barely

places himself in definite time and space is characteristic of his indefinable position and identity. From the few facts he mentions, one could deduce that the novel is set in Spain, some time during the 1990s and maybe that the narrator, like the writer, lives in Madrid, although it is indicative, as we shall see, that the name 'Madrid' does not occur anywhere in the novel and that there are hardly any references to Spain.

This narrative, temporal and spatial vagueness could not only be interpreted as the reflection of existential despair, but also as a narrative strategy which runs parallel to the existential goal the narrator seems to set himself: not to become part of the establishment. In doing so he does not only seek to avoid a certain way of life, but also to create one, through rock music:

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT FROM YOUR SONGS?

Right, I am sitting here in my room and the songs come out and I only hope that they will not abandon me, I expect from the songs everything my parents did not give me, they were very good at giving advice and laying mines. They laid millions of mines in the corridor and said, boy, we are on your side, we only want to help you, but when I entered the corridor I only saw their mines lying under the carpet. I hope to be able to walk more calmly on my songs than I walked on the footsteps of the others. (*ibid.*, p. 63)

The question arises whether the narrator's texts could be interpreted as the representation of the new symbolic reality he is looking for, whether they could be interpreted as song lyrics. There is more than one reason to doubt this. Although the length and intensity of his texts are similar to those of rock songs, they lack the directness, the simplicity and the structure based on repetition. Moreover, they mainly express the existential struggle itself, instead of its desired result: a different kind of life, another identity. This is even true for the fragments in which the main character (if it is the same character, that is) tours Australia and the United States with a rock band (or imagines he does) and 'experiences' the rock-mythology of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. The I-figure does not reach the existential fullness and stability he longs for and is unable to settle in the virtual or imagined story of a rock star, nor in his symbolic creations, the songs. His 'story' remains stuck in a torn life which *hopes* to find salvation in rock music.

The religious connotation of the expression 'to find salvation' is important in connection with the aura of sanctity which the narrator attributes to rock stars such as Jim Morrison, Lou Reed, Bob Dylan and David Bowie. David Bowie has a special place among these heroes. The narrator regards him as the saviour of saviours: 'David Bowie is the only one who can take away your panic. He has been taking care of all the angels for a long time and he can take care of us too, if we learn to trust the songs' (*ibid.*, p. 37). The elect role of David Bowie's person and work is obvious from the title (*Héroes*) and the dedication of the novel ('for Ziggy'), which refer to one of Bowie's most legendary songs ('"Heroes"') and to one of his most talked-about and emblematic creations (Ziggy Stardust), respectively. These two para-texts share a common theme, be it on different levels and in different degrees of intensity: metamorphosis, change. '"Heroes"' is about a forbidden love which could allow the man and woman to transcend their own existence:

I, I will be king
 And you, you will be queen
 Though nothing will drive them away
 We can beat them just for one day
 We can be Heroes just for one day.

The song, the title of which is placed between quotation marks to give it a slightly ironic taste, only expresses the *possibility* of change and even then ‘just for one day’. On Bowie’s lips these words melt together into a paradoxical combination of fervent hope and melancholy resignation.

Whereas ‘‘Heroes’’ is characterised by an atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty, *Ziggy Stardust*, on the other hand, is one big, staggering feast of metamorphosis, which is staged and celebrated, not only on the album, in the songs and during the legendary tour of 1972–3, but in David Bowie’s own life as well, which – even in his own perception – became increasingly difficult to distinguish from that of the fictional character he created.

Ziggy Stardust would not only turn Bowie into the god of glam rock, but also signified his final breakthrough as a rock star. During the years preceding this breakthrough, he had been searching feverishly for an artistic identity which would enable him to become the celebrated and respected rock artist he wanted to be. A change of name was the first step: to prevent confusion or association with Monkees singer Davy Jones, David Robert Jones became David Bowie, after the famous Bowie knife (Buckley 2001, pp. 33–4). In that capacity he practised an impressive range of musical genres – mod pop, psychedelic rock, progressive rock, folk – none of which gave him the recognition he longed for. The single ‘Space Oddity’ did become a great international success, but because it did not have a follow-up, Bowie threatened to become a one-hit wonder.

The tide turned with *Hunky Dory* (1971). On this album, which appeared half a year before *Ziggy Stardust* (although the two albums were recorded nearly simultaneously), he explored in a rather subdued way the ‘gay’ image he would, in later years, exploit with great zest in his creations of Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane (‘a souped-up Ziggy’, according to one of Bowie’s friends). The explicit references to rock icons such as John Lennon, Bob Dylan and Lou Reed in the *Hunky Dory* songs also herald *Ziggy Stardust*, the main character of which is described by Nicholas Pegg as ‘a construct of rock’s archetypes’, with traces of, among others, Vince Taylor, Peter Green, Lou Reed, Jim Morrison and Mick Jagger (Pegg 2002, p. 212).

There are striking similarities (both in form and in meaning) between this decisive period in David Bowie’s career and the ‘slice of life’ which takes shape in Ray Loriga’s novel. In order to lift their existence to a different, higher level, both Bowie and the narrator of *Héroes* seek refuge in rock music and rock heroes. There are even parallels in their preferences for John Lennon, Jim Morrison and Lou Reed, prominently present in both ‘texts’. However, the differences between the ventures of David Bowie and those of the main character of *Héroes* (perhaps shared by the author, who is depicted on the cover of all editions of the novel that I know of as a black-romantic heavy metal rocker looking at the reader with a penetrating gaze) are no less important. The narrator of *Héroes* is as withdrawn as Bowie is extrovert, a difference which is also mirrored in the areas in which the two *rites de passage* take place. David Bowie is in the thick of (professional) life, whereas the narrator of *Héroes* has locked himself up in his head. The fact that David Bowie’s medium is music, while that of Loriga’s main character is literature, might not be without meaning either. After all, contrary to Bowie, the fictional character remains imprisoned in his solitary anonymity, by which means Loriga may have wanted to suggest that literature does not have the power of transformation which music does have. Or should the disillusionment, the cynicism, the failure and the despair of the narrator be

interpreted as symptoms of the existential climate among 'us, boys of the nineties' (Loriga 1993, p. 125), who did not share the megalomaniac euphoria so characteristic of post-Franco's Spain? That could very well be the case, though the number of outbursts on the topic of Spain ('this damned Spain which kills poets and animals'; Loriga 1993, p. 113) is quite limited. But isn't this silence highly significant because of its contrast with the eccentric and even hysterical attempts of Spanish culture to be (post)modern, as manifested in the famous *Movida* (Movement) that stirred into action in Spain around 1980?

In any case, it is interesting to read *Héroes* as a dialogue with the life and work of David Bowie. Not only the title and the dedication, but also the beginning and end of the novel put the reader on this track. In the first fragment the I-figure tells of his futile attempts to meet David Bowie in Moscow, while in the last but one text of the novel he meets the rock star ('disguised' as Ziggy?) in the city which Bowie, on several albums, amongst other '*Héroes*', transformed into a legend (Berlin). The situation and dialogue that frame this meeting are enigmatic, mysterious, even if one takes into account that Bowie, after a short and disillusioning stay in Moscow, embraced Berlin as the 'free world' into which he wanted to withdraw to recover from a deep crisis and where he finally felt that he had become himself again:

When I finally found Bowie he was sitting under a bronze angel. I knew from the start that he would be sitting under an angel, but Berlin is full of angels.

His eyes were painted blue and his hair red. He knew I had come there for him and therefore he barely looked at me. It started to rain, but we didn't move. The angel didn't, Bowie didn't, I didn't.

When it was nearly dark he said to me, Don't worry, you are too young to choose. (*ibid.*, p. 179)

How may this encounter and this dialogue be interpreted? As exposure (the rain washing away the make-up and thereby revealing that the revered identity is really a mask), that is to say, as a humanisation or re-humanisation of the worshipped idol? Or does Bowie function as an oracle and remains, as far as the narrator is concerned, in possession of divine powers? Or is there some truth in both interpretations, so that there is disillusionment and exposure without the idol falling from its pedestal? That could very well be the case in view of the reference (in the last sentence of the quoted fragment) to Ziggy Stardust's last song, 'Rock 'n' Roll Suicide', the second verse of which begins as follows: 'You're too old to lose it, too young to choose it'. In that case the I-figure would be a *rock 'n' roll suicide* who, again according to the song, is not alone, but can count on the (alien?) help of Ziggy Stardust/David Bowie. 'Just turn on with me and you're not alone [...] Gimme your hands 'cause you're wonderful/Oh gimme your hands', as Bowie puts it in the last verse of the song.

The final fragment of Loriga's novel, however, is much less hopeful:

Sometimes I imagine I have a wife and a child running through the house. A child to cuddle and to kiss, so little that there is nothing in it yet. Who will I be by then? Which things will I be able to grasp with my hands and which not? Will I be as tall as I am now? Will I have a face that resembles the face I have now? What will my wife think of what I used to be? Will my wife be the blonde girl or will I have to hide from her that she is not? How will I look when I am fucking? When all that time has passed, where will the present time be and that of thereafter and where will I be in the middle of all that? What will I look like when I dream? What happens to what

you've done? The responsibility of all the things you have done should expire, like tinned food. How long will I remain who I am now?

I feel like a business about to be taken over. (*ibid.*, p. 180)

This final fragment seems to seal the failure: the end of the quest is the prospect of a colourless existence which will not give the narrator the existential salvation he is looking for, but doubt and despair, primarily with regard to his identity (or the lack of it).

In other parts of *Héroes* there are echoes of David Bowie as well, for example in semi-quotes such as 'I could transform into a rock 'n' roll star and disappear before you know it' (*ibid.*, p. 49), 'Is there life on Mars?' (*ibid.*, p. 56) and 'Mickey Mouse is walking down your street, carrying a sawed-off rifle (. . .)' (*ibid.*, p. 113), while David Bowie and Ziggy Stardust themselves are regularly 'hailed' as a never-failing refuge ('We are Ziggy's band and would never have abandoned you'; *ibid.*, p. 142), as an oracle ('Perhaps Bowie was right and it is nothing but a coincidental dream'), and as an example: 'Things can travel from the stars down to the ground with dizzy speed. Then you have to be David Bowie not to give up (. . .)' (*ibid.*, p. 151).

Even the mines that the protagonist complains of in the earlier quote from *Héroes* may have ended up in Loriga's text through Bowie: the Berlin wall – the decor of the love story of "'Heroes'" and of the studio where the song was recorded – was full of them. The shifting perspective (especially the 'you' changes identity all the time) is in agreement with Bowie's songs on *Ziggy Stardust* as well.

The shadow of David Bowie's life and work that is cast over *Héroes* gives the novel a meaning and coherence which it seems to lack at first sight. Even its fragmentary style could be interpreted as a Bowian characteristic if we take into account that the novel's 'structure' is very similar to that of *Ziggy Stardust*. The separate songs of that record coalesce into something like a concept album at a relatively late stage. If one listens to the songs on *Ziggy Stardust*, one has to make a very big effort to find a story-line. In this respect it is rather telling that Bowie wanted to use William Burroughs' novel-writing technique for his Ziggy-shows, by putting all the separate scenes into a high hat before the beginning of each show, and thus letting chance decide in which order they would be performed.

Due to its unruly character, Loriga's novel is also related to the far from commonplace, elusive and partly instrumental album "*Héroes*", which was created in accordance with the poetics of 'abstract communication', which Bowie was introduced to by Brian Eno. "*Héroes*" was written and recorded nearly simultaneously by an improvising singer/composer who was trying very hard to get rid of his serious addiction to cocaine and became an alcoholic on the rebound. If there is one theme that connects the different songs on the album, it is drunkenness. Can it be coincidence that Loriga made sure that he was depicted on the cover of his novel grasping a bottle of beer?

Paradoxically, Bowie could both be the cause and the remedy for the 'chaos' of the texts of which *Héroes* is made up. However, this remedy is limited in its effects, because even when you read *Héroes* with Bowie in mind, the novel leaves many riddles to be resolved. Eventually, Loriga's intriguing novel remains 'just a couple of dreams', the 'real story' of which will never be known to the reader, to quote the Bowie song, 'Joe The Lion' ("*Héroes*").

Finally, with the risk of committing what Umberto Eco termed 'overinterpretation', I venture to state that the final sentence of the novel ('I feel like a business about

to be taken over') could also be interpreted as a veiled attack on Bowie as a rock star, who, after "Héroes", would become more and more of an entertainer and less of an innovator. Bowie was, so to speak, taken over as well.

Memory versus sanctity

Both in *El jinete polaco* and in *Héroes*, a battle is being fought against a way of life and a way of being which are experienced as imposed and unnatural. In Antonio Muñoz Molina's novel, this struggle takes place in the context of stifling provincial life during (the last years of) the Franco dictatorship. In Ray Loriga's novel there are barely any references to definite time and place, though on the basis of a few slight indications one may assume that the narrator's existential struggle is set in Madrid in the early 1990s, a decade after the notorious *Movida*.

There is, I think, a fundamental difference. In *El jinete polaco*, a rejected and lost identity is finally embraced through passion and imagination. In *Héroes*, however, the narrator perseveres in his dislike of the identity of his origins and uses the imagination of Anglo-Saxon rock to create a different identity and reality.

One could say, therefore, that the narrative force of *El jinete polaco* is memory, while that of *Héroes* is oblivion. In view of the difference in age and also in historical and cultural experience between the two authors – Muñoz Molina was born in 1956, Loriga in 1967 – this might not be a coincidental, but an essential difference. It seems justified to suspect that whereas Muñoz Molina's generation wanted to be reconciled to the reality of their origins, Loriga's generation – which has been labelled *La Generación X* – perseveres in a radical aversion to their Spanish roots ('[...] it is important to point out that to say 'Spain' is as difficult as to pronounce my mother's name [...]') (*ibid.*, p. 26). Those who nevertheless want to read the conclusion of the novel as a reconciliation between the narrator and the reality that surrounds him, will have to accept that this reconciliation is imposed, forced upon him, a dead end. Therefore the term 'failure' would seem to be more appropriate than 'reconciliation'.

In Muñoz Molina's discourse aimed at harmony, rock is associated with a certain phase of life in which rebellion and the urge to change fight for precedence. Hence, in *El jinete polaco*, rock has a rather traditional role and function, not only as regards its symbolic meaning, but also in the way it is actually incorporated into the narrative. The many references to rock songs are little more than a soundtrack accompanying the (re)constructed memories of the narrator. In *Héroes*, on the other hand, rock is not part of a past made present by memory. It is the fuel of the other, 'higher' existence the narrator longs for, a life that transcends historical time and space by ignoring it. To put it differently: in Loriga's novel, rock is not the memory of the desire for another life that was never realised, but an emphatic *presence*, not only at a thematic and existential level, but also at the level of narration itself. In *Héroes*, rock is not a memory of a rebellion against Spain that would end in a reconciliation with the *madre patria*, but a sanctity that is part of a cult, a metaphysics. A metaphysics of metamorphosis and oblivion.

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