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## The New Capital of Spanish Literature: The Best Sellers

*Maarten Steenmeijer*

“Nosotros no somos nada en el mundo, y las voces que aquí damos, por mucho que quieran elevarse, no salen de la estrechez de esta pobre casa” (84) (We are nothing in this world, and whatever we say here, as much as we want to elevate our voices, does not leave the narrowness of this poor house). With this sentence taken from Benito Pérez Galdós’ prologue to Clarín’s 1901 edition of *La Regenta*, the author laments the marginal position occupied by Spanish literature in what Pascale Casanova was to call “the world republic of letters” in a book by the same title. In this excellent study, the French critic and sociologist revitalizes this concept in relation to the imaginary of the Enlightenment, redefining it as a “literary universe relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions” (xxi). Echoing Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas, Casanova views the world republic of letters not as an open space of intellectual exchange, but as a closed one dominated by power relations, processes, and mechanisms:

This world republic of letters has its own mode of operation: its own economy, which produces hierarchies and various forms of violence; and, above all, its own history, which, long obscured by the quasi-systemic national (and therefore political) appropriation of literary stature, has never really been chronicled. Its geography is based on the opposition between a capital, on the one hand, and peripheral dependencies whose relationship to this center is defined by their aesthetic distance from it. (11–12)

For many centuries, as Pérez Galdós implies in the quote registered above, Spain’s position in the international literary space has been marginal at best. This is further illustrated by the fact that the author’s magnum opus, *Fortunata y Jacinta*, which embodied nineteenth-century Spanish realism, took more than 100 years to be translated into French (1980) and English (1986).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Galdós’ 1901 observation did not lose its currency in the course of the twentieth century. With few exceptions,

notably Miguel de Unamuno, José Ortega y Gasset, and Federico García Lorca, contemporary Spanish literature was widely unknown overseas, and was even less known during the Franco era. Julia L. Ortiz-Griffin and William D. Griffin observed that “for most of the world, the history of Spanish literature began with Cervantes and ended with Lorca” (78).

During the ostracizing, retrogressive, and nationalist Franco regime that propagandized isolationism with impunity, little was done to conceal the insignificant position of Spanish literature within the international literary arena. Having published *Los cipreses creen en Dios* (The Cypresses Believe in God), the beginnings of a trilogy that would become an authentic best seller, in 1955 José María Gironella wrote an article whose title expressed an unmistakable diagnosis: “Why Is the World Unfamiliar with the Spanish Novel?” In 1964, Antonio Iglesias Laguna prepared a study whose title also synthesized the lack of prestige that Spanish literature held in the world: *Why Is Spanish Literature Not Translated?*

In 1963 a young Peruvian’s first novel, written in Paris, had been published in Spain after receiving the prestigious Biblioteca Breve Prize in the previous year. I refer to Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La ciudad y los perros* (The City and the Dogs), which made history with the advent of the Spanish American *boom* novel. The spectacular phenomenon of this new Spanish American literature was to occupy a primordial space in the center of the literary world thanks to Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, and other major figures like Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Octavio Paz, and Pablo Neruda. Casanova maintains that,

In the twentieth century they managed to achieve an international existence and reputation that conferred on their national literary spaces (and, more generally, the Latin American space as a whole) a standing and an influence in the larger literary world that were incommensurate with those of their native countries in the international world of politics. (38–39)

As is well known, Spain—and Barcelona in particular—had a decisive role in the inception of the *boom*. During the height of the Franco period, a literary climate had developed in Barcelona thanks in part to the infrastructure established by editor Carlos Barral and literary agent Carmen Balcells (among others), one which enabled the new Spanish American literature to be published, distributed, and exported on a large scale. The contrast between the position of Spanish American literature and contemporary Spanish literature could not have been more pronounced (see Marco and Gracia). The new Spanish American novel that invaded Spain in the 1960s, to later conquer Europe, contrasts with the poor state of things at home. In the words of author and critic José María Guelbenzu,

La novela hispanoamericana nos hizo descubrir que el lenguaje que estamos hablando aquí está medio muerto; y quienes nos están enseñando a hablar son Carpentier, Borges, Cortázar, y esto es un golpe muy fuerte. Aquí en España no se habla el idioma

madre, sencillamente se habla el idioma sin más; somos lingüísticamente lentos y pesados como hipopótamos. En todo caso, es el *empleo* que los latinoamericanos hacen del castellano [. . .] el que nos puede ayudar a nosotros mucho, quiero decir, su capacidad de utilizarlo, el pluralismo con que lo hacen, la precisión que buscan. (qtd. in Marco and Gracia 132)

(The Spanish American novel made us discover that the language we speak is half-dead and those who are teaching us to speak are Carpentier, Borges, Cortázar. This is a painful blow. Here in Spain the mother tongue is not spoken; it is simply the language that is spoken. Linguistically we are as slow and as heavy as hippopotamuses. In any case, it is the Latin Americans' use of *castellano* [. . .] that can very well help us. That is, their capacity to use it, the pluralism with which they speak, and the precision that they seek.)

The historical, political, and cultural circumstances claimed *ad nauseam* to explain, lament, and justify the deplorable state of Spanish literature were in fact fallacies. If Spanish American authors had been capable of writing such brilliant and pioneering literature in circumstances comparable to those of Spain's poverty, repression, and isolation, why did Spanish authors continue to espouse a stagnant literary program, such as social realism and its variants, that had dominated post-war Spanish narrative?

This sad but true story does not end here. For if Spanish writers justified themselves by arguing that life was substandard with Franco, only a few years would pass after the dictator's death before they would be compelled to admit that the situation had only minimally improved with democracy. Jordi Gracia reminds us in *La llegada de los bárbaros* that in 1979 the prestigious literary magazine *Camp de l'Arpa* surveyed the opinions of literary editors to map out their position with regards to the state of democratic culture. Gracia notes that, "Unanimously, the diagnosis was very disheartening." Those surveyed

no rehuyeron caracterizar el presente como uno—otro—de los momentos más estériles de la cultura española. Los adjetivos se repartieron sin ambages: desde negarle la existencia—'no está en situación alguna,' dice Moura—hasta ser 'anémica' (Lacruz), 'desastrosa' (Bruguera), 'descorazonadora' (Esther Tusquets), 'sin vitalidad ni brillantez' (Juan Grijalbo) o en 'situación de marasmo,' según Herralde. (153)

(They did not shy away from characterizing the present as just one of many sterile moments of Spanish culture. The adjectives used to describe such moments were employed without hesitation. Some, such as Moura, even denied its existence, saying, 'It's not in any situation.' Others described it as 'anemic' (Lacruz), 'disastrous' (Bruguera), 'disheartening' (Esther Tusquets), 'without vitality or brilliance' (Juan Grijalbo) or being in a 'state of paralysis,' according to Herralde.)

At the risk of converting this set of self-criticism into a collection of self-flagellations, I would call attention to the revealing title of an article published only two decades ago in the literary magazine *Quimera*: "Is Spanish Literature Boring?" (Bada).

For some decades now, the perception of Spanish literature has changed. At present no one would agree with the depressing diagnosis cited above. In fact, plenty of examples point to Spanish literature having a presence both worldwide and in Spain. Arturo Pérez-Reverte's adventure novels have not only penetrated the North American book market, but have also taken root in Hollywood through the cinematic adaptations of some of his novels by film directors Jim McBride and Roman Polanski. It is also worth noting the surprising success of Javier Marías' novels. The German translation of *Corazón tan blanco* sold 1,200,000 copies and was praised by Marcel Reich Ranicki, the prestigious and powerful critic and host of the literary program "The Literary Quartet," as the best and most important novel he had read in many years.

To properly illustrate the idea and scale of this phenomenon, it is important to keep in mind that this success is not limited to literature written in Spanish, as illustrated, for example, by the fact that the first novel of Catalan anthropologist Albert Sánchez Piñol, *La pell freda* (2002), was translated into thirty languages. Sánchez Piñol's novel is only the tip of the iceberg. Catalan literature is creating a respectable presence worldwide and reached a key point in 2007, when Catalan culture was the honored guest at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Additionally, thanks to authors such as Manuel Rivas and Bernardo Atxaga, Galician and Basque literature continue in Catalan's footsteps, though at a great distance.

Nonetheless, it is clear that authors who write in Spanish dominate the field. It would be pretentious to offer an exhaustive list here of the authors who have been widely translated in the last decades. I shall limit myself to mentioning perhaps the most important: Eduardo Mendoza, Rosa Montero, Arturo Pérez-Reverte, Almudena Grandes, Javier Marías, Antonio Muñoz Molina, Rafael Chirbes, and Enrique Vila-Matas. I think that it would be fair to consider Eduardo Mendoza's *La ciudad de los prodigos* as the novel that finally initiated the *boom* of the new Spanish narrative in the world republic of letters. One should ask, however, if the term *boom* is appropriate to describe the diffusion and reception of recent Spanish narrative compared with that of Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s. My view is that if extensive translation is one of the major criteria, the description is justified and the boom of the Spanish literature is comparable to that of Spanish America.

To have a more complete idea of the position of Spanish literature in the world republic of letters, one must make clear that while the number of translations is impressive, its reception is not. No Spanish author, with the exception of Javier Marías, has the sufficient prestige or literary capital (to use Casanova's term), to qualify as a modern classic. The difference with Spanish American narrative is pronounced if one considers that contemporary Spanish American literature forms part of the literary canon and that the average reader of "good literature" is familiar with the names of Borges, Cortázar, Fuentes, García Márquez, and Vargas Llosa and has probably



read some works of these authors consecrated in the world republic of letters. The same would be impossible to affirm for contemporary Spanish literature. As demonstrated in a recent monograph published by *Quimera* (Grohmann and Steenmeijer), the diffusion and reception of Spanish literature differs considerably in countries such as France, Italy, Holland, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. One might mention, for example, the great resonance that Rafael Chirbes' work has had in Germany, while noting that in a country such as Holland, he has had much less of an impact. At the same time, it is also the case that he is virtually unknown in the English-speaking world.

With this less than spectacular reception in mind, how does one explain that in the last decades so much contemporary Spanish literature has been translated? One important factor, though not a decisive one, is Spain's strong economic and political position in the world. The latter view has been prominently discussed in international newspapers (see for example the "Special Report" of *Time* [March 8, 2004] that introduced on the front page with the following words: "In the arts and architecture, business and foreign affairs, food, and sports [. . .] Spain rocks!"). One should also note that Spain has a remarkable image in foreign countries which has been captured in international media public announcements to promote tourism: "Smile! You are in Spain." Spain is no longer Galdos' nineteenth-century "pobre casa" (poor house) or as it was during the Franco era. Spain has become a wealthy, modern, and democratic country while at the same time remaining exotic: this New Spain represents for most foreigners the hybrid promise of hospitality, hedonism, and modernity.

Another important factor to consider is that Spain has a very professional and competitive literary and editorial infrastructure at its disposal. Though Spain is known for its small readership, this should not detract from the fact that it is among the most industrious countries with regards to book production and distribution. Publishing houses continue opening new markets in Spain, Latin America, and in the United States, where Spanish is its second most spoken language. Additionally, new markets are sought where the Spanish language is highly esteemed among students and professionals.

One would be remiss not to mention the literary agencies that since the revolution led by Carmen Balcells in the 1960s have continued to expand and contribute to the current presence that contemporary Spanish literature enjoys abroad. Another substantial factor, and in some cases decisive, are translation and publication subsidies for authors of Spanish literature. Since 1984 such grants are distributed by the *Dirección General del Libro, Archivos y Bibliotecas del Ministerio de Cultura*. This type of important economic assistance covers translation expenses, which in turn saves foreign publishing houses substantial operating costs, thus making the publication of Spanish literature more attractive, competitive, or put differently, privileged. However, this competitiveness is economic rather than literary, one that can lead to shortsightedness, anomalies, and misunderstandings. Let us consider the way that Antonio Muñoz Molina's work has been widely translated into Dutch: to date, eight titles

which include some of his most celebrated novels, such as *Beatus Ille*, *El invierno en Lisboa*, *El jinete polaco*, and *Plenilunio*, and minor works such as *Carlota Feinberg*. Nonetheless, one could not submit that he has achieved literary importance in Holland given the fact that his books have received few and not very enthusiastic reviews by Dutch newspapers and that they have had meager sales. Why then, has De Geus continued to publish Muñoz Molina's work? Is it because of its loyalty to, or confidence in, him as an author? Or is it perhaps a love for his literature? Surely, if these were the only motives, the standard would have been to promote two or three of his books rather than eight. It is my opinion that the Spanish government has had an important role in facilitating the translation of Muñoz Molina's works into Dutch by taking upon itself much of the economic risks. The case of Álvaro Pombo is even more illustrative: all six of his novels that have been translated into Dutch (all published by the small publishing house Menken, Kasander & Wigman) received subsidies from the Spanish Ministry of Culture.

Given the above considerations, the massive success of *La sombra del viento*, by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, is surprising, as it has sold two million copies in Spain and more than nine million abroad. When the work appeared in 2001, it was the first novel for adults by an author who was completely unknown in the literary circuit. Planeta promoted the novel without grandiose expectations: the publisher did not organize a publicity campaign and would have been happy if it had sold the first print run of four thousand copies. In the beginning, the media barely noticed Ruiz Zafón's novel. Yet it was to become a huge success, as readers were attracted to it exponentially through word of mouth (which is in reality the ultimate publicity a book can receive). Emili Rosales, Ruiz Zafón's editor (and author of *La ciutat invisible*, a novel which in the shadow of *La sombra del viento* became a considerable success in France, Italy, Germany, and Holland) accurately noted:

[*La sombra del viento*] es un longŕsŕller que se ha ido construyendo al ritmo de los lectores, pues sus ventas oscilan en unas ondas que coinciden con el tiempo medio que se tarda en leer el libro: es decir, una ola de personas lo leen y luego lo recomiendan, provocando un incremento de ventas, y así sucesivamente. (Ayén 37)

([*La sombra del viento*] is a long-seller constructed to the rhythm of readers, for its sales oscillate in waves, which coincide with the average time readers need to read the book. That is, a wave of people read it and then recommend it, provoking an increase in sales, and the same process is repeated time and again.)

The German literary agent Alexander Dobler, whose clientele resides in Germany, Holland, and Scandinavian countries, recalls that initially Ruiz Zafón's novel did not generate a lot of interest abroad. Editors in those countries were doubtful of its forthcoming success given the translation, the editorial costs, and the overall investment involved with the publication of such a voluminous work. Dobler affirms, "Het was geschreven door een auteur die niemand kende en wiens naam ook

nog eens moeilijk uitspreekbaar was voor noorderlingen. Het kostte me uiteindelijk een jaar om het boek in het hoofd en hart van mijn cliënten te praten” (Hoeniet 52) (It was a book written by an author that no one knew and whose name was difficult to pronounce for Northern Europeans. All in all, it took me a year to convince my clients). When a German edition was published in 2003, the novel was well received by the media, was widely reviewed, and became a commercial success. Soon thereafter, it received extraordinary praise in the Frankfurt Book Fair from Joschka Fischer, the Minister of Foreign Affairs (“Sie werden alles liegen lassen und die Nacht durch lesen!” [You will leave everything that you are doing and keep on reading all night long]), and became one of the most successful best sellers of the new century.

The reception of Ruiz Zafón’s novel in Holland was similar to its reception in Spain. The Dutch version appeared in the fall of 2004, and in the first few months, contrary to the great expectations of the translator (Nelleke Geel) and the publisher, only a few thousand copies were sold. However, in 2005 due to the fascinating and vital role of word of mouth publicity, sales increased astronomically, and continue to grow. *La sombra del viento* turned out to be more than a best seller: it is concurrently a *steady-seller*, and, in the words of Emili Rosales, a *long-seller*. To date, more than 700,000 copies have been sold in Holland. To have a clear idea of the implications of this figure, one only needs to consider that the fact that the translated works of Vargas Llosa, which includes his narrative and essays, have sold 250,000 copies in Holland in a period that spans more than four decades. *La sombra del viento* is without a doubt, the first true world, or if you prefer, global success for contemporary Spanish literature. Ruiz Zafón’s novel is well-known, sold, and read on a massive scale. It is in every bookstore, kiosk, airport, and nightstand. It achieved what no other modern Spanish literary work had managed to achieve before: to form part of a collective global memory. To put Ruiz Zafón’s success into perspective, it would be more appropriate to compare the accomplishment of his novel with that of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, rather than to the reception of Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s novels (the first writer of democratic Spain to achieve the status of an international best-selling author).

Unlike Ruiz Zafón (and of course Brown), Pérez-Reverte has not achieved the same authorial status abroad. In Holland for example, the author of *La tabla de Flandes* continues being an unknown writer who is under-sold, though seven of his works have been translated into Dutch. Among these is *El sol de Breda*, a novel from the Alatríste series whose action takes places in the Netherlands. As such, one would think that it would be more popular with Dutch readers. This is not the case. To celebrate and promote the publication of the Dutch translation and generate publicity, Pérez-Reverte was invited to Breda to “return” the key to the city to its mayor. A similar key was given to General Spinola in 1625 as portrayed by Velázquez in his famous painting *The Surrender of Breda* (which appears on the cover of the Dutch edition of *El sol de Breda*). Pérez-Reverte’s visit, I insist, made little difference: the staged presentation generated little publicity and his book sales were as meager as those of his other Dutch translations.



It seems appropriate to link the difference of reception between *La sombra del viento* and Arturo Pérez-Reverte's novels with yet another, perhaps more intrinsic divergence. Pérez-Reverte's novels vindicate historical and cultural signs of identity that are profoundly rooted in the Mediterranean's millennial patrimony (enmeshed with literary ambition fervently defended by its author, though not always confirmed by the critics). Pura Fernández maintains: "El autor se aparta de la literatura fungible o, según sus propias palabras, de la "literatura desechable," la de los autores anglosajones de *best seller*, porque éstos no se nutren "de una imaginación que cuenta con tres milenios de historia narrativa" (43) (The author distances himself from throwaway literature, or according to his own words, 'disposable literature,' like that of English speaking best-selling authors, given that they are not nourished 'by an imagination that has three millennia of narrative history').

In contrast, Carlos Ruiz Zafón draws inspiration from another source. In 1993, he moved to Los Angeles to earn a living as a screen writer and a teen novelist. It was there where he also wrote his first adult novel, *La sombra del viento*. His residence in the United States had a profound effect on *La sombra del viento*, whose plot, sequences, and images are indebted to Hollywood's stereotypical cinema. Thus the reader finds a young hero who confronts precarious situations which he is always able to overcome unharmed. As expected, there are heroes and villains, vulgar sex and pure love, violence, much dialogue, many cliffhangers for climactic tension, and numerous one-liners for comedy. However, *La sombra del viento* is not just Hollywood entertainment. It is also an ode to literature and the text as a place of memory which is foregrounded in the novel's opening plot: the Cemetery of Forgotten Books, the protagonist's (Daniel Sempere) obsession for the work and life of Julián Carax, and the numerous references to a specific literary canon (Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Umberto Eco, Gabriel García Márquez, among others). *La sombra del viento* oscillates between high and low culture.

Though there are apparent divergences with respect to their literary sensibilities and stylistic elaborations, I do not deem it unwise to underscore the similarities between *La sombra del viento* and *The Da Vinci Code* (the contemporary best-seller paradigm) with respect to the hybrid character of both novels: the manner in which they combine the cultural tradition of the Old World, and the narrative strategies borrowed from popular culture such as the detective novel and certain Hollywood cinema.

In the case of Javier Sierra's *La cena secreta* (The Secret Supper), its affinity with *The Da Vinci Code* is even more prominent as evidenced by the important role of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* in both novels though much more emphasized and elaborated in Sierra's novel than in Brown's. While the action in Brown's novel takes place in modern times, *La cena secreta* is a historical novel in which Leonardo da Vinci plays a decisive role and is an essential character. It is important to bring to the fore that the relation between the two novels is one of affinity, and not one of influence. When *The Da Vinci Code* was published in 2003, Javier Sierra had been working on

his novel for several years. However, this does not imply that the success of *La cena secreta* is not indebted to Brown's novel. Sierra explained to me:

Johanna Castillo [agente literaria] leyó *La cena secreta* en Nueva York en una noche y decidió apostar por ella con un adelanto astronómico de 500.000 dólares. En este tiempo Simon & Schuster, antiguos editores de Dan Brown (publicaron todos sus libros, excepto *El código Da Vinci* que editó Random House con el éxito que conocemos), estaban buscando una obra con la que llenar el hueco dejado por Brown. (personal communication June 27, 2008)

(Johanna Castillo [literary agent] read *The Secret Supper* in New York one night and decided to risk an astronomical advance of \$500,000. At this time Dan Brown's previous publishers, Simon & Schuster [they published all his books except *The Da Vinci Code* which was published by Random House with well-known success], were looking for a work to fill the void left by Brown.)

According to Sierra, it was of utmost importance that:

cuando me pidieron apoyo para las fases iniciales de marketing 'in house' (dentro de la Editorial) del libro, yo les envié un video profesional en el que, en inglés, yo mismo les presentaba el libro y les hablaba del alcance de la historia de *La cena secreta*. Aquel video, diferente a las grabaciones domésticas de autores frente a una cámara que estaban acostumbrados a ver, les animó y les convenció de que tenían un buen material en las manos.

(When they asked for my support in the book's initial 'in house' marketing phases I sent them a professional video in English in which I presented the book and spoke of the historical significance of *The Secret Supper*. That video was different from the usual homemade recordings by other authors. It enticed them and convinced them that they had good material in their hands.)

Johanna Castillo's and Simon & Schuster's confidence in the novel was shared by the translator, none other than the writer and bibliophile Alberto Manguel, who without a doubt imbued the novel with his own prestige. It would not take long for their confidence to be justified for in spring of 2006, the novel was launched in the North American market with a print run of 370,000 copies. *La cena secreta* soon became an absolute success. It was the first book originally written in Spanish to be highly ranked on the *The New York Times* best-sellers list.

*La sombra del viento* and *La cena secreta* belong to a new subgenre distinguished as best seller, historical novel, or more specifically, religious thriller, revelation novel, or *thracul* (*thriller histórico religioso aventurero cultural*: cultural adventurous religious historical thriller).<sup>4</sup> Another *thracul* published in the United States that same spring

with similarly impressive circulation was Matilde Asensi's *El último Catón* with a first print run of 100,000 copies. As with *La cena secreta*, it was received as a novel that emulates *The Da Vinci Code* despite the fact that Asensi's original version had been published in 2001, two years before Brown's novel. However, the comparison of *La cena secreta* and *El último Catón* with *The Da Vinci Code* did not prove to be detrimental to the alleged (even though unauthentic) imitators, given that some North American critics judged Sierra and Asensi's novels to be superior narratives and better documented than Brown's.<sup>5</sup>

Ruiz Zafón, Sierra, and Asensi have opened up the international market for the Spanish thracul. Others writers have followed in their footsteps: Emilio Calderón (*El mapa del creador*), Esteban Martín and Andreu Carranza (*La clave Gaudí*), Juan Gómez-Jurado (*El espía de Dios*), and Ildefonso Falcones, whose novel *La catedral del mar* was launched in 2008 in the North American market with much success. It was received with great interest and emphasized as a serious novel, similar to, or even superior to Ken Follett's *Pillars of the Earth*. It was argued that "Follett merely describes the medieval mind-set to a modern audience; Falcones enters it, complete with its acceptance of brutality and embrace of religious sensibility" (*The Washington Post* 2008).

For lack of space, it is not feasible to go into depth here regarding the possible explanations for the world success of the thracul. I limit myself to the lucid words of the Dutch philosopher Ger Groot who links the surprising popularity of the genre in the West to a sociocultural phenomenon of extraordinary scope:

Religion has become secularized in a manner not foreseen by philosophers and sociologists. Religious beliefs have not been substituted by scientific ideas, nor has devotion been compensated by a hedonism lacking in metaphysical emotions. Religion has slipped into daily life. It is everywhere, barely visible, yet, commonplace.

Historical-religious novels—which trace back to Umberto Eco's founding novel of the genre, *The Name of the Rose*—are often read not as fictions, but as revelations. They divulge truths that confront the institutionalized dogma of Christian religions, and in particular Catholicism. They offer alternative histories and "secret" knowledge repressed during centuries of religious institutionalizations. In this way they concurrently satisfy religious, or if you prefer, metaphysical needs and inscribe themselves into the critical and individualistic discourse of modernity, combining the best of two worlds.

In what follows, I am interested in commenting on another question: how do we explain that it is precisely in Spain where so many well-versed authors in this new sub-genre are competing in the center of the world republic of letters? In the first place, it is necessary to comment on the professionalization of the Spanish editorial publishing world, which follows the North American model, by considering the sale of the product as more important than the product itself. The author loses the romantic aura of genius to be converted in an artisan, or if you prefer, an artist

that should provide products that perform well in a market dominated by competition and profit. The author's words are no longer sacred by definition. They can or perhaps should be polished, adapted, crossed out, or further developed if the editor deems that such corrections will facilitate greater accessibility to readers.

The inception of Ildefonso Falcones' *La catedral del mar* illustrates that this may not only include the correction of minor details in the form of minimal editorial interventions. In 2002, he began to write a novel which he later revised in the Ateneo School of Writing. Subsequently, he sent his manuscript to six publishing houses and, thereafter, found out that no one was interested in his narrative debut. Through the mediation of a friend of a friend, his book was placed in the hands of literary agent Sandra Bruna, and through her, it reached Ana Liarás, editor at Grijalbo. Between the three of them they prepared his first novel which became a national, and later, an international best seller. As Sandra Bruna specifies: "(E]l libro) necesitaba retoques. Nosotras le recomendamos recortar unas sesenta páginas y mejorar las partes en las que flojeaba. Su editora colaboró también con él perfilando algunos personajes, simplificando episodios" (Azancot) ([The book] needed finishing touches. We recommended that sixty or so pages be reduced and that some weak sections of the novel be further developed. Its editor also collaborated in shaping certain characters and simplifying episodes). Falcones similarly characterizes the revision process: "Trabajamos mucho con el libro los tres, porque al recortar la extensión tuve que cambiar algo el argumento, di más empuje a algunos personajes, aunque sin alterar la trama" (Azancot) (All three of us worked a lot on the book because by reducing its total length I had to change the narrative somewhat, giving more force to some of the characters without altering the plot).

The big changes in the editorial world are illustrative of the great cultural change that has come about in a democratic Spain. The ostracism, self-complacency, and conservatism defended during centuries by dominant institutions gave way to openness, flexibility, and curiosity. It seems to me that the mentality of the contemporary Spaniard has much in common with its North American counterpart. Both feel an insistent and irresistible obsession to prove or justify their existence, to take the initiative, to show off, and to continuously renovate themselves. This may have its origin in the problematic link with the modern tradition of the Old World felt by both countries. To use a forceful term, both countries have a complex. North Americans have the sensation that their historical roots are short and incomplete, while Spaniards believe that theirs are politically incorrect due to the anomalous trajectory they traveled for centuries in a continent replete with modernization. The two countries feel, in some way, that they are handicapped Europeans. One could add that contemporary Spaniards are more than the new European brothers of the Americans due to Spain's profound historic roots.<sup>6</sup> This observation elucidates how authors such as Javier Sierra, Ildefonso Falcones, and Julia Navarro form part of a new generation that is able to take advantage of the best of both worlds: a new mentality of vitality, flexibility, and curiosity stimulated them to play with the historical and cultural discourses transmitted within the traditional model.



Moreover, today's readers, as Javier Sierra posits, "feel the need to return to a more magical perception of reality [. . .] Spain is a country with a rich history [. . .] and when it comes to looking for the origins of Western civilization, it is natural that all eyes turn to Europe and the Mediterranean, the very heart of where it all started" (Montejo). Tom Colchie, Ruiz Zafón's literary agent in the United States, adds yet another argument: "American literature is becoming less and less interesting as a direct result of the industrialization of literature through workshops. [. . .] This is pushing editors to look elsewhere for new, more exciting things" (Montejo).

Given the above discussion, I do not consider it to be an exaggeration to conclude that thanks to its best-selling authors, Spain is settling down in the world republic of letters. Given the success of thraculs, Spanish literature is finally living its long-awaited and anticipated international boom. This (r)evolution has hardly been a motive for the Spanish literary establishment to celebrate. Now that the best seller is news, literary critics, like it or not, have no choice but to review Carlos Ruiz Zafón's new novel, *El juego del ángel* (The Angel's Game) but, on the other hand, the literary press continues to close its doors to an author like Javier Sierra. The literary supplement of *El Mundo*, the daily to which Sierra periodically contributes, insists on not reviewing his novels. In the United States, however, thraculs are worthy of being commented on and reviewed with intent and dignity in such prestigious newspapers as *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*. It goes without saying that the less than generous treatment given to these authors in their own country is bothersome to them: "Aquí la literatura es un gueto de mediocridad y pretensión" (Here literature is a ghetto of mediocrity and pretentiousness), grumbled Carlos Ruiz Zafón during the 2008 Madrid Book Fair. (*El País* May 30, 2008). Even Arturo Pérez-Reverte is still bothered by the presumed elitism of Spanish literary critics despite his success in many foreign countries and regardless of the critical and academic recognition his work enjoys in Spain.<sup>7</sup>

It's not difficult to pass judgment on thraculs working from a certain critical-literary imaginary and institutionalized paradigms. I would add that this should not detract from the fact that authors such as Carlos Ruiz Zafón, Javier Sierra, Julia Navarro, and Matilde Asensi have broken barriers by inscribing Spanish letters at the center of the world republic of letters with the type of narrative that Pascale Casanova has denoted as "world fiction" (171). This is to say:

Productions [that] have created a new composite measure of fictional modernity. Restored to current taste are all the techniques of the popular novel and the serial invented in the nineteenth century: between the covers of a single volume one can find a cloak-and-dagger drama, a detective novel, an adventure story, a tale of economic and political suspense, a travel narrative, a love story, a mythological account, even a novel within the novel. (171)

Departing from other criteria than the established ones, one could affirm that the horizon of the narrative of Javier Sierra and company is broader than that of much of

the Spanish literature that is considered to be “serious.” The thracul exemplifies the ease with which its authors incorporate scientific, historiographic, cultural, and literary knowledge in their novels. Given these characteristics, Spanish thracul authors have proven themselves to be capable of amassing literary capital that appears to be conquering and establishing a stable position in the center of the world republic of letters. This achievement is not to be underestimated, for it would be the first time since the Golden Age that a consistent and coherent Spanish literary corpus achieves such an accomplishment.

## Notes

1. In 1926, an Italian translation of *Fortunata y Jacinta* was published as *Fortunata e Giacinta: Storia di due Donne maritate* (Firenze: Adriano Salani Editores); the first German edition, *Fortunata und Jacinta: 2 Geschichten von Ehefrauen* (Zürich: Manesse), was published in 1961.
2. The presence and prestige of Spanish American literature continued to be dependent in great measure to the consecrated values of the boom (García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Fuentes). Only one new value competes with them in terms of success and presence (though not in literary prestige): Isabel Allende. As is well-known and was highlighted in Madrid's 2008 Book Fair (Cruz), post-boom literature has not secured the commercial success and literary prestige on the same scale as García Márquez and company. The most commented post-*boom* author is without a doubt Roberto Bolaño. Notwithstanding the numerous translations and critical commentary of his corpus, there is an abyss between the impact of his work and that of García Márquez et al.
3. Ruiz Zafón is also the author of four teen novels that have come to be known after the success of *La sombra del viento: El príncipe de la niebla* (1993), *El palacio de la medianoche* (1994), *Las luces de septiembre* (1995), and *Marina* (1999).
4. See also, among others, Ferrero, Galán, and Winston Manrique.
5. “Javier Sierra's take on Da Vinci is much sharper, more focused and more rewarding. This is partly because Sierra is a better writer and largely because his story makes more sense” (*New York Daily News* May 26, 2006); “Asensi's research is much better than Brown's, and her writing is better, too.” (*The Calgary Herald* May 27, 2006).
6. In *El antiamericanismo español*, Alessandro Seregni affirms that, according to a 2004 survey, “the Spanish people, second to the Turks, sympathizes less with the United States” (277). John Hooper synthesizes some of the historical reasons for this rejection based on different ideological levels: “The US prompts grim historical memories among many Spaniards. Traditionalists recall that it was the US that put an end to the Spanish empire in 1898, wiped out its fleet and deprived it of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Progressives remember it was Washington that helped Franco out of his international isolation in exchange for military bases in Spain. And due to its close ties with Latin America, Spaniards have tended to be more aware than other Europeans of the ugly sides of US foreign policy there” (75–76). Above all, this resentment refers to the United States' political power and not necessarily to its mentality, way of life, or

- North American culture, as stated by Hooper: "Spaniards tend not to expect from the state the sort of cushioning which is regarded as normal in the rest of Western Europe. They look astonished when you say it, but of all the societies in Europe, theirs is the one where attitudes to the role of the state are closest to those in the United States" (81).
7. See also Pérez-Reverte's speech delivered at the Second "Cita internacional de la literatura" celebrated in 2008 in Santillana del Mar, where there are two discursive arguments: a passionate praise for "classic" narrative and a vicious diatribe against certain literary ideals that dominated the era in which he published his first novels: "Durante algún tiempo se nos quiso imponer una idiotez victimista que, además, es mentira: la literatura difícil, minoritaria y poco leída era la única que valía la pena. La otra era prescindible y superficial, culpable de la facilona vulgaridad de contar cosas (como si contar cosas fuera fácil) y de ser bien acogida por el ciego y necio vulgo" (163) (For some time we were to be branded with victimism, which was a lie: difficult minority literature was read little, yet it was the only literature deemed worthwhile. The other was dispensable and superficial, guilty of narrating with improper simplicity [as if storytelling were easy], and of being accepted by the blind and vulgar). This speech is replete with spears thrown at representatives that follow a particular literary program: como "algunos pajilleros de la vacuidad inane, capaces de elogiar, o incluso de escribir, novelas cuyo fascinante argumento es, precisamente, la imposibilidad de escribir una novela" (169–70) (some of the idiotic shallow jerk-offs capable of praising or even writing novels, whose fascinating argument is precisely the impossibility of writing a novel). "Hablo de quienes olvidan, o ignoran, un principio elemental que ya apuntaba Stevenson: si un presunto novelista no tiene nada que contar, por muy bello estilo que maneje, lo mejor es que se calle. Que cierre la boca, que deje las saturadas mesas de novedades de las librerías en paz, y se vaya a hacer puñetas" (164) (I am speaking about those who forget or choose to ignore the basic principle that Stevenson called our attention to: if a would-be novelist had nothing to say, regardless of his stylistic beauty, it would be better that he not even open his mouth. He should keep it shut and refrain from adding weight to the already heavy and saturated bookstore shelves. Let him go to Hell). "Para saber qué siente un don Nadie recién divorciado viajando en metro no necesito leer trescientas páginas donde un pelmazo juega a ser novelista masturbando a la perdiz. Me basta con divorciarme y tomar el metro" (170) (I don't need to read 300 pages by a masturbating bore that plays novelist to know what it's like for a recently divorced Mr. Nobody to take the train. I'd rather divorce my wife and take the train).

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