
Marginally Normal and Normally Marginal: the Concept of Decentered Self in Julián Ríos's Fiction

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Literary character is one of the basic structures and the very foundation of any narrative. In most traditional literary fiction, a literary character is represented as a specific person taking actions during the course of the story or a novel. As Aleid Fokkema observes "for a long time nothing seemed more natural than to take it for granted that characters represent human beings, that novels were about people, and that psychological motives sustained the plot" (18). Consistently, rather than talking about characters, many critics talk about people, heroes or human beings (Fokkema 19-20), and focus on their psychology, motives, and the ethical evaluation of their actions. In the past, literary critics have often equated the writer's skill with the ability to create lifelike characters, and many writers have left written testimony of their concern with constructing veritable and convincingly "real" characters in their narratives.

It would be difficult and particularly unrewarding to attempt applying traditional modes of character analysis to Julián Ríos's texts, such as the multivolume *Larva, Sombreros para Alicia* or a more recent novel *Amores que atan o Belles lettres*. By those criteria Ríos's characters are socially deficient and dysfunctional, inconsistent in their motives, flat and merely schematic in their heavy reliance on intertextual references, schizophrenic in their fragmented psychological reality, and ultimately doomed to failure, if they were to function in "the real

world." Indeed, Ríos's characters are constructed in a way which, in realistic and modernist narratives, was reserved for characters from the margins of the "acceptable" society, both in the manner they are constructed on the textual level, as in the way they seem to function (or rather not to function, by traditional standards) in the represented world. As Gordon Slethaug observes, "the double [and hence all composite characters]...opens a window onto psychological and social disorder and illegality, onto what lies outside the structures of dominant value systems" (19). However, a careful reader will no doubt notice, as in the case of Ríos's prose, the characters' lack of conformity with modern society's prescriptions and recipes, both literary and social, is not a matter of the author's deficient writing skill, but rather a question of conforming to an entirely different poetics—a poetics of postmodernist fiction. Polymorphous and multiform, the characters which populate Ríos's fictional universe challenge the notions and functions of a character as a well-established and unchanging literary construct. Rather than creating characters with monolithic personalities within a definite and unique context and following the well-established character-to-person correspondence, Ríos engages his central characters in continuous games of hide-and-seek, games of lost and displaced identities. During the course of action Ríos's central characters do not merely act: they *become* multiple, related,

and yet merge from the different entities they comprise into one literary construct. Ríos's characters are best described as *protean*: the adjective derives from Proteus, the mythological keeper of Poseidon's dolphins, who not only could foretell the future, but also had the unusual ability to adopt any physical shape he chose. In the case of the two main characters in Ríos's novelistic series *Larva*, the protean element is encoded even in their names. Milalias, is literally *a man of a thousand names*, and Babelle, the main female character, is synonymous with the multiplicity of tongues. As Derrida notes in his essay "Des Tours de Babel," Babel is a symbol of confusion, of lost coherence and unity. It symbolizes the impossibility of complete translation, and, by extension, of communication with the Other. But through the magic of endless neologisms and word-games, which Ríos himself named *motamorphoses* [sic], the Babel/Babelle of *Larva* stands not so much for the confusion of tongues on which Derrida focuses, but rather the fusion of multiple selves in one. Through continuous verbal transformations and during the course of the novel, Babelle becomes [among others] Sheherezade, Sei Shōnagon, and Molly Bloom. The connections Ríos creates are not always obvious at first glance; they are nonetheless clear and explicit. They are a part of the text, not merely a function of tentative interpretation.

As in the case of Sheherezade, Babelle's tale is one of many tales. But since it can be read forward, backward, and inside out—and if the reader prefers, with disregard for the linearity of narrative—it is also a tale of many tails, or endings. And just as Sheherezade's time frame is one thou-

sand nights, Babelle's is the magical night of Saint John (with an additional reference to "La noche oscura" of St. John of the Cross), according to Ríos a *thousandnightsinone* (*milnochesenuna* or "las mil y una noches de una noche," *Larva* 11). Like Sei Shōnagon, a Japanese female writer of the 10th century, Babelle jots down her sensual memories and personal comments in glosses gathered at the end of *Larva*, in a section titled "Pillow Notes," which is also, the title of Sei Shōnagon's prose. And like Molly Bloom, who in the final chapters of *Ulysses* implores "Jamesy" to let her step down from the pages of the book into the "sensual world," Babelle is aware of the fictitious nature of her existence. She and Milalias both mention *Herr Narrator*, whom they accuse of distorting their voices by calling him "una especie de ventrílocuelo que malimita nuestras voces" (12). In an odyssey similar to Babelle's transformation, Milalias is transformed into Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, the Knight Errant, Sindbad, and the Wandering Jew.

This gallery of polymorphous characters is not limited to the initial volume of *Larva*. It is a recurring motif in Ríos's narrative. Other examples of Ríos's protean characters include Alice in a 1993 collection of interconnected vignettes titled *Sombreros para Alicia*, and "la Fugitiva" in the most recent, 1995 novel, *Amores que atan o Belles lettres*.

One can find certain analogies between Ríos's treatment of a literary character and that of several other Spanish contemporary authors whose fiction is considered postmodern, although the degree of the characters' instability varies from one text

and author to another. In Juan Pedro Aparicio's novel *El año del francés*, the main characters are at some point superimposed over their earlier, historic counterparts. In Carmen Martín Gaité's now canonical *El cuarto de atrás*, it is implied that the man in black who interviews the narrator, may also be a protean character. Although the narrator isn't sure herself, this man may comprise the figure of the unnaturally enormous cockroach she sees in the hall, the devil from an old picture hanging in her bedroom, or a fictitious character from her juvenile, never-published romance novel (novela rosa). Torrente Ballester's fiction also provides numerous examples: as Genaro Pérez notes in his study *La novela como burla/juego*, José Bastida, the main character of *La saga/fuga de JB*, is also "a protean character, who goes through transformations, and sometimes incarnates an astronomical number of [different] characters" (44). In another study of Torrente, Janet Pérez mentions a total of 343 "projections" of this character which can be found in the novel (112).

It could be reasonably argued that polymorphous characters are not new and, in fact, have a long literary tradition. After all, Proteus himself is not a postmodern character, nor are Don Quijote, Dorian Gray, or Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But it is not the lack of stability that distinguishes the protean characters created by Julián Ríos from the traditional ones—it is the positive value which this instability brings to the characters that constitutes a new and distinguishing feature.

In literature and folklore, typical polymorphous figures capable of physical transformation range from the un-dead to

werewolves, vampires, and witches. It is worth noting that all these popular embodiments of Otherness carry the stigma of being a threat to the established order of things. By their very existence, since they are perceived as different manifestations of the Other, they threaten to undermine a coherent vision of reality, or the *grand narrative*, to use Lyotard's term. The Other is perceived as a threat and has to be either neutralized or destroyed. One way of neutralizing Otherness is to rationalize it as a deficiency of the normal state. As Foucault would have it, Otherness can be explained as an illness or madness. If Otherness cannot be rationalized, it has to be destroyed. Both popular mythology and literature include many examples of the above paradigm. Werewolves and vampires, two most popular folk-literature embodiments of Otherness, both defy a different series of basic ontological borderlines. In the case of vampires, it is the separation between the living and the dead that is threatened; in the case of werewolves, the distinction between the human and the animal. In either case, both are very basic, fundamental oppositions to the established order.

Folk and popular literature have confined their interest in the Other to discovering the means of its control or destruction. What needs to be known about werewolves and vampires is no more than what is needed to destroy and neutralize their Otherness: silver-cast bullets or wooden stakes will re-establish the threatened ontological borderlines by making the Other dead—a clear, unambiguous, and hence unthreatening condition.

In literature, the process of transformation into Otherness itself is often con-

structed by literary texts as a means of punishment, a symbolic banishment from the realm of the normal and the quotidian: Ovid provides many examples of gods punishing mortals in this way in his *Metamorphoses*, and Kafka's version of human-to-insect change in his *Metamorphoses* implies that its cause is some unspecified crime and its outcome a deserved punishment.

Otherness thus poses a very vivid threat to the established order. On the level of an individual it poses a threat to identity, sanity, self-preservation, and, ultimately leads to self-destruction. The sad end of Don Quijote, himself a quasi-protean character, who imitates and takes on different identities, is a perfect example of the disastrous effect which such a personality split has on an individual. In his study of the double in literature, Gordon Slethaug gives many examples of characters split among "polarities which repel each other.... These [different] selves and worlds are equally strong and coexistent, but they are incapable of reconciliation" (54).

The conflict between the coherent self and the Other has been rationalized by Freudian and Jungian criticism as the conflict between the conscious and the subconscious, or between *thanatos* and *eros*. This tension of two opposing forces produces a traumatizing split, which, in turn, leads to psychosis and is ultimately destructive to an individual. But this psychological rift, or in Ríos's terms "desdoblamiento," is not a traumatizing experience for Ríos's characters, or postmodern characters in general. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, perhaps the best known literary rendition of the Freudian conflict between the

conscious and the subconscious, recurs in *Larva* several times in a humorous manner, as *the strange case of Dr. Freud and Mr. Joyce*, or as *Doctor Rays & Mr. Rayos*, "another strange case of split personality" (11).

In Ríos's fiction previously existing reservation towards and fear of the Other gives way to a clearly marked desire for the Other—the desire for possession of the impossible, otherwise inaccessible knowledge, the knowledge of the world as it is experienced and comprehended only by the Other. The splitting and shifting of the self, the continuous changing of forms and masks by his characters is Ríos's way of expanding their experience beyond what would be directly accessible to them, should they remain single, unchanging selves. Ríos confirmed this view indirectly, in one of the interviews, by saying that Babelle and Milalias invent (and also become) their "doubles" in order to "live their lives in a more intense way" (Robayna 221). Just as in *Larva*, Milalias and Babelle go through multiple transformations, in *Sombreros para Alicia*, Lewis Carroll's character from *Alice in Wonderland* becomes different women thanks to the magic of the Mad Hatter. He invites Alice to try on the various hats he has in store: each one makes her re-live a different story as a different "wearable" persona. One such vignette, titled "San Valentín," recounts Alice's encounter with a mysterious stranger. This man, "un anciano elegante... completamente vestido de negro," tells her the story of their previous amorous encounters, when both of them were different people in distant times and places. The multiplicity of Alice's selves on the level of Mad Hatter's narrative is additionally mirrored

in this particular narrative vignette, since the stranger reveals to Alice the history of their love as it could not have been experienced by mere mortals: during the French Revolution in Paris, hundreds of years later during the World War II in London, and in the present Gramercy Park of New York. In another story, Alice becomes a bull in a corrida in order to kill the torero, an unfaithful lover who betrayed her. Yet another hat contains the vignette called "Masculine/Feminine," which allows her to change gender by just turning the hat front-to-back. Finally, in the last of 23 vignettes, a coiled rattlesnake [serpiente de cascabel] in the form of a hat whispers in her ear "with my double tongue I can tell you about your pasts and futures, perfect and imperfect, one thousand and one lives which await you in the shade of Eros and Thanatos, the great tree of life and death, of ever-changing shape" (*Sombreros para Alicia* 96). Ironically, the book ends with a brief epigraph from Joyce's *Ulysses* (*Sombreros* 100), which inevitably also brings to mind the drawing of a hat-boa-elephant from the pages of Antoine Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*.

For Ríos's Alice, becoming somebody else and experiencing life as various literary characters is a desirable and voluntary act. This act not only does not threaten her identity, but lets her go beyond the individual experience so as to experience Otherness as a part of the self. She is similar to Babelle and Milalias who become different selves "para prolongar vida en ficción—y vice versa" (*Larva* 11). The fear of the Other is replaced by the nostalgia of Otherness. This shift from fear to fascination and desire is not limited to Ríos's fic-

tion, and is not particular to postmodern literature alone—in fact it permeates even the popular culture of Hollywood blockbusters (such as the movie version of *Interview with the Vampire*) and popular television series such as *Quantum Leap* or *Forever Knight*.

I believe that the nostalgia surrounding the Other is a reflection of the postmodern change in the conceptualization of a paradigm of knowledge in which there is held, as a revered and real ideal a centralized, unified knowledge and truth. On the social level, the attainment of knowledge, validated through science and society-sanctioned institutions, is perceived as the way to improve mankind, a way to make it better, to make humanity more humane. This is, in other words, "the modern project." As Brian McHale points out, the modernistic mode of writing emphasizes the epistemological, and poses questions such as "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" (Higgins 101), or "What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it and with what degree of certainty?" (McHale 9) Consistently, traditional literary characters go through "conventional fictional epiphanies in which the central figure advances from incompleteness to wholeness, from ignorance to self discovery and knowledge" (Slethaug 32).

Lyotard's emphasis on seeing the postmodern as a crisis of, and distrust towards, the grand narratives (grand récits), denies the possibility of one absolute truth. Many narratives can (and indeed do) make claims of being adequate descriptions of reality, sometimes, in clear opposition to other competing narratives. Since there is

no longer one "right answer," what follows is an openness towards other constructions and perceptions of reality or other realities. The knowledge of these realities, possessed by the Other, is only possible by actually becoming the Other.

The strange games of hide-and-seek which characterize, to various degrees, most of Ríos's characters and most of his texts, thus become more than simply gratuitous game-playing with the reader. They seem to reflect the dynamics of change from modernistic to postmodern approaches to Otherness and margins of knowledge, and change the views on the nature and functions of representation. As such, Ríos's prose ultimately can be read as "liberature" (Spanish *liberatura*—his favorite term for describing his own prose, which he uses repeatedly in numerous interviews): it frees its characters from the rigid bounds of one single identity, and also liberate the reader from the traditional concept of representation.

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