The Stories We Tell Ourselves
Narrative identity and the fiction of Javier Marías

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At times in the evenings a face
Looks at us out of the depths of a mirror;
Art should be like that mirror
Which reveals to us our own face.
—Jorge Louis Borges, “Ars Poetica”

Reading a Javier Marías novel is like becoming part of a detective story whose mysteries are everyday and seemingly inconsequential bits of life: a stranger’s laughter, a turn of the eyes, a familiar but nameless face. Unlike detective stories, Marías’s novels usually leave these mysteries unresolved. Marías’s most recent novel, The Infatuations (2013), revolves around a bigger mystery: a violent death whose explanation ultimately remains unclear. The narrator, María Dolz, learns who is responsible but cannot tell if what happened was a homicide or an act of euthanasia. There is no proof to be had, no final word.

Marías’s previous work also traffics in ambiguity. The three-volume opus Your Face Tomorrow (2002, 2004, 2007) features a narrator named Jacques Deza who has a talent for reading people’s faces and gauging their potential actions. A shadowy British intelligence operation recruits Deza for his powers of interpretation and tasks him with discerning peoples’ intentions and the “probabilities in their veins.” What comes to haunt Deza’s professional and personal life is the problem of knowing today “your face tomorrow, the face

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that is there already or is being forged beneath the face you show me or beneath the mask you are wearing.”

Both novels demonstrate how our responses to certain ambiguities—the inconsistencies of our intentions, the contingencies of life-changing events, the impossibilities of knowing one’s face tomorrow—help us understand ourselves. Like Marías’s protagonists, we respond to them by constructing and sharing our own narratives. In responding through narratives, we attain distance from ourselves and closeness to others. We come to recognize ourselves and others as unique individuals both subject to our circumstances and capable of altering them.

LITERARY THINKING

While the popular reception of Marías’s fiction has been muted in North America, his novels consistently earn critical and popular acclaim in Europe, where his name is often floated for the Nobel Prize. Born in Madrid in 1951, Marías has written dozens of novels and translated extensively. While it seems natural to describe his fiction as philosophical, Marías says that his novels instead embody a form of literary thinking: “a way of thinking which takes place only in literature—the things you never think of or hit upon unless you are writing fiction. Unlike philosophical thinking, which demands an argument without logical flaws and contradictions, literary thinking allows you to contradict yourself.” According to Marías, literary thinking produces something more like recognition than knowledge. It challenges readers to notice inconsistencies and grasp their meanings within the larger story.

The act of writing itself is a process of discovery for Marías. When writing the thousand or so pages that constitute Your Face Tomorrow, for example, he relied on only a few pages of handwritten notes, starting with the first pages and barely revising them as the rest of the book came together. Literary thinking is the product of invention: “The verb to invent, or inventar in Spanish, comes from the Latin invenire, which means to discover, to find out. That is what I like to do in writing: find out what I am writing about as I write it. I decide on the spot. If I had decided the whole story from the start—how


many characters there will be, what will happen to them, etcetera—I probably wouldn’t write it." This project of invention and discovery rubs off on Marías’s narrators. They often seem at pains to piece together the past—the Spanish Civil War in Your Face Tomorrow, the life of a dead man in The Infatuation—and unearth the ways it has shaped their lives.

Marías’s novels typically begin with the narrator describing a strange or vexing event that then becomes the story’s center of gravity. Near the beginning of The Infatuation, María Dolz reflects on her past encounters with the murdered man and his wife:

I used to delay slightly getting into work just so as to be able to spend a little time with that couple, and not just with him, you understand, but with them both, it was the sight of them together that calmed and contented me before my working day began. They became almost obligatory. No, that’s the wrong word for something that gives one pleasure and a sense of peace. Perhaps they became a superstition; but, no, that’s not it either...it was just that, without my daily sighting of them, I began work feeling rather lower in spirits or less optimistic, as if they provided me with a vision of an orderly or, if you prefer, harmonious world, or perhaps a tiny fragment of the world visible only to a very few...5

Dolz struggles to get the words right, to explain exactly what the couple meant for her. Not satisfied with calling the couple “obligatory” or “a superstition,” she resorts to longer and more metaphorical descriptions. What Dolz initially calls a “sense of peace” soon gets rendered as “a vision of an orderly or, if you prefer, harmonious world.” But even these apparently more fitting descriptions remain provisional, a shortcoming underscored by Dolz’s repeated use of “perhaps” to qualify her words.

Passages like this pervade Javier Marías’s fiction; nearly every pause in dialogue or step forward in the plot prompts the narrator to reflect on the broader meaning of individual events. This preoccupation with interpreting people, actions, and events shows us how the act
of accounting for our pasts, while utterly commonplace, is thornier than we usually recognize.

To negotiate the manifold possibilities of relating their pasts, Dolz and Deza attempt to analyze particular events, doubting and discarding their own interpretations when they do not seem faithful or do not cohere with the larger story. But since the meaning of the whole is not simply given, they must continually hazard guesses and validate them against their interpretations of particular characters and actions.

Marías’s narrators must negotiate the perspectives of other characters in arriving at their own interpretations of events. In The Infatuations, Dolz struggles to reconcile her view of things with the account offered by Díaz-Varela, the man she falls in love with and later learns is responsible for a violent death—that of a friend who was dying of cancer and supposedly asked him to take his life. While Dolz is infuriated with Díaz-Varela, she also feels compelled, out of love, to listen to him. But neither Dolz nor the reader can discern if Díaz-Varela’s story is fabricated, or genuine, or something in between.
While Deza’s job is to predict how people might act in the future, and Dolz’s chief concern is to understand a perplexing sequence of past events, their interpretive tasks are essentially the same: to find the reasons that motivate people to act. Perhaps this is what leads Deza to muse, “to guess at their probabilities, to predict their future behavior, it was almost like writing novels, or at least biographical sketches.” Writing novels involves conceiving of characters’ actions and reasons for acting, which is not so different from understanding why people (including ourselves) act the way they do.

NARRATIVES AND NORMATIVITY

Narration allows Marías’s protagonists to critically reflect on their actions and the circumstances that led to them. At one moment in Your Face Tomorrow, Deza reflects on a man’s irritable outburst, his own reaction, and what it says about his role among his colleagues:

But I didn’t like the man’s second irritable outburst at all. It wasn’t that I felt affronted or bullied. Well, I did, but that didn’t matter, I was not what I was (‘I am not what I am,’ I would sometimes repeat to myself, ‘not entirely,’ I would think, ‘not exactly’)…when I accompanied Tupra [Deza’s boss], alone or with the others; in a sense, I simply played the role of subaltern or subordinate.

Deza admits to feeling affronted and then tries to express why he is not his usual self when working with the intelligence unit. Later, the incongruity between Deza and his surroundings grows almost unbearable, as Tupra goes to shocking lengths to manage a tricky situation, threatening to kill someone and presenting Deza with a moral crisis. Deza later confronts him, “You can’t just go around beating people up, killing them.” To which Tupra responds, “Why, according to you, can’t one do that?” Deza is caught off guard, and has trouble formulating an answer. It is only later that he can more adequately grasp what he should have done and said.

This example, while extreme, helps bring out the ethical functions that narratives can perform. Narratives are not empirical explanations for how one event caused another, but explanations given in normative


7. Your Face Tomorrow: Dance and Dream (New York: New Directions, 2006), p. 86. Deza incorporates a famous line by Iago, the villain of Shakespeare’s Othello: “I am not what I am” (Act 1, Scene 1). The line surfaces several times in Your Face Tomorrow, and Deza is occasionally called Iago, a form of Jacques.
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To use a distinction made by philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, narratives operate in the “logical space of reasons,” as opposed to the space of causes, which is the object of empirical investigation. For Sellars, the space of reasons is conceptually irreducible to the space of causes; to suppose otherwise is to make the central error of empiricism. His point is that an empirical account is not a story, but rather an enumeration of events connected by causes. We learn little about the people behind such events from an empirical point of view.

Instead we seek explanations of human action grounded in the intentional states of people—their desires, beliefs, and values. Such explanations enable an evaluative stance and are satisfying for us in a way that empirical explanations are not. While we may be able to entertain the suggestion that a person committed a crime or a relationship fell apart due to causes beyond anyone’s control, when all the chips are down we would still seek an explanation of these events grounded in peoples’ intentions. A strictly empirical explanation may help us understand why the events occurred, but it does not admit of the possibility of judging people and their actions. The possibility of adopting an evaluative stance is inherent in narratives, in which intentions are regarded not merely as causes of actions but as things that can be right or wrong. Narratives contain “practical wisdom” that organizes and evaluates the events recounted. Paul Ricoeur, reflecting on Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller,” writes:

The art of storytelling is the art of exchanging experiences; by experiences, [Benjamin] means not scientific observations but the popular exercise of practical wisdom. This wisdom never fails to include estimations, evaluations that fall under the teleological and deontological categories... in the exchange of experiences which the narrative performs, actions are always subject to approval or disapproval and agents to praise or blame.

Ricoeur’s contrast between scientific observations and practical wisdom hangs together with Sellars’s distinction between causes and reasons. By “practical wisdom,” Ricoeur has in mind something like Aristotelian phronesis, which involves reflection upon which ends we ought to pursue. Writing and sharing stories is a sort of ethical
exercise: in fashioning narratives we form tentative judgments of actions and characters. Ricoeur further suggests that evaluating what characters do and what befalls them is intrinsic to the meaning of the events recounted.

As exercises in practical wisdom, stories help us evaluate our own actions in light of knowledge we gain or values we adopt; I may regret tomorrow a past action that I have not regretted up until now. Provided that we regret some aspects of our prior selves, the possibility of evaluation introduces a gap between who we were and who we would like to be. Our own narratives express this gap, which is unavoidable and essential to our sense of identity. The activity of coming to know ourselves through narration is descriptive and normative; in writing our own stories we come to grasp what happened from one remove and thus what we ought to have done.

CONTINGENCY AND UNCERTAINTY

For all the uncertainty that weighs on Marías’s narrators in their attempts to interpret intentions and past events, readers are left with a sense of closure upon finishing these novels. This is not unlike the experience of wrapping up a chapter of our lives or productively reflecting on our pasts. In both cases we incorporate contingent events into our sense of self (or observe characters doing so), like the violent death in The Infatuations or an accidental collision on the sidewalk with a person who later becomes one’s spouse. Since these events can change us irreversibly, they demand that we account for how they have changed us, lest we be unknown to ourselves.

While we may hatch detailed plans for our future studies, career pursuits, or relationships, we know these intentions may be
summarily disrupted by accidents or encounters. In Your Face Tomorrow, Deza plans to go back to his native Madrid but happens to be noticed by someone working for a British intelligence unit. In The Infatuations, Dolz is visiting the bereaved wife of the murdered man when Díaz-Varela (who was a good friend of the couple) happens to visit; and so begins Dolz’s infatuation with him. Unforeseeable developments threaten to disrupt our best-laid plans and undermine our sense of identity; they can throw us on our heels until we understand their impact on our lives.

The disruptive nature of unforeseeable events runs up against what Ricoeur calls our self-perspective as “a temporal totality which is itself singular and distinguished from all others.”10 This self-perspective sees our identities as constituted not by our varied experiences, but rather by something fixed that underlies them. This is the source of the belief that we would still be the same people even if we had made very different choices or if other life-changing events had befallen us.

In Oneself as Another, Ricoeur suggests that the tension between these two perspectives—one in which our experiences determine our identities and another in which we remain the same people through time—creates the urgency to narrate. By narrating our own lives we come to grasp ourselves as in one way constituted by our particular experiences and yet in another way by our constant, internal selves. And a particular narrative, one of many possible interpretations of human actions and events, in a sense creates the resulting identity: “the contingency of the event contributes to the necessity, retroactive so to speak, of the history of a life, to which is equated the identity of the character. Thus chance is transmuted into fate...The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told.”11

Ricoeur points out that the events of a narrative, which could have been different or nonexistent, take on an appearance of necessity when integrated into a story. Narratives provide a way of construing

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10. Ibid., p. 147.
11. Ibid.
those events as non-accidental or non-arbitrary to our sense of self. They help render our pasts intelligible by explaining and sometimes justifying why we hold the particular beliefs and intentions we do.

In *The Infatuations*, Dolz’s life would have been utterly different had she not happened to realize that the man she used to observe in the café was the same man whose name appeared in the newspaper reports of his murder. And the murder itself, as Dolz later finds out, was in many ways a matter of dumb chance. Life-changing events like this irreversibly alter our world and pose a threat to our current sense of self. Like Dolz, we try to incorporate them into narratives through which we grasp our own identities; otherwise the present circumstances in which we find ourselves may start to appear arbitrary or absurd when we take a step back. This is partly what makes Kafka’s stories like *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis* so disorientating: an external power that remains alien to the character and readers alike determines the character’s fate.

Though our personal stories bear many ambiguities, the act of narration gives us “the experience, however incomplete, of what is meant by ending a course of action, a slice of life.” This is precisely what delivers a sense of closure to readers of *Your Face Tomorrow* and *The Infatuations*. In each case, we observe the narrator’s attempts to come to terms with an elusive past, which may or may not seem less elusive upon the completion of the story. The narrator has tried, to the limits of her capacities, to understand how this past grounds her identity, after which it becomes possible to turn the page as a changed yet identical person.

Were we not half mysteries to ourselves, and were we not equally baffling to others, there would be little need to write and exchange narratives. Ricoeur writes that it is “precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively.” While the act of narrating can give
us stability regarding our pasts, as Marías’s fiction demonstrates, it does not replace these ambiguities with certainties, but rather helps us recognize them for what they are. We recognize that our lives could have gone otherwise, but that we would still in some sense be the same person; we realize that our past intentions may have been misplaced or that we did not live up to them; and we see how our lives are dependent on others whose actions we cannot foretell.

Narration helps us take a step back and evaluate our actions in relation to others, whose perspectives cannot be wholly known yet cannot be disregarded. Since the stories through which we come to know ourselves are linked to other people in ways we often regret, our own identities can often seem frightfully dependent on the decisions and desires of others. This might be cause for despair if it did not also contain, in Hannah Arendt’s words, “the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all.”