

LOVING LOVES THAT BIND

AMAR AMORES QUE ATAN

Steven MOORE

Abstract: I was surprised when Michael Dirda, book review editor at the *Washington Post Book World*, invited me to review Edith Grossman's forthcoming translation of *Loves That Bind* in 1998, for the newspaper has a policy against reviewers reviewing authors they personally know. Dirda was aware that, as an editor at Dalkey Archive Press, I had overseen publication of the English versions of both *Larva* and *Poundemonium*, which I had prepared and indexed before I left Dalkey in 1996. He may not have been aware that, in addition, I had had the pleasure of meeting and hanging out with Julián in New York City in November 1990. I can't remember why Dirda flaunted the rules, perhaps because he knew that I was more familiar with Ríos's work than most people, but I'm glad he did, for I loved the new novel and welcomed the chance to spread the love.

Keywords: Julián Ríos, Loves that bind, Review, Intertextuality, Modern literature.

Resumen: Quedé sorprendido cuando Michael Dirda, editor de las reseñas de libros del *Washington Post Book World*, me invitó a realizar la de la nueva traducción de Edith Grossman de *Amores que atan* en 1998, ya que el periódico tiene una política según la cual los reseñistas no pueden reseñar autores que conocen personalmente. Dirda sabía que, como editor de Dalkey Archive Press, yo había supervisado la publicación de las versiones en inglés de *Larva* y *Poundemonium*, que había preparado e indexado antes de dejar Dalkey en 1996. Con todo, es posible que no supiera que tuve el placer de conocer y pasar un rato con Julián en Nueva York en noviembre de 1990. No recuerdo por qué Dirda decidió saltarse las reglas, tal vez porque sabía que yo estaba más familiarizado con el trabajo de Ríos que el resto de gente, pero me alegro de que lo hiciera, ya que me encantó la nueva novela y agradecí la oportunidad de difundir el amor.

Palabras clave: Julián Ríos, Amores que atan, reseña, intertextualidad, literatura moderna.

Foreword: I was surprised when Michael Dirda, book review editor at the *Washington Post Book World*, invited me to review Edith Grossman's forthcoming translation of *Loves That Bind* in 1998, for the newspaper has a policy against reviewers reviewing authors they personally know. Dirda was aware that, as an editor at Dalkey Archive Press, I had overseen publication of the English versions of both *Larva* and *Poundemonium*, which I had prepared and indexed before I left Dalkey in 1996. He may not have been aware that, in addition, I had had the pleasure of meeting and hanging out with Julián in New York City in November 1990. I can't remember why Dirda flaunted the rules, perhaps because he knew that I was more familiar with Ríos's work than most people, but I'm glad he did, for I loved the new novel and welcomed the chance to spread the love. Here is what I wrote:

Pity the woman who loves a bibliophile: In addition to competing with former girlfriends or wives, she is up against all the heroines of literature. A man who loves novels often loves their leading ladies, and may even be foolish enough to choose a woman because she reminds him of a literary character or at least a metaphor ("eyes like drenched violets"). A man who confuses his love of books with his love of women is asking for trouble; on the other hand, it can beget a wonderful book like *Loves That Bind*.

Spanish writer Julián Ríos obviously loves both books and women passionately, and in his third novel to be published in English has found the perfect form to express literary love. Having been left by his jealous girlfriend, Babelle, a painter named Emil Alia decides to search for her throughout London, pausing to write her 26 confessional letters about the previous women in his life, in alphabetical order. Though none of them is named, each resembles a female character from modern literature, challenging the reader to guess her identity. Assisting the game reader is Emil's adoption of the style and substance of the writers who created these figures. The first chapter is easy: A is for Albertine, the bisexual flirt of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Some are equally easy to identify—D is for Daisy (*The Great Gatsby*), L is for Lolita, and O is for Woolf's Orlando (the source of the ocular metaphor above)—while others are not so easy. Unless you've read Céline's *London Bridge*,¹ Arno Schmidt's *Lake Scenery with Pocahontas*, and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, you won't be able to recognize the titular heroines of chapters V, P, and Y, respectively.

I'm proud to say I was able to identify all but six of the 26 characters, though I had to spend an hour in a bookstore confirming some hunches. Ríos usually drops hints to the titles of the books he's parodying: For example, in the chapter for X, I had no idea who the referent could be until he used the phrase "the blue of noon in his demonic eyes." I remembered that the French writer Georges Bataille had written a novel called *Blue of Noon* (1957), and when I consulted it, there she was: Xenie. When

¹ Julián urged me to consider publishing this novel in an English translation, which I did in 1995.

Loves That Bind was first published in Spain in 1995, Ríos's publisher sponsored a competition to see how many readers could identify all 26 heroines. Only four readers got them all.

Loves That Bind is more than a literary version of Trivial Pursuit, however. Ríos is exploring the varieties of amorous experience in modern literature. These range from the vampiric (G is for Grace Brissenden, from James's *The Sacred Fount*) to the pedophilic (*Lolita* and *London Bridge*) to the masochistic (W is for Wanda, from Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, the only non-20th-century work I could identify). In between are the more common stages of love affairs, from unrequited love (*The Great Gatsby*) and deception (F is for Florence, from Ford's *The Good Soldier*) to bemusement (S is for Sally Bowles, from Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*) to spirited fun (Z is for—who else?—Queneau's *Zazie in the Metro*). Even if you don't have much of a literary background, you will be fascinated by this gallery of women and the ways they pursue their sense of the erotic.

But it is as a literary tour de force that most readers will be entranced by this book-length love letter to modern literature. Alphabetically structured works of fiction have appeared from time to time—Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*, Karen Elizabeth Gordon's *The Red Shoes*, Gilbert Sorrentino's *Splendide-Hôtel*—but rarely with such delightful results.² A cunning linguist, Ríos puns in several tongues in the manner of his forbears—Lewis Carroll, Nabokov, Schmidt, and above all the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*—and indulges in all kinds of wordplay, imaginatively re-created in Edith Grossman's translation.

For example, the Proustian narrator of the first chapter tells Albertine "of my aversion to the sophisms of sapphism. But she could also adopt an angelic air (was the seraphic pose easier for her than the sapphic?)." The Spanish subtitle for the book is *Belles Lettres*, and Ríos celebrates every meaning of the phrase: These are beautiful letters about the belles of modern belles lettres. It was Emil's love of letters that drove Babelle away, not any actual indiscretions: The loves that bind him are bound in books. Does he eventually find her? Does she read these letters? You'll want to know.

Emil and Babelle are also the immensely appealing protagonists of Ríos's two previous novels: *Larva* appeared here in 1990, and *Poundemonium* in 1997. Both are stunning achievements, albeit challenging to read because of their Joycean density of language, and should have established Ríos here as the world-class belletrist he clearly is. The more accessible *Loves That Bind* should be the one to win for Ríos the large audience he so richly deserves. It's charming, clever, often profound, and frequently moving. I live for novels like this one.

Whom haven't I named? B is for Bonadea (Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*), H for Hermine (Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*), J for Julia (Jean Rhys's *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*), M for Molly (Joyce's *Ulysses*), N for Nadja (André Breton), Q for Quentin (Caddy's daughter in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*), and R for Robin (Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*). Readers who can identify the six remaining heroines are urged to send me their own belles lettres in care of *Book World*.

² I have a longer list of such works in the first volume of my *The Novel: An Alternative History* (p. 183n69), but I thoughtlessly forgot to add *Loves That Bind*.

Afterword: No one responded to that invitation. I now regret identifying so many of the heroines—I felt I was helping the reader out, not showing off—but as long as I did so, here are the remaining six, courtesy Julián himself: Celia is from Beckett's *Murphy*; Ellen from Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*; Iku-Ko from Tanizaki's *The Key*; Klara from Kafka's *Amerika*; and Tristana from the novel and film of the same name by Benito Pérez Galdós (1892) and Luis Buñuel (1970).

TROPELIÁS