

## INTERVIEW WITH JULIÁN RÍOS<sup>1</sup>

### ENTREVISTA CON JULIÁN RÍOS

Mark THWAITE

**Resumen:** Julián Ríos es autor de *Monstruario*, *Amores que atan*, *Poundemonium* y la excelente *Larva. Babel de una noche de San Juan*. Aquí contesta amablemente a mis preguntas.

**Palabras clave:** Julián Ríos, entrevista, literatura, modernidad, tradición, traducción.

**Abstract:** Julián Ríos is author of *Monstruary*, *Loves That Bind*, *Poundemonium* and the excellent *Larva: A Midsummer Night's Babel*. Here he kindly answers my questions.

**Keywords:** Julián Ríos, interview, literature, modernity, tradition, translation.

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**Mark Thwaite:** *Larva* is a massive book. By turns funny, erudite, infuriating, stimulating, allusive, elusive, enchanting... how was it you came to settle on the form of writing that you did?

**Julián Ríos:** *Gradually, bit by bit, listening to the beating of the words. A long novel like Larva develops gradually its form and changes. It had an organic, very organized life, a sort of larval development. It is also an encyclopedic novel and its quixotic bookworm recycles and cannibalizes everything, from Alice's Caterpillar to grub-street pulp. Larva is the beginning of a cycle and contains in embryo the themes of the next and very different novels, for instance Poundemonium, Loves That Bind, or Monstruary, and even of such books of critique-fiction as Kitaj: Pictures and Conversations, La Vida sexual de las palabras (The Sexual Life of Words), or the recent Casa Ulises (Ulysses House), where the main characters reappear, the young lovers Emil and Babelle and their old mentor Reis, AKA Herr Narrator. And London is also a recurrent setting, to some extent a global stage, a résumé of the world. A London of foreigners and immigrants of multiple origins. Larva echoes this multiplicity of tongues, a babel of aliens. Babble of belles, also, to the novice Don Juan and Romeo roaming about the streets, from the Waste Ends of London to the World's End. Of course, the form of writing changes with the nature of each book. Thus the aim in Nuevos sombreros para Alicia (New Hats for Alice) was the flash fictions, and in Loves That Bind the portrayal of characters, while on the other hand in Larva it was the building of a tower of words, a Babel of many stories.*

**M. T.:** Twenty years old now (and I understand big celebrations were held in Spain), did you ever think *Larva* would be so successful?

**J. R.:** *Oh, success is a succession of mirrored mirages. The writer's real success consists in leaving behind a work that will survive him. But, unfortunately or fortunately, he will never know. The still-life paintings called vanitas usually present a skull on a book or besides several books. As anonymous as the skull. Alas, poor Author. Nothing odd will last... Twenty years already? Yes! Mark twenty... Twenty years, I repeat to myself now in French, looking at the river Seine through my French window. Curiously enough, twenty years sounds in French like vain time. You can step twice into the same reversion. And the river ran... By the way, I consider literature as a sort of relay race, through different lanes and traditions, and when a group of young and innovative Spanish writers decided to celebrate Larva's anniversary, some months ago in a symposium [see The Barcelona Review], I forgot for a moment the loneliness of the long distance runner. And I was relieved to see that the novel in Spain had not lost the quality of being novel and new novelists are making it new again.*

**M. T.:** There is a real jouissance to your work. Is the pleasure of the text partially an expression of the freedom you as a Spaniard felt in the early '80s?

**J. R.:** *Do as you like, a minimal maxim, an old favorite of mine, so exalting and at the same time so difficult as a Rabelesian rule. I hold the liberation theory that the best writers liberate the language from taboos, tattoos, cockatoos, repetitions, old fashion repressions and expressions, clichés, fetters, and so forth. For this reason I call it sometimes liberature for short, this liberating literature. In regard to my pleasures of writing, and joie de vivre, I have to say that it started more than a decade before, in the late '60s and early '70s, in London, when Franco was still alive. The first excerpt, with many caustic remarks in lingua franca to Franco and the dictatorship in Spain, was published in 1973, in the Mexican review Plural, edited by Octavio Paz. This and other fragments published in foreign reviews about the same period were not included in Larva: Midsummer Night's Babel and will be reunited in the closing volume called Auto de Fénix (Auto-da-Phoenix). Cervantes called the Italian period of his youth "the free life in Italy." The swinging London gave also this Spaniard a free swing.*

**M. T.:** You helped translate the work. How did you find working so closely on your work again with others who were now collaborating to produce an English version of it? Did you come nearer your own work via translating it?

**J. R.:** *I have an optimistic view of literature and I consider translation as a second opportunity for the text. I'm speaking not only from the point of view of a co-translator of some of his books. The aim of an exigent translation is to improve the original. No text is perfect. Borges, the smart ironist, said in praise of the English translation of Vathek, written in French by William Beckford: "the original was unfaithful to the translation". I'm very lucky with my translators, almost all very creative and experienced. Some of them, for instance Edith Grossman and Albert Bensoussan, are the American and French voice, respectively, of good part of the Latin American novel. In the cases I know or can read the language, I like to read the translation before its publication. I'm always accessible to clarify and even solve a problem. But I don't transact with the insolvent, insolent, lazy, unprofessional counterfeiter. I remember that with the help of my agent we stopped the publication of a calamitous German transmogrification of Loves That Bind where everything was translated and the Paris plane trees were transformed into banana trees. But this is the exception and usually I take my hat off to the translator. In the case of Larva my collaboration with the translators was a unique and exceptional experience. Only the author could give the translator the permission and the help to become an unfaithful traditore to achieve paradoxically the ultimate and highest fidelity. Richard Alan Francis spent a year in Madrid, with a grant, and we devoted many séances to the spirits and ghosts of Larva. Rick's*

*feat is also a feast. I collaborated also actively in the French translation of Larva. I am the co-translator into French of several books of mine, a forced labor sometimes, but Larva was a tour de force. Larva changes its masks in English, French, and Spanish but the inner and threefold persona is always the same.*

**M. T.:** I see Joyce referred to as a forebear, but Sterne and Flann O'Brien seem equally important reference points. The text itself alludes to Cervantes. Which writers/what books would you say most influence you?

**J. R.:** *Their names are legion, a multitude, but the important thing to me is to distinguish among the parade my own tribe, my ancestors and relatives: an old lineage whose founders are Rabelais (in the beginning was the word of words), Cervantes (in the beginning was the book of books), and Sterne (in the beginning was the page, for short), a trinity for eternity, because their books are endless. Joyce and his fellow countryman Flann O'Brien, and many others before, such as Flaubert and the Brazilian Machado de Assis, belong to the same tradition. I always have presented Joyce as an example of integrity, exactness and permanent creativity. I wrote extensively on his work, particularly on Ulysses, and last year I published a fiction-essay or kind of meta-novel on this masterpiece, Casa Ulises. It is an easy house to run, and a fun house too, and I strongly recommend it to those unable to finish Ulysses. I hope the book will appear soon in English.*

**M. T.:** *Larva* has been called a postmodern classic, but it seems to me (wonderfully) to have many of the tropes and concerns of Modernism. I suspect most writers dislike such labels, but where do you see the book in terms of literary traditions (or non-traditions)?

**J. R.:** *You are absolutely right, and thank you for putting the finger on the sore spot of postmodernism. Is there any post for me? In fact I dislike things pre or post, they are preposterous to me. To be modern, every day, absolutely modern, as Rimbaud wished, that's the real thing. Concerning traditions or contradictions, see above, with my dearest Cervantes and sternest Rabelais.*

**M. T.:** What are you working on now? What is coming next?

**J. R.:** *A novel, Puente de Alma, with the name of a famous Paris bridge, and a book of essays.*

**M. T.:** How do you write? Longhand, straight onto the computer?

**J. R.:** *It depends. This interview, for instance, directly onto my pressed Presario or Impressario. But usually I combine longhand and the computer in countless preversions and perversions.*

**M. T.:** What are your favorite websites?

**J. R.:** *The most special: bouvardandpecuchet.com, which I created in my novel Monstruary. In a chapter called "With Bouvard and Pécuchet in Cyberspace" I went to visit Flaubert's two immortal amanuenses, at his little village in Normandy, to discover they have modernized a lot and have exchanged the old writing desk for the computer desk and are copying valuable out of print books and making them available again via the Internet. I hope other literature saviours will follow their path.*

**M. T.:** What is your favorite book/who is your favorite writer?

**J. R.:** *Beware of the man of one book. In Loves That Bind I pay homage to my favorite novels of the twentieth century, courting their heroines, from Albertine to Zazi, without omitting Lolita, Molly and many others. But allow me now to pick up my parents gave me as a prize, after the exams, the complete works of Cervantes and Shakespeare. Two leather-bound books still on the shelf, but not forgotten. My parents wanted to offer me the two best authors in the world. Maybe they were right. These are my two favorite books, physically, by my two favorite authors. Shakespeare, the supreme wordsmith, is the most quoted, alluded, and paraphrased author in Larva, not in vain subtitled Midsummer Night's Babel.*

**M. T.:** What book do you wish you had written?

**J. R.:** *A prophetic book of anticipated memoirs, Memento Memory, revealing my exciting life in 2041, as a terribly earnest young old man, like Jünger the Younger. I'm taking risks, I know. A few years ago, in a Greek dialogue by the Socratic method with the wise novelist and translator Philippos D. Drakodaidis, I made a pun on a greyhound from La Mancha to outline an imaginary novel and the poor dog is now chasing the waves in a beach of la Manche, by the English Channel, in a fiction in progress.*

**M. T.:** Do you have any tips for the aspiring writer?

**J. R.:** *Tipping not allowed. Do as you like...*

**M. T.:** Anything else you'd like to say?

**J. R.:** *Only an anecdote to try to explain the impossibility of seeing everything in a text, even in a plain interview. During World War II a bomb damaged a portal of the cathedral of Chartres and one*

*of the figures there lost part of the stone drapery and revealed a snake around the left leg. Obviously the snake was invisible before the accident. I suppose the artful artist put it there only for the eye of God. I recalled it once when I realized, my God!, that first letter of my first, second, and third answer composed an acrostic GOD. I imagined then a lunatic poet living in Acrostic Land, composing wet blank verses in a dry den, torturing words in unspeakable ways, perhaps inspired enough to complete the acrostic along my incomplete answers: GODISNOWHERE... It's WHAT? A double-edged motto from Larva. What if... Too late! It's getting late.*

**M. T.:** Thanks so much for all your time here Julián.

TROPELIÁS