

JULIÁN RÍOS: AN ENVELOPE OF BEGINNINGS

Thomas McGONIGLE

A Beginning for the Beginnings

It is likely that anyone reading this article will know the source of the following, "A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings." There is no need to cite the source of this text and if a reader of this article does not know the source of this quote it is likely he or she is probably not really a reader of Julián Ríos but I insist on beginning in this fashion as it was located in a place identified by the author of the above quote as, "the privacy of my mind."

a beginning (IV)

Once upon a time, Julián Ríos came to New York City, in December, 1990 and two months later my profile-interview with appeared in The Guardian in London on Friday, February 1, 1991.

Larva: Midsummer Night's Babel (published this month by Quartet Books) has been described in the yearbook of the Encyclopedia Britannica as, "An instant postmodern classic, without doubt the most disturbingly original Spanish prose of the century."

Larva: Midsummer Night's Babel is a novel unlike any ever published in English. It comes complete with index, foldout map, a 32-page glossy section of photos and is the first novel to ever begin on the dust jacket, "To My Undercover Reader: If *Midsummer Night's Babel* will be just one more book that you judge by its cover, let me quickly present, since there's no time or space to waste, a quintessential list of what such a nocturnal Babel embraces. Six hundred pages textually abused with lusty rations of illustrations..."

Larva's closest relative would be Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* but even that would be to miss the point because as Ríos has said, "*Larva* is a novel that can only represent itself, and just barely but I do agree that the aim of all great books is to stand for all works. Joyce used to say that if they burned Dublin down, they could rebuild it on the basis of *Ulysses*. My highest ambition would be to write a book that would permit all of literature to be rewritten if they burned down every library in the world. This is impossible, of course, but authors write to seek the impossible and they have to remain impassable about doing so.

Ríos does understand that all this can be formidable to the prospective reader and he offers the helpful suggestion, "Think of *Larva* as a sort of kitchen gadget. You can use it to prop up tables. It can keep piles of paper from being blown about."

Also, ever of assistance to the reader, Ríos raises his voice, "Remember: the tale is the head of the novel. It is not a surrealist or dadaist novel. It is not a mere juggling of words. That is why there is a map and photos. The city actually exists. I am interested in the actual physicality of London as a city."

The novel's tale is a party in Chelsea on Midsummer's Night in which Don Juan gets his comeuppance for past sins of omission and commission. The London setting is of first importance to Ríos, "London is a resume of the world. It appeals to me because it is a magnet drawing in all the languages of the world to itself. It is a multilingual city, a kind of Third World revenge against imperialism. I listen to a soundtrack of the city. In New York for instance, you are constantly hearing this Puerto Rican Spanish mixed with English. In London I heard a sort of tower of Babel."

From 1969 to 1975 Ríos was a constant visitor to London and continues to visit the city where he is drawn to the parts of London that visitors do not usually see or hear: Battersea Park, Deptford, Chiswick, World's End. His London is a London of foreigners, of marginal people. The central characters of the novel are outcasts. "Out Castilians, you might say," Ríos says. "They take their revenge against the repressed language of their own country. All the languages, all the tongues become Spanish. Spanish becomes a cannibal tongue."

At this point in the usual profile, some more personal details are inserted to let the reader know that the subject, Julián Ríos is an actual so-called human being. The reader must in this case be disappointed.

In more than 10 conversations with Ríos I learned only that he prefers wine to beer because beer gives him a headache and he had been married when he was very young and has two grown children who live on their own. When I mentioned this to his translator Richard Francis, who saw Ríos constantly in Madrid while they worked on the translation he said, "I know little more. Julián is a very private almost secretive person." Biographer Frank MacShane was of the same opinion before meeting Ríos, "Possibly you just have to think of Ríos as a writer without a biography."

When asked why he writes, Ríos quotes the reply he gave to the French newspaper Liberation, "I write to live, I live to write."

But if Ríos does not have a biography, he does have a desire, "I do not so much want many readers as I do want a certain number of readers. Re-readers, if you please. *Larva* does seem to attract good readers. Some writers are proud of the number of readers they have. I don't know about that. I do know my readers are very good readers. I don't know really who and how many but they are all sorts: professors, students, young people. The sort of people who appreciate, what shall I call it. *Cachondo*. You can't really translate it. But it something like sexy, funny, sexy-fun. *Larva*, you must know, is the most stolen book at bookfairs and from bookstores in Madrid."

Ríos, not having a biography of potential gossip, does have at least a literary history and an imagined pedigree, "In my 20s I'd won prizes for my short stories but have never felt any need to reprint them. I prepared myself through them to write the books I have wanted to write: *Larva*, *Poundemonium* and the nearly finished *Belles Lettres*."

Poundemonium, similar in form and technique to *Larva*, is centered upon South Kensington and the figure of Ezra Pound who lived there before and during the First World War.

Published last year in Spain is *Impressions of Kitaj*, an impassioned long conversation on the work of the American painter R. B. Kitaj. There are also four other books on painters which join Ríos's first published book, *Solo For Two Voices* (1973) co-authored with the 1990 Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz, a wonderfully playful dialogue about writing complete with photographic puns and multicolored pages, along with plenty of asides and footnotes.

As to his pedigree: "*Don Quixote*, Rabelais and *Tristram Shandy*. They are the family I belong to which I belong. Rabelais because of the most extraordinary largeness of his world and who can admit with equal ease the high and the lowbrow. The opposite of magic realism which is *Don Quixote* and in *Tristram Shandy* where Sterne found a new space for the writer: the page. There are two others, well, three: Lewis Carroll, James Joyce and Arno Schmidt."

Ríos admires the physicality of Celine's yet to be translated novel *Le Pont de Londres* (NOW ACTUALLY AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH) which reminds him, "when a culture does not translate it is a dead culture. I will be one of the three or four modern Spanish writers to be translated into English and that is sad for the English reader. To know so little of the world."¹

The translation of *Larva: Midsummer Night's Babel* required heroic labour and skill on the part of Francis, "I believe in the relationship of author and translator and his co-translator, his own traitor. It is a version, a perversion. The original was faithful, as Borges says, to the translation," Ríos says.

Finally, the English speaking world is catching up with Ríos. During the years of knowing Ríos I have received a constant stream of clippings about his work in Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and in Arabic because he is particularly interested in the partial Arabic base for much of the Spanish language. Now the clippings will hopefully be in all the versions of English. There have already been two articles in Japanese. The clippings do not arrive because of any vanity on the part of Ríos but as way to make the books known. "I always distinguish between my life and the life I describe in my books. WE NEVER GET TO RE-WRITE OUR REAL LIVES, THEY NEVER GO INTO A SECOND EDITION." (my caps)

Playfulness should never be forgotten. *Larva: Midsummer Night's Babel* is funny and fun to read as is being with Ríos who when he signs *Larva* to me points out that if you reverse the letters of my

¹ Julián Ríos in a blurb for Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *London Bridge (Guignol's Band II)* (Dalkey Archive Press) wrote the following: "For most readers Céline is only the author of his first novel, *Journey to the End of the Night*. But Céline, like good wines, and good novelists, has improved with age, *London Bridge (Guignol's Band II)* is Céline's most thrilling novel and his best journey—a hallucinatory trio—to the ends (East and West) of an unreal or rather surrealistic city very much like hell. *London Bridge (Guignol's Band II)* is not falling down and will not fall from your hands." The heroine of Céline's novel, Virginie, was also the main character of the V chapter of Ríos' own *Loves that bind* (Knopf, New York, 1998).

name it is *mot* (word in French) and it is appropriate that he is signing it at night because if you reverse the letters of his name it is *Soir*, the word for night. And such playfulness and its implications can go on forever because in Irish, I point out, *soir* is the word for eastwards and thus optimistic because eastwards is the opposite of the World War One direction as in, he had gone west, which meant to die. Quickly the reader understands why *Larva* is only the beginning of a five-volume series.

a beginning (IX)

Steve Wasserman, the editor of the Los Angeles Times Book Review, asked me to review *MONSTRUARY* by Julián Ríos and the review was published on April 8, 2001 with the title: *Epiphanies Without End* and the writer of the review was identified as THOMAS MC GONIGLE WHO IS the AUTHOR OF "THE CORPSE DREAM OF N. PETKOV" AND "GOING TO PATCHOGUE."

Julián Ríos is one of the most original writers living in Europe today. At 60, Ríos has a body of work marked by a uniqueness of vision and design that begins with his very first book, *Solo a dos voces* (published in collaboration with Octavio Paz in 1973), a dialogue exploring language and place that is based on a poem by Paz. In *Larva*, the reader is seduced linguistically by Don Juan on a midsummer solstice in London; *Poundemonium* follows two readers of Ezra Pound as they walk the sites of London associated with him, while in *Loves That Bind*, a lonely man constructs an alphabet of fictional lovers—from Albertine to Zazie—to console himself.

Ríos has been creating an island in the universe of literature that is uniquely his own: an island requiring only that the reader possess a sympathetic and informed *cuRíosity*. In return for this, the reader gains access to a territory where art and literature are still the supreme sensuous accomplishments of the human imagination.

Monstruary is an opportune place to begin reading Ríos. *Monstruary* opens in Berlin as the story's narrator, Emil Alia, sits at the bedside of painter Victor Mons, who threw himself out of a hotel window after a frenzied evening of destroying his own work. His long years of painting have been an attempt to depict the horrors of the 20th century.

But something seems to have cracked in the man; the horror he tried to capture had gone to his mind. But Emil observes that Mons, lying in bed, seems to recover: "Now I don't know if I'm the mummy or the Invisible Man, said Mons with some difficulty through his bandages, and we laughed relieved to suppose that along with his good humor he had also recovered his reason sometimes he opened his eyes wide-two coals, edged in red-through the slits in the bandages. Three days after the accident he was still confused and agitated at times—by the feeling that the most broken part of him was his memory"

If his memory is broken, then Emil attempts to restore it through the story he tells in *Monstruary*. The book's chapters follow Emil's attempt to describe all the people that Mons has known, including, among others, a corrupt patron who paid for Mons to draw his face upon the stomach of a mistress;

while in another chapter he uses wordplay to tell the story of why Cezanne ends in "-anne" and why this unfortunate Anne must die (perhaps playing on a meaning of cesser) in a car wreck.

In perhaps the most rarefied and heartbreaking section of the novel, "Paris as Paradise," Emil describes Mons' paintings of Frank Reck, a Joyce scholar who is the author of an ambitious book on Joyce called *Epiphanies Without End* and who tries to call back to life his dead wife, Joyce, by walking the streets of Paris and mingling his memories with the life of James Joyce. Coming in contact with places associated with her, memories return to Reck, even though the act of recollection can do nothing else.

Ríos comes from the literary tradition that produced *Finnegans Wake* and the novels of Arno Schmidt, Vladimir Nabokov and Italo Calvino (and you might add Georges Perec and Raymond Roussel for good measure). Impatient with the limits of the conventional novel, Ríos shuns elaborate scene-setting and long conversations between characters. Instead, he toys with his own knowledge of art (he has written about the painters Kitaj, Saura and others) and language to create Mons and the people that he has transformed into bestial erotic images for his series of paintings titled "Monstruary" ("monster" as well as his own name).

The novel suggests that the sources for the creation of modern art are far different from those for the art of centuries past. Once, one painted for the glory of God, for kings, with a sense of divine purpose. But Mons seems to be missing such an inspiration, such a reason. Viewing the grotesque images Mons creates, Emil wonders, as he writes the catalog for Mons' next exhibition, whether the modern artist's muse isn't demonic: "Since the devil cannot be the creator, a divine attribute, God permits him to possess artists." And so, we enter the world of the possessed figure of Mons, about whom revolves the vivid dead of his life and, in particular, the form of a mysterious woman, all of which he has attempted to capture in his series of paintings.

The force of the writing in *Monstruary*, full of wordplay and puns, with the insinuating intermingling of fact and fancy, shove the reader into accepting its authority. Consider the macabre fascination as Emil describes a sketch of a woman's face, drawn after Mons had witnessed a suicide: "I saw the portrait of a woman's face as white as a death mask with shadowed eyes and sensual lips slightly parted in an enigmatic smile, and I asked who she was. Edmonde in her bath of death an hour and a half after cutting the veins in her wrists and at the back of her knees with a Gillette razor blade. A forensic answer. So as to seem precise. As he would try to be when he made the drawing with a steady hand, leaning over his dead wife. In the sketch you don't see the tub, only a whiteness that looks like a pillow beneath her black hair."

In Mons' art there is never an escape into fantasy; instead there's a sharpness of language and a precision that one might find in an autopsy report. The illusion that art is an escape from reality is not true for Ríos, who shows that art is in a constant dialogue with reality.

Mons recovers from his madness, Emil relates, and throws himself back into his work. Late in the novel the reader encounters another moment in which fact and reality merge once again for Mons. In Strasbourg, at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Mons makes sketches of various paintings, before seeing

a triptych painted by the 15th-century artist Hans Memling (“Mmm! Memling ...” Emil says.) One of the images, of the devil in hell, stops Mons. The face of a man is drawn on the devil’s belly; it is Mons’. “Does one come to resemble what one most admires, loves or even fears?” Emil asks.

Facts and fiction are so mixed in this story of Victor Mons that it’s foolish for the reader to concern himself with distinguishing between the real or the imagined: Simply read, and be led by Ríos through Mons’ strange, hallucinatory world. In the mail, for instance, from Ríos’ publisher, a photocopy arrived of a page from the “Encyclopedia of Fictional Artists From 1605 to Today” edited by Koen Brams. In it is an entry for “Mons, Victor,” whose career is described in a two-page entry. If Mons has entered already into this fictional encyclopedia, how soon will his name also slip out into the Internet-that realm of what Ríos calls “words, words, words” (an alternative to “World Wide Web”)—mingling there with the real and the unreal?

And though it is often said that some books resist translation, *Monstruary* welcomes it. Ríos’ original Spanish text is also “infected” by English, French, German and Swedish, and so it can be said that this book, in English, is shadowed by the languages of Europe through the efforts of the translator, Edith Grossman.

Monstruary is a book constructed of many roads, all of which must be taken in order to grapple with the mystery of artistic creation at the center of this story. Through Alia’s eyes, Ríos has conjured up a novel as a tour through the infernal memory of contemporary Europe.

The End

A few years ago Ríos composed a blurb for my book, *ST. PATRICK'S DAY another day in Dublin*. It can easily serve as a wrapping for the eventual box of my ashes that will slip from someone's hand and be scattered on the floor of a pub in Dublin, in remembrance of the imagined fate of Beckett's Murphy: “Retrospective portrait of a young Irish American in Dublin, *ST. PATRICK'S DAY another day* in Dublin by **Thomas McGonigle** combines the acute vision of the best fictional memoirs from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. It has also Edward Dahlberg's acid lucidity and the caustic tone of *A Fan's Notes* by Frederick Exley. I make mention of these two uncommon American writers because Thomas McGonigle ranges with the lone rangers of unique writers.”