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## *Literary Shifts*

# English Language Translations of the Works of Javier Marías and Their Presence in the United States

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**Abstract:** Recognized by critics both at home and abroad, Javier Marías has one of the greatest international reputations of Spain's authors. In this article, his presence is explored through the examination of his fictional world's creative origins, his foreign influences, and the impact of literary translation on his work. Through an exploration of his presence both in the media and in American academia, the place of his novels in translation within the Anglo-Saxon world is examined: which aspects of his work are of interest outside the Hispanic world? How well-known are his texts in the United States? Are they taught in the great North American universities?

**Keywords:** Javier Marías, Spanish literature, United States, contemporary novel, short stories, translation.

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<sup>1</sup> [Editors' note: This is an English translation, offered by the Observatorio, of the Spanish original submitted by the author. See study 076-03/2022SP.]

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## 1. The Fictional World of Javier Marías

There is little doubt that Javier Marías is one of the great names in Spanish narrative. A perennial candidate for the Nobel, recognized by critics, readers, and academic circles alike, Marías is, more than fifty years since the publication of his first novel, *Los dominios del lobo* (1971), an irreplaceable figure in the literary world.

Over the course of more than half a century of publishing, Marías has created and burnished a fictional world and literary style that are well known to his millions of readers. His digressive style creates an atmosphere in which the plot becomes suspended for many pages during which it appears to pend from a thin thread which is always taken up again. While the author follows this thread, his readers witness his protagonists' meditations on the nature of violence, the relationship between reality and language, the importance of that which does not occur or the uncertainty that surrounds them. These and other reflections have become trademarks of his work; a fictional world in which we recognize not only themes but iconic characters, some of whom have accompanied us for decades.

It is in part due to the continuity of these characters that readers become enmeshed in the plot before it unfolds; it is them, the characters, who immediately take us back to a world we had already inhabited. When we reencounter Custardoy strolling along the streets of Madrid fifteen years after the publication of *Corazón tan blanco* (1992), this time arm in arm with Luisa, the wife of Jacques Deza in the third volume of *Tu rostro mañana* (2007), readers know that his new choice of partner is extremely dubious even before Deza does. We fear even more for the fates of María Dolz and Díaz-Varela in *Los enamoramientos* (2011) when we learn that they have a relationship with Ruibérriz de Torres, whose misdeeds we witnessed in *Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí* (1994) and whose reputation we had known for even longer: in his youth he had killed a man during the filming of *Fun in Acapulco* with Elvis Presley

in the story “Mala índole” (2012).<sup>2</sup> And then there is the fearsome Tupra, the Marías character who “knew how to know and knew” (Marías, 2021a, p. 665)<sup>3</sup>; readers of *Tu rostro mañana* (2002-2007) missed him in *Los enamoramientos* and *Así empieza lo malo* (2014), but we feared his return and waited for him with anticipation as much as apprehension. When he reappeared in *Berta Isla* (2017), he stole the best years of Tom Nevinson’s life—or perhaps he gave him access to an existence that he needed in order to survive because it included him in something—and as Tom discovers when he tells his own story from Ruan, it is difficult to leave something when we have been on the inside, when we have been a part of it and have been chosen for it. Something like this happens to Marías’s readers, who have been entering and exiting the lives of his characters. Once we have become trapped in his net, it is difficult to remain unscathed by his fictions.

4 Marías had written and published stories before 1971, but in that year he published his first novel, *Los dominios del lobo*. The year 2021 marks 50 years since readers first heard his voice as a novelist. In this study we wish to investigate this voice and these readers, especially beyond Spanish borders. Who does his voice reach? Do those who read him in English experience the same impact? What happens in his translated work when more than one language exists in the original text? How does the U.S. market respond to his unusual plots? Member of the Spanish Royal Academy of Letters since 2008 and columnist for *El País*, Marías is a public figure in Spain who writes about the political panorama, the state of the Spanish language and other contemporary issues. However, the average reader in the United States does not read the Spanish press and will know only what the major

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<sup>2</sup> Although Plaza & Janés published this story in 1998, it was republished in 2012 with all his short fiction in the book *Mala índole: cuentos aceptados y aceptables*.

<sup>3</sup> [Editors’ note: Not all Spanish quotations introduced in the original version of this study are from works which have published English translations available. In this English version of the study, those without published translations are offered in a version done by the Observatorio and cite the original Spanish text; quotations from works with published English translations have been extracted from these and cite the corresponding English version. All Spanish quotations can be found in the original version of this study (076-03/2022SP).]

publications cover and reveal about his work. What is, then, his media presence in the United States? How visible is his work in this literary milieu? Is his writing studied in North American universities?

Before looking at external indicators to examine the place that his translated work occupies in the literary panorama outside of Spain, this study will look at Marías's texts to establish the important presence that the Anglo-Saxon world and translation have had in his work since he began to write. As we explore his inception as a novelist, we see that the British and North American world for which his texts are now translated was the world he first admired and translated. In addition to his many literary feats, this fact alone makes him a unique author in Spain, whose foreign essence seems to be found in the depths of his literary creation.

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## 2. The Anglo-Saxon World and Translation as Creative Sources

As many readers will probably know, Marías is a self-declared Anglophile: when he published his first novel the critics labeled him “foreigner” or “Anglo-boring” (they even called him “anglosajonyjodido” [fucking Anglo-Saxonish]), but Marías did not object to the criticism that he was writing as if translating (Marías, 2001, pp. 59-60); translation not only merits the author's profound respect, but he had practiced it with dedication for years and it had become a valuable tool for his formation as a writer. In addition, his models were definitely foreign and his first novels from the beginning of the 70s, *Los dominios del lobo* (1971) and *Travesía del horizonte* (1972), were influenced by North American cinema of the 40s and 50s and were tributes to Henry James and Conan Doyle, respectively. His initial and subsequent work was completely structured in a world of British and North American influences that avoided Spanish context and ‘Spanishness,’ which he avoided in the democratic era and had shunned even more vehemently during the years of the Franco regime.

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These accusations of foreignness are unsupported by our investigation of Marías's literary ideas: the external influences of admired authors are not less personal due to their foreignness. In his own words, the narratives of those first novels “responded to a series of experiences that were undoubtedly lived by their author, albeit from a seat in a movie theater or as a reader in an armchair. Whether cinematic or bookish, these experiences were not less personal or untransferable” (Marías, 2001, p. 72). We do not defend the idea that there is intrinsically superior value to material that emanates from the author's imagination compared to that which originates in their biographical details, but in this case, as Marías himself affirms, it was something he did experience in real life; Marías's Anglo-Saxon model was a foundational aspect of his writing and continues to constitute an essential part of his literary universe and unmistakable style.

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In 1979 he was awarded the National Translation Award for his well-known rendition of *Tristram Shandy*. In addition to Sterne's famous novel, Marías has translated texts by Nabokov, Conrad, Hardy, Faulkner, Hardy, Yeats, Sir Thomas Brown, Isak Dinesen, Wallace Stevens and Stevenson, all of whom are highly influential authors and as frequently translated as they are admired (Pittarello, 2006, p. 12). One may, then, affirm that the connection between translation and creation is a key element in his writing, so much so that it is impossible to thoroughly understand his fictional world without taking into account this important link and that which it implies for his writing.<sup>4</sup>

His identification as an Anglophile stems not only from his admiration for this foreign culture but also from his position in respect to the art of translation. Marías has declared that both practices, writing and translation, are much more related to

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<sup>4</sup> To examine this aspect of Marías's narrative more thoroughly, see *Javier Marías's Debt to Translation* (2012), by Gareth Wood.

each other than one initially thinks; while the first's existence is based on the creation of a text, the second, the author explains, is based on the absence of the text in the language to which it is translated:

The translator, upon beginning their work, senses the original text as an absence. What counts for them and their work is the absence of this text in their language [...] The translator does not reproduce, copy or trace [...] They portray a unique, unrepeatable and untransferable experience always for the first time (Marías, 2011, p. 378).<sup>5</sup>

Hence, if we conceive of translation as an “exercise of memory” (Marías, 2001, p. 379), Marías asks us,

Is translation, in effect, essentially distinct from creation? Or could one consider the possibility that they are basically one and the same—or at least versions of the same thing—and that their apparently irreconcilable differences are merely of a quantitative nature and therefore secondary and irrelevant? (Marías, 2001, p. 373).

These profound reflections transcend mere ideas about translation: they reveal to what extent these Anglophone authors' texts form part of the author's imaginary universe, to what extent he has made them “his own” upon translating them. As he incorporates them into his literary universe, an imprint of their authors' style remains. Some of the most relevant and archetypal aspects of Marías's novels—such as the presence of uncertainty—have their foundation in the work of these authors, in this case especially that of Henry James (Grohmann, 2002, pp. 41-9).

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### 3. Presence of the English Language in His Work

Since the publication in 1989 of *Todas las almas*, the novel that inaugurated the mature stage of his fiction, the majority of his novels' titles have been translations from English. The title *Todas las almas* refers to *All Souls College* in Oxford, where the novel takes place, at the same time that it alludes to the souls that wander the “city

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<sup>5</sup> This opinion about translation is also shared by authors such as Octavio Paz, George Steiner and Walter Benjamin.

preserved in syrup” where the narrator is temporarily situated. In this novel, Marías plays, for the first time, a game suggested by the two languages in which the protagonist lives, and the reflections provoked by this “double system of thought.” This is the tendency to observe and internalize the world which surrounds him from a bilingual perspective, which often results in more than one version of reality (Pérez-Carbonell, 2016a, p. 87). *Eavesdropping* (a difficult term to translate to Spanish that refers to the act of spying on the conversations of others), *wardens* and *high tables* are words that appear in English in the novel. On the other hand, the text is rife with Spanish words such as *plataformas* and *vino rojo*, referred to by the novel’s characters who, influenced by English, don’t immediately recall the Spanish terms *andenes* or *vino tinto* (Pérez-Carbonell, 2016a, pp. 93-99). After this novel’s success and the controversy surrounding it—it was interpreted in some circles as a *roman à clef* that, disguised as fiction, revealed the comings and goings of Oxonian professors in the Spanish sub-faculty—the possibly most important novels of his career as a novelist appeared: *Corazón tan blanco* (1992), *Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí* (1994), *Negra espalda del tiempo* (1998) and *Tu rostro mañana* (2002-2007). All these titles are quotes from different Shakespearean works. This British influence, limited not only to the choice of titles, appears in London scenes and in the bilingual protagonists who form the central axis of these novels. In *Corazón tan blanco* the digressions of Juan, an interpreter often disturbed by the lack of equivalencies among the languages he speaks, are well known: when confronted with the Shakespearean phrases “so brainsickly of things” or “my hands are of your colour but I shame to wear a heart so white,” he becomes obsessed with how to translate the English adverb “brainsickly,” as well as the precise term for “white” in this context. Far from being anecdotal, those familiar with the plot know that the uncertainty produced by these terms is not only part of the story, but key to the protagonist’s anxiety (Pérez-Carbonell, 2016a, p. 104). In *Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí*, the narrator Víctor also ponders terms such as “to haunt” and the French “hanter” (Pérez-Carbonell, 2016a, p. 110)—which defines his state of being during the novel—



and for which he doesn't find a term in his language because they are, in his words, "more or less untranslatable" (Marías, 1996, p. 66). In *Negra espalda del tiempo*, a 'false' novel that relates the events in a writer's life after the publication of *Todas las almas*, the action occurs principally in Oxford and its various fragments are connected by the irrefutable presence of the British world. In *Tu rostro mañana*, the plot revolves around the British secret service and the part played in them by Jacques Deza when he moves to London. Once again, the British world influences the bilingual mind of a protagonist who teaches at Oxford. Does his boss, the evil Tupra, ask him to kill De la Garza by ordering him to "deal with him?" "I deeply regretted then that it wasn't my first language, because I don't know how they [these words] would strike a native English speaker, but to me they seemed too ambiguous," reflects Deza after Tupra's order (Marías, 2009, p. 335). In the first volume of this four-part novel, he also asks himself about the distinction between *país* [country] and *patria* [homeland] which, as Deza explains, is more revelatory in Spanish; but how do we know whether someone who speaks English and only uses 'country' is trustworthy? (Marías, 2002a, p. 93). These questions that haunt Deza respond, once again, to the "double system of thought" which has possessed his protagonists.

With Shakespearean titles that have been translated from English in order to exist in Spanish, these novels define Marías as the Spanish author who has paid the most attention to reality as understood in two languages and from the perspective of two cultures. Although with *Los enamoramientos* he momentarily distanced his narrative from the British world and Shakespearean titles, he returned to them with *Así empieza lo malo*. Likewise, in his latest two novels, *Berta Isla* (2017) and *Tomás Nevinson* (2021), his protagonists' lives are marked by the British nationality of Tomás and his desire to defend the United Kingdom.

## 4. The Works of Marías in the Anglo-Saxon World

### 4.1. *His Novels in Translation*

Texts that have plots and investigations that involve another language and culture can add a level of complexity for a literary translator. When the language present is, additionally, the language into which they are being translated, this complexity is magnified as in a game of mirrors. What should be done with examples of English terms when translating a novel into English? Can English-language readers detect this “double system of thought” when it occurs in the language in which they read the novel?

The poet Kwame Dawes relates an anecdote about an argument over the translation of a volume of Russian poetry, in which a writer expresses her frustration at the lack of metric equivalence between the original Russian and its translation to English: seen through the veil of translation, these poems lack rhythm and musicality, she opines. “How would you like to be kissed through a curtain?,” she asks. “Better than not kissing at all,” someone replies (“Kissing Through a Curtain,” 2021). In literary translation, the original becomes obscured at times by this curtain—a lesser evil perhaps, since I also believe that it is preferable to be always kissed through a curtain than to not know what a kiss is. However, at times a translator appears on the literary scene whose texts appear to be unveiled and conceived in the language into which they are translated. Such texts have been created, as Marías explains, from the absence of the original in their language, since only by sensing that absence can the literary translator create their own text in their language. Marías’s texts in English are like this: they give readers the impression that they are being kissed without an intervening curtain; they are texts that have placed him among the most recognized authors in the panorama of world literature.

The great Margaret Jull Costa, a British translator who translates the works of Bernardo Atxaga, Enrique Vila-Matas and Álvaro Pombo among other Spanish speaking authors, is responsible for the English versions of Marías's work. She also translates the works of the Nobel Prize for Literature winner José Saramago, Fernando Pessoa and others from the Portuguese language. Her unquestionable talent has been recognized with numerous awards, among which is the *Order of the British Empire* in 2014 for her service to literature, and the *Translation Prize* awarded by the Queen Sofia Spanish Institute of New York in 2018. Marías himself has praised her versions of his texts, qualifying them as "excellent." His knowledge of English allows him to judge the quality of the translations and to be part of the process; our author commented to me that Jull Costa, who he describes as meticulous and very talented, consults him when she has irresolvable doubts about the originals. The result, says Marías, "half-jokingly," are texts that "even improve the originals" (Marías 2022). Undoubtedly, this translator's skill has been key for the reputation of Marías's works in the Anglo-Saxon world; the reader who knows his work in both languages feels that when they read Marías in English his voice is ever-present, that the translations contain not only the words and their connotations but also the unmistakable tone of the Mariesque characters, at times humorous and at others ominous, and they recognize his fine sense of humor and playfulness with language.

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To discuss Marías's hypnotic and melodic style and how Jull Costa is capable of translating it into English is a discussion about the music of language, about the connotations of terms and expressions, about how words are not only meaning, but also allusion and rhythm, and how all this has resulted in the seductive texts that Jull Costa has been translating into English for years. "Words *denote* because they mean, but they *connote* because they contaminate. Seduction begins with the connotations, with the messages between the lines" (Grijelmo, 2014, p. 39). Indeed, when Alex Grijelmo talks to us about the seduction of words, he reminds us that:

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seduction originates in the brain, yes, but it is aimed not at the rational zone of the person who receives the statement, but at their emotions [...] Seduction is not based so much on the narrative but on the words themselves, one by one. It does not appeal so much to reasoned construction as to the concrete elements that are employed. Its connotative value exerts a sublime function here (2014, p. 37).

The 'sublime' function that distinguishes Marías's prose is that quality of language that would be difficult to acquire in a writing or even a translation workshop. Jull Costa transfers the connotative value of the Mariesque language, "the metaphors, the scent of the words and the value of the letters" (Grijelmo, 2014, p. 87). The recognition of Marías's work by millions of English-speaking readers has been made possible by this ability to recreate its connotative value in English. Yes, they read our author from Madrid in English, but—and this is the most surprising and wonderful thing—they read his work as Marías conceived it. Grijelmo says that words are like cherries, "always tied to one another, and even if we separate them with a slight tug of our fingers, they will maintain the flavor of their neighbors, they will enrich our mouths with the juice that they have shared and that they have disputed" (2014, p. 21). And in Marías's translations, even though the "neighbors" are necessarily different, the English-language reader doesn't miss any of the cherries that Marías anticipated in his original text.

In the recent interview by Katrina Dodson for *The Paris Review*, Jull Costa recalls her beginnings as Marías's translator and the challenge of working on *Todas las almas*<sup>6</sup>, the first of his novels that she translated into English (2020, p. 11). In this novel, published in the Jull Costa translation in 1992, which as already noted speaks of high tables, colleges, wardens, bursars and other peculiarities of Oxford life, her version incorporates this world naturally, but loses the element of exoticization that exists in the original. This element is introduced, however, in her translation of the hilarious passage in which the protagonist invents, before the impassive gazes of students and colleagues, the most uproarious etymologies for the

<sup>6</sup> Translated in English as *All Souls* (Marías, 2003 [M. Jull Costa, Trans.]).

terms “*papirotazo*” or “*capirotazo*.” In other cases, Jull Costa opts for the omission of what could affect the natural rhythm of the prose. Thus, when in *Corazón tan blanco* the protagonist mentions the initials of the commissioner, ECOSOC, and, Juan observes: “siglas que en una de las lenguas que hablo suenan como si fueran la traducción de una cosa absurda, ‘el calcetín del eco’” [acronyms that in one of the languages I speak sound as if they were the translation of an absurd thing, ‘the echo sock’] (Marías, 1992, p. 241), the translator omits this comment in favor of prose that flows in English and does not include metalinguistic references to the very language in which the reader is reading the novel.

Jull Costa makes use of a great number of literary resources in her translations, thus displaying her knowledge of the connotative value of the words on each of the pages. In *Thus Bad Begins* (2016), for example, she retains whenever possible the humor of some expressions that appear in the original *Así empieza lo malo* and manages to give them an old-fashioned and humorous air in their rendition into English. The “*estaríamos medrados*” (Marías, 2014, p. 166) pronounced by Professor Rico in the original text is translated by Jull Costa as “in a right pickle” (Marías, 2016, p. 168), an option that preserves the flavor of an old-fashioned expression. In the same way, “Wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am” (Marías, 2016, p. 166) is the solution for “*polvo echado, visita terminada*.”

Within the enormous challenge of transferring a literary text to another language, humor is one of the elements that can be most problematic, especially when a cultural gap exists between the two texts in terms of certain expressions. The scene in *Así empieza lo malo* in which Juan De Vere is surprised by a nun while spying on Beatriz Noguera’s sexual encounter is an interesting case. Spanish readers are likely to find Juan’s original comment more humorous than its English version: “Haga el favor de no llamarme ‘hijo,’ madre” versus its translation “Be so kind as to not address me as ‘my child,’ Mother” (Marías, 2016, p. 167). Those ‘cherries’ that

accompany the expression ‘Haga el favor’ are closely linked to Spanish culture; the use of ‘Usted’ together with the imperative of ‘hacer’ is loaded with connotations of outdated expressions, representative of a large part of the population in Spain. It evokes the image of an older nun, from whom Juan could have heard so many reprimands in his youth. Finally, that last ‘hijo’ completes the picture perfectly. It is possible that, in this case, the readers of the text in English will miss some of these humorous connotations. However, with her characteristic linguistic mastery, Jull Costa uses English set phrases on other occasions when Marías does not, thus compensating for instances in which it is not possible to retain the salty tone of the original: “best to call a spade a spade” (Marías, 2016, p. 177) replaces “mejor entendernos,” and “pleased as punch” (Marías, 2016, p. 401) replaces “encantado.” Similarly, “gente que siempre ha sabido favorecerse” becomes “people who have always known which side their bread was buttered on” (Marías, 2016, p. 396).<sup>7</sup>

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Although some of these expressions are more common in British than in American English, U.S. editions have retained the text as translated by Jull Costa. It is known that texts translated by British translators are often adapted so that the U.S. reader encounters an English as natural as would one from the United Kingdom. In the case of Marías, however, there are no significant differences between his British and American editions. There are, however, differences in the structure of some of the novels. I don’t know the reason behind this decision, but in the translation of *Así empieza lo malo*, the British edition is structured differently in that two of its chapters are divided in two, adding two more chapters to the novel. In the North American edition, on the other hand, the original structure of the text is respected. This change does not affect the rhythm of the prose, but it is interesting that it is the British edition that deviates from the original in this case.

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<sup>7</sup> For more examples of how other specific terms in this novel were translated, see my review (Pérez-Carbonell, 2016b).

## 4.2. Awards and International Recognition

The international awards received by Marías are remarkable in their quality as much as in their quantity: in the British Isles, *A Heart So White* (1995) was the second novel to win the *IMPAC* of the city of Dublin in 1997; two years earlier, he had been awarded the prestigious *Rómulo Gallegos Prize for Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí*<sup>8</sup>. The majority of his novels have been recognized individually with national as well as international prizes over the last four decades, but his overall work has also received awards both in Spain and abroad: among others, in Germany he was awarded the prestigious *Nelly Sachs* in 1997; in Italy he was awarded, among other prizes, the *Grinzane Cavour* in Turin in 2000, the *Alberto Moravia* prize in Rome and the *Alessio* prize, again in Turin, both in 2008. In Chile, he won the *José Donoso* in 2008; in Austria, in 2011, he was given the *Österreichische Staatspreis für Europäische Literatur* prize in Salzburg. Recently, in 2021 he was named a member of the prestigious *Royal Society of Literature*, the British association of which he is the only Spanish author. In Spain, he earned the *Terenci Moix* prize in 2012 and the prestigious *Formentor* prize. In 2020 his rejection of Spain's *Premio Nacional de Literatura*, awarded by the Ministry of Culture, was well known. Marías had declared that he would not accept an official prize from any Spanish government because he refused to be labeled as an author favored by one or another political party.

Although many readers have yet to be reached by Marías, his sales in the United States are high and his work has been recognized here by several prizes and praised by a variety of creators. Contemporary American novelists, poets, playwrights, and essayists of the stature of John Ashbery, Jonathan Franzen, Ben Lerner, Charles Baxter, Vendela Vida, Dave Eggers and Sigrid Nuñez have praised his work in a variety of texts and interviews, as have the late Mark Strand, Sam Shepard, and Ben

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<sup>8</sup> Translated in English as *Tomorrow in the battle think on me* (Marías, 1996 [M. Jull Costa, Trans.]).



Sonnenbeg, founder of *Grand Street* magazine. The iconic literature review *Zoetrope: All Story*, founded in 1997 by Francis Ford Coppola, published two of his stories. In popular culture, the actress Jordana Brewster of the films *Fast and Furious*, declared a few years ago in the *Huffington Post* that *Your Face Tomorrow* (2005) was one of her favorite books (Turnbow 2013).

Thus, though there are still a surprising number of readers on this side of the Atlantic who are unfamiliar with Marías's work, his name appears with ever more frequency in the publications of artists and creators in America, as well as in the country's most important literary awards. In 1997 *A Heart So White* was named by the New York Public Library one of the 25 most memorable books of the year in the United States. The official webpage of this important New York library hosts a video of Marías in 2009 examining first editions of Shakespeare and Sterne, which are held in its collections.<sup>9</sup> The video shows the open admiration of this author for his master teachers, and we recognize Marías the reader, which is a crucial aspect of his voice as a writer. Also in 2009, on the appearance of *Your Face Tomorrow* in its English version, Marías participated in colloquia at Princeton and Yale universities. His novelistic career has continued to be recognized in the last decade: in 2010 he received the *America Award in Literature* for the entire body of his work, and in 2016 he was named *Literary Lion* by the New York Public Library, also for the totality of his work.

Marías is probably the living Spanish author who has the greatest international projection today. This is evidenced by these awards and recognitions from beyond Spanish borders, as well as the many book sales in European countries such as Germany, France and Italy, in addition to his presence in the Anglo-Saxon market. Moreover, he publishes under the great Penguin Random House imprint: in

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<sup>9</sup> The complete video can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpvWOH2Ez44>



the United Kingdom with the publisher Hamish Hamilton and in the United States with Knopf, although some of his novels and collections of stories have also been published by the prestigious independent publisher New Directions. For almost a decade Marías has also formed part of the select group of Spanish authors in the Penguin Modern Classics collection.

### 4.3. US Media

Although Marías's roots in the English-speaking world are in the United Kingdom, in the United States his novels capture the attention of the country's most important media outlets as soon as they appear in translation. We find author profiles, interviews, and interesting reviews of his work in *The New York Times*, *The LA Review of Books*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, and on *National Public Radio*, to name a few of the most celebrated platforms. However, at the 2009 event organized by the 92nd Street Y in New York (which brought together Marías and Paul Auster at New York's famous cultural center), Wyatt Mason correctly observed that Marías is not read as much in the United States as in other parts of the world.<sup>10</sup>

*The Paris Review* has published two interviews with Marías: in 2006 by Sarah Fay, and in 2018 by Michael LaPointe. In addition to his literary influences or the voice of his latest novels, both interviewers were interested in details such as the images of balconies in his work and the relationship between smoking and writing. His role as king of the small island of Redonda is another topic that arouses interest and curiosity in the United States (Fay 2006; LaPointe 2018). Redonda is a desert island in the Caribbean belonging to Antigua, and today, the only literary monarchy in the world; Javier Marías, who is king of this inhospitable place, was offered the position by its previous monarch, Jon Wynne-Tyson, shortly after the publication of

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<sup>10</sup> To view the complete video, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PePONIUWCRc>

*Todas las almas* in 1989, in which his story had been fictionalized. In Marías's literary trajectory, where fiction and reality continually intersect, his status as literary monarch must be one of the attainments that attracts the most attention.

In 2014, Colm Tóibín dedicated a beautiful article in *The New York Review of Books* to Marías and to Antonio Muñoz Molina, "Lust and Loss in Madrid," in which he examines the former's *The Infatuations* and the latter's *The Night of Time*, both published in English in 2013 and 2014, respectively. In the article, the great Irish novelist pays close attention to details about the subject matter and style of two of our most important authors and notes how, just as Paul Klee felt that drawing was like taking a line for a walk, Marías conceives the act of writing as taking a sentence for a stroll, as extensive as it is languid (Tóibín, 2014). Thus, we see how some of the best North American publications have dedicated detailed studies to a wide range of the most outstanding literary themes and concerns of our author.

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Among these, we cannot fail to mention *The New Yorker*, possibly the most emblematic literary publication in the country, which to date has published two interesting texts about Marías, in 2005 and 2016. In November 2005 Wyatt Mason wrote "A Man Who Wasn't There," an article which, by interspersing quotes and passages carefully selected by the attentive reporter from various works of Marías, creates an insightful portrait of the Mariesque characters, their meandering thoughts, and that which they have in common with our author. It begins by mentioning that Marías, in addition to being a novelist, is a newspaper columnist; as Mason explains, this is unusual in the U.S. and would constitute an extravagance in the case of North American novelists (Mason, 2005). It should be mentioned, however, that there is a long tradition in the Spanish press of novelists who are also columnists. In *El País* alone we can cite Rosa Montero, Javier Cercas, Elvira Lindo and the late Almudena Grandes. In this aspect, Marías is not at all exceptional in the

Spanish panorama. In any case, as Mason's article progresses, he delves into the fictional world of Marías, creating an accurate and attentive portrait of its themes and peculiarities.

Eleven years later, Jonathan Blitzer, one of the staff writers at *The New Yorker*, had the opportunity to meet Marías in New York and accompany him to the Frick Collection as he passed through the city. This visit coincided with the last time Marías set foot on American soil. It was November 9, 2016; Donald Trump had just won the election and his administration would remain in power, despite the surprise and disappointment of many, for four long years. "The Americans, it seems, have just committed suicide," Blitzer recalls Marías saying as soon as he got out of the taxi. During that meeting they discussed the novel *Thus Bad Begins*, which had just appeared in English. Blitzer used this space in *The New Yorker* to talk about the role of the United States in Marías's family history, about the paintings they saw at the Frick, the literary themes that interest him, and his conception of truth and literature (Blitzer, 2016).

Marías's family history is so linked to the history of Spain that sometimes the press focuses on one of the darkest chapters of our country when dealing with his career as a novelist. As we know, the Civil War and the ensuing Franco regime largely determined the life of the great philosopher who was his father, Julián Marías, and therefore that of his family as well. A defender of the Republic and a declared anti-Francoist, Julián Marías was prohibited from teaching at the Spanish public university during the regime and moved twice to the United States, where he taught at Yale and Wellesley universities. With this past, which Marías also fictionalized in the first volume of *Tu rostro mañana* through the character of Jacques Deza's father, it is understandable that there is interest in his opinion on the Francoist ideology in Spain. In 2019, *The New York Times Magazine* published a long report on him by

Giles Harvey that focuses on this part of Spanish history. The article even begins with a chronology of Franco, and its title, “Spain’s Most Celebrated Writer Believes the Fascist Past is Still Present,” reveals its central theme (Harvey, 2019).

Those of us who read Marías’s weekly columns, however, know that although the writer has been and continues to be anti-Francoist, he does not agree with many proposals of the Spanish left; in fact, his contempt for Spanish political leaders includes both the left and the right, and he has been controversially critical of both. In relation to this topic, our author recently observed:

The individual [Franco] has managed to perpetuate himself in an artificial and unsuspected way, to the misfortune of those of us who had to suffer part of his infamous regime. Who would have thought, given the speed with which we threw him into the bin of waste and forgetfulness. I remember how, six months after his death, everything we had lived under his whip—in my case, 24 years—became remote [...] It immediately became the distant past, in the manner of nightmares that vanish with the progress of the day [...] Why, then, do many of us today have the feeling that he is eternal and that his supporters have managed to maintain his presence? Oh, who would have imagined that this work would be carried out by parties that proclaim themselves to be leftist and his staunch enemies [...] There is no doubt that the current PSOE and Podemos parties—as well as Vox—maintain an immortal idyll with Franco (Marías, 2021b).

Although *The New York Times Magazine* article mentions how Marías assures the reporter that he has no interest in going to the Valley of the Fallen as part of the process of the exhumation of graves, it is possible that its tone does not convey the complexity of the author’s ideas regarding his political position. The article does, however, present the important political debate that in Spain continues to divide the country.

#### 4.4. Academic Presence in the United States

As has been pointed out, the presence of Marías in the United Kingdom is greater than in the United States. It is in the United Kingdom where many of his plots are developed, where his works are translated and where his novelistic career is most

studied in academic circles. The latest conference on his work to date was held in 2019 at the University of Oxford (De Miguel, 2019). This institution, where he spent two courses as a visiting professor in the 1980s, brought together experts in his work from the United States, the United Kingdom, Holland, Italy and Spain for the occasion. As a result of this conference a volume of texts by various specialists on different aspects of his work will be published by Brill/Rodopi in commemoration of his fifty-year career as a novelist. This volume, *Javier Marías: 50 años de literatura (1971-2021): Nuevas visiones*, edited by Santiago Bertrán and Alexis Grohmann, adds to an important number of monographs and studies on our author, many of which have been published under the Brill/Rodopi imprint.

In addition to his well-known courses at Oxford University, Marías also left his mark on American academia. When invited by Wellesley College to be a visiting professor, he joined the long Hispanic tradition of this prestigious university in the northeastern United States, which by then had already welcomed exiles and displaced persons such as Jorge Guillén, Pedro Salinas, Guillermo Cabrera Infante and our author's own father, Julián Marías.

Thus, in 1984 Javier Marías settled into the same house on Washington Street where he had lived when he was just an infant. On that distant occasion, his family had also moved to Wellesley as a result of an invitation to his father. Nabokov lived at the time in that same house, on the top floor. Years later, Marías imagines his admired author becoming unhinged by the cries of a newly arrived baby in the early 50s, perhaps already thinking about and conceiving his famous *Lolita* (2002b, p. 192). Thirty-three years later, Marías the adult was once again welcomed by Wellesley and there he dedicated himself to teaching the courses *Theory of Translation* and *Don Quixote*; recently, with notes from the latter, he composed and edited *El Quijote de Wellesley* (2016), which marked the fourth centenary of Cervantes's death.

In 2002, *Wellesley, recuerdo ileso*, a compilation of texts by famous writers who had passed through the legendary Department of Spanish at this prestigious women's university near Boston, was published to commemorate 125 years since its founding and as a celebration of Hispanic culture at this university. In the text proffered by Marías, 'Fantasmas leídos,' the writer makes use of one of his most beloved literary tropes to reflect upon those who have occupied the places we inhabit and that which remains of the previous tenants in these spaces.

Since his time at Wellesley College in the 1980s, Marías has not spent long periods of time in the United States or been linked to any of its universities, although his work is studied in North American departments of Spanish literature. Even so, his presence in the American academic world is smaller than in the British one. In the major Hispanist conferences held in the United States, we often find that there are no panels or presentations on his work, while in the United Kingdom the national conference of Hispanists held annually by the AHGBI association (Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland) usually has at least one paper on Marías's work. It is difficult to venture a hypothesis as to the reason for this disparity, since the experts in his work are scattered throughout universities around the world. Alexis Grohmann, a pioneer in Mariesque criticism and one of the greatest scholars of his novelistic career, is at the University of Edinburgh. His disciple Santiago Bertrán is also in the United Kingdom, as is Gareth Wood, who published a monograph in 2012 on the influence of literary translation on Marías's novels. In Spain, José María Pozuelo Yvancos has dedicated a large part of his career as a critic and academic to Marías's work, and today his former disciple Carmen María López López examines the links between the work of Marías and cinema. In Italy, it was the attentive eye of the eminent Hispanist Elide Pittarello, perhaps the founder of Mariesque criticism, who began to write about his work; and, in the Netherlands, Maarten Steenmeijer has devoted much of his career to examining the work of Marías and disseminating his research through the publisher Brill/Rodopi. On the other hand, we cannot argue

that the American academic world does not have Hispanists who study his work: researchers such as Heike Sharm at the University of South Florida, Isabel Cuñado at Bucknell University, the now retired David Herzberger at Riverside (California) and myself at Colgate University each have at least one monograph on our author.

The presence of his work in the American classroom could also be greater, although most of us Mariesque critics include some of his texts in our teaching programs—especially his short stories. Cuñado, in her classes at Bucknell, and Pozuelo Yvancos, during the time he spent as a visiting professor at the University of Virginia in 2016, have both included stories such as “Gualta” and “En el viaje de novios” in their courses, respectively. I also teach both texts in my course on short fiction in contemporary Spain, along with “Caído en desgracia,” “Cuando fui mortal” and “Mientras ellas duermen” (all included in *Mala índole* [2012]). These two professors and I remember the students being entertained and intrigued by Marías’s stories. Christopher Carlton, who teaches comparative literature studies at Binghamton University (SUNY), adds “El médico nocturno” (The Night Doctor) in English to this list and discusses them all in a course called *Literature and Psychology*.<sup>11</sup> My colleague Herzberger, like myself, has included *Corazón tan blanco* in his classes, and his students found it to be more accessible than the work of Spanish author Juan Benet. On the other hand, my Colgate students (who did not read Benet) found it to be the most difficult novel in the course. Cuñado, however, has had a positive experience when including *Los enamoramientos*, a novel whose intrigue keeps students on edge until the final pages, in her course on narrative and contemporary culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Carlton, who, like many teachers, claims to deal with short stories because of their accessibility, confesses to me that he sometimes considers including all three volumes of *Tu rostro mañana* to see what happens. I also have that temptation at times.



All in all, considering the literary value of his work and the place it occupies in Spanish letters, it would perhaps be expected that Marías would have a greater presence in Spanish literature classes at American universities. However, the difficulty that his novels present for students (compared to other authors with less digressive prose) leads professors to select mostly his short stories for their courses. Added to this is the fact that the concerns of his characters, who are often erudite, as are the worlds they inhabit, are distinct from those in the texts that appear most often in Spanish literature programs in the United States; these tend to be more linked to the social struggles of contemporary Spain. This trend is explained in part by the fact that cultural studies, which have an important presence in foreign literature departments in the country, pay more attention to interdisciplinary issues in which literature tends to be linked to the study of the historical and social panorama.

“What part of the Spanish reality does Marías’s literature represent? What does it teach us about Spain? What do the characters think about Franco?” These and others were the most common questions that students had when I taught *Corazón tan blanco* in one of my literature classes. The fact that students tend to look for *what a Spanish novel tells us about Spain* responds precisely to the idea that foreign literature should teach us something about the country it comes from.

As we mentioned in the previous section, this tendency can sometimes be found in the media; but it would be unfair to argue that this is the norm, since important American literary publications have paid detailed attention to Marías’s work and to its characteristics. Likewise, in academic literature departments, Marías experts continue to introduce his texts in the classrooms, although perhaps less often than to be expected. All in all, I would venture to say that readers of the press—as well as teachers and students—would benefit from allowing Marías’s works to speak more for themselves, from not always putting them at the service of representing Spanish reality, and allowing them, instead, to manifest their own reality.



## 5. *On the Other Side*

In the sophisticated fictional world created by Marías, the reader must be open to the complexity of the world, to the moral questions that the characters pose to themselves and to the presence of distinct possibilities, without limiting or delimiting the narrative to what a work can teach us about a country. Reflecting on that which makes writing possible, Marías observes: “I know that when writing or telling stories and inventing characters, I have known or recognized or thought things that only in writing can be known or recognized or thought” (2001, p. 122). Hence, in the same way that there are things that can only be contemplated when writing, in my opinion there are also things that can only be contemplated when reading.

Reading fiction without a clear idea of what that fiction should show us gives us the opportunity to open ourselves up to the complexity of the world and to create and recreate texts subjectively, as Unamuno said should be done with works of art (1967, II, p.974). By admitting the diverse possibilities of fiction and acknowledging different versions of ourselves, we surmount the limits of our existence and peer a little beyond its margins. Reading is, in the end, getting so close to those limits that we manage to see what is a little further from our center, on the other side of who we think we are.

Thanks to Margaret Jull Costa’s translations, the literature of Javier Marías, which pushes us so much to look at the other side, has reached millions of English-speaking readers. Without a curtain to veil his unmistakable style, they, too, can be caught in the net of the Marías’s universe and, like his Spanish-speaking readers, not be released.

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38. Rosalina Alcalde Campos. *De inmigrantes a profesionales. Las migraciones contemporáneas españolas hacia los Estados Unidos / From Immigrants to Professionals: Contemporary Spanish Migration to the United States.* (En español: 038-02/2018SP; in English: 038-02/2018EN). Febrero/February 2018
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53. José María Albalad Aiguabella. *Periodismo hispano en los Estados Unidos: análisis de cuatro modelos referentes. / Hispanic journalism in the United States: analysis of four key models.* (En español: 053-09/2019SP; in English: 053-09/2019EN) Septiembre/September 2019.
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59. Mónica Álvarez Estévez. *Entre dos orillas: la inmigración gallega en Nueva York. Morriña e identidades transnacionales. / Between Two Shores: Galician Immigration to New York. Morriña and transnational identities.* (En español: 059-03/2020SP; in English: 059-03/2020EN) Marzo/March 2020.
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63. Eduardo Viñuela. *El pop en español en EE.UU.: Un espacio para la articulación de la identidad latina / Pop in Spanish in the U.S.: A Space to Articulate the Latino Identity.* (En español: 063-09/2020SP; in English: 063-09/2020EN) Septiembre/September 2020.
64. Marjorie Agosín, Emma Romeu, Clara Eugenia Ronderos. *Vida en inglés, poesía en español: Escribir desde la ausencia / Living in English, Writing in Spanish: The Poetry of Absence.* (En español: 064-10/2020SP; in English: 064-10/2020EN) Octubre/October 2020.

65. Cristina Lacomba. *Hispanos y/o latinos en Estados Unidos: La construcción social de una identidad / Hispanics and/or Latinos in the United States: The Social Construction of an Identity*. (En español: 065- 11/2020SP; in English: 065-11/2020EN) Noviembre/November 2020.
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74. Javier A. Cancio-Donlebún Ballvé. *Los esclavos del rey de España en San Agustín de La Florida (1580–1618) / The King of Spain’s Slaves in St. Augustine, Florida (1580–1618)* (En español: 074-12/2021SP; in English: 074-12/2021EN) Diciembre/December 2021.
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