ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present

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Soldiers of Salamis: Javier Cercas on the Truth of Betrayal

It is said that history is written by the winners. But Javier Cercas's *Soldiers of Salamis* (*Soldados de Salamina,* 2001) questions that old adage. The book focuses on an individual who was on the winning (Nationalist) side of Spain's Civil War, and claims that he "had won the war but lost literature" (19). More generally, Cercas's novel is concerned with how memory becomes narrative, how stories emerge, are retold, and persist over time, and also how secrets are passed on, revealed, or lost to posterity. In the end, it suggests, it may be the winners whose stories are most seldom told, whose secrets they take with them to the grave. It also poses a reconsideration of the relationship between writing, fidelity, and the truth: perhaps it is only treachery that takes us to the heart of the matter; the real can only be betrayed. And in something of a response to the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño, who features here as a character in the novel, Cercas praises the forgotten heroes who march for countries and causes that are not their own. It is on them, the ones who cross the lines and fight for other sides, that civilization depends.

1. A Real Tale?

Few novels require an explicit declaration that they are works of imagination, rather than fact. Yet *Soldiers of Salamis* is prefaced (on its copyright page) with the quasi-legal statement, more familiar from the movies than from literature, that "This is a work of fiction." "Where real-life historical figures and public figures appear," it continues, "many of the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental." Yet these "real-life" historical and public figures loom large in the narrative, and much of what is written about them is demonstrably true.

There really was a Spanish writer and politician named Rafael Sánchez Mazas, for instance, whose career was much as the book describes it: he helped to found the Falange, an ultra-right-wing nationalist movement that provided ideological ballast to Francisco Franco's military uprising against the democratic government of the 1930s; he was captured by the Republicans during the civil war that followed, escaped (according to some sources) a firing squad, and later briefly became minister of state after Franco's eventual victory. There really was a Chilean novelist named Roberto Bolaño, who lived

in Catalonia and at one point was an attendant in a caravan park there, where apparently he met a veteran of the war named Miralles, who had fled to southern France at the close of hostilities and went on to fight for the Free French forces in North Africa during World War Two. And of course there really is a journalist and novelist named Javier Cercas, who has written a book entitled *Soldiers of Salamis*, in which he documents Sánchez Mazas's life, describes his friendship with Bolaño, and gives Miralles a starring role in the resulting narrative, which is as much about the writing of the book as it is about the events that it relates.

There is, however, also much misinformation—call it imagination—in the novel. Cercas the narrator tells us that he has just turned forty in 1994 when his story begins (making his year of birth 1954), is divorced, childless, and missing his recently deceased father. Cercas the author, by contrast, was born in 1962, is married with a son, and, at least when the book came out, his father was still alive and well. Moreover, he never met Miralles (whose first name was Enric, rather than Antoni or Antonio, as the book has it), who died in 1991, long before Cercas began researching and writing his book. As for Sánchez Mazas and Bolaño, then, both of whom are also long dead, the former in 1966 and the latter in 2003, we are left to ask how much of what we are told here is conjecture or sheer invention. The narrator (or is it the author?) warns us on the opening page: "I'm lying" (13). But he also seems to invite us to play a guessing game to separate out fact from fiction.

My question for you is how much all this matters. What truth claims does this novel make? How consequential are the falsehoods or errors in the text? How important, by contrast, is it that we take at least some of what we are told to be true? Pause the video, and note down how much, if at all, in reading the novel, you asked yourself about its accuracy or otherwise. While you do that, I'll have a Nescafé, but I'll be right back.

Miralles offers Cercas Nescafé as they have their final interview—"interrogation," Miralles calls it—in his residential home, about his encounter with Sánchez Mazas. The drink is presented with apologies, as a poor substitute: "Decaffeinated, of course. They've forbidden me the real stuff." To make it palatable, Miralles spikes it with clandestine cognac: "If you don't add a bit of this, [. . .] this stuff tastes like shit" (230). The gesture hints at an allegorical reading: that a little extra may have been added to the narrator's

story, to spice it up and make it more potent. Nescafé itself dates to the period that the two men are discussing: it was launched by the Swiss company Nestlé in 1938, just before the end of the Spanish Civil War. During World War II, foil packets of instant coffee were a staple in the rations of American GIs (while Nazi-occupied Europe, cut off from supplies from Latin America, had to make do with still less convincing ersatz stopgaps). In Spain, CAFÉ (and later, NESCAFÉ) was sometimes a coded allusion to the Falange: "Camaradas, Arriba Falange Española," "Comrades, Up with the Spanish Falange" (or "No Estás Solo, Camarada, Arriba Falange Española," "You're Not Alone, Comrade, Up with the Spanish Falange").

Cercas (the author) tells us in a prefatory note that "This book is the fruit of extensive reading and long conversations." And Cercas (the narrator) makes much of the investigation that went into writing it. In fact, we have a double narrative. On the one hand, there is the story of a relatively minor incident from the civil war, in which Sánchez Mazas dodged execution and then evaded Republican forces while he awaited the Nationalist advance on Catalonia during the dying days of the conflict. This is a tale that Sánchez Mazas himself apparently told many times, and promised he was going to turn into a book, which he said he would call *Soldiers of Salamis*. On the other hand, flanking this account—the reconstructed text of what the Falangist writer might have written, but never did—is the story of how Cercas pieced that tale together, interviewing experts and tracing witnesses, and ultimately tracking down Miralles, who he comes to believe is the Republican soldier who, by turning a blind eye, enabled Sánchez Mazas to escape in that winter of 1939.

In the course of this research, the narrator comments on his undertaking, repeatedly telling us that what he is writing is "not a novel" but a "true tale," which he claims is "like a novel [. . .]. Except, instead of being all lies, it's all true" (74, 75). As he tells us he puts it to Bolaño: "It's a story with real events and characters. A true tale" (192). Here Bolaño serves as a foil to Cercas, responding: "Same difference. [. . .] All good tales are true tales, at least for those who read them, which is all that matters" (193). But when the Chilean tells the Spaniard that "You'll have to make it up. [. . .] The interview with Miralles. It's the only way you can finish the novel," Cercas demurs: "my book wasn't meant to be a novel [. . .] making up the interview with Miralles would amount to a

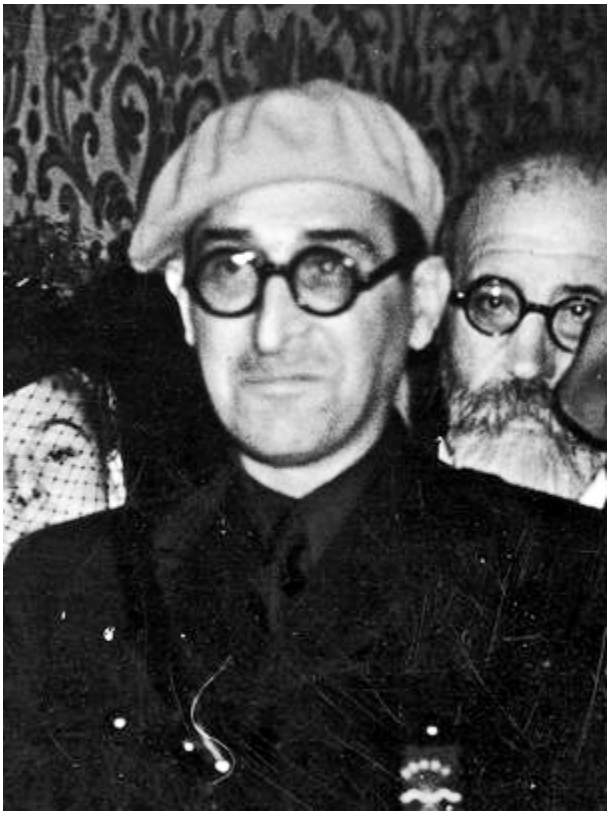
betrayal of its nature" (197). Invention is cast as treachery, while to be "true" takes on that word's connotations of loyalty or steadfastness: "Loyal or faithful to a person, cause, promise, etc." ("true"). Moreover, the fact that it is the translation to English that stresses these connotations—the original Spanish phrase is "*relato real*," though elsewhere the Spanish has "*fiel a los hechos*" ("faithful to the facts") where the English has "verifiable" (177)—adds another layer of duplicity to the story. Bolaño, however, argues against loyalty and in favour of treason: "Reality always ends up betraying us, it's best not to give it the chance and betray it first. The real Miralles would only disappoint you [literally, deceive you: *te decepcionaría*]. Better to make him up: the invented one will surely be more real than the real one" (197). *Writing is rendered a battle of betrayal and counter-betrayal, whereby it is not truth (fidelity) that leads to the real, but subterfuge (perfidy) that gives us the really real, the heart of the matter!*

2. Betrayal and Being

The themes of loyalty and betrayal, honour and cowardice, responsibility and dereliction of duty, are woven through *Soldiers of Salamis* such that at times it is hard to tell them apart. In almost every case, treachery requires fidelity as much as (not least for the writer, Bolaño is made to suggest) truth depends upon deceit.

Sánchez Mazas, for instance, is the architect of the grandest of betrayals: the Nationalist revolt against Spain's legitimate government. The book notes repeatedly his personal accountability for the carnage and for the ultimate triumph of the insurgent forces: he was "more responsible for the victory of Francoist arms than all the inept military manoeuvres of that nineteenth-century general who was Francisco Franco" (54). Yet the success of that enterprise required discipline and loyalty—which by contrast was very much lacking on the other side, which descended into bloody ideological infighting between Communists, Anarchists, and Liberals, as is famously depicted in George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Sánchez Mazas, Cercas tells us, kept his allegiance to Franco even when the general ultimately reneged on his radical ideals of wholesale transformation, in "a veritable coup d'état in reverse" absorbing the Falange and ensuring that "the fascist revolution they'd dreamt of was never going to happen" (146). Faced with this "dilut[ion]" of principle into "sanctimonious, predictable, conservative slop," Sánchez Mazas was faced with the choice of whether to "denounce the flagrant discrepancy between their political project and that governing the new state."

"Naturally," Cercas reports, "Sánchez Mazas did not. Not right after the war finished, or ever" (147, 148). Loyal to a fault, the writer kept his mouth shut and frittered away his declining years, betraying himself and his own potential as a writer in the process. Hence he "won the war but lost literature" and squandered his own reputation.



Rafael Sánchez Mazas in 1939

Sánchez Mazas only survived the war (in Cercas's account, at least) thanks to a rural Catalan family and a trio of Republican deserters, who rather than turn him in to the authorities in the wake of his escape from execution, sheltered and supported him even though they were well aware of who he was. The deserters become the "forest friends" (a phrase that "had the adventurous ring of a secret password" [142]) who "implicitly or explicitly" enter into a "pact" with the fugitive Falangist: "now they would protect him, with their weapons and their youth and their knowledge of the area, and later he would protect them with his indisputable authority as a hierarch" (133-34). To seal the contract, when finally the Nationalists arrive and take Sánchez Mazas to safety, the writer leaves his accomplices a notebook in which he has "put down in writing the bond of gratitude that would always unite them" (145). And though they never meet again, the future minister keeps his word by ensuring that none of these former Republican soldiers are subject to reprisals, quietly intervening when one of them is thrown into prison, arranging his release. As for the family that fed him (and the other three), their daughter becomes so successful in petitioning sub-officials of Franco's government that "over the years she was endowed with a saint's halo, or made into a fairy godmother to the desperate people of the region, whose families came in search of protection for the indiscriminate victims" of the new regime (143). Again, long-lasting loyalty is founded on shared perfidy.

Finally, at the very centre of the tale that Cercas tells, there is the soldier who comes across Sánchez Mazas in the immediate aftermath of his escape, when he is at his very lowest ebb, "muddy and alone and shaking with dread and shame in an undignified hole in the ground" (117). The militiaman has the condemned man at his mercy, and looks him firmly in the eye. But rather than reporting his find, he "calls out loudly without taking his eyes off him: / "There's nobody over here!" / Then he turns and walks away" (118). It is this moment, this brief but considered dereliction of duty, that drives the narrator's entire investigation. He calls "what passed through [the soldier's] mind when he looked [Sánchez Mazas] in the eye" a secret that, if it were to be unveiled, "might perhaps also touch on a much more essential secret" (24). But when he comes to imagine this scene in his recreation of what might have been Sánchez Mazas's account, the key to this inexplicable refusal comes to be ineffable, beyond language. He tells us that "the soldier's look doesn't express compassion or hatred, or even disdain, but a kind of secret or unfathomable joy, [. . .] something that eludes words the way the water in the stream eludes stone, because words are only made for [. . .] saying the sayable, when the sayable is everything except what rules us or makes us live or matters or what we are" (118). Less an omission or a fault, here noncompliance is figured as inherent to the basic struggle for survival, the "obstinate condition of being" that the philosopher Benedict de Spinoza calls "*conatus*" or "the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being" (159). The militiaman emerges as a version of Bartleby, the title character of American writer Herman Melville's novella "Bartleby, the Scrivener," whose refrain is that he would perpetually "prefer not to." There is nothing negative about this refusal; it is a joyful affirmation of power even in the shadow of the Spanish Republic's inevitable downfall. It is the secret, inexpressible snatching of victory from the jaws of defeat.

No wonder that Miralles, if indeed it is he who is the militiaman in question, goes on to prove himself the most relentlessly loyal of fighters for freedom in the face of the global threat of fascism. Cercas imagines him with a small but diverse group of fellow combatants ("four Moors, a black guy, and a Catalan lathe operator" [229]) in the deserts of North Africa and then at the head of the troops liberating Paris in 1944, "carrying the flag of a country not his own" (246), with the fate of civilization in his hands. None of this may be "true" in any strict sense, but in his book's closing homage-cum-riposte to Bolaño (whose novel *Amulet* imagines a parade of Latin America's idealistic youth marching only

to their deaths), Cercas celebrates Miralles as a type of unknown and unknowable hero, whose contributions remain forever secret, who ensures that history does not end badly, or at least that it does not end entirely, because there are always more stories to be told.

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Song: "Suspiros de España" (Rocío Jurado)