

LITERARY JOURNALISM IN SPAIN

Where it came from and where it is headed.

By Sara Prieto García-Cañedo, Universidad de Alicante (Spain)

Not long after a recent IALJS Conference, I came back home wondering about the current state of literary journalism and its studies in my country. Whereas I am a fervent magazine and newspaper reader, I had never truly thought about the state of the ques-



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tion in contemporary Spain. These things happen: Sometimes you focus so much on a certain topic that you forget to look around and reflect on other things that are closer to you.

Everything stated here are conclusions derived from my own personal

experience, combined with a bit of academic reading, and some media observation. Therefore, do not expect to find the answer to the "Top-Ten Truths" about literary journalism in Spain. What I intend to do is simpler: I intend to share some ideas about where literary journalism in Spain comes from and where I think it is heading to in the future.

The relationships between literature and journalism in Spain are complex. I agree with Sonia Parratt, who has pointed out in her article "Literary Journalism in Spain: Past, Present (and Future)?" that the presence of literary journalism in the Spanish written press is of extreme importance. If you have a look at current newspapers and magazines, literature and the literary form seems to be found everywhere. Likewise, when reading many of our contemporary novels one can perceive the influence of the journalistic style in the prose. Many of our famous fiction writers from all periods have developed a parallel career as journalists and this has had an influence in the development of our literary and journalistic tradition.

Let's start then from the begin-

ning. As early as 1845, Joaquín Francisco Rodríguez Pacheco defended the nature of journalism as a literary genre. It is precisely the journalism written in the nineteenth century what people would think of as the "Golden Age" of literary journalism in our country. If you asked any Spanish researcher or student in the Humanities or Social Sciences to name an author who has cultivated the genre, most of them will very likely refer to Larra and his articles. Mariano José de Larra was a writer and journalist from the early nineteenth century who wrote satirical and pessimistic articles on Spanish issues. His

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texts are still well-known in our contemporary world and widely studied in Spanish literature classes in secondary schools and universities. Other key names that might also come up in this hypothetical brainstorming are Emilia Pardo Bazán and Leopoldo Alas "Clarín" in the late 1880s, or Miguel de Unamuno and José Martínez Ruiz "Azorín" among the intellectuals of the Generation of '98. The members of this generation, named after the influence of the moral, social, and political crisis provoked by the loss of the last Spanish colonies in the Spanish-American War of 1898, promoted the creation of literary magazines. Deeply influenced by Larra's fatalistic view of Spain, these authors reflected about the present and future situation of the country. Their style was often experimental, combining different literary genres and breaking boundaries within disciplines.

These are, among many others, some of the Spanish canonical figures in

the field of literary journalism. I would also add Carmen de Burgos to this list who, at the



beginning of the twentieth century, covered the first year of the Rif War and became one of the first Spanish women to work as a war correspondent. All of them wrote in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but what was the situation during the rest of the twentieth century? One needs to bear in mind that between 1920 and 1975 Spain suffered two dictatorships and one Civil War. These events would naturally have an immediate effect in the written press, with highly politicized and polarized opinions too complex to discuss in this article. During the first decades of Franco's regime, some of our famous fiction writers, such as Miguel Delibes, Jacinto Benavente, or Nobel-winner Camilo José Cela published articles in magazines and newspapers, but they are more well-known today for their careers as fiction writers than for their careers as journalists.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, coinciding with the gradual opening of Franco's regime, there was a new boom in the field of journalism. New publications, such as *Triunfo*, *Hermano Lobo*, *Diario 16* or *Interviú*, promoted a new critical and intellectual attitude, politically engaged and influenced by our nineteenth-century tradition, but also related to the French events of May 1968, the American counterculture movement and, of course, the Spanish Transition period. Authors such as Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Francisco Umbral, or Maruja Torres are representatives of this new fashion. This trend has continued today and is to be found in the two largest Spanish newspapers, *El País* and *El Mundo*, and their Sunday editions, but also in other national newspapers such as ABC or regional publications such as the Catalanian *La Vanguardia* or the

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Basque *El Diario Vasco*.

Famous fiction writers such as Javier Marías, Almudena Grandes, Rosa Montero, or Antonio Muñoz Molina, or others who are more well-known for their careers as journalists, like Juan José Millás, Enrique Vila-Matas, Juan Manuel de Prada or, again, Maruja Torres, are the key names of the columnists collaborating in the corporate media today. The authors combine resources of fiction with factual accounts to write about the current political, economic or sociological situation in Spain and worldwide. To my mind come two outstanding columns written by Almudena Grandes in May 2011, during the occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid, that exemplify the nature of these articles: Grandes personified the Spanish capital and its famous square and through a brief historical journey she chronicled and reflected on the events that took place during the 15-M Movement.

Among the books published by these authors, I could mention Juan José Millás's *Hay algo que no es como me dicen: La verdad sobre el caso Nevenka* (*Something's Missing Here: The Truth about Nevenka's Case*), published in 2004. A combination of investigative journalism and literary creation, Millás related the story of Nevenka Fernández, a city councillor of a small town in northern Spain who had accused her boss for sexual harassment. The case had a tremendous impact in the media at the time.

The above-mentioned trend corresponds to the "traditional" or mainstream literary journalism. However, the era of social media has brought about a shift in this tendency and there seems to be a new (and refreshing) fever going on, different from the one found in the mass media. The magazine that perhaps best embodies this new movement is the cultural magazine *Jot Down*, but there are others such as the cultural magazine *Diario Kafka*, the design magazine *Yorokubu* or *Libero*, an innovative football magazine written with a radically different style from the one found in sports newspapers.

Jot Down was created by a group

of friends (none of them belonging to the communication world) who decided to simply edit the magazine they wanted to read. It started back in May 2011 as a digital publication and thanks to viral platforms and other social media such as Twitter it has currently around 400,000 monthly visitors, a lot in Spanish standards for such a publication. Its readers do not only come from Spain, but also from Latin America, London, or Paris. After their first anniversary they decided to publish a printed edition with 320 pages, including no advertising whatsoever. They have published a new issue every three months since. Ricardo J. González, one of its editors, has claimed that the magazine was born with the desire of being the Spanish *New Yorker*. And with its rapid success, the laudatory reviews it has received and especially the outstanding quality of its articles, it seems to me that they are on the right track.

Promoting the Slow Movement philosophy, *Jot Down* offers lengthy articles and interviews (usually around 10,000, but sometimes up to 20,000 words), written with exquisite literary style. In the magazine we can find articles on anything. And by anything, I mean articles that indistinctively talk about current politics, literature, fashion, travelling, neuroscience, chess in the Middle Ages, flamenco dances, NBA legends, or sexual life in the Soviet Union, to name but a few. The editors have managed to attract people who have published in mainstream media to collaborate in the magazine, such as the philosopher Félix de Azúa, or journalists like Ramón Lobo and Enric González, who has also published his last autobiographical book *Memorias Líquidas* (*Liquid Memories*) with them.

The *Jot Down* phenomenon has even been object of analysis in one of the 2013 summer courses of the International University of Andalusia, and something tells me that it will not be the last one. I think it is in this new format where the future of Spanish literary journalism lies. The younger generations are read-

ing these articles, talking—and tweeting—about them but also buying their printed publications, in an era in which so much discussion is going on about the eventual death of the printed press.

Hopefully, this will lead to the embracement of literary journalism studies focused on these phenomena and also on the articles and reportages found in mainstream media. From my point of view there is a gap on criticism about these issues. I do not recall having studied literary journalism beyond the nineteenth-century tradition in my classes of Spanish Language and Literature during my high school years. Neither do I recall having learned anything from the Spanish twentieth-century authors in the MA course I took on the relationships between journalism and literature. I know for a fact that this is an understudied aspect in Spanish Studies and Journalism degrees. It seems as if we had assumed the existing relationships between journalism and literature but we were still too shy to critically discuss about them. For this reason, I would like to conclude this article highlighting this lack of expertise in the field: there is a lack of critical material on the subject but there is plenty of primary material waiting to be analysed. I might even follow my own advice and pursue research on this topic in the future.

Perhaps I will come back in a couple of years to this newsletter or the IALJS's fine *Literary Journalism Studies* journal with an extended and more detailed article addressing some of these questions. ♦

