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## IMPLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY: HISTORY, FICTION AND THE ENIGMA OF TRUTH IN CERCAS'S *EL IMPOSTOR*

### RESUMEN

*El impostor* (2014) de Javier Cercas es una de varias novelas del autor que exploran las profundidades de la memoria, la historia y la recuperación de la verdad. Incluidos entre ellos son *Los soldados de Salamina* (2001) y *Anatomía de un instante* (2009). La obra sigue al narrador Cercas mientras investiga a Enrik Marco, un fraude que durante décadas se pintó a sí mismo como un rebelde republicano y sobreviviente del campo de concentración de Mauthausen en Alemania. La misión de investigar a Marco le lleva a Cercas a un mundo de registros oficiales, rumores y entrevistas con historiadores, cineastas y otros que provocan un cambio de perspectiva inesperado en su investigación. En lugar de escribir una exposición dura, cargada de hechos, Cercas se retira a un modo reflexivo en el que contempla su vida como escritor de ficción y cómo lo que hace es paralelo a las acciones de Marco. El resultado es verse a sí mismo como otro impostor. La razón tras la ansiedad de Cercas surge cuando se da cuenta de que la memoria y la historia son distorsiones similares de la verdad y evidencias de la ficción en la vida. Aunque la motivación para un recuerdo en particular puede provenir de buenas intenciones, la base todavía es defectuosa, flexible y está sujeta a la perspectiva de quienes cuentan la historia. En este artículo examino la naturaleza enigmática de la memoria histórica y la línea fina que separa la verdad de la ficción tal como se ve a través de un lugar dislocado, asíncrono y fragmentado en el tiempo y el espacio.

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PALABRAS CLAVE: Javier Cercas—memoria—historia—ficción—verdad—Enrik Marco—Guerra Civil Española—recuperación de la historia—memoria histórica

ABSTRACT

Javier Cercas's *El impostor* (2014) is one of several novels by the author that explore the depths of memory, history and the recuperation of truth, including *Los soldados de Salamina* (2001) and *Anatomía de un instante* (2009). The work follows the narrator Cercas as he investigates Enrik Marco, a fraud who for decades painted himself as a Republican rebel and survivor of Germany's Mauthausen Concentration Camp. Cercas's fact-finding mission takes him into a world of official records, rumors and interviews with historians, filmmakers and others that bring about an unexpected change of direction in his investigation. Instead of writing a hardboiled, fact-laden exposé, Cercas retreats into a reflective mode where he contemplates his life as a fictional writer and how what he does parallels Marco's actions. The result is seeing himself as yet another impostor. The reason for Cercas's anxiety surfaces as he realizes that memory and history are similar distortions of the truth and evidences of fiction in life. Though the motivation for a particular memory may come from good intentions, the foundation is still faulty, pliable and subject to the perspective of those telling the story. In this essay I explore the enigmatic nature of historical memory and the fine line that separates truth from fiction as viewed through a dislocated, asynchronous and fragmented location in time and space.

KEYWORDS: Javier Cercas—memory—history—fiction—Enrik Marco—Spanish Civil War—recuperation of history—historical memory

Is any given bombing in Italy the work of leftist extremists, or extreme-right provocation, or a centrist mise-en-scène to discredit all extreme terrorists and to shore up its own failing power, or again, is it a police-inspired scenario and a form of blackmail to public security? All of this is simultaneously true, and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of the facts does not put an end to this vertigo of interpretation. (Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 16)

Javier Cercas's *El impostor* (2014) follows the footsteps of an author-turned-detective to unmask the history, and truth, behind the life of Enrik Marco (b. 1921), a self-proclaimed hero of the Spanish Civil War and alleged prisoner in Nazi Germany's Mauthausen Concentration Camp. The narrator, whose voice is that of a fictionalized Cercas, obsesses over the revelation that Marco is an impostor, a fixation that takes him on a journey that leads to

documents, interviews, biographies and anecdotal evidences that increasingly expose and confirm decades of deceit, rumor and innuendo. Throughout the novel the author weaves these strands of biographical information into a pseudo-biography of Enric Marco and his lifetime of deception. However, in an ironic twist, the outcome of Cercas's efforts to reveal Marco's imposture moves well beyond the limits of his personal and contrived history. While in the act of uncovering Marco's life, Cercas comes face to face with his own insecurities regarding his life as a fiction writer. His doubts appear to center around the verity of the information gleaned from his investigation and the accuracy of memory as a means of exposing history and truth. The reader becomes aware that what appears at first glance to be a *detective-styled* novel becomes a self-reflective autobiography where Cercas reexamines his life as a fiction writer and questions the legitimacy of so-called truths. This exposé reveals two aspects of writing that move beyond Cercas's obsession with Marco and his imposture. First, he questions the reliability of the *memoria histórica*<sup>2</sup> when attempting to recover historical truth. Second, he explores the ambiguous frontier that separates truth from fantasy, the real from the imaginary. Both elements combine to question whether it is possible to adequately recuperate history and at the same time disclose truth.

The novel's opening chapter, "La piel de la cebolla," foreshadows Cercas's uncertainty regarding the unattainable absolute that history pretends to embody. Much like the transparent and porous nature of the onion skin, the author suggests that his work will involve the relative nature of perception and the difficulty involved in laying bare the multiple and varied views of history. Indeed, like the onion his work must be seen as the sum of all its parts, many of which remain obscured from view and ignored. It is only when the layers are peeled back one by one that aspects of the onion (and his work) are revealed in much the same way that history constitutes a process of discovery and revelation. However, even those revealed parts are merely fragments of a broader narrative. From this paradigm grow Cercas's questions as to whether history is, at its core, simply another layer within a broader literary tradition or whether history, supported by evidence, is the revelation of truth in its whole and complete form. The metaphor of the onion presents an additional invective on the viability of history outside the literary tradition. The product of history constitutes only the outer, dried and peeling skin. Beneath this layer are manifestations of the *other*, alternative narratives that never reach the surface. Thus, what we see is the invention and product of a process that removes the outer layers only to reveal other dimensions of the onion, which in this case might be history and truth.

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<sup>2</sup> Law 57/2007 (passed on 31 October 2007), known as the *Ley de Memoria Histórica*, recognizes and expands the rights of those impacted by the persecution and violence they suffered during the Spanish Civil War and in its aftermath by the Franco dictatorship. The law officially recognizes victims from both sides of the conflict and provides measures for those affected, including the descendants of victims, to legal recourse. The law also condemns the Franco regime.

While struggling with the nuances of writing, originality and truth, Cercas vacillates between defining his work a *historicized novel* or a *novelized history*. On the one hand, he perceives writing as an attempt to recuperate Spain's *memoria histórica* and demonstrates how truth and reality may assume objective and plausible forms. This recuperation and compilation of the *real* into a cathartic narrative allows a nation to heal from the trauma of the past. On the other hand, Cercas recognizes, as described by Hayden White, history's vulnerability to subjective interpretation and exaggeration. To highlight this complexity and variety of narrative perspectives, Cercas partitions his narrative into an array of reliable narrators whose subjective (and objective) voices give legitimacy, breadth and depth to his research into Enric Marco. Each voice offers a perspective, a judgment or a testimony that discloses aspects regarding Marco's life, but rarely does it approximate a definitive historical absolute. By means of these voices Cercas strains to disentangle the objectivity of evidence from the subjectivity of interpretation. The more Cercas documents his history and strives to produce a genuine historical exposé on Enric Marco's life, the more he jeopardizes his authorial objectivity and tinges with *fictionality* the factualness of his investigation. It is his objectivity that suffers as he dives deeper and deeper into his subject. With every new discovery Cercas faces additional insecurities as a writer, especially as he confronts an increased number of criticisms from his peers. These frequent criticisms fuel doubt regarding his competency as either novelist or historian, both of which he naively embraces. To this end the novel's title, *El impostor*, produces a dialogic interface that both reflects and refracts its meaning onto the charlatan Marco, as well as the self-deprecating writer Cercas.

As Cercas pours over the wide array of testimonial documents that come into his possession, he comes to a strange and disconcerting realization. With every step forward into Marco's strained and factually dubious history, Cercas must take a step back to examine his own place as a fiction writer who also lives a life of deception. This fact surfaces early in the novel when his friend, Mario Vargas Llosa (who strangely enough is also a fiction writer), exclaims, "¡Marco es un personaje suyo!" (22). Cercas muses,

El fogoso comentario de Vargas Llosa me halagó, pero, por algún motivo que entonces no entendí, también me incomodó; para ocultar mi embarazosa satisfacción seguí hablando, opiné que Marco no sólo era fascinante por sí mismo, sino por lo que revelaba de los demás.

—Es como si todosuviésemos algo de Marco —me oí decir, embalado—. Como si todos fuésemos un poco impostores. (22)

Then, after a long pause, his friend and colleague Ignacio Martínez de Pisón administers the fatal blow to Cercas's ego, declaring, "Sí: sobre todo tú" (22). Cercas notes, "Todos se rieron. Yo también, pero menos: era la primera vez en mi vida que me llamaban impostor; aunque no era la primera vez que me relacionaban con Marco" (22). As a result of this crucial

conversation, Cercas begins to fall into a postmodern nightmare where he is plagued with doubt not just concerning Marco but also regarding his own history as a writer. Alberto Moreiras observes, “We all falsify our history; we all falsify our lives; we all falsify our work, even if we do not necessarily always cross the material line into document falsification, and even if we are not always necessarily investigated by an impenitent historian whose mission is to reveal our bogusness” (77). He then surmises that

Cercas is interested in neither finding guilt nor cleansing it. What he seeks is an equally miraculous, rare, impossible thing: to produce a book about the truth residue of a monumental set of lies; to find what still might stand up when all the lies are eliminated. Such is the technical exercise in his nonfiction novel or *real fiction*: how does one go about writing a book where there are no lies? And what remains? (77, emphasis in original text)

This is not the first time that Cercas has delved into and put at odds the narrative of simulation, simulacra and dissonance with regard to history and truth. Indeed, *El impostor* is one more in a succession of novels, including *Los soldados de Salamina* (2001), *Anatomía de un instante* (2009) and *Las leyes de la frontera* (2012), where the author investigates the depths of human behavior and the inconsistency of perception and memory; that is, whether what we see, believe or construe may or may not correspond to what is real. He recognizes the mundanity of history taken from a purely pragmatic point of view when, speaking of *Anatomía de un instante*, he states that

El caso es que, no sé cómo, un día llegué a la conclusión de que la culpa de mi tristeza la tenía mi libro recién publicado: no porque me hubiera dejado exhausto física y mentalmente (o no sólo); también (o sobre todo) porque era un libro raro, una extraña novela sin ficción, un relato rigurosamente real, desprovisto del más mínimo alivio de invención o fantasía. Pensaba que eso era lo que me había matado. A todas horas me repetía, como una consigna: «La realidad mata, la ficción salva». (16)

It is particularly significant that Cercas chooses to highlight *Anatomía de un instante* at this juncture of his narrative. As Cercas dives more deeply into his consideration of Marco and the historical reconstruction that he is pursuing, he notes that any observable event may be flawed and jaundiced by preconceived notions making it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the real from the unreal; truth from fiction. A perusal of this previous historical novel dialogues intimately with *El impostor*. In the opening pages of *Anatomía de un instante*, the narrator observes that the public’s reception of an event is “el fruto de una neurosis colectiva. O, de una paranoia colectiva. O, más precisamente, de una novela colectiva. En la sociedad del espectáculo fue, en todo caso, un espectáculo más. Pero eso no significa que fuera una ficción” (*Anatomía* 15). Then, Cercas reflects, “No hay novelista que no haya

experimentado alguna vez la sensación presuntuosa de que la realidad le está reclamando una novela, de que no es él quien busca una novela, sino una novela quien le está buscando a él” (*Anatomía* 16). His notion that the recuperation of historical memory is a form of paranoia anticipates his equally paranoid and unstable relationship with both Enric Marco and his novel. Via the two novels, as well as a third, intermediary work, *Las leyes de la frontera* (2012), Cercas reaffirms his belief that writers are impostors who are incapable of resolving the uncertainty surrounding their access to reality.

This exasperation with the instability of reality and the strictures placed on history manifest themselves conclusively in *El impostor* as it vacillates between the two narrative planes of fiction and history, both conjoined at the investigative level to create a hyper-blended fictional nonfiction.

In *El impostor*, Cercas continues his exploration of the permeable, overlapping and fluctuating circles that comprehend the supposedly pragmatic nature of Marco’s history, the idealized content of his own fiction and their erratic coexistence within the sphere of simulation. Jean Baudrillard has noted that “The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible” (19). From this position he then hypothesizes, “...if it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation, through the force of inertia of the real that surrounds us, the opposite is also true (and this reversibility itself is part of the apparatus of simulation and the impotence of power): namely, it is *now impossible to isolate the process of the real*, or to prove the real” (Baudrillard 21). Herein rests Cercas’s enigma as he attempts to reconstruct Marco’s life: the proof of the real that he accumulates proffers little more than a simulation of the historical real and not the real itself. In other words, a fiction. Throughout his work, Cercas posits his disillusionment with history; that is, history kills the mind while fiction saves and enlivens it. Thus, the recovery of the *memoria histórica*, from this vantage point, is reduced to little more than a shadowy reflection of truth.

One might surmise that Cercas’s approach to writing *El impostor* draws indirectly a Lacanian perspective on reality and its presumptive relationship to truth. Writing from a psychoanalytic posture, Slavoj Žižek notes that the observer, or in our case Cercas the author-turned-historian, is frequently exposed to dual realities and substances that our subjective mind reflects and refracts into multiple perspectives and iterations (*Looking Awry* 11). Later he explains, “If we look at a thing straight on, matter-of-factly, we see it ‘as it really is,’ while the gaze puzzled by our desires and anxieties (‘looking awry’) give us a distorted, blurred image” (*Looking Awry* 11). Žižek then turns this logic upside down stating that when we turn our attention to the object of our observation and consider it as the thing that it is, perhaps “matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot:

the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it 'at an angle,' i.e., with an 'interested' view, supported, permeated, and 'distorted' by *desire*" (*Looking Awry* II, emphasis in the original). He then concludes, "For reality to exist, something must be left unspoken" (*Looking Awry* 45).

Similarly, in *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White explores the challenges of reproducing history and uncovering what might be perceived as *the real*. He notes that a good historian "reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents, and agencies found in the always incomplete historical record" (82). He continues,

...there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. (82, emphasis in original text)

Given White's characterization of history, the classification of a text as either "historical" or "fictional," "genuine" or "contrived" rests primarily on how the author chooses to construct his narrative and the mindset with which he approaches his task. So, at this crucial intersection of writing *El impostor*, Cercas finds himself wrestling with doubts regarding his aptitude as a writer to cross or, perhaps more significantly, to straddle the tenuous boundary between history and fiction in order to recuperate the events that frame Marco's duplicitous life. Cercas notes that "... mi vida era una farsa y yo un farsante, que había elegido la literatura para llevar una existencia libre, feliz y auténtica y llevaba una existencia falsa, esclava e infeliz, que yo era un tipo que iba de novelista y daba el pego y engañaba al personal, pero en realidad no era más que un impostor" (17). His perceived fraudulence as a novelist also taints his perception of himself as a historian and biographer. The question arises as to how to rationalize the use of one narrative vantage point (i.e., fiction) with that of another (i.e., historical). White recognizes the scope of such a challenge when he writes,

*How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian's subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-writing, operation.* (85, emphasis in original text).

Thus, Cercas must come to grips with his task as writer to produce a historical text that straddles the thin line separating a historical narrative from its fictional counterpart. As we have already noted, his feelings of being deceptive and an impostor overshadow this task and become his greatest creative hurdle. White makes it clear that the line of separation is porous once the writer recognizes that *fiction* fills the narrative gap where *history* is silent. It appears that Cercas

acknowledges this deficiency in his writing and struggles with feelings of inadequacy, hypocrisy and imposture as a writer and one who earns a living as a purveyor of fiction, distortion and half-truths. Therefore, how is it possible to reconstruct history, and its implicit truths, from fragmented, biased evidences? Is the recuperation of the *memoria histórica* feasible (and viable) when contextualized from incomplete, imprecise and subjectified evidences of the real?

In an intelligent and engaging article on the impact of memory on Spain's historical narrative, Sara J. Brenneis argues that the efforts to recuperate and explicate the events that occurred during the Spanish Civil War, and its correlation to the events of the Holocaust, have been met by Cercas and others with contempt and scrutiny. She holds that "Cercas turns a blind eye to the non-Jewish victims of Nazi aggression..., aligning [himself] more than he may have intended with the false survivor at the core of his narrative" (367). Brenneis suggests that despite the author's "misplaced glorification of Enric Marco and [his] narrow focus on the historical memory movement as a moribund collective memory of the Spanish Civil War and Franco dictatorship", the efforts of the *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* and the Law of Historical Memory (2007) have nonetheless led to a more concerted and positive engagement with the "legacy of the Spaniards deported to Nazi camps during World War II" (367). Despite her engaging arguments and conclusions, I believe that Brenneis has missed a vital aspect of Cercas's work and the possibility of a reading that discloses a deeper, more socio-politico-historically nuanced treatise on the meaning of history and truth. Cercas confronts the history of an enigmatic character whose life, though concrete and real, reflects more broadly a generic view of Spain and its Civil and post-Civil War history. For example, while in the process of identifying biographical *facts* surrounding the birth and childhood of Marco, Cercas quotes from the subject's autobiography where he writes, "«Me llamo Enric Marco y nací el 14 de abril de 1921, justo diez años antes de la proclamación de la Segunda República española»" (26). After reflecting on this singular statement, Cercas observes that

[a Marco] le permitía a su vez presentarse, de manera implícita o explícita, como el hombre providencial que había conocido de primera mano los grandes acontecimientos del siglo y se había cruzado con sus principales protagonistas, como el compendio o el símbolo o la personificación misma de la historia de su país: al fin y al cabo, su biografía individual era un reflejo exacto de la biografía colectiva de España. (27)

This comment is one of the first among several that suggest that Cercas sees Marco as more than a mere person of interest: he is a representation of Spain's most recent history and the difficulties faced in attempting to disentangle truth from error. Indeed, Brenneis' presumption that Cercas sympathizes with Marco seems to ignore the arbitrariness unveiled through historical discourse and its dialogue with fiction writing. If the reader views *El impostor* in



the context of *Los soldados de Salamina*, the nonfiction fiction genre emerges as a meditation on the complexities, uncertainties, fictions and disguises enmeshed in the recuperation of memory and history. From this vantage point, what Cercas addresses is the fragile frame in which history is viewed and how either the negation or the affirmation of the subject is represented. Indeed, the questions that must be asked are: What exactly constitutes truth in history? Is history an agglomeration of uncontested facts or is it a loose array of fictions and conjectures? And, is the historian to be trusted? To what extent does history insert and assert itself into and onto the writer? Is history an attempt to restore *the* truth or *a* truth? To what extent is history motivated by politics rather than social inquiry? A reading of *El impostor* obliges the reader to confront the legitimacy of the *memoria histórica* and the role of truth in this process. Žižek notes that

it is crucial to distinguish...between the fantasmatic spectral narrative and the Real itself: one should never forget that the foreclosed traumatic narrative of the crime/transgression comes, as it were after the (f)act; that it is in itself a lure, a 'primordial lie' destined to deceive the subject by providing the fantasmatic of his or her being. (*The Fragile Absolute* 63)

In order to illustrate the implausible, and at times phantasmatic, nature of writing in regard to the reconstruction of history, let us turn to the opening paragraphs to *El impostor*. Cercas launches the first chapter of the novel with a tried-and-true Borgesian trope in which the written text appears as a preexistent entity that exerts its *consciousness* or *will* onto that of the writer. Cercas muses,

Yo no quería escribir este libro. No sabía exactamente por qué no quería escribirlo o sí lo sabía pero no quería reconocerlo o no me atrevía a reconocerlo; o no del todo. El caso es que a lo largo de más de siete años me resistí a escribir este libro. Durante ese tiempo escribí otros dos, aunque éste no se me olvidó; al revés: a mi modo, mientras escribía esos dos libros, también escribía éste. O quizás era este libro el que a su modo me escribía a mí. (15)

The author's conclusion that perhaps he has not written the text, but that the text has written him opens up and subjects the novel to a more penetrating gaze into the role of writing and the recuperation of history. As we have noted, the quasi-realism of Cercas's work, in conjunction with its apparent narrative autonomy, elevates the art of writing to a whole new level of aesthetic complexity. Indeed, this "virtual history" is not the 'truth' of the official public history, but the fantasy which fills in the void of the *act* that brought history about" (Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* 64). It is not coincidental that Cercas's view of the text mimics that employed not only by Borges, but by other writers and their works. Most notable among them is Miguel de Cervantes and his errant knight don Quixote de la Mancha, who become narrative cohabitants with Cercas and Marco within the pages of *El impostor*. Like Cervantes's alter ego Cidi

Hamete Benengeli, Cercas inscribes himself into this *real novel* (Moreiras, “Memory Heroics” 76) as historian, detective, testator, character and omniscient narrator. The result is a form of “fake authenticity” (Moreiras, “Memory Heroics” 79) that alludes to the real without generating evidence of its truthfulness. Perhaps this is the quandary suggested by the insertion into the novel of Cervantes’ unrealistic *historical* figures. The juxtaposition of Cercas/Marco to Cervantes/don Quixote raises the question of how these co-actants in the recuperation of history define the line that separates reality and truth from fantasy and imposture. Cercas notes that “La verdad es que estoy harto de realidad. He llegado a la conclusión de que la realidad mata y la ficción salva. Ahora necesito un poco de ficción” (33). To this observation Santiago Fillol, who along with Lucas Vernal produced the film *Ich bin Enric Marco*, responds,

Enric es pura ficción. ¿No te das cuenta? Todo él es una ficción enorme, una ficción, además, incrustada en la realidad, encarnada en ella. Enric es igual que don Quijote: no se conformó con vivir una vida mediocre y quiso vivir una vida a lo grande; y, como no la tenía a su alcance, se la inventó. (33)

The novel’s enigmatic authorship and its virtualization of history are further complicated by Cercas’s *ex post facto* apology for having submitted his will to that of an apparently autonomous, pre-existing, pre-written story. In this post-(pre)textual confession, he states,

Los primeros párrafos de un libro son siempre los últimos que escribo. Este libro está acabado. Este párrafo es lo último, ya sé por qué no quería escribir este libro. No quería escribirlo porque tenía miedo. Eso es lo que yo sabía desde el principio pero no quería reconocer o no me atrevía a reconocer; o no del todo. Lo que sólo ahora sé es que mi miedo estaba justificado. (15)

Why fear? Perhaps it is the realization that Cercas is not in control of the narrative. His confession also lays bare the fact that despite all his previous misgivings regarding this project, he finally falls victim to its lure. The text, the history, and the intrigue reveal far more than Marco and his history. All three elements coalesce into a Janus-like history that denounces two distinct yet coequal deceits: one involving Marco and the other revealing Cercas’s as writer. Perhaps Borges’s concluding remark from his short story “Guayaquil” reflects best this anxiety: “Presiento que ya no escribiré más. *Mon siège est fait*” (119).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, his

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase *Mon siège est fait* is attributed to René-Aubert Vertot (1655-1735), a French clergyman and historian. According to history, Vertot was commissioned to produce a history of the Order of Malta. He sent a request to a knight for information regarding the siege of Rhodes. When he did not receive the requested information, he resumed and completed his task. Soon after completing the history, the documents he had requested arrived, to which he responded, “J’en suis fâché, mais mon siege est fait”. The implication of the statement became a proverb for work done without the necessary documentation.

history and that of his subject have become the locus of an even broader and more penetrating uncertainty regarding the place of the writer in relationship to his subject, memory and historical reality.

Cercas's alarm is not unwarranted when he concedes that his narrative voice has also become a fiction within a fiction that portends the possibility of revealing and representing truth in history. Not unlike the parallel that he perceives between the flesh-and-blood Enric Marco and his fictional counterpart don Quixote, words disempower the writer by giving to their creations an autonomous selfhood that transcends the power of their creator. The fear is further exacerbated by the uncertainty regarding who is writing whom? Is the voice of the text that of Cercas the man or of Cercas the creation? Or, are they individually or collectively a projection of the unconscious self that stands outside the bounds of reality? As Borges surmises in "Borges y yo," "Así mi vida es una fuga y todo lo pierdo y todo es del olvido, o del otro. No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página" (70). Ultimately it seems, no matter which way the pendulum swings between objective documentation and subjective observation, there remains a deficit to the truth and subjection to the inaccuracies of memory and interpretation.

One of the (im)probabilities that Cercas alludes to in his explanatory preface is whether the character, or characters (including himself), are redeemable as historical constructs. In other words, in the context of the illusion perpetrated by Enric Marco, are his efforts as author/character/narrator sufficient to redeem, or reconcile, himself and his subject from their imposture. Moreiras defines this process in *El impostor* as the "denarrativizing narrative and a testimony in deconstruction" (78). He asks

How does one go about denarrativizing narrative? Is that not a contradiction *in terminis*, an impossible endeavor? And how does one pursue a deconstruction of *testimonio* without leaving us all in the uncanniest form of exposure, having been denied the last shelter, which is to trust that others may trust our personal truth...? If you take away from us the double possibility of myth and testimony – both of them negatively enframed by mythomania – then we are left with nothing; we no longer know what to grasp for. We would have to give up not just literature and philosophy but also politics, in the necessary acceptance of a horizonless nihilism. (78)

Thus, the text, with all its personal and documented historical nuances, may exist within an autonomous, idiosyncratic condition of the subjective real. However, this testimonial text exists only if our testation is true. Thus, the writer exists primarily as the mechanism by which events and individuals are processed, revealed and simulated into textual form; constituting a form of testimonial redemption. Ironically, the consequence of the author's redemptive posture results in a folding in or entrapment of his persona into the narrative cycle as yet another fiction within the historiographical apparatus. As I will note later in

this study, this entrapment comes about as the narrator, Cercas, creates an emotional and ethical-moral link with Marco. Perhaps this is another reason for Cercas's reticence to write Marco's history. There is a degree of psychological capital that Cercas will expend in order to produce and expose *their* commonly held moral and ethical history while seeking reconciliation with society. Whatever the motivation, the evidence that the narrator uncovers in the recuperation of history and in attempting to define who Marco really is, collapses *ad infinitum* into a cycle of discovery, negation and apology. This historical recovery both affects and afflicts Enric Marco and the narrator, subjecting both to the probative lens of derision and the pejorative optics of truth. Thus, Cercas's narrative posture ascribed to history suggests the possibility that writing brings to light the implausible, yet incontrovertible, nature of truth as presented in history or what has been described as "undeniable historical certainty."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is precisely this notion of uncertainty in the face of truth with which Cercas wrestles incessantly throughout the text. Like the author, the reader can only grasp fragments of the real that are interlaced with inferences to reality mixed among fictional embellishments. In the end, Cercas must confront the potential impossibility of recuperating Marco's history at all, as well as his own literary biography. David K. Herzberger notes that "The paradigm of incompleteness in fictional discourse is found in the world (i.e., the narrative paradigm is mimetically adequate to life), hence the revealed meaning stems from the perceived coincidence between reality and narrative form" (7).

Unlike Cervantes, whose character is purely fictional, Cercas focuses his writing on a flesh-and-blood, historical personality. However, Cercas's recuperation and transmission of historical data has unexpectedly transformed Marco into a semi-fictional character and his history into a moral tale of a rise and fall from grace. Thus, like don Quixote, Marco and his story (as well as Cercas and his story) are, as noted, embedded within a tale of redemption and reconciliation. The result is a narration that intermingles and blurs the line that partitions authenticity from contrivance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In "Dr. Littledale's Theory of the Disappearance of the Papacy," Rev. Sydney F. Smith's observed that "No mere statement of a few writers, even if contemporary, and no mere academic inferences from the principles of ecclesiastical jurisprudence...are of any avail. He must furnish us with *undeniable historical certainty* in all the cases of invalidity on which he relies, or we are not obliged to listen to him" (18, emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> Herzberger reminds us that "...the link between language and reality is fragile to begin with, and since whatever really did happen in the past is now placed within a narrative system that can only confirm the absence of the real, then we are left to ponder history plagued by chaos and distress" (8). He then notes that "The primacy of narration supplants the primacy of the mind (conjoined with the world) in the constitution of meaning, which in turn compels history and fiction to collapse into amorphous and unpredictable relationships defined by varying perceptions of writers and readers" (8).

Perhaps these queries regarding history, fiction and the unascertainable truth in life can be fleshed out and understood in light of Rita Felski's insightful study regarding the art of reading. In her *Uses of Literature*, Felski describes reading as a subjective, emotive and personal approximation to a text, whether it be fiction or non-fiction. For her, reading enmeshes a dynamic relationship shared by *recognition*, *enchantment*, or wonderment, *knowledge*, and *shock* into a transcendent and individualized experience. The result is the reader's estrangement from the work; a phenomenology of perception coupled with engagement. Felski's premise also suggests a similar effect in the writer who engages in an unrestrained dialogue with his subject and work. At this boundary between fiction and history, the imaginary and the real, the writer must decide how much of his self he invests in the process of investigating, interpreting and identifying with the subject of his work.

In the process of recuperating Marco's history, Cercas falls victim to what Felski terms *self-intensification* (39). This emotional, psychological, and even physical state reeks of "densely packed minutiae of daily life: evocative smells and sounds, familiar objects and everyday things, ordinary routines, ways of talking or passing time, a reservoir of shared references" (39). Based on these free-associating behavioral markers, Felski continues:

Recognizing aspects of ourselves in the description of others, seeing our perceptions and behaviors echoed in a work of fiction, we become aware of our accumulated experiences as distinctive yet far from unique. The contemporary idiom of "having an identity" owes a great deal to such flashes of intersubjective recognition, of perceived commonality and shared history. (39)

Felski expands this literary characterization to include "*self-extension*," the coming to see "aspects of oneself in what seems distant or strange" (39). This strangeness or difference forms the binding link that blurs and, occasionally, erases the lines that distinguish fiction from history and visa-versa. The writer's "cross-hatching of likeness as well as difference" narrows the breach that ought to separate the author from his character (40). For the author the initial strangeness and foreignness, which engendered his intrigue and interest in recuperating the truth behind his public history, no longer exists. The narrator's objectivity has been compromised by the recognition that, like Marco, he is an impostor. With that realization Cercas feels compelled to rescue Marco through some form of reconciliation and redemption:

Lo único que quería era recuperar la voz, quitarse la mordaza, poder defenderse y contar la verdad o por lo menos su versión de la verdad, poderse la contar a los jóvenes y a los no tan jóvenes, a todos aquellos que habían desconfiado en él y lo habían ensalzado y querido. Y dejarle un nombre limpio a su familia y poder morir tranquilo. Eso era lo único que quería. (40)

The motive “dejarle un nombre limpio a su familia” is reminiscent of the conclusion to *Don Quijote* where redemption is achieved by the recuperation of the knight’s historical self, Alonso Quijano. Perhaps the linkage that Cercas establishes between Cervantes and Marco’s enigmatic history reveals an underlying motive for his change of heart regarding Marco and his deception. The author’s empathy toward Marco, codified in his confession of being an impostor, undermines his attempts at constructing a viable, truthful history, drawing it nearer to subjectivity, invention and fiction. Just as fiction is nurtured by illusion and deceit, so is history, as it strives to redeem itself from its own fragmented uncertainty.

Cercas reinforces the notion of *self-extension* and *self-intensification* as he attempts to assure Marco’s redemption, vindication and reconciliation when he notes, “Entender, por supuesto, no significa disculpar o...justificar; mejor dicho; significa lo contrario” (20), and later queries, “¿Entender es justificar?” (53). He breaches the ambivalent gap separating process from outcome stating that

El pensamiento y el arte...intentan explorar lo que somos, revelando nuestra infinita, ambigua y contradictoria variedad, cartografiando así nuestra naturaleza: Shakespeare o Dostoevski, pensaba yo, iluminan los laberintos morales hasta sus últimos recovecos, demuestran que el amor es capaz de conducir al asesinato o al suicidio y logran que sintamos compasión por psicópatas y desalmados; es su deber, pensaba yo, porque el deber del arte (o del pensamiento) consiste en mostrarnos la complejidad de la existencia, a fin de volvernos más complejos, en analizar cómo funciona el mal, para poder evitarlo, e incluso el bien, quizá para poder aprenderlo. (20).

Here, the narrator’s challenge is how to authenticate and verify his historical discourse. Later in the novel, Cercas strives to justify his nonfiction fiction by couching literary endeavors as being innately narcissistic in nature.

La literatura es una forma socialmente aceptada de narcisismo. Como el Narciso del mito, como el Marco real, el novelista está del todo insatisfecho de su vida; no sólo de la suya propia, sino también de la vida en general, y por eso la rehace a la medida de sus deseos, mediante las palabras, en una ficción novelesca: como al Narciso del mito y al Marco real, al novelista la realidad le mata y la ficción le salva, porque la ficción no es a menudo más que un modo de enmascarar la realidad, un modo de protegerse o incluso de curarse de ella. (204)

Clearly, Cercas sees his relationship to Marco as self-absorbed and selfish. They become coauthors of a text that embodies their need for exoneration and justification. Indeed, it is a case of implausible deniability where the fear of discovery overwhelms their capacity to recognize undeniable truths. As a result, instead of a “mastery over the text, you are at its mercy. You are sucked in, swept up, spirited away, you feel yourself enfolded in a blissful

embrace. You are mesmerized, hypnotized, possessed. You strain to reassert yourself, but finally you give in, you stop struggling, you yield without a murmur” (Felski 55). The author must convince the reader of Marco’s *innocence* in order to justify his professional existence. His argument rests on the plausibility that both are victims of the literary process rather than conspiring charlatans enmeshed in a game of deceit. Within the historical narrative, as conceived by Cercas, there is no absolute truth, only an interpretation of it. Thus, what the text proposes as its aim (i.e., to recover and reveal Marco’s life) becomes a game of smoke and mirrors in which the truths that are discovered and those that are revealed do not always correspond to reality. Again, they become simulations of “the third order, beyond true and false, beyond rational distinctions upon which the whole of social and power depend. Thus, *lacking the real*” (Baudrillard 21). With this in mind, it becomes apparent that Cercas is compelled, out of a need for self-preservation, to discover an elusive, unobservable *truth* that underlies Marco’s motives and deceptions. For Cercas, reality becomes like an onion skin through which the truth appears layer upon layer in small, disconnected, and veiled fragments. Consequently, the selfish and narcissistic intentions of the author and the subject resist the “sober and clinical eye” of objectivity and are “pulled irresistibly into [the] orbit” of their own lie (Felski 55).

A little over halfway through the novel, Cercas directly broaches the subjectivity of history, referencing once again the similarities between Marco and the fictional Don Quixote. At one point, he draws a comparison between the innocent nature of the Manchegan knight and Enric Marco, stating that “Marco convenció a todo el mundo de que el Marco ficticio era el Marco real, y de que era un héroe civil” (231). The oddity of this comment is that Cercas has engaged in a similar deceit as he has attempted to justify, reconcile and redeem Marco by means of implausible deniability. The twist comes when Cercas turns his discussion from Marco to the histories forced upon the Spanish people during the country’s recuperation of and (re)writing of post-Civil War Spanish history. Speaking of the transition from the Franco dictatorship to democracy he notes that “España fue un país tan narcisista como Marco” (234). He then probes further:

¿Pudo la democracia construirse sobre la verdad? ¿Podía el país entero reconocerse honestamente como lo que era, en todo el horror y la vergüenza y la cobardía y la mediocridad de su pasado, y a pesar de ello seguir adelante? ¿Podía reconocerse o conocerse a sí mismo, igual que Narciso, y a pesar de ello no mirar por exceso de realidad como Narciso? (234)

With these questions Cercas catalyzes the triad of self-deception, self-interest and subjectivity as the primary obstacles that thwart a writer’s capacity to generate a substantive, verifiable and objective historical narrative.

Similarly, the reader is seduced by the text's subjectivity to the extent that he too is victimized. Like the author, the reader peers deeply into the text and is mesmerized by its discursive tactics. The result is a reader who is swayed and lulled by the writer into a state of moral, emotional and ethical contentment. These discursive seductions further blur the line dividing historical verity from fictional nonfiction, enveloping the narrative structure in a cloud of dissonant subjectivity. Perhaps more shocking is Cercas's assertion that there is not a single person or entity that does not attempt to reinvent himself. The act of simulation is a conscious, deliberate act that carries with it the threat of either positive or negative consequences. He concludes by asserting that

Lo que sí sé es que, al menos durante aquellos años, las mentiras de Marco sobre su pasado no fueron la excepción sino la norma, y que en el fondo él se limitó a exagerar hasta el extremo una práctica por entonces común: cuando estalló su caso, Marco no pudo defenderse diciendo que lo que había hecho no era más que lo que todo el mundo hacía en los años en que él se reinventó, pero sin la menor duda lo pensaba. Y lo que también sé es que, aunque nadie se atrevió a llevar su impostura hasta donde Marco la llevó, quizá porque nadie tenía la energía, el talento y la ambición suficientes para hacerlo, también en este asunto nuestro hombre en parte, como mínimo —en parte— estuvo con la mayoría. (234)

As is suggested by Cercas's defense of Marco, history is fluid and, occasionally, obscured by its own fictions. Equally certain, as evidenced in the author's behavior, is the fact that the writer too is subject to inadequacies that strain the process of writing and the recuperation of the *memoria histórica*. Essentially, Marco becomes the author's "alibi, a way of circumventing the question of [his] own attachments, investments, and vulnerabilities" (Felski 10) as a writer.

As we see reflected repeatedly throughout *El impostor*, Cercas laments the fact that he had strayed away from the formula that he had applied to *Los soldados de Salamina*, where the fiction and the reality of Rafael Sanchez Maza's experience blended into a nonfictional fiction, a truth embellished by other truths. He recognizes that all forms of writing cannot exist in a pure, unelaborated form and that the writer is tasked with making necessary concessions in order to maintain the integrity and aesthetic appeal of his creation. Within the circular nature of Cercas's novel, he introduces this theme early in the text, where he concedes that

...era que mi vida era una farsa y yo un farsante, que había elegido la literatura para llevar una existencia libre, feliz y auténtica y llevaba una existencia falsa, esclava e infeliz, que yo era un tipo que iba de novelista y daba el pego y engañaba al personal, pero en realidad no era más que un impostor. (17)

The reader learns that it is this personal epiphany and irritation that he reinforces in the latter half of the novel, in part, as a justification for writing *El impostor*.



Returning to Herzberger's ideas regarding fiction and history, we note his contention that history "pursues the truth of the past through the objectifying sanctions of human knowledge" (3), while fiction "relates imaginary events through the oxymoronic paradigm inherent in all storytelling of 'it was and it was not'" (4).

The fragments of the real, whether perceptual or evidential, that constitute the creation of historical records rely on filling the gaps in the narrative with fictional forms. As we have already noted, Cercas illustrates this point on two levels. First, he attempts to reconstruct Enric Marco's life through documents, films and other historically *reliable* sources. These sources reveal gaps in his history that impede a full, unobstructed assessment of what is real and what is fiction. In this aspect of the narrative, the real and the imaginary coexist as narratological equals. In order to create the whole narrative story Cercas must resort to anecdotal and unsubstantiated constructs (e.g., interviews, oral histories, memories) to construct scenarios with their potential solution and outcomes. Second, Enric Marco embodies the process of historicizing reality as he (re)constructs, imagines, lives and correlates his personal narrative with that of *authentic* history. As *El impostor* winds towards its conclusion, truth and lies become indistinguishable as the historical Enric Marcos slowly morphs into a fictionalized other of himself, an inverse of what happens with his fictional-turned-realistic counterpart don Quixote. The Enric Marcos at the beginning of the work is not the same as the one who appears at its conclusion. Our gaze has shifted away from the subject himself onto a *tele-vised* other that has become refracted and distorted by fiction and doubt.

One of the misconceptions about *historical* texts is the notion that such works offer a panoptic or inclusive gaze of its subject. However, Cercas demonstrates that the real cannot be fully comprehended in its current fragmented state. Likewise, historical memory is riddled with unanswered questions, gaps and holes. Memory is frequently blotchy, paralyzed or particularized in such a way that only bits and pieces of *truth* filter onto the page. As a result, history reveals a multilayered, multicultural and multidimensional ambiguity; a mosaic of pieces that cannot be fully expressed or comprehended into a single, coherent narrative. This is Cercas's dilemma as he grapples with validating Marco, and his own existence as a writer, while recognizing his powerlessness as a writer to reproduce history in its most elemental form.

Throughout the novel, Spain's past and present interweave their elements into the narrative. The flawed nature of the *memoria histórica* raises its head repeatedly as Cercas suggests that its past is as fictional and simulated as its present. Thus, the reality of the official narrative becomes as suspicious as Enric Marco's imagined life. Every aspect of what we construe as history is reduced to the proverbial question mark of doubt. Cercas observes that

Las implicaciones del caso Marco... no son sólo políticas o históricas; también son morales. De

un tiempo a esta parte la psicología insiste en que apenas podemos vivir sin mentir, en que el hombre es un animal que miente: la vida en sociedad suele exigir esa dosis de mentira que llamamos educación (y que sólo los hipócritas confunden con la hipocresía); Marco exageró y pervirtió monstruosamente esa necesidad humana... todos representamos un papel; todos somos quienes no somos; todos, de algún modo, somos Enric Marco. (43)

As we have seen, Cercas lures his reader into a forged, fictional nonfictional world in the hope that he will empathize with his illusion of the real, rather than excoriate it. The reader is led to embrace the newly fictionalized Marco under the guise that we must understand him rather than despise him for his feigned and disingenuous life since we all carry in our psyche aspects of Marco. Marco becomes the fiction of personal and national histories. The *memoria histórica* becomes as unstable, unverifiable, and fictional as was Marco and his feigned existence, relying on half-truths and public consensus rather than objective realities. Cercas thus muses:

¿Era posible averiguarlo? ¿Era posible contar la historia de Marco? ¿Era posible contarla sin mentir? ¿Era posible proponer la crónica de la mentira de Marco como una historia verdadera?...Vargas Llosa y Magris habían imaginado que nunca llegaríamos a saber la verdad profunda de Marco, pero ¿no era ésa la mejor razón para escribir sobre él? ¿No era ese no saber o esa dificultad de saber el mejor motivo para tratar de saber? Y aunque el libro sobre Marco fuera un libro imposible..., ¿no era ése un estímulo perfecto para escribirlo? (54)

Clearly, this *other* Marco is the one that Cercas is attempting to uncover and understand through his research and documentation. In addition to this *other* Marco is the *other* Cercas who stands face to face, creator with his creation. Because his credibility is at stake, this *other* narrator feels compelled and justified, whether by sympathy or by duty, to restore the truth behind Marco by disassembling and reordering his fictionalized, public self and replacing it with a new, emancipating narrative. From this vantage point, *El impostor* moves the narrative toward a reconciliation and redemption of history that inflicts itself on the writer and demands to be rescued from obscurity, misunderstanding and falsehood.

By way of *El impostor* Cercas challenges the mistaken assumption that history accurately mirrors truth and reality, that Spain's efforts at a recuperation of the *memoria histórica* were as riddled with fiction as was the previously accepted official history of the country. Via a dizzying array of documents, oral histories, documentary films and theoretical assumptions, he exposes the readers to the ambiguities and elusiveness of history. As a result, the truthfulness of history must be viewed within the frame of a nonfiction fiction that reaches only a nominal degree of clarity, reality and truthfulness. Meanwhile, the reader participates in the (re)constructed world perceived awry from a dislocated, asynchronous and fragmented place in time and space.

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