



# RIDERS



EDNODIO QUINTERO

- » Translated by Rowena Hill
- » Foreword by Enrique Vila-Matas



*Alliteration*

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## BY WAY OF A PROLOGUE

There will be no Rómulo Gallegos prize for the novel this year, which for many is one more proof of the destruction of the public sphere that manages art and culture in Venezuela. “Anything institutional is perverted, museums, libraries, are no longer such”, notes Antonio López Ortega, a Venezuelan story-writer and essayist and well known cultural organizer, for whom what is surprising in all this is that, in spite of the problems of recent years, the quality of creative activity in Venezuela remains intact. His words made me think immediately of Ednodio Quintero, born in 1947 in Trujillo, near the beautiful Andean city of Mérida. This great story-writer has constructed a literary world charged with a dense personal mythology, wonderfully invented, the starting point of which is always a village imagination raised to the highest power; I still remember the strong and pleasurable impression made on me in 1991 by *La danza del jaguar* (The Dance of the Jaguar), his first novel.

Quintero is regarded more and more as an essential writer, but the recognition of his work has been slow, due to an infinite number of causes, among which we would have to include the cultural deviation of a Venezuela isolated from the outside world and also the fact that he belongs to the category of what Fabián Casas, speaking of Bolaño, called “writers of before”, that is, he belongs to the category of those who were never simply writers, but also points of convergence between life and literature,

beacons in which the young could see themselves reflected. Quintero is one of those “writers of before”, and it is possible that, in the end, being so far removed from the lens of the media has benefitted him, because it has allowed him to accede to the ideal of certain purebred story-tellers: being pure text, being strictly a literature.

In the middle of his most recent novel, *El amor es más frío que la muerte* (Love is Colder than Death) (Candaya), there is a moment when the narrator, the former writer, the “stateless man”, the hero of women (in the manner of Bioy, but very Japanized) notices that a rock has the shape of a tomb and reminds him of a Procrustean bed. A stone bed, he thinks. And he lies face up on the cold slab and says he feels comfortable, serene as a king in a great house for ever. In that intense moment of the novel may be the absolute key to the eternal, dynastic, body that Quintero’s writings enthrone in the history of the literature of all time; we could say that the Venezuelan is tuning in to the celebrated passage by Pierre Michon in *Corps du roi* where he tells us that the monarch has two bodies: one eternal and dynastic, which the text magnifies and consecrates, and which we arbitrarily call Shakespeare, Joyce, Beckett; and another mortal body, functional, relative, rags on the way to becoming carrion, which is called Dante, and only Dante, and wears a bonnet that slips down his face to his snub nose; or is called only Joyce and wears myopic glasses, or is called Shakespeare and is a good-natured and sturdy landlord with an Elizabethan ruff.

Enrique Vila-Matas

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# RIDERS

*to Leda, my daughter,  
to Rosbelis.*

*Writing is a dense and profound pleasure.*

STENDHAL



## SELF PORTRAIT

The picture I have of myself is changeable and transitory. Blurred, as if I'm observing it through a distorting lens. Protean? Almost always unsatisfactory. It varies with lights and shadows. Nevertheless, the passage of time doesn't alter its essence. It acquires a certain density when – as if it's being imprinted thousands of times on the surface of a film – it starts to move. Isolating one photogram, invoking chance, can lead to insidious results: the saint or the monster. In any case, and much to my regret, I swing between the two extremes. I'm schizophrenic.

Multifaceted? By a process whose mechanisms I'm unable to understand, I've been endowed with an imperturbable mask. Only its eyes, which often burn like live coals, betray my state of mind. That mask, elusive and impervious, emphasizes my Asiatic features. My profile like a blunt knife and my very black hair imbue the whole with a touch of the monk or the bandit. My skin sometimes shines, pale and yellowish. Is it perhaps freeing itself from some stigma: the memory of my sojourn in hell...? A few more brushstrokes and the portrait will be complete. Not even my mother will recognize me. Narrow forehead, non-existent eyebrows. A constellation of moles. Honey-colored eyes. A basilisk stare.

According to the Chinese horoscope, I'm a boar. I think the other one defines me better: fish. Evasive and slippery. Maybe a trout with rainbow sides swimming up a waterfall. Besides, I

like the simplified shape of those graffiti that the early Christians painted in the catacombs. My nature takes pleasure in water. But in dreams I fly like a falcon.

My vocation and my destiny fuse in the only possible place: in writing. I write with passion, even with anger. I trace convoluted signs in which, some day, maybe as my death approaches, I will discover my true face.

**Li Po's Ox**

I was born in a wild place in the high mountains. I lived up to an age beyond redemption – six years – in that hamlet in the Andes, a place forgotten by map-makers and God, whose collective imaginary was more like that of some region of sixteenth century Spain than the vague and promising view of an oil-rich tropical country in the middle of the twentieth: Venezuela. My ancestors of Spanish origin, peasants from Andalusia and Extremadura, had settled on these lands three hundred years ago. My indigenous ancestors, who came from the northern branch of the Chibchas, had been living there from remote times. From the former I inherited my Mediterranean vocation, my Semitic nose and the language of Cervantes and Quevedo; from the latter my unruly hair, my eyes, which are those of a hallucinating Japanese, and my warrior's awareness.

I understood very early that my fatal and inescapable destiny was that of a warrior. However, the battles and defeats and flights and desertions – and some thankless wounds – awaiting me in an uncertain future were to have as their setting other landscapes, different from the ones I could see from my mountain home, which resembled rather the lava fields of the moons of Jupiter: Ganymedes, Io, Europa and Callisto.

I grew up in a big house, with sloping roofs of different materials, tiles, straw and zinc, recklessly situated on the bank of a fast-flowing river. My first memories, which are clear and perhaps revealing, float in that space: a strip of sun on the veranda, a flock of parrots flying over the maize field, my father reading by the light of an oil-lamp, my mother singing a hurt love song. In many of them I still recognize myself, others have been eroded by imagination that turned them into literature, some I would like to see again. I'll choose one for my pleasure. I see

coming along the public path an ox loaded with two bundles of firewood and, sitting astride its back, an unexpected rider, a boy who is steering the animal as if it was a horse. I don't know why that sight – which was in fact unusual – gave me such an attack of happiness and admiration. I ran and jumped, announcing in a loud voice the arrival of that ox-horse, a fantastic figure that had just entered my personal bestiary. Years later, by one of those fortunate conjunctions in which we recognize a gift from some god, I relived the memorable scene on reading a poem by Li Po.

### **Helen of Troy**

In September 1953 my father, who had just turned sixty, decided to take time out from his life as a farmer. We left the misty village and moved to a town with broad, steep streets, threatened by a lake and surrounded by coffee plantations. There was electricity there, and a fleet of three jeeps that made the journey to Boconó. The fact that I had been able to read for as long as I could remember did not save me from having to go to the town school. The change unsettled me, but at that early age we adapt fast to the demands of our situation. Ah, but a major surprise was waiting for me in a month's time...

On the 24th of October, the day of the Archangel Raphael – the patron saint of my temporary home – I had a first, unforgettable encounter with my destiny: I met Helen of Troy. On the whitewashed wall of a yard there arose, as if from a dream, scenes of the siege of Troy. I knew nothing of the magic of cinema, and that spectacular introduction to the art of moving pictures left a mark on my memory that time has only deepened. I've tried in vain to rescue from some remote film library that Hollywood version of the *Iliad*, and I've found only in Cacoyannis' *The Trojan Women* a sensation similar to the pure, wild excitement of my first film. But what I'm trying to express here, beyond an anecdote common to many people of my

generation, is the existential – and even conceptual – richness of that original experience. The cinema – *Helen of Troy* in particular – opened for me the doors of perception. On the night of San Rafael, on the whitewashed screen, some of the constants which were to accompany me all through my life were prefigured: mythology, which I’ve never stopped drawing on; film, which has always nourished me; literature – since although I had never heard of Homer he was the screenwriter for the film; the feminine as a way to knowledge, represented in the woman Helen; and, in sum, the imagination. “The imagination”, as Cortázar writes, “in the service of no one.”

### **In the Library of Babel**

I don’t know when I became a writer. I think it wasn’t till I was forty, when I was feverishly writing the early chapters of my first novel, *La danza del jaguar*, that I found out – with joy and horror – that that was my sole destiny. Writing. It wasn’t even a destiny I’d chosen, as one doesn’t choose, for example, the color of one’s eyes. What I am sure of – and proud of – is having always been a fanatical reader.

Although I wasn’t born in a library, and in my family the art of reading was not assiduously practiced, I learned to read before I could talk. I even, with my mother’s complicity, cultivated the fantastic notion that when I was born I could already read. Amniotic reader, that’s me. I remember my father gave me a gold coin when he found me deciphering the hieroglyphics of his lunar almanac.

Years later, and by a fortunate chance, I had access to the enormous library of my godfather, Efraín Baptista. At the end of my third year of high school, as a result of a sharp decline in my marks, my adopted family – conspiring with a quack doctor – decreed I was insane. The hasty diagnosis was followed by a naturopathic prescription, a year’s rest in the country. Return to the home there in the high mountains where my father had

taken refuge after his divorce, in the company of my two younger brothers. I clenched my teeth and took the bitter medicine; since childhood I had taken pleasure in studying. And I devoted myself, like a lone avenger, to my favorite vice, reading. My godfather lived three kilometers away from my father's house, and by an unwritten agreement every week on Thursday, mounted on Plata, my father's quiet and faithful horse, I rode down to Visún, as the hamlet was called where his blessed library offered me an invaluable treasure trove and an inexhaustible mine. Open to his sleepless and diligent godson, thank God. After a delicious lunch, prepared by Matilda, the housekeeper, an expert in wedding banquets, my godfather Efraín led me to the library and recommended me some particular books, and I would choose others according to chance and my curiosity. And on the way home, on the horse's back, I would leaf through and even read a book of adventures on the Siberian steppes or a love story.

It would be idle and quite difficult, not to mention pretentious, to make a catalogue of the marvels kept on those shelves, which reached right up to the ceiling. Nevertheless some works stand out as enjoyable memories. I read William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, without understanding it. I still have a couple of cards where I noted the difficult names of the characters, an incestuous genealogy which went back to a legendary Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin. I read *Silja* and *Life and the Sun* by Frans Emil Sillanpää, a Finnish writer forgotten in spite of his Nobel Prize; the stories are set in a rustic environment similar to the one that surrounded me, and I was in love with the Finnish girl whose name is the title of the first of them, who suffers the ups and downs of a sad destiny and dies in the flower of her youth. I read *Not By Bread Alone*, the novel by Vladimir Dudintsev where the protagonist, an engineer who is living in very precarious conditions, prepares for his frugal supper when he comes home in the raw Russian winter grilled potatoes with salt, the same recipe I used in those lean years. Without

realizing it, in those three narratives I offer as examples and in my own experience as an exile on a gelid moor, I was putting into practice the principles of the complex and fascinating relations between reality and fiction. Ah, and to finish, in the long and sleepless nights I read by the light of three candles Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and I still wake up some days transformed into Raskolnikov.

### **The Night Face Up**

At the end of 1965 I arrived in Mérida with the intention of studying forestry. In my scant baggage I had a couple of notebooks and a timid – I thought ambitious – plan for a novel. The following year, within a short space of time – as if they had come to an agreement to give me a beating – works by Borges, Marcel Schwob, Ambrose Bierce, Kafka and Cortázar fell into my hands and from there went to my eyes and my feverish brain. I had survived the Baroque nightmares of Edgar Allen Poe, in particular the horrible recurring dream connected with ‘The Telltale Heart’, but this bombardment of light and lethal creative artillery buried me. My smudged manuscripts got lost in a convenient rubbish dump, and the desire to travel one day the paths drawn in the air by those masters of the imagination went to incubate – like the seed of a curse – at the bottom of my bones. I can't fail to mention the impact made on me by reading Borges' ‘The Secret Miracle’ and ‘The Circular Ruins’, that pair of masterly creations that can leave you knock out. And my faltering and elusive memory still retains the dazzling images suggested by ‘The Night Face Up’ by Cortázar, the Cronopio Mayor: I was the chosen victim of the implacable hunters of the *guerra florida*, I was the motorcycle rider dying of fever in a hospital. And what can I say about *The Metamorphosis*, the elaborate incursion, like a skinning with a scalpel, into the final days of Gregor Samsa, that extraordinary tale by Franz Kafka that belongs now to myth and collective memory. How many times

did I wake up terrified in the middle of the night, lying face up, looking in relief at my hands and feet which still retained their original shape?

### **Kaikoué**

I think it was Yeats who wrote that we start to live when we think of life as tragedy. At the age of forty, and after a tragicomic immersion in my personal hell, I started to live. At least I was given a second opportunity. For a long decade I had written nothing, and suddenly – when I was convalescing from my imaginary illness – like a child discovering a most amusing game I found myself in the whirlwind of a novel. Without realizing, I had started to write a novel: *La danza del jaguar*. And in it, also without realizing, I was risking my skin and bones. I was demanding, in lyrical tones or with blind fury, the right to dance naked, smeared with clay, under the equinoctial sun, on the banks of a river on the plains. Like the jaguar – *Kaikoué* in the Pemon language – who mates with his female on only two nights in the year, making the forest resound like a revelry of demons, I was trying to make myself heard in the jungle of the end of the millennium, empty of ideas and sense. I would like to believe I survived the attempt. In any case, the impetus of that mad dance keeps me alive. Do I have to confess that for me life is synonymous with writing? Or vice versa. Ah, I should also tell you that the winds that hold me in the air, or rooted to the wild mountains where I was born, are nothing other than memory and desire. That's enough now, since as William Blake well said, "He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence."