

ALL SOULS:
JAVIER MARÍAS AND ARTHUR MACHEN

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All *Souls/Todas las almas* by Javier Marías is a novel haunted by time, place, memory, and the dead or soon to be dead.¹ It is a tale of a nameless professor of Spanish translation who spends two years at Oxford University continuously homesick for his native Spain. His misadventures focus on his teaching, relationships with other professors, wandering the streets in search of dusty secondhand bookstores, and an affair with a married woman. Academic ennui threatens to stifle him. The nameless professor is truly a stranger in a strange land.

The story of 'Will' sets the tone at the beginning of the novel. Will is the doorman of the building where the nameless professor lectures. Approaching 90 years of age, Will is a time traveller, who from his glass cubicle greets the shambling academics. Literally not knowing what day it is, Will could be in 1947 or 1914 or 1935 or any year of his long life. One day the nameless professor is told by a colleague to go and console Will, who is living the day in 1962 that his wife died. Will accepts the condolences, thanking 'Mr Trevor' for his concern. Tomorrow it will be Dr Myer or Mr Brome or Dr Ashmore-Jones, all retired or deceased professors. And our narrator remains nameless. Will is the embodiment of the stasis of Oxford University.

Walking and wandering the streets of Oxford is one way to dispel ennui. Our protagonist is a bibliophile at heart on a continuous quest for forgotten and obscure authors. He is especially keen to find books by Arthur Machen, and it seems that Machen is more well known in Spain than in his native Wales. This could be due to the championing of Machen by Jorge Luis Borges in the Spanish speaking world. The

¹Please be aware that this essay necessarily contains spoilers regarding the plot of Marías' novel.—Ed.

narrator mentions a curious fact about Mächen. A poll was taken of fifty prominent British authors about which side they supported in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Mächen was the only one who made public his support of the insurrection's Francisco Franco, who would later destroy the Spanish Republic and install a fascist dictatorship as well as give moral support to Hitler, one of his benefactors.¹⁷ This is where our nameless professor speculates that Mächen may not have wanted to contradict his affinity for pure terror. This is all interesting in light of the fact that Javier Marías's father, Julian Marías, who was a philosopher, was briefly imprisoned and banned from teaching for opposing Franco. He later went into exile in the United States where Javier spent part of his childhood. In spite of this, Marías has taken up the torch of championing Mächen from Borges. Which goes to show that being forgiving of our heroes is possible. One may be enthralled by a writer's oeuvre even though his or her personal failings are found execrable.

And so the booksellers are put on notice. Any Mächen book is to be held for the nameless professor. Exit Mächen, enter Alan Marriott. Here fact and fiction become almost indistinguishable. In his bibliophilic rummaging of dusty secondhand bookstores, our narrator notices a strange man who seems to shadow his every step. The man frequents the same bookstores as he, and usually enters the bookstore shortly after he enters. This is extremely unnerving. Apparently, there is another person who shares the same obsessions as him. Is this some kind of doppelgänger? They pass each other with furtive glances, like two ships passing in the night. To complicate things, the strange man has a companion, a three-legged dog that sits outside the bookstore waiting for its master.

In the end, our narrator shrugs it off as a mere coincidence, probably a bookseller from London foraging for books in Oxford. And so it seems until one Sunday the strange man shows up at the narrator's house with his three-legged dog. Thus begins one of the longest dialogues of the novel. Presenting himself with bonhomie as

Alan Marriott, in response the professor has no choice but to invite his uninvited guest in, *sans* dog.

Marriott has a passion for Arthur Mächen. He is on a quest to find a copy of *Bridles and Spurs*. The professor, who is equally passionate about Mächen, has never heard of this work. The conversation eventually drifts to what Marriott calls "The Mächen Company", and Marriott tries to enlist the professor in its ranks. Marriott explains that the Mächen Company is a group of Mächen enthusiasts, and that the professor, if he joins, can be their representative in Spain. The professor agrees to join, paying a modest membership fee.

The whole episode is based on real events. Alan Marriott is Roger Dobson. Javier Marías wrote a short memorial essay shortly after Dobson's death in 2013. The circumstances of their actual meeting are identical to those depicted in the novel. It was from Roger Dobson/Alan Marriott that Marías/the narrator learn about the Kingdom of Redonda and its drunken beggar King, John Gawsworth. The legendary kingdom, the title of which is passed down from M. P. Shiel to John Gawsworth, becomes a major influence on the narrator's life, as well as on the real life of Marías, who would later found the publishing house of Reino de Redonda in its honour. This was a direct result of events related to Gawsworth's death, his portrayal by Marías in the novel *All Souls* and a subsequent sequel or "false novel", *Dark Back of Time*, that recounts these events. However, that would be best explored in a future essay.

So, the expert on all things Redonda, Alan Marriott—a "redondologist" if you will—carries on an exchange of information and discoveries with our nameless professor from Spain. They do not become fast friends, but are more like interested acquaintances who share the same obsessions. At this point in the novel, Marriott exits, but haunts from the background, a shadow of the narrator.

Enter Terence Fytton Armstrong, a.k.a. John Gawsworth whose ghost haunts almost every page of *All Souls*. The narrator becomes obsessed with the beggar King of Redonda and his tragic destiny. So much is this obsession that he even fears suffering the same fate or at least becoming a mirror image of Gawsworth. His keenness for the work of Mächen is the catalyst for a new quest to explore the legend of the Kingdom of Redonda and all that pertains to it. And so our

¹⁷The actual "poll" being referred to in the novel is a fascinating document titled "Authors take sides on the Spanish Civil War", published by the *Left Review* in 1937. While Mächen was certainly in the minority, there were four others, including Evelyn Waugh, who took the anti-government side, and many declared themselves "neutral", including H. G. Wells and T. S. Eliot.—*Ed.*

narrator sets out to put flesh on the bones of an obscure and forgotten writer.

Such is the search for anything written by Gawsworth that his first success is a moment of rapture and ecstasy. He finds a copy of *Backwaters* (1932), signed by Gawsworth: "John Gawsworth, written aged 19½." There is also an annotation in the author's own handwriting on the the first page of text. The word "monster" has been added after the name "Frankenstein" to indicate the abomination created and not the creator. Holding the book in his hands like a holy relic, the narrator decides that he will make an investigation of the life of Terrence Fytton Armstrong a priority, at least of the months left of his two-year internship. Of course, he must juggle this effort with an ongoing affair, the story of which runs parallel throughout the novel.

The dead come back to life slowly. The skeleton that was John Gawsworth grows flesh in the form of two photographs, but this discovery bears witness only in retrospect, back in Spain. The meditation on Gawsworth is long, as if the pages were intended to capture the larger-than-life personage of the beggar king who held such literary promise in his time, only to be broken on the very pavement of his drunken wanderings.

One photograph is Gawsworth in a Royal Airforce uniform, a cigarette in his mouth, looking into the distance with a nostalgic and crafty gaze. This is the Gawsworth who spent the war years in Cairo and North Africa. His uniform betrays a need for ironing. Probably in his thirties, there is no sign of the poet or the man of letters.

The other photograph is not of Gawsworth himself, but of his death mask. This is Gawsworth at the end, at the age of fifty-eight. The mask was made by Hugh Olaff de Wet on 23 September 1970, the day of Gawsworth's death. It was donated by an old friend, Sir John Weller, to the Poetry Society. The man who was John Gawsworth and Terence Ian Fytton Armstrong, and Orpheus Scranell and John I, King of Redonda, and sometimes Fytton Armstrong or J.G. or even simply 'G', is not looking anywhere. His eyes are closed. There is no doubt that this is the face of a dead man, but the face of a man who wandered the London streets. Such a face must have looked into the urban distance while pushing a pram full of empty beer

bottles, telling stories about Tunis, Algeria, Italy, and Egypt, while declaring himself King of Redonda.



The narrator of *All Souls* asks himself many questions about John Gawsworth, but in the end he recognises the futility of exploring the life of a man with a false name. All he has are a few scattered texts and two photos, but he feels a lingering premonition that he might end up sharing a destiny with Gawsworth.

Exit John Gawsworth, but he still looms in the background. Enter Clare Bayes, a colleague and the wife of another colleague. The affair takes centre stage, at least for the months remaining of the nameless professor's stay. The ghost of Gawsworth makes quite a surprising appearance at the the end, when our lovers are in the middle of ending the affair. Clare Bayes tells the story of another affair, her mother's. This affair ended tragically with her mother's suicide. Her mother's lover's name was Terry Armstrong.

Javier Marías has long been a champion of Arthur Machen and all things Redonda in the Spanish-speaking world. He established a publishing house, Reino de Redonda, in order to reprint obscure and forgotten authors, most recently a new Spanish translation of

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Machen's later stories under the title *Ritual*.ⁱⁱⁱ Anyone interested in the quest of the bibliophile for a holy relic of a book by a forgotten author should visit the pages of *All Souls*. You will find intrigue and mystery involving the Kingdom of Redonda, M. P. Shiel, John Gawsworth, and of course Arthur Machen, and there is even an affair to spice up all that rummaging for books.

Mention has been made, if only briefly, of the sequel to *All Souls*, *Dark Back of Time*. Here Marias explores the story behind the writing of *All Souls*. This is a sequel that not only tells, but shows. Its pages are full of photos, drawings, old and rare bulletins, fragments of old newspapers in German and English, old maps of the Caribbean, a bookplate from the Kingdom of Redonda, and even a fragment of a Nazi document. What does all this have to do with Machen and his circle of friends? That would be telling.



John Gawsworth and Arthur Machen (centre) from Thomas Burke's *Will Someone Lead Me to a Pub?* (1936 – drawing by Frederick Carter).

ⁱⁱⁱ We hope to include a full review of *Ritual* in a forthcoming edition of *Faunus—Ed.*