



El planisferio de Morgius Cancri.

Enciclopedia universal

(The Flat Map of Morgius Cancri.

Universal Encyclopedia)

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In one of his most celebrated essays, “The Storyteller” (1936), Walter Benjamin expressed his consternation at what he perceived as the end of the art of storytelling. The German thinker associated it with the devaluation of experience, and, as a result, with a growing incapacity to communicate that experience. More than storytelling capacity, he noted the lack of the ability to create fables, which comes from the oral tradition: that is, the epic tale.

We should remember, however, that already in Flaubert’s late work, when he aspired to writing a novel about nothing, fiction had begun to be suspicious of its materials, and occupied itself determinedly with procedures. That road that began with *Bouvard y Pécuchet* (1881) by Flaubert himself, and which in poetry was sparked by Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance) (1897), gave birth to the avant-garde of the twentieth century, that is, writing critical about its vehicle: language.

El planisferio de Morgius Cancri. Enciclopedia universal, by Ignacio Díaz de la Serna, invites the reader to revisit some of Walter Benjamin’s ideas about storytelling. The preamble of

the book asks us to doubt; it talks about a flat map and alludes to a universal encyclopedia, but there is no guarantee that what we are holding is anything like that. Nevertheless, something close to a certainty is slipped in: a machine for inventing. That is the key: invention before storytelling, as Benjamin-the-reader-of-fiction would prefer. Not a Machine-for-Storytelling, which would imply stories that look at themselves and sometimes deny themselves as such, but rather a Machine-for-Inventing, the mental territory where everything happens according to a certain logic, which only occasionally has points of contact with that which, not too convinced, we call reality.

Just like the novel *Los acordes esféricos* (The Spherical Chords) (Mexico City: ERA, 2005), the texts of *El planisferio de Morgius Cancri* seem to enjoy their apparent anachronistic character. Almost everything that happens in the stories takes place—or seems to—in the past, and the language, with its surprising mixture of registers, attempts to produce that sensation, but a ferocious sense of humor constantly destabilizes the reading. Are these characters real? Are they imaginary? Are they real beings in imaginary lives? It is a real flat map: it

places the roundness of a ferociously personal narrative on the two dimensions of the page.

This book probably belongs to a genealogy that dates back to Marcel Schwob's *Imaginary Lives* (1896) and that —just between us— moves through titles like *Retratos reales e imaginarios* (Real and Imaginary Portraits) (1920), by Alfonso Reyes; *Historia universal de la infamia* (A Universal History of Infamy) (1935), by Jorge Luis Borges; *La sinagoga de los iconoclastas* (The Temple of Iconoclasts) (1972), by J. R. Wilcock; or *La literatura nazi en América* (Nazi Literature in the Americas) (1996), by Roberto Bolaño. The main antecedent of *El planisferio de Morgius Cancri* is recognizably Borges, but it is a book with a different temperament: it lacks the Argentinean's modest intent and appeals to the guffaw rather than a smile.

Reading *El planisferio de Morgius Cancri* means meeting up with the world of, and particularly the characters from, *Los acordes esféricos*, a novel set in the eighteenth century, written as the commented diary by Ireneo Díaz, who allows the author to amble through an imaginary Madrid. We reencounter Nereus, an herbalist trained in Basle and an inhabitant of Noriamula; Charles III, the emperor of Spain and the Great Onan; Joseph Townsend, better known as Fucking Joseph, an English reverend and author of *A Journey Through Spain in the Years 1786 and 1787, 1791*; Sister Hierónima, a devotee of Christ raped by Satan; Ireneo the Pious from the peninsula of Anatolia, the author of the *Gospel of the Nomad* and the patron saint of bile; and Cunqueiro —not the Gallegan writer of the same name, one of Díaz de la Serna's reference points, together with writers like Ítalo Calvino or Roberto Calasso—, the ship's captain who controlled beasts with his gaze and was in contact with a devil woman. Almost all of them crossed paths with the person or the work of Beelzebub (or Lucifer or Satan, according to your preference), the character from the *Old Testament*, whose new adventures are offered here. *El planisferio* is, therefore, a rewriting in the form of an encyclopedia of the author's previous narrative work.

A subtle essayist, sophisticated disseminator of the work of Georges Bataille in Mexico, retired poet (*Humos y dispersos* [Smoke and Dispersed], Mexico City: Quinqué, 1989), an expert on the republican ideals of the U.S. founding fathers, Ignacio Díaz de la Serna (b. Mexico City, 1955) seems to feel the need to construct alter egos when he writes fiction. In *Los acordes esféricos*, it was Ireneo Díaz, a native of New Spain who traveled during the Enlightenment to the Iberian Peninsula, which, at least in the fiction, seems more akin to obscurantism —some of the scenes bring to mind Goya's *Witches'*

Sabbath. The same is true with *Planisferio*, this time signed by Morgius Cancri, of whom little is known: it is a pseudonym, he likes steak seasoned with pepper, as a child he dreamed of the clouds of the Indian Ocean, and he played *La cumparsita* on the accordion.

But back to the original idea. In this book, the author is seeking to invent, to recover the lost art, according to Benjamin, of storytelling. This is no easy task, not in what Nathalie Sarraute has called the "Age of Suspicion,"¹ and here is dubbed the Age of Befuddlement. But, of course, it is impossible to invent as if nothing happened in the last century. In that sense, Díaz de la Serna's prose does its job as parody. It constructs a parallel voice to those of past ages, without being absorbed into them. The writing in *Planisferio* has different formal sources: medieval literature, Spain's Golden Age, sketches from Pompey, or the Encyclopedists, and it interlinks different forms of wisdom that come equally from history and the occult sciences. However, it has no choice but to be contemporary.

In the epilogue to his *El hacedor* (The Maker), Borges wrote a few lines that, although well-known, are no less relevant: "A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face."²

I don't know if Díaz de la Serna has traced his own face in *Planisferio*. A complete portrait would have to include, for example, the admirable epilogue of his Bataille anthology, *La oscuridad no miente* (Darkness Does Not Lie) (Mexico City: Taurus, 2001). It may be the map of Noriamula, a town impossible to pinpoint where people like telling stories, where old Nereus and his polyglot macaw insult passersby, and where the rare imagination behind these stories may well come from. ■■■

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NOTES

¹ Nathalie Sarraute, *La era del recelo: ensayos sobre la novela* (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1967). [Editor's Note.]

² Jorge Luis Borges, "Epilogue," *The Dream Tigers*, Harold Morland, trans. <http://thefloatinglibrary.com/2008/12/09/dreamtigers-epiloge-j-l-borges/>. [Editor's Note.]