



THE SPECTRES OF DEAD HOURS AND DREAMS- AN EVALUATION OF CARLOS RUIZ ZAFON'S "THE SHADOW OF THE WIND"

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ABSTRACT

Carlos Ruiz Zafón's first novel, *El Príncipe de la Niebla* (The Prince of Mist, 1993), earned the Edebé literary prize for fiction. The author of three more novels, *El palacio de la Medianoche* (1994), *Las Luces de Septiembre* (1995) and *Marina* (1999). The English version of *El Príncipe de la Niebla* was published in 2010 and followed it closely by *La Sombra del Viento* (*The Shadow of the Wind*) - a story "about accursed books, about the man who wrote them, about a character who broke out of the pages of the novel so that he could burn it, about a betrayal and a lost friendship. It's a story of love, of hatred, and of the dreams that live in the shadow of the wind"

Keywords: Carlos Ruiz Zafón, Barcelona, The Cemetery of Forgotten Books, Daniel Sempere, Clara Barcelo, The Endymion Myth, Wasteland Myth, Time and memory, Julian Carax

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In an interview by Paul Bleazard, Zafon interprets the making of his masterpiece: *"Take all the great ambition in all those nineteenth-century novels, but try to reconstruct those big novels – the Tolstoy, the Dickens, the Wilkie Collins – but try to reconstruct all of that with all the narrative elements that the twentieth century has given us, from the grammar of cinema, from multimedia, from general fiction, from everything that is out there, to create a much more intense reading experience for the readers. So that was the idea, and that was the experiment to create with The Shadow of the Wind. So, in a way, The Shadow of the Wind is like a novel of novels; it is a story that is made of many stories; it's a story that combines humour, it combines mystery, it combines a love story, it combines historical fiction – it combines many different genres, to great a new one, a new genre, a hybrid that does all those things as well."* The Cemetery and the

Semperes – all ensconced in Barcelona, a darkly magical city with a terrible history – appear in every volume. Fast forwarded to the 1920s in *Angel's Game*, in which a young writer, David Martin, survives a brutal childhood during which Sempere & Sons was his only refuge: *"My favourite place in the whole city."* He begins his career writing newspaper articles and falls in love with an elusive woman he loses, but is forever adored by a young girl Isabella who refuses to leave him. When the one and only title that bears his true name is ignominiously dismissed, he begins to write a new book in fulfilment of a shockingly lucrative contract for a mysterious foreign publisher, Cordeali. Almost three decades later, in *The Shadow of the Wind*, the Sempere son, Daniel, follows the trail of *"burnt books"* and a big saga with many characters, many stories, spanning five decades, and structured in a way like Russian dolls opens up before the readers

where every mystery leads us to another mystery and every character leads us to a different character. *"So this whole cathedral of words, of fictions, this whole world ... it's like a labyrinth, and it's opening constantly, and progressively it starts closing, so all the mysteries are solved, all the stories, are these arcs of the lives of many characters become one, and at the end this book we've been reading about, which is The Shadow of the Wind – which is the same book we are reading – become one, and the whole mystery of this meta-fictional experiment works."* (Excerpt from interview by Paul Blezard)

By balancing the protagonist Daniel Semperes against Clara Barcelo, Zafon culminates a Keatsian version of the quest. And death and disillusionment thongs the narrative as the man of imagination, however comprised, quests perpetually for an immortal female, more daemonic than human. Clara Barcelo may seem an inadequate version of a Lamia, but she is a possible Spanish La Belle Dame Sans Marci as a phantom that haunts the pages of Shadow of the Wind and in extension, also the reader's psyche. For both Keats and Daniel, the object of their adoration remains illusionary but their drive is Transcendental. What matters is what the Yeatsian quester of *A Full Moon in March* calls *"the image in my head"* and the distortion of innocent values with the disillusioned perspective of Experience in the fallen world- a realisation that

"She dwells with Beauty- Beauty that must die;
Bidding adieu, and aching Pleasure night,
In the very temple of Delight
Veiled Melancholy has her sovereign shrine"

The Endymion myth serves as a bridge between both Keats and Zafon in the protagonists' falling in love with inaccessible ideals while the impact of the transgression is felt not by their lovers who, like the goddess of the moon, remains *"gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the struggles of the poor"* .

The Waste Land was Eliot's response to a post-war Europe experiencing radical change. Letha Audhuy traces how "historically, one empire after another had fallen, the last being the Hapsburgs, with Great Britain in line to be the next "falling

tower". Man had lost his primitive energy, had lost the basis for the Fisher King whose sacrificial vitality had been handed down in the form of Osiris, Adonis, Atiz, Tamuz to Christ. Their vitality was now being played out, exhausted in the post-Enlightenment era of science and technology." This sense of the exhaustion of romantic possibility was inseparable from the post-war sense of world weariness that ties all the two stories- the one Tiresias tells in The Waste Land and in Nuria Monford's letter. *"This city is a sorceress, you know, Daniel? It gets under your skin and steals your soul without you knowing it."*

"...I sat on the stony steps that descended into the dark waters next to the docks that sheltered the pleasure boats. Someone had chartered a night trip, and I could hear laughter and music wafting across from the procession of lights and reflections in the inner harbour..." reminds us of the topographical likeness between the two "wastelands" threaded in the same string. "The valley of ashes is bounded on one side by a foul river" which brings into the reader's consciousness the "dull canal" along "the arid plain" in which the protagonist of The Waste Land was fishing in vain (Part III, 1.189, and Part V,II.424-5) ; the "Sweet Thames" flowing in The Waste Land, in Autumn when :

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes,
cigarette ends,
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed. (Part III, 11.177-9)

Both these desolate lands are emblematic of sterility and waste, and they underscore the main theme of each work. The connotation of Eliot's ashes image (i.e. *"Fire Sermon"*) for his characters unfaithfulness in love are stigmatises the lustful. For Zafon, he dedicates an entire chapter- "Days of Ashes" as a fitting epilogue to the rest of the novel.

Life in this world is thus meaningless, in Eliot without spiritual meaning and significance, in Fitzgerald, devoid of purposeful idealism while Zafon's protagonist Daniel muses *"it occurred to me that perhaps the papier-mâché world that I accepted as real was only a stage setting. Much like the arrival*

of Spanish trains, in those stolen years you never knew when the end of childhood was due."

When Daniel weds "his unutterable visions" to Clara's "perishable breath" and makes her his holy grail, she becomes the organizing point of his existence, providing him with a structure that determines what he will do and who he will be. She becomes his access to a certain self-image.

"There are no second chances in life, except to feel remorse" It is the desire to escape this state of remorseful existence that fuels Nuria Monford to envision a life with Julian Carax. The motif of waiting is pervasive in all the characters and looms large over their existence. For Nuria Monford, Carax is just an idea of the ideal. The existence of Carax is as elusive as Lalin Cubet or probably Cordeali- the alter ego of the narrator's psyche who inspires the other to exist and make that existence complete.

The notion of time and memory plays a significant part in *The Shadow of the Wind* as most of the events seem to be played out in the minds of the characters. Inlaid within the mainframe of the book Daniel discovered in *The Cemetery of Forgotten books*, he muses: "every book has a soul, the soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and dreamed with it." All the events thus seem to write themselves under the authorial gaze of Julian Carax. *Shadow of the Wind* thereby becomes a memory novel where time and space merge and blend into one harmonious fusion. The novel; constructed and materialised from the letters of Penelope Aldiya, Nuria Monford, or of Miquel; flows gently like a river into the epilogue: "The Waters of March"

Among the post war aspects of the novel, another which is essential is the very setting which conceptualises the novel. The novel is a piece of literature where space, both time and spatial influences the characters in acting out the drama of their existence. Their motivations, faith, issues are all raised by the moment that they all inhabit. Chaplin's films like *City Lights*; *Modern Times* all explores the modern city as a subject. The city in *The Shadow of the Wind* makes its presence felt and transcends almost to an idea in the novel, symbolically referring to various issues manifest in the novel.

In *The Shadow of the Wind*, figures like Don Gustavo Barcelo, Miquel Moliner thrive the alleys and passageways of the text. The society is one in transition when the rattle of the first motorcars are making their presence felt. In both the texts, motor cars play a vital role in denoting the rising upper class. In her memoir, the lonely housekeeper, Dona Aurora, another anachronistic figure that seems to live perpetually in the past, recounts of Julian's dreams of a little girl who "came out of mirrors and as if she were made of thin air and that she lived in a palace at the bottom of a lake"- the utopia of lost innocence we forever seek to attain and fail.

Zafon's narrative revolves wholly in Barcelona where the city appears as a living, feeling organism, capable of eating the dreams of those who inhabit it. A dream image of a moving city that walks by itself collaborates to this idea. The cold stone angels in the Aldayas family mansion thus seem to come alive into emissaries of the bleakness of the world within and without. The fading away of an era is captured with unparalleled beauty when time seems to stop or move at a more languid pace; infinitely alien to this age of micro-conductors, bullet-trains, the shrill ringing of tele-communicators or the general cacophony that pervades modern life- "That Sunday, clouds spilled down from the sky and swamped the streets with a hot mist that made the thermometers on the walls perspire. Halfway through the afternoon, the temperature was already grazing the nineties as I set off toward Calle Canuda for my appointment with Barcelo, carrying my book under my arm. The Ateneo was—and remains—one of the many places in Barcelona where the nineteenth century has not yet been served its eviction notice. A grand stone staircase led up from a palatial courtyard to a ghostly network of passageways and reading rooms. There, inventions such as the telephone, the wristwatch, and haste seemed futuristic anachronisms. The porter, or perhaps it was a statue in uniform, barely noticed my arrival. I glided up to the first floor, blessing the blades of a fan that swirled above the sleepy readers, melting like ice cubes over their books."

Zafon, himself a screen writer, borrows the various cinematic techniques of his times and

invests them in his narrative and gives his creation a visual dimension-

"The lamps along the Rambalás marked out an avenue in the early morning haze as the city awoke, like a watercolour slowly coming to life. The brightness of dawn filtered down from balconies and cornices in streaks of slanting light that dissolved before touching the ground"

The *Shadow of the Wind* challenges the concepts and constructs of authorship, identity, so-called truth, perspectives of good and evil and every grey zone in between. "One of my ambitions has been to go back to what those great authors were doing then, and try to reinvent . . . the language through deconstruction and reconstruction. That's always the direction I'm trying to hit. Mariana on a small scale tries to do that, to bridge that sensibility of old Victorian Gothic tales and reconstruct them in a modern way." (Zafon)

From *Great Expectations* to *The Count of Monte Cristo*; the 2013 paperback version of *Prisoner* includes a "P.S." section that ends with Zafon's own eclectic list of "Dead Fellows You Should See and Read Frequently" (from Bronte to Faulkner to Dos Passos). Although each novel stands alone, but when read together, the connections become sublime, even at the price of our own memory (sanity?); interwoven and overlapping, whose story is reliable, who is even able to speak the truth, who will deceive the readers once again, while proving to be the most daunting mysteries of all.

The narrative is based on the murky desolations the war leaves behind- nameless entities, shadowy memories, shards of the past that merge and blend; into a mauve display of pain, isolation or banality. "In my world death was like a nameless and incomprehensible hand, a door-to-door salesman who took away mothers, beggars, or ninety-year-old neighbours, like a hellish lottery. But I couldn't absorb the idea that death could actually walk by my side, with a human face and a heart that was poisoned with hatred, that death could be dressed in a uniform or a raincoat, queue up at a cinema, laugh in bars, or take his children out for a walk to Ciudadela Park in the morning, and then, in

the afternoon, make someone disappear in the dungeons of Montjuïc Castle or in a common grave with no name or ceremony."

Shadow of the Wind sets a historical story within the story. Set in a prison castle after the victory of Franco in the civil war, with an ambiance of lice, cold and summary executions, it features a novelist, imprisoned and denounced as "the worst writer in the world" and Zafon, the splendidly solicitous craftsman, comments, "it (the setting) was clear that it was a visual metaphor, not just for forgotten books, but forgotten people and ideas." In an interview by Linda M. Castellitto, Zafon elaborates: "I'm fascinated by the period that goes from the Industrial Revolution to right after World War II. There's something about that period that's epic and tragic. There's a point after the industrial period where it seems like humanity's finally going to make it right. There were advances in medicine and technology and education. People are going to be able to live longer lives; literacy is starting to spread. It seemed like finally, after centuries of toiling and misery, that humanity was going to get to a better stage. And then what happens is precisely the contrary. Humanity betrays itself.

The "illusive rhythm, the fragment of lost words" that Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* tries to recall, is the rhythm and words of an American myth. "But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever" Life in the west would never again be like before. Zafon writes, "The last days of the war were the prelude to an inferno. The city had lived through the combat from afar, like a wound that throbs dully, with months of skirmishes and battles, bombardments and hunger. The spectacle of murder, fights and conspiracies had been corroding the city's heart for years. When the storm broke, there was no compassion."

"Nothing feeds forgetfulness better than war, Daniel. We all remain silent and they try to convince us that what we've seen, what we've done, what we've learned about ourselves and about others, is an illusion, a nightmare that will pass. Wars have no memory and nobody has the courage to understand them until there are no voices left to tell what really happened, until they return with

another face and another name and devour everything they left behind"

"When there's a war, things happen that are very hard to explain, Daniel. Often even I don't know what they really mean. Sometimes it's best to leave things alone." He sighed and sipped his soup with no appetite. I watched him without saying a word.

"Before your mother died, she made me promise that I would never talk to you about the war, that I wouldn't let you remember any of what happened." My father half closed his eyes, as if he were searching for something in the air—looks, silences, or perhaps my mother, to corroborate what he had just said. "Nothing is ever the same after a war." Our eyes met briefly. After a while my father got up and took refuge in his bedroom. When I returned to the sitting room, I turned off the light and sat in my father's old armchair. The breeze from the street made the curtains flutter."

Characters like Frances Javier Fumero or Cordeali from *The Angel's Game* suggest in the epilogue that the devil (abetted by David) is somehow responsible for the real-life horrors of World War II. The smell of gunpowder and a fascist regime, of blood and excreta soaked walls of the police lock-up pervades the narrative as Zafon paints the cobbled streets and narrow alley ways of Barcelona where *"night falls on the city and the streets carry the smell of gunpowder like the breathe of a curse"*

The Shadow of the Wind balances the mundane against the eternal. On a scale of high poetic seriousness, they allude to Ovidian transmutation, and to Vergilian moments. Below transmutation- and at a considerable spiritual distance- is its gross and earthly form, social mobility. Like the Mangan Sister of James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Fitzgerald's *Daisy*, Zafon's Clara Barcelo became tantamount to a grail for the young Daniel, even as she "vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life, leaving" Daniel "nothing". All the characters remain united by pain and gloom-agencies of anger that are laid latent, buried deep

within their soul and appear as apparitions, calling from time to time their dismayed selves to return to the alter of healing, to let their mind and soul be at rest in a placid sanctuary. There is no new light to languish in life's own charm in all its abundance of hues and colours, nor an overwhelming desire to drink the intoxicating nectar of life makes them detest death and beckons them to grab onto life and never let go of it.

The novel may be summed up as *"this was a story about lonely people, about absence and loss, and that was why i had taken refuge in it, until it became confused with my own life, like someone who has escaped into the pages of a novel because those whom he needed to love seem nothing more than ghosts inhabiting the minds of a stranger...I thought there were no more ghosts than those of absence and loss, and that the light that smiled on me was borrowed light, only real as long as I could hold it in my eyes, second by second"*

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