



**Virginia Newhall Rademacher, *Derivative Lives. Biofiction, Uncertainty, and Speculative Risk in Contemporary Spanish Narrative* (New York, etc.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, ISBN: 9781501386909).**

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With a very original title, which is indebted to economics studies as explained at the time, Virginia Rademacher groups together eleven titles of Spanish novels published in the 21st century which have in common their belonging to the category of 'biofiction'. The book uses a methodology that is also original, as the subtitle states, in which three very different concepts, belonging to equally distant worlds, are employed. These three concepts are biofiction, the essential one, 'uncertainty' and 'speculative risk'. The combination of them creates an interdisciplinary approach to a universe that is in principle literary but that extends its roots and consequences far beyond, to game theory and economic analysis. Undoubtedly, such a thoughtful title sums up very well what the reader will find in its 200+ pages.

Moreover, among Rademacher's declared intentions is to enter into the Hispanic world, which is almost always little dealt with in scholarly writing in English (and, one might say, in European research in general), which is usually due to complex factors that come together all too often, and not only in studies of current literature. That is why the book starts very positively with the intention of bridging a marked gap, on this occasion in the studies on biofiction, with works written in Spanish, the 'understudied area of Hispanic biofictions' (11), which are abundant and in some cases very influential.

The analysis of works by well-known authors (Javier Cercas and Rosa Montero, with two texts each, or Antonio Muñoz Molina, Elvira Navarro and Antonio Orejudo) is combined with that of others less read or less famous (Gabriela Ybarra and Adolfo García Ortega) and sometimes less appreciated by critics (Lucía Etxebarria, of whom

two texts are also studied). The fact that it does not only pay attention to canonical texts is a strong point of the book. The diversity of the approaches of the eleven works is covered by a very careful organization that studies them in six chapters that in turn are grouped into three large sections (two chapters in each one): 'The Circumstantial Case: Chasing Criminals / Tracing Traumatic Histories', 'Speculative Truths and Derivative Fictions' and 'Critical Plays in Biofictional Games'.

Besides the aforementioned concepts, along the pages there are some issues that would be difficult to qualify (philosophical?, communicative?, political?) and among them the idea of post-truth stands out, and that is why the book ends with a 'Coda' entitled 'Biofiction's Antidotes to Post-Truth'. It is not strange that fiction applied in different ways to basically biographical narrative unleashes an issue that in recent years has been connected with media information, with the influence of networks and certainly with populism. Alongside this strange and difficult new truth, so opposed to the traditional conception of it, there is also the enormous richness of literary production. And, at the same time, we must take into account the great difficulty in understanding certain processes of the modern world, because they occur at an accelerated speed, in which literature does not cease to inscribe itself. But the search for originality and the desire to analyze the results of biofiction have led to the adaptation of the economic concept of 'derivatives'. Thus, if 'in financial markets, derivatives refer to contracts [...] between two parties whose value is derived from an undervaluing asset. Rather than owning a tangible asset, the derivative involves speculative expectations regarding the value of its future direction' (88), the literary application of these 'derivatives' would imply a pact between author and reader to see how the biographical material is used.

The analysis of the different works is careful and very clear; it is very well documented with a critical bibliography in English and on two occasions it also includes parts of interviews by Virginia Rademacher which, published elsewhere, serve here very well to support her interpretations of Cercas' or Montero's texts. Along with this core, which occupies most of the book, there are two types of explanations that I do not always find convincing. On the one hand, there are comments on the phenomenon of biofiction in Spain, which is connected with the end of Franco's dictatorship to justify a discourse that flees from authority and what could be called a kind of single thought: 'it is perhaps not surprising that many writers turned to historical fiction or historiographic metafiction to reveal versions of history that had long been silenced' (10). But in other cases, such as that of Lucía Etxebarria, younger and seen as part of generation X, other factors come into play, such as the use of technology, unemployment and disconnection with the consequences of the civil war

(120-21). It seems to me, all in all, that the connection with the dictatorship as a form of reaction is debatable, and above all that the development of biofiction had to wait a quarter of a century after Franco's death to take place, although it could be considered that this time is how long it can take for the old ghosts of a dictatorship of almost four decades to die out. And yet, the fact that biofiction is developing at the same time in other parts of the world, with very conspicuous names that Rademacher cites, would force one to think rather of a phenomenon with global causes. It is true that the somewhat foundational importance of Javier Cercas' *Soldados de Salamina* (2001), and its delayed investigation of a hitherto little-known episode at the end of the civil war, may have created the mirage of the need to revisit such a determining event, that of the civil war itself and its consequences, in history, politics, literature and the worldview of several generations of Spaniards, but I believe that in Cercas' novel there is no reason to set aside the many advantages of an extraordinarily ambiguous discourse. In any case, I believe that what may be specific in the Spanish case is not as important as the weight of the factors that occur in the rest of the world.

On the other hand, the chapters often conclude with moral or philosophical considerations about the functions or values of biofiction, which means going much further than what the literary field usually admits. Of course, the book is formulated from the very beginning with this broad perspective, in which concepts from studies as different and presumably as distant as law, economics or game theory are fused. It is a conscious bet, of course, but one that seems to me to be nuanced, especially because the idea of verisimilitude, so closely connected from its beginnings with fiction, is probably a much more solid element both for the analysis of texts (in their creation and their reception by readers) and for evaluating their possible consequences, although these may also be debatable, and in *Derivative Lives* there seems to be a reference to Barbara Shapiro for the opposition reality/verisimilarity (17). Fantasizing about one's own life is usually encompassed in the term of 'autofiction', so popular in Spain although Rademacher hardly uses it, while Rosa Montero defines this fantasizing as 'an intersection of autofiction, literary essay and biofiction' (69) in *The Madwoman in the House* (2003). When fantasizing about the life of others 'biofiction' is particularly apt, while serving to subsume the former, as the analysis of *Courtney and I*, by Etxebarria, shows (122). But, in the end, fantasizing about one's own or other people's lives is very literary, as it implies liberation from facts, from history, from oneself, and has enormous value in its own right.

The whole book is based on the risks of the concept of 'biofiction' and does not avoid them, although Rademacher naturally prefers the advantages. Thus, Javier Cercas states in his interview that 'biofiction, as you've denoted it, is very dangerous. You

take a lot of risks. But a writer that doesn't take risks is not a writer, he's a scribe' (90). In the interesting discussion of uses and functions, positive and negative, within the organization of works and authors, the following is later stated: 'A novel examines not only reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he's capable. Novelists draw up the map of human existence by discovering this or that human possibility' (99). And in this sense a further step is taken in the analysis of García Ortega's novel: 'the biofiction functions [...] as a source of creative potential and freedom against the delimiting forces of an oppressive history. The ethics of the biographical novel in this way become an antidote to despair and paralysis, a mode of acting on the present' (106).

The general idea, in the atrium of a book written during the pandemic, is that 'by revealing our biographical lives as contested sites, biofictions are perhaps the perfect metaphor or vehicle for negotiating our contemporary human condition' (18). It is in this negotiation about what is the human condition of the past and the future that biofiction, according to Rademacher, has much to say: 'Coming to a decision about how to narrate the past is not only about determining what happened, but also about how responsibly we envision what is yet to come' (38). And it is precisely in the conclusions of each chapter, where the broadest statements tend to be concentrated, that the concepts that the author has deployed to approach biofiction are interpreted. Thus, after joining Muñoz Molina and Ybarra in the same chapter, which shows the existence of different types of 'biofiction', Rademacher concludes by contrasting the possible desire to escape from reality when it is complicated with the fact that fiction can also be used to remix and recontextualize seemingly disconnected lives and perspectives, bringing together contradictory ideas and images that might otherwise remain isolated from one another and from examination of their real effects. In so doing, biofiction has the potential to embolden ethical imagination, opening to the complicated, transformative pursuit of embodying and reimagining the human condition. (63)

Elsewhere, the conclusion refers to the use of risk in literary narrative: 'Incorporating risk and uncertainty into the model of how we imagine a life, such speculative biofictions suggest we are free to experiment anew' (85).

*Derivative Lives* is undoubtedly a very interesting approach to the phenomenon of biofiction in Spain in the last two decades. The reader ignorant of Spanish culture will find fine analyses of well-chosen texts, by canonical authors or not, that dwell on the creation of other lives, other possibilities, personal or not, and that serve to discuss the uses of post-truth, truth, fiction and reality, all concepts that the supposedly moribund

postmodernism has put back on the table, in a context different from the one that saw its birth. The book is very well organized, has a generous and accurate use of an abundant bibliography, the notes are numerous and pertinent, in an ambitious work on the diverse possibilities of biofiction.