

Literary Hub

The Life and Times of the Great Rafael Chirbes

"Literature Demands a Form of Aloneness That Can Be Unbearable"

January 6, 2016 By [Valerie Miles](#)

The following essay by Valerie Miles appears as the afterword to [On the Edge](#), available January 25th from New Directions (translated by Margaret Jull Costa).

As a young boy, Rafael Chirbes was sent to an orphanage for the children of railroad workers after his father died, because his mother couldn't afford to keep him. He was born in 1949 in a small town on the shore of the Mediterranean, Tavernes de Valldigna, Valencia, to a Republican family—his grandfather was a basket maker—on the losing side of the Spanish Civil War. Beleaguered, considered traitors and “reds,” his father committed suicide when he was four and his mother, who worked as a switchman, was eventually detained. Yet before he died, Rafael's father taught his unusually bright son how to read, and at eight the boy was sent away from the sparkling blue seaside, muscatel vineyards, and liberal-minded rural town, where they showed movies without censoring them for the children and celebrated bawdy, pagan-infused spectacles during which vedettes' breasts would fall from their blouses as they danced in defiance of the suffocating national Catholic dogma imposed by Franco. At least that's how Rafael Chirbes remembered the warmth and earthiness of the Mediterranean world from which he'd been uprooted to find his way alone in the severe, snowy, landlocked plains of Castile during some of the darkest, most miserable years of the dictatorship.

His peripatetic life began in towns like Avila, Salamanca and Leon—the dour lands of Santa Teresa, where her pruny reliquary finger presided “like a fruit peel” over life and “celebrations” transmogrified into ominous religious processions with waxy virgins and proselytes dressed either in habits, cinctures, olive uniforms, widow's black or penitent purple. This contrast between the coast versus the famous rainy (often in fact quite dry) plains of Spain (which Chirbes—who went on to become a gourmand with friends like the writer Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, founding the magazine of literature and gastronomy *Sobremesa*—described as “fresh vegetables versus dried legumes and salt cod”) is a recurring motif in some of his early novels.

Just to be on the safe side, his grandmother had warned him when he was taken away that dare he return in priest's garb, she would strangle him. What he came back dressed in thirty years later, though, was the Spanish language as well as a uniquely obsidian sentimental education that would chisel one of the most renegade and uncomfortable literary testaments of Spain—for both the establishment and anti-establishment alike. “Who do I write against?” Chirbes once asked rhetorically: “I write against myself. If you stand yourself up against the character you most despise, you'll find your own contradictions staring straight back at you.” His novels sprout from a deep human

disquiet and this inexorable process of self-examination—novels as private passions that take a public form. Writing as a means for making sense of things that seem incongruous, as a way of broaching that nagging question that won't go away. First comes fixing the perspective, the way of looking, the point of view from which the story is to unfold, and once he catches sight of the figure trapped in the marble, Chirbes takes no prisoners in the carving, the shaving, the filing, the telling. Not even himself.

It's not hard to imagine how these years went into crafting a certain narrative distance in his writing, which is an essential feature; the objectivity and detached scrutiny of a solitary, acutely observant child stunned by the weirdness of a strange new environment, the alienation of a new language with its new possibilities. Not merely the desire but also the ambition to make sense of it by naming and appropriating and organizing the derangement of a peculiar alternate domain. Though stripped of his native Valencian, he gained the high artifice and syntactical precision of Castilian, a language he fell in love with and a literary tradition he absorbed copiously—along with the French—and with which he was in constant, intense conversation throughout his life; from his revered, 17th-century Baltazar Gracian—whose philosophy of skepticism influenced Schopenhauer and Nietzsche—to a 40-year love affair with the writing of Benito Pérez Galdós, and of his beloved Mexican-exiled French-German-Jewish-Spanish experimentalist Max Aub. *No hay mal que por bien no venga* (all clouds have a silver lining) Chirbes said of being sent away as a boy; it caused him to relinquish any identification with a single place on earth. He became a stateless writer “freed of any romantic baggage” that would wax syrupy on the orange blossom breeze of Mediterranean writing and disregard the ripe stench of its marshlands.

On the Edge is set in Valencia, yet its intentions are closer to how Gracián “works everyday language in a way that deviates from it enough that it neither falls into caricature nor mere reproduction.” He also pointed to Jonathan Swift’s “A Tale of a Tub” for the indulgence of its digressions, and closely identified with the intentions of John Dos Passos. *On the Edge* is a poetic spasm, an epic of the garbage dump written by a witness who breaks the underclass’s legacy of silence during a crisis that is not merely economic, but social and acutely moral. The song of the real estate siren from its debris-ridden cesspool, the swan song of the hope that was deposited in a generation, his generation, who held the country’s future in their once-militant hands and yet quickly betrayed those who, with a modicum of dignity, had struggled before them during the years of the regime. There’s no dignity in the struggle against greed in a world where values have shifted away from the human. You’re just poor. But Chirbes would quote Hermann Broch: “Was there ever a time when values were not in crisis?” He believed that the novel as a form is inescapably a creature of its time and that any writer who considers it to have some supreme value-in-itself as a piece of artifice reduces the form to something banal, a paltry toy. Even in language’s search for what’s on the inside, there is a relationship, a tie, to what’s on the outside. Writers who don’t understand this connection, Chirbes felt, yet claimed to inhabit literature as if a sacred temple, are really living in a dollhouse. And like selfish children they are negating the novel’s public concern, canceling its role in civil accountability.

At a precocious 16, and despite the stacked odds, Chirbes moved to Madrid where he studied Modern and Contemporary History at Universidad Complutense. There he joined an underground student group and became involved in clandestine, anti-Franco activities that landed him in Carabanchel prison. He also worked in several bookstores,

notably Tarantula in the early 1970s, which fed his voracious reading habits and exposed him to many of the books prohibited by the regime that were kept hidden away in a special room, like a speakeasy its bottles of whisky: Sade, Miller, Marx, Lawrence, Aub and Juan Marsé, among many other delicacies. History, politics, social movements and literature converged in these years, and crystalized his perspective as an eyewitness. He spent the rest of his life narrating—in a great, twirling kaleidoscope of voices—the annals of this generation of young rebels who grew into tentative democrats: how many of them fell into the habits of their predecessors, how daily life is much harder to bear than putting up a good fight, how hard it is not to betray the ideals they had fought for as students when it came their time to make life choices. As the French writer Jean Genet quipped when asked what he would like from the world, “I would like for the world not to change so that I can be against the world.” For many, fighting against Franco had been much easier than forging a democracy, which obliges thinking of the greater good.

Chirbes went to Paris for a year and became a consummate Francophile, devouring all of Proust and declaring himself a “Proustian Leninist.” He read the *maudits*, Zola, saw the films of Renoir, Ophüls, Goddard, listened to Debussy, Satie. “Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal, Maupassant are in me, they are in my novels, they are me. I admire Sartre and Camus in some books, but others are boring. I admit that Braudel is magisterial. I like Carrère’s *Limonov* and *The Wound* by Laurent Mauvignier.” From Paris he headed for the Morocco of Paul Bowles, Jean Genet, and Mohammad Choukri to teach the history of Muslim Spain in a school in Fez without knowing “a potato” of Arabic. Chirbes was searching elsewhere for paradise; Franco had died and the free-for-all atmosphere disturbed him. He quickly discovered Morocco was no nirvana either, but the experience spurred the writing of his first published novel, the alcohol-infused *Mimoun*. The novel oozes sexual tension and debauchery and an idea that “life is dirty, pleasure and pain sweat, excrete, smell. No human is anything more than a badly stitched sack of muck.” His life-long fascination with the work of painters like Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud should come as no surprise. His writing eventually worked into a style that broke with any conventional idea of realism; his sharp-edged hyper-realism moves into the poetic, the revealing detail so excruciatingly exact, existentially emblematic, that it becomes unbearable, searing. In his later novels, the aging human body serves as a symbol of the decadence and decay of the political and social body, too. It was the novelist Carmen Martín Gaité who first discovered his work. She sent the manuscript of *Mimoun* to Jorge Herralde at Anagrama, who called immediately and encouraged Chirbes to present the novel for the Herralde prize. His debut was voted the runner-up. Herralde continued reassuring Chirbes at a crucial moment in his creative life, and Chirbes never forgot it. The relationship between writer and editor would last his lifetime and produce several novels and essay collections.

History for Rafael Chirbes was the key that opened his creative spigot, the present was the crystallization of the past and a writer was an antenna able to capture what Chateaubriand called an epoch’s *esprit principe*. He embraced Walter Benjamin’s concept of the moment of danger, “for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. [...] In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. [...] Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.” The German

philosopher, who killed himself in Portbou (a Spanish town just across the French Border that had been an important Republican supply route through the Pyrenees), had been with his close friends Hannah Arendt and Arthur Koestler in Marseille shortly before fleeing to Spain because he didn't have a French exit visa. Exhausted and in despair, he committed suicide by morphine pills when he found that, instead of granting him asylum, the Spanish authorities were going to deport him back to occupied France. Benjamin is one of the ghosts, the deceased writers that Chirbes talked to, listened to: Cervantes, Tolstoy, Montaigne, Yourcenar, Lucretius, Virgil, Döblin, Faulkner, Eça de Queiros.

Chirbes had always been attracted to literature and cinema, but found the vastness of formal abstraction terrifying. History was a system, it tied things down and grounded them, brought things from the fanciful into an initial structure that allowed him to pose questions through literature and use the form of the novel to seek knowledge, to place an object in the light, to apprehend it long enough to distinguish its mechanics and intricacies. History was a boomerang—the past through the light of the present and its projection into the future. “You can't see anything without history because if you don't comprehend the evolution of things, you'll never understand anything. Either you bear witness to your time, or you become a symptom of it.”

After returning to Spain, Chirbes settled into a tiny 400-soul town in Badajoz, Extremadura. He wrote travel and culinary pieces to get by, but plunged into 11 years of fervent reading, re-reading, and writing. By night, he would frequent the town's profusion of bars and argue with the local socialists about how the cause had been sold for a few measly government contracts. He produced a fine second novel, *En la lucha final*, and a third, *La buena letra*, written in the feminine voice against the “new pragmatism” which he said could be summed up perfectly in a phrase by Deng Xiaoping: “Black cat, white cat, what does it matter, as long as it hunts rats.” He wanted his storytelling to pierce the marrow of the transition, hit that quivering moment when the scales balance and the novel finds its vantage point, its aura, firing an infinitude of meanings. “Beautiful penmanship is a costume for lies,” his protagonist laments. Chirbes believed that literature is like a lover, either you go all the way or you'll be left alone.

When his fifth novel, *La larga Marcha*, came out in 1996 it became a *casus belli* among certain sectors of the critical apparatus in Spain. It was translated into German, and the critic Reich-Ranicki melted into a paroxysm of accolades, establishing Chirbes as the “model to follow” for the great German novel that was coming. It was “the book that Europe needed.” Chirbes became an instant bestseller there, winning prizes and a veritable phenomenon. For many years his most ardent readership was German while in Spain he was still a “cult” writer. “I'm not a priest or a politician, I'm not writing to console readers, but to awaken contradictions and disquiet.” This is part and parcel of what made Rafael Chirbes the consummate outsider in Spanish letters, the prickly, unrelenting social conscience of his generation: his was an intimate knowledge of the age-old underbelly of the human condition, he knew that victims become executioners and “no human being can be considered free of guilt.” In this he echoed Camus's famous dictum: “In such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people not to be on the side of the executioners.” It's what suffuses his work with its potent edge, its sense of urgency and grit. For years he was described as a “secret” writer, which in Spain is often a euphemism to describe someone emerging

from the underclasses, but as he well knew, eventually the readers are the ones to decide who is a great author, not the establishment. Chirbes the reader's writer, Chirbes the witness of his time, Chirbes the historian: he always understood the artistic act as an ethical one, and the novel as a potent artifact for describing a particular time and place on earth, as a microcosmic representation, as a fractal, of the universal.

Novel after novel, Chirbes continued pushing form, experimenting, and became one of the greatest prose stylists of the language, forging new and original forms to renovate the boundless European tradition of social realism, adding modern, original twists to the sweeping fresco style of writers like Galdós, Balzac or Musil. Early in the new century, Rafael Chirbes returned to the Levante of his childhood, and found a solitary home in the small town of Beniarbeig, Alicante, living as a near recluse with his two dogs and two cats (he had been afraid of dogs earlier in life, and one can follow their presence throughout his novels). His tipping point came in 2007 with *Crematorio*, his eighth novel and a force to be reckoned with, like it or not. By now it was too dangerous for the establishment to flaunt ignorance of a writer of such a categorical stature. However uncomfortably, even the audacious few establishmentarians who still believe that history can keep a secret, yes, even they were forced to pay attention—the man isn't going away and he writes like the devil. And Chirbes's work proves that history cannot keep a secret. A tepidly-conceded finalist for the City of Barcelona Prize that year, *Crematorio* landed the wildly applauded National Critic's Award. It was about time. The novel was then adapted to television, becoming one of Spain's most successful series ever.

In an essay (Chirbes has four books of essays) focusing on the work of one of his totem authors and a fellow member of the underclass, Juan Marsé, Chirbes writes: "He devoured his predecessors, ground them up into little pieces and built a new height over their remains from which to observe." This is what Chirbes did in his last two books that are linked like bubbly (*cava*) and a hangover; *Crematorio* describes the Spanish soul at the beginning of the 21st century, particularly on the Mediterranean coast during the heyday of the real-estate bubble. But if *Crematorio* was about bling and bigger-than-thou yachts and beachfront properties, *On the Edge* takes a swan dive into the putrid bog left behind when the bubble burst. The main character is the marsh, the poisoned quagmire where the mafias dump their hot guns and cars, where toilet bowls float with construction site debris, where corpses were hacked and disposed of. It chronicles in human terms the consequences when the tower of cards came tumbling down and asks very difficult questions: Are the underclasses any better off now, than they were under Franco? Do we remember how much they struggled? "I dream about the dead people I knew when they were alive," Chirbes said to me in Xalapa, México: "I've touched them, even, and now they're nowhere, and knowing that they're not here and that I can't talk to them or hear their voices distresses me when I go to bed. Some nights they take control of the room: their absence leaves me breathless and I have to turn on the light so I don't suffocate." What has his generation done with the new democracy they were given? The word "carrion" appears in the last sentence of *Crematorio* and in the first one of *On the Edge*. "The wind has dropped again, and in the ensuing calm, from the place where the dog is scratching, a sickly smell of old carrion rises up, impregnating the air." "The first one to spot the carrion is Ahmed Ouallahi." The young Moroccan sees a dog chewing on something. Other dogs try to take it away. He draws closer, apprehensively. It's a human hand.

On the Edge is a masterful example of writing at the top of its form, a centrifugal novel whose sentences are like sticky tentacles that clutch onto readers and suck them into a swirling, tempestuous, pulsating center. The tension comes from the language itself, from the myriad stories of his characters all told in his characteristic torrential, terse, powerful prose, whose cadences echo his beloved American writers, Faulkner, Mailer and Dos Passos. Language that is as theological as it is diabolical, that keeps a surreptitious network, or builds a web, like a dictatorship. *On the Edge* garnered a second National Critic's Award and, finally, the National Prize for Literature.

Rafael Chirbes, who died physically in August 2015 after being diagnosed with incurable lung cancer, accepted his role as the defiant, intrepid author who bears witness, who acts as counterbalance to the forces of power, of corruption and of greed and misery, yet writes lucidly, and even at times tenderly. "Literature obliges a radical practice, it demands a form of aloneness that yes, at times can be almost unbearable: but it's a matter of old virtues and harsh discipline." Writing was his form of observing and expiating his own inconsistencies and primal urges—sex, power, money—in their modern iterations—real estate speculation, prostitution and human trafficking, political debauchery—and challenging readers to look into his pages as into a dark mirror, to see the ghostly reflection of their own faces looking back. What redeems these scathing truths—for a writer with this experience and depth of insight—is art.