

THE LATEST AND LAST NOVEL

Juan Goytisolo, author of works as emblematic as *Marks of identity*, bids farewell to fiction through his latest novel *Telón de boca*. From his home in Marrakech, this Barcelona native talks about his wife's death in 1996, about war, literature and his projects for the future, and, not least, about his latest and largely autobiographic book. By **Javier Valenzuela**

Awidower since 1996, this 72-year-old writer has decided to bring his career as a novelist to a close with *Telón de boca*. Juan Goytisolo is ready now to live each day as it comes.

And today is a beautiful day in Marrakech. The sun shines over the ochre city and glitters on the abundant snow on the nearby Atlas mountains. In the past week, rain has poured over this area of Morocco, leaving behind a crisp air and lush palm, olive and orange trees. Rain is vital for the Moroccan people, who seem content and bear patiently the brunt of the economic downturn and the apparently inevitable war against Iraq. When the calls to prayer subside, Marrakech basks in the rhythm of the flutes and drums of the musicians of Jemaa el Fna square, of the merry cries of children playing soccer and of honking truck drivers as they try to make their way through the winding streets. This day is a gift for Goytisolo, a good gift.

Today the writer won't cross the Atlas and walk into the desert to die. As the protagonist of his latest novel, Goytisolo realizes the world's beauty outlives individual pain. From his home in the Medina, which he shares with his friends Abdelhadi and Abdelhak, he talks about his latest novel, the war and his plans for the future.

Question. Reading *Telón de boca* you soon realize that the death of your wife, French writer Monique Lange, in 1996 was a terrible blow for you. It seems as if Monique's demise brutally forced you to stand before a mirror where you saw the reflection of the nearness of your own death. The first chapters of the book are exacting. The narrator says: "Wasn't his own being the deceptive glowing of an extinct star?"

Answer. That's what being is, it's not just me. This is the sad truth we face. And yet, no, no. There was a lot of bitterness in the early drafting stages of the text, but it's taken me six years to complete it and in the end I simply see it as lucid. I tried to look for the beauty of the text — perhaps with her memory in mind — through the most beautiful and fairest words possible. Poetry transports a language that is perhaps deeper than that of philosophy itself. I have Höderlin and Nietzsche in mind, for instance. Novels must strike a very delicate balance between poetry and plot. If it leans one way or the other, it will become prose, poem or a straightforward movie script. Some novels written for cinema are essentially all plot, and there's nothing else to them. Those novels I'm most interested in, however, tend toward prosody, the music in words, the beauty of language, something that goes beyond pure plot. And yet, balance is essential and that balancing act is tough.

Q. Your text has little to do with conventional novels, with those you say are easily trans-

ported to the screen. Yours is more like a poem in prose.

A. Yes, but there's a plot behind it. Most of the chapters and different segments can almost be read independent from the rest, and yet there's a story line there, there's a logical plot that leads to a conclusion. I've always made this distinction between literary texts and editorial products. The two are essential for the smooth functioning of the industry, but I'm certainly more interested in literary texts. I would also make a distinction between authors who write to be purchased and those who write to be read: To be read and reread. I'd love to have the largest possible number of recurrent readers. I don't want to be read by many, instead I'd like to be reread by many.

Q. It's telling to hear you quote Nietzsche, because a

handful of premises are enough to embark on a rereading of *Telón de boca*. There are three characters in this text: The woman, the narrator and God...

A. Yes, the demiurge or Mephisto who pretends to be God...

"I'm most interested in prosody, beauty of language, something beyond pure plot"

Q. And some of his thoughts are terrifying. At a point in time he says: "There's only one certainty, but you refuse to face it straight up: Equality among the dead."

A. Yes, it's the only kind of equality there is.

Q. At the age of 72, would

you really say the only kind of equality you've ever seen is the equality of the dead?

A. Yes, yes. It's the only kind of equality there is; we ought to have no doubts about it. [LONG PAUSE] Although the dead are badly mistreated.

Q. What do you mean when you say that?

A. Well, they're still unearthing the mass graves of the Spanish Civil War. I've got enough experience in war zones to realize the victors mistreat the dead of the defeated.

Q. So you can't even find equality in death?

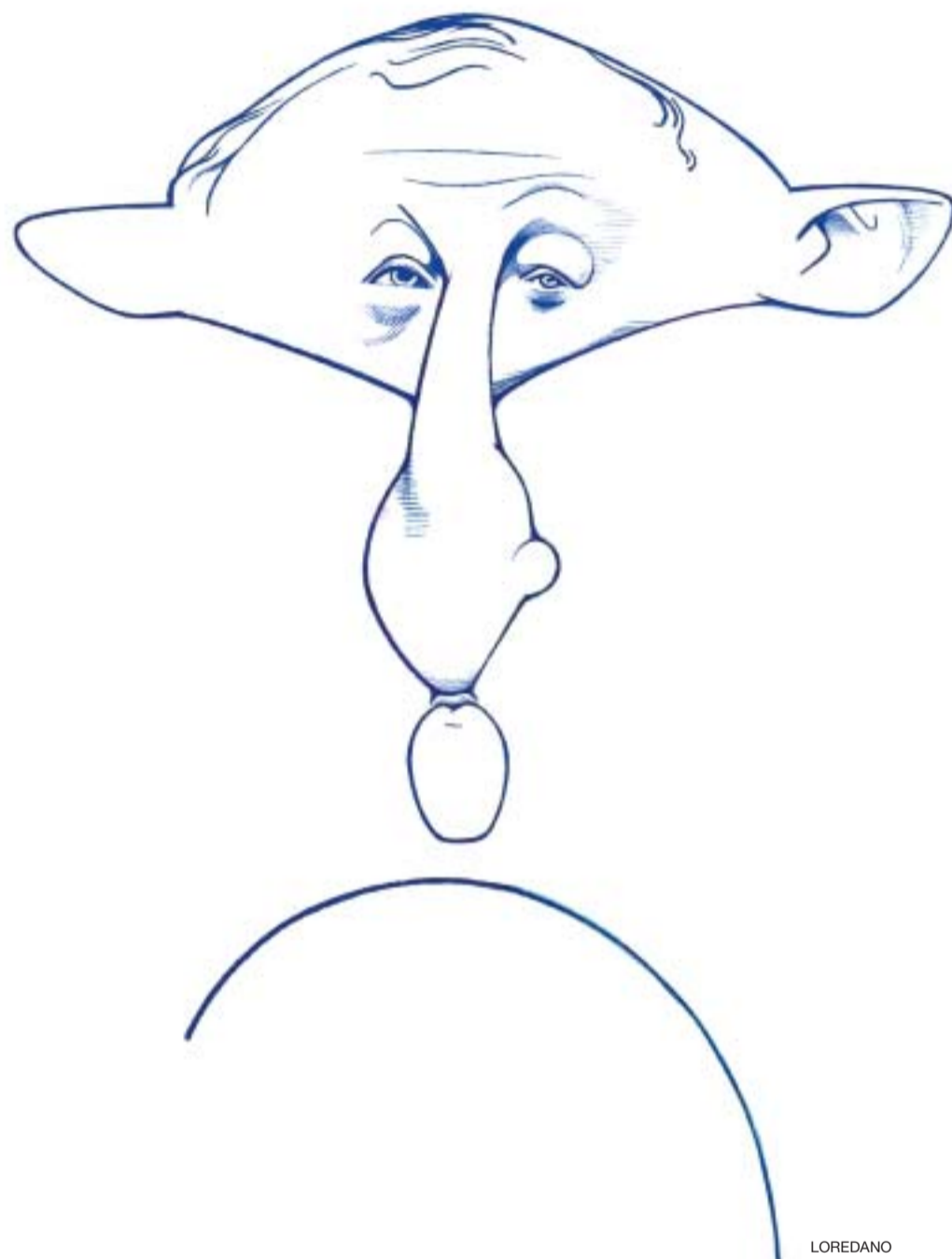
A. There ought to be, but even the dead are mistreated.

Q. Would you say this is an autobiographic novel?

A. Let's say it's autobiographic fiction. When life gets mixed up in literature, life itself becomes literature and we should treat it as such. There

JUAN GOYTISOLO / Writer

"The beauty of the world outlives human pain"



are many autobiographic elements in this text, but only as a function of an autobiographic fiction. Obviously, I've never talked to Mephisto, the demiurge or God.

Q. There's also a boy and the narrator reflects on his childhood. You write: "He'd never wanted offspring, which meant undertaking responsibility for an irrevocably doomed life." These words also sound autobiographic, you've never wanted to have children.

A. No, I've never wanted to undertake that kind of responsibility. I've done so for the children of others, though. Helping out those children, without being in any way responsible for their being, makes me happy.

Q. What's the difference?

A. Those children exist separately to myself and I can help them. I'm not responsible for bringing them into this world. I've never felt the need to make sure the species lives on.

Q. Did Monique ever want to have children with you?

A. I don't think so. She already had a daughter from her first marriage and I doubt she ever considered having a child with me. She understood my wish not to prolong the disaster.

Q. The pessimistic lucidity of this text...

A. No, it's not pessimistic. It's bare lucidity. I'm the least pessimistic person in the world at this point in time. What happened in 1996 [Monique's death] was a terrible blow for me, but I'm not pessimistic now. A friend told me: "Look, once you make it to the age of 70, you've got to treat each day as a gift, a present." And that's what I do. I don't do things I don't want to do. I refuse to be programmed; only I program my own life. I live with whoever I want to, wherever I want to and choose the family and children I want. I'm not pessimistic at all. I make the most of each day.

Q. Let's return to the demiurge in your novel. He says: "I'll be there to close the parenthesis between nothing and nothing." How does literature fit into this? Why write then?

A. If I knew why I wrote I wouldn't write. I've never known why I write. I guess I was genetically programmed to write. And I'm useless at everything else, I'm the least practical person ever. I'd be a real mess if I weren't surrounded by practical people. Writing aside, there's nothing I can really do well. And I don't really know why.

Q. Isn't a certain desire to leave a legacy part of it, a wish of eternity perhaps? "After myself, there's nothing," you say, but perhaps somewhere in your mind you realize your books will live on.

A. Look, do you think Spain and Europe will exist in 1,000 years time?

Q. Probably not.

A. Yes, probably not. Thinking about immortality seems fatuous to me, it's absurd to pro-

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JUAN GOYTISOLO, THE LAST NOVEL

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From previous page

gram your immortality, such as [writer Camilo José] Cela did, through foundations, universities, streets and the whole lot. People will read my works if they're worth reading. Honors and foundations are just pointless. I don't buy any of it. Some works have withstood the test of time because they've made their contribution to the literature tree. If a work doesn't add anything new to what's already out there, then people will stop reading it, however many awards its author has been honored with.

Q. At another point in the book you write: "Literature brought together and distilled his two childhood passions — history and geography — into a single whole." Were those Juan Goytisolo's passions as a child?

A. Those were the only things I was interested in. When I was 15 years of age, I came up with the absurd idea of becoming a diplomat, just because I knew diplomats traveled a lot. I couldn't see any other way to travel, I was obsessed with leaving Spain and seeing the world.

Q. And you succeeded in doing so. Your literature doesn't depend on atlases and encyclopedias. Instead it rests on your many trips. In *Telón de boca* we read about a trip to war torn Chechnya walking in the footsteps of Tolstoy.

A. Yes, it was extraordinary to travel to Chechnya with Tolstoy's book under my wing. Once the journey came to an end, I reread all of his works. His first-hand account of the wars of the Caucasus is impressive.

Q. Why have you included this testimony in *Telón de boca*?

A. It's one of the guiding threads of the plot: The image of a thistle squashed by Russian boots, the Tzar, Yeltsin or Pu-

"Rather than writing, it's been more about condensing what was written to its raw core"

tin's boots. The recurrence of human cruelty. Our animal heritage sometimes prevails amid society's progress. Things haven't changed much in this respect. Every civil war relives the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. You saw what happened in Lebanon, and I saw it in Algeria. It begs the question whether the human species has improved? Perhaps it would be more fitting to call it inhuman species.

Q. And brutality doesn't only have its strongholds among the poor and illiterate, the terrible thing is that it's also entrenched in wealthy and scientifically advanced societies.

A. We're witnessing this right now, through those constant callings to God on the part of bin Laden's terrorists, and Bush doing so too. We should learn to leave God alone. But we continue to invoke God to justify cruelty, massacres and barbarity.

Q. Going back to your Mephisto. In your novel he says: "When I shat your physical world and contemplated it from above I shook in horror: It was worse than dung, than a stink-

Telón de boca

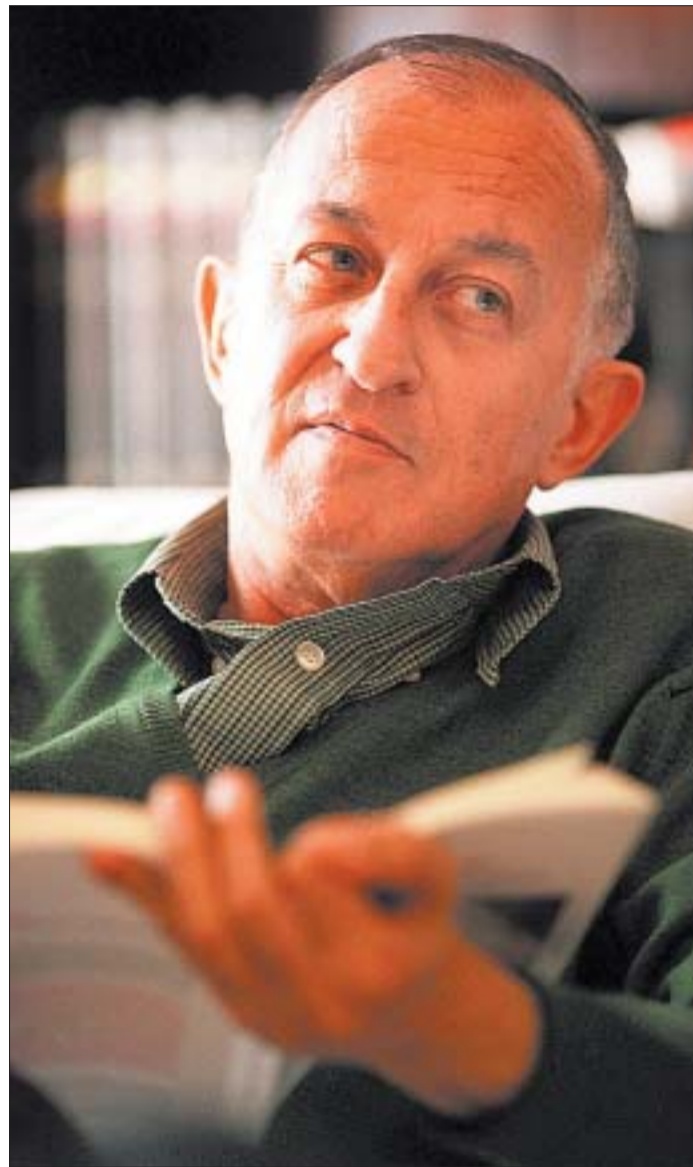
Juan Goytisolo
El Alpeh, Barcelona, 2003
€15, available at usual outlets.

With over 30 titles under his belt, Juan Goytisolo's writings tower as one of the most outstanding products of contemporary Spanish language literature. His works, which come together as a deliberately asymmetric whole, are always a source of gossip, an acid test to its readers, a sort of catharsis that stands in sharp contrast to all our certainties. His works destroy us as they grow, running the risk of destroying themselves in the enveloping holocaust, they unleash and testing us (and themselves) constantly. Goytisolo always comes up with unexpected twists and turns, and the most recent among them is his latest novel: *Telón de boca*. In approximately 100 pages, the author manages to transform his backdrop and his overall tone, approaching a theme that is fundamental for everyone of us: Death, which in a nutshell is what imbues life with meaning. Like Malraux said, death only drives men toward their own fate.

Bearing this in mind, it is hardly surprising that Goytisolo's readers are either awed or irked by his works. Because this author is capable of decreeing and betraying, of building and corroding simultaneously, leaving us ruffled and disturbed, and always consumed by this unrelenting holocaust. This is why I am convinced his works should be viewed as a whole, without casting any of his writings aside. Concealing parts of the whole, as sometimes the author himself does, rejecting, ignoring and correcting those texts he views as weak or flawed, I believe is a mistake. Each individual life is too long to hold up in the same manner from beginning to end. While it is certainly possible to review the entirety of Goytisolo's literary production, explaining every detail and nuance to refine its content — a process Goytisolo masters — I do not find any reason to ignore the early, realistic part of his work. Comprising six novels, two short story volumes, two articles and two essays, the author has flatly rejected part of his early writings — an essay and the novel *El circo* — and corrected another part. And this is only a fraction of the correction process he is subjecting his past writings in preparation of their latest editions. I, however, consider Juan Goytisolo's work relevant as it is, in its true chronological sequence, because he

ing turd, than a fetid pasty mass whirling like whipped meringue." And he concludes by saying a donkey soon urinated on that world.

A. The image has precedents in Spanish literature. Mateo Alemán says that when Jupiter created the world he first created donkeys and later men, and



The Cataluña-writer, Juan Goytisolo. / CARLES RIBAS

has always been, and still is, a master of moral and political self-respect. Concealing this would mean contributing to collective forget, something the author is actively engaging in today.

Only six of the 15 books Goytisolo wrote before Franco's death were published in his own country, Spain, and the author later rejected two of them. Goytisolo is the recipient of a number of prestigious literary prizes, including the Europalia, Nelly Sachs and Octavio Paz awards, but he has never received such kind of recognition in Spain. None of his own country's private or institutional awards have ever fallen into his hands. It seems as if we simply refused to acknowledge this vexing horsefly that keeps on biting us, and I must say I find this very disquieting.

But now I must move on to this short but noteworthy *Telón de boca*, a title that refers to the curtain used to conceal set changes in theater plays. In this work, Goytisolo turns to his past, snatching at his childhood and teenage years and projecting himself as a character cracked in three. In *Telón de boca* he leaves behind the phase of total politi-

cal and cultural rebellion of his trilogy *Marks of identity*, *Count Julián* and *Juan the landless*. He also moves on from the linguistic experiments of *Makbara* and *Landscapes* after the battle, and from his heterodox mysticism of *The virtues of the solitary bird* and *Quarantine*. The widower narrator returns to his own voice after the passing away of his wife, French writer Monique Lange. Her absence is what forces him to reflect upon his own life in the face of a demon that pursues him since he abandoned all search for meaning in his life. In this text we find brutal fragments against any thought of God, against any kind of meaning to life. In the end, the widower will head to the desert to die. But there he will find rejection once again, and will be pushed back into looking for a new meaning to an absolutely meaningless life. In this situation, set changes are perhaps the only thing that keeps us going, and yet they do not really seem to work. Perhaps those mountains that surround us, the curtain we improvise to keep on convincing ourselves that life goes on, is just the fiercest of all our tragedies.

Q. Is that how you see things?

A. Let's say I don't entirely

agree with my character, but the barbarity of the world pervades. Although modern and postmodern intellectuals refuse to see it, barbarity pervades. And it's not just wars, there's also hunger, all that's going on in Africa and Latin America.

Q. And yet you still raise your voice against far drawn in-

justice, you haven't yielded to brutality by giving up the fight.

A. The greatest commitment of creators is to their own language. There are villainous creators, like Quevedo. He was the perfect villain. He hated women, homosexuals, Jews, moors, blacks; he boasted an excessive patriotism and then it so happened that he was working for the French embassy: The perfect villain. And yet he was a brilliant poet. And look at Céline's works. He was anti-Semitic, collaborated with the Nazis and whatever else; but he also wrote *Journey to the end of the night*, one of the greatest works of the 20th century. I've always been committed to words, to contributing to the culture I belong to with a different kind of language. On the other hand, I've also been very committed to social causes. First I fought against the Franco regime and now I fight against all types of nationalism and fundamentalism, including the technoscientific branch of fundamentalism, which is the one I fear most today.

Q. The severity of your reflections in *Telón de boca* are heart wrenching. But nearing the end of the book, the reader encounters a pleasant surprise in the narrator's sudden vitality. After describing life as a brief and quite unpleasant parenthesis, the novel ends on an optimistic note, in which the narrator faces a new day perched on the stage of life.

A. Yes, that's life. The narrator has one more day to live. He realizes sadness vanishes before beauty does. The beauty of the world outlives human pain. Forgetting is the most powerful thing.

Q. Do you feel sadness is fading now, six years after those very painful times for you?

A. Yes, pain fades, as well as

"I don't want to be read by many, instead I'd like to be reread by many"

sadness and memory. It seems impossible, but that's the way it is.

Q. We wouldn't survive otherwise, would we?

A. Yes, fortunately that's the way things are. I don't think I'll ever write fiction again. In this novel I've said all I wanted to say regarding literary creation. From now on, I'll work on essays and articles. And I'm going to take part in a Jean-Luc Godard film in Sarajevo. It's quite fun to embark on an acting career at my age.

Q. You spent six years writing this book and yet it's one of the shortest ones you've ever published.

A. Yes, I kept chopping and chopping. Rather than writing, it's been more about condensing what was written to its raw core. I guess this short book of mine has one major advantage, the advantage one of Céline's readers admired him for. "The greatest thing about your books is that when I drop them, they don't crush my feet." It's a fantastic compliment. I doubt *Telón de boca* will crush anybody's feet if it's dropped, which could easily happen.