

THE MEMBRANES OF COMPREHENSION IN JAVIER MARIAS'S NOVELS

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Abstract The theme of understanding in a sense of comprehension is well illustrated in literature by Javier Marias – a Spanish writer born in 1951, son of the Spanish philosopher Julian Marias Aguilera (1914-2005), who lived a great deal of time abroad (America) and who also studied and taught in England. The paper is focused, from an inter- and multi-disciplinary approach of philosophy, literature and ethics, on the problem of the “exile from the world,” with a special focus on identity, trans-world identity and implications for the moral aspects. The present paper begins with a summary analysis of the idea of exile from the world, continuing with several considerations on the membranes of the world and the membranes of the good, and ending with a few words about the world, truth and identity.

Keywords Philosophy and literature, Marias, Plantinga, David Lewis, Saul Kripke, Leibniz, comprehension, world, identity, trans-world identity, good, moral ambiguity, metaphysical ambiguity, membranes of the world.

The theme of understanding,¹ in the sense of comprehension (following the lines traced in hermeneutics by Schleiermacher, Dilthey or Ricoeur), is well illustrated in literature by Javier Marias² - a Spanish writer born in 1951, son of the Spanish philosopher Julian Marias Aguilera

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¹ The present paper is based on a chapter from my upcoming book, *The Membranes of Understanding*.

² Novels: *El hombre sentimental* (1986), *The Man of Feeling* (US: New Directions/UK: The Harvill Press, 2003); *Corazón tan blanco* (1992). *A Heart So White* (The Harvill Press, 1995; New Directions, 2002), *When I was mortal* (1996); *Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí* (1994). *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* (The Harvill Press, 1996; New Directions, 2001); *Negra espalda del tiempo* (1998). *Dark Back of Time*, translated by Esther Allen (New Directions, 2001; Chatto & Windus, 2003); *Tu rostro mañana. Your face tomorrow. 1. Fiebre y lanza* (2002). *Fever and Spear* (New Directions, 2005); *2. Baile y sueño* (2004). *Dance and Dream* (New Directions, 2006); *3. Veneno y sombra y adiós* (2007). *Poison, Shadow and*

(1914-2005) who lived a great deal of time abroad (America) and who also studied and taught in England (he has died in September 2022). I will begin this text with a summary analysis on the idea of exile from the world, I will continue with certain considerations about the membranes of the world and the membranes of the good and I will end with a few words about the world, truth and identity.

1. Can one be exiled from the world?

A novel from 2017, *Berta Isla*, mentions the possibility of the exile from the world. The temptation is to somehow intervene in the world and in the universe, even in the slightest, and to not pass through the world inertly, like a trunk, like a garbage bin or like a furniture item. However, most men and women from the mists of time have indeed passed through the world thusly. According to Wheeler: everyone that toiled daily, with no moment of respite from dusk to dawn, working to bring food to the table, or struggling to exert influence over their peers, or domination, or awe, was overall just as indifferent as a shop owner who merely opens and closes his shop daily, between the established hours, his entire life, never changing his routine. All were exiled from the world from birth, or from their very conception, or even from before: simply ever since they were imagined by their parents who were irresponsible and oblivious, or who never knew that they were merely fabricating the umpteenth useless cog through their instinctive actions.³ The expression “exile from the world” or outcasts of the universe⁴ strikes, because being in a world is part of the fundamental make-up of being human, as illustrated by Heidegger: *In-der-Welt-Sein* is part of the constitution of this privileged being that is Dasein⁵ - to be in the world is one of the fundamental membranes of man;⁶ therefore, to be at the North Pole, to be in the Amazonian jungle, to be on Mars or to be on a planet situated at a million light years away from us are all situations that warrant being in the world.

A hermeneutical suggestion is offered by the popular dichotomy of “our world” and “the other world”; in other words, when we die, we would be in another world, a supposedly better one, with no hardship or suffering. We found this meaning in *Berta Isla*: to be exiled from the world, in the sense of being dead, is one of the possibilities undertaken by a spy or a secret agent.⁷

Before we move forward, we must summarize the plot. Tomas Nevinson, half Spanish, half English, with an unusual talent for foreign languages, married Berta Isla. His talent is noted by one of his professors at Oxford - a man who is very familiar with the secret services, so

Farewell (New Directions, 2009); *Así empieza lo malo* (2014). *Thus Bad Begins* (Knopf, 2016); *Berta Isla* (2017); *Tomás Nevinson* (2021).

³ Marias, *Berta Isla*, 94.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), I, ch II, § 12-13.

⁶ See Adrian Nita, *Epoca spiritului* (Age of spirit) (Iasi: European Institute, 2020).

⁷ Marias, *Berta Isla*, 379.

much so that the young Thomas is recruited (in truth, obligated to enlist, because of a murder accusation). Their family life become increasingly more difficult, especially because of the fact that Thomas is not allowed to tell his family the truth about his two jobs - in Madrid, where his family lives, he works at the Embassy, and in England, what his wife knows is that he works at the Foreign Ministry. As an agent, we see Thomas infiltrating and doing good deeds in Belfast (using another identity, let's call him John), then retreated and hidden (as Jim); we then see him returning to London, after the fall of the wall of Berlin (as David); 20 years later, we find him back in Madrid, with his old identity, trying reconnect to his old family.

Another sense of exile is presented by Marias as being an outcast, being fallen. However, given the fact that we cannot choose our parents or even certain facts, we simply cannot influence the world and, thus, we do indeed passed through it like a trunk.⁸

The third sense of exile underlines the roles of the shadows, meaning what cannot be seen from the fantastic and complicated arrangement of the world. Marias, through the voice of Professor Wheeler, shows that this is the paradigm of the secret agent, of the infiltrated. With his unusual linguistic talent, Thomas would be an excellent infiltrated secret agent.⁹

The fourth sense underlines the relation with morality: to be exiled from the world means to arrive in a possible world, or perhaps more precisely, in a membrane of the world, in which, in order to make good deeds, you have the power to do evil. *All will be normal once you are in Spain – says Wheeler; when you are not, I'm not going to lie, you will live fictive lives, lives that are not yours. But only temporarily: later you will abandon them and you will return to your own being.* And Wheeler used and Arabic possessive in English, or one that was only kept in prayers: “to thy former self”¹⁰. You can have different identities “fictive lives” but motivated by the hostile pre-assumption actions of the country enemies.

To be exiled from the world means, in another sense, to be exiled from one membrane in which you are nothing, as long as you cannot influence the world, and enter another membrane, in which you are truly noteworthy.¹¹

Leaving aside the air of superiority, the arrogance characteristic to the attitude of a secret agent, who does not need to justify his actions to anyone, we must note the context of the discussion: Professor Wheeler wanted to convince the young student that working as a secret agent was an interesting job that was also highly useful for the country.

The sixth sense, namely the most important one, from the perspective of the present research, is the one placed in connection with Berta – to be exiled from the world means to be exiled from Berta's world, and moved into one of the agents' worlds (Wheeler, Tupra etc.). For Berta, who loves Thomas, he is indeed *somebody*, he is definitely not a nobody; even after many silences and secrets, he continues to fill the world of Berta. Only after she finds out that it is likely that Thomas is dead, Berta decides to move on without him, as a widow. From

⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁹ Ibid., 94-100.

¹⁰ Ibid., 110.

¹¹ Ibid., 210.

another viewpoint, namely from Berta's viewpoint, the exile from the world is equivalent with the unbecoming, with treason, with hate. Thomas' exile from Berta's world (a twelve year long exile) means that her world was deeply troubled (as shown in the fourth part of the book).

The fantastic ability of working perfectly in many different languages - in my interpretation, in many different worlds - allows Thomas to interpret many roles, in accordance with each task he has to fulfill. Thus, he is gifted with the eminent ability of reading people, of predicting actions, of understanding the worlds of others, similar to the situation brilliantly described in *Your Face tomorrow*. We must note that some characters are common in the two novels, professor Wheeler and Bertram Tupra (who is a type of captain over the agents), and thus the reader has the opportunity of gaining a more in-depth understanding of the idea of interpretation, of translating the faces, the characters and the identities of a character, in order to predict today the actions of tomorrow. Practically, both Thomas (from *Berta Isla*) and Jamie Deza (the main character of *Your Face tomorrow*) have the eminent ability of reading people's faces today and understand their faces of tomorrow, together with each of their own ideas and actions of tomorrow.

Thomas understands the worlds of others, so much so that he can infiltrate them with the task of influencing them directly. If, in our world (Berta's world), Thomas works at the embassy and, respectively, at the Foreign Ministry (henceforth regarded as W_1), in world W_2 , we see him infiltrated in Belfast, gathering information, contributing to the reducing of the damages made by the war and carrying out different good deeds for the Kingdom. In the same manner, in world W_3 , we see him (disguised as Jim) in a city in which he is a professor, a good citizen and a convinced family man. Finally, as David, we see him in world W_4 , returned to London, but under the obligation of never contacting any old acquaintance, not even his former agent colleagues.

We can see how each world of exiles has different layers of understanding, to different extents, as if their invisible membranes were the ones that decisively influence the respective worlds. In this manner, the invisible has a great power over the world, just like dark matter is supposedly responsible for the occurrences in the universe, despite it being merely hypothesized, not seen (observed). According to the secret agents, the invisible membranes of the world are the ones that truly and decisively influence the world, to a much larger extent than the visible membranes, namely the institutions, the organizations or the individuals. It is the greatest extent to which an individual can aspire, in order prevent becoming a regrettable but complete exile.¹² Secrecy engulfs the supreme form of intervening in the world.¹³

The fact that the world membranes are membranes of the understanding also emerges from the fact that Thomas has, in each of the worlds in which he had been exiled, a proper understanding specific to each world. If, in W_2 , Thomas understands and accepts being infiltrated, he assumes the dangers implied by this interpretation - even the idea of his life being in danger at any time. In W_3 he understands that he is a school teacher, that he needs to

¹² Ibid., 100.

¹³ Ibid., 100, 108.

live a modest life, isolated, unknown to anyone outside the city, although there was indeed a constant possibility for the other side to infiltrate this world and kill him. In W_3 , he understands that the moment had come for Thomas to die, at least for Berta's world, so much so that this understanding directly impacts the world inhabited by Berta - giving her the possibility of deciding to be a widow, despite the absence of her husband's body.

What is thus notable is how being exiled from the world implies the choice for one understanding or another of the world: when he makes and assumes a choice, the world in which he exists coagulates, meaning that it is thus given life, it is brought into existence, although, from another viewpoint, the world exists, but it *is* not (or even the other way around, namely that it *is*, but it does not exist).

Each of the worlds discussed above has a body, a depth given by the meanings associated with it, just like it was excellently suggested by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*¹⁴. The mixture of visible and invisible, that compiles the world's body of meanings is generously illustrated by Marias, with a remarkable literary talent, in *Your Face, tomorrow*, volume 3, *Venom and goodbye*, in which the protagonist, the one who interprets, understands and predicts people, actions and ideas, Jamie Deza, sees a CD containing facts less known to the public (actually, completely unknown to the greater public) about different politicians. The videos, made by secret agents, are almost a type of poison that damages the organism; the exterior becomes the interior, the borders between the self and the world disappear; the world is the self; the self is the world.¹⁵

2. The membranes of the world and the membranes of *good*

Beyond comprehension, beyond the body of meanings, the membranes of the world are in connection, according to Marias, with ethics, namely with good and evil. Present in all his works, one illustration in this respect is from the novel *Thus Bad Begins* (2014), in which a physician, Van Vechten, who cares for his patients, whom he visits even under combat conditions, and is completely indifferent to the political group to which they belong, all while concealing an unknown, deeply evil side. The novel focuses on revealing the blackmail system practiced by this physician: in exchange for not revealing certain compromising (political) information, he solicits sexual services either from his patients or from their female relatives. As an evil physician, Van Vechten treats the *evil* in the sense that he treats the healthy folk of their *good* (by extirpating their *good*). This moral ambiguity puts him in the position of negotiating the evil. We see him described as a pig, a vermin¹⁶, a Franco supporter¹⁷ - in the sense that he had been in the service of evil for many decades, even after the fall of the Franco regime.

¹⁴ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible, suivi de notes de travail*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1964, 1979), ch. 4.

¹⁵ Marias, 3. *Veneno y sombra y adiós* (2007). 3: *Poison, Shadow and Farewell* (US: New Directions/UK: Chatto & Windus, 2009), 939-944.

¹⁶ Marias, *Thus Bad Begins*, 433.

Some moral ambiguity is also present in *Berta Isla*: good is relative in the sense that a certain action is good from the perspective of one side and evil from the perspective of the other. For example, from the perspective of the English, as an agent infiltrated in Belfast, Thomas collects information, predicts hostile actions, prevents or eliminates evil. However, for the Irish, this secret agent carries out “a great evil” in Belfast, as we can see in the discussion between Berta and the two agents of the adversary side (Mary and Miguel) infiltrated in Madrid in order to contact Thomas’ family.¹⁸

Moreover, a comparison can be made between the image of the secret agent, regardless of whether or not he is infiltrated, from the perspective of the recruiter, Professor Wheeler¹⁹, from the perspective of Miguel²⁰, or from that of Thomas himself.²¹ Thomas understands that what he is doing for the Kingdom is good, from a moral viewpoint, despite the opposing side considering his actions to be evil.²²

As a stabilizing element, Berta is the one who provides the stability point for morality, although she appears in the novel rather sporadically (the book begins with her, from her perspective, and ends with her perspective being doubled by the first-person narration), approximately three quarters being dedicated to Thomas’ actions - be they good or bad - within the worlds in which he is exiled. From this perspective, I am inclined to believe that what Marias wants to emphasise is not the moral ambiguity of the world, but rather the moral clarity, the verticality - the proper virtue of Berta’s world.

The moral ambiguity facilitates the interpretation of Thomas as a postmodern character: at a superficial glance, a reader could believe that Marias’ stance is on the side of postmodernism. However, one understanding that emphasizes the essential role played by Berta, making her the one that incarnates the prime image, the one that truly holds weight within the literary work as a whole, since her morality is the one that tips the scales. Her lack of understanding of Thomas’s moral emphasizes the anti-postmodernism stance taken by Marias in this novel.

Thomas’ understanding of the good that he does for his country, in the form of preventing, foreseeing and eliminating evil, raises the need for meditation on the nature and the limits of duty, the relation with values and ideals, the action - virtue relation and several other aspects pertaining to ethical judgment. He carries out good deed with no need for rewards; moreover, nobody knows of these deeds (except, of course, for the two-three of his supervisors). In a sense, this somewhat *Good Samaritan* quality of a secret agent shows how moral ambiguity can have a positive counterpart, in the sense of doing something for the greater good. An action is good if it is taken seriously, and, from the viewpoint of a certain

¹⁷ Ibid., 448.

¹⁸ Marias, *Berta Isla*, 191 sqq.

¹⁹ Ibid., 67-73.

²⁰ Ibid., 203-209.

²¹ Ibid., 263.

²² Ibid., 321-322.

ethical theory, it simultaneously appears as evil if it is placed in relation with another, greater action - given the fact that values have the eminent quality of admitting degrees.²³ Despite being the lesser good in comparison with other goods actions, one and the same action can be deemed as evil.²⁴ Tupra, Wheeler, Thomas and in general those inhabiting the world of secret agents are allowed to do evil for a greater good.²⁵ For the sake of national defense, evil is done to one man to prevent the suffering of ten; evil is done to ten, to prevent the suffering of hundreds, and so on.

Regarding this argument, Berta's stance is that, in a situation in which the cause is not just (i.e., the cause is not *good*, in the sense used in the present paper), even a king would be held accountable in the greater trial of history. One such example is present in the Shakespearian *Henry V*, IV, 1, in which the king mingles amongst the people in order to discover their true thoughts.²⁶ Thomas emphasizes the viewpoint of the soldier who merely follows his orders, although he does agree that if a cause is, in fact, unjust, obeying the king absolves the individual of any true guilt. The chain of command must be upheld and the orders need to be carried out with precision, unquestioned by moral considerations; otherwise, chaos ensues. An undisciplined army is an army that loses all battles. Perhaps, as a disciplined soldier, the agent chooses to carry out evil, ugly, sordid deeds.²⁷ The agent understands that good and evil go hand in hand, when it comes to national interests.

At this point, the idea of duty can be placed under scrutiny: does Thomas (alias John, alias Jim, alias David) do good deeds as part of his duty or is he beyond duty? Regarding the trajectory of his career, we find out that, in a way, this was indeed a choice, but, in another sense, he was obligated to be an agent. The context is the following: his girlfriend from London, Janet Jeffrys, is found dead, right after he visits her. To avoid prison and the entire scandal that would erupt from a trial in which he had no evidence to support his innocence, he chose to accept the aid of the world of secret agents (namely, that of Tupra). Thus, if we were to focus on the lack of obligation, we may assert that he does indeed do good deeds voluntarily.

Moreover, the fact that he does good deeds (for his country), in all of the worlds from which he is exiled, leads to the evil that is done to himself and to his family: he leaves his family from Madrid (Berta and the children), he lies and leaves his second family (wife Meg and daughter Valerie). In addition, the novel perfectly illustrates this loss from his perspective, him being continuously isolated, distressed and unhappy. He practically destroys his life by dedicating it to his country.

An extremely important and interesting aspect regarding *understanding* can be found in *Venom and Goodbye*. Jamie Deza is asked by his colleague, Nuix Peres, to be careful when conducting his evaluation of a certain person - her father is indebted to him and it would thus

²³ Leibniz, *Essays on Theodicy*, I, 8.

²⁴ Marias, *Berta Isla*, 328-329.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 391.

²⁶ Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV, 1.

²⁷ Marias, *Berta Isla*, 479.

be ideal if the unpleasant (evil) things uncovered by the evaluation were not reported further. Therefore, Jamie Deza has a true moral dilemma: if he uncovers evil aspects and does not report them to Tupra, it is possible that his superior (who also has a good capacity of understanding, interpretation, translation – although is not so strong as Deza's) uncovers them himself; in addition, if the person in question has such negative character traits, measures may be taken against Nuix's father, regardless of the results of the evaluation.²⁸ *This episode shows how morally profound understanding truly is.* To interpret, understand, and translate someone's character is not merely an intellectual or rational operation, but also a moral judgment.

We have thus outlined the main aspects that allow for a very brief discussion on the issue of *supererogation* - considering that, from one viewpoint, there are supererogation acts, namely the acts of good that are beyond duty, since they are not requested, meaning that they are carried out voluntarily, and not out of obligation.²⁹ Naturally, a spy (even one that is the likes of James Bond) is neither an Angel nor a Saint - the paradigm of supererogation, although it was precisely this aspect that the movie *The Saint* aimed to emphasize. However, a spy is not a *Good citizen* (The Good Samaritan) either, as depicted in the homonymous movie. Taking all of the limitations and necessary precautions into account, the present approach will place the case of the spy under scrutiny as a type of activity that implies (includes) supererogatory acts. We have seen how, from a certain viewpoint, certain acts are good from a moral viewpoint, regardless of which theory of good is followed. The fact that the secret agent gathers information about the hostile actions of the country's enemies, the fact that he predicts and prevents evil deeds or sometimes even annihilates evil, all testify to the moral character of these actions, although they are neither obligatory nor necessary.

One objection in this regard would be as follows: if the spy is in charge of the gathering of information and of the prevention and annihilation of evil, is he not merely fulfilling the requirements of his job? Along the same lines, even teachers, despite not being apostles, do good daily in their classrooms, by virtue of the fact that their job description entails that they teach the children to read and to count.

To a certain extent, the actions of a secret agent are indeed included in the job description (the gathering of information, for instance). However, there are other actions that are not entailed by the employment obligations. In *Berta Isla*, Thomas keeps the secret from his family: he does not give away all the details of his actions. This aspect is part of his obligations, and they are clearly stated in his agent contract. However, the fact that he dedicates his time and energy to the needs of his country, to the detriment of his family, surpasses the bounds of the duty that he needs to fulfill.

²⁸ Marias, *Tu rostro mañana. Your face tomorrow. 3: Poison, Shadow and Farewell* (US: New Directions/UK: Chatto & Windus, 2009), 81.

²⁹ Nora Grigore, "On Why There is a Problem of Supererogation," *Philosophia*, 47 (4): 1141-1163 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-018-0045-z>.

Forgiveness and tolerance are truly interesting acts. Although his second family did not forgive the actions that caused their suffering, Berta proved to be both forgiving and tolerant. During their marriage, she tolerated his silences, departures and disappearances. Finally, when Thomas returns, after having disappeared for twelve years, Berta forgives him, despite not having the slightest obligations to do so – she was not even his wife. If, presumably, she had tolerated and forgiven his silences and disappearances out of wifely duty, as a single woman she decided to resume her relationship with Thomas, which makes it a completely *voluntary action*. As supererogatory acts, forgiveness and tolerance seem to fit into a moral theory that focuses on virtue (as opposed to one that relies on the law, on obligation and rules).³⁰

3. World, Truth, Identity

The issue raised by Dostoyevsky in *The Karamazov Brothers*, regarding the conditions of possibility for doing good (in a situation in which God does not exist³¹), is transposed by Marias from the perspective of identity. With respect to ethics, the following question arises: what are the conditions of possibility of doing good in the situation in which one either has no identity or has an unstable identity? The present analysis is limited to *Berta Isla* and *Your Face, Tomorrow*, although there are many cases that involve personal identity in other novels by Marias – who is obsessively preoccupied with memory and language.

As previously established, the main character is exiled in different worlds in order to fulfill different tasks. In certain worlds, he is doing good acts (at least from one side's perspective). However, the issue that arises is whether or Thomas can do good deeds, since Thomas himself does not exist in those worlds, but rather the persons he is disguised as, namely John, Jim or David.

One possible answer is that it is indeed possible for him to do good as long as he exists in that world. Even bearing different physical descriptions, different histories, and even bearing the names Jim or David; he fully exists in that world, according to Quine: no entity without identity.³²

From another perspective, another question must be raised: what makes him to be him? How do we know that we are dealing with the same man, with the same character? Even we, as readers, although we do understand Thomas's disguise, have good reasons to doubt his identity. Moreover, how does he (Thomas) know that he is Thomas, since he is called Jim or David?

³⁰ For further information on supererogation, see Grigore, "On Why There is a Problem of Supererogation." For further information on the morality of law *versus* morality of virtue, see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After virtue. A study in moral theory* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

³¹ If God does not exist, everything is permitted, and if everything is permitted, we are lost (see Dostoevski, *Karamazov Brothers*).

³² Willard van Orman Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 23.

These questions are by no means childish, despite them also being present in *Alice in the Wonderland*. When she starts to grow, Alice asks herself whether she is Ada or Mabel. The fact that Ada has long curly hair invalidates this hypothesis, as does the fact that she is good at geography, while Mabel is not; finally, Alice concludes that she is indeed Alice, but in a much larger size.³³ One means of verifying Thomas's identity is by way of his memory of Jim's actions, words and ideas; likewise, David has the memory of Jim's and Thomas's actions, words and ideas; therefore, all three characters are incarnated by one and the same person, despite taking on different identities. These identities are, from this point of view, merely the disguises of one single person.

This kind of argument, supported by John Locke,³⁴ can, in a certain sense, also be rejected. One hypothetical situation is one in which Jim suffers an accident and loses his memory. He is admitted to a hospital, his family confirms that he is Jim, but does not remember that he is also Thomas. This hypothetical situation could have led Marias to permanently exile Jim to that respective world, and to thus no longer attribute the good actions carried out by John and Thomas, or to never return to Berta's world.

A different approach would be that the identity is given by the psychological continuity; thus, memory is not the only factor must be taken into account, but all other factors that compile the line of continuity of all mental states that occurred in different moments of time. However, in order for Thomas to be identical to Jim, the primary condition would be that their mental states be on a continuous line (between each two points, a third must be introduced). The fact that Marias presents the exiled Thomas through many worlds, and in the end he returns to his primary identity (the one that came first in the timeline and that is the natural primal one), makes me believe that Marias agrees with this identity theory – supported, among others, by Parfit³⁵ and Nozick.³⁶

The emphasis placed on this type of argument on the space-time continuity – proposed by David Wiggins, could lead to the identification, in the novel, of a certain form of *unstable identity*: the characters both are and are not one and the same person; Thomas is and it is not identical to Jim and David. He is identical if the space-time continuity is emphasized (between the limits of a single world) and he is not identical (if the temporal discontinuity is emphasized). This type of identity traces the limits between the entities (the world, the membranes, the cities etc.) of each world in which the character is exiled. For example, from s_1t_1 to s_2t_2 we see him in London; from s_3t_3 to s_4t_4 , we see him in Belfast; from s_5t_5 to s_6t_6 we see him in a little town etc.

³³ Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Philip Parker (San Diego: Icon Group, 2005), 10.

³⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book I, ch. XXVII, § 9.

³⁵ Derek Parfit, "Personal Identity" (1971), reprinted in R. Hoy, N. Oaklander (eds.), *Metaphysics. Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Wadsworth, Belmont, 1991). Original text: Derek Parfit, "Personal Identity," *The Philosophical Review* 80, no. 1 (1971): 3–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2184309>.

³⁶ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

The question that arises now is the following: is Marias's approach similar to the idea of the possible world put forth by Leibniz? As Leibniz of infinite forms of Sextus, is the case of Marias's character the same, especially since the Spanish writer has a strong philosophical background?

Having exerted a decisive influence on the modern semantics of the possible worlds, in *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, Leibniz presents this idea in the context of the need to defend free will: if, out of all possible worlds, the best (*optimum*) world did not exist, God would not have created any world whatsoever. What I call "world" encompasses the entire succession and collection of existing things, in a way in which the aforementioned things could not exist in several worlds in different times and spaces. Otherwise, together, they would compile one single world or one universe. When all of the times and all of the spaces are filled, it becomes no less true that they could be filled in a variety of means and that there is an infinite number of possible worlds, out of which God must have chosen the best one.³⁷

Leibniz imagines several possible situations which could include Sextus Tarquinius, the son of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (approximately 534-509 AD) the last legendary king of Rome – after whom the Republic was established. Arriving at the Oracle, and wishing to know whether or not to travel to Rome to reclaim his father's throne, he hears the following:

"Poor and cast way from your country
We will see you lose your life."

In other words, the Oracle tells him that the decision to go to Rome is unwise, so he had the liberty to do something different, so as to save his own life. Leibniz imagines the possible worlds (out of which the best and most beautiful one is, in fact, the present one) as rooms inside a building in the shape of a pyramid. The most beautiful one is at the very top, while the other, less beautiful ones are below, in infinite rows. In the world at the top, namely the actual world, Sextus departs from the Oracle and sets off to Rome, where an entire mess ensues: he rapes his best friend's wife, he is cast out by his father and ends up beaten and miserable.³⁸ In another world, he heeds the Oracle's words and moves to a city similar to Corinth, where he buys a garden, finds a treasure, becomes rich and loved, and he lives to a ripe old age.³⁹ In another possible world, Sextus goes to Thrace, marries the daughter of the king and is thus next in line to the throne.⁴⁰ There are thus multiple Sextus that are similar, who will have all that we know from the true Sextus, but not all that is already within him but unknown and, consequently, everything that would happen to him in the future is equally unknown. In one

³⁷ Leibniz, *Essays on Theodicy*, I, § 8. See also *Principium meum est, quicquid existere potest, et aliis compatibile est, id existere* (1676), A VI, 3, 581; *Quod non omnia possibilis ad existentiam perveniant* (1677), A VI, 4, 1352-1353; *De rerum originatione radicali* (1697), GP VII, 302-308.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, § 416.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, § 415.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, § 415.

world we will find Sextus very happy and superior, in another a Sextus satisfied with a mediocre state – an infinity of Sextus in an infinity of states.⁴¹

The idea of the world in the form of a book is also present in Leibniz’s view: in every possible world, there is a book of destinies, namely the history of the world of which we are part in the present. This book depicts everything that is taking place in the respective world to the smallest detail.⁴²

Before approaching the personal identity through the possible worlds, namely whether Sextus from one possible world is identical to Sextus from another possible world, or, in the case of Marias’s novel, whether Thomas is identical to Jim or David, we must note that the idea of possible worlds was borrowed by Carnap as a form of “state description”⁴³; thus, Saul Kripke has a solid basis for providing the semantics of the possible worlds.⁴⁴ From among the more recent theories, I am inclined to believe that the modal realism supported by Plantinga⁴⁵ and Lewis⁴⁶ could contribute to the understanding of a certain parts of the issue under scrutiny in the present paper.

In accordance with Plantinga’s theory, Thomas exists within the possible worlds in which he is exiled: in one possible world he is infiltrated and does good in the service of his country, in another possible world he is hidden, so as to not be killed by the ones whom he had harmed, in another possible world he is unhappy and alone etc. Regarding this aspect, we must emphasise the fact that, according to the author of the famous work *The Nature of Necessity*, the names Thomas, Jim, David etc. are, in a way, essences, meaning that they express essential properties.⁴⁷

One understanding that is, possibly, even more profound can be given by the modal realism of David Lewis –Thomas is not identical to Jim, nor is he to David, of course, because he is merely their homologue or counterpart. Thomas is bound (indexed) to the world in which he exists (W_1), just as Jim is bound to the world in which he lives (W_3), while David is bound to W_4 . Although they are indeed very similar to each other (more so than to any other individual from the respective worlds), Jim is not identical to Thomas, or to David (naturally, Jim thus not identical to David either).⁴⁸

We must note a perplexity that arises: the approach of the exile from the world, described by Marias using the instrument offered by philosophy, shows, on the one hand, a certain satisfaction regarding the best understanding of the ideas present in the novel, and, on the other hand, a certain dissatisfaction, considering the fact that the aspects described by Marias (regardless of whether they are deemed as worlds, possible worlds, membranes of the world, state situations, possible situations, cities etc.) are not quite what philosophy and logic

⁴¹ Ibid., § 414.

⁴² Ibid., § 415.

⁴³ Rudolf Carnap, *Meaning and necessity. A study in semantics and modal logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 9 sqq

⁴⁴ Saul A. Kripke, “Semantical considerations on modal logic,” *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 16 (1963): 83-94.

⁴⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *The nature of necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

⁴⁶ David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

⁴⁷ Plantinga, ch. V, 16-25.

⁴⁸ See Lewis, ch. IV.

outline as the concept of “possible world”⁴⁹. In other words, does the idea of possible worlds surpass Marias’s narrative?

We must strongly emphasize the fact that the present analysis began from the idea of exile from the world: being exiled from the world bears certain meanings that are similar to the idea of exile from one’s own world, namely the actual world, into a possible world.

The objection is now much clearer: does being exiled (in the sense of being infiltrated in Belfast, being hidden and disguised as a professor, being exiled in London as David) reflect the fact that we are dealing not with possible worlds, but more likely with membranes of the actual world? In this case, the substance levels of the actual world must be scrutinized. This aspect opens another possible route of interrogation: does being exiled from the world mean being exiled from and into a fictional world, a narrative world, proper to Marias’s novel?

We have already seen that Thomas understands – in a professional sense, as part of a job – others, meaning that he interprets them, he translates them, and he appropriates this understanding, he assumes it perhaps even without realizing it.⁵⁰ Their horizon is transcribed to his own horizon. The world of meanings read by Thomas, is given precisely by the others’ faces. By working with the face in the same manner as working with a text, Thomas simultaneously works on his own self. He build his own self – in the case of the story from *Berta Isla* this gives him a certain unstable identity; Jaime Deza, from *Your Face, Tomorrow*, does not reach the same result, because he has both a clear identity and moral clarity. A possible answer to the question of identity emerges: Thomas builds his identity in the sense that he is what he says that he is. As a literary character, he has a narrative identity: Thomas is identical with himself, even beneath the masks he wears in his exile from the world, despite the changes in personal information, physical features, and even names.⁵¹ Many philosophers would be outraged by this possibility.⁵²

However, although Ricoeur can offer a good direction for understanding the problem of identity, we must note several aspects that can amend the position of the French hermeneutist. He claims that, in the case of individuals, friendship and thoughtfulness are the fundamental marks of identity.

According to Marias, this list should include altruism. Thomas had indeed dedicated his life to the service of his country, to the detriment of his personal life. Moreover, in the case of Berta’s character, the true moral champion, altruism and generosity (in addition to the

⁴⁹ There are many differences between them, but the most important aspect is the relationship between the worlds – the accessibility relation. w_1Rw_2 : the possible world w_1 is in relation R with the world w_2 ; w_2 is accessible to w_1 (relation R) in the sense that a true sentence in w_2 is possible in w_1 . For details in this regard, see Sorin Vieru, “Semantica ‘lumilor posibile’ și logica modală” [The semantics of possible worlds and modal logics], in *Încercări logice* [Logical Essays] (Bucharest: Paideia, 1997), 163-206.

⁵⁰ See Paul Ricoeur’s suggestion from *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 83-96.

⁵¹ See Paul Ricoeur, *Soi même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), ch. V-VI, 137-198.

⁵² Kripke, for example, disagrees with the idea that Thomas is identical to Jim – the names are rigid designators.

mentioned tolerance and forgiveness) are the essential marks of moral behavior, the ones that give substance to the self.

In London, as David Cromer-Fytton, Thomas feels like a ghost, roaming from place to place.⁵³ Without tasks, he is a man without traits,⁵⁴ as if he has no being - he is alive, but he is in fact dead.⁵⁵ He is dead both in his own eyes, and in the eyes of others, namely Berta and Meg. In bad times, he used the expression "impersonating someone he is not," because he needed a way to approach his own stance. For years, he had not been preoccupied by it, since it had all been part of his work: impersonating other people. Now, when Mr. Cromer-Fytton lacked characteristics, when he did not need to take on any role or any behavior, or to speak different languages or to imitate dialects and accents, when he was free to conduct himself however he wished, since there were no others around to impress or convince, Thomas Nevinson realized that it was difficult to know who he truly was.⁵⁶

The fact that he is another, that he understands that David is not David, but Thomas, makes it impossible for him to assume an identity, to build it and to fight for it. After all these exiles, and after so many years, he understands that he is (just) Thomas – in other words, that he is another, in the sense that he is not David, but Thomas.⁵⁷

The profound relationship that exists between the understanding of self-identity, what makes him assume it and build it, and (or at the same time) to affirm it (to talk about it, just like we see in the dialogue (monologue, in fact) with professor Southworth⁵⁸), is brilliantly illustrated by Marias in the pages that precede the return to Thomas, and thus to Berta and her world. The trigger of this mechanism is the *understanding* of the fact that the secret services had framed the crime and had thus pushed him towards the enrolment in the secret service: incidentally, he also meets with two children that strikingly resemble Janet Jefrys, which means that she had not died 12 years prior, as he had been told, so long as she has two sons of 10 and 12 years.⁵⁹

Thomas understands that his life had a bad starting point, an idea further developed in the novel *Thus Bad Begins*. David decides to become Thomas, to confront Tupra for framing his of the crime, and then return to Berta to try to resume his life alongside his family. After blaming his superior for the fact that, for twenty years, he had lied to his family and that for twelve years he had been dead in the eyes of his family, David (-Thomas) asks why had the secret services deprived him of his own life before it had ever even begun.⁶⁰ Tupra answers

⁵³ Marias, *Berta Isla*, 537.

⁵⁴ As we see in Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities* (London: Picador, 2017).

⁵⁵ Marias, *Berta Isla*, 541.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 539.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 542-543.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 576.

that Thomas had done a great deal of good for his country, given that all his actions (or most of them, with one exception) had been successful.⁶¹

If the first part of the book starts by establishing Berta's position in the third person, namely that she is under the impression that her husband is not her husband,⁶² the final part reiterates the same idea, but in the first person.⁶³ This emphasis placed on Berta suggests that Berta is the criterion of identity for Thomas, she is the rock on which his identity is based - an ever flowing, unstable identity that requires her to be the lifeline that pulls him back from the worlds in which he is exiled. He does good deeds for the country, even Berta knows it, but he also needs to protect family from suffering. In other words, his personal losses need to be as few as possible.

We see how Berta's world (or the membranes of Berta's world) is the criterion of identity and, as shown in the previous chapter, the criterion of moral clarity. The membranes of Berta's world are simultaneously good and identical with the self (they have their own identity), given the fact that Berta does not understand, does not accept neither moral nor metaphysical ambiguity.

If the character of Thomas is placed in relation with that of Berta (thus, not with his counterparts from the novel), another interesting aspect emerges. Thomas understands the worlds of the others, but does not understand his own world, he does not understand himself. He can interpret many roles (as John - infiltrated, as Jim - hidden etc.), but he cannot interpret the role of Thomas - or, at least not until the end of the book. He understands Thomas only after twenty years, at which point he decides to return to Madrid and tries to reconnect with his family, although, as Berta rightfully points out, he seems to be a different person: the Thomas of now (at the age of 40) does not appear to be the Thomas of the past (at the age of 20).

In conclusion, several aspects emerge from the study of Marias's literature: 1. The membranes of the world, in the sense of its layered structure, of its substance, are the membranes of understanding the world; 2. The membranes of the world are, given its contents, the membranes of good and evil; 3. The world is the set of visible and invisible levels, of truths and lies, love and hate, good and evil.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 6.

⁶³ Ibid., 587 sqq.