A gossip chronicle, literary confessional – and lyric novel set in epic times

Venus envy

MICHAEL KERRIGAN

Vicente Molina Foix and Luis Cremades

EL INVITADO AMARGO
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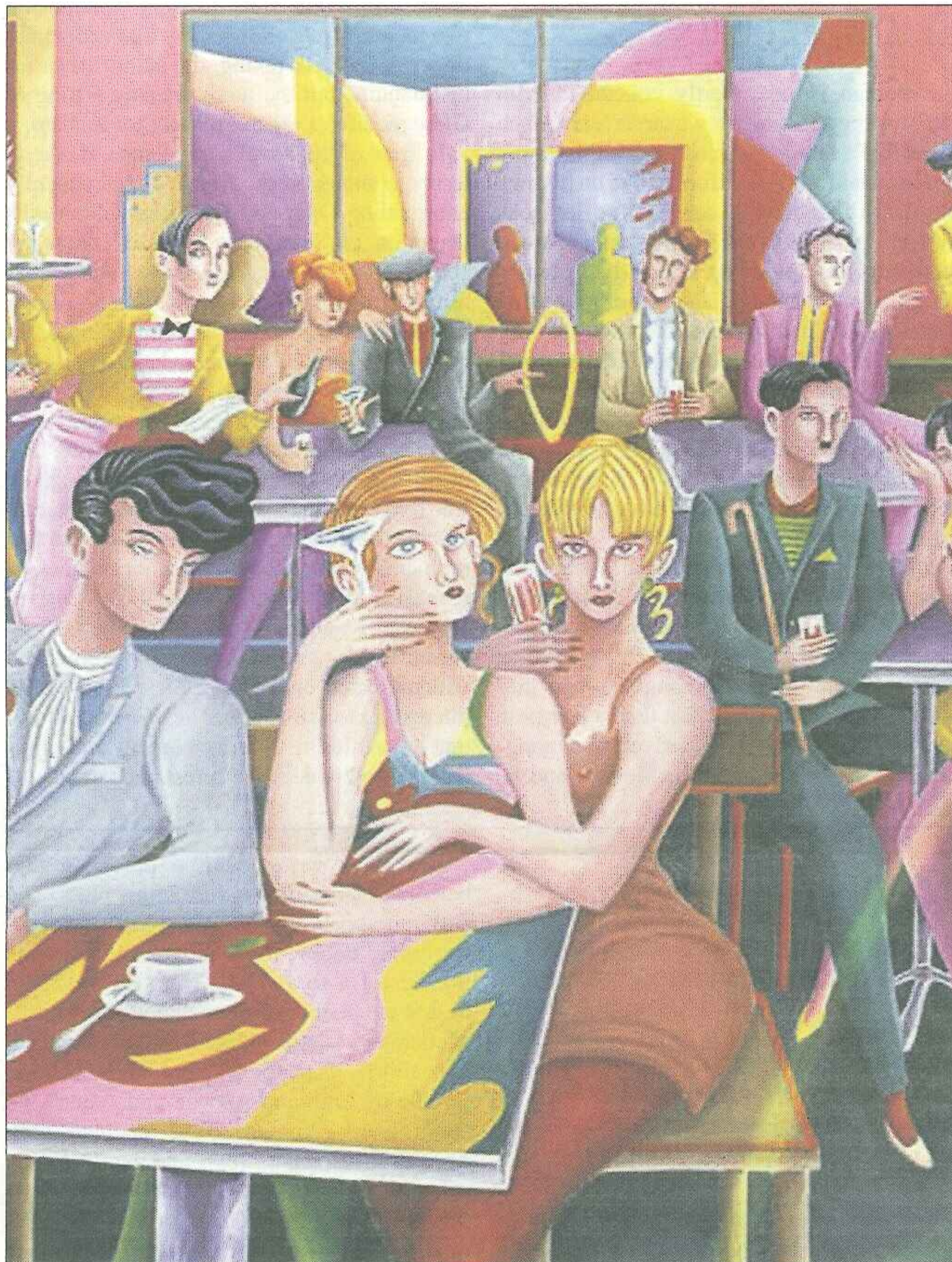
Two lovers recollect their relationship, three decades on from an acrimonious parting, taking turns to tell their story in a book built around the letters they exchanged. It is all here: from the initial uncertainties and mutual fulfilment through mounting tensions and suspicions to the break-up – and an afterlife forever marked by what went before. They view what they have written as a novel because it lends a fictional coherence to what was never experienced that way; it weaves a haphazard succession of experiences into a plot. The story is "true": Vicente Molina Foix was thirty-five in 1981, a successful writer and public figure, when he met and fell in love with a nineteen-year-old man, Luis Cremades, a would-be poet. Set out here in context, with later commentary, Molina Foix's and Cremades's letters afford some exquisite ironies, and their writers deserve all credit for the honesty with which they now acknowledge their dishonesties of that time.

It is perhaps in this, more than in its dual authorship and innovative structure, that this work of reminiscence is such a departure for Spanish letters – albeit one whose significance is likely to pass beneath the radar in the English-speaking world. Protestant Britain and North America have been much quicker to embrace the literary confessional than Catholic Spain, where memoirs and biographies haven't generally enjoyed wide appeal. The novel's title comes from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, in which jealousy is described as "the sour unwelcome guest" at what should be love's feast. Jealousy does feature here, but if anything it is the indignity of an unequal relationship imploding that reminds us most vividly of Shakespeare's poem.

This isn't the only way in which *El invitado amargo* may seem oddly mismatched with its own material. This is a lyric novel explicitly set in epic times; a gossip-chronicle of a country undergoing historic change. Cremades starts his story to the sound of automatic fire from the Cortes (parliament), where – on February 23, 1981 – Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero and his henchmen were trying to precipitate a return to military rule. As love descends into resentful bickering, in October 1982 a socialist government is being swept to power. These events are marked in passing here, while less important and interesting matters occupy the foreground. Along with the besetting sins of the literary memoir (the underwhelming anecdotes about little-known figures; the you-had-to-be-there humour; the pointless name-dropping), this one is guilty of the odd cruel comment of the kind conventionally described as "waspish". Molina Foix does manage to rise to an interesting and sympathetic discussion of Juan Benet and the effects of bereavement on his work, but his Javier Marías is little more than a player of clever word games. There's much chat about (if rather less insight into) gay writers such as Luis Antonio de Villena, Gil de Biedma and Álvaro Pombo (the title of whose 1977 collection, "Stories on the Lack of Substance", might not have served too badly for the present work, it sometimes seems).



"Café de Madrid" by Ceesepe, 1982

Not that there wasn't an enormous amount at stake for the two lovers. They just don't say so and don't feel they need to, knowing too well with Wilde that "seriousness is the only refuge of the shallow". Post-Franco Spain was still a long way from embracing alternative lifestyles – the world's most gay-friendly country (as a Pew Research Center report determined in 2013) lay far in the future. The success of Tejero's coup would have meant the reintroduction of a system under which homosexuals were by definition outsiders, criminals and *invertidos* – regardless of class or social attitudes, rebels despite themselves. There's a certain heroism, then, in the fact that Vicente Molina Foix was a lover and a *littérateur* rather than a fighter; that Luis and his young friends were more likely to man the bars than the barricades. Militant frivolity may have much to contribute to a country overshadowed by the recent fact and the impending threat of dictatorship: they also subvert who only stand around and look good. The *Movida Madrileña* – that countercultural movement which shook Spanish society in the early-1980s (and in whose literary salons Molina Foix himself had so prominent a voice) – was striking in its hedonism, a liberation party in the most frankly festive sense. It was important too, perhaps, for Spain to appreciate more generally the ways in which the personal and the political might make common cause. Cremades describes his realization on a trip to London that democracy was not just a "political form, an idea, but a feeling, fundamentally urban and founded in proximity, in living together, in the capacity of such very different people to get along together in confined spaces".

The crux of this novel, though, is not to be found in the ups and downs of the lovers' relationship – nor even in those of a democratizing Spain. Rather, it lies at what Cremades calls the "crossroads of homosexuality and literature", where we find a quasi-family formed in intolerance and fear. A background presence throughout, the Spanish Surrealist (and 1977 Nobel laureate) Vicente Aleixandre looms large as the mentor to Vicente Molina Foix. Indeed, "Vicente the Younger" sees him as his "first second father". When Luis goes to meet him in his turn, the aged poet tells him about his own meeting, many years before, with Federico García Lorca and his induction into that secret subculture of literary homosexuality for which García Lorca had come up with his own codeword, *epentismo*. Now, so many decades later, Cremades feels he's being initiated into some "invisible tribe". This is why a modern sexual politics schooled primarily in ideas of "exploitation" and "power imbalance" may miss the point. In Britain and America too, young gay men coming to the metropolis in flight from the restrictiveness and persecution of the provinces have historically found support in patronage of this kind: how much more important must it have been in twentieth-century Spain? Love and sex were just the start. Luis, at nineteen "suffering a double conversion" as a homosexual and poet, saw his primary relationship with the older writer as that of the "apprentice" with his master. "I couldn't say if I liked his legs or hands. He was a presence, an attitude, a way of being – a language, amorous and welcoming – a style of life."

Yet theirs was emphatically a literary love: Vicente became Luis's "outside world . . . the incarnation of all the books worth reading". The older poet, for his part, appreciated the chance to read and comment on Luis's verses – then subsequently see his "insinuations transformed into a deep and mysterious poetry". More important in *El invitado amargo* than Venus' view of jealousy is a version of "Venus Envy" manifested in the male writer's desire to perpetuate an established artistic tradition and transcend the triviality of the moment with enduring work. The Shakespearean resonances are really with the Sonnets: the idea of writing as a means of reproduction; a bid for immortality by "increase"; "breed to brave" the cruel scythe of death. Any work of literature, however lightweight, is an act of faith, a commitment to the community of readers and an investment in the lasting value of the written word. The authors' appreciation of this is what gives their little love story its suggestion of universality, and makes a breezy, bookchat-memoir into something more.