

Literature as a Pre-Philosophy: Exploring Julian Marias's Notion of Dramatismo and Narrative

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Abstract

Spanish philosopher Julián Marías explains that the adequate philosophical explanations of the human person reside in literature, particularly in the constitutive *dramatismo* (dramatic character) of the person, which is made meaningful by narrating human life. He claims that literature is a sort of pre-philosophy, as has been the case since the time of the Greeks, especially in their presentation of philosophy in the form of literature, that is, the story-like structure of the dialogues. Marías says life has *dramatismo* because it consists of a series of circumstantial happenings that have a projective quality, and this is only intelligible through narration, by 'giving an account' of the dramatic character of my life. Since my life is a story on account of its *dramatismo*, it is only properly recounted, that is, understood, when it is narrated. But no matter how much these two literary notions inform philosophical inquiry, they can never be isolated from their proper domain: literature. In some way, then, philosophy relies on literature because of the ease with which it penetrates the

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reality of the human person; and the tools that make it possible are, as I shall explore in this paper, Marías's notions of *dramatismo* and narrative.

1. Introduction: The Adequate Concepts from a Pre-Philosophy

Following his mentor José Ortega y Gasset, Spanish philosopher Julián Marías attributes to the human person a circumstantial character, such that the reality of the human person cannot be understood apart from his circumstance, nor can his circumstance be understood apart from him. The reason is that "a self can never be postulated as an ontologically independent being".² Hence, Marías, in the course of developing his own philosophy, adopted the formula developed by Ortega to describe—without presuming to exhaust—the reality of the human person: *Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia*, that is, 'I am I and my circumstance'.³ This is why it is possible to understand the human person as someone who "acquires the ultimate circumstantial and individual reality, the absolutely concrete reality, of *each* life, which *happens* dramatically, in respect to which the possible and adequate form of 'enunciation' is to *narrate it*".⁴ Two ideas are of great importance here, which will prove to be the starting points for understanding how literature is a precursor to philosophy. First, that human life, because it is circumstantial, happens dramatically; second, that the adequate method of speaking of life's dramatic quality is to narrate it. From these two key aspects by which the reality of the human person is made manifest, we find Marías referring to two literary concepts to discover the person: *drama* and *narrative*.

Such a curious deference to literary concepts, which will turn out to offer fantastic philosophical nuances, is deliberate on Marías's part. For, in one of his works, he makes the bold claim that literature, particularly the novel, is a 'pre-philosophical'

² Mora, José Ferrater (2003) *Three Spanish Philosophers: Unamuno, Ortega, Ferrater Mora*, State University of New York Press, 147.

³ Marías, Julián (1971) *Metaphysical Anthropology: The Empirical Structure of Human Life*, Frances López-Morillas, trans, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 71.

⁴ Marías, *Metaphysical Anthropology*, 76.

method by which we can access the reality of the human person.⁵ But in what way is literature prior to philosophy as a 'pre-philosophy'? "Do not forget", Marías writes, "that the intellectual, philosophical discovery of human life has been *posterior* to the creation of a splendid literature [my emphasis]".⁶ He offers, as examples, the Homeric poems, the stories of the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Qur'an, and countless historical narratives. In other words, he means to say that literature is prior to philosophy in the discovery of the human person, that is, literature was talking about human persons long before philosophy began to. While philosophy began with concepts proper to things (e.g., Aristotle's *ousía*, the Scholastic's substance, Descartes's *res cogitans*, and Heidegger's *Dasein*), literature began with stories and myths about human persons (e.g., Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, etc.).

Literature has always assumed its chief subject matter to be about *persons*, about human life.⁷ Hence, it is possible, through literature, to reach into the person and speak of him, make an accounting of him. But this is achieved only by having recourse to the adequate concepts that unveil this marvelous reality, which, for Marías, involves *drama* and *narrative*. Marías does not give explanations as to why drama and narrative are among the 'adequate concepts' by which the reality of the human person is made manifest, but it seems to me the proof lies precisely in the richness that is drawn from the reality of the human person when these concepts are used to understand him: that human life, because it is dynamic and ongoing, has a dramatic structure that must give an account of itself, that must be narrated.

To elucidate these two concepts, we will have to lay out Marías's notion of *dramatismo* (dramatic character) and narrative, defining each one, describing the various aspects that constitute them, illustrating how they unfold in human life, in each one's life,

⁵ Marías, Julián (1996) *Persona*, Alianza Editorial, 65, this and succeeding quotes from *Persona* were translated by Paul Dumol (August 2023).

⁶ Marías, *Persona*, 82, my emphasis.

⁷ "History and literature have taken as their great assumption their being about persons": Marías, *Persona*, 82.

and therefore serve as ample justifications for literature being a precursor to philosophy.

2. *Dramatismo*: A Constitutive Property of Human Life

The Spanish word *dramatismo*, which Marías uses, has no equivalent English translation, and the best approximation is ‘dramatic quality’ or ‘dramatic character’. This *dramatismo* of human life is consistent with one of the first facts we come to terms with: that we do things and things happen to us. (Which is, uncoincidentally, Marías and Ortega’s definition of *life*: “What I do and what happens to me”).⁸ From these ‘happenings’ in my life I discover that these things that ‘surround’ me are the concrete materials in my life that make up the ‘stage’, ‘setting’, or ‘mise-en-scène’ of my life. This Marías calls the *circumstances* where I find myself in life because each one’s “circumstance... is not a collection of things, but a stage or world where this drama [of each one’s life] is played.”⁹ Each one finds himself in the drama of his own life, an exclusively *personal* drama that projects to the future with a plot-like structure.

My life moves forward as in a plot because my circumstances change. We are speaking here of the projective quality of human life, which indicates that human life begins *somewhere* (my ‘stage’ or circumstance) and moves forward, by making use of the things I find in my circumstance, to ‘somewhere else’ (my next stage made up of a new circumstance thanks to the movement of my life, that is, my *living*). This projective quality, life’s ‘ongoingness’ is suggestive of the future-oriented characteristic of human life, so much so that I cannot begin to think of my ‘where’ *now* without a view of the ‘where’ *I plan to be*.¹⁰ In other words, I cannot think of the present without thinking of the future, nor can I think of the future without thinking of the present. This is another way that makes the projective quality or the

⁸ Marías, Julián (1956) *Reason and Life: The Introduction to Philosophy*, Kenneth Reid & Edward Sarmiento, trans, Hollis & Carter, 207.

⁹ Marías, *Metaphysical Anthropology*, 49.

¹⁰ Marías, *Reason and Life*, 27-8.

future-orientedness of human life unmistakably *dramatic*. Since my life is a project and living is projective, something I have to do *now* for the sake of *what will be*, I always have to deal with dramatic tensions in my life, which often have a character of uncertainty.

This uncertainty amplifies the *dramatismo* of my life because, through that very uncertainty (the precariousness of *what will be*), I must 'anticipate'. I must 'get ready' or 'fix my stance' on the stage that is my circumstances to encounter the next moment with some degree of preparation.¹¹ Now we are starting to see how drama is present in the project of human life, the anticipation that accompanies the progression of that project, and the projective quality of living that extends to the future with uncertainty. In all points of my life, therefore, there is a drama that plays out—a drama in which *I* am the protagonist, because things happen to me, and I encounter the need to do something with things, to use the things that are present to me in my circumstance. It is thus fitting to say that *living* is inseparable from drama; that human life is inexplicable, unintelligible, without its inherent *dramatismo*.

We have expressed and explored a feature of *dramatismo* demanding that I do something with things in the ambit where I find myself. Its implications are illuminated by the fact that my life 'loses', as it were, its dramatic character, or at least 'diminishes', when I do not do something with and make use of the things I find in my circumstance, and avoid or prevent things from happening to me. This 'interruption' in living, characterized by 'not doing anything', is the vital manifestation of the phenomenon we call 'boredom' and, as a consequence of boredom, 'idleness'. I first fall into boredom when I have nothing to do now, much more when I have no one to do things with.¹² It is as if I put living to a grinding halt. Moreover, boredom indicates an imminent (but temporary) biographical cessation—a 'postponement' of *living*—that soon ends up in a worse and more lasting state,

¹¹ Cf. Marías, *Metaphysical Anthropology*, 243.

¹² Cf. Marías, Julián (1993) *Razón de la filosofía*, Alianza Editorial, 123.

idleness. Boredom and idleness are, therefore, the very antithesis of drama, the very absence of drama.

Further, we also observe that, in a literary sense — primarily in novels, theater, and films — there can never be room for boredom and idleness. Otherwise, the novel, play, or film's story ceases to be a story. There is no novel or film where drama ceases to be present, no kind of literature where boredom or idleness is present, because "all that is human can be quiescent, but never static".¹³ There is always a happening, a doing, no matter how dull or uninteresting it may be. At *all moments* there is a drama ongoing because life is ongoing. Drama gives vitality to the story and is the principle of the story's movement and development. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Marías posits that novels and films are most representative of human life.

We find in novels and films the very dramatic quality of living expected of each human life, and it is from them that I can learn to live up to my *dramatismo* and live dramatically so that I may be a dramatic event that is *really* 'living'. In novels and films, we discover a *story*; so, too, in human life, we discover a story because (1) in it there are elements of a story: setting, characters, moment, future, projection, and uncertainty, among others, and, more importantly, (2) human life is itself inherently and intimately *dramatic*, so much so that its *dramatismo*, although strictly speaking is a *characteristic* of human life, can be said, without any pretense of absolutization, as commutative to human life itself, i.e., that human life is drama and drama is human life.¹⁴ Drama is an exclusively human feature: only persons can possess *dramatismo*.

Marías does not settle for a definition of "drama" but rather points out how it determines the structure of human life. Primarily, the implications on the dynamic character of human life that is always 'ongoing', or as Marías prefers to call it,

¹³ Marías, *Metaphysical Anthropology*, 83.

¹⁴ A simple syntactical observation of the following quotation will reveal the conclusion just made: "The only thing that interests human beings is human living, 'drama', and when this is lacking the film becomes a documentary and, whatever its virtues, produces boredom": Marías, *Reason and Life*, 64.

'arriving'. This should not be a cause for dissatisfaction because one can easily draw the conclusion from Marías that it was not his intention to offer a definition of *drama*. His conception of 'drama' is, as we have shown, *story-like*. It is not meant to be articulated with symbolic meanings enclosed in a genus with a specific difference, as 'definitions' are understood logically.

Rather, he sees the definition of drama as, itself, a story that unfolds, because, as he comments, "the myth [a story or a drama] is not something to fall back on in the absence of a definition, but something superior, in which genuine philosophical knowledge consists". And the reason for this is that a story is "something like an abbreviation [of knowledge about human life] accessible to man".¹⁵ This 'lack of definition', so to speak, then becomes the very ingredient that helps us make fuller sense of what we have said about drama: that human life is drama and drama is human life. No other created beings are constitutively organized by a dramatic character apart from human persons.

3. Narrative: Accessing Human Life

My life, having a constitutive dramatic character, "is something that happens to me, here and now, in these precise circumstances, and the means of having access to it is to relate it, to tell someone about it. The form of 'statement' that corresponds to it is a report, a *narration*" [my emphasis].¹⁶ This directs us to a more salient question worth attention and curiosity: what does *narration* consist of? In its commonest conception, it is something 'told' or 'said'. But narration includes an articulation of the *why* and the *how*—which, by their very semantic construction, have a temporal reference—and not simply an expression of *what*, which is a static matter-of-fact. It is one thing to say, 'I want a cookie', and another to say, 'I want a cookie *because* I am hungry'. The

¹⁵ Marías, Julián (1971) *Philosophy as Dramatic Theory*, James Parsons, trans, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 43-4.

¹⁶ Marías, Julián (1967) 'The Idea of Metaphysics', in Aloysius Robert Caponigri, ed & trans, *Spanish Philosophy: An Anthology*, University of Notre Dame Press, 363, my emphasis.

former is a plain utterance that evokes no hint of a story, of a drama, of a plot; but the latter, by its mere expression of the *why*—expressed in the reason: ‘because I am hungry’—is already a drama, or at the very least, has the proper ingredients for a drama.¹⁷

The reason for this is that, as Marías put it, “the narrative, the story, is the life-giving nucleus of the myth [or the drama].”¹⁸ Drama is vivified—it ‘comes to life’—when it is narrated. The drama of my life is concretized, incarnated, even in some way immortalized, when it is narrated, much more when *I* narrate it, that is, when *I* ‘give an account’ (*‘dar razón’*, in Spanish; literally, ‘give reason’) of *my* life. My life, as a story, re-counts the past from the present toward what remains of the future. This temporal distension of my life from my earliest recollections to what I anticipate is, precisely, the drama of my life concretely lived. Not anyone else’s.

Hence, narration operates in a unitary fashion. A narrative speaks only of *one* life: this or that. When I narrate my life, for instance, I relate what *I* did with the things with which I found myself and why *I* did those. What we are saying at present will receive more clarity from the example Marías offers:

[...] I have compared the dictionary entries of three very different realities: for example, “pentagon,” “owl,” and “Cervantes.” Of the pentagon, an ideal object, the dictionary gives a *definition*; of the owl, a real object, a thing in the usual sense of the word, it gives a *description*; of Cervantes, a personal reality, it tells a *story*. The dictionary gives the “essence” of the pentagon: a polygon with five sides; it tells what the owl is, what it looks like, what it does, how it behaves—“the” owl, be it understood, “each” owl; but when it speaks of Cervantes it offers us a narration; it tells us where and when he was born,

¹⁷ “This structure could be formulated by saying that the past and the future are *present* in my life, in the ‘why’ and the ‘wherefore’ of each of my actions. In my immediate actions the past is present, because the reason for what I do can only be found in what I have done, and the future is present in the project, on which hangs the whole meaning of my life”: Marías, Julián (1954) *Ensayos de teoría*, Editorial Barna, 48, my translation.

¹⁸ Marías, *Philosophy as Dramatic Theory*, 44.

where he traveled to, where he lived, whom he married, what he wrote, where and when he died.¹⁹

Narrative always implies a telling of a plot with a determined setting, specific goals, concrete characters, real motivations, etc.—all of which work dynamically to enable the narrative to *go on*, to *keep telling*. It is only through narrative that the apparent independence of plot, setting, goals, characters, and motivations coalesce into a *unitary drama*, a unitary reality, that is, human life itself, each one's life. Further, as Marías indicates in his example, to speak of human life, it is not a definition that we need, nor a description, but a *narration* of a story, *my drama*—the drama of *my life*. If 'human life' is left to the task of simply being defined or described, we would be guilty of committing a violent reduction. When we wish to ask *what* or *who* the human person is, only the *narration* of life's drama serves as an adequate way of answering those questions and discovering the person as he is in his own life.

The *what* of the human person—or 'essence', if you like—is intimately linked to his *who*. We cannot speak of his *what* as an isolated reality from his *who*. The unfortunate separation of these two is clearly articulated by the medieval philosopher Boethius (and, in fact, many of the Scholastic thinkers who adopted his definition, including Thomas Aquinas) because he thought of the person simply as a substance with a rational nature.²⁰ *What* I am helps explain *who* I am, just as *who* I am helps explain *what* I am: *soy alguien corporal*, I am a 'corporeal someone'.²¹ Without this, we would easily fall into conceiving human life isolated from its fundamental reality: *my* life, *your* life, *his* life, *her* life, and so on, preventing us from narrating anything at all, since

¹⁹ Marías, *Metaphysical Anthropology*, 73.

²⁰ Boethius's famous definition of the person is as follows: *persona est individua substantia rationalis naturæ*, "the person is an individual substance of a rational nature".

²¹ Marías, *Metaphysical Anthropology*, 33. See also Raley Harold (1997) *A Watch Over Mortality: The Philosophical Story of Julián Marías*, State University of New York Press. Raley paraphrases Marías's term with much more poeticism, "Someone who is also some-body".

narration is executed only discriminately through disjunction: it is about *this* life and not *that* because *this life* is irreducible to *that life* and vice versa.²²

Now, when we speak of human life, of my life, we speak of it under the function of Ortega's formula: 'I am I and my circumstance'.²³ Therefore, to speak of human life, to narrate human life, my life, my circumstances must never be excluded. To narrate is to narrate me *and* my circumstances. However, here we stumble across an interruption, one that we dealt with previously: it is that human life—because it is systematic, dynamic, and dramatic—is uncertain. (But as we shall see, Mariás's idea of narrative is an optimistic approach to facing the constitutive uncertainty of human life). Mariás distinguishes 'incertitude' from 'ignorance', the latter being a 'not knowing' and the former being a 'not knowing what to hold by'.²⁴ To a certain extent, life is characterized by the 'presence' and 'presentness' of these incertitudes, and to overcome them we must be aware of our *situation*²⁵ and 'give an account' of it.²⁶

I must give an account of my situation, *narrate* it, if I am to navigate through any sort of incertitude in my life. For, when I narrate my situation or the drama of my life, when I relate it, when I give an account of it, I find out what I should hold by, and therefore my circumstance acquires relative stability based on a degree of certitude. But, we must not forget, human life—hence my circumstances, too—will always be unstable and precarious: it is constant anticipation of *what will be* or *where I will find myself next*.²⁷ This is also why each human life, each *I*, "tells a story or narrates for

²² For a more detailed treatment of 'disjunction', Mariás explains it in his *Metaphysical Anthropology*, generally in 'Interpretation, Theory, Reason' and 'Empirical Structure', but especially in 'The Sexuate Condition'.

²³ José Ortega y Gasset proposed an understanding of human life in the formulation: 'I am I and my circumstance'. For an elaboration of this Ortegian-Marian metaphysical doctrine, Mariás discusses this in his book *José Ortega y Gasset: Circumstance and Vocation* (1970).

²⁴ Mariás, *Reason and Life*, 88.

²⁵ "The term *situation*, on the other hand, alludes to a much more circumscribed reality; it refers only to those elements of the circumstance the variation of which defined each phase of history and which *situate* us at a certain historical level": Mariás, *Reason and Life*, 29.

²⁶ Mariás, *Reason and Life*, 90.

²⁷ "Human life is not everlasting, but has begun and will end—most important of all, will end, whatever its *ulterior* fate. Furthermore, its possession is not simultaneous, but specifically successive—it is possessed bit by bit—and it is not perfect, but highly imperfect and precarious: unstable in the present *instant*, pale and impoverished in memory of the past, uncertain and vague in anticipation of the future": Mariás, *Metaphysical Anthropology*, 210.

something, and this sends us to the future".²⁸ In any case, our concern is that narration sheds light on the situation in which I find myself, and so with more clarity, I more fully find myself *in* it. Thus, the *dramatismo* of my life is, as it were, 'magnified'.

That is why "all thinking, and for profounder reasons all speaking, always occurs with reference to a situation", that is, a circumstance involving certain things.²⁹ This means that all sorts of narration refer to a context, *living*, "which is the total situation within which [all forms of narration] are given and within which they have meaning".³⁰ In other words, the things around me receive a personal meaning because they are prerequisites for *living*. That is not to say, however, that things mean only what they mean to the extent that they mean something *to me*. Such an erroneous conception removes from us all responsibility toward the 'outside world'—to anything outside that fundamental reality that is my life—or to whatever is not *me*.

Rather, things are given another layer of meaning—a personal dimension that is relevant to my life—when they *concern me*. "I can find meaning for something only by living," Marías says, "that is, by making it really function within the ambit or area of my life".³¹ When I take something to inform my living, then it assumes a deeply personal meaning to my life. Another way of articulating this, coming from what we have said about drama, is to admit that things take on a dramatic quality insofar as they relate to and refer to me. That is why all things surrounding us, surrounding me, can be narrated—*has* to be narrated. Thus, "every vital act... is an interpretation" of the things that I act upon and which move me to act.³² Some splendid words from Marías sum up what we have expressed and make it possible to grasp them in greater depth: "Life's only mode of *being* is, self-evidently, *living*; and the only mode of speaking about it, in its concrete reality, is *recounting* it",³³ and "this explains why

²⁸ Marías, *Razon de la filosofía*, 189, this passage was translated by Paul Dumol (July 2023).

²⁹ Marías, *Philosophy as Dramatic Theory*, 45.

³⁰ Marías, *Philosophy as Dramatic Theory*, 45.

³¹ Marías, 'The Idea of Metaphysics', 363.

³² Marías, *Reason and Life*, 186.

³³ Marías, *Reason and Life*, 194.

to live is necessarily to give an account (*dar razón*) of what one does in each moment; i.e., to do, in that moment, something specific, in view of the totality of my life".³⁴

4. Conclusion: A Preliminary Step to Philosophy

What, then, are we to do with these two concepts? How are they employed in any serious undertaking of philosophy? For one, we can earnestly admit that literature, when it is faithful to the demands of the drama and narrative proper to human life, serves as an entry point into philosophical inquiry. As we noted at the beginning, literature was the first area that took seriously the seemingly mundane fact that the human person is its chief subject matter, the object of its investigation. It is the concepts we have surveyed—*dramatismo* and narrative—that operationalize that characteristic of literature that penetrates and illuminates the reality of the human person, which amounts to literature assuming its place as a precursor to philosophical anthropology. Drama and narrative are not simply literary principles and conceptual tools; they are realities very much present in human life, in each person. Far from being merely abstract notions or theoretical interpretations of human life, they are real—but only insofar as they are manifested in life that is concretely lived, that is, *my* life, the life of each one.

These two concepts, which are indispensable in the area of literature, are key notions in the discovery of the human person. That is why they are essential conceptual motors to reaching philosophy, especially to the analysis and discovery of human life—philosophical anthropology. We have said that human life is constitutively dramatic, and the only way to give an account of life and its drama is to narrate it. Literature, especially novels, are most reflective of this reality. Novels make an account of the drama of a singular life, to such a great extent that Marías said boldly that “man must be the novelist of his own life”.³⁵ Being the novelist of our own lives,

³⁴ Marías, *Reason and Life*, 188.

³⁵ Marías, Julián (1967) *History of Philosophy*, Stanley Appelbaum & Clarence Stowbridge, trans, Dover Publications, 457.

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we must have, among our conceptual tools, an idea of life, because having an idea of life opens up the possibility of narrating life. In some way, then, literature “offers the possibility of prefiguration, the condensing of the experience of life”.³⁶ The reason for this is that literature “is a preliminary stage of the metaphysical investigation of human life, a provisional stage of philosophical thought”.³⁷

It is recourse to these two concepts that give access to this ‘possibility of prefiguration’, which is no less than a preliminary step to the philosophical discovery of the person. This is in no way to say that literature takes on the role of philosophy; rather, it is that literature provides the conceptual tools that make the discovery of the human person in human life more philosophically transparent. Marías employs other conceptual instruments that originate from a literary character that could help in justifying the claim we have been making, such as the notion of *ilusión* (loosely, ‘hope’, ‘excitement’, ‘expectation’). Nevertheless, the notions of *dramatismo* and narrative appear to be the crucial theoretical scaffoldings drawn from literature that build up most effectively toward philosophy. To say that literature, through *dramatismo* and narrative, is a pre-philosophy becomes meaningful if ‘pre-philosophy’ is understood not as literature’s priority in a temporal succession, but as literature’s essential—though inchoate—role in discovering the human person and human life.

³⁶ Cole, Ralph Dean (1974) ‘Julián Marías as a Literary Critic’, Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Oklahoma.

³⁷ Marías, Julián (1960) *Obras*, vol 5, *Revista de Occidente*, 491, my translation.

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