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Like a Good Knight

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## Like a Good Knight

Javier Marías

ON JUNE 22, 2006, in Oxford, Sir Peter Russell died. He was a Hispanist and Lusitanist of enormous talent and prestige, and the author of magnificent studies of Cervantes, *La Celestina*, and Prince Henry the Navigator, as well as *The English Intervention in Spain and Portugal in the Time of Edward III and Richard II* and many other works. For many years, and up until his retirement in the 1980s, he was King Alfonso XIII Professor of Spanish Studies at Oxford University, and it was there that I met him, shortly after he had retired, through his successor, Ian Michael, and through his disciple and great friend (to me and to him) Eric Southworth. He was the first winner of the Premio Nebrija, perhaps the highest distinction a Hispanist can receive.

But to me, all of this, though significant, is secondary. What matters is that a very dear friend has died, another of my old friends. On the day he died he was ninety-two and almost eight months, and not long before, he had bought a new car, which he delighted in driving, having had his license restored to him after a brief period of ill health. That is the main thing. The strangest and most troubling part of all this, however, is that it also means the death of a major character in certain of my novels, especially in the very long and as yet unfinished *Tu rostro mañana* (*Your Face Tomorrow*), of which only the first two volumes have so far been published, *Fiebre y lanza* (*Fever and Spear*) in 2002, *Baile y sueño* (*Dance and Dream*) in 2004, and of whose third and last volume I have written more or less half. In an earlier novel, *Todas las almas* (*All Souls*), published in 1989, I had already used many of Russell's characteristics for the person I called Toby Rylands. Shortly after starting work on *Your Face Tomorrow*, in September 1998, I phoned Peter and asked permission to use him as a character, this time with real biographical details (including his long years in the British Secret Service departments of MI5 and MI6) and even his name. I wanted to attribute events, experiences, and fictional conversations to someone who would, in many respects, be him and share his life, although not in every detail of course: my character, for example, would be a widower, and Russell had always remained a bachelor. He hesitated for a moment over my use of his name, and then it occurred to me to suggest using, instead, the name that had been his from his birth in New Zealand, in 1913, until his arrival in England, when he was sixteen or seventeen (he changed it then for reasons that are of no interest here). "Would you rather I called the character Sir Peter Wheeler?" I asked. And he agreed at once, greatly amused: "Yes, I'd like that. That way

I'll find out what happened to Peter Wheeler, whom I bade farewell to all those years ago." Because his official name was already Russell, which is how everyone knew him and how he signed his books.

Sir Peter Wheeler is perhaps the principal character in the first volume of my novel, and will play a not insubstantial role in the third. There is another character in the novel, too, Juan Deza, the narrator Jacques Deza's father, who is, in turn, undisguisedly based on my own father, from whom I took quite a lot of the character's personality and from whose story I borrowed a considerable number of facts. The two old men, Russell and my father, were curious and even impatient to see themselves "fictionalized," and that was the most potent reason—I can say this now—behind my decision to publish the novel in parts, instead of waiting as long as it would take to finish it and then publishing the novel as a whole. Their ages were already so fragile (my father was born in 1914) that I feared, if I waited, they might not get to see themselves as characters. I'm glad now that I took this risky decision, because they were at least both able to read the first two volumes. Sir Peter Wheeler and Juan Deza have yet to appear and to talk in what remains for me to write, and I don't know in what way it will influence or affect me, the fact that their two real-life models have now died, nor if, in the novel, I will also make them die (one or the other, or both). Obviously, while they were still alive in life, I would never have dared to do so, out of justifiable superstition, given their respective ages of ninety-two and ninety-one. I know that Sir Peter Russell died suddenly, without warning and without pain. He lived alone and had managed, to his great delight, to avoid ending his days in an old people's home. It seems that on June 22 he got up, collected the newspaper from the doormat, prepared his breakfast, and returned to bed with both breakfast and paper. When he failed to respond to a routine call from his doctor, the latter asked the porter to go upstairs and see if Sir Peter was all right, and the porter found him peacefully dead, with no indication that he had suffered at all. As Eric Southworth said in a letter to me: "Peter died like a good knight, in his bed." I keep remembering the last image I have of him, when I visited two summers ago, and, how, when I left and was downstairs in the street, I turned to look up at his windows. There he was—tall and strong, with his very white hair and that expression on his face: ever alert as regards other people and ever ironic as regards himself—slowly waving goodbye. We will see each other again in the pages that still remain for me to write. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

## Inventory

This is my cap,  
this is my coat,  
here my shaving things  
in their linen pouch.

Here is my mess-kit:  
my plate, my cup,  
into their tin  
I've scratched my name.

Scratched it with  
this precious nail  
that I'm keeping safe  
from covetous eyes.

Inside my bread bag,  
there's a pair of wool socks,  
and some other things  
I'll never say

so it can serve as a pillow  
for my head at night.  
The cardboard here  
lies between me and the earth.

What I cherish most  
is my pencil of lead.  
It writes the poems by day  
that I think up at night.

This is my notebook,  
this is my tarp,  
this is my towel,  
this is my twine.

1945

—Günter Eich  
(translated from the German by  
Jan Heller Levi and Christoph Keller)



August Sander, *Frail Old Man*