

THE ROLE
OF HISTORY
IN THE RECENT
MEXICAN NOVEL

A STUDY OF FIVE HISTORICAL NOVELS
BY ELENA GARRO, CARLOS FUENTES,
FERNANDO DEL PASO, PACO IGNACIO
TAIBO II AND ROSA BELTRÁN

LAURA RAFAEL

PhD

University of St Andrews

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ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to investigate the development of the recent historical novel in Mexico by examining a corpus of five novels. Elena Garro's *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963) represents the final point of the novel of the Revolution and it is the link with the recent historical novel. Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra* (1975) and Fernando del Paso's *Noticias del Imperio* (1978) belong to the group containing the postmodern historical novel. *Terra Nostra* summarizes all the concerns of postmodernism and can be considered as a paradigm of this current of thought. *Noticias del Imperio* seeks a reconciliation between history and literature in an attempt to get closer to the historical truth. Paco Ignacio Taibo II's *La lejanía del Tesoro* (1992) is a representative novel in the way it melds history with the mystery novel, developing the genre of the historical thriller. Lastly, Rosa Beltrán's *La corte de los ilusos* (1995), and in particular its treatment of history is pertinent to this thesis due to the fact that women have been traditionally silenced by official history. This novel gives them a voice.

From its beginnings, the historical novel confronted the problem of being questioned for its lack of accuracy when dealing with the past. This skepticism sparked a long lasting debate that initially degraded the historical novel as secondary genre that could never contribute to historical knowledge. However, as a result of recent theories that seek to defend the poetic nature of history, a theory developed initially by Hayden White, the recent historical novel has sought to debunk historiography's claim to be the only possible way to recount the past. This thesis advances the theory that the recent historical novel in Mexico is the result of a search for a genuine identity, as well as a quest to develop an alternative, yet truthful,

interpretation of a past whose true nature has been distorted by decades of historical officialdom. This process is seen in a context of increasing democratisation and globalisation.

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INTRODUCTION

The historical novel has the power to humanize its characters and bring to life historical facts that are usually recounted in an aseptic fashion by history books. The historical novel is capable of exploring not only the political, social, and economic events of the past, but also the dreams, hopes, and everyday lives of the people. The factual and fictional events recreated by novels transcend, as well as accommodate, the historical circumstances they are immersed in. People want to know about their common, national and universal past and how the world was before they themselves formed part of it. The fictional approach offered by literature is frequently regarded as “entertainment”, while history books can sometimes be seen as aimed solely at the academic community. There are, of course, exceptions to this general principle and not all novels or books of history can be categorized as such. Some historical novels focus mainly on philosophical or metafictional topics, such as *Terra Nostra* (1975) or *La huella del conejo* (1991). And some historians research topics related to studies of every-day-life. However, the combination of a historical topic with an artistic approach has proved key in enhancing the extraordinary scope of the historical novel as a genre.

The development of historicism during the second half of the twentieth century has been demonstrated by the flourishing growth of the historical novel in Latin America. This growth has been driven by the combination of historical circumstances particular to each individual country, as well as the spread of universal globalisation. The problem of identity has been one of the main issues explored by the

Latin American novel from its beginnings. However, since each country has felt the need to create boundaries between itself and the rest of the world, and search for its own definition, the topic of national identity has become increasingly popular. Courses, lectures and studies covering the subject of cultural identity are very common nowadays. In Mexico's case, defining cultural identity is extremely complicated due to the country's heterogeneous make-up. Mexicans need to find an inclusive identity, a task that can only be accomplished by revisiting the past from a critical and conciliatory point of view.

Mexico's history is fascinating, but history books have been unable to reach their intended target audience. When I went to Mexico City in 2005, one of the first complaints that I heard from one of my professors in El Colegio de México was about Mexican's lack of historical knowledge. She affirmed that when asked about the Mexican loss of territory during the nineteenth century, most of the students were unaware that Mexico had lost half of its territory in a war with the United States of America. Some of them knew that Texas had been part of Mexico. Only very few knew that six North American states had belonged to Mexico.

On the one hand, through the historical novel the authors attempt to extend and reveal Mexican history to those who do not know it, in a context in which history is important for defining cultural identities. On the other hand, the historical novel serves as an answer to the official history mirrored in text books, monuments and some historiographical works. As such, the sense of rejection of historiography is evident in the novels of the 1970s and 1980s.

The reason why I decided to study the recent Mexican historical novel in particular is due to the fact that the vast majority of scholars have centred their attention, with regard to the new historical novel, on Latin America in general rather

than on Mexico. While this is a global phenomenon - and there are underlying characteristics that cover the genre - the Mexican historical novel has its own distinctiveness. In Mexico social concerns and historical contexts form the background to a historical novel that has its own peculiar themes and worries, despite forming part of a global trend.

This dissertation offers a new approach to the recent historical novel in Mexico, focusing mainly on the problem of identity and the different devices and approaches that some authors have used to tackle the historical material. The problem of the impossibility of knowing the historical past is a key topic in all these novels. However, the initial rejection of historiography is progressively supplanted by a reconciliation of historiography and literature which advocates a union of forces. The main aim of this union is to discover the nation's past. The novels chosen to illustrate this phenomenon are *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963) by Elena Garro, *Terra Nostra* (1975) by Carlos Fuentes, *Noticias del Imperio* (1987) by Fernando del Paso, *La lejanía del tesoro* (1992) by Paco Ignacio Taibo II, and *La Corte de los ilusos* (1995) by Rosa Beltrán. These novels are paradigmatic of the evolution of the historical novel as a genre in the second half of the twentieth century. *Los recuerdos del porvenir* is a historical novel written when the novel of the Revolution was declining and it still preserves some features of previous traditions. The techniques and devices employed by Fuentes in *Terra Nostra*, along with the philosophy that underlies the novel, allow us to define this book as one of the paradigms of the historical novel. The postmodern philosophy of *Terra Nostra* is developed by Del Paso in *Noticias del Imperio*, although this novel represents a new concern about the recent historical novel. This text, therefore, can be seen as a transition between the experimental postmodern novel that challenges all social conventions and a new historical novel

that is also interested in a didactic approach to history. One of the main characteristics of the recent historical novel is its hybridism and its incorporation of all related disciplines and traditions. *La lejanía del Tesoro* can be seen as paradigmatic in this sense, since it is a fusion of history and the detective novel that converts history into the object of the search of a mystery novel. Lastly, *La Corte de los ilusos* is representative of the feminist –or feminine– historical novel and, as such, it provides a vision of history that has not been offered before.

Despite the many differences between these novels and the evident changes that the historical novel underwent in Mexico from the beginning of the 1960's until the 1990s, the principal driving force behind all of these historical novels is a country's search for its identity. Some historical traumas, such as the threat of foreign countries, the problem of the integration of the Indians, and the traditional macho society, are believed to have prevented Mexicans from expressing their true self. In a parallel development, the historical novel has evolved as a genre, offering new perspectives on the debate about identity.

To illustrate the argument, this study starts with an examination of a number of critical theories which include, amongst others, George Lukács' hypothesis concerning the historical novel and Mikhail Bakhtin's critical literary theories with regard to the related concepts of heteroglossia, intertextuality and the dialogical novel. I have also sought support for my argument in the feminist critiques of the recent historical novel and of patriarchal discourse, principally in the two chapters that study novels written by women.

Chapter 1 introduces the debate about the historical novel as a novelesque genre. Attempts to explain what the historical novel is, and the boundaries beyond which it cannot stray, have constituted the set of problems that have attended the

genre from its beginnings. The hybrid character of the historical novel is regarded as the main obstacle to identifying it as a genuine literary genre. This peculiar character gave rise to an initial confrontation with historiography, a confrontation that created a debate among historians. Some historians considered the genre as a valuable source to recur to when researching a historical period; others, however, rejected it due to its unfaithfulness towards the “historical truth.” This debate leads to the question about the definition and delimitation of what we are referring to when we speak about “historical truth.” Hence, the discussion will focus on the legitimacy of historiography to consider itself as the only discipline capable of recovering the past in an accurate fashion, and the main challenges that both the historian and the novelist face when attempting to reconstruct a historical event. This chapter will, thus, prepare the reader for an explanation of the confrontation between fact and fiction that will be found in all the historical novels studied in this thesis.

Chapter 2 explains the development of the historical novel in Latin America with the aim of understanding the evolution that has taken place from the traditional to the recent historical novel. On the one hand, the novel in Latin America has been founded, from the beginning, on two inseparable elements, namely, fact and fiction. From the Chronicles of the Indies, America was a misunderstood continent and the chroniclers, witnesses, and adventurers that tried to explain this new reality, projected a distorted image of the continent. This image was not necessary a deliberate falsification but was at times the product of the desire of these writers to understand this new world in terms of the old one: they attempted to explain a new, unknown reality by resorting to previous Judeo-Christian literary and historical sources, such as the Bible or classical mythology. Inevitable, perhaps, this resulted in a particular understanding of history which has been determined the treatment of history by the

recent historical novel. On the other hand, the continent's history, and especially the history of Mexico provides the perfect background for the development of the historical novel. As Lukács asserts, the historical novel arises during a moment of crisis and Mexican history has always been struggling between critical periods, wars, and rebellions. This chapter will attempt to explain why the socio-political crisis that started at the end of the 1960s created the conditions that made it necessary to revisit the historical past from an artistic point of view. By the end of the chapter, I will have provided an approach to the analysis of the main characteristics of the recent historical novel in Latin America based on Seymour Menton's ideas, with the aim of establishing the common issues and devices that we will find in the novels studied in this thesis.

The following five chapters concentrate on the study of a selection of Mexican historical novels from the second half of the twentieth century. First, Elena Garro's *Los recuerdos del porvenir* plays a key role in the process, since it is the link between the novel about the Revolution and the recent historical novel. Without considering herself a feminist, her examination of Mexican identity addresses issues such as macho stereotypes, power relations and the hypocrisy of Mexican society with regard to issues such as sex or women's independence. Secondly, Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra* provides the paradigm of the new historical novel in its most experimental form. The novel is a search for Mexican roots, a re-creation of history, a challenge to the univocal concept of truth and a serious attempt to realise the utopia of the total novel. His premise consists on the dismissal of historiography as the only discipline suitable to recount the past. This novel represents a radical subversion of the premises of the traditional historical novel and serves to debunk the concept of history as a definable and absolute subject. The novelesque proposal leads eventually to the

defence of fictional imagination as the only way of miss/understanding the past and to the idea that literature offers a second opportunity in which history can be re-oriented. Thirdly, Fernando del Paso's *Noticias del Imperio* is interpreted as an attempt to create a historical novel *par excellence*, in which documentation and imagination go hand in hand to understand the past and Mexican identity. His novel is one of excess written in a baroque style, where history goes insane and a questioning dialogue with the past is developed. The debate about the historical truth becomes a metaphor in a novel that converts itself in an all-out attack on official historiography. Del Paso demonstrates in this novel that history and literature ought to work together on the task of discovering the past and challenging the manipulated, official version of history. Fourthly, Paco Ignacio Taibo II's *La lejanía del tesoro* represents the hybrid novel taken to an extreme and demonstrates the tendency of contemporary novelists to incorporate every useful element within the novelesque space. Not only is it a novel that mixes fiction with invention, but furthermore it incorporates an element of suspense, thus producing a historical thriller. Mexican identity finds itself under siege by a foreign power, France, and the preservation of its identity becomes the protagonists' principal aim. Relating Mexican identity to its history, Taibo II affirms his conviction that if the past is destroyed there will not be a place for the construction of a future. Lastly, Rosa Beltrán's *La corte de los ilusos* is a grand feminine parody of history, in which patriarchal discourse is demystified and turned into a sarcastic stance. Through the recreation of the court of a theatrical Iturbide, the writer assumes responsibility for establishing the importance of women in history, while at the same time subverting historiographical discourse, which has traditionally demonised the figure of Agustín de Iturbide. This novel represents a different approach to history: the *other* part of the story told from the point of view of women. But it is also the

space in which one of the recent historical novel's main concerns is addressed: the attempt to give a voice to those who never had the opportunity to explain their version of the past.

This dissertation, therefore, will try to demonstrate that the common feature linking all of these novels is that they all embody an attempt to understand a past that has traditionally been manipulated by official historiography, an attempt that thereby seeks to explain the problems of identity that beset the Mexican people. Historiography and literature are complementary disciplines, since both are engaged in the task of recovering the past. However, literature transcends the limitations of history by incorporating and presenting the *possible* reconstructions of the past along with the *probable* recreations presented by historiography. Nowadays, we are moving towards the consideration of historiography in terms other than its critical or its recompilation value. Historians are becoming more aware of the value of the "poetic effect" when dealing with the past. It is quite possible that, in this changing world, the role of the historian may get closer to that of the fictional writer and vice versa.

CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORICAL NOVEL AS A

GENRE

1. INTRODUCTION

When Walter Scott published *Waverley* in 1814, he did so anonymously. In part, this was due to the fact that the novel was considered as a second rate genre in comparison with poetry. However, *Waverley* proved a great success and the first edition sold out within two days of publication. After this, critics and historians attempted to describe and delimit the characteristics of the historical novel as a genre initially developed by Scott. However, the hybrid nature of this genre constituted of history and literature, has been the basis for an enduring debate. This chapter will present the key theoretical concerns that have clustered around the historical novel from the beginning.

The origins of the historical novel as a genre have been linked to a moment of crisis in European history. According to George Lukács, all the economic and political transformations that occurred in Europe after the French Revolution laid the foundations for the creation of the historical novel.¹ In the case that concerns us, this chapter will argue that the concern with historical matters spread throughout Latin America during the critical period after Independence, mainly as a response to the necessity of building a common national identity. Subsequently, the recent historical novel was developed in Mexico during the second half of the twentieth century as a result of an identity crisis related to particular historical circumstances. The infamous

¹ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 23.

massacre at Tlatelolco Square (Mexico City) in 1968 not only demonstrated the existence of a deep social crisis, but also unleashed a political crisis and a questioning of the democratic character of the *priísta* government.² Furthermore, the economic crisis that became significant during the 1970s intensified the feeling of social disenchantment. In the context of social, political and economic exhaustion, Mexican writers started to look back to the past in a quest for defining national identity. Thus, I will argue that the recent historical novel can be considered as a tool used by a society searching for a self-understanding in a context of crisis.

The controversy about the hybrid nature of the historical novel as a genre has always been marked by a dialectic between fact and fiction. Literature was traditionally related to fiction, while history was attached to factual issues. However, *Waverley* contributed to the establishment of a debate between people in favour of and those opposed to the historical novel as a genre. Historians of the period such as Thomas B. Macaulay and Thomas Carlyle supported it, suggesting that books of history were not successful when dealing with “the history of the people.” In contrast, Alessandro Manzoni rejected the genre after experimenting with it in his novel *I promessi sposi* (1825).³ Recent historians and philosophers, especially Hayden White, have defended the proximity between these two disciplines, highlighting the poetic nature of history. Thus, this chapter will attempt to set the limits of the historical novel as a genre, differentiating it from history as a social science. As a factor in this debate, the recent historical novel can be seen as debunking widely-held assumptions about the concept of truth, when applied to history and literature. The recent historical novel implies a questioning of history’s capacity to portray the truth in a more

² PRI stands for Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party).

³ Later, critics like Herbert Butterfield and George Lukács contributed to this debate, arguing for the legitimacy of mixing history and literature within the same book.

accurate manner than the historical novel and defends the great importance of the role of literature when dealing with the challenge of reconstructing the past.

This chapter will therefore provide a definition of the historical novel as a genre which will allow us to appreciate the shifts, changes, and development of the recent historical novel in Mexico, in particular. I will explore the main features of the historical novel in order to understand its evolution. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the recent historical novel represents a technical, ontological and epistemological challenge not only to historiography, but also to the traditional historical novel. Thus, it is important to understand first the genre that the authors studied in this thesis are subverting. In order to explain the origins of the historical novel and its close relation to the search for identity, I will support my argument by reference to the works of Noé Jitrik and Benedict Anderson. With regard to the nature of the historical novel as a genre, I will scrutinize the theoretical proposals of Lukács in order to obtain an understanding of the motivations for the development of this genre. The doctrines of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur will be the main sources used to explain the differences and coincidences between history and literature and to delimit the boundaries between concepts such as those of *truth*, *verisimilitude*, and *accuracy*. Determining the characteristics of the historical novel will be a task reserved for the end of the chapter, thus allowing us to link it with the explanation of the recent historical novel in Mexico and the rest of Latin America, which will be covered throughout the second chapter.

2. THE ORIGINS OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

As we have seen, it has been said that the historical novel started with the Scottish writer Walter Scott.⁴ If this is true for the historical *novel*, historical *theatre* started much earlier: Shakespeare wrote his historical tragedies in the seventeenth century; and, even further back, Euripides produced *The Trojan Women* in 415 BC. In this sense, the origins of the historical novel have been traditionally linked to the nineteenth century and the socio-political circumstances of the eighteenth century, following the French Revolution. This section will show how the origins of the historical novel were closely connected to a necessity to understand and establish the nature of the national identities constructed during that period.

2.1. A response to times of crisis

Georg Lukács (1885-1971) was one of the most influential figures in European Marxism during the twentieth century and his work on the historical novel led to a significant advance in the understanding of this genre. According to him, Walter Scott initiated the historical novel as a genre at about the time when Napoleon's power was starting to wane. There had been novels covering historical topics before, such as the realistic social novel of the eighteenth century, but they could only be considered as "precursors" to the historical novel as such. In these novels, the psychology of the characters corresponded to that of the writer's own period. In contrast, "Scott's greatness lies in his capacity to give living human embodiment to historical-social types."⁵ Furthermore, he states that "Scott's historical novel is the direct continuation of the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth

⁴ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

century,” and the time when his novels were created was a “stormy period”⁶ with huge social and political transformations. Indeed, when Walter Scott was writing his historical novels, there were several particular socio-political circumstances that resulted in the emergence of this new genre.⁷ Lukács highlights the French Revolution and the rise and fall of Napoleon as the main circumstances that turned history into a “mass experience,”⁸ necessitating the development of the concept of national communities.

Also, Lukács postulates, as a reason for the increase in historicism during the nineteenth century, an imbalance between the socio-political situation and the ideas of the scholars in Germany:

This conscious growth of historicism, which receives its first theoretical expression in the writings of Herder, has its roots in the special position of Germany’s economic and political backwardness and the ideology of the German Enlighteners, who, standing on the shoulders of their English and French predecessors, developed the ideas of the Enlightenment to a higher level.⁹

The parallelism with the development of the recent historical novel in Latin America is clear. Scholars and writers lived in the 1960s in an intellectual golden age. Postmodernism was, in the 1970s, a trend that was quickly spreading throughout the continent, and new generations of writers were willing to experiment with it after the major success of what has been termed the “boom”. The popularity that

⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁷ Regarding this, David Brown in his book *Walter Scott and the Historical Imagination* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) states that “by far the most notable event in a not uneventful century was the Jacobite rebellion in 1745, which affected both Lowland Scotland and England with profound cultural shock [...]. It is certainly significant that Scott should have chosen the Forty-Five as the natural subject of his first historical novel, *Waverley*,” 199.

⁸ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 23.

⁹ Ibid., 22.

Postmodernism experienced led to a debate about the paradox of talking about postmodernity in a continent where modernity never existed. This debate provided one of the main motivations for the appearance of the recent historical novel. Conversely, the socio-political situation in Mexico experienced a deterioration that culminated in 1968 with the massacre of students at the Plaza de Tlatelolco in Mexico City. This situation caused a social and political disenchantment that was strengthened by the economic crisis of the 1980s. It can be argued that Mexican writers felt at that time the need to understand history from a poetic point of view. The main aim of this insight was to draw an alternative and challenging picture of the Mexican past. In this context of crisis, and supported by postmodern theories, these novelists proposed to look back to the past in order to seek a clue that led to an explanation of the present. Confronted with a moment of crisis that had come after a period of relative stability, Mexicans established a dialogue with the past in order to subvert and challenge the official version of history and the *spirit of the truth* found within books of history. Hence, Mexico experienced an imbalance between its economic, social and, political critical situation and the ideological and cultural self-awareness of the intelligentsia, sparking the development of the recent historical novel.

2.2. The historical novel and the quest for identity

According to Noé Jitrik, the historical novel first appears in the nineteenth century when history is looking for a place among the sciences and trying to detach itself from literature. It can be argued that this struggle was one of the motivating factors of the debate surrounding the validity of history, which sought to establish whether history is the best way to recount the past, and the discussion of history's

feasibility as an empirical science. Following Jitrik, all romantic historical novels were engaged in a search for identity, and it is possible to perceive within them a concern about their contemporary circumstances.¹⁰

Benedict Anderson defines the concept of nation as “an imagined community,” a cultural artefact with great emotional connotations. In the nineteenth century, novels and newspapers provided the necessary technical support for “re-presenting” these “imagined communities” or nations and, in the case of Latin America, to enhance the differences between Creoles and Spaniards.¹¹ Most of the Creole population read both local and peninsular newspapers, but it was very unusual to see a Spaniard reading a local newspaper. According to Anderson, this fact, along with the continual discrimination Creoles suffered when trying to gain access to higher military, clerical and administrative posts, created a “consciousness of connectedness” between the people born in America. As such, the Creoles started to call themselves Mexicans, a term that also included Indians, Mestizos, and all the people that had been born in Mexican territory. This can be linked to the idea that when a nation is being built, the re-discovery or even the invention of a common history that unites all those people under the same flag is essential. Needless to say, this overwhelming necessity of creating a common history is associated with the emergence of the historical novel. People ignore their past because they have not experienced it, but that past represents the cornerstone of the creation of a nation. The historical novel both recreates and invents a new national historical past; it “imagines past communities” and serves to provide a nation with its identity because we need a past to be in a position to say who we are and how we have become the way we are.

¹⁰ Noé Jitrik, “De la historia a la escritura: predominios, disimetrías, acuerdos en la novela histórica latinoamericana,” in Balderston, *The Historical Novel*, 13-29.

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 6

Thus, the creation of the historical novel as a genre is related to two historical circumstances: a critical historical period and the necessity to lay the foundation for the creation of a nation.

In the case of Latin America, the recently-created nations needed to develop a sense of unity among the often heterogeneous communities that had been thrown together under the same flag after achieving Independence. In Mexico, the creation of this national identity was especially problematic, since it had to include all the ethnic groups in the new country. Daniel Balderston states that

La novia del hereje, Durante la Reconquista, Sab, Enriquillo and many others like them show that novelists were preoccupied with the literary construction of a historical past. Indeed, this act of imaginative creation of a national past was linked in an obvious way with the concerns for national organization.¹²

This growth of historicism is directly related to the necessity of creating and describing a national identity, and this historical interest is reflected in nineteenth-century literature. The issues regarding the *mestizo* character of Mexican society added another level of complexity to the definition of their national identity, whose main cohesion point during and after Independence was the Catholic religion and their fervour for the Virgin of Guadalupe. In short, the historical novel and the interest in history appeared as an artefact to explain and construct the new emergent nationalities.

There are some historical circumstances that give rise to the development of the historical novel in a particular period. A search for a past that explains the present is a common feature of these novels. Periods of sudden change and crises have been

¹² Daniel Balderston, ed., *The Historical Novel in Latin America: A symposium* (Gaithersburg: Hispamérica, 1986), 9.

the source from which novelists have extracted more raw material to write about. When a historical panorama changes progressively rather than dramatically, people can understand and assume it properly. But when something unexpected happens, people need to go back to seek the reasons and motivations of that change. This is even stronger in the case of negative changes and depressions, since the sense of guilt and defeat provokes the necessity of understanding and compensating for the effects of the failure. The next section will show how the socio-political crisis that drove the development of the recent historical novel in Mexico brought with it an identity crisis. In this period, Mexican society immersed itself in a feeling of exhaustion after innumerable attempts to fix national problems. Thus, it can be stated that this crisis of Mexican identity was one of the main motivating factors that led to the development of the recent historical novel.

3. THE LIMITS OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL: AN UNRESOLVED DEBATE

A key element of our argument is the delimitation of the boundaries of the historical novel as a genre. Carlos Mata Induráin suggests that the historical element is something common to every novel because “toda novela, sea o no de temática histórica, presenta de alguna manera un carácter histórico, pues sus protagonistas no pueden prescindir del devenir histórico en el que están insertos.”¹³ It can be said that every novel reflects reality in some way and that when a novel is reflecting reality,

¹³ Carlos Mata Induráin, “Retrospectiva sobre la evolución de la novela histórica”, in Spang, Kurt, Ignacio Arellano and Carlos Mata, eds., *La novela histórica: teoría y comentarios*, 2nd ed (Pamplona: EUNSA, 1998), 12.

this reality is unavoidably connected to a historical past. However, the relation to history in a historical novel must be a direct one: at least the plot must be set in the past. What is peculiar in the historical novel is that some of the events recounted, or characters portrayed, actually existed and are identified with historical ones. Among these historical novels, however, the emphasis may be on history or on other aspects of human psychology. Most of the historical novels, in fact, are hybrids of different genres. This is especially true in the case of the recent historical novel. A good example of this hybrid nature can be found in the book *Mal de Amores* (1996) by the Mexican writer Ángeles Mastretta. This novel tells the story of Emilia, who lives during the last stages of the *porfiriato*¹⁴ and the Mexican Revolution. The characters in the novel are influenced by the historical events they are experiencing, but Mastretta's principal intention is to highlight the feelings and necessities of her female protagonist. The main objective of this novel is not to show us the factual circumstances of the period, but rather to offer the reader an insight into the characters' personal lives. However, history is part of the plot and Mastretta could have chosen to set the novel in the present. The novelist is not demonstrating how these people used to live in order to permit us to understand the social history related to every day life, but rather in order for us to comprehend the feelings of these people. But, the historical perspective that offers a *maderista* viewpoint, which differs from the more common *villista* or *zapatista* view, reflects an interest in that particular historical moment, which goes far beyond the protagonist's life. In this sense, this novel can be considered as a psychological-historical novel.

¹⁴ Porfirio Díaz governed Mexico for over thirty years (1876-1880, 1884-1911) and this phase of Mexican history has been popularly called "porfiriato". What started as a liberal un-re-elected government became a presidency held for life by Díaz that ended with the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920).

Needless to say, the historical novel is related to the concept of history as a *human process of development* but it is also related to the concept of history as *the subject that studies that development*. If the historical novel is connected only with the first concept, then almost every novel can be considered as historical, since all books are human products. But the historical novel highlights the second meaning of the word ‘history’ and, in that sense, has to be judged by the same criteria as the historical subject. Recent generations of historians have become more and more concerned with topics related to ordinary people’s everyday life in a set historical period. During the twentieth century, only novels dealt with the so-called *petite histoire*. Recently, the differences, in this sense, have narrowed. As an example of this, is the multi-volume book, *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México*.¹⁵ As both disciplines progressively approach each other, the main difference lies in the re-construction of the ephemeral, be this a feeling, a stare or a gesture: insignificant moments of the past that recreate the human soul.

David Cowart considers that a historical novel is “any novel in which a historical consciousness manifests itself strongly in either the characters or the action”¹⁶, highlighting the relevance of these two literary premises in order to classify a novel as historical. Other authors such as Lukács cite the use of history as the background in the historical novel as the defining characteristic. In a historical novel, a set historical period serves as the backdrop, and that is the most important feature to consider when classifying a historical novel as such. However, traditionally, the novelist was also expected to show an element of accuracy in the presentation of historical characters: they could not simply be a replica of contemporaneous people.

¹⁵ The first volume of this series is already out: Pablo Escalante Gonzalbo, *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México: Tomo I* (Mexico: FCE, 2004). This project was created in 1998, arising from an investigation seminar in El Colegio de México and has been directed by Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru.

¹⁶ David Cowart, *History and the contemporary novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 6.

The recent historical novel, nevertheless, is often a subversion of the historical novel as a genre and parodies its traditional structure and style. In some cases, it mixes present and past, making them interact within the same novelistic space. This technique is known as *deliberate anachronism* and is very common in the recent historical novel. This is used, for instance, in *Los perros del paraíso* (1987) by the Argentinean writer Abel Posse. When Christopher Columbus is travelling to America, some of the sailors recount how they have passed some strange ships by:

Una de ellas, la *Rex*, pasó dejando un velo de música feliz. Era al atardecer y se vió nítidamente, junto a una especie de alberca con sombrillas de colores vivos, a varios jóvenes con sombrero de paja, ranchos y chaquetas blancas, de hilo. Ellas con deliciosas capelinas con cintas de florcitas. Aperitivos con rodajas de limón y pajitas.¹⁷

Obviously, this ship does not belong to Columbus' period. Some scholars such as Linda Hutcheon do not consider these novels as historical but rather as a different type of novel she calls *historiographic metafiction*. For her, "historical fiction is that which is modelled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force."¹⁸ However, historiographic metafiction "shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured."¹⁹ In this sense, some key concepts will be found in the novels studied in this dissertation such as self-reflexivity, metahistory, intertextuality and subjectivity – concepts that question and challenge the boundaries of the traditional historical novel.

Another problem regarding the nature of the historical novel is the time-frame that the novel must have and its treatment of the events it recreates. According to *The*

¹⁷ Abel Posse, *Los perros del paraíso* (Barcelona: Random House Mondadori, 1987), 209.

¹⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, the historical novel is “a novel in which the action takes place during a specific historical period well before the time of writing (often one or two generations before, sometimes several centuries), and in which some attempt is made to depict accurately the customs and mentality of the period.”²⁰ A historical novel deals with historical facts, events that took place in the past. This then begs the question: how long before? For instance, intuitively everybody considers as part of history the beginning of the economic crisis that Argentina is currently suffering. The problem is that if there were an author that created a historical novel set in that historical moment, its historical condition could be questioned. Taking historiography as an example, some historians who experienced the World War II have manifested the embarrassment that they feel because of the difficulty that they have writing about Hitler or the Holocaust, when trying to adopt a historical perspective while remaining objective. Nevertheless, in spite of the atrocities committed by the Roman emperors, it is relatively easy to make an objective reading of the facts nowadays. This does not mean that nobody can write a historical novel about his or her own experiences. Leaving aside the subjectivity or partiality of the writer, the historical aspect of a novel depends on the perspective that the writer takes regarding the events portrayed. As such, even though a historical novel is one that deals with events which took place in the past, some exceptions will be made when the writer places him/herself at some *historical distance* from the events s/he is recounting, even if s/he has experienced them first-hand.

Generally speaking, historical novels display an awareness of the past in the present. In the case of the Latin American historical novel, this awareness of the past emerges from an unresolved debate about the search for a national identity. After all,

²⁰ Chris Baldick, comp., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 100.

novels are written in order to describe the human condition. This is why, to define a country, ethnic group or nationality, there is nothing more appropriate, with regard to literary fiction, than the historical novel and the possibilities that it offers to return to the origins of the country or group. Therefore, the problem of identity implies a search for answers in the past, in order to be able to understand the present. This dissertation will consider the historical novel as a novel that sets its plot in a past not experienced by the author or a novel that observes the present from a historical point of view. Hence, the classifying factor will be the perspective adopted by the author.

4. THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY

The voices that questioned the scientific nature of history accompanied historiography from the very beginning. The dialectics between fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity that are present in the historical novel were also present in historiography as the reconstruction of the human past. The duty that historians had to reconstruct the past in the most accurate form possible gave history a scientific aspect. However, historians and scholars soon realized that history was not a science whose conclusions could be tested empirically. Rather, they discovered that history was a discipline capable of being falsified. The methods used by historians sought to turn the discipline into a science but the important role that opinions and unresolved hypotheses have in books of history, complicated the categorization of this discipline, and brought it closer to the field of conjecture. This section will explain the spirit of what we call “historical truth” with the aim of establishing the different contributions that history and literature can make to the reconstruction of the past.

4.1. The origins of historiography and its scientific character.

The dialectic of literature versus history was already present in Aristotle's writings. According to him,

[...] it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen, -what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.²¹

According to Lukács, the novel nowadays has the same mission that the epic genre used to have, and literature and history share a common origin in the epic. Before the eighteenth century, the epic genre used to frequently mix historical and fictional elements, and the history of the nations was often based on mythological stories such as that of Romulus and Remus, or Adam and Eve. From the eighteenth century onwards, with the birth of history as a science and the subsequent development of the positivist movement, the standards that historiography had to maintain changed radically. The historian became a scientist and he was expected to demonstrate a rigorous accuracy when dealing with the past. Hence, he had to explain not only what happened (a past reconstruction) but also why it happened in the way that it did (analysis, interpretation of that past). According to historian Edward Hallet Carr, history today is the study of the causes of events and historians have to establish a hierarchy, a scale that reflects the level of influence in the historical process of

²¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. by S. H. Butcher (London: MacMillan and Co., 1911), p.35.

development, and specifically in those precise events that the historian is studying.²² As such, history was not always the rigorous discipline that is today and the premise of “interpretation of the facts” that is embodied in it nowadays is something relatively new.

Especially relevant during the nineteenth century, and related to the positivist movement, is the attempt to define history as a science integrated in the same group as the other empirical sciences. Paul Ricoeur attributes this to the historian’s desire to be the only person with the right to talk authoritatively about the past:

Once the false claim of historians to produce history in a sort of state of sociocultural weightlessness is unmasked, the suspicion arises that all history with a scientific pretension is vitiated by a desire for mastery that sets up historians as the arbiters of meaning. This desire for mastery constitutes the implicit ideology of history.²³

This arrogance was one of the causes that provoked the crisis of historiography and brought about the raising of discordant voices from other fields such as philosophy and literature. The problem of considering historiography as an empirical science instead of an analytical one resulted in a complete failure, since historical data is normally unverifiable, in order to confirm or dismiss the results or the conclusions that historians come to. The documents, evidence, and data that historians handle for their research are traces of something that *was* but *is not* anymore. In that sense, this material could have been manipulated in the past in order to change history, even though it might have remained as key historical evidence. Frequently, historians discover new documents that deny a fact of history that has been taken for granted,

²² Edward Hallet Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

²³ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 150.

and history consequently changes. Thus, even if the hypotheses that historians defend are supported by historical data, sometimes they cannot be verified and eventually are contradicted by the discovery of new evidence. Hayden White explains how this problem could possibly be the greatest difficulty that history confronts in its attempts to define itself as a science:

The difficulty with the notion of a truth of past experience is that it can no longer be experienced, and this throws a specifically historical knowledge open to the charge that it is a construction as much of imagination as of thought and that its authority is not greater than the power of the historian to persuade his readers that his account is true. This puts historical discourse on the same level as any rhetorical performance and consigns it to the status of a textualization neither more nor less authoritative than literature itself can lay claim to.²⁴

In this context, there are two characteristics inherent to historiography that scholars have addressed when dealing with the character of history as a human convention. Firstly, for Ricoeur, the time of history is an unreal time since it is a reconstructed time. Secondly, according to White, history is not something that is given to us but rather something that humans create through a narrative body.

Books of history create a sense of linear time that is reconstructed and not real through the use of narrative actualization. But historians do not *recover* the past, they *reconstruct* it and, in that sense, they create something new. Historians only recreate a story that, according to their individual artistic preferences, and regulated by the appropriate historical conventions, approximates as far as possible the historical

²⁴ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 147.

events, to *what really happened*. Recovering the past as it really was is an unattainable task since the time of the past –real time- does not correspond to the time of history –reconstructed time. In order to re-tell the past as it really was, historians would have to be like Ireneo Funes, and the time required to recount that past would have to be exactly the same as the original time of that event.²⁵ Needless to say, this is impossible, and historians need to make a selection of the highlights and key aspects that they want to recollect before reconstructing any historical event.

This question is related to the issue of the narrative character of historical discourse. The historian has the task of creating a narrative body from some empirically-known facts from the past and of offering us a book of history. Carr highlights the idea that “the use of language forbids him [the historian] to be neutral”²⁶ even though they try not to be swayed. Also, White states that

many modern historians hold that narrative discourse, far from being a neutral medium for the representation of historical events and processes, is the very stuff of a mythical view of reality, a conceptual or pseudoconceptual “content” which, when used to represent real events, endows them with an illusory coherence and charges them with the kinds of meanings more characteristic of oneiric than of waking thought.²⁷

Historians, then, use narrative techniques belonging to literature when they write books of history and containing the past in a narrative form that is imposed arbitrarily. Needless to say, since the historian is human and s/he is him/herself part of historical development, his/her own personal circumstances and ideology will always influence

²⁵ Borges created the character of Ireneo Funes in one of his fictions called “Funes el memorioso.” Apparently, he had the ability of remembering all his past exactly as it happened. As a result, recollecting the events of one day took him one day because he was incapable of forgetting anything. Yet, Borges says that Funes was unable to “think” because to think is to forget and abstract.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 19.

²⁷ White, *The Content of the Form*, ix.

his/her work. Subsequently, if history is to reclaim its objective character, it first needs to be aware of its own limits and its inability to completely recover the past. History and literature, since they are both narrative artefacts, only exist when they are written or spoken and they have no meaning until they are read or heard. According to Ricoeur, “it is only through the meditation of reading that the literary work attains complete significance, which would be to fiction what standing-for is to history.”²⁸

However, there is a risk in this new approach to history, since it leads to more radical ideas related to the negation of the past. If any historical fact can be challenged and reconsidered in the light of new evidence, then history as a whole can be challenged. Hence, the problem arises of diminishing the importance of, or denying altogether, the actuality of some historical events. Examples of this revisionist tendency are not difficult to find: some right-wing historians have thus denied the existence of the Holocaust, and several military officers have affirmed that there was no torture in Argentina under the dictatorship. When a period of horror in history is coming to an end, all evidence is erased so the propagandists can manipulate history. That was the tragic case, for instance, of the Nazi extermination camps: when the Nazis knew they were about to lose the war, their gas chambers doubled their work in an attempt to kill all the Jews and leave no witnesses behind. Neither Ricoeur or White support the antirealist thesis and they both recognize the key role of history in the discovery of human identity. Thus, they do not defend the non-existence of the past, but the impossibility of knowing that past totally through history as a narrative artefact. In sum, history is one of the ways that we can recover part of the past. Its work is extremely valuable and it brings the past a little bit closer

²⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 158.

to us. However, it needs to be understood as a human creation and, as such, as a limited objective discipline.

4.2. The concept of historical truth.

The relationship between fact and fiction in history and the novel is not a new topic. Max Aub, talking about Galdós, stated that

La obra enorme del novelista se divide en dos partes: los *Episodios Nacionales* y las *Novelas Contemporáneas*, y ambas se completan para dar un panorama exhaustivo del siglo XIX español. Perdiérase todo el material histórico de esos años, salvándose la obra de Galdós, no importaría. Ahí está completa, viva, real, la vida de la nación durante los cien años que abarcó la garra del autor. Existen, para siempre, sus centenares y centenares de personajes históricos e imaginados, tan ciertos los unos como los otros. Porque el genio de Galdós no se limita a sus protagonistas, sino que alcanza a dar bulto a sus pericos de los palotes.²⁹

For a certain time it was believed that it was possible to learn about British history through Walter Scott's books. There were authors like Thomas Carlyle who thought that the real History would be the History of literature because it reflected more profoundly than History itself the preoccupations and restlessness of societies.³⁰ Conversely, Italian critic and writer Alessandro Manzoni did not believe that Walter Scott's novels were "truer than history,"³¹ since they were fictional in part and, as

²⁹ Max Aub, *Manual de historia de la literatura española* (Madrid: Akal, 1974), 450.

³⁰ Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (Chapman and Hall Ltd.: London, 1899)

³¹ Alessandro Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, trans. and intro. Sandra Bermann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 126.

such, a creation of the writer's mind. Herbert Butterfield is more specific when he says that

Scott does something for history that the historian by himself cannot do, or can seldom do; he recaptures the life of an age, and resurrects a picture of the past [...]. The historical novel, then, is one of many ways of treating the past and of wresting from it its secret [...]. The artist or the poet will turn a different light upon them and meet them in a different way [...]. To the historian the past is the whole process of development that leads up to the present; to the novelist it is a strange world to tell tales about.³²

So history and literature can be seen as simply two different, but equally valid, ways to deal with the facts about the past.

Furthermore, in the case of Latin America, historiography has had to deal with the problem of distrust. Within a context of authoritarian governments, the falsification and distortion of history frequently attached to the “official version” offered by the governments have created a new generation of writers-liberators that have tried to “debunk the official history” and give voice to alternative stories. They offer a new “contrahistory”³³ that, even though it is fictional, is more authentic than the “official version.” This correlates with the broadly-known fact that the version of the events that history portrays is that of the victors. In this sense, the recent historical novel creates this “contrahistory” in order to rebel against all these absolute and univocal versions of the past, thus enriching history with the stories of those who never won.

³² Herbert Butterfield, *The Historical Novel: An Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 29, 112, 113.

³³ Janina Montero talks about this in “Historia y novela en Hispanoamérica”, *Hispanic Review*, 47 (1979), and says that “la contrahistoria rescatada y profetizada por la nueva narrativa hispanoamericana es, en última instancia, una apología de una realidad negada al principio por ilusiones y luego simplemente por mentiras,” 519.

Some recent novels, especially those identified with the postmodern condition,³⁴ propose that it is through literature that we can gain a greater knowledge of the past. Now, if the word “knowledge” refers to a recreation of a period of time, of people’s feelings, of the essence and, of the *intrahistory* of an age, then some historical novels will be *more* accurate when dealing with the past since they are more suitable for reconstructing the soul of an era. Following this line of thought, Lukács states that,

the popular character of Scott’s historical art manifests itself in the fact that these leader figures, who are directly interwoven with the life of the people, in general are more historically imposing than the well-known central figures of history.³⁵

First of all, if *truth* is “what really happened,” *historical truth* is a more verifiable and solid version of “what really happened.” This historical truth correlates with the evidence that we possess and needs to be supported by a corpus of historical documents and data. However, in literature, the writer is normally not dealing with a concept of historical truth, but rather with a concept of *verisimilitude*. This means that the novel needs to present a coherent story but, in this case, the work’s loyalty is not to the past but to the internal structure of the story. Thus, historical novels offer a plot which demonstrates an attempt to create verisimilitude, presenting facts that could have happened. However, this is completely different from recreating something – even partially- that actually happened. With regards to historic and fictional characters Lukács notes that “the characters of a novel are forced to be more rational than historical characters. The former must be roused to life, the latter have already

³⁴ Term taken from Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979)

³⁵ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 38.

lived.”³⁶ This is why verisimilitude represents a key device within the structure of every historical novel: even if they are completely caricaturized and transformed, historical characters need to be credible. This comes about because historical characters do not need to give the appearance of credibility, since they actually existed. When a novelist uses a historical character in a novel, he is aware of all the preconceptions and misconceptions about that historical figure, and is able to play with and subvert them in order to create a parallel dialogue with the reader. However, fictional characters have to demonstrate coherence and verisimilitude, and must maintain a dialogue and compromise with the historical figure they represent.

Related to this, recent historical novels take advantage of the preconceptions about some historical figures in order to present an apocryphal, fantastic, or to provide a psychologically more accurate version of the past. Sometimes, these novelists are not interested in legitimising or giving verisimilitude to the story, but rather in debunking History as the only way to know the past. In these novels, the narrator highlights not only the artificiality of history but also the partiality of the historical novel itself. For instance, Argentinean Tomás Eloy Martínez’s book, *La novela de Perón* (1985), warns in the title about the fictional character of this version of Peron’s life. Thus, these authors are not searching for *the* definitive version, nor even to destroy *the* official version of history that some governments provide, but rather to demonstrate simply that there are multiple versions of the past and all of them have to be told. In this sense, the *novela* of Peron’s life is an alternative version that points out the multiplicity of reality.

Despite what has been argued so far, it is not the intention here to defend the use of subjectivity in history, but rather to state that subjectivity needs to be taken into

³⁶ Ibid., 42.

account when analyzing a book of history. The historian's task is one of interpreting and not only recounting the past. As White states,

I will consider the historical work as what it most manifestly is –that is to say, a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them.³⁷

Thus, historians must aim to be objective when analyzing certain historical documents, even though it is impossible to discard completely and simply ignore the historical and cultural circumstances of which he is part. Frequently, different historians come to different conclusions when researching the same historical events. They are inevitably influenced by subjective factors and personal circumstances. But, although this could be seen as a weakness of historiography, in fact it is an integral part of the discipline. Historian William H. Walsh states that “history is not strictly cognitive but emotive.”³⁸ Different approaches to the same problem serve to enrich the global vision of the past. According to Walsh, it is through historical objectivity that we obtain “a series of different but not incompatible portraits of the past, each reflecting it from a different point of view.”³⁹ Every historian has a new perspective to offer and a different viewpoint to contribute. Walsh is of the opinion that every historian offers something to us and that “every history is written from a certain point of view and makes sense only from that point of view.”⁴⁰ Therefore, in history a reconstruction or interpretation of a specific historical moment is considered as objective when it is presented to us taking into account the historian's exact point of

³⁷ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 30.

³⁸ William H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1992), 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

view. In this sense, verisimilitude is also mandatory in a history book, since a historian needs to be coherent with his own line of thought and every piece of evidence needs to fit into the historical jigsaw.

Lastly, it is not fair to expect history to recount absolutely everything that happened in a set historical period. Selection is essential in history since a book is not able to contain every tiny detail of the historical past. Carr distinguishes between “facts of history” and “facts about the past.” The subsequent relevance of the facts about the past will determine their transformation into facts of history and historians are responsible for selecting and differentiating between the two of them. There are events that belong to the past but that are not vital to understanding the development of history. Some “facts about the past” can become “facts about history” at any time, if historians consider them as relevant. At the same time, there are facts of the past that have not been documented and have been lost forever, about which it is possible only to speculate. Historical novels sometimes exploit these unexplored or unknown facts of the past, creating or recovering them in a fictional work. Documented or not, facts about the past are transformed by the historical novel into “facts about novelistic history” and they always deepen our self-knowledge about the human condition.

In sum, *truth* and *verisimilitude* are two closely related concepts and are traditionally associated with history and literature respectively. However, they are equally related to both disciplines. The identification between history with fact and literature with fiction can no longer be sustained, since the boundaries between the two are no longer clear. In the next section we will examine the difference between a book of history and a historical novel and see how far, if at all, a definitional distinction can be made.

4.3. Historical novels versus books of history.

The first difference between the historical novel and the book of history is in their epistemological approach: they deal with the same material in very different ways. While History has become analytic-scientific in its approach to the past, the historical novel takes an artistic approach to reality. Thus, as noted above, both share the same referent but their perspectives and intentions differ.

The historical novel, furthermore, incorporates a fictionalization process that is not present in books of history. White states that

unlike literary fictions, such as the novel, historical works are made up of events that exist outside the consciousness of the writer. The events reported in a novel can be invented in a way that they cannot be (or are not supposed to be) in a history.⁴¹

The novel can contain elements that falsify reality, while these creative liberties are forbidden in a book of history. Poetic truth comes with an element of uncertainty that is not present in historical truth. For example, it can be said that Augusto Roa Bastos writes *Yo el Supremo* basing his protagonist on the figure of the Paraguayan dictator Dr Francia, but this historical character is deliberately falsified and distorted by the author. The technique that Roa Bastos uses serves to lead the reader into a labyrinth where reality, dream, and deliberate invention are mixed together in a kind of palimpsest –the novel- that is nothing but the memoirs of Dr Francia dictated to his secretary. The portrayal of the dictator is manipulated in order to highlight his monstrosity, reinforcing his negative image in the reader's mind. For Carr, in history

⁴¹ White, *Metahistory*, 6.

“accuracy is a duty, not a virtue.”⁴² However, accuracy is not a duty for the writer.

Ricoeur states that

unlike novels, historians’ constructions do aim at being *reconstructions* of the past. Through documents and their critical examination of documents, historians are subject to what once was. They owe a debt to the past, a debt of recognition to the dead, that makes them insolvent debtors.⁴³

When a novelist is writing a historical novel, he is supposed to adhere to some yardstick of historical accuracy so the reader can identify those events as historical. However, the degree of accuracy will depend on the novelist’s intentions. In this respect, this dissertation will deal with novels such as Carlos Fuentes’ *Terra Nostra* (1975), whose historical referent is completely distorted, but it will also study Fernando del Paso’s *Noticias del Imperio* (1987) which is a deeply-researched reconstruction of the French Intervention in Mexico (1862-67).

As stated above, “history means interpretation,”⁴⁴ and this normally separates a book of history from an historical novel. Historians not only recollect some historical facts but also evaluate and interpret them, creating theories about their causes and consequences. However, novelists normally avoid open interpretations of the facts. Notwithstanding that metafictional and metahistorical devices are quite common in the recent historical novel, these elements do not necessarily constitute an interpretation of the past, and are in fact frequently parodic. If a historical novel makes some kind of analysis of the facts, this is normally subtly dispersed throughout the whole novel. An exception to this is Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1865-77), where the author is continually analysing and trying to unravel the causes of the

⁴² Carr, *What is History*, 5.

⁴³ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 142-3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

historical events he is reconstructing. However, this device, which was more common in the traditional historical novel, is very unusual in the recent historical novel. There are some exceptions to this such as Moya Palencia's *El México de Egerton* (1991) or Enrique Serna's *El seductor de la patria* (1999), whose main aim is to unravel the truth behind a historical event, rather than to create a poetic version of the past.

As stated above, the ontological discussion around the concept of "historical truth" has confronted historians, philosophers and writers. In this context, the problem of whether it is possible to achieve a truer knowledge of history through historiography or through a historical novel is frequently addressed through what Linda Hutcheon has called *historiographic metafiction*. With regard to this new type of fictional work, she says that these writers are "obsessed with the question of how we can come to know the past today."⁴⁵ Although she does not consider historical novels as historiographic metafiction, she quotes historical novels such as Roa Bastos' *Yo el Supremo* to illustrate this phenomenon. Hutcheon analyses the literary devices and narrative techniques employed by this type of novel, which are frequently present in the recent historical novel in Latin America, and which will be reviewed in the next chapter.

Concluding with one of Tzvetan Todorov's ideas, "literature is not a discourse that can or must be false [...] it is a discourse that, precisely, cannot be subjected to the test of truth; it is neither true nor false, to raise this question has no meaning: this is what defines its very status as 'fiction'"⁴⁶. Thus, since the understanding of the past is an extremely difficult task, each discipline can contribute with its different perspective. In that sense, history and literature are not contrary but rather complementary subjects in their treatment of the past.

⁴⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 47.

⁴⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 18.

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

From our discussion so far, it can be seen that the concept “historical novel” is loose enough to cover every novel with any kind of connection with what we call “our world.” However, most readers can distinguish between a historical novel and another type of novel simply by using their intuition. This last section will attempt to clarify the main characteristics that any historical novel needs to fulfil in order to be considered as historical.

1. The historical novel has to set its action in the past. This seems to be clear but the problem appears when that *past* has to be defined. All human actions are determined by time. But the present is ephemeral and becomes part of the past every second. Furthermore, the past is no more than a collection of traces that we can memorise and actualise, but something that no longer exists in the present. Ricoeur describes this problem by stating that “the present is then indicated by the coincidence between an event and the discourse that states it.”⁴⁷ However, the question seems to deal more with the concept of the *contemporary* rather than with that of the *present*, which is an unreachable instant. As stated above, remoteness in time allows an author to adopt a sufficiently historical perspective to write a historical novel, but that distance can be simulated even when recreating contemporary events. An example of this could be the novel *Amalia* (1851-55) written by the Argentinean José Mármol. This novel falls halfway between the historical novel and the realist-romantic novel, since although it fulfils all the formal requirements to be considered as a historical novel, the plot is based on events contemporaneous with Mármol’s life. A closer study of its plot, however, reveals that Mármol employs a historical perspective, distancing himself from the events. Besides, he is making neither a documentary

⁴⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 109.

realist nor a journalistic treatment of the events, but rather, he is recovering them as if they were part of the historical past. In that sense, this novel should be included in the category of the historical novel. Thus, the question of the historical past will have to be clarified when we are studying a historical novel.

2. The historical novel has to make a reconstruction of the historical period in which its plot is set, and it has to be able to capture the essence of that period in some way. According to Carlos Mata Induráin, “para que una novela sea verdaderamente histórica debe reconstruir, o al menos intentar reconstruir, la época en que sitúa su acción.”⁴⁸ Traditionally, the issue of whether it achieved this partially or totally was one of the factors judged by critics in order to consider the quality of the book. Even now, some historical novels are rejected by historians because of their *lack of accuracy*. However, the role and relevance of history differs from one novel to another. On the one hand, for instance, there is Alejo Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo* (1949) that is a reconstruction of Haiti’s struggle for independence. In this novel, the author recreates not only that specific historical period, but also the feelings and the fears of the people, offering a perfectly valid portrait of the period. However, a subtle manipulation of the past is present when the author decides to include some historical characters such as Pauline Bonaparte, Mackandal and Bouckman and exclude others such as Jean Dessalines and Alexandre Pétion. The atmosphere of the novel enables us to discover that historical moment, highlighting some circumstances while forgetting others. On the other hand, there are novels such as *La huella del conejo* (1991) by the Mexican writer Julián Meza. This novel re-invents Christopher Columbus’ travel to the Indies and its topic is essentially historical. The main characters are Columbus and the Pinzón brothers, and the narrator tells the story of a

⁴⁸ Mata Induráin, “Retrospectiva,” 12.

trip and a discovery. The plot is easily identifiable with Columbus' adventure but history is completely subverted in a way that appears barely recognizable and the narration is full of inaccuracies and anachronisms. However, this novel is clearly a historical novel, since it is reconstructing a historical period and its inaccuracies cannot be considered as determining factors in judging the quality of the novel. It must be borne in mind that a novelist is free to change and subvert history, since the role of a novel is not a didactic one. The historical facts, however, have to be identifiable in order to be catalogued as a historical novel. The essential element in a novel is the story, not the history, since if this were the case, it would stop being a novel and would become a book of history. However, the historical part has to form the basis from which to tell the fictional story. Thus, a novel will have some freedom to subvert, recreate and transform history, but the historical reconstruction is essential in order for the work to be considered as historical.

3. The historical novel has to offer a historical topic. Referring to the nature of these novels, Lukács feels there are no structural differences with respect to the conventional novel; what makes a novel historical is the theme and this "historical theme" is related to the selection of transcendent historical facts. For instance, Gabriel García Márquez's *El general en su laberinto* (1989) is a novel about the decadence and the glorious moments of Simón Bolívar's life. The historical topic is the biography of Bolívar, a historical character whose existence can be confirmed and whose life has been reconstructed by historiography. The last moments of Bolívar's life provides the novel with the necessary historical character, since his biography is factually verifiable in history. As such, to consider that a novel has a historical theme, it is necessary for this theme to be related to facts of history.

4. In every historical novel there has to be an equilibrium between the fictional and the historical parts. A historical novel is both novel and history, and both need to be subtly integrated within the novel. The novel needs to recreate a historical character or event, but the novelist should not overload a novel with historical data because then it will become a documented, historiographical fictional book. As such, the writer has to find the balance between the parts. However, since the novelist is dealing with “historical novels” and not with “fictional history,” the most important element will be the *novel* and not the *history*. Hence, the element that will be taken into account in order to determine its quality as a novel, will be its poetic quality, its style and its internal congruency, not its loyalty to that historical period. A good example of this aspect could be the novel *El señor presidente* (1946)⁴⁹ by the Guatemalan writer Miguel Ángel Asturias. Although the story is set during a particular historical period and deals in a retrospective fashion with Manuel Estrada Cabrera’s dictatorship, the plot is completely fictional. Asturias tells us the story of Cara de Ángel, the favourite minister of a dictator-president, never named, who ends up in jail. The events are invented –or presented as the history of *what could have happened*- but the period in which the plot is set is historical. In this sense, the novelist demonstrates a certain loyalty to history, but it is precisely because a historical novel is first and foremost a novel that this loyalty can be suspended in order to create a fictional plot. In this regard, apocryphal versions of history are very common in the recent historical novel, and some of these versions fit perfectly with documented history. For instance, *Morada interior* (1972) by Angelina Muñiz reproduces the contents of the secret diary of Santa Teresa de Jesús. The diary is based upon historical sources, but some aspects, such as the problems with religion

⁴⁹ Although *El señor presidente* was not published until 1946 because of the censorship in Guatemala, Asturias wrote the book during his stay in Paris (1923-1933).

that confront the fictional Santa Teresa are historically unverifiable. This story fits in history but it is a fictional interpretation of the past.

5. With regard to the traditional historical novel, the historical characters are frequently secondary characters and are rarely the protagonists.⁵⁰ History informs the atmosphere of the novel, and these historical characters contribute to the reconstruction of the past but not to the development of the plot. Linda Hutcheon believes that “in many historical novels, the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal, ontological sleight of hand.”⁵¹ Some novels use techniques such as that of the found manuscript or the pseudoautobiography to give verisimilitude to what is being recounted and the use of broadly known historical characters serves to increase this verisimilitude, a device which can be traced back to *Don Quixote*. In contrast, the main characters tend to be part of what Unamuno called *intrahistory* and they represent the history of people’s every day life. For instance, when Mariano Azuela tells us about the disenchantment of the Mexican revolutionaries in *Los de abajo* (1915), the story deals with unknown characters such as Luis Cervantes, Anastasio Montañés and Demetrio Macías (los de abajo). Historical characters such as Pancho Villa, Pánfilo Natera and Álvaro Obregón (los de arriba) are just named in the novel and they are not main characters. However, the historical novels in Latin America and especially the most recent ones, differ from this. As we shall see in the next chapter, the theory of the representative man that owes a debt and has an antecedent in Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, has led to,

⁵⁰ We will see that this changes with the recent historical novel in Latin America, where novels focusing on a historical figure have proliferated during the second half of the twentieth century. Examples of this are numerous and include novels such as *El general en su laberinto* (1989) by Gabriel García Márquez, *Vigilia del almirante* (1992) by Augusto Roa Bastos, and *El largo atardecer del caminante* (1992) by Abel Posse.

⁵¹ Linda Hutcheon, “The past time of the past”, in Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy, eds., *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, 2nd ed (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 483-4.

especially in Argentina, the historical novel being determined by an interest for infamous representative personalities such as Hernán Cortés, Christopher Columbus, or Simón Bolívar.

6. Lastly, the question of freedom and the boundaries between “slightly fictional” and “completely invented” play a decisive role in any historical novel. While a novelist has the freedom to recount history as s/he pleases in a historical novel, a historian must be as faithful to his/her sources as possible, and must follow some methodological rules imposed by his discipline when conducting research. A writer can permit him/herself certain liberties that a historian cannot. Furthermore, if the traditional historical novel intended to be relatively faithful to the historical past, the recent historical novel is deliberately unfaithful, continually transgressing the limits between fact and fiction. This is known as the manipulation of history and is a very popular device among recent historical novels. For instance, in Abel Posse’s *Los perros del paraíso* (1983), the historical element of the novel is emphasized by the chronological notes that precede every part. However, history is manipulated by the author since he introduces apocryphal, anachronistic or fictional events attributed to historical or fictional characters. According to Miguel Zugasti, this is due to the fact that “lo poético está por encima del rigorismo historicista”⁵² and, hence, the novelist is allowed to be unfaithful to history.

⁵² Miguel Zugasti, “El Bandolero de Tirso de Molina: Novela histórica de tema hagiográfico. Apuntes para el estudio del género en el Barroco”, in Kurt Spang, Ignacio Arellano and Carlos Mata, eds., *La Novela Histórica: Teoría y Comentarios*, 2nd edn (Pamplona: EUNSA, 1998), 109.

6. CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to establish the boundaries of the historical novel as a genre. The aim has been to define the characteristics of what has traditionally been considered as a historical novel and to introduce the problems associated with this type of novel, problems which will be applied to the case of Mexico and Latin America throughout the next chapter.

Our definition of the historical novel, as it will be considered in this dissertation, will fulfil two commitments. Firstly, it will be a novel that deals with *historical facts*, i.e., facts about the past that have had subsequent repercussions. Secondly, in the case of portraying events that are contemporary with the author, these events will be presented from an historical perspective and will be treated, along with the *invented facts*, as if they both were historical.

The next chapter will explain the recent proliferation of this genre in Latin America, focusing on the causes and the special features of these novels in the Mexican context. On the one hand, this genre will prove to be a very commercial one, possibly because of the enduring attraction of historical themes.⁵³ On the other hand, the versatility of the recent historical novel opens up a new path for a culture exhausted with technical experimentation. The best proof of this success is the great proliferation in the number of historical novels in Latin America, and the tremendous development that this genre has experienced during the past few decades. The reasons

⁵³ Michael Stanford states in *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) that man's fascination with History is due to a desire to know about other men (this is exemplified in the success of the reality TV shows nowadays where we can witness and know everything about other peoples' lives). Stanford also states that History stimulates our imagination by a strange element and exoticism. But this need to know is more related to the necessity of knowing ourselves rather than knowing others. By knowing about the past, man feels that his life has a meaning. The human desire for verifying that the world existed before him as an individual and that this existence is motivated by the action of some historical forces is related to the eternal human preoccupation about the topic of immortality. Mortal man is obsessed with death. But history gives him some relief since he realises that his acts are immortal from the moment they become part of the narrativized past.

why this proliferation has taken place specifically in Latin America will be found in the origins of the history of the Latin American countries, and will be seen to relate to a necessity for self-discovery within a national context.

CHAPTER 2: THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN LATIN

AMERICA

1. INTRODUCTION

What Seymour Menton has called the new historical novel appears in Latin America towards the middle of the twentieth century. Defining this type of novel and establishing the features that characterize it is a task that has been undertaken by many critics recently.¹ The urgency for scholars to establish the boundaries of this genre was not felt until the twentieth century, when it became associated with both realist and romantic historical novels. However, the second half of the twentieth century saw the appearance of a new type of novel slightly different from the traditional historical novel but demonstrating a marked preference for dealing with historical themes. This chapter will cover the twin problems of understanding this process and that of accurately categorising the recent historical novel. In order to address the issues raised we must first turn to the question of the origins of this phenomenon. The historical novel as a genre changes to enable itself to illustrate a historical process that cannot be explained.

The main obstacle to the understanding of the genre of the historical novel seems to lie in its intrinsically hybrid nature. This problem, as examined in the previous chapter, has been a feature of the historical novel from its very beginnings.

¹ This refers to classic works that discuss the historical novel in Latin America such as that already quoted by Menton (1993) and others, e.g. Noé Jitrik (1995), María Cristina Pons (1996), Fernando Aínsa (2003) and Ana Rosa Domenella (2002).

This ambiguity is particularly determined by the crisis of history -as a non-stable and non-univocal phenomenon- and by the fact that the role history should play in a novel in order for the work to be considered as historical has not yet been established. Influenced by the new current of uncertainty regarding historical knowledge and reality itself, the historical novel presents some questions with no answer in order to challenge any univocal interpretation of the world. In this sense, the recent narrative is subversive and offers a historical interpretation that rejects the official version of history endorsed and sustained by authoritarian governments through schoolbooks, public holidays, parades, monuments, street names, etc. Therefore, the recent historical novel highlights this dilemma confronting the reader with an alternative conception of reality. These writers create their books for an “ideal reader” who is willing to create a new story with every reading. After all, this subverted new version of the past accords with the postmodern tendency of these writers to debunk any kind of definitively imposed version of national history. And, it might legitimately be asked whether there is any other version that tries harder to legitimate itself than the official one.

Some scholars see parallels between the new historical novel in Latin America and the postmodern condition, while others reject this connection by considering it not applicable to the Latin American socio-historical conditions. Postmodernism arose as a reaction against the absolute values and the idea of progress imposed by Modernity.² Generally speaking, this dissertation will refer to postmodernism as a

² In this field of research, there are a great number of different attitudes. Scholars such as Néstor García Canclini, Alfonso de Toro or George Yúdice defend the applicability of the term *postmodernity* to the Latin American cultural spectrum. A different position is adopted by Nelson Osorio, who rejects the existence of a period called *postmodernity* and consequently further refuses to accept the validity of the postulates of this cultural tendency. For him, *postmodernism* is an imported term that refers to realities that are not Latin American. In this sense, Osorio highlights the nonsense of talking about postmodernity as a reaction against a modernity that has never taken place in the subcontinent. On the contrary, Canclini proposes the redefinition of the concept of modernity to make the term applicable to Latin America. For him, this reveals a concern with creating a transcultural parallelism.

cultural tendency that challenges any univocal and absolute understanding of reality. The recent historical novel deals with the issue of how we interpret the past today and is characterized by a rewriting that demythologizes history and by the use of narrative devices associated with postmodernism.³ As we shall see throughout this chapter, although the appropriateness of using the term postmodernism in a Latin American context has been questioned, this current of thought has flourished in these countries and the recent novel has been mostly influenced by the postmodern condition.

Although the historical novel is not a new genre, its nature changed dramatically during the last decades of the twentieth century. The hypothesis proposed will be as follows: the historical novel arises, according to Lukács, during a period of historical crisis. However, since Mexican history is one of continuous crises, the reappearance and strengthening of this genre from the 1970s in Mexico would have not been caused by a historical crisis -in the socio-political sense of the term-, but rather by a crisis of identity. This chapter will tackle the question of the re-invention of the historical novel in Latin America –and specifically in Mexico- in order to explore the main causes that led to its revival and to understand the growth experienced by this genre during the last decades of the twentieth century.

³ We refer here to the use of deliberate anachronisms, metafiction, desacralization of the hero, intertextuality, self-referentiality, etc., identified by Linda Hutcheon as features of postmodernism. Hutcheon suggests the term *historiographic metafiction* for naming those novels that deal with history in the frame of postmodernity. However, she does not consider *historiographic metafiction*s as historical novels although she quotes historical novels such as Roa Bastos' *Yo el Supremo* to illustrate her theory. Due to this, this dissertation will follow Hutcheon's work in analysing the characteristics of the recent historical novel. However, the term used will be rather that of "the recent historical novel," because we consider that the metafictional nature of these novels is one of its features but not the main one.

2. THE ORIGINS OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN LATIN AMERICA

Most of the historical novels of the nineteenth century in Latin America deal with the theme of the Iberian conquest and demonstrate a preoccupation with reinforcing the concept of nationhood of the Americas. The preoccupations of the authors of this period seem to revolve around issues relating to the foundation of a sense of national identity. These issues are often characterised by a need for returning to their origins in order to rediscover the roots of America.⁴ Conquerors, priests and adventurers such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, and Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, had left their visions and impressions about those new lands in numerous chronicles and reports. According to Daniel Balderston, the historical topics more frequently covered by the authors of the nineteenth century were those of the conquest and independence.⁵ This is the case of *Netzula* (1832) by the Mexican, José María Lafragua which recreates the story of the Aztec defeat. Also, Eligio Ancona's *Los mártires de Anáhuac* (1870) focuses on the arrival and subsequent conquest of Tenochtitlan by Cortés. However, there are some novels that deal with the colonial era such as *La novia del hereje* (1846) by the Argentinean, Vicente Fidel López, and *Guatimocín* (1846) by the Cuban, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. Also, the new romantic spirit among those American countries that had recently acquired independence fostered nationalistic feelings. This is why these writers preferred to present the topic of conquest from the point of view of the Indians, selecting plots which deal with the wars between Indians and Spaniards. These books all demonstrate a preference for an epic and grandiloquent tone combined with the idealization of the

⁴ Octavio Paz points out that "México nace en el siglo XVI" and it is this century that has been covered more extensively by the historical novel, in *El laberinto de la soledad* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1993), 240.

⁵ Balderston, *The historical novel*, 9.

Indian, a very strong anti-Spanish sentiment and a great optimism about America's future. The nineteenth century was influenced by Rousseau's theories about the noble savage. But these books also reflected a desire to support the recently acquired independence and retrospectively endow heterogeneous racial groups with a common national past. The first Latin American historical novel, *Xicoténcatl* (Philadelphia, 1826), written by an anonymous Mexican author, is a strongly anti-Spanish work that tells of Cortés' and his allies, the Tlaxcaltecs, march on Tenochtitlan. The novel depicts an idealisation of the Indians and presents the beauty of a perfect world stained by the Spaniards' arrival.

As discussed in chapter one, the historical novel as a genre appears during a critical moment in the history of communities, a period of socio-political changes when countries were starting to develop their own national identity. Also, the Napoleonic threat in Europe provoked a reaction against an enemy force. Hence, the nations under attack needed to define 'our' identity in opposition to 'their' identity in order to create a sense of unity to fight against that alien threat. Following Lukács' theories, critical moments in the history of nations are widely perceived by critics as forming the defining spur of the emergence and proliferation of the historical novel. However, far from being a uniform process that can be taken for granted, this thesis seeks to highlight and explore several complicating factors in the specific case of Mexico and Latin America.

Firstly, the relationship between literature and history in Latin America has been a very special one from the beginning. The first men that wrote about the American adventure, such as Christopher Columbus, Hernán Cortés or Bernal Díaz del Castillo, were not men of letters in the conventional sense. But neither were they historians. These navigators and adventurers felt obliged to inform the rest of the

world about the new reality they had discovered. Some of the works created by them are studied nowadays at universities as works of literature, but these books were not written primarily for artistic reasons. The testimonial value of these books as primary historical sources of the discovery and conquest of America is immense. However, these narratives contain many references to imaginary events that appear along with documented facts and, as a consequence, they cannot be considered as history books. This particular treatment of reality in these first books has developed into a special approach to history in the Latin American novel, an approach that has in turn influenced the recent historical novel.

Secondly, in the case of Mexico, the line that connects the rise and development of the historical novel with a set moment of crisis in the country's history is not a clear one. In the context of Mexican history, it is difficult to avoid making the following conclusion: Mexican history, especially from the beginning of the war of independence in 1810, is one of continuous crisis and change.⁶ The first Mexican historical novel, *Xicotencatl* (1826), written by an anonymous author, was published in Philadelphia and its appearance reflects a widespread national concern. The War of Independence in Mexico started as a Civil War in which most of the creoles remained loyal to Spain. This uprising was motivated by several factors, including the social discontent motivated by the abuse of power carried out by Spaniards, who were retaining positions of power, and the Bourbon Reforms imposed upon the colonies. However, after the formal proclamation of Independence through

⁶ During the nineteenth century, Mexico experienced wars, foreign interventions, changes of government, economic crisis and social disasters that culminated with the thirty year long *porfiriato*. Porfirio Díaz ruled Mexico for thirty of the thirty four years between 1876 and 1911. His despotic government brought some stability to the country but also provoked a great social unrest that led to the 1910 Mexican Revolution and what has been called the *década sangrienta* (bloody decade). The subsequent power struggle among the different factions, ended with the establishment of a democracy controlled by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which claimed to win the elections until 2000. For more information on this topic see *Historia General de México*. Versión 2000 (México City: El Colegio de México, 2000).

the Plan of Iguala in 1821 and its subsequent rejection by Fernando VII, the initial conflict of interests turned into a direct diplomatic confrontation between two different countries: Spain and Mexico. Hence, with independence recently acquired, the most difficult task for Mexicans seemed to be the differentiation between two cultures that had been linked for three centuries and the complete separation between Mexicans and *the others*. In this context, it seemed essential to make an effort to rediscover the bravery of the Tlaxcaltecs who fought against and with the Spaniards and to highlight the cruelty of the Spaniards whose descendants the Mexicans were combating at the time. Conversely, the growth of the recent historical novel, especially from the 1970s can be seen as reflecting a feeling of social disenchantment that would have led Mexican people to question how, as a society, they had come to such a pass. The answers to this question are to be found in the historical circumstances leading up to the present day. Successive Mexican governments had maintained the image of a stable and long-lasting democracy and of a developed country, in the Latin American context. This was shattered in 1968 with the massacre of students in Tlatelolco. This incident, along with the social disappointment and the sense of powerlessness felt by a society that thought it was safe from reprisals of this nature, served as a spark to reignite the debate about Mexican identity. We might posit that in relatively untroubled times societies are less pre-occupied with questions of identity. However, in times of crisis, when societies are challenged by the 'other' in a context of uncertainty, they then feel the need to assert their identity, to define it, and will employ history, memory and myth to do so. Mexico has been in constant crisis since its formation as an independent nation state. It may be argued that this fact motivated the endless national obsession for defining *lo mexicano*, the national identity of the Mexican, from Carlos María de Bustamante to Roger Bartra. In short,

the recent historical novel in Mexico may be regarded as being determined by a search for identity throughout a national history in perpetual crisis. Hence, this genre has tended to be revived by moments of social disenchantment throughout Mexican history.

Lastly, the historical novel in Latin America has been studied as a whole as if it was a single, homogeneous entity, pointing out the similarities but without highlighting the disparities between novels from different countries.⁷ The historical novel in Latin America has had a spectacular development during the past decades but this process has not been the same all around Latin America. Given the lack of focus of previous critics to adequately discriminate between the different national contexts of the recent historical novel, this thesis will focus on Mexico with reference to the production of the historical novel as a global process in Latin America and in the world. Thus, we will deal with Mexican novels published from the 1960s in order to charter the evolution of the historical novel during the last decades of the twentieth century.

2.1. Fact and fiction as the bases of the historical novel in Latin America

The first chronicles and letters about America, the accounts of the different conquests and all of the other historical and pseudo-historical documents related to the discovery, conquest and colonization of America have been shown to be already falsified and manipulative. On the one hand, they were addressed to a specific audience, generally the monarchs. The aspirations of these early pseudo-historians were to leave a record of the heroic Spanish actions or deny accusations aimed at damaging the author's personal honour. Furthermore, the fascination that these

⁷ Most of the critical studies about the historical novel refer to it as a global process. This is the line of investigation followed by critics such as González Echevarría (1984), Menton (1993), Pons (1996) or Aínsa (2003).

conquerors felt when they discovered this different world, coupled with their inability to explain its new reality, encouraged the interpolation of fantastic elements within these chronicles that would forever retain a certain poetic aura.

Columbus' *Diario de a bordo* is widely held as the origin of Latin American literature. This diary was edited by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas', the defender of the Indians. While Columbus' original text and intentions remained intact at the hands of his editor, Fray Bartolomé, the book also contains the friar's personal thoughts. The Indians are portrayed as extremely generous, almost angelic, in contrast to the Spaniards, who appear full of greed and obsessed with gold. Columbus is presented by his editor as a dreamer who attempted, as far as was within his power to do so, to stop the atrocities committed against the Indians and the abuse of power by the Spaniards:

En llegando allá los cristianos, tomó el señor de la mano al escribano del Almirante, que era uno de ellos, el cual enviaba el Almirante para que no consintiese hacer a los demás cosa indebida a los indios, porque como fuesen tan francos los indios y los españoles tan codiciosos y desmedidos, que no les basta que por un cabo de agujeta y aun por un pedazo de vidrio y de escudilla y por otras cosas de no nada les daban los indios cuanto querían, pero, aunque sin darles algo se los querrían todo haber y tomar, lo que el Almirante siempre prohibía, y aunque también eran muchas cosas de poco valor, sino era el oro, las que daban a los cristianos, pero el Almirante, mirando el franco corazón de los indios, que por seis contezuelas de vidrio darían y daban un pedazo de oro, por eso mandaba que ninguna cosa se recibiese de ellos que no se les diese algo en pago.⁸

⁸ Cristóbal Colón, *Diario de a bordo* (Madrid: Historia 16, 1985), 163.

The *Diario* was written by Columbus with the aim of praising his own role in serving the monarchs and, logically, he would have been unlikely to have pictured himself as a cruel gold hunter. While this particular point can be argued further, in this historical document the **presentation of the events** has been **manipulated** so as to support the author's interests to show his intentions in a more favourable light, be this Columbus' or Las Casas'. There are numerous references to the ease with which they were able to Christianise Indians, who are presented as docile beings with no religion, living in sin through ignorance. However, they are also shown as accepting the word of God in a spirit of simple generosity and with a profound desire to grasp *the true faith*. In this sense, one of the principal aims of Columbus' expedition had been to "spread Christianity" and, in this sense, he can be regarded as having been extremely successful. Columbus points out that he thought they were "gente que mejor se libraría y convertiría a Nuestra Santa Fe con Amor que no por fuerza"⁹ and later states that "se trabajará de hacer todos estos pueblos cristianos, porque de ligero se hará, porque ellos no tienen secta ninguna ni son idólatras."¹⁰

The notion of **falsifying a historical document**, a common feature in Latin American novels towards the end of the twentieth century, derives from the chronicles of the conquest. Columbus deliberately tricked his men to avoid them despairing at the length of the journey. Las Casas says that "habrían andado aquel día al Oeste, cuatro leguas, porque siempre fingía [Colón] a la gente que hacía poco camino, porque no les pareciese largo, por manera que escribió por dos caminos aquel viaje: el menor fue el fingido y el mayor el verdadero."¹¹ Las Casas himself doubts at one stage the veracity of the historical document: "Al parecer del Almirante, distaba de la línea equinoccial 42 grados hacia la banda del Norte, si no está corrupta la letra de

⁹ Ibid., 90.

¹⁰ Ibid., 134.

¹¹ Ibid., 83.

donde trasladé esto.”¹² The incorrect latitude noted by Columbus could be attributed to a further attempt to confuse his crew and other rival navies, but Las Casas presents the possibility of there being an error in the original document.

The mixture of fantasy and reality is one of the most salient characteristics of these chronicles. The navigators arrive at a new world where everything is indeed different to what they had seen up to that moment in Europe and on their Western travels. On many occasions they did not have sufficient words to describe their situation. Books of chivalry and medieval myths created from the stories told by travellers such as Marco Polo presented these men with a fantastic range of descriptive vocabulary which they used to explain this new overwhelming reality in European terms. According to Bernard Bentley, in the sixteenth century the differentiation between the notions of history and literature was not as clear as it is today and he states that, “cualquier ‘mentira’ podría ser aceptada con tal que fuera plausible, o que los odores no la supieran mejor, y que estuviera presentada en un contexto que no se conocía y se tenía que aceptar por verdadero.”¹³ In the case of the the new conditions constituting a wholly different “reality” discovered in America, its exoticism and the complete ignorance that Western people had about those lands, provided writers with a huge material with which they could experiment and create fantastic stories. Bentley also highlights the important role of verisimilitude in history books, where historians were conventionally obliged to tell the truth and avoid ambiguity. The overwhelming impact of what must have seemed an entirely new reality led to some of those writers attempting to accommodate that reality with the previous European beliefs inherited from the Bible or from classical mythology. Thus,

¹² Ibid., 111.

¹³ Bernard P. E. Bentley, “La historiografía ante la experiencia de las Américas y de las ficciones narrativas: el caso de la *Relación de la jornada de Cíbola* de Pedro de Castañeda,” in *Primer Congreso AngloHispano*, ed. Alan Deyermond & Ralph Penny (Madrid: Castalia 1993), 75.

writers and historians were falsifying what might be regarded as historical reality in order to give the story more credibility and provide the rest of the world with a picture they could understand.

The assuredness with which Christopher Columbus speaks of the exact location of the Garden of Eden in his *Diario*, the route which the wise men followed to reach Bethlehem or the island inhabited by the Amazons, is remarkable. The myth of the Amazons is referred to frequently by the Indians. They told Columbus how to arrive at the island of these self-sufficient female warriors who only mixed with men to reproduce. Columbus says that “de la isla de Matinino dijo aquel indio que era toda poblada de mujeres sin hombres, y que en ella hay muy mucho tuob que es oro o alambre, y que es mas al Leste de Carib.”¹⁴ Later on, the existence of this island inhabited by women is confirmed by some more Indians:

Dijéronle los indios que por aquella vía hallaría la isla de Matinino, que diz era poblada de mujeres sin hombres, lo cual el Almirante mucho quisiera (ver) por llevar diz que a los Reyes cinco o seis de ellas; pero dudaba que los indios supiesen bien la derrota, y él no se podía detener por el peligro del agua que cogían las carabelas, mas diz que era cierto que las había y que a cierto tiempo del año venían los hombres a ella de la dicha isla de Carib, que diz que estaba de ellas diez o doce leguas, y si parían niño enviábanlo a la isla de los hombres, y si niña, dejábanla consigo.¹⁵

When Columbus arrives on the new continent, he is convinced that he is approaching the Garden of Eden:

¹⁴ Colón, *Diario*, 188.

¹⁵ Ibid., 192.

Concluyendo, dice el Almirante que bien dijeron los sacros teólogos y los sabios filósofos que el Paraíso Terrenal está en el fin de Oriente, porque, es lugar temperadísimo. Así que aquellas tierras que agora él había descubierto, es –dice él- el fin del Oriente.¹⁶

Hence, Columbus' *Diario*, the first historical and literary document of the conquest, served as a guideline for all subsequent works of fiction that use history in any way.¹⁷ Columbus' travelogue represents the ideal brought to life by Cervantes in his *Don Quixote*, in which books themselves shape perceived reality, rather than the perceptions that inform the books. It can be argued that Columbus' *Diario* is the first text of Latin American literature. As such, the work brings with it a peculiar form of interpreting literature and history that has come to influence the appearance of magical realism and the development of the recent historical novel. Consequently, the Latin American novel draws nearer to reality from a perspective of belief in contrast to the default position of scepticism seen in postmodernism. These novelists *believe everything*. Anything and everything can have a place in a novel since, in these countries, reality overcame fiction from the beginning.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., 208

¹⁷ Luis Arranz in his introduction to Columbus', *Diario de a bordo*, explains Columbus' way of thinking by raising two issues. On the one hand, Columbus was a man belonging to the middle ages with regard to his ideas on religion and interpretations of culture. On the other hand, his prophetic messianism led him to believe that he was the one chosen to spread Christ's word through new countries and cultures (Arranz, 1985). Both notions are evident in Columbus' *Diario*, equally in the way in which he presents himself as in the location of lands of fantasy, as much mythological as Biblical.

¹⁸ Beyond the scope of the current work is the study of other chronicles and history books of the era of the conquest. Two works will suffice as examples of the genre. The first is the case of the *Conquista de México* where its author, Francisco López de Gómara attributes the Spanish victories to a mysterious knight, Santiago, who accompanies them during battles. This claim would be refuted later on by one of the witnesses, Bernal Díaz del Castillo in his book, *Historia verdadera*, which states, with a tinge of sarcasm, "que todas nuestras obras y vistorias son por mano de nuestro señor Jesucristo y que en aquella batalla había para cada uno de nosotros tantos indios, que a puñados de tierra nos cegaran, salvo que la gran misericordia de Dios en todo nos ayudaba; y pudiera ser que los que dice el Gómara fueran los gloriosos apóstoles señor Santiago o señor san Pedro, e yo, como pecador, no fuese digno de verles." (63-4) The second example would be the *Nafragios* by Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. This being a novel in which documentary values join literary ones, the fantastic adventures reach their

In conclusion, if, as Edmundo O’Gorman says, America was invented rather than discovered¹⁹ –as traditional historiography maintains-, the continent’s history would be more likely to have been created rather than recounted. If the first documents relating to the conquest mixed fiction and reality with the strong conviction of both belonging to the same category, then the historical novel will follow this path as well. What is widely termed ‘reality’, as filtered through the lens of American experience, cannot be explained through conventional and narrowly historiographical treatments. Hence, fiction could be regarded by critics and those interested in the Latin American context as a legitimate source of history itself, a source which seeks to create narrative accounts for the peculiar circumstances that characterise these countries. With sources such as these chronicles, Latin American novelists have been particularly engaged in developing an understanding of history through the medium of fiction. These authors mix the most extravagant fiction with the most overwhelming reality in order to comprehend their past and their present. This will to enable them to discover their identity.

2.2. The continual crisis in Mexican history

As with the period of the conquest in Mexico, 1968 marked a period of social mutilation, where part of the national identity –considered as a cancer by some politicians- was brutally eradicated once and for all. The wave of dissent driving the student movement that had gathered momentum throughout the world crashed with tragic consequences in Mexico in October with the massacre of students at the infamous Plaza de Tlatelolco, also called Plaza de las Tres Culturas. The State Party

zenith with the resurrection, by Cabeza de Vaca himself of an Indian “que estava muerto e yo avía curado, en presencia dellos se avía levantado bueno” (128).

¹⁹ Edmundo O’Gorman, *La invención de América* (México: FCE, 2004)

or PRI irretrievably lost legitimacy as a consequence of this outrage.²⁰ The growing economic crisis that had become evident by 1973, supposed the end of the “Mexican economic miracle.” That period of stable annual growth, in comparison with the rest of Latin America, ended with the devaluation of the peso in 1976. The decades of the 1980s and 1990s were determined by a succession of economic, political, and social crises. Keeping these historical circumstances in mind, it is reasonable to find a link between this moment of crisis in Mexican history with the appearance of the recent historical novel in Mexico that flourishes in the 1970s. It could be argued that after Tlatelolco, the moment for repairing the constantly damaged national identity had arrived. The massacre of the students marked a turning point in Mexican arts and writers became even more compromised concerned to find solutions.

As stated above, Mexican history is characterised, from the beginning, by consecutive crises joined together in the development of the country.²¹ The nineteenth century can be seen as a continuous “stormy period”, a term coined by Lukács. The first historical novel, *Xicoténcatl*, was published in 1826 and although not many Mexicans read it, it reflects a challenge to the legitimacy of Spanish rule in Mexicans’ country. The greatest change produced at that time was unquestionably the independence from Spain. As in Europe, the rise of the historical novel in Latin America is linked to a radical change in the socio-political configuration. The recently-acquired independence needed whatever kind of support it could muster and

²⁰ The PRI or Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party) was almost the only party –or, at least, the only one with serious aspirations for the presidency– between 1928 and 2000. It was the political party originating from the coalition of most of the parties after the 1911 Mexican Revolution. Plutarco Elías Calles created the PNR or Partido Nacional Revolucionario (Revolutionary National Party) whose purpose, in theory, was to make the postulates of the 1917 Constitution applicable. In practice, it would be an association of the main *caciques* and organizations that recognised Calles as their leader. President Cárdenas ended the power of Calles and changed the name of the Party in 1938, which became the PRM or Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (Mexican Revolution Party). In 1946, the Party adopted the name that it has retained up to the present day, PRI.

²¹ Considering 1814 with the publication of *Waverley* as the date that marks the rise of the historical novel as a genre, the historical period reviewed will be that starting in 1810 with the beginning of the Mexican War of Independence.

the historical novel was thus employed as a legitimatising instrument. The main historical change at that time was the transition from a colonial to an independent type of government and the signs of support came not only from politicians but also from writers. However, after this, establishing the precise critical historical moment that determined the resurgence of the historical novel is problematic.

After independence was achieved in 1821, Mexican society was expectant, anticipating the changes and the benefits that the War of Independence was supposed to bring. The situation that the Spanish Crown left behind was not the most favourable for reconstructing the ex-colony and the new leaders ruling the country were sometimes inexperienced when not just motivated by personal interests. In 1822 Agustín de Iturbide founded the first Mexican Empire: it lasted for less than a year.²² After him, the alternative governments and dictatorships led by Santa Anna made the image of the latter fluctuate between that of a national hero and a *vendepatrias* –as many Mexicans blamed him for the loss of Texas to the United States. He was elected President six times before he was exiled in 1855. Benito Juárez's itinerant government, first formed in 1858, also proved to be far from a paradigm of stability. Juárez had to relocate his government several times under the menace of French troops, but his defeat of Maximilian I, herald of the French intervention in Mexico, converted him into an almost mythological figure: the Indian that had taken revenge for the atrocities committed by a succession of foreigners since Hernán Cortés. As such, war was the normal state in nineteenth-century Mexico.²³ The twentieth century

²² Iturbide was crowned on 21 July 1822 and he abdicated on 19 March 1823.

²³ In 1829, Mexico had to repel a Spanish attempt to reconquer the country. In 1835 Texas started a War for independence supported by the US. In 1838, they fought against France in the "Guerra de los Pasteles". Between 1846 and 1848 the Mexican-American War ended with the loss of half of Mexican territory to the US. The French intervention lasted from 1862 to 1867, ending with the execution of Maximilian I. Apart from all these external wars, there were also several internal ones such as the Caste War in Yucatán (1847-52) or the fight between liberals and conservatives called "Guerra de Tres Años" (1858-1861). With the triumph of the liberal faction, Benito Juárez first and Porfirio Díaz later ruled the country.

looked set to continue the relative stability attained under the *porfirista* regime.²⁴ However, social unrest and the need for radical change finally led to the Mexican Revolution and the “Decena Sangrienta” that saw all factions of Mexican society fighting against each other and resulted in the death of most of the revolutionary leaders and a million Mexicans. The political situation started to resemble a state of normality during the 1930s with Lázaro Cardena’s government after the Cristero Rebellion (1926-29). From 1940 the political situation was at least provisionally resolved and foreign demands for Mexican products reactivated the economy. Mexico entered a period of political stability, unequalled in Latin America, and triggered an accelerated growth and diversification of the economy. As stated above, these prosperous years came to an end during the 1970s with the economical, political and social crisis.²⁵

Two questions arise now. Firstly, which one of the numerous crises in Mexican history should be selected as the one that led to the rise of the historical novel? And secondly, what was unique about that particular crisis? In answer to these questions, we offer the following hypothesis: if it is the case that Mexican history is in continuous crisis, then the recent historical novel arose in a moment of psychological crisis among Mexicans. This moment of crisis is closely related to the search for identity in a historical moment when there was a widespread feeling of powerlessness and fear permeating society and the economy was in deep crisis. This political, economic, and social crisis during the 1970s was particularly acute, since it followed a thirty-year-long period of stability although it was also a period of authoritarianism. This fact, along with the *primermundismo* image projected by the presidency, had

²⁴ We have employed the term “relative” because the notion of stability was exaggerated by the historians of the Porfiriato to justify his hard government and emphasize his success, the so-called “Pax Porfiriana.”

²⁵ *Historia General de México*, versión 2000 (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2000) and *Nueva Historia Mínima de México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2004).

created an atmosphere of optimism and a feeling of national superiority that needed to be reviewed during the 1970s. In this sense, it is not a crisis *per se* that led to despair, and the necessity of understanding it in terms of identity remains pertinent. The resurgence of the recent historical novel is not a response to a crisis from the point of view of a condemned nation. But rather, it is directly linked to a crisis after a brief period of intense hope. The prosperity and economic growth experienced by Mexico for almost three decades was suddenly terminated during the 1970s and the great optimism experienced for a while came to an end. This caused a situation of uncertainty that led some writers to the necessity of “remembering their future” within a context in which Mexicans wanted to know where their country was going once the Priísta legitimacy had been lost. Thus, the need to reinterpret the national past was motivated by a feeling of social exhaustion after the last attempt to establish a solid socio-economic structure in Mexico.

2.3. The presence of the historical novel in the subcontinent

Making generalisations about Hispanic and Latin America is a common activity outside of the countries of which it is formed. The national histories of these countries share many parallels and they are united and separated by the same language. They were colonized by Spaniards and the process of independence within these countries started at approximately the same time. Some Americans even dreamt of a joint Hispanic American project, from Simón Bolívar to Pablo Neruda and Che Guevara. But, considering the historical novel as a global Latin or Hispanic American process is a Eurocentric view that considers all these cultures as homogeneous. In the case of Europe, the term “European literature” is not usual, since the historical and

cultural contexts of these countries are considered to be far from uniform. The new historical novel in Latin America has been studied broadly within the homogenizing tradition -as described above-, but there are few studies that focus on a single country. The literatures of all these countries have common features, but they experienced different historical processes that made them evolve in a peculiar way. The historical novel is not an exception.

Let us take Argentina as a case in point. Whilst this is a country in which many historical novels are published every year, the popularity of this genre in other countries is on a lower scale or even non-existent. Menton gives the example of Chilean literature, where the presence of the historical novel is limited to a few examples, such as *Martes tristes* (1985) by Francisco Simón. Menton identifies the causes of this in terms of the writers' concern with contemporary events such as Pinochet's coup d'état and dictatorship (1973-1990) and with the "preferencia chilena tradicional por novelar de un modo realista el mundo contemporáneo."²⁶ According to Martin Mullins, Chileans want to forget and look forward even if this implies that national literature has become truncated.²⁷ Thus, subtle distinctions need to be made in the term 'Latin American historical novel' in order to describe a process common to all the countries. Even then, it will be a generalisation that will not be applicable to all of them.

Furthermore, the question of the role played by historical crises is one of the factors that may explain why there are significantly fewer historical novels in Chile than in Mexico. If we examine the twentieth century in Chile, we will see that there was a period of stability and almost no change until Allende won the elections of

²⁶ Seymour Menton, *La nueva novela histórica de la América Latina, 1979-1992* (México: FCE, 1993), 47.

²⁷ Martin Mullins, "The Effects of State Violence on National Identity: The Fate of Chilean Historical Narratives Post-1973," in Will Fowler and Peter Lambert (eds.), *Political Violence and the Construction of National Identity in Latin America* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006), 167-186.

1970 and Pinochet carried out his coup d'état in 1973. Indeed, this is one of the topics that contemporary historical novels in Chile, such as Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* (1982), attempt to explain. As we have seen, Mexico was in constant crisis during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and experienced changes of power, coup d'états, scandals and revolutions that provided writers with a great deal of materials to focus on. Some historical periods are insufficiently examined or documented and the lack of documentation creates a factual vacuum which historical novelists have been keen to fill. In some cases, history is presented as a trauma that has to be overcome and the historical novel as a therapy that can help people understand the past and make clear who they really are. The historical novelist returns repeatedly to certain events from different points of view. Sometimes, when people have been oppressed and controlled by an authoritarian regime, such as those by Videla in Argentina or Pinochet in Chile, people feel an overwhelming need to discuss and verbalise their experiences and the widespread atrocities that were committed. At this point, the historical novel becomes the form of choice for writers of fiction because it provides an account of the large-scale historical events as well as a personal and emotional narrative. It can also fill the gaps that history has no access to, by recreating the historical and fictional circumstances of a past event that has not been appropriately documented. The historical novel comes into its own when authors and nations need to express a deep-seated anxiety and verbalise a traumatic experience.

Within the recent historical novel, we can trace the evolution from the most experimental and dark, *Terra Nostra* (1975), towards a novel with more traditional narrative tastes, such as *La corte de los ilusos* (1995). After the experimental novels of the 1950s-70s, the attention of the new authors changed and began to focus on a wider audience. What many critics classify as a "simple" narrative actually represents

a desire to abandon the type of narrative orientated, almost exclusively, to a learned/scholarly public and which seeks intellectual praise for its innovative techniques. The most recent novelists seem to be more interested in telling stories than in experimental techniques that could lessen the message's appeal.

3. THE HISTORICAL NOVEL FROM THE 1970s

3.1. Reasons for the appearance and development of the recent historical novel in Mexico

As stated above, the recent proliferation of the historical novel has been originated by an identity crisis in Mexican society, a crisis driven by certain historical circumstances that challenged the basic assumptions of a society reconstructed after the 1910 Revolution. However, since the cultural and historical circumstances of the twentieth century differed from those of the nineteenth century, the new historical novel consequently diverges from the traditional one which appeared during the nineteenth century. The circumstances that caused the development of this new historical novel also contributed to its compositional structure, influencing the direction that this type of genre would take. Thus, before turning to a consideration of the characteristics of the recent historical novel in Latin America, this section will show some of the motivating factors that helped to shape the historical novel of the second half of the twentieth century. Most Latin American countries shared some of the same conditions that led to the appearance and development of the recent historical novel while some other Latin American countries were specifically attached to what we have termed the Mexican reality. Due to this set of circumstances, the

historical novel will be found to have some common features all around Latin America but it will also be seen to differ from one country to another.

1. With the decline of positivism as a universal approach in academic history, historians became more and more conscious of the limits of historiography as a science and, consequently, more aware of its nature as a subjectively motivated discipline. Philosophers and historians started to formulate a new concept of history and attempt to establish the limitations of a discipline that had unquestioningly accepted its positivistic methodological assumptions, closing the gap between itself and other subjects such as literature or journalism. In this sense, the ideas of historian Arnold J. Toynbee and philosopher Robin G. Collingwood were essential for the development of these changes within the epistemology of history.²⁸

2. The appearance of historical revisionism during the first half of the twentieth century introduced a new, sometimes challenging, way to look at the past. This movement in historiography is a reinterpretation of accepted historical “facts” traditionally provided by official historiography. These historians try to debunk the official versions of history imposed by political regimes that they considered as ideologically influenced, and as orientated with a view to controlling the masses.²⁹

The concerns of these historians are shared with the themes that are treated in some

²⁸ Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975) was a British historian. His *A Study of History* depicts the rise of civilizations as the result of creative responses to physical and social challenges. He explained the rise and decline of civilizations in spiritual terms and criticized those that understood history in scientific terms. Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943) was a professor of Metaphysical Philosophy. His ideas tried to bring together history and philosophy. In the introduction to his masterpiece, *The Idea of History* (1946), he attempted to define a “philosophy of history” and argued that history should be considered as a subject of knowledge such as those of the natural sciences.

²⁹ Some historians consider historical revisionism as a strongly politically-determined pseudohistory. While some of them are highly-regarded historians trying to decipher past events to shed light on new discoveries, others pretend to influence their readers and manipulate them in a political way. In Mexico, the historian Salvador Borrego is considered as a revisionist. The dangers of this way of researching the past are evident through the example of a radical version of it: the denial of the Holocaust, by a group that claimed to be historical revisionists that arose after the Second World War. They disputed, with little or no evidence, widely accepted facts about the Holocaust inventing hypotheses such as the fact that no Jews were gassed or that the Holocaust was a Zionist conspiracy.

recent historical novels, whose authors attempt to challenge official versions of history by using different devices such as subverting facts that are widely held as truths or giving a voice to narrators from marginalised groups, such as women, Indians or historical antiheroes.

3. In 1979, the French philosopher Jean François Lyotard explained what he understood by *the postmodern condition*.³⁰ Thinkers such as Michel Foucault – with his *archaeology of knowledge*- and Jacques Derrida –who is associated with *deconstruction*- presented the problems that appeared in a new era which has been called postmodernity. They showed the incongruity of concepts created by society such as “race”, “gender”, or “nation” although these critics postulated the need for using them even when they considered them to be untenable. These philosophers studied the impossibility of apprehending reality and hence historical reality and the links between literature and history, which provided a new impulse to the study of literary texts. Being both literature and history, narrative works would both accomplish the task of recounting the past. However, even if reconstructing the past seems to be an impossible mission, these philosophers did not reject the concept of history outright but rather sought to establish its limits of applicability.

4. The development of the postmodern phenomenon in literature had a special impact in Latin America. This was generated by the debate that revolved around the dichotomy of modernity as distinct from postmodernity, a debate motivated by the peculiar historical circumstances experienced by the nations of Latin America. As stated above, some critics defended an unproblematic account of the distinction between modernity and postmodernity while others denied the applicability of the label *postmodernism* to the Latin America reality. This debate, still far from

³⁰ Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984)

resolved, at least implies the existence of a new and different, social, politic, economic, and cultural context that had changed and had to be explained. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to find at least a tinge of postmodernism in most of the novels published from the 1970s.

5. Postmodernism can be considered an exhaustion of the absolute values postulated by Modernity. Modernity was based on the Enlightenment belief that humans could gain a greater knowledge of nature through the exercise of critical reason and believed in a rational organisation of everyday life. In opposition to this, Postmodernity is based on the idea that everyday life and history are nothing but chaos and, as a result, the past cannot be represented. The impact of Postmodernism in Latin America in particular brought with it the strongest reaction against tradition. Traditional forms of art were felt to be useful for recounting a new Latin American reality. In the case of literature, the interest in experimental techniques was especially strong during the 1950s, with novelists inspired by writers such as William Faulker, John Dos Passos, and James Joyce. In this context, the recent historical novel represents also a reaction against the traditional historical novel, because it incorporates new techniques and consciously subverts the limits of the historical novel as a genre.

6. The gap between the ideas of the novelists, inspired by postmodernism, and the stagnant socio-political reality in Latin America led to the need for a re-evaluation of the past from a new perspective in order to understand an unstable reality. Intellectuals drew attention to the historical past motivated by the hope of finding within it solutions for current problems. Hence, the intention of reconstructing this past was not one motivated by nostalgia, but rather an attempt to understand the present national reality.

7. The influence of some Latin American precursors such as Carpentier's novels and essays and the philosophical ideas reflected in Borges' short stories laid the foundations for a new concern about history and a new way to confront and understand reality. Carpentier wrote four historical novels: *El reino de este mundo* (1949), *El siglo de las luces* (1962), *Concierto barroco* (1974) and *El arpa y la sombra* (1979), two of which anticipated what we regard as the recent historical novel in Latin America. These novels shared some features with the historical novels from the 1970s, and they foreshadowed the development of this genre. Moreover, Borges' short stories can be considered as a clear antecedent of the subsequent Latin American narrative. Furthermore, the philosophical ideas that underlay his stories appear in the recent historical novel. Borgesian concepts such as the book within the book; the use of irony to confront and challenge reality; the recurrent use of intertextuality and the idea of literature as an eternal palimpsest; the impossibility of knowing absolute reality due to its relative nature; and the cyclical character of history represent some of the main features of the recent historical novel.

8. The recent historical novel grew out of a reaction against partial versions of history. This was a reaction against nineteenth century Mexican historical novels that exalted the pre-Hispanic roots of Mexico, denigrated its colonial past and rejected its Spanish roots. Novels such as *Xicoténcatl* were perfectly valid for the nineteenth century, but a new way to consider reality implied a new way to express it. It is a reaction against the official versions of history produced by governments; against partial historical accounts that are manipulated to hide the truth, and which seek to create a mindset that does not acknowledge dissent. It is, fundamentally, a struggle against the strategic aim of these official versions to legitimise univocal accounts of history that seek to discredit any alternative thought. It is a reaction

against history books created to convince rather than to examine objectively. And it is a reaction against the monuments that stand forever petrified proscribing any different interpretation of the past.

9. In the particular case of Mexico, there is also a problem of identity. During the 1950s the debate about Mexican identity was revitalized thanks to the publication of Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950). The search for identity has been a Mexican issue from Carlos María de Bustamante to José Vasconcelos but this debate is especially developed during the 1950s with the so-called "filosofía de lo mexicano." They claimed to explain national problems by seeking their origins in diverse historical traumas related to national identity. The classic metaphysical question of "who are we?" is tinted with national colours. They try to resolve the ambiguities inherent in a predominantly mixed-race society, such as that of Mexico. According to Paz, the tortured Mexican psyche, offspring of a mother raped by a Spanish father, tries to reject its Spanish part and embrace wholeheartedly its indigenous past. But this denial of identity would have led to a mutilation of the Mexican self and to the creation of a country founded on historical traumas and a crisis of identity.

10. Menton states that "el factor más importante en estimular la creación y la publicación de tantas novelas históricas en los tres últimos lustros ha sido la aproximación del quinto centenario del descubrimiento de América."³¹ We can ask whether it is true that most of the historical novels that are conceived and published during this period cover historical events that occurred during the discovery and the conquest of America. The commemoration of the five hundredth anniversary determined the selection of both, the topic and the historical events portrayed in some

³¹ Menton, *La nueva novela histórica*, 48.

of the historical novels of this time. Therefore, the year 1992 influenced but did not determine the development of the historical novel from the 1970s. The selection of this specific historical period could also be linked to the question of identity. If the historical novel in Latin America, and especially in Mexico, is closely related to national problems of identity, the search and research will focus on the period when these two cultures that gave birth to the Mexican nation –Indians and Spaniards– collided. Also, the historical novel started to develop during the 1970s –or even before, if we consider the cases of Alejo Carpentier and Elena Garro-. There is a substantial break between the five hundredth anniversary in 1992 and the start of the development of the genre. This gap seems to be too long to support the notion that these authors had in mind the proximity of the Centenary. This proximity, then, will be considered as another factor in the development of the recent historical novel but not as the main motivating cause.

11. During the 1970s the illusion of prosperity, created in Mexico during the post revolutionary period with the PRI government, came to an end. This feeling worsened with the political and economic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s and the questioning of the wide-spread idea of “belonging to the first World” that Mexican politicians advocated. The key date is that of 1968 when the global student movements took place. This resulted in many demonstrations against government politics and ended with the massacre of Tlatelolco, a square in Mexico City. This event resulted in the international unmasking of the monoparty Mexican system. After this, the crisis of 1973 led to the end of the prosperous post-war years and the Mexican economy crashed. The historical novel develops at that point caused by a disappointment in the successive governments of the last two centuries and with an awareness of being part of an adolescent continent.

12. More recently, the process of globalization, along with the technological revolution of the last thirty years, has forced nations to consider the risks of the dissolution of national identities. With the world becoming somehow “smaller” and more uniform, one of the key reasons why individuals have become increasingly concerned with issues of national and cultural identity is the dissolution of individual cultures, many of which have been subsumed in a common, global culture driven, in particular, by the massive use of the Internet. In this sense, the recent historical novel represents the last attempt to define a nation and establish its peculiarities.

3.2 Characteristics of the recent historical novel

In his discussion of the historical novel of the second half of the twentieth century, Seymour Menton distinguishes between the traditional-oriented historical novel and the new historical novel, to which he attributes characteristics such as metafictional reflexivity, the deliberate falsification of history, the use of anachronisms and the incorporation of intertexts. However, this classification must be qualified slightly. On the one hand, it is difficult to find historical novels, especially after the 1970s, that do not contain some of the characteristics identified by Menton, as they are general features of the postmodern novel. On the other hand, the distinction between the new novel versus the traditional one implicitly creates a prejudice with regard to the artistic quality of the traditional novel, which is immediately downgraded to the secondary place of the narrative that has already been left behind. It is true that the novels selected by him as ‘new historical novels’ are all widely considered to be of the highest literary quality, but the fact that he makes this

distinction, seems inappropriate. This thesis will refer to the recent historical novel to designate those novels written since the 1970s including some examples from previous decades –such as *Los recuerdos del porvenir* by Elena Garro.

The rise of this new historical novel obeys the desire to learn more about history than is offered in books of history. It does not matter if this ‘more’ literary work is reality or fiction. For instance, historical novels tell what happened to the North American journalist Ambrose Bierce when he crossed the United States border looking for a heroic death in Mexico; if this is not recounted in history books, it is recreated in *Gringo viejo*.³² Fernando del Paso recounts the impressions of Empress Charlotte of Hapsburg in her final moments of life in *Noticias del Imperio*, a fact of the past that was never turned into a fact of history. But some historical novels, such as *Terra Nostra*, offer also fantastic subversions of that past reality, telling the story of a Spanish Catholic King, Felipe II, son of Juana *La loca*, who experienced the discovery of America and then was reincarnated as a wolf. This is what the historical novel has that the book of history does not: the power to speculate. As Juan José Barrientos said, “la nueva novela histórica aprovecha esos rumores que la historia oficial había descartado”³³, and if such rumours do not exist they are simply invented.

In spite of the fact that the phenomenon of the recent historical novel is not homogeneous, certain common features can be identified within these novels:

1. Non-linear time. The conception of historical time as linear is a consistent feature of novels written up to the middle of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, from this moment onwards, the doubts surrounding this linearity expressed by previous writers and historians, leads to a different use of time in the historical novels that

³²In *Gringo viejo* (1985), Carlos Fuentes tells us the true story of this journalist who, aware of his old age, decided to go to Mexico to die memorably before sitting down to watch his decadence. Fuentes gives him a heroic death, such as the real Bierce would have wished for.

³³ Juan José Barrientos, *Ficción-historia. La nueva novela histórica hispanoamericana*, (México: UNAM, 2001)

emerged in this period. It is common to come across different alternatives such as circular or spiral structures that sometimes leave the reader with a sense of retrogression rather than progression. History is no longer presented as a progressive advancement towards a conclusion, but rather as a series of circumstances that occur, without necessarily ever interlinking. On certain occasions the opposite notion is presented: not only does history not advance but it actually turns back towards its origins. History is repeated, apparently transformed, but in essence is the same. García Márquez's, *Cien años de soledad* can be considered as paradigmatic of this approach. The novel starts with the creation and foundation of Macondo and finishes with its destruction. The circle is closed at the end of the narrative and this circular structure creates a sensation of mythical present time, detained eternally. This idea of circular historical movement is related to the indigenous myth of eternal return. In the case of Mexico, the Aztecs believed in the cyclical repetition of a history trapped in a circle of destruction-creation that ruled their lives. For them, the progression of history was an eternal return to their origins, followed by development, destruction and starting again. The situation soon submerges into one of what might be termed "no-time," into an eternal present in which events occur that, temporarily, appear to happen simultaneously. The reader is transported from one historical moment to another with no prior warning.

2. The inability to discover the exact truth about history. The recent historical novel brings with it the inability to know the truth, and consequently, the historical truth. Traditionally, writers of historical novels aspired to capture the essence of a period, either because it interested them or because they wanted to understand the past or as an excuse to reflect on the present and search for answers. Some used this recreated past in their novels to evade the present, as was the case with the romantic

historical novel. This evasion could take place as much spatially as temporally and its aim was to give the story an air of exoticism. With the crisis of historiography, the notion came about that literature could represent historical reality more accurately and faithfully than history itself. In this sense, literature penetrated people's feelings and the way in which they went about their daily lives. The new historical novel goes one step further. Neither history nor literature offer the means of discovering the historical truth, due to the fact that this truth is not linear or reliable. Rather, the "truth" of history has multiple versions, and arises from the infinite combination of experiences, thoughts and perceptions of each individual. The historical truth of a particular moment includes every word, every feeling and every perception of each protagonist, and incorporates the version of every single witness. However, it is not only this, but also each of the different versions that each character can give at certain moments and in different circumstances. They remember different details, they forget others and, with the passing of time, the initial version has either been forgotten or enhanced with details that did not occur or were simply fabricated perceptions felt by the narrator. Still, the fact that these authors are presenting the idea that this truth cannot be known or understood, does not signify that writers and historians have to stop looking for it. They do not deny the existence of a past, neither do they deny the veracity of the documents that emerge from this past. What they pose is the proposition that it is impossible to know this past as it really was. As such, what the new historical novel proposes is the following: if you are not able to apprehend history in its infinite version, invent it. It is at this point when the knowledge of what might have happened acquires immense importance. Literature is history's second opportunity. The fatally cyclical nature of history will only be broken, by understanding what could have occurred and appreciating that whilst history can be changed, the past cannot. These

philosophical reflections have their origins in Borges' short stories, although their roots are in the ideas of philosophers such as Hume or Berkeley³⁴ and even in the pre-Columbian cultures.

3. Historical unfaithfulness. The main goal of the traditional historical novel was to be loyal to history and its commitment to *what really happened in the past*. In the recent historical novel there is a conscious distortion of history. Writers use literary devices such as exaggerations, anachronisms, omissions, and caricaturization. In these novels, historical figures appear transformed. The main characters are distorted in comparison to the historical figures they represent. This distortion is often related to the use of the grotesque. The portrayal of the historical figure is retouched and these changes can be humoristic, burlesque, or even treated in a solemnly conventional way. In other cases, the writer chooses a fictitious character with features of a historical figure. The result of this can be, for instance, a representative character of all Latin American caciques (as in *El otoño del patriarca*), or of some Spanish monarchs (as in *Terra Nostra*). Manipulating historical figures and events has disorienting effects. A set historical fact – including here both figures and events – brings with it intrinsic preconceptions. For instance, Herminio Martínez re-invents the diary of one of the most infamous Spanish colonisers in *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* (1990). By using Nuño de Guzmán as the protagonist in his book, he is creating some expectations with regard to a real historical figure. He does not need to describe him as readers already have a preconceived idea of who he is before they

³⁴ George Berkeley (1684-1753) was the principal representative of idealism. Berkeley's philosophy reduces reality to a combination of representations within our consciousness. Things only exist as and when we perceive them. Berkeley is telling us that feelings are deceitful and that sometimes things are not what they seem. At the same time, Hume tells us that knowledge is solely possibly through imagination. Both are two different forms of extreme scepticism that, through a Borgesian filter, are able to influence the new historical novel. What Borges is presenting us with, is the notion that we cannot really know what reality is because the way in which we view things is determined, not by objects themselves, but rather by our mental categories and our personal circumstances.

read the novel. For those who have heard about Guzmán, the image of one of the cruellest protagonists that makes him sound like a purely fictional character of the conquest of Mexico comes to mind. For those who have not, the name itself will refer, for them to, at least, a person that existed in the past and the book will reveal the atrocities –real and invented- committed by him. But in these novels, instead of serving as a guide full of clues for the reader, historical facts are used as a disorienting instrument, since they are manipulated, exaggerated or combined with elements of fantasy.

4. Ironic reinterpretation of history and intertextuality. History is the most parodied discipline in historical novels, but this parody is extended to literature itself. There are historical and literary intertexts within these historical novels. These intertexts can consist of a number of quotations from a history book, from literary works –by the author himself or by a different author-, or from historical documents either real or fictitious. Sometimes they refer to or recreate an apocryphal version of history. The way that these intertexts are intertwined is normally by way of a parody of history books. For example, in *Los perros del paraíso* (1987), Abel Posse introduces every chapter with a chronology and uses several apocryphal footnotes. Historians and critics of literature use these techniques but literary authors propose an alternative way of reading the texts they are quoting or recreating. They sometimes rewrite the texts. Official history is presented as fiction –created by victors, governments or by anyone motivated by a particular self-interest. In García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967), the official version of Macondo erases any trace of the massacre carried out in the village's train station. The official history of Macondo is a forgery but the only survivor capable of telling the truth, José Arcadio Segundo, will not be believed by a village that trusts the official version. However,

there is not a final version of history in these novels. The historical novel does not offer a single possibility and is not a conclusive genre. Rather, historical events can be interpreted in infinite ways. Scholars should be aware of the historical inaccuracies, but will not find a solution to the problem of the impossibility of completely recovering the past exposed within these historical novels. One of the most radical consequences of this rewriting process is what has been called the “death of the author”. It does not matter if the author is called Cervantes, Pierre Menard, or Juan Rulfo. This universal being is the author of *Don Quixote*, *Yo, el supremo*, and *Ulysses* and all of the books that have been written in the past, are currently being written and that will be written in the future. In addition, this author is also a reader of his own book and rewrites each book many times as a reader. Taken to the point of a *reduction ad absurdum*, this rewriting is not a reinterpretation but an exact reproduction of the text as proposed by Borges in his short story “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”.³⁵ This is why narrators are deliberately confused and confusing, doubting what they see and even their own existence. They doubt if what they witnessed was a dream, a stylized memory, a product of the imagination or a bad interpretation. In this sense, uncertainty will be found to be the main device surrounding the recent historical novel.

5. Metafiction. In the recent historical novel there is a continuous oscillation between fiction and metafiction. Both, the narrator and the author themselves are allowed to reflect on the process of creation and on the process of reading. There are notes about the problems that a writer encounters when creating a story, such as, whose ideas come to him, references to sources, the use of pauses within the plot for discussing a difficulty that the author had when writing that part, etc. This is described

³⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, *Narraciones* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1998), 85-96.

by Fuentes as “una crítica de la creación narrativa contenida dentro de la obra misma: crítica de la creación dentro de la creación”.³⁶ When Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca writes about his secret Indian family in *El largo atardecer del caminante* (Abel Posse, 1992), he exclaims: “¡Por fin! Por fin pude escribirlo. Nunca me costaron más unas cuartillas que éstas. Las rompí varias veces y hasta las quemé en la azotea como los papeles de un criminal.”³⁷ The narration is often presented as a fictitious book, told by a fictitious narrator, written by a fictitious author, inferring sometimes a fictitious reader (us). This reminds one of Borges’ short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”.

6. The recent historical novel in Latin America inherits the features proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his dialogical theory. The dialogic novel always offers two or more possibilities from a single utterance. They often use an unreliable narrator, whose point of view is used to tell the story but who is surrounded by other languages and implications. In *Maluco* (1989), by Napoleón Baccino Ponce de León, the narrator is a buffoon who is apparently the least insane human on the ship. His profession, nonetheless, is one of inventing stories and he could well be inventing this one. Novels are presented as dramatic spaces where carnivals take place. These are the places for finding otherness. History stops being something familiar and becomes the masked protagonist of a carnival. The carnival normally takes place accompanied by grotesque imagery. By incorporating carnivals, orgies, performances, circuses and so on, these novels incorporate the supernatural into “normal” life. The protagonist of Juan José Saer’s *El entenado* (1983) is the only witness of an orgy where the Indians cook and eat his fellow crew members and engage in a sexual feast. The young survivor is the spectator of an atrocious ceremony where the grotesque element reigns. Frequently, the reader is offered different versions of the facts. Sometimes the

³⁶ Carlos Fuentes, *Cervantes o la crítica de la lectura* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Cervantinos, 1994), 15.

³⁷ Abel Posse, *El largo atardecer del caminante* (Barcelona, Mondadori, 2003), 88

same character presents all of these different versions; at other times, the narrator doubts the truth of the story he is telling, suggesting that it could have been a dream. They commonly question the official version of history that was believed to be true for so long. By questioning this version, the narrator at times shakes the belief systems of Western civilizations such as religion, popular beliefs, and behavioural norms. The polyphonic novel is often presented as a parody, and this parody affects every genre, sub genre, subject or narrative discourse that can be the subject of parody. This parody normally finds its referent in history books or official versions of history but they sometimes refer to other books such as chronicles, letters, traditional historical novels or other novels. For instance, Jorge Ibargüengoitia's *Los pasos de López* (1982) is a parody of the novel of the Mexican revolution.

7. The theory of “representative men”. For Lukács, historical novels had to rely on “un ‘héroe’ mediocre, correcto pero no propiamente heroico”.³⁸ However, the historical novel in Latin America follows the theory of “representative men” inherited from Sarmiento's *Facundo*. Most of the recent historical novels discuss different aspects of the lives of historical figures such as Columbus, Cortés or Lope de Aguirre. They also recreate archetypal characters such as the Latin American dictator, the conqueror, or the president. The main characters of the recent historical novel in Latin America are rarely the mediocre hero proposed by Lukács. An exception to this would be two novels by Homero Aridjis: *1492. Vida y tiempos de Juan Cabezón de Castilla* (1985) and *Memorias del Nuevo Mundo* (1988). The main characters of both these novels are fictional. Figures such as Columbus, Cortés and the Catholic Monarchs appear as secondary characters and they are not deemed important for the development of the plot. Lukács states that

³⁸ Georg Lukács, *La novela histórica*, 33.

Scott elige siempre protagonistas que por su carácter y por su destino entran en contacto humano con ambos campamentos. El destino justo de un héroe mediocre de esta especie, que no se decide apasionadamente por uno de los poderes en pugna en la gran crisis de su tiempo, sirve de excelente eslabón unificador en la composición de la obra.³⁹

The use of a protagonist that is a direct witness of the historical events narrated takes place in *Los años con Laura Díaz* (1998) by Carlos Fuentes. His books owe a great debt to cinema. In *Los años con Laura Díaz* he uses Laura as if she was a camera filming and reproducing the Mexican history of the 20th century. However, the recent historical novel in Latin America seems to be more preoccupied with understanding ambiguities about historical personalities. Columbus is the most popular figure in this sense. Books dedicated in part or totally to him are *El arpa y la sombra* (Alejo Carpentier, 1979), *Los perros del paraíso* (Abel Posse, 1983), *Cristóbal Nonato* (Carlos Fuentes, 1987), and *La huella del conejo* (Julián Meza, 1991).

4. CONCLUSION

The recent historical novel in Mexico has been produced in a country traumatized by its history. This trauma originated during the conquest but became a greater problem with the falsifying of history by different political factions. The resurgence of the recent historical novel has also been determined by an awareness of being part of a country in continuous crisis, finally disenchanted by its unfulfilled

³⁹ Ibid., 37.

dreams of glory. The problem of identity that these falsifications and crises created is the source of the recent historical novel and this problem will determine its special nature. In sum, the historical novel in Mexico arises as a protest against partial versions of history and its main goals are to achieve an understanding of the past in the light of the present and the search for a new identity in a period of political, social and cultural exhaustion.

The next chapter will deal with Elena Garro's *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963). Even though this novel was written in 1953 –well before the development of the recent historical novel in Mexico-, its relevance to this thesis lies in the combination of three factors. Firstly, this novel falls in-between the novel of the revolution and the recent historical novel and it can be considered one of the main precursors of the latter. Secondly, the focus on the female characters of the novel anticipates the subsequent postmodern novel that tends to present the plot from a traditionally marginalized perspective. Thirdly, the fact that Garro introduces the fantastic element in a historical novel constitutes a challenge to the concept of verisimilitude traditionally attached to the historical novel and, in that sense, Garro is subverting the rules of the genre. Thus, *Los recuerdos del porvenir* will lay the basis for the historical novel from the 1970s onwards.

CHAPTER 3: THE LOSS OF THE ABSOLUTE:
DECONSTRUCTING THE PATRIARCHAL DISCOURSE
IN *LOS RECUERDOS DEL PORVENIR*

1. INTRODUCTION

Elena Garro (1920-1998) published *Los recuerdos del porvenir*¹ in 1963. However, it has been established that she wrote the book in 1953 while recovering from an illness in Switzerland and that she kept the novel in a trunk for over ten years. Although this novel was written prior to the period covered in this study, it remains a pertinent choice since *Recuerdos* is considered as a precursor of what was to come with the peak of the historical novel occurring at the start of the 1970s.

Firstly, *Recuerdos* is a traditional historical novel that focuses on the era of the Cristero Rebellion in Mexico (1926-1929). This rebellion brought about a confrontation between the Church and the State and was mainly situated in the poor and rural areas. While the principal hierarchies of the Church were in the city forming part of the *Liga Nacional para la Defensa de la Libertad Religiosa*, the armed conflict took place in the rural areas. In many cases, it consisted in local defensive units comprised of neighbours of the town, whose economic resources were limited and could not buy weapons. The Church hierarchy and the State reached an agreement in 1929. However, the conflicts, for religious reasons, lasted ten more years. Garro

¹ Elena Garro, *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1963). All the quotations from the book will refer to this edition. From now onwards, I will refer to it as *Recuerdos*.

chooses this historical moment as the background for her novel because she considers her narrative as an instrument to show the world the situation of the most marginalized people and their struggle to survive.

With regard to her narrative premise, *Recuerdos* anticipates the new tendencies which the historical novel would come to demonstrate. The questioning of the truth extends to the official history of great battles and national heroes insofar as this official history is subverted to give a voice to those that never had the right to speak. For Garro, the present, past, and future co-occur simultaneously, without permitting human beings to escape time's consequences. Each temporal plane influences the others, to the point where the reader is able to predict future actions on the basis of past events.

In this sense, *Recuerdos* is also a social novel that focuses its attention on existential themes such as inequality, solitude, or the anguish of human beings. While it was Lukács who established the proximity between the social-realistic novel and the historical novel, Garro brings them together in this work. However, the influence of this social concern will not be present in subsequent historical novels. This is due to the fact that this novel was written in 1953 and, as such, it portrays several social concerns related to the novel of the revolution and the indianist novel. By employing a historical perspective, Garro shows how certain tragic circumstances never change, highlighting the fact that that everyday life remains essentially the same. This fatalistic perspective is very common in Garro's narrative and is related to her own personal circumstances. In particular, the author centres her attention on the most helpless groups: Indians and women, who are the most anonymous and marginal figures in Mexican society. Through them, Garro demystifies the official version of the History of the Mexican Fatherland enshrined and written by white men. Overall,

she is interested in discovering the identity of two social groups: women and Indians. They have been stripped of everything by a society in which they have no power, a society in which even the powerful are victims of a historical stagnation that condemns the country to a loss of hope. In *Recuerdos*, she attempts to invent the past of those who have never had one so that they are able to remember their future. Even while remaining pessimistic in her vision of Mexico, she sees a way out through imagination, finding a solution in magic as an escape route to a traumatic past and a condemned future.

2. SEARCHING FOR THE LOST TIME

2.1. The abolition of historical time

The narration of *Recuerdos* is situated in an alternative time related to memory, imagination and dreams. Despite the dynamic nature of the narration and the fact that it advances in linear form towards the end of the novel, the reader's temporal sensation is one of being enclosed in a world with its own temporality. The narrator describes this sensation of 'detained' time:

Como en las tragedias, vivíamos dentro de un tiempo quieto y los personajes
sucumbían presos en ese instante detenido. Era en vano que hicieran gestos
cada vez más sangrientos. Habíamos abolido el tiempo.²

The use of this narrative strategy is in some way related to the fact that Ixtepec is remembering itself from a hypothetical present that fulfils the past from the novelistic

² Ibid., 64-65.

space. This fulfilment differs from that used in other historical novels, where the past is presented as something alive and the reader is transported to that exotic world brought to life through the novel. Ixtepec's narrator recounts the story of a dead town whose past cannot be resuscitated, making an implicit statement about the impossibility of recovering the lost time. The experiments with the treatment of the representation of time in this novel are very similar to those used by Juan Rulfo in *Pedro Páramo* (1955). However, in *Pedro Páramo*, the stories emerge audibly from the murmurs of the dead people from Comala. In the case of *Recuerdos* it is, as its title indicates, the collective memory of Ixtepec the figure that tells the story of their people. Thus, while the past cannot be rescued, the time-frame employed in *Recuerdos* is that of an eternal present, a present in which the events of the past are irreversible and have become petrified into a type of memory for future generations. Even though past events cannot be altered, the versions of the past are mutable insofar as people are willing to recreate, suspect or imagine this past. As such, the author does not offer the reader a complete and definitive version of Ixtepec's past. The past is static, but its interpretations are not.

However, from another perspective the sensation of frozen time is suggested by the passiveness of a town on the margins of history, beset by the apathy of people fearful of action and conscious of the inevitable cyclical repetition of history. Ixtepec explains this atemporal situation with the following words:

Un círculo se cerraba sobre mí. Quizá la opresión se debiera al abandono en que me encontraba y a la extraña sensación de haber perdido mi destino [...]
También el general, incapaz de dibujar sus días, vivía fuera del tiempo, sin pasado y sin futuro.³

³ Ibid., 15.

One set of military men replace another, the oppression continues and the unfortunate incidents repeat themselves over and over in a world dominated by the myth of the eternal return. In this context, Ixtepec's collective memory recalls the things to come by remembering what happened in the past, since these memories will repeat themselves in the future.

2.2. The other time: the memory of imagination

However, another kind of memory exists, that of imagination. Garro suggests that this second memory is the only possible way out. In *Recuerdos*, each one of the novel's two parts are marked, respectively, by the figures of two women: Julia and Isabel. In the first case, Julia manages to escape the oppression of her lover by means of imagination and magic. Rosas possesses her physical body but never succeeds in dominating her mind and having access to that other memory: the remembrances that Julia has of a past and a future in which Rosas does not figure. Her fantastic escape is presented as the only possible way out. While remaining ambiguous, the essential message given to the reader is that, wherever she is, Julia is better there than in Ixtepec. In the case of Isabel and her brothers, they had planned to escape from Ixtepec. Isabel dreams of far away places and the theatre production organised by Felipe Hurtado presents her with the opportunity to be another person, an outsider that at long last is able to see the sea. She dreams about another life, a life of liberty where she is not obliged to find a husband. Nevertheless, in her case, she cannot escape from Ixtepec's cyclical fatality. When she becomes aware of this, she loses her memory. In

the novel, memory is related to imagination. When everything has failed, Isabel says to Rosas,

Francisco, tenemos dos memorias... Yo antes vivía en las dos y ahora sólo vivo en la que me recuerda lo que va a suceder. También Nicolás está dentro de la memoria del futuro...⁴

Isabel has lost the vision, hope and imagination, just as Nicolás has, who only awaits death. There is no possible escape and consequently his sole memory is that of the collective cyclical memory of Ixtepec. This collective memory belongs to the unreal, general and communal world, where people stop being human and become statues and petrified specimens to be studied and catalogued as historical events. Isabel realizes, in these last moments of her life, that she will not escape history and that she will become just another myth, an archetype, that of the fallen woman who betrays her own people for love and power.⁵ At the same time, she knows that Nicolás will be unable to escape his own destiny: he must become the hero who fights against the dominating power. Both knew their destiny, both tried to escape from it, but neither managed it. Garro's pessimism is linked to the idea that the mistakes of the past have repercussions in the present and in the future. The decisions we have made will affect the future.

In Garro's view, the revolution has changed nothing substantially in terms of the socio-economic conditions of the vast majority of ordinary Mexicans. The poor are still poor and the middle class has been pushed further away from power due to a

⁴ Ibid., 251-252.

⁵ Some scholars relate Isabel's fall to the story of La Malinche, Hernan Cortes' Indian lover that served him as a translator. As portrayed in popular iconography, La Malinche betrayed her Indian roots and was one of the key weapons that Spaniards used to conquer the Aztec Empire. For more information about the use of La Malinche's myth in *Recuerdos* see Sandra Messinger Cypess, "The Figure of La Malinche in the Texts of Elena Garro," in Anita K. Stoll, ed., *A Different Reality: Studies on the Work of Elena Garro* (Lewisburgh: Bucknell University Press, 1990), 117-35.

group of opportunists personified in the novel by Rodolfito and his mother Doña Lola. Mexican rural society is still stuck in the Stone Age and does not appear to have any realistic prospect of changing in the near future. Juan Cariño, the crazy man, fears the expression “Edad de Piedra,” that he uses to scare his friends in the brothel. This also alludes to Ixtepec’s paralysis and anticipates Isabel’s petrification at the end of the book. For Garro, the necessary changes were never undertaken and the revolutionary spirit was betrayed by the generals, who looked for personal benefit at the expense of the communal good and did not carry out the extremely necessary agrarian reform required by rural communities. Power passes from one social group to another and Mexico is trapped in time, awaiting changes that, from Garro’s pessimistic perspective, seem unobtainable. When faced with a question related to the situation of Mexico’s peasants, Garro resoundingly affirms that:

No, no ha cambiado nada. Me fui 25 años, volví, y [los campesinos] siguen en la misma miseria o peor... No, no se les ha hecho justicia, ni se les va a hacer nunca, creo.⁶

This interview took place in 1993. For her, Mexico is stuck in the mythical time of collective memory. Nothing changes and nothing will change. This is the reason why the *ixtepequeños* have memories of the future, because the actions of the past will be cyclically repeated.

In a second interpretation of the title, what is narrated in the novel is a necessary memory that the future should have about its past: a memory that should not be lost, so that future generations have the experience needed to break away from

⁶ Verónica Beucker, “Encuentro con Elena Garro,” in Lucía Melgar and Gabriela Mora, *Elena Garro. Lectura múltiple de una personalidad compleja* (México: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2002), 42.

cyclical fatality and put an end to passivity. Garro paints a picture of 1920s Mexican society which is not substantially different from that of today's society. Garro integrates herself, in this sense, with the group of people who write historical novels not as the representation of a picturesque and exotic painting of bygone times, but rather as the recollection of facts that form part of a collective memory which has forged a sense of national identity over the years, and whose echoes can be heard in the present. It is in this novelistic space and time -the space and time of imagined memory-, where the impossibility of changing the future becomes a possibility. Garro herself expressed on one occasion her frequent disposition to change the ending of her novels so she could change the future.⁷ This exorcizing power of literature is, for Garro, the only way out for stagnant Mexican society.

2.3. The melancholy

The melancholy that runs throughout the whole novel is linked to the notion of delusion. Ixtepec is a town that has lost its emotions and lives with the melancholy of memories of bygone times. For Ixtepec's omniscient narrator, any era was better than the one they are experiencing at the present moment, and the collective memory embraces a remembrance of better times that only exist in its imagination. Nevertheless, as indicated by the novel's title, this memory is not necessarily of better past times, but rather of future times. Ixtepec has lost hope that the current situation will one day change and, as highlighted above, has become submerged in an atemporal history, in an eternal, stagnant present in which people change but disasters are repeated cyclically. Given a future without hope, and one which is known

⁷ Emmanuel Carballo, "Elena Garro," *Protagonistas de la literatura mexicana* (México: Ediciones del Ermitaño, 1985), 490.

beforehand, the characters become nothing but mere spectators of their own misfortune. They are stripped of all capacity to act, captives of a routine and of a disgraced condemned life and without any possibility of change. According to Harry E. Rosser, the characters in *Recuerdos* will be condemned to a “muerte viva” upon having a “vida bajo circunstancias que no permiten la auto-realización.”⁸ The circular structure of the novel results in a feeling of stagnation, of a society that is unable to do anything to escape a predetermined future. Despite their efforts, the Moncada’s children cannot outrun their destiny. Isabel says to her father “siempre supe lo que está pasando... También lo supo Nicolás... Desde niños estamos bailando en este día.”⁹ From the beginning, their attempts to escape this reality are futile. This is suggested throughout the novel by the numerous anticipations that appear of what will occur in the future. The reader suspects that the Moncadas are condemned from the outset, and this suspicion creates an atmosphere of suffocating sadness that surrounds Ixtepec. The characters themselves have an intuition about their future, paradoxically through the memories that they have about what is to come. In the rehearsal of the theatre play organised by Felipe Hurtado, Isabel shivers when reading her line ““¡Mírame antes de quedar convertida en piedra!”¹⁰ as if she knew the future that awaits her. This predetermined future plunges Ixtepec’s inhabitants into inertia and melancholy when faced with a life of misfortune that cannot be changed.

Through the use of Ixtepec’s collective memory as the narrator, Garro gives the novel the nature of an oral narrative and an objectivity that permits the text’s heteroglossia and dialogic character. In the novelistic space, the racist voices of Doña Elvira and Tomás Segovia coexist with the Moncada’s idealism and Lola Gorívar and

⁸ Harry Enrique Rosser, “Form and Content in Elena Garro’s *Los Recuerdos del Porvenir*,” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 2, no. 3 (1978): 282.

⁹ Garro, *Recuerdos*, 206.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

her son's greed. However, despite the expected judgment carried out by the reader, the narrator remains neutral, as all these characters form part of its own being. It is in this way that Ixtepec objectively presents its story and history. Nevertheless, the text is laden with a feeling of sadness for its inhabitants that are condemned to a perpetual state of subjection and inaction. All of them, from Rosas to Conchita including the Goribars, are condemned, defeated by Ixtepec's melancholy. There are brief moments of action in which the narrator becomes excited by the prospect of outlining the inhabitants' new plans. This is the case during the preparations for the party in the doctor's house to facilitate the priest and the sacristan's escape. Despite their tragic destiny, the narrator considers the fact that the people of Ixtepec have decided to act, as something positive, independent of the tragic ending of the plan. Both Conchita and Isabel suspect that the plan is doomed to fail, however neither of the two inform the others of their fears. In Conchita's case, the authority of her father's phrase repeated during her childhood "en boca cerrada no entra mosca,"¹¹ prevents her from speaking in time. In Isabel's case, her stance is identical with that of the narrator: she dreams with breaking out of the inaction that paralyses Ixtepec. Despite the plan's risks, Isabel decides to be part of a living story. She wants Ixtepec to enter into the course of universal historical events, into the time of anecdotal history that moves the world. For a moment, it seems possible for Ixtepec to break free from cyclical history, but the plan fails. The story of Ixtepec is that of a dark town whose inhabitants have always been victims of history. Isabel and her brothers dreamed of getting far away from there, in search of a history of action. It seems paradoxical that the only action they undertake in their lives leads to their deaths. Garro's pessimism can be seen clearly in the fact that everything ends in tragedy. Julia is the only one who survives.

¹¹ Ibid., 175.

Through the use of imagination, she is able to run away from Ixtepec and liberate herself from its static time. Garro proposes imagination, dreams and magic as the only means of escape from the suffocating present. The only thing that man cannot stop doing is dreaming, because the day in which the dreams end is the day in which life will end. For this reason Ixtepec is a town of dead people, because it is a town whose inhabitants do not dream.

2.4. The loss of reality

In *Recuerdos* there is no clear division between the real and the imaginary, not even for Ixtepec's omniscient narrator, who knows that the recorded events will be wiped out as time passes. Amalia Gladhart describes the memory of Ixtepec as "at once paramount and unreliable."¹² From one perspective, the narrator desires that the sad events turn into dust, to give way to happier times than those currently being experienced. However, from another, he himself states "estoy y estuve en muchos ojos. Yo solo soy memoria y la memoria que de mí se tenga,"¹³ implying that memory is comprised of a plurality of voices and oblivion signifies definitive death. As such, the anonymous Indians that appear dead in the *trances de Cocula* every day will bring with them a feeling of global death. Gregoria thinks that "los indios colgados obedecían a un orden perfecto y estaban ya dentro del tiempo que ella nunca alcanzaría."¹⁴ They are dead in all possible ways: they are, literally, no longer alive and, metaphorically, they are dead in the sense of having being forgotten. They are not deceased, with names and surnames, subject to life's and death's natural laws, but rather a handful of anonymous deaths. Part of Ixtepec dies every night, as if afflicted

¹² Amalia Gladhart, "Present Absence: Memory and Narrative in *Los Recuerdos del Porvenir*," *Hispanic Review* 73, no. 1 (2005): 91.

¹³ Garro, *Recuerdos*, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

by an incurable disease, leaving the town submerged in an eternal sadness only punctuated by brief moments of ephemeral happiness.

The impossibility of knowing reality and the suspicion that memory is eventually lost –and, with it, history- is manifested in the novel's numerous gaps. Mircea Eliade maintains that what was one day a collective memory ends up being converted into a myth:

The recollection of a historical event or a real personage survives in popular memory for two or three centuries at the utmost. This is because popular memory finds difficulty in retaining individual events and real figures. The structures by means of which it functions are different: categories instead of events, archetypes instead of historical personages. The historical personage is assimilated to his mythical model (hero, etc), while the event is identified with the category of mythical actions (fight with a monster, enemy brothers, etc.)¹⁵

The story's protagonists end up being turned into myths, as occurs with Isabel - turned into the archetype of the fallen woman through the inscription on her epitaph -, Rosas -prototype of the dictator-, or Nicolás Moncada -archetypal hero. Despite their efforts, none are able to escape the destiny that has been determined for them: i.e. that of becoming myths of a collective memory. For this reason, as explained above, the narrator recounts the story of the past of a country that has acquired the status of a legend.

However, since the narrator represents the collective memory of Ixtepec, he is the only one capable of retelling the totality of versions of the facts, or at least the greatest number of versions that can be contained within the confines of a novel. With regard to the development of the novel, what is not said is just as important as what is

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History* (London: Arkana, 1989), 43.

said. Gladhart points out that “it is precisely the unresolved tension between presence and absence that shapes the novel’s approach to memory.”¹⁶ The impossibility of establishing a definitive version of what occurs with Felipe Hurtado and Julia or the doubts surrounding Isabel’s final petrification, are linked to Garro’s notion that it is impossible to recover the past just as it happened or to know reality as it “really” is. As Garro demonstrates in her novel, although we cannot recover one part of history the past existed indeed. However, the oblivion of the deaths signifies their second and definitive death. Ixtepec is only a memory: at the moment in which someone stops remembering Ixtepec, the town will be forever lost amongst the multitude of anecdotes belonging to Mexican intrahistory. The collective memory will convert history into myth. Through this memory and the oral tradition, Julia and Isabel’s stories pass into posterity as magical legends.

Julia’s legend states how she escaped with her lover on horseback surrounded by symbols belonging to the storytelling tradition. However, due to certain comments by Rosas, it can be presumed that he assassinated his lover as a means of avenging her unfaithfulness. Following Nicolás’ death, Rosas thinks: “¿Por qué había de matar siempre a lo que amaba? Su vida era un engaño permanente; estaba condenado a vagar solo, dejado de la suerte.”¹⁷ Maybe he killed his lover, although this assertion could also be interpreted as a metaphor of the love that he himself destroyed when trying to dominate Julia.

Isabel will pass into posterity as a woman who fell because of love. The legend tells that she was turned to stone when, going to pray to the Virgin for salvation, she changed her mind and fled in search of her lover. This legend emerges after the story of Gregoria, an old *curandera*, who seems very likely to have imagined

¹⁶ Gladhart, “Present Absence,” 92.

¹⁷ Garro, *Recuerdos*, 287.

it all. Criticism of the partiality of written history is implicit in the last gesture that closes the novel: the epitaph written on Isabel's grave. According to this epitaph, presumably written by Gregoria but attributed to Isabel, she lost herself because she was madly in love with Rosas and could not resist temptation. However, as the novel reveals, this version is contradictory and could have been unconsciously manipulated by Gregoria. In both cases, the narrator does not know the true story or is keeping it to himself, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps and create his own story. The reader will then have to decide whether Isabel was a sinner, a hero or neither of these. Thus, Garro creates a novel with multiple readings, establishing a parallel with the multiple interpretations that historians can make of the past. Hence, she proposes that subjectivity influences any version of the past and that even the pieces of evidence and documents about that past are frequently subjectively determined. In this sense, Garro associates the task of the historian to the process of reading. In a novel like *Recuerdos*, the reader is given the opportunity to create the story by selecting and reconsidering the pieces of evidence offered by the narrator. In the case of the historian, he classifies his evidence and reconstructs the past. Both carry out an analysis and selection of the "facts of the past" that will be used in the construction of their story/history. Hence, *Recuerdos* offers a metafictional metaphor of the impossibility of reaching a univocal and definitive interpretation of the past.

The irreality of the world is also linked in the book to the figure of Juan Cariño. Ixtepec's narrator speaks of him with great affection and deep respect. Juan Cariño is Rosas's alter ego. He is insane and does not have any authority, despite calling himself "el señor presidente" and surrounding himself with a retinue of prostitutes as if they were ministers. For him, words have physical existence and possess a strong vitality. Every day the words escape from dictionaries populating

Ixtepec's streets with embodied actions, with the danger that bad words also escape. For this reason, Juan Cariño goes out every afternoon in search of dangerous words such as "ahorcar y torturar"¹⁸ so as to make them return to the place from which they should never have left. The reader is informed immediately about Juan's madness and about his secret mission to capture these bad words. However, the numerous allusions to the embodiment of words by Garro in *Recuerdos* converts Juan into a visionary. On numerous occasions, Garro presents a word with a real body. Such is the case of the shout "¡Viva Cristo Rey!" that takes the form of a body and becomes a slippery dissident and whispers in the soldiers' ears challenging them to a duel to the death.¹⁹ Another example is the violence that dominates the town. This violence is embodied when the narrator refers to it saying, "se agazapó debajo de las sillas."²⁰ Hence, the embodiment of words, which at the beginning of the novel was presented to the reader as one of the features of Juan Cariño's madness, also invades Ixtepec's life in such a way that it becomes just another characteristic of everyday life.²¹ On the other hand, the fact that these words are embodied is not that strange when seen in the context of a world that believes in the opposite process. History offers words *as if* they were realities and everyone believes the reality of these words. Garro proposes that Cariño's delusion of the embodiment of words is as naïve as history's attempt to enclose the past in words. In this sense, Juan Cariño, is presented as a remarkably prudent lunatic whose actions are frequently more lucid than those of the rest. This is

¹⁸ Ibid., 61.

¹⁹ Ibid., 185.

²⁰ Ibid., 28.

²¹ This embodiment of words is related to the magic realism employed by other authors from Garro's generation such as Gabriel García Márquez. According to García Márquez, the narrative technique employed when telling a story is the use of the device he calls "cara de palo", that is to say, he tells fantastic events as if they were completely normal, so they become real within the magical novelistic universe.

Garro's last criticism of a world where social conventions and absolute versions of reality collapse under their own weight.

3. IXTEPEC AND MEXICAN IDENTITY

Ixtepec is like any other town in the South of Mexico, and in it one can find the essence of the Mexican being: its worries and doubts, its history and conflicts of identity.

3.1. Mexican masks and fiesta

Octavio Paz used to say that Mexicans wore masks to defend their intimacy and to hide their inner being. According to him, "el mexicano siempre está lejos, lejos del mundo y de los demás. Lejos, también de sí mismo."²² This can be seen as a defence mechanism against a hostile environment in which Mexicans do not feel comfortable. In the case of *Recuerdos*, this hostile environment is the macho and patriarchal Mexican society. Paz says that

En cierto sentido la historia de México, como la de cada mexicano, consiste en una lucha entre las formas y fórmulas en que se pretende encerrar a nuestro ser y las explosiones con que nuestra espontaneidad se venga.²³

All these characteristics attributed to Mexicans by Paz can be easily detected in *Recuerdos*' characters. The society of Ixtepec lives in a perpetual simulation in which

²² Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1998), 164.

²³ *Ibid.*, 168.

the appearances maintained in society do not correspond to the real person who hides behind the mask. The characters are, deep down, conscious of this, collectively creating a feeling of distrust amongst them: they know that they do not permit themselves to be truly seen by the rest of the characters and as such do not trust the friendly aspect of their neighbour, who they consider false. In the case of General Rosas, influenced by magic and Ixtepec's pretence, in a world where words do not correspond to things, he doubts what he sees. He no longer trusts the reality that surrounds him:

Pasaron los días y nadie se presentó en la Comandancia Militar a solicitar el permiso de inhumación para el cuerpo de don Roque. El general no se sorprendió. Estaba acostumbrado a los engaños de Ixtepec y dudaba de que el sacristán hubiera existido alguna vez [...] Para él esas gentes no existían.²⁴

This suspicion that appearances can be deceitful and that perceived reality is not trustworthy leads Rosas –and all the *Ixtepequeños* in general- to perpetual pretence, forever acting and distrusting each other. Appearances are deceptive in a society in which everyone lies. However, what is accepted by all, in a relatively docile way, is rejected by the Moncada children, who dream of a different world. For this reason Nicolás can no longer withstand the pressure of a destiny that he feels is imposed from outside. He exclaims, “¡yo no quepo en este cuerpo!”²⁵

The result of this simulation is what Javier de Navascués calls *Recuerdo's* “teatralidad novelesca.”²⁶ Despite being a novel, the characters act as if they were in a theatre and they had been given a role previously written for them that does not

²⁴ Garro, *Recuerdos*, 183.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁶ Javier de Navascués, “La teatralidad novelesca de Elena Garro: *Los recuerdos del porvenir*,” *Insula: Revista de Letras y Ciencias Humanas* 618-619, (June-July 1998): 16.

correspond to their own personality. Often, their feelings do not correspond to their words, limiting themselves to saying what is expected of them rather than what they truly feel. A good example of this theatricality is the case of Doña Elvira. Despite reproaching her child for not having a husband, internally she is grateful that Conchita does not pay any attention to her, because she remembers her marriage as a very traumatic experience. Even though she does not want Conchita to suffer a tyrannical husband, she reprimands her because that is what is expected from a “decent” Mexican mother. While these masks prevent the characters from truly knowing one another, the narrator knows the true being of each one of them, and the reader receives the necessary information to understand their ambiguous actions. Nevertheless, in Julia’s case, her character remains unexplainable for the narrator. Her words do not correspond to her real being and the collective narrator does not have access to her inner thoughts and feelings since she is an outsider and does not belong to Ixtepec. Felipe Hurtado appears to be the exception in this world of masked people: everyone seems to know his intentions from the first moment and he does not hide the fact that he had known Julia previously.

For the people that inhabit Ixtepec, and especially female characters, the only form of possible liberation is imagining. The imagination is a place to flee to and the space where the marginalized are given a voice. There, Julia is able to kiss other men that are not General Rosas; Conchita can look eternally at Nicolás Moncada; and Isabel can be free. One of the interpretations of Julia’s escape with Felipe Hurtado in the first part of the novel is that it is an escape facilitated by the imagination. Felipe Hurtado is not a human, but rather, he belongs to a magical world where everything is

possible. In fact, he is probably a product of Julia's imagination.²⁷ However, if what happened in reality is that the soldiers assassinated Felipe and Julia -as is suspected by the *queridas* locked up in the hotel Jardín- Ixtepec remains unbothered, because fantasy, myth and legend offer the weapon to rebel against the atrocious reality that is everyday life. For this reason, the town's collective memory picks up the mythical-fantastic version and incorporates it in its past without questioning its fictitious nature.

It is important to highlight the constant references to the unreality of everyday life and the perception of another "reality" that never occurred, as more genuine. Martín Moncada lives in a time and space that he does not understand. For him, "la memoria de lo sucedido era la única irreal para él. De niño pasaba largas horas recordando lo que no había visto ni oído nunca."²⁸ In his memory, other possible lives would have been more real and more genuine than the one his family lives in Ixtepec. Martín Moncada has two memories, and the one relating to that which did not occur seems more real to him: "desde esa noche su porvenir se mezcló con un pasado no sucedido y la irrealidad de cada día."²⁹ Seeing the unfortunate future that destiny has reserved for his children, Ana Moncada asks herself "¿y si estuviera viviendo las horas de un futuro inventado?"³⁰ What is happening to her seems so similar to what happened to her mother with her own children that it appears to her as surreal. The same events are locked in a circular time condemned to repeat themselves again and again. Ana Moncada's brothers died in the Mexican Revolution. Now, her children will die in the Cristero Rebellion. Nevertheless, Isabel rebels in her own way against this fatalism. Upon fleeing with Rosas, Isabel rejects marriage. She refuses to mourn the death of the children that she will never have.

²⁷ Kay Sauer García expounds the theory that magic realism (and magic) are related to imagination and literature. This is the escape that Garro offers to oppressed people.

²⁸ Garro, *Recuerdos*, 35.

²⁹ Ibid., 85.

³⁰ Ibid., 238.

For Garro, there is a relationship between imagination and memory of that which never occurred. It could be that this memory refers to something that is due to happen, or it could be that it never occurs. In Ixtepec's hermetic world, however, the only way out is that of imagination. Needless to say, imagination inevitably proves an ineffective strategy for escaping problems but, nonetheless, we have to consider Garro's pessimistic view of reality. For her, the situation will never improve, so fantasy is a way of finding relief in Mexico's stagnant society.

Following the closure of Ixtepec's Church and the imposition of an even more violent government by General Rosas, Ixtepec decides to forget and not think any more about the people who are hanged everyday in *las trancas de Cocula*. In Mexican society, the best way to forget is to hold a party: the only moment in which all evils vanish. According to Paz, the party is one of the inherent features of Mexican identity. For him, Mexico is a ritual country and Mexican parties are always excessive and liberating, and social rules are dissolved: "a través de la Fiesta la sociedad se libera de las normas que se ha impuesto. Se burla de sus dioses, de sus principios y de sus leyes: se niega a sí misma."³¹ During the Moncada's party, time stops and people forget: "Nadie nombraba a los muertos aparecidos en los caminos reales. Mis gentes preferían el camino brevísimo de las luces de Bengala."³² Thus, parties are also used as an escape from the monotony of everyday life. In this sense, there is nothing more appropriate than a celebration to cover an insurrection attempt from Ixtepec: a revolt against power covered by a revolt against monotony.

The party does not have any temporality, but rather occurs in a primordial "pre-time." Paz states that, during the party, "el tiempo deja de ser sucesión y vuelve a ser lo que fue, y es, originariamente: un presente en donde pasado y futuro al fin se

³¹ Paz, *Laberinto*, 187.

³² Garro, *Recuerdos*, 194.

reconcilian.”³³ According to Bahktin, a party is popular and egalitarian in its origins. Identities are lost in parties and carnivals, people disguise themselves and each person takes on the identity of someone else. Even though Ixtepec’s segregational and racist society forgets conventions during the first moments of the Cristero Rebellion, this spirit will not last long. The narrator tells that when the suspensions of cults reaches Ixtepec “llegaron las señoras y los señores de Ixtepec y se mezclaron con los indios, como si por primera vez el mismo mal los aquejara.”³⁴ Religion unites them all. One of the pillars of Mexican identity is the Catholic religion and from the beginning of the war of independence different social groups fought together under the name of “Mexicans” and the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe. However, when they plan the insurrection, Ixtepec’s higher classes ignore the lower classes, the “others”. The prostitutes are only included as the priest is hidden in the brothel, but the Indians are left to one side. Everyone except the Indians is invited to Ixtepec’s party, although they are acknowledged as part of the conspiracy. It will be Inés, Doña Elvira’s Indian servant, who, taking advantage of her invisibility, will dismantle the plot. It is, by definition, a party destined to fail as it is not egalitarian. What at the beginning was meant to be a union of the victims against power, ends up being a failure due to the division of powers.

Following the debacle of the party and the discovery of the conspiracy, Ixtepec’s inhabitants realise that they have an uncertain outlook. They have lost their future, and are at last conscious of their roles as actors in the world’s great theatre: “enfundados en sus trajes de fiesta, parecían actores envejeciendo sin papel mientras en escena se desarrollaba una tragedia.”³⁵ Before the party, Ixtepec’s inhabitants enjoyed moments of action in which they had control over their own lives. The

³³ Paz, *Laberinto*, 183.

³⁴ Garro, *Recuerdos*, 158.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

situation now has returned to normal and the *Ixtepequeños* have re-assumed the order of stagnated time, an eternal pantomime time in which they are unable to do anything to divest themselves of their roles.

3.2. The struggle for power

Recuerdos is also a novel about power. The aim of the people is to rule over others or liberate themselves from the power that others try to impose on them. However, in Ixtepec's society, all of the characters are condemned and none of them have any real power: that of being able to live their lives freely. During the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero Rebellion, many Mexican villages lived the terror of being controlled by an armed force and Garro portrayed this in *Recuerdos*.

In the novel, those with most power (in this case the military) imposed the official version of history. They dominate politically and have the right to impose, on the population of Ixtepec, the decisions made by the government. For example, the soldiers deny that they were the ones who perpetrated the attack against the verger, despite the town bearing witness to the events. Power gives them the privilege of determining the definitive version of what happened and they are the ones who judge what is true and what is not. Even though Doña Ana rebels against them by affirming that it was the soldiers who assassinated the verger, the colonel vociferously denies it and warns the lady of the dangers of falsely accusing someone. This will be the official version of events that will be passed on to posterity, although this does not legitimate it. Nevertheless, Garro in *Recuerdos* does not present any version as trustworthy. If the reader realises that the soldiers are deliberately falsifying the facts, Doña Ana's version is not a totally trustworthy version either, even though her

feelings are more sincere than those of the soldiers. The soldiers know what really happened but they lie to cover up their crime. Doña Ana does not lie, but the narrator makes it clear that the events were somewhat confusing - it was dark and she could not appreciate with clarity what exactly occurred. Due to the historical circumstances that Ixtepec is experiencing and the dialogue between those who gave the verger the beating, it is evident that it was the soldiers. Furthermore, they themselves know that the town recognises their guilt. One of the defining characteristics of the powerful is that they attempt to cover up their atrocities. If they are so powerful, what people think should be of little importance to them. However, deep down, they fear losing legitimacy.

Garro describes how the central government took responsibility for the disappearance of the revolutionary leaders, a process which ended by the creation of a *cacicazgo* at a provincial level without obtaining the necessary consensus amongst the masses to legitimise power. In Rosas' case, despite being the most powerful man in Ixtepec, he feels that the town dominates him and that they have made his life intolerable. Attempting to understand the origin of his troubles, he suddenly realises: "¡Era verdad! Corona tenía razón. La burla de Ixtepec era el origen de su desdicha."³⁶ At the same time that Ixtepec had unleashed its fury on the figure of Julia, blaming her for its evils, Rosas blames the town for his troubles. Rosas becomes even more despotic following the escape of his lover – an escape that he himself is convinced was brought about by a conspiracy by the town against him. The irony of his power is that it is finite, and fails to cover the one thing that he really wishes to possess: Julia's soul. Rosas searches for total power, but the only power that he cannot obtain is the power over Julia's thoughts. He can possess her body, but not her soul, since this is not

³⁶ Ibid., 183.

something that he can control through the classical strategies of political power. Julia's indifference to Rosas' suffering leaves him paralysed, and he does not know how to act towards her. Throughout the novel the allusions to the fact that Rosas fears Julia more than she fears him are frequent. The only moment in which Julia feels afraid is upon seeing the swollen eye of the person who will be her lover, Felipe Hurtado. Nevertheless, the people of Ixtepec know that Rosas fears Julia more than she fears him. They say of him "se anda dando valor antes de llegar a verla."³⁷ Rosas needs to be drunk to give himself enough courage to confront Julia each night. This is the only weapon left to the victims to struggle against power which, at the end, proves to be more powerful than firearms and terror.

In this sense, Rosas' character represents the betrayal of the revolutionary ideals. The soldiers had the power to change things but they did not. All of the actions that the soldiers carry out serve only to satisfy their own desires and needs, without worrying for a single moment about Ixtepec's inhabitants. It can be argued that the *Ixtepequeños* are, in part, right to blame Julia for all of their troubles. General Rosas, who holds the people's fate in his hands, takes his decisions in a state of mind totally influenced by his destructive relationship with his lover. Every time that Rosas has a fight with her, the landowner Rodolfo takes advantage of this to ask Julia's lover for new lands, and subsequently kills all the Indians that own or inhabit them. Rodolfo knows very well that "cuando [Rosas] se enojaba con Julia era el momento en que concedía todas las muertes."³⁸ At the same time, the old *porfirista* regime is sustained by the actions of Rosas, who is not concerned in the least about the Indians' future or the demands of the *agraristas*. For Ixtepec's narrator, the new war is caused by a pact

³⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁸ Ibid., 78.

between the Church and the State to distract the population from Mexico's real problems such as the distribution of land. According to the narrator,

entre los porfiristas católicos y los revolucionarios ateos preparaban la tumba del agrarismo. Hacía menos de diez años que las dos facciones habían acordado los asesinatos de Emiliano Zapata, de Francisco Villa y de Felipe Ángeles, y el recuerdo de los jefes revolucionarios estaba fresco en la memoria de los indios. La Iglesia y el Gobierno fabricaban una causa para “quemar” a los campesinos descontentos.³⁹

Despite being a popular movement, the Cristero Rebellion, like the Mexican Revolution (1910), particularly affected the weakest sections of society. While the Indians and the families living in Ixtepec are denied their right to practise their religion, the Goribar's house maintains its own chapel where Rodolfo's mother continues to pray. Garro protests against these injustices, rising up against the official version of history where there are always two factions: winners and losers. For Garro, it is the poor people that are always the losers of any war, regardless of who wins it.

Throughout the novel, the reader is confronted, on the one hand, with Garro's overwhelming pessimism where a tragic destiny repeats itself over and over. On the other hand, this fatality is reinforced by Garro's pessimism that leads her to defend the idea that the only “escape” from the oppressive power of patriarchal society is through the imagination. In the world of the imagination, the oppressed are the powerful ones and have the opportunity to be the victors. However, if women have at least this one possibility to escape through imagination although remote, for the

³⁹ Ibid., 154.

Indians this escape does not even exist as, in Felix's words, "para nosotros, los indios, es el tiempo infinito de callar."⁴⁰

3.3. Smashing stereotypes.

Garro also challenges patriarchal society by subverting its stereotypes. In this sense, Garro can be considered as one of the antecedents of a Postmodernity that challenges the assumptions which inform the creation of social constructs. Gender, racial and sexual stereotypes have all been subverted by the postmodern novel and it is exactly these stereotypes that Garro has challenged in the context of Mexican identity.

As discussed above, the men of Ixtepec are as much victims of this patriarchal society as are the women. The soldiers themselves are victims of the historical-social circumstances of the country. The cause of this oppression lies in the fact that patriarchal Mexican society operates by means of mechanisms of social control which turn not only women but also men themselves into victims. Men are condemned to carry out a role that has been forced upon them, and this role is one that they cannot decline. Speaking about Garro's novel, Melgar states that

el machismo favorece una visión dualista de los géneros y fomenta la hostilidad de los hombres contra las mujeres pero, en la medida en que exige de éstos un comportamiento impasible y la represión de sentimientos como el dolor, también los mutila.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.

⁴¹ Lucía Melgar, "La obra de Elena Garro: testimonio y recreación de nuestro tiempo," in Priscilla Gac-Artigas, ed. *Reflexiones: ensayos sobre escritoras hispanoamericanas contemporáneas* (New Jersey: Ediciones Nuevo Espacio, 2002), 319.

Such is the case of Damián Álvarez. Responsible for capturing Antonia, who will be Colonel Corona's lover, Álvarez falls in love with her. Nevertheless, his fear of the inevitable repercussions prevents him from fleeing with her. When, at last, he decides to rescue her, it is too late and the Colonel kills him. The narrator does not, however, make it clear whether Damián was truly in love or if his obsession was prompted by the necessity of complying with macho roles in a society where the man must always rescue the weak woman. In the case of Rosas, the only thing that he wants is to be loved by the person whom he loves. Despite being responsible for all the cruelties committed against the people of Ixtepec, the reader feels sorry for him. Rosas is a man trapped in Ixtepec's tragic destiny, a character condemned to see all hope of happiness in his life eradicated. Despite his power, he is unable to do anything to prevent Nicolás' death who, at the end, through his courage and heroic conduct, demonstrates that he is more powerful than Rosas himself.

The men from the respectable families of Ixtepec do not conform to the prototype of the macho man, but rather are sensitive beings with complex and elaborate personalities. The only one who is depicted as an exploiter of women is Doña Elvira's deceased husband, ironically named Justino, whose tyranny is avenged by his wife when she buries him wrapped up in a sheet. Tomás Segovia is a racist conservative but his love for poetry has given him a certain level of sensitivity. As for the remaining characters, Isabel recognises in her father someone to trust with regard to her problems of identity, while she rejects her mother's love whom she considers to be an enemy in her plans to remain single. Doña Ana would like her children to live the life they are supposed to: for Isabel, she wants her to be a wife and a mother; for the boys, she wants them to work hard in the mines to support their family and

children. However, she herself realizes that it will not be possible. When she used to think of her children, “Ana acostumbraba decir: ‘los hijos son otras personas’, asombrada de que sus hijos no fueran ella misma.”⁴² Matilde’s husband is presented as a tender being that worries about picking up stray animals from the streets. It appears that Garro is implying that oppression sometimes can be found within ourselves. Patriarchal society is maintained because everyone maintains it, not only men but also women. In this sense, patriarchal society is hegemonic. Doña Matilde has let herself be absorbed by the monotony of every day life that marriage has brought her. Doña Ana is concerned that her daughter should find a good husband, distancing Isabel, in this way, from her anxiety to escape with her brothers to discover other worlds. Doña Elvira represents the most hypocritical case of all the characters in the novel. She insists outwardly that her daughter marries someone decent although internally rejoices that Conchita does not listen to her. Overall, Garro strongly criticises Mexican patriarchal society, but does not exclusively attribute the blame to men: she also holds the women partly responsible for imitating the masculine roles and for not looking for their own identity.

In *Recuerdos*, a transgression of the traditional female role is, however, achieved. Isabel does not want to marry and defies the role that has been assigned to her. In this patriarchal society, the only possible destiny for a woman is that of a wife and mother. But Isabel is not the stereotypical woman of the Mexican middle class who aspires to marriage and to having children. Instead, she rebels against it and decides never to marry. She does not wish to become, like her aunt Matilde, who

De joven [...] fue alegre y turbulenta; no se pareció a su hermano Martín. Los años de casada, el silencio y la soledad de su casa hicieron de ella una vieja

⁴² Ibid., 32.

risueña y apacible. Perdió la facilidad para tratar a las gentes y una timidez casi adolescente la hacía enrojecer y reír cada vez que se encontraba frente a extraños.⁴³

Matilde began to lose her vital force throughout the course of her marriage. It is precisely this loss of vitality that Isabel struggles against and which leads her to reject the idea of marriage as a viable option:

Le disgustaba que establecieran diferencias entre ella y sus hermanos. Le humillaba la idea de que el único futuro para las mujeres fuera el matrimonio. Hablar del matrimonio como de una solución le dejaba reducida a una mercancía a la que había que dar salida a cualquier precio.⁴⁴

According to Robert Anderson, Isabel flees with Rosas to escape from the extreme solitude that she endures, living among “unknown” members of her family who do not understand her.⁴⁵ It is true that Isabel is misunderstood within her own family, especially by her mother, who wants the same destiny for her daughter that she herself had. Isabel turns to her father and regrets that nobody understands her.⁴⁶ However, to limit Isabel’s escape to a gesture of rebellion against her family’s incomprehension runs the risk of simplifying Isabel’s true psychological complexity. For Marta Umanzor, on the contrary, Isabel escapes with Rosas for reasons of love, “llegando hasta el sacrificio.”⁴⁷ However, Isabel does not appear to be happy with the destiny that she has apparently chosen and, while in the room of the hotel Jardín, she remains

⁴³ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁵ Robert K. Anderson, “Myth and Archetype in *Recollections of Things to Come*,” *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 9, no 2 (Spring 1985): 215.

⁴⁶ Garro, *Recuerdos*, 162.

⁴⁷ Marta A. Umanzor, *La visión de la mujer en la obra de Elena Garro: El árbol, Los perros, Los recuerdos del porvenir, Testimonios sobre Mariana y La casa junto al río* (Florida: Ediciones Universal, 1996), 76.

silent, accusing Rosas with an incriminating stare. In this sense, it can be argued that, faced with the fall of her brothers, Isabel refuses to be a victim, the role destined for women in these circumstances. Instead of opting for being captured and raped, she decides voluntarily to hand herself to Rosas, thus avenging the deaths of her brothers through her presence as a continual rebuke. The rest of the *queridas* have been kidnapped -apart from Luisa, who fled with his lover. Isabel decides to destroy the archetypes of women and to escape with Rosas in order to break out of the imposed destiny of middle class women, dragging Rosas with her in the process. She herself does not want to be a heroine and she does not go with Rosas in exchange for the life of her brother Nicolás, as some critics have suggested. He is condemned to death when his attempt at insurrection fails. For this reason she does not ask Rosas to save her brother until the very last moment, perhaps because she realizes that her brother's life means more to her than does the act of taking her rebellion to its final consequence. In a last attempt to change the future that she already knows, Isabel asks Rosas for the life of her brother, despite knowing that Nicolás' destiny is to be executed.

As I have already mentioned, apart from women, the main marginalized group that appears in the novel is that of the Indians. Garro recovers and subverts the figure of the silent and victimized Indian portrayed by the *indianista* novel. For Ixtepec's inhabitants, Indians do not count. This is how the narrator describes how Doña Matilde's servant, Cástulo, feels at the commander's headquarter:

El criado se hundió en una tristeza polvorienta que lo dejó solo en la habitación llena de voces y de humo. Era menos que un extraño, no existía, no

era nadie, y en su calidad de nadie se miraba los huaraches usados con la única esperanza de desaparecer.⁴⁸

The Indians are figures who clean their houses and appear dead in the morning. They are considered to be worse than dogs. Nevertheless, two Indian women, Inés and Gregoria, are key characters in the novel who, without being protagonists, determine the course of events.

In the case of Inés, the soldiers take advantage of the Indians' subhuman status to use them as invisible spies within the houses of Ixtepec's "respectable" citizens. If women are the victims of men, Indians are the victims of both the white and *mestizo* people. In the hierarchy of power, women change places from being victims to exploiters when they find themselves in a powerful position. A good example is the case of Doña Elvira. Having been a victim of her husband's tyranny, the treatment that she gives to her Indian servants is that of a despot. She frequently makes racist comments, and when she is in an ill humour vents her anger on her maid and her daughter. Inés, in the name of her race, seeks retribution for the continual signs of disrespect towards Indians by telling her soldier lover about the conspiracy. Paradoxically, the Indians are at greatest danger of violence from the government, which assassinates them every night due to their support for the agrarian movement. Inés reveals the inhabitants' plans, thus condemning her own class to the fate of seeing different Indians hanged daily at the sadly infamous *trancas de Cocula*. She does not seem too concerned by this fact, perhaps because she knows that regardless of whoever might be in power, the poorest will always be the most exploited. The fact that Garro chooses society's most marginal character, Inés –Indian and female- to avenge her oppressors –in this case Ixtepec's civilians- is ironic. For a moment Inés

⁴⁸ Garro, *Recuerdos*, 221.

has power: “-Tiene miedo...- aseguraba Inés, preparándose para salir al encuentro de su amante, el sargento Illescas.”⁴⁹ When Doña Elvira discovers that Inés has been dating Sergeant Illescas, she suddenly feels powerless, and fears the Indian servant for once.

Secondly, Gregoria the Indian *curandera*, has a pivotal role in the novel. It is she who recounts the end of the story: Gregoria is the only one who knows what occurs to Isabel Moncada at the end of her life. Ute Seydel has indicated the importance of the inscription that Gregoria carves on the supposed rock that Isabel transforms into at the end. According to her, “esta inscripción, aunque realizada por un personaje marginal, obtiene una importancia particular, ya que es la única interpretación escrita de los acontecimientos.”⁵⁰ For once in Garro’s novel, those who write the story are invisible and not the other way round. The only speech that will survive in posterity is that of Gregoria. She pretends to be Isabel Moncada, subverting both the discourse of history -written by the white man- and the discourse of intrahistory –as she transforms the reality of every day life, converting it into a myth that serves as an example for future generations. This is the Indians’ last revenge: they are the anonymous and unacknowledged authors of Ixtepec’s tragedy.

3.4. The identity of the proscribed

As we saw earlier, the story of Ixtepec is recounted by a collective narrator that represents the union of the inhabitants’ voices. The pronoun “we” unites this group of people, who share an identity through their belonging to the town of Ixtepec.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 259.

⁵⁰ Ute Seydel, “Desmitificación de la historiografía oficial y del discurso nacionalista: Elena Garro y Juan Rulfo,” in Castro, Maricruz and Laura Cázares Hernández, *Escrituras en contraste: femenino, masculino en la literatura mexicana del siglo XX* (México: Editorial Aldus, 2004), 75.

This inclusive “we”, that sometimes becomes a metonymic “I” and other times a distancing “they” refers to all of the *Ixtepequeño* insiders, i.e., those normally referred to as *la gente del pueblo*. Outsiders, such as the soldiers - an alien invasion force -, are not included in this group, nor are their *queridas* or Felipe Hurtado, the fantastic traveller who arrives one morning in Ixtepec. It is because of this division between insiders and outsiders that the narrator knows inner turmoil of all of the members that comprise its being but cannot penetrate the feelings of characters such as Julia or Felipe Hurtado. However, the reader experiences two incongruities in such a set-up. On the one hand, if Rosas is an outsider, how can the narrator read his thoughts? And secondly, why are there moments in which the narrator only identifies itself with the Indians?

With regard to the first of these incongruities, Rosas’ double condition has already been explained: if he is the primary culprit of the crimes committed against the people of Ixtepec, he is also a victim of destiny and of the patriarchal society in which he lives. This links with the fact that Garro would not want to present a Manichean version of reality in which the virtuous are entirely without stain, and the bad devoid of any redeeming qualities whatsoever. For the reader to sympathise with a character, she/he needs to know their feelings and this is why Garro opens Rosas’ mind to us. As a result, the author presents us with a General that, if not from Ixtepec, has been so possessed by the town’s sad spirit that the town’s conscience can now know what is happening inside him. In this sense, Ixtepec has destroyed Rosas in the same way that he has destroyed Ixtepec, creating a macabre symbiosis amongst them when condemned by history’s doom. On the other hand, the narrator reserves the right to exile undesirables that, from birth, should have been included in that “we” of Ixtepec’s inhabitants. Gladhart observes that “Lola Goríbar and her son Rodolfo, the

town's wealthiest inhabitants and the most brazen beneficiaries of post-revolutionary corruption, remain outside the narrator's 'we'."⁵¹ In an attempt to avenge the crimes committed by those characters that try to kill his own kind, the narrator condemns them to a mental ostracism, considering them outsiders of a society which they have betrayed.

The second apparent contradiction is to do with the intrinsic nature of Ixtepec's narrator. Who are the people of Ixtepec? The narrator describes the townspeople in a passage at the beginning of the novel,

Mi gente es morena de piel. Viste de manta blanca y calza huaraches. Se adorna con collares de oro o se ata al cuello un pañuelito de seda rosa. Se mueve despacio, habla poco y contempla el cielo. En las tardes, al caer el sol, canta.⁵²

It seems obvious that the description refers to Ixtepec's Indians. However, Ixtepec's memory does not rescue the history of those he calls *mi gente*, but rather that of the Moncadas', the Montufars' and the rest of the "decent" people: the town's white middle class. Furthermore, the Indians are secondary characters, and the only decisive intervention during the course of events is that of Inés, the servant who, ironically, is the protagonist of the story of a betrayal. As such, the true identity of Ixtepec's narrator appears to be that of the indigenous community. This occurs despite the fact that the narrator's consciousness can extend to certain outsiders who, with the passing of time, have become inhabitants of Ixtepec. These outsiders include whites and *mestizos*, as well as those drawn into the cycle of the town's enveloping doom such as Rosas. It is the Indians' voice that, in a lyrical form and with a mythical mindset,

⁵¹ Gladhart, "Present Absence," 97.

⁵² Garro, *Recuerdos*, 12.

turns it into a “salutary” lesson for posterity. In this way the story remains wrapped in both the magic of indigenous oral traditions that transform the past into an eternal present, as well as mired in the horror of reality. In written history, Indians are invisible, those who do not have a voice. Garro gives them a voice in her novel, where her cyclical vision of history enables the author to emphasize the fact that the life of Ixtepec has no discernible meaning. On the other hand, the selective consciousness of this narrator is linked to the schizophrenic nature of Mexican identity.⁵³ When Martín Moncada warns “¡No hablen así! ¡Todos somos medio indios!”⁵⁴ Doña Elvira replies offended: “¡Yo no tengo nada de india!”⁵⁵ Garro makes her antipathy for the *mestizos* evident and she believes that they are guilty of all of the country’s ills; “Por su culpa mi tiempo estaba inmóvil,”⁵⁶ states Ixtepec’s narrator, distancing himself from the town’s racist middle class. For Garro, it is necessary to take on the past, the origins and the true identity of Mexicans. If not, the country will not advance but will forever stagnate. Due to this, despite the fact that the narrator identifies *mi gente* with Ixtepec’s Indians, the novel focuses instead on the town’s middle class. It is, at heart, the story of those in power told by the powerless, by the mass of anonymous people grouped together under the collective name of *mi gente*.

Identity is founded on the basis of unequal power relationships, as it is established by reference to these inequalities. Fernando Aínsa highlights the need for self-affirmation when confronting the others as one of the reasons for the search for

⁵³ Mexicans praised the Aztec past from the era prior to the independence in an attempt to create a common past for the different races that would later fight together for their independence against the Spanish oppressors. It was evident that no relationship could be established with the past of the dominating Spaniards. However, the theory of a common Aztec past was evidently plucked from the air, to the point of being claimed by many people of the white race who had nothing to do with this past. If these ideas served to unite forces during the era of Independence, its perpetration brought with it fatal consequences for the creation of a national identity based on the concept of race. On the one hand, the *criollos* exalted “their” Aztec past, but the strong racist feelings meant that they as well as the *mestizos* rejected any type of Indian impurity in their blood.

⁵⁴ Garro, *Recuerdos*, 27.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

identity. He states that “el problema de la identidad no existe mientras no aparece una diferencia entre la propia cultura y las otras.”⁵⁷ If we were all identical there would be no identity. This differential factor is also applicable to the identity of the groups that conform a society. As such, when discussing the identity of women, it is assumed that they are different to men, and this has its own risks. If misinterpreted, identity is an effective mechanism of oppression that places each individual in his or her position in a seemingly pre-established universal order. The creation of a stereotyped identity is more dangerous than having no identity. What Garro does in *Recuerdos* is deconstruct the identity of Mexican women in order to invent a new identity for them. Garro creates a new identity for women, an identity without identity, as it were, where they are the ones who choose their paths without being judged by a society which feels betrayed upon seeing its values challenged. However, for the moment this new identity, which is not determined by social conventions, remains a long way off. In this context, the only way out left for women is to escape through the use of imagination: in their minds they are free to choose their own destiny. Reality is very different and their bodies live trapped in a world with assigned roles. At the end, both Julia and Isabel manage to escape - possibly through death - and the collective memory turns them into a legend ensuring that they serve as an example to subsequent generations.

⁵⁷ Fernando Aínsa, *Identidad cultural de Iberoamérica en su narrativa* (Madrid: Gredos, 1986), 43.

4. CONCLUSION

Recuerdos establishes a bridge between the revolutionary novel and the new historical novel developed during the 1970's. The revolutionary novel was about the present or the immediate past and the vast majority of writers had witnessed the events that they narrated. The subsequent historical novel would recreate events much farther away in time with an investigatory interest in the search for the origin of Mexico's problems. The pessimism that emanates from Garro's work is due to her proximity to the events she experienced and to Mexican society's deep disenchantment after the revolution. However, subsequent writers will be committed to a search for a real identity hidden in Mexico's past despite doubts about the recreation of a past that appears to escape through gaps in memory. The impossibility of understanding the world that surrounds them will not prevent these writers from trying to explain, at least, a small part of that world. The cyclical repetition of past mistakes will remain a constant feature in the works of subsequent writers, who will attempt to break this cyclical fatality by means of the exorcising power of the pen. The themes that deal with the Indian found in *Recuerdos* will not be revisited after the 1970s, thereby opening up more general themes of national and international importance. From this point onwards history becomes the theme and protagonist of the historical novel, an object of a narrative concerned with the issue of Mexican identity.

The next novel, *Terra Nostra*, can be regarded paradigmatic of what was to follow: the transformation of the traditional historical novel into a self-referential and metafictional narrative in search of the past and the creation of Mexican identity. What had started as the questioning of the authority of historiographical speech

somehow evolves into the total destruction of reality in *Terra Nostra*, where nothing is what it seems and the past disguises itself to deconstruct the official version.

CHAPTER 4: *TERRA NOSTRA* AND THE TOTAL NOVEL:

THE SCATOLOGICAL PARADIGM

1. INTRODUCTION

Terra Nostra (1975) is Carlos Fuentes' (b. 1928) most ambitious novel.¹ It took the author more than six years to write and represents his most serious attempt to write a total novel. It constitutes a paradigm of the postmodern novel and incorporates all the techniques, devices, concerns and topics that were to be developed in the historical novel in the last decades of the twentieth century. *Terra Nostra* is the space in which all possibilities occur simultaneously: Fuentes the writer, Fuentes the reader, Fuentes who reads and who is read in different places and times. From the Roman Empire, during Tiberio's reign, up to the last year of the second millennium in Paris, *Terra Nostra*, attempts to provide the reader with a mythical vision of Hispanic culture, whose culmination would be the day that the world ended, on the mystically significant date of 31 December 1999. Using techniques originally developed in the mystery novel, the author plays a complex game with the reader's expectations. The information is provided in small doses and the plot is presented through overlapping versions of the facts provided by different characters and narrators. The book is full of gaps and the reader is presented with questions that she/he has to answer in order to re-construct the

¹ Carlos Fuentes, *Terra Nostra* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1991). All the quotations from the book will refer to this edition.

plot. Fuentes transports us to an uchronic time² in a utopic world that is a narrative reinterpretation of “terra nostra,” our world. The result of this temporal displacement is a novel that is a postmodern representation of the creation of the New World discovered or invented by Europe in the fifteenth century.

Although the novel was published in 1975, Fuentes has admitted on numerous occasions that it took him six years to write. This brings us to the year 1969, the year after the massacre at Tlatelolco. In 2 October 1968 Mexicans were confronted with consequences stemming from the failure of principles they had, as a nation, defended in the Revolution of 1910. The quest for national identity needed to be reoriented. To achieve this it was necessary to focus on the legacy of Mexican history from a different point of view. *Terra Nostra* attempts to heal the main Mexican historical traumas and explains the relationship between Mexicans and their history, returning to the historical moment when different decisions could have resulted in the creation of a different culture. Fuentes proposes a dialogue with the past in which he subverts the undisputed conventional notion that history is truth.

The complexity of *Terra Nostra*, both thematically and interpretatively, led Fuentes to publish a work that served in part as an explanation and as a theoretical guide to *Terra Nostra* in general.³ This chapter will show that *Terra Nostra* can be considered as the Mexican paradigm for the recent historical novel, in particular with regard to the structure and themes treated within the genre. The role of history and its relation to literature will be studied in depth using this novel as a guide for the next generation of historical novels. *Recuerdos* anticipated the development of the recent historical novel

² The word “Uchronia” was created by the philosopher Charles Renouvier in his novel *Uchronie (L’Utopie dans l’histoire). Esquisse historique apocryphe du développement de la civilisation européenne tel qu’il n’a pas été, tel qu’il aurait pu être* (1876). It refers to an alternative time period related to what is broadly known as “our world.” In the case of *Terra Nostra*, Fuentes creates a mythological time that reminds us of the era of the conquest of America. However, all times are mixed together and the time that Fuentes explores in his novel never existed.

³ Carlos Fuentes, *Cervantes o la crítica de la lectura*. Madrid: Centro de Estudios Cervantinos, 1994.

by serving as the transitional point between the novel of the Revolution and the new historical novel. *Terra Nostra* is an attempt to create literary theory through a novel: it is the definition of a new genre through experimentation. If the recent historical novel can be characterised as a hybrid genre that welcomes themes not conventionally related to literary fiction, *Terra Nostra* is then the hybrid of hybrids, where every discipline has its place; where everything is questioned and still remains valid; where all is true and false but never black and white. The unusual and the paranormal will be the rule, and the challenge to reality will affect everything, even the challenger.

2. TERRA NOSTRA AND ITS HISTORICAL PARADIGM

As we have seen, the topics in *Recuerdos* preceded and predicted the topics that would be present in subsequent historical novels. As such, *Recuerdos* can be seen as a precursor to the recent historical novel. More than ten years later, *Terra Nostra* strives to be a paradigmatic novel to the historical novel in terms of the same devices, techniques and topics that would later be employed by what we now regard as the recent historical novel. Fuentes creates a novel that exemplifies, almost perfectly, the recent historical novel, as discussed in chapter 2. *Terra Nostra*'s metafictional role manifests the conscious and deliberate use of these techniques by its author.

In the first instance, the linear conception of history is completely derailed by a succession of temporalities and spaces with regard to which human perception can only make a fragmented account. The plot is not presented as a linear structure either, but rather the compiler builds a spiral structure where the story is revealed as a puzzle through the different versions of witnesses and narrators. For instance, in the second

part of the novel, the castaway recounts his adventure in the New World. But he himself does not have a clear picture of what happened there. It is only later, with the revelation of Jerónimo's story, that the reader discovers that the castaway's story about the New World was only a dream. However, even this revelation is not clear either, since the fact that the three brothers only exist in each others' dreams for years, is a fantastic story that could have been invented by Jerónimo. Reality is depicted as a mystery that can only be penetrated by the apprehension of a plethora of realities. Different time planes appear within the same spatial frame and time itself seems not to affect all the characters equally. The best example of this is the case of Celestina, whose memory and soul passes from one woman to another in such a way that her wisdom is maintained and her life undergoes a form of metempsychosis or transference of souls. Time does not affect her in the same way as it affects people around her. When she marries Jerónimo the blacksmith, they are both young. When she returns, years later, she is still the young girl who was raped on her honeymoon but Jerónimo has become an old man. He recognises her but he also realises the impossibility of this fact: time has not passed for her. Alternative time-frames are offered and simultaneity is developed within a circular or a spiral structure. Through his conversations with the Anciano de las Memorias, the castaway discovers that "hay vidas que son flechas. Son disparadas, vuelan, caen. De esas era la vida de mi amigo. Pero hay otras vidas que son como círculos. Donde parecen terminar, en verdad se inician nuevamente. Hay vidas renovables."⁴ If time is circular, then it is eternal, because it is renewable. The teleological conception of time defended by Christianity is challenged. First of all, this challenge comes from within Christianity itself, with the heretical movements and sects

⁴ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 481.

of the Middle Ages pictorially represented in the painting from Orvieto. Fray Julián, the real painter of this picture, warns the Cronista:

No prestes atención o crédito, así, a lo que otros te cuenten, prosiguió Julián, ni creas en las simples y mentirosas cronologías que sobre esta época se escriban en beneficio de la lógica de una historia linear y perecedera; la verdadera historia es circular y eterna.⁵

El Señor observes this new reality in the painting and starts to think that “el tiempo le ha sido favorable y que, en vez de progresar, retrocede.”⁶ This notion of circular historical movement finds its expression with the castaway’s dream of the New World and is related to the indigenous myth of eternal return. The Aztecs believed in the circular repetition of history with men trapped in a ring of destruction-creation that ruled their lives. For them, historical advancement was an endless returning to the origins; a process involving development followed by destruction, and which then starts all over again. This idea of time as circular is reflected in *Terra Nostra* along with the elimination of temporary advancement. The sentiment is first explained by the castaway when he arrives at the New World: “Dormí largo tiempo en lecho de perlas. Al despertar, me dije que el tiempo era inmóvil: la misma luz, el mismo oleaje tibio, las eternas tortugas mirándome desde esa frontera entre la playa y el bosque.”⁷ The castaway has been transported to a mythical time, a place where there is no time. We soon find ourselves submerged in a no-time, eternal present in which the events seem to take place simultaneously. The reader is transported from one historical age to another without previous warning and, in the mythical time, all times converge. History is then repeated over and over again, trapped in a circular movement of eternal return. In the

⁵ Ibid., 776.

⁶ Ibid., 342.

⁷ Ibid., 460.

New World, the “Noche del retorno” is the last night the castaway spends in that land. However, it is also the night when the myth of the eternal return is portrayed. Different events collide in the shadow of the dark destiny reserved for Mexico, from the fall of Tenochtitlan to the massacre in Tlatelolco. Finally, the circular structure of the novel promotes this sense of present time being eternally stagnant. *Terra Nostra* starts and concludes in Paris with the destruction of the world. The circle is complete and rebirth after the end is symbolised by the figure of the androgyne. The novel is not closed. The return is eternal.

Writers whose work is closely associated with the postmodern condition are concerned with our inability to understand reality as it is and, by extension, with the impossibility of us understanding history. This world-view permeates *Terra Nostra*’s philosophy. This epistemological uncertainty is portrayed within the novel as a worldwide instability and as a questioning of all the categories traditionally considered to be unquestionable. The text is demystifying and the author is the witness of his own death by the loss of “author-ity”. The author becomes an unreliable narrator with a partial view of story and of history. Even the witnesses cannot be sure of what they saw or of what they lived through. The castaway tells his story doubting if he is alive or dead, if he is dreaming or awake, with the feeling that he is forgetting most of the story. He only realises at the end: “Entonces todo lo he soñado... Entonces nada ha sido cierto... Entonces debo despertar...”⁸ One version contradicts previous versions of the same events. Narrators discredit each other in their fight to assert their version of reality:

Hasta aquí, le dijo Julián al Cronista, lo que yo sé. Y nadie sabe lo que yo sé, ni sabe más que yo. He sido el confesor de todos; no creas sino en mi versión de

⁸ Ibid., 586.

los hechos; elimina a todos los demás narradores posibles. Celestina ha creído saberlo todo y contarlo todo, porque sus labios heredaron la memoria y creen transmitirla. Pero ella no escuchó la confesión cotidiana del Señor.⁹

Uncertainty invades the sacred written word. El Señor thinks that

lo escrito permanece, lo escrito es verdad en sí porque no se le puede someter a la prueba de la verdad ni a comprobación alguna, ésa es la realidad plena de lo escrito, su realidad de papel, plena y única.¹⁰

However, an event does not have to be true just because it is found in a historical document as this written artefact can be manipulated. Guzmán ridicules the faith that the Señor has in the written word by saying that “ahora mismo podría reescribirlo, eliminar, añadir, escribir que también asesinaste a Ludovico y Celestina, y tú así lo creerías, porque así quedó escrito.”¹¹ This process of demystification of history also extends to the traces that are left by the past in order to reconstruct the course of history:

El populacho sólo conocerá la cara de vuestro hijo por las monedas que, con la efigie por mí inventada, se troquelen y circulen en estos reinos: nunca podrá comparar la imagen grabada con la real: nunca verá a nuestro infante sino desde lejos, cuando os dignéis mostrarlo desde un alto y lejano balcón; y la historia sólo conocerá la efigie que yo, siguiendo vuestra voluntad, deje.¹²

The confusion between dream and reality, and the dissolution of temporal and spatial boundaries, transports the reader to a mythical time where even the writer, compiler and narrator are no longer aware of what is reality and what is fiction. History is not reality,

⁹ Ibid., 776.

¹⁰ Ibid., 258.

¹¹ Ibid., 205.

¹² Ibid., 212.

but a collection of impressions recovered by historians and chroniclers. The past leaves only traces in the present that are merely a sign of the historical fact, but never the historical fact itself. In *Terra Nostra*, history is an academic convention constructed to allow society to make sense of the past, i.e. it is a human creation. History interprets but never recovers. The past is something that no longer exists and is only reachable from the present as written word. The traces of the past “humo son mientras no se escriba su historia”¹³ and books of history are not reliable since their sources can be manipulated. History is condemned as artifice, created by humans to try and recapture the past. In view of this failure of history, literature is presented as a possible alternative, never a substitute, but rather complementary to history itself. The Señora de las Mariposas tells the castaway: “eres uno en la memoria. Eres otro en el olvido.”¹⁴

Terra Nostra and the recent historical novels try to rescue what has been forgotten, the possible versions of history, the possibilities that never had the opportunity to become a historical fact. Literary fiction, as an artifice that exposes “cuanto pudo haber sido y no fue,”¹⁵ is presented as a possible approach to the problem of the failure of history, a repetitive discipline which can only describe “lo que realmente es y sera,”¹⁶ but which cannot ultimately restore the lost past. However, neither literature nor history are complete enough to attain a full understanding of reality: “tu destino es el olvido.”¹⁷ It is only through the utopic knowledge of all versions, factional and fictional, that the total truth will be discovered: “las posibilidades que negamos son sólo las posibilidades que desconocemos.”¹⁸ Carlos

¹³ Ibid., 165.

¹⁴ Ibid., 549.

¹⁵ Ibid., 676.

¹⁶ Ibid., 676.

¹⁷ Ibid., 549.

¹⁸ Ibid., 608.

Fuentes offers the opportunity of imagining the past and remembering the future¹⁹ through the fictional reality of the historical novel.

According to Brian McHale, the traditional historical novel²⁰ respects a number of basic rules with regard to historical faithfulness. On the one hand, it never contradicts “official” history, when presenting specific characters, events, environments, or customs. It employs creative freedom when dealing with “dark areas” or unknown gaps in history. On the other hand, historical novels always have to be linked to reality, “a fantastic historical fiction is an anomaly.”²¹ In postmodernist writing, however, the conscious distortion of history is not the exception but the rule. In *Terra Nostra* historical faithfulness is not the norm. A main feature in *Terra Nostra* is precisely the use of temporal and spatial anachronisms where all the times and spaces can co-exist within the pages of the book. The mother of El Señor represents the historical character of Juana La Loca (1479-1555), mother of Carlos I (1500-1558). This is confirmed by the multiple allusions to historical data such as the birth of Carlos I:

Usted misma dio a luz una noche de baile, en el patio del palacio de Brabante;
mientras su esposo perseguía a las muchachas de Flandes usted sintió los dolores
del parto y se fue a esconder a la letrina y allí la encontramos y allí nació su hijo
nuestro actual Señor.²²

However, El Señor in *Terra Nostra* is not Carlos I, but his son, Felipe II, Juana’s grandson. Felipe has no descendants but Felipe II had four children. In the novel, Felipe marries Isabel, his English cousin, who resembles Elizabeth I, queen of England and eternal enemy of Felipe II. They obviously were never married in reality. An example of

¹⁹ Fuentes, *Valiente mundo*, 17.

²⁰ McHale takes the term historical novel to refer to the nineteenth-century “classic” historical novels, the modernists and most of the late-modernists historical novels.

²¹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 87-88.

²² Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 123.

material anachronism is the letter from Ludovico and Celestina that Polo Febo receives after helping Madame Zaharia give birth. The paper is old and the hand-writing belongs to a different epoch. The letter has travelled in time. So has Celestina, who enquires about “common” things such as electric light, cars, and clocks. In contrast, she does not see anything unusual in signs that announce the end of the world manifested in Paris. Exaggerations and omissions create a new image of history, historical characters and events. The figures in the novel are often caricaturized and stylised, and their feelings and thoughts seem less relevant than usual in this type of internal dialogue in the psychological novel. The re-invention of history is also superimposed on the novel’s characters and they appear in a role different to their own. This is the case of the Cronista. He is the fictional image of Miguel de Cervantes, “regresaste, fatigado, vestido de limosnero, mutilado de un brazo, de la feroz batalla naval contra el turco”²³ but Cervantes never wrote a chronicle about the reign of Felipe II and he was not sent to galleys for writing about a heresy. The historical characters depicted in *Terra Nostra* are never portrayed as they conventionally have been in traditional historical sources and the univocal certainty of history is threatened by the plurivocal doubt of the historical novel.

Terra Nostra is a great parody of life. It is a parody of history and a parody of literature. And it is also a parody of parody –one of the main intertexts in *Terra Nostra* is Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, a parody of chivalry books. Fuentes re-writes other texts by employing an ironic reinterpretation of the past –historical or fictional- and the device of intertextuality. His ironic reinterpretation becomes evident when he wants to create a new subversive version of the past. This is taken to an extreme when he revises the life of Jesus Christ and the origins of Christianity. The story is told in the Bible, the sacred

²³ Ibid., 777.

book *par excellence*, but he breaks all the rules and re-invents the story, by proposing a new history where Mary was not a virgin, John the Baptist was in love with Jesus, Joseph the carpenter was the one who betrayed Jesus and God is a woman. And all these stories are perfectly documented: they are told by direct witnesses of the events: Mary, Joseph and God herself. Fuentes finds the gaps and fills them in: he creates the story of a young Don Quixote that is identified with the figure of Calixto from *La Celestina*. But he also re-writes fictional stories like that of Don Quixote, Celestina or Don Juan that are widely known by the reader. In *Terra Nostra*, Celestina deceives Don Quixote when he pays to obtain the favours of Dulcinea. Dulcinea is raped and Don Quixote, trying to forget her by reading chivalry books, goes crazy and starts to believe that he is a knight. These versions are compatible with the one provided by Cervantes but it is a free interpretation not based on the book by Cervantes. Fuentes offers a new reading, a new possibility for the original book.

As I have already mentioned, intertextuality is also a common feature in *Terra Nostra*, especially in the context of the novel's parodic nature. Fuentes drops literary hints for the accomplished reader by inserting texts that recall different writers such as Santa Teresa de Jesús (1515-1582): "Allí muero porque no muero"²⁴; Francisco de Quevedo (1580-1645): "Estiércol y coraje, polvo enamorado"²⁵; Franz Kafka (1883-1924): "Una mañana, tras un sueño intranquilo, encontróse en su cama convertido en un monstruoso insecto"²⁶; and Ciro Alegría (1909-1967): "Y sobre todo, ¿por qué, siendo tan ancho y ajeno el mundo, los tres aquí?"²⁷ The idea that lies behind all these intertexts is what Roland Barthes called "the death of the author".²⁸ The author does not

²⁴ Ibid., 235.

²⁵ Ibid., 272.

²⁶ Ibid., 326.

²⁷ Ibid., 341.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in Rice, Philip, ed., *Modern Literary Theory: a Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), 118-122.

create his discourse, but recreates stories that have already been told. He does not identify with his text because “the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent.”²⁹ Hence, the boundaries are dissolved: the reader is read, the narrator is narrated and the orphaned characters start looking for an author.

The use of metafiction is not exclusive to *Terra Nostra*, but has become a common feature in contemporary literature. This process is especially remarkable within the historical novel since this self-revision affects not only literature but also other disciplines such as history, anthropology, philosophy and religion. Fuentes ponders the task of the writer and the reflection of his ideas within the text. El Señor explains to Guzmán that the fact that a narrator tells a story does not imply that he identifies with the ideas or characters exposed by him: “¿Y quién te dice que el Cronista no ha hecho lo mismo: simplemente contarlas, sin aprobarlas?”³⁰ The process of creation is reflected in *Terra Nostra*, along with the problems faced by the author-compiler-narrator when trying to put together all the stories. Fray Julián, one of the narrators, excuses the lacunae in his story by saying:

Miro cómo me miras, reprochándome los cabos sueltos de esta narración mientras yo te pido que me agradezcas el olvido en que he dejado tantos gestos no cumplidos, tantas palabras no dichas [...] todo narrador se reserva la facultad de no aclarar los misterios, para que no dejen de serlo; y al que no le guste, que reclame su dinero.³¹

In spite of all the efforts made by the narrator, the author and the characters, the story is unknown even at the end. According to Fray Julián, he is the most reliable narrator,

²⁹ Ibid., 120.

³⁰ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 316.

³¹ Ibid., 780.

because everybody told his or her stories to him. What Julián ignores is that although he might know all the stories, he will never know *the* story because it does not exist.

Terra Nostra represents a superb realisation of the dialogical novel proposed by Bakhtin. The narrators (or the compiler) frequently offer two or more versions of the same events. Some witnesses deny what others have previously related and official historiography is threatened by new peripheral versions. These versions are labelled as peripheral since they are provided by traditionally marginalized characters not related to the centre of power. These are the voices of women, children, homosexuals, mad people, relegated historical figures in general that have not had the chance to be heard. All these voices are heard in what Bakhtin called the *polyphonic novel*. In *Terra Nostra*, the vision of the defeated is as relevant as the vision of the victorious. Any voice, any version counts. These new versions and visions refer in *Terra Nostra* to taboo themes such as religion, popular beliefs and norms of behaviour. The narrator provides alternative and original versions about the origins of Christianity that come from peripheral historical figures. According to Pilate in *Terra Nostra*, Christ and Jesus were twins. While one of them died on the cross, the other one faked the resurrection and became the Errant Jew, slave of his own legend. Mary, mother of Jesus, asserts that she never knew who the father of Jesus was, insinuating that she was not a virgin and complaining that “las historias dirán lo contrario, porque son escritas por los hombres: yo, la mujer, hija de David...”³² El Señor imagines the possibility of a homosexual relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. Joseph confesses that he was the one who betrayed Jesus and constructed the cross where he was martyred. In this sense, history is generally –and allegedly– written by the winners but Fuentes subverts this

³² Ibid., 270.

and, for once, the secondary figures of history are given a voice, creating the apocryphal version of Hispanic culture.

The dialogical novel opens its world to otherness. The clash of different world-views is crucial in *Terra Nostra* since the historical moment chosen is that of the discovery of the New World. Thus, for example, el Señor is disgusted and horrified by the castaway's account of the sacrifices carried out in the New World. He is overwhelmed by the darkness of a land where human life is not valued, where inhabitants kill each other in order to maintain their world. The irony lies in the fact that the Inquisition and el Señor himself are killing and torturing people in a much more sadistic way. Guzmán's repression of the *comuneros* is atrocious and nobody seems to see these punishments as "brutal". In this context, European "civilization" can no longer be more acceptable than American "savagery". The monological world of el Señor is now "pluralized" by the otherness of the New World. He will try to erase it by ignoring its existence but he will not succeed this time. "¿Estaremos los europeos a la altura de nuestra propia utopía?"³³

3. THE TOTAL HISTORICAL NOVEL

3.1. The encyclopaedic novel

Terra Nostra is not a novel about a single historical event. It is an encyclopaedic novel that attempts to grasp what could be termed *total history*. Confronted with the traditional conception of history, which only embraces political history and atypically, a few social and economical aspects, the concept of *total history* attempts to embrace all

³³ Ibid., 782.

kinds of disciplines and people, from Felipe II to Celestina. In *Terra Nostra*, history is the background and, as it is manipulated, subverted and stylised at the author's will, it becomes eventually unrecognisable. The plot covers any topic related to Hispanic culture. Politics and religion, arts and science, astronomy and theology, literature and economy, mythology and anthropology are all mixed. All the disciplines, arts, genres, subgenres related to mankind and the world in which we inhabit are included in *Terra Nostra*. As an example, Fuentes provides some notions about falconry when Guzmán explains the art of rearing these birds.³⁴ Medieval heresies are not only portrayed in *Terra Nostra* but they are also presented as though they were data entries from the dictionary. This is particularly clear when Simón the friar reads the manuscript written by the Cronista where he recounts the beliefs of different heresies. *Terra Nostra* is also a treatise on witchcraft. Fuentes demonstrates a deep knowledge on the matter when La Señora is trying to resuscitate her heir-mummy in the chapter "No pasa nada."³⁵ Fuentes offers a critical study of art when Julián explains the nature of his own painting, supposedly from Orvieto.³⁶ And he also presents an essay on anthropology when portraying the customs and every day life of the Indians in the New World.³⁷ In sum, this book can be seen as the utopia which Diderot dreamed of: enclosing human knowledge in a book. This is the main objective of any total novel and, in the case of *Terra Nostra*, Fuentes attempts to recreate all the sources that form the foundations of Hispanic culture.

³⁴ Ibid., 293-294.

³⁵ For more information about this topic see Gloria B. Durán, *The Archetypes of Carlos Fuentes - From Witch to Androgyne*, (Connecticut: University of Connecticut Press, 1980)

³⁶ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 424-425.

³⁷ Ibid., 472-477.

3.2. Hybridism

The new historical novel in general and *Terra Nostra* in particular, are not pure novels. They are, rather, impure, belonging to a hybrid genre within which other genres can emerge, such as poetry or theatre, or even other subgenres, where the chronicle goes hand in hand with oral history and the epistle. *Terra Nostra* is a space for poetry and Fuentes inserts lyrical Aztec poems at the point when Tenochtitlan is being destroyed. It is also a stage where the play is being performed, evidenced when Catilinón, Martín and Jerónimo complain about the hard life they are condemned to live.³⁸ *Terra Nostra* assumes a fracturing role which breaks away from a single aesthetic model traditionally promulgated by critics and poets. It is interesting to observe how Fuentes uses three figures from Spanish literature as characters for *Terra Nostra*: Celestina, Don Quixote and Don Juan. In the first instance, Celestina's character is derived from the go-between that appears in Fernando de Rojas' *La Celestina* (1499), but it also has a clear precedent in the figure of the "Trotaconventos" in the *Libro de buen amor* (circa 1343) by Juan Ruiz Arcipreste de Hita. Both books transgressed the contemporary moral codes of their time and were regarded as seditious in their time while they still influence modern literature. *La Celestina* is, as its other title indicates, *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, a hybrid between tragedy and comedy.³⁹ In the *Libro de buen amor* the book's lyrical and dramatic elements, together with its subgenres of picaresque autobiography and satire, convert into an unclassifiable piece of art.

Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, is a book that is characterised by its digressions, intercalated stories and the sayings Sancho Panza voices, where vulgar language mixes with cultured language and breaks away from a single medieval vision to exploit an endless number of possibilities in reality. At the same time, *Don Juan*

³⁸ Ibid., 296-297.

³⁹ *La Celestina* (1499) by Fernando de Rojas tells the love story between Calisto and Melibea and the intercession of the old witch Celestina.

Tenorio written by the romantic Zorrilla is a betrayed tragedy: everyone dies, including Don Juan, but he is saved by the strength of Doña Inés' love, leading to a happy ending. Therefore, the three protagonists, considered by Fuentes as representative of Hispanic culture, derive from "impure novels". *Terra Nostra* is not only a hybrid of different literary genres: it is also a transgressive hybrid novel. Fuentes exploits the conventions of different types of novels only to violate them. Thus, *Terra Nostra* is a historical novel, a fantastic novel, a mystery novel, a thesis novel, an adventure novel, an epic novel, a travel novel –both in time and in space- and, at the same time, none of the above. Fuentes presents us with a confrontation between our world and a world where all the rules can be broken; a world where time and space have been dissolved, where reality is false and a novel is not a novel anymore.

3.3. The archetypal novel

Terra Nostra is also an archetypal novel. The characters are not endowed with any attempt at verisimilitude, nor are they perfectly delineated in psychological, as is the case in the realist novel or the traditional historical novel. On the contrary, the characters presented by Fuentes represent a paradigm that compiles the attributes of several historical characters. Some of them have generic names, such as el Señor, el Cronista or la Señora. These figures are composed of several historical characters. The figure of the Cronista is identifiable with Cervantes (he was mutilated and fought against the Turks) but also with Kafka (he wrote a book telling the story of a man that becomes an insect) and with Fuentes himself (he writes the chronicle detailing the last years of the reign of el Señor that is *Terra Nostra* itself). The Cronista constitutes the figure of the universal writer. El Señor has Phillip II's features (he is called Felipe and

is building the monastery of El Escorial), Charles I (he is the son of Juana la Loca) or Charles II (he has no children and the autopsy reveals their physical identity). The Mother Queen is the image of Juana la Loca (she is the wife of Felipe el Hermoso) but is also the figure of other Queens such as Charlotte, wife of Maximilian of Hapsburg (she cries for the death of a prince in the lands of the sun)⁴⁰ and Mariana of Hapsburg, mother of Charles II (“Mi nombre es Mariana”)⁴¹. Other characters have a proper name, such as Celestina, Simón, Ludovico or Polo Febo, but they are also representative characters of the witch, the friar or the student and they live several lives, becoming archetypes of humanity. Julián the friar adopts the personality of the priests that travelled to the New World to defend the Indians (Bartolomé de las Casas), to create a new utopic community (Vasco de Quiroga) and to recover the Indian traditions (Motolinía).⁴²

Fuentes focuses his attention on the universal rather than the particular. Each of these archetypes is a synthesis of numerous historical characters, literary or mythical, that includes the common features of different individuals, belonging to the world of reality and fiction. The novel’s suprahistorical approach succeeds in the way that is projected into the future. This is possible because in having archetypal characters, the novel acquires a universal character which is both spatial and temporal. For instance, the figure of the writer (Cronista) and that of the authoritarian governor, president, King, dictator (Señor), share features that not only belong to people who have been and are, but also that will be. Furthermore, literary fiction enriches the possibilities of the archetype by giving him the features of those that they could have been or could be. To sum up, Fuentes understands

⁴⁰ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 129.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 840.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 781.

la novela no sólo como encuentro de personajes, sino como encuentro de lenguajes, de tiempos históricos distantes y de civilizaciones que, de otra manera, no tendrían oportunidad de relacionarse. Este fue el criterio que me guió, notablemente, en la redacción de *Terra Nostra*.⁴³

3.4. The total language

The language used by Carlos Fuentes in his novel is “el lenguaje de la ambigüedad: de la pluralidad de significados, de la constelación de alusiones: de la apertura.”⁴⁴ In *Terra Nostra* he is searching for the apprehension of a total language. This total language would, by definition, have to be ambiguous in order to embrace not just one, but all stories; a language which can be identified with every community, place and time but which remains, at the same time, a language belonging to Mexico, different to the one imposed by the Spanish conquest. It is also a language that doubts, a language that enquires, a language that is born of the confrontation with a new reality that puts in perspective the importance of our own reality: “¿Nos descubren ellos... o les descubrimos nosotros?”⁴⁵ And it is a language that is not only what it is, but also the language that it could have been; a language that covers all times, all registers, all worries, and all peculiarities; a language that does not allow us to learn about the past, but rather -following Bakhtin- allows us to enter into a dialogue with the past; a language that covers in the form of a total novel but not in a definitive form otherwise, the mystery that is history. For Fuentes, “inventar un lenguaje es decir todo lo que la historia ha callado.”⁴⁶ El Señor wants to keep his own truth, inviolable and immutable,

⁴³ Carlos Fuentes, *Geografía de la novela* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1993), 33-34.

⁴⁴ Fuentes, *La nueva novela*, 32.

⁴⁵ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 469.

⁴⁶ Fuentes, *La nueva novela*, 30.

and he fears the creation of this new language represented visually by the painting from Orvieto:

Espera, Guzmán, qué decimos, qué escribimos, por mera costumbre, ¿tú nunca dudas, Guzmán, a ti nunca se te acerca un demonio que te dice, no fue así, no fue sólo así, pudo ser así pero también de mil maneras diferentes, depende de quién lo cuenta, depende de quién lo vio y cómo lo vio?; imagina por un instante, Guzmán, que todos pudiesen ofrecer sus plurales y contradictorias versiones de lo ocurrido y aun de lo no ocurrido; todos, te digo, así los señores como los siervos, los cuerdos como los locos, los doctores como los herejes, ¿qué sucedería, Guzmán?⁴⁷

The paradox resides in the fact that Fuentes presents, in *Terra Nostra*, the impossibility of absolute knowledge, be this knowledge in the present, past or future, American or European. However, the book itself deals with a paradox. *Terra Nostra* is a total novel but it has an open ending and it contains significant gaps that can (or cannot) be filled by the reader. In this sense, Fuentes proposes a historical novel as a space where a total, ambiguous language can be achieved. Literature actualises and carries the simultaneity of all historical times and spaces. In literature, Celestina can live with Don Quixote and Phillip II can be Juana's son. Fuentes suggests that "deberían aliarse, en tu libro, lo real y lo virtual, lo que fue con lo que pudo ser, y lo que es con lo que puede ser."⁴⁸ This sentence synthesizes Fuentes' total language.

⁴⁷ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 258.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 779.

4. THE TOTAL FICTIONAL HISTORY

4.1. Literature as history's double

Borges wrote about abominable mirrors that reproduced an atrocious or banal reality. For some, this revealed reality could be banal featureless, trivial, common, insignificant, whilst for others, it could be atrocious, cruel and inhuman. Some people are indifferent. Others are overwhelmed.⁴⁹

Fuentes picks up this motif in *Terra Nostra* and he takes it to the limit; every character has a double and an opposite and their successive “reincarnations” lead us to discover, bit by bit, their complete or fragmented personalities. The pairs of doubles that appear, God/Devil, heresy/orthodoxy, light/shade, Celestina/Señora de las Mariposas, are not always equal but rather they are often complementary and even antagonistic. In the case of the castaway, the Aztec Gods, Quetzalcóatl and Tezcatlipoca (sun and light, life and death), are both integral parts of each other’s personality. The three castaways that appear in el Cabo de los Desastres, are virtually identical doubles without identity and without a past. However, the moment that they make contact with different characters, they adopt a personality that differentiates them, going to the length of even changing their physical appearance.

The struggle of these doubles, antagonist and complementary, enriches *Terra Nostra*. Furthermore, they cannot exist without each other, as the destruction of one results in the annihilation of the other. One might be tempted to ask, how can we establish that what is beautiful is, in fact, beautiful if it is not compared with what is ugly? And even, how can light exist without shade?

- Señor: me hablas de una fatalidad sin fin, circular y eterna. ¿Nunca se resolverá con el triunfo definitivo de uno de los dos: mi doble o yo?

⁴⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1956)

Nunca. Porque lo que tú representas solo vivirá si es negado, agredido, secuestrado en un palacio, una prisión o un templo. Pues si tu reino pudiese establecerse sin contrincantes, pronto se convertiría en reino idéntico al que combates. Tu bien, hijo mío, solo se mantiene vivo porque tu doble lo niega.⁵⁰

In this sense *Terra Nostra* presents literature as history's double to us, like a mirror. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the image reflected in the mirror need be an exact replica of reality. On the contrary, Fuentes proposes that everyone sees the image that they wish to see when they look into the mirror. The possibilities are not exhausted by the novel, rather they multiply within it. That is why in *Terra Nostra* the same stories are recounted numerous times, sometimes by different characters, sometimes by the same one at different moments, giving the narration a new meaning, or not, as the case may be. The reader is told the same story on various occasions, but never in the same form, since the characters, times or places always differ. Generally, but not in every instance, new information or a new focus is added, enabling the story to be understood in more depth. Sometimes, fictional truth coincides with historical truth, even if that was not the intention of the character who tells the story. The Cronista recites a poem that is suspiciously similar to the love story between la Señora and Miguel de la Vida and he is sent to the galleys "convencido de que nos había leído la verdad poética, sin imaginar siquiera que nos había repetido, en voz alta, la secreta verdad de todos los días."⁵¹ On other occasions this new focus is undermining the opinion the reader had up to that point concerning a certain historical event. Due to these multiple contradictions, it is not until the end, when one knows all of the histories and all of the stories. The reader, then, contemplates the picture in chiaroscuro with its ambivalence and ambiguities, forming a global fictional world.

⁵⁰ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 584.

⁵¹ Ibid., 314.

An example of this technique is the information that the reader receives regarding the Señor's bastard brothers. It is not until well into the novel, that the reader is told that the Señora had a child from the Señor's father and that Ludovico and Celestina abducted and took him from the castle. The child born to a wolf and assisted by the little shepherdess is also his brother: Julián tells the Cronista that Felipe's father confessed he had raped a wolf. The third brother, born of Celestina, could also be Felipe's brother, since his father raped Celestina the day she married Jerónimo as an *ius prima noctis*. The partial information is supplied suddenly in the form of a confession by each and every one of the protagonists about the event, until the pieces of the jigsaw finally fit together.

The note about falconry regarding the care of the goshawk, repeated on numerous occasions by Guzmán and the Señora, is also compelling:

En la palma de la mano, la Señora sentía el latido creciente del pecho del ave y entonces temía que el instinto activo fuese más fuerte que la necesidad pasiva y que el pájaro, vencido por aquél, se desprendiese del puño de su ama y, creyendo que la oscuridad era infinita, saliese volando a estrellarse contra los muros de la capilla o el fierro de la celosía, y así muriese o quedase manco: Guzmán se lo había advertido.⁵²

Until it actually happens:

Aleteó desesperadamente, trató de zafarse del brazo de la Señora y lo logró, aprovechando la intensa concentración de su ama [...] inició un vuelo ciego, nervioso, suicida y salvador por la rica alcoba, oasis del palacio sombrío, estrellándose contra el brocado que cubría los muros, contra los techos repujados a la manera árabe [...] todos los hábitos del ave, adquiridos por el instinto y

⁵² Ibid., 146.

fijados por la aplicación de Guzmán, se desvanecían con cada aleteo furioso; el azor chocó sin piedad contra la ventana y cayó, herido, al suelo⁵³

Frequently, the literary double is analysed to the furthest point, employing the most extreme paradox and caricature. The incestuous marriages amongst the Hapsburgs supposedly caused physical and mental decadence within the Royal family. These defects are imposed on the figure of the Señor who is depicted, in a hyperbolic grotesque form, with an almost monstrous physique and is riddled with hereditary diseases. In the case of the Dama Loca, Juana la Loca's insanity leaves its mark on this character but in an exaggerated and caricaturised way. In this sense, the author only employs the features from the historical personage which are most useful for the purposes of increasing the dramatic effect of his narrative.

4.2. History's second chance

Related to the use of archetypal characters whose destiny is mapped out beforehand, the myth of eternal return and the sensation of time having frozen overcomes the reader, who finds her/himself faced with the "second opportunity of history" repeated in a cyclical manner.

Critics are divided when judging *Terra Nostra's* ending. While some interpret its pessimism literally, others see an indication of hope in the reincarnation of a new androgynous humanity that will fulfil the utopia of the Golden Age at its apocalyptic end. However, an analysis of the novel as a whole reveals that the explanation is not so simple. While it is true that the ending permits one to see a ray of optimism, the failure of all the campaigns carried out throughout the novel cannot be forgotten:

⁵³ Ibid., 369-370.

Todos hemos soñado con una segunda oportunidad para revivir nuestras vidas, una segunda oportunidad, escoger de nuevo, evitar los errores, reparar las omisiones, ofrecer la mano que la primera vez no tendimos, sacrificar al placer el día que antes dedicamos a la ambición, darle una nueva oportunidad a cuanto no pudo ser [...] todo ha terminado, todo fue una mentira, se repitieron los mismos crímenes, los mismos errores, las mismas locuras, las mismas omisiones que en otra cualquiera de las fechas verídicas de esa cronología linear, implacable, agotable: 1492, 1521, 1598.⁵⁴

Periodically, history is given a second chance, but this opportunity is wasted again and again, leading to a new cycle in which history is condemned to repeat itself. The young Señor betrays the group of heretics, to which he had allied himself, to win his father's trust. Throughout his adult life he questions whether or not he was right to do what he did, and these doubts torment him to the point of obsession. Ludovico offers the young Señor what he has been waiting for (and fearing) during his reign:

Felipe, óyeme, una segunda oportunidad. Deja entrar a todos, esta vez no los asesines, no repitas la historia, gana tu libertad y la de todos probando que la historia no es fatal, purga para siempre tu primer crimen evitando el segundo.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, when he is presented with a second opportunity, his chance to break the development of cyclical history and give way to the birth of a new era, he does not take advantage of this. Rather, he maintains the ruling political order which would henceforth be exported to America. This interpretation of the novel is somewhat

⁵⁴ Ibid., 917-18.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 743.

negative and implies that the characters are not free to take this second redeeming opportunity, as they appear to be led by their destiny, rather than guiding it themselves.

Guzmán, yo no te di órdenes, yo no he terminado de debatir este problema dentro de mi propio corazón y consultar con mi propia alma, ya es tarde, Señor, huid, escondeos, descienden por la escalera, armados, las hordas, sólo he seguido el ejemplo que vos mismos disteis hace cuatro lustros, soy fiel a vuestras lecciones.⁵⁶

El Señor does not have sufficient strength to change the course of history and allows Guzmán to repress the rebellion, ensuring that the history of death and fatality repeats itself. Nobody can change the past. However, literature provides a second opportunity for history, so we can, in a sense, remember our future.

Celestina's character is emblematic of this "future historical" paradox. Symbolising wisdom, knowledge and memory, she is the driver of history, as she seems to be the only person with access to knowledge. Even though she understands history and knows what the future holds, she does not lose hope and appears to be sure that, despite all the failings, the promised second opportunity will become a reality, giving way to the Golden Age. Celestina delimits the times and the places of the novel, arranging a date to meet with the castaways first and subsequently with Polo Febo (or maybe we are to read this the other way around). She is the creator of the androgynous being, humanity's only hope following the Apocalypse. Polo Febo does not understand what is happening and he simply lets himself be guided by an imposed destiny in an almost instinctive manner. It is in Celestina's character where memory and hope meet. And even though history repeats itself, it is not due to this final destiny that the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 753-54.

characters have to give up and turn their backs on the possibility of breaking this fatal circularity: “Sí: fracasaremos una vez, y otra, y otra más. Pero cada fracaso será nuestra victoria.”⁵⁷

To avoid the fate of repeating history, Carlos Fuentes proposes that we must gain an understanding, as well as knowledge, of history. Guzmán states that “nada se olvida más rápido que el pasado; nada se repite tanto como el pasado.”⁵⁸ The past has to be assimilated when we are trying to create a future as well as attempting to understand the present. However, not only should we study what happened to see the effects that a set historical event had, but rather we should imagine the effects that it did not have. We should ask what could have happened -and also what did not happen if we want to avoid history repeating itself. It is for this reason that Valerio Camillo establishes his Teatro de la Memoria, a theatre that gives us the opportunity to learn what might have been. This theatre can be seen as a metaphor for literature itself. Carlos Fuentes is of the belief that “el arte da vida a lo que la historia ha asesinado. El arte da voz a lo que la historia ha negado, silenciado o perseguido.”⁵⁹

At this point in the argument the next question that needs to be answered is why writing a historical novel if it does not attempt to be faithful to history? Is it the aim of a historical novel to depict what might have been, but which did not actually occur, or a situation in which historical events were in fact as the novel(ist) imagines they might have been? Fuentes demonstrates in *Terra Nostra* what Cervantes had proposed before: if Don Quixote is able to read his own life story written on paper, perhaps our own histories/stories can also be read by others. The notions of the book within a book and the dream within a dream become, in this context, the more pertinent. Julián tells his story to the Cronista who will write the chronicle of Felipe’s reign. This story will also

⁵⁷ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 616.

⁵⁹ Fuentes, *Cervantes*, 84.

be the tale that inspires the creation of a second book: the adventures of a nobleman who goes mad reading too many books of chivalry. This story is based on a “real” character that Jerónimo meets on one of his trips and is recounted in the Chronicle. At this point, it becomes necessary to define the notion of truth and the possibility of categorizing a story in terms of whether it is more true, less true, or only partially true. In *Terra Nostra* even Julián himself calls into question what he is recounting and challenges the Cronista:

“Hasta aquí, le dijo Julián al Cronista, lo que yo sé. Y nadie sabe lo que yo sé, ni sabe más que yo. He sido el confesor de todos; no creas sino en mi versión de los hechos; elimina a todos los demás narradores posibles.”⁶⁰

The story told by Peregrino about his travels overseas is confirmed by Guzmán when he goes to the New World and confirms that the places and the people are as Peregrino described them. However, this does not mean that Peregrino actually experienced what he recounts. He himself is incapable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality and he reaches a point where he raises the idea that everything has, in fact, been nothing more than a bad dream. Peregrino’s story changes and is embellished with new details when his version is set against that of other characters that were also witnesses. However, the possibility exists that Peregrino dreamt about those alleged witnesses and that they told him everything, which he subsequently ignored or had simply forgotten in his own version of the story. Proof of Peregrino’s unreliability as a narrator can be found in the fact that when he meets the Anciano de las Memorias for a second time, the youths who had acted as guides and who are with him confirm

⁶⁰ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 776.

that he has, in reality, been talking to himself and that there was no old man.⁶¹ This confuses Peregrino even more. He is incapable of differentiating between reality and fiction. In addition, the essentially selective nature of memory combined with a necessarily subjective interpretation of the facts, makes the reader's task of distinguishing between reality and invention almost impossible.

Consequently, Fuentes teaches us that literature is the only path that offers us the realization of history's second opportunity of history: what, we can speculate upon, might have happened if, upon the second chance of history actually arising, a different approach had been adopted. Faced with historiographical inadequacies, and even its falsifying of history, Fuentes presents literature as an opportunity to "rescatar la verdad de manos de las mentiras de la historia."⁶²

4.3. History is alive

History is subject to relativity. It changes from the perspective of the present because each individual is able to interpret the past in a different way, contributing new interpretations. It also changes through writing, both through writing that is concerned with the present as well as writing that is not. This is the theme that Carlos Fuentes explores in *Terra Nostra*. Just as the interpretations of a literary text or work of art in general are infinite, so are those of a historical event. Fuentes, in a speech given to mark the four-hundredth anniversary of the publication of *Don Quixote*, stated that "the reader will last longer than the writer."⁶³ While the creator of *Don Quixote* is dead, his last reader has not yet even been born. If writing is an act of creation, then each new

⁶¹ Ibid., 589.

⁶² Fuentes, *Cervantes*, 84.

⁶³ Carlos Fuentes, "Four hundred years with Don Quixote", lecture presented at Canning House, 12th October 2004.

reader of Don Quixote *re-creates* the story through the act of reading the book and, consequently, the hero from La Mancha enjoys a new lease of life. Furthermore, if this same reader reads the book again, the last re-reading will be different from the first reading. In this sense, Fuentes describes historiography as “todos los tiempos vivos en un solo espacio muerto.”⁶⁴ Literature can also recount all the possible times that never had the chance to be. Literature invents the past outside the limits of history. Fuentes suggests using literature to invent the past: “Art will not reflect *more* reality unless it creates *another* reality,”⁶⁵ thereby recreating history to be able to remember the future and bring about an end to the inevitable historical regression. It is not possible to change the past, but it is possible to change history.

Carlos Fuentes suggests that even though the total truth is unattainable, this should not be a reason for the novel to avoid attempting to span total history: all of the presents, pasts and futures -personal, dual and global- seen from the perspective of each person at different moments or periods. *Terra Nostra* aims to give the reader the total vision of the Mexican land at the moment of its foundation. But it does not pretend to be the definitive novel. Rather, it seeks to be the complete opposite. Fuentes says: “Nunca he ocultado mi desdén por las obras cerradas, de pretendida autosuficiencia y de segura reducción.”⁶⁶ Fuentes leaves gaps so that the ideal reader -one who has read as much as he has done- and the not-so-ideal reader can fill these gaps with their own imagination and perspective. But he also suggests the impossibility of total knowledge through a narrative technique full of suggestive gaps that encourage the reader to supply the missing information. Fuentes deliberately omits key dates to unravel the timeline of the novel and no character possesses total knowledge -not even the narrator and certainly not the author himself. Even Celestina, the character who represents wisdom in the

⁶⁴ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 593.

⁶⁵ Carlos Fuentes, *Myself with Others. Selected Essays* (London: André Deutsch, 1988), 68.

⁶⁶ Fuentes, *La nueva novela*, 49.

novel, is incapable of understanding the truth: when she is in Paris at the beginning of the novel, she is overwhelmed by technology and asks Polo about these ‘extraordinary’ things that she is seeing. Needless to say, this is a device from mystery novels that Fuentes exploits to create suspense and provoke uncertainty in the reader. But he is establishing from the beginning that none of us possess a complete knowledge of the world. Not even the all-powerful Señor is able, during his lifetime, to read the manuscript that the third bottle contains. The reader’s expectations remain unfulfilled and it is not possible to fill all the gaps: all the theories about the third bottle will be conjectures, never the ultimate truth.

The implication that comes with the realisation of the impossibility of total and definitive knowledge about reality and history is that history will always be alive, with the ability to be modified, reinterpreted, recreated, manipulated, perverted, subverted, and noticed by new readers. The process of creation never ends, and the task of the writer is described in these terms:

Se remontó al origen, condenado a escribir sus propias aventuras una y otra vez, creer que ha terminado el libro sólo para empezarlo de vuelta, relatarlo todo desde otro punto de vista, de acuerdo con una posibilidad imprevista, en otros tiempos, en otros espacios, aspirando desde siempre y para siempre a lo imposible: una narración perfectamente simultánea.⁶⁷

Fuentes, in *Terra Nostra*, shows us the utopia of the total novel, where all the times and periods meet simultaneously. Despite being an impossible project, it must continue in order that we can have at least a partial vision of that past. Hence, no reading will be the last one and history will stop being a sacred, dead space.

⁶⁷ Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 666.

4.4. The historical novel as an exorcism of the past

Fuentes' metafictional concerns about literature and the role of the writer that appear in *Terra Nostra* are not new in the writer's work. In his first book of literary criticism, he speaks about Latin American literature in these terms:

En *La casa verde*, como en *Cien años de soledad*, *Pedro Páramo*, *El lugar sin límites* y *Los pasos perdidos*, la novela latinoamericana se ofrece como un nuevo impulso de fundación, como un regreso al acto de la génesis para redimir las culpas de la violación original, de la bastardía fundadora: la conquista de la América española fue un gigantesco atropello, un fusilico descomunal que pobló el continente de fusilokitos, de siete leches, de hijos de la chingada.⁶⁸

The search for a national identity, based on the understanding of reality and history, has been a task that has attracted Latin American writers since the origins of literature on the continent. Nevertheless, the way in which to confront these problems and the metaliterary reflections they entail varies significantly from one writer to another. For instance, whilst Borges understands Latin American literature as a game or artificial device, Fuentes interprets it as a struggle, emphasising the constant combat with tradition and univocal ways of thinking. It is for this reason that Fuentes' novels, and *Terra Nostra* in particular aspire to blow away the cobwebs of conformist minds that disregard the past and accept unconditionally a received tradition.

Fuentes warns that this unquestioning of the official version of the past is one of the factors that prevents progress in the country, as well as fomenting the repetition of errors and impeding the formation of a national identity. This syndrome provokes the insanity and the alienation of the individual that finds himself lost in a world that he

⁶⁸ Fuentes, *La nueva novela*, 45-46.

does not feel as his own, incapable of expressing his individuality freely and feeling part of a national identity.

As explained in chapter three, the proclamation of Mexican identity led to the denial of some of its aspects: first, the denial and persecution of the Indian; later, the denial and hatred of the Hispanic. The *mestizo*, as a result, was defined by comparison with other groups: they were *mestizos*, and not Indians, because Indians were inferior; they were *mestizos*, and not Spanish, because Spaniards were those cruel beings, related to Cortés, the man who arrived in Mexico to rape Indian women and subjugate the Mexican Empire.

For Fuentes and Octavio Paz, Mexican identity is related to its *mestizo* roots: offspring of the Spaniard Cortés and the Indian, la Malinche, the Mexican *pueblo* sprouts from the union of both traditions. According to Fuentes, Mexicans have denied their identity for fear of confronting their past, their roots. However, he warns that if the past is not understood, then Mexicans will not discover themselves and history will be doomed to repeat itself over and over again. In order to avoid this inevitable repetition, Fuentes proposes in *Terra Nostra* an exorcism of the past to cure Mexico of its evils. By confronting their historical mistakes, Mexicans will not repeat them in the future.

In the first instance, the exorcism of the past would have a therapeutic effect: the Mexican *pueblo* needs to embrace its past so as to enable itself to cure the historic traumas that paralyse it. However, to cure a trauma it is necessary to overcome the original wound. Fuentes suggests a form of therapy for Mexico: first, Mexicans need to recognise that they do, indeed, have a problem and then search for the origin of this problem, to understand where this trauma was created and to attempt to overcome it.

Also, the exorcism of the future has the aim of predicting future disasters in order to prevent them from happening. When these disasters, mistakes or

misunderstandings are written, they are exorcised and they will never happen. This notion derives from the popular belief that dreams contain information about our future: dreams are wishes or predictions of what will occur that, if verbalised, will not happen. Also, it is believed that desires, once told, become unattainable. Fuentes picks up on this popular belief and he inverts it: if one recounts what one does not desire, this non-wish exorcised will lose its force and will never come true.⁶⁹

5. CONCLUSION

Terra Nostra is a mythical-literary recreation of Mexico's *mestizo* origins where the reader is transported to the brief period of gestation of the American adventure. Carlos Fuentes' intentions in writing the novel move between different fields. On the one hand, he presents his concerns about literature and the recent historical novel through the metafictional role of his own writing. On the other hand, he demonstrates his social commitment in his search for a Mexican national identity, with the aim of answering the question about the Mexican existence. In his search for identity, Fuentes creates a novel that spans all areas of human thought, formulating principles about human existence that have their beginning in distinct religious-cultural traditions such as Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity or the Náhuatl and Totonacan cultures.

Given this aim of universal struggle that governs Fuentes' narrative, *Terra Nostra* tries to shake the reader by creating feelings of anxiety, doubt and uncertainty about the incompleteness of her/his expectations and giving her/him the chance to

⁶⁹ This is relevant to Carlos Fuentes' own life. The character of Santiago in *Los años con Laura Díaz* (1999) has some similarities with Fuentes' own son. The death of Santiago is an attempt to exorcise the imminent death of his own son, Carlos, who died in 1999 at the age of 25 from haemophilia.

understand the novel as best she/he can. Reality is something that we cannot apprehend in its entirety. Our senses, our subjectivity, and our previous experiences all play a key role in the way we perceive that reality and in the way we interpret and recount that *truth*. In this sense, *Terra Nostra* constitutes a paradigm for the recent historical novel in Mexico and abroad. This historical novel, in Latin America, feeds off the postmodernist ideas advanced by critics such as Jean-François Lyotard, Brian McHale or Linda Hutcheon and the baroque aesthetic proposals postulated by Carpentier. The concerns will remain constant: the denial of a univocal vision of reality, the destruction of the official version of history and the proposal that the imagination is the best means in the search for identity.

These same preoccupations are found in Fernando del Paso's narrative. But his approach is not the same. The challenge of the historical truth and the need to search for new theoretical paths are ever-present in *Noticias del Imperio*. Nevertheless, the reader's uncertainty can be regarded as a dogmatic statement. Even if the narrator, Charlotte of Hapsburg, is crazy and, as such, unreliable, it is a commonplace in literature, from the Fool in *King Lear* onwards, that drunkards, children and the insane always tell the truth. At least, it may be said, especially in light of our preceding discussion of Fuentes' unreliable narrators, their own version of the truth.

CHAPTER 5: NOTICIAS DEL IMPERIO OR THE NOVEL

OF THE THOUSAND AND ONE VOICES

1. INTRODUCTION

Noticias del Imperio (1987)¹ is the third novel published by Fernando del Paso (b.1935). He spent ten years creating it, the first two of which were dedicated exclusively to researching the historiography related to the Empire of Maximilian and Charlotte. Its publication was a commercial success and it received very positive critical reviews. In Europe, critics considered the novel as being a retrograde step in the author's career, finding it of considerably lower critical value than his previous novel, *Palinuro de México* (1977). The novel's success in Mexico reflected the fact that it deals with themes relevant to Mexican history and identity.

In Mexico, historians as well as critics believed the book to be a milestone in the search for a novel that moulds history and literature into one. In essence, the novel does not limit itself to the ephemeral empire of Maximilian and Charlotte, imposed in Mexico by an alliance of Mexican conservatives and Napoleon III of France (1864-67). Rather, it also covers aspects of universal history, historiography and the contemporary novel, as well as examining the process of literary creation itself. Del Paso deals in his novel with themes linked to national identity, such as the right of every country to struggle for its self-determination against imperialism. In this sense,

¹ Fernando del Paso, *Noticias del Imperio* (México: Diana, 2004). For convenience, we will subsequently refer to the novel as *Noticias*.

Del Paso finds in the postmodern novel a means of expression that allows him to explore these themes. The narration turns inwards upon itself to examine its own process of formation through the viewfinder of irony. The impossibility of knowing the truth and the self-referentiality that we discovered in *Terra Nostra* are deployed in *Noticias* as a way of exploring the relationship between Mexican history and identity. Del Paso attempts to retell the past in order to lay the foundation for a better future. It is in this novel where Del Paso takes Carlos Fuentes' manifesto of "imaginar el pasado, recordar el futuro"² to the extreme.

Del Paso considers himself a baroque writer of novels whose style rejects conventional narrative constraints. This baroque style is closely related to a fear of empty spaces. This fear finds expression in Charlotte's persecution mania and her obsession to tell the whole story before she dies. Del Paso considers this excessive and unrestrained way of narrating not as an arbitrary effect but rather as something deliberate, related to his style as a writer who eschews any form of moderation. Temporal and spatial constraints are perceived as limitations. Given this fact, *Noticias* is a novel that searches for a global spatial-temporal dimension: the Novel that contains within it the past, present and future, where all time periods occur simultaneously and all spaces are superimposed on each other. Almost seven hundred pages seem to be hopelessly inadequate to achieve this and Del Paso makes the most of every word in order to capture *everything*.

² Fuentes, *Valiente mundo*, 17.

2. THE SEARCH FOR THE PAST WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF POSTMODERNISM

Brian Nicol defines postmodernism as “a term that refers to a shift in what it means to be a subject in late twentieth-century society and to designate a related attitude of self-reflexivity or ironic knowingness that permeates our culture as a result.”³ The concept of *reality* is contested and comes to be seen as a human creation systematically structured by the vested interests of the capitalist economy and manufactured by the mass media.⁴ However, Linda Hutcheon points out that the *real* was already a convention, even before the era of the mass media.⁵ The existence of the mass media can be understood as an *awakening*. The human being is now capable of perceiving *other realities*. But these realities are, sometimes, predicated on facts so unlikely that they seem to have been completely bogus. At the same time, the public is not overawed when faced by science fiction’s extraordinary inventions which are themselves quite likely to become part of reality in the future.

Reality itself, as manifested in the contemporary British media, is the best example of what has been discussed. Peter Falconio, a British backpacker who was travelling around Australia with his girlfriend, was murdered in July 2001. The brutality of his murder and the proliferation of articles and books written during the trial have made it virtually impossible to distinguish a single, verifiable account of the “truth” of the case. Roger Maynard, one of the newspaper correspondents that covered the story, has stated that “when you sit down and write about it you realise that although it is a story of fact it reads like a story of fiction because it is so

³ Brian Nicol, ed., *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel. A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 33.

mysterious.”⁶ The existence of the mass media confirms that, in fact, some of the morbid stories that we see on films, sometimes occur in *our real world*. The everyday tragedies and bizarre stories that form the stock-in-trade of the mass media seem to exist in a symbiotic relationship with the stories of fictional TV and cinematic creations. Taken to the extreme, the negation of reality and the impossibility of knowing history lead us to the problematic field of manipulating and negating the past. This is the posture adopted by the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who negates the existence of the Holocaust arguing that the massacre of the Jews was a *myth*. We may also add that Ahmadinejad’s statements were not made as part of a fictional book and were not said with a humoristic intention but rather with making a deliberately inflammatory statement in order to provoke a particular political or diplomatic response. There is a certain level of overlap between the arguments of Ahmadinejad and the postmodernist belief in the impossibility of knowing the past as it really was. However, postmodernist thinking does not negate the past. The search for some form of agreed truth must go on.

Taking this perspective, Del Paso can be seen as understanding history, along with literature, as cultural artefact, as well as viewing what we consider *the real* as a human creation. The approach to this epistemological problem that he proposes is the deliberate intertwining of every single discipline of human knowledge in order to provide a coherent account of the world we live in. However, the past cannot be conjured out of thin air: the historical novel is a fiction created on the foundations of historical events. The fact that Del Paso spent so much time in investigating Maximilian’s Empire meant that the weight of the documentation threatened to debunk the work’s status as fiction. In *Noticias*, fidelity to historical sources is almost

⁶ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4525064.stm>

absolute, due to the didactic intentions of Del Paso in his novel. According to the author, there is an unfathomable ignorance about the past of the Mexican nation. This lack of understanding is even more pernicious in the case of the Mexicans themselves, since the official version of history promulgated through various media such as text books and official propaganda, has contributed to this partial understanding of history. Given this legacy of popular ignorance about the Mexicans' own history, the task of the novelist is to make a new version available to Mexicans that faithfully records past events and offers new perspectives from the point of view of the imagination.

Hutcheon states that "postmodernism paradoxically manages to legitimize culture (high and mass) even as it subverts it"⁷. This could be taken as Del Paso's articles of faith. His opinion about this notion is summarized in the next paragraph:

Pero la última página sobre el Imperio y los Emperadores de México, la que idealmente contendría ese «Juicio de la Historia» -con mayúsculas- del que hablaba Benito Juárez, jamás sería escrita y no sólo porque la locura de la historia no acabó con Carlota: también porque a falta de una verdadera, imposible, y en última instancia indeseable «Historia Universal», existen muchas historias no sólo particulares sino cambiantes, según las perspectivas de tiempo y espacio desde las que son «escritas».⁸

On the one hand, historians are incapable of recounting history objectively because their versions are dependent on their own culture and personal circumstances. The selection of sources, as well as the events they feel should be highlighted in a set historical moment, condemn the status of the history book to one of partiality. On the other hand, literature is freighted with the irrational and the unreliable, since it is the

⁷ Hutcheon, *Politics*, 33.

⁸ Paso, *Noticias*, 638.

product of imagination. Having this unreliable foundation, a fictional novel cannot be considered as being faithful to historical events, due to the fact that its duty is not to reality but rather it creates its own world-within-a-world. Given the competing accounts of truth represented by history and fiction, Del Paso proposes in his book a possible *modus operandi*: the joining of both disciplines so as to be capable of “asaltar la historia oficial.”⁹ Hence, Del Paso becomes a novelist, who throughout his book gradually transforms himself into a historian until, in the final chapters, one finds oneself confronted with a new Del Paso: Del Paso disguised as a historian who puts on the mask of researcher in the third person with a scientific style worthy of conventional academic history books and hidden behind the security provided by bibliographical sources.

3. THE NOVEL THAT IS EVERYTHING

Noticias is the novel that *aspires to be everything*. Del Paso solves the dilemma regarding the historical novel by creating a hybrid novel that is the child of imagination and documentation. He combines history and fiction creating a collage in which pastiche and parody are the key elements. A dialogue between those who have something to say about Maximilian’s Empire is established. Hence, apocryphal history challenges the official historical account and the nature of the relationship between the future and the past becomes more comprehensible. At the same time, Del Paso continues his search for the total novel, initiated in works by other novelists,

⁹ Fernando del Paso, “La novela que no olvidé”, in Norma Klahn and Willfrido H. Corral, comp., *Los novelistas como críticos* (México: FCE, 1991), 322.

breaking down barriers with other literary genres and feeding off the help of these other disciplines.

3.1. History, “the craziest in the house”

Speaking about *Noticias*, Del Paso declared that one day he realised that “la locura de la emperatriz Carlota estaba destinada a representar a la imaginación –la imaginación, “la loca de la casa”- y su lucha por conquistar una realidad que se nos escapa todos los días.”¹⁰ Charlotte’s madness comes to represent the impossibility of completely remembering the past in spite of the attempt made by historiography to structure its fragments so as to prevent it from being forgotten. Charlotte turns to imagination and memory to paint her memoirs in the last moments of her life. In the even chapters, Del Paso employs historiographical techniques and sources and the historical novel as the artefacts to recreate events from the past. In contrast, the Empress uses dreams, memory and imagination to create a version which, if not more complete than that of history, is at least more human.

The theories about the reason for the Empress’ madness are so numerous that Del Paso dedicates a whole chapter to them. We may speculate that for Charlotte reality itself was so disturbing that she sought refuge in her own madness, an attempt to escape the world in which all of her dreams had crumbled. She insinuates that it was a punishment “por haber escapado a la realidad para vivir en un sueño.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the Empress’ gargantuan monologue illuminates what happened in Mexico and the circumstances that surrounded the tragic events. Her life, as well as her monologue, is so long that it seems that she is incapable of dying until she

¹⁰ Ibid., 319.

¹¹ Paso, *Noticias*, 488.

completely understands what occurred.¹² Despite her madness and uncontained style, her internal monologue reveals a certain level of intuition and great sharpness when analysing the facts. It is true that her paranoia and persecution mania turned her into an unreliable narrator and stripped her speech of any authority. She herself recognises the limits of her own narration and identifies the tremendous difficulty of the task of reconstructing the past, when she confesses, “qué terror me dio la primera vez, cuando vi todas esas páginas en blanco, cuando me di cuenta que si no encontraba mis recuerdos tendría que inventarlos.”¹³ However, many of her statements are perfectly documented in history books and those that are not, might well have been historically true. Her testimony gains its authority from her condition as a witness. Charlotte is a direct witness of the events occurred over a period of almost a century of history.

The odd chapters in the novel contain Charlotte’s monologue. All of these chapters have the same title, “Castillo de Bouchout 1927” and are situated in the same space and time. The stability of these chapters serves as a counterpoint to the enormous flow of events of the even chapters, where the circumstances surrounding Maximilian’s Empire are narrated in a linear fashion. For Charlotte, nothing has changed, her madness has left her frozen in a world that no longer exists and to which she does not belong anymore. Everyone that formed part of her life has died. However, she and her madness remain trapped in the Imperial past. Meanwhile, the world has been the static witness of changes that she intersperses within her thoughts and experiences about her past. Her imagination is the only thing that cannot be taken from her and she is able to shape it as she pleases. Even though the Empress’ attention is orientated towards different characters and her monologue is, sometimes, aimed directly towards Juárez or other characters, it is Maximilian who is Charlotte’s main

¹² The real Charlotte died on January 16, 1927, at the age of eighty-six.

¹³ Paso, *Noticias*, 23.

interlocutor. In the form of an interior monologue, Charlotte constantly upbraids Maximilian, who becomes a constant presence in her mind. Notwithstanding her madness, Charlotte is capable of isolating herself and seeing her life experiences objectively. She discovers that, despite all the worldwide events that occurred during her years of madness, the essence of the world has not changed. Mexico remains vulnerable to foreign expansion; Europe, regardless the war, still views itself as the centre of the world; and the United States has extended its area of influence to cover the whole American continent in the interests of democracy. For Charlotte, nothing has changed. But Charlotte is insane and the opinions of a mentally-deranged woman will most likely receive little credence.

The real, historically recorded life of Maximilian and Charlotte was surrounded by lies. In the first place, they were lied to by their own “allies”, from Napoleon III to the Emperor’s own brother. They were also lied to by their “friends”, people they trusted in the Mexican government and the court. These false friends advised them badly, driven as they were by self interest. Such was the case of Father Fischer. Last of all, however, Maximilian lied to Charlotte; he lied about his love and infidelities, for which she reproaches him in her monologues. In contrast to this, Charlotte’s monologues –the fiction– are replete with truths. Charlotte takes off the mask of hypocrisy that she had to live with until she went mad and she abandons herself to a vast speech which permits her to exorcise her demons and to free her mind of the phantoms that always pursued her. Lies created by official history regarding Maximilian’s Empire are finally destroyed by Charlotte. Hence, she proposes the creation of new lies. However, this time around they are to be lies of her own choosing. Destroying history’s lies and accessing the truth, enables the Empress to create a world tailored to her own needs and desires. Or even, it may be a world that

suits her own madness. Towards the end of the novel, she says: “Yo soy una memoria viva y temblorosa.”¹⁴ When she dies, the narrated events will stop being a living memory and become a lifeless memoir. They will become a piece of history. The living past dies with the person. This is also perceived by Juárez when he agonises:

Sí, si no fuera por ese dolor tan grande que tenía en el pecho, el Señor Presidente hubiera pensado que no era él quien estaba allí en la capilla del Hospital de San Andrés, sino otro Juárez, otro Pablo Benito Juárez García que un historiador o un dramaturgo del futuro estaban inventando.¹⁵

The moment Juárez dies, his image will go on to form part of the nation’s history. He is yet to face the “tremendo fallo de la historia,” but he knows that it will be others who decide what will remain of his extinguished life.

In the case of the *real* past events, Maximilian’s execution takes place in *el cerro de las campanas*, in a cold and dark atmosphere, shot as if he were simply an insignificant enemy in any war picked at random. Menton has referred to the similarities between Del Paso’s presentation of the execution with that of the agony suffered by Jesus Christ on the cross.¹⁶ However, Del Paso, apart from the historical version and that of one of the witnesses, describes a solemn execution, as Maximilian would have liked, following the protocol conventions of the death of emperors. It is true that this chapter has a sarcastic tone and can be interpreted as a burlesque critique of Maximilian’s need to control everything by writing rules of protocol. Adopting a parodic tone, Del Paso imitates the style used by Maximilian when dictating his orders to his secretary Blasio. This does not preclude a certain complicity between the

¹⁴ Ibid, 657.

¹⁵ Ibid., 623.

¹⁶ Seymour Menton, *La nueva novela histórica*, 133.

narrator and the reader, who immediately recognises the deliberate imitation of the Emperor's pompous style. Nevertheless, the style used in the chapter "Ceremonial para el fusilamiento de un Emperador"¹⁷ is solemn in tone rather than written in a humorous way. Del Paso offers an image of a dignified and heroic Maximilian who, whilst being a puppet at the mercy of both destiny and Napoleon III, nevertheless remained faithful to his ideas until the end. On a personal level, when the reader disregards Maximilian's political failures, s/he feels a certain admiration for the Emperor's bravery in his last moments of life. Charlotte is the one person capable of doing this, of reinventing history and reconstructing the past as she would have liked it to be:

Eso es lo que jamás me perdonarán: que pueda yo, de un solo golpe, hacer volar las piezas de todos los rompecabezas que hice y deshice en mi vida, para formarlos de nuevo, a mi gusto, y hacer héroes a los villanos, traidores a los héroes, vencidos a los victoriosos, triunfadores a los que fueron humillados con la derrota.¹⁸

It is for this reason that people assert she was mad –in the same way that imagination itself attempts to overthrow reason-, because she wants to invent a past and recreate it according to her whims. What she discovers at the end of her life is that history and fiction are the same and neither of them are rational. Charlotte is "la madre de todos ellos [los mexicanos] porque yo, Maximiliano, soy su historia y estoy loca."¹⁹ The boundaries between fiction and reality are unclear and no discipline can establish them indisputably.

¹⁷ Paso, *Noticias*, 645.

¹⁸ Ibid., 414.

¹⁹ Ibid., 665.

3.2. Pastiche and history books

As we have seen above, as the book progresses, Del Paso turns into a historian-researcher who analyses and interprets the events of the past. However, when he borrows techniques usually employed by historiography, especially in the final chapters, his intention is far from parodic. Del Paso takes over the role of the historian through the use of pastiche. According to Fredric Jameson parody and pastiche are imitations of a certain style, a linguistic mask adopted by the author through the use of a speech in a dead language that assigns the role of any interpretation to the reader. However, in pastiche, the satiric intentions and laughter are left aside; “pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs.”²⁰ This is exactly what Del Paso does when, imitating the historian’s method of working, he starts to quote sources, inserts the opinions of a variety of scholars and recovers testimonies of different witnesses of the events. The style used throughout these chapters is not that of the man of letters who takes possession of historiographical techniques to subvert them, exalt them or criticise them but rather that of a writer who has become a professional historian and adopts the historian’s mode of speech. Del Paso’s primary aim is to delineate as accurately as he can the diverging and converging possible routes of events, whether seen from the perspective of either literature or historiography. He thus demonstrates that neither the historian’s conclusions and strategies, nor those of the novelist, can be taken as definitive. Nevertheless, the synthesis of the two disciplines can throw light on answers concerning the research of the past.

In the following passage, Del Paso describes the effect he strives for in his novels:

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, in Nicol, ed., *Postmodernism*, 27.

Quizás la solución sea no plantearse una alternativa, como Borges, y no eludir la historia, como Usigli, sino tratar de conciliar todo lo verdadero que pueda tener la historia con lo exacto que pueda tener la invención. En otras palabras, en vez de hacer a un lado la historia, colocarla al lado de la invención, de la alegoría, e incluso al lado, también de la fantasía desbocada...²¹

Even so, we must remember that Del Paso is, first and foremost, a novelist. When referring to *Noticias* the author himself explained:

Hace tiempo decidí establecer una carrera entre la imaginación y la búsqueda sin fin de materiales y datos. Supongo que ganará la primera, porque al fin y al cabo estoy escribiendo –o pretendo escribir- una novela.²²

In contrast, our expectation is that research has a primary role in historiographical books, where the historian's imagination plays a secondary role. However, the syncretism of the two will provide the key offered by Del Paso in the search for an appropriate method to find the loose thread that can unravel the past. Del Paso criticises the judgements presented by scholars divinely empowered with the right of establishing what was good and what was bad. He rebels against the overwhelming force of the judgement of history, a judgement that Juárez fears, when faced with the absurd demand of writers and historians to exclude any other interpretations.²³ Del Paso does not stand against history or against research into the past, but rather against the constructions of official versions of the past which have obstructed the formation of a historical consciousness within Latin America and which, according to the author, “nos ha ofrecido una versión distorsionada que nos impide contemplarnos en

²¹ Paso, *Noticias*, 641.

²² Paso, “La novela,” 319.

²³ Paso, *Noticias*, 641.

el espejo tal como hemos sido, que equivale a decir tal como somos.”²⁴ For him, the lack of knowledge about this historical reality is what provokes a partial understanding of national identity. The countries that ignore or simply create a history that cannot be questioned are incapable of understanding their present.

3.3. The identity of the Empire

The historical novel has, from its origins, been related to the search for a collective identity. This was especially true in those periods that witnessed the birth of the nation-states in the nineteenth century. By means of his novel Del Paso transmits the message that Mexican identity and that of Latin America in general is a problem that it is still unresolved today. This is the reason for the enormous vitality of the historical novel. The research undertaken by Del Paso for *Noticias* led him to realise that Mexico had not changed during the years of history that had elapsed since French intervention. It was as if “la corrupción y la miseria se hubieran quedado congeladas.”²⁵ Consequently, for Del Paso, the mission of the Mexican novelist is a didactic one: helping the Mexican people to discover their own past and identity.

Del Paso’s portrayal of imperialism as one of Mexico’s endemic problems leads to an identification of this issue as something still current, and implies a criticism of the governments that even today attempt to convert themselves into “saviours” of the tragic destiny of a given country. As such, *Noticias* stops being a novel about the past and becomes a novel of premonitions concerning future political events, where the reader finds certain sinister parallelisms with some of the “heroic” U.S. interventions in countries such as Vietnam and Iraq. Both American

²⁴ Ibid., 319.

²⁵ Ibid., 320.

expansionism and European arrogance are ever present in Western societies. Despite the setbacks suffered by the U.S. in many of its projects destined to “protect” the interests of certain countries, its vocation as a “good shepherd” means it feels an overwhelming need to redirect any sheep that leave its fold. Moreover, despite the numerous fictional novels, non-fictional novels and critical novels that in the last few decades have leant towards the idea of breaking out of the Eurocentric myth, Buenos Aires is still talked of as Latin America’s most European city, viewed as the paradigm of development and modernity. If Del Paso rediscovers a historical period such as that of French intervention in Mexico, it is not only with a didactic goal in mind –even if this goal is ever present in the novel. The ultimate mission of *Noticias* is to show the world that many of the historical blots on the nation’s history are still present today and will be present in the future if nothing is done to prevent them.

Del Paso presents Maximilian and Charlotte as executors and victims of their own destiny. “Mamá Carlota” is a sarcastic nickname given to the Empress by the poet Vicente Riva Palacio as a means to mock the Empire. She herself takes on this name converting herself into the mother of all the Mexicans. This aspect can be interpreted as one more sign of Charlotte’s ambition to become the leader of a great Empire. However, it can also be seen as a sign of tenderness by Charlotte towards the Mexicans, children in need of a mother who reveals their true identity. As a mother, she is the person who brings news of the past, to the Mexicans, news that they need to know. In this sense, Charlotte is a metaphor of the mother that Mexicans never had after the rejection of the figure of La Malinche.²⁶ In this context, Charlotte is the step-mother of all the Mexicans who have been orphans since the Conquest. She is the

²⁶ Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad* speaks about the historical trauma in Mexican society with regard to its origins. The Indian La Malinche was raped by the Spaniard Hernán Cortés, giving birth to the mestizo. This new race was the Mexicans and their future was determined by their awareness of being *hijos de la chingada*, the product of a rape. La Malinche was also considered as the traitor that helped Cortés to destroy the Aztec Empire.

person who will tell them the truths and the lies about their history, the metonymy of the past. She is Mexico's history. In a last attempt to free herself from all that is killing her, Charlotte makes her final confession before she dies. Charlotte's language is marked by a dialectic between the historical events established by historiography and what she discovers within her imagination. Del Paso presents the character of Charlotte as the crazy metonym of Mexico's past in an attempt to challenge the absolute version of the past dictated by official history.

On several occasions Del Paso uses the French intervention as an excuse to introduce a debate about Mexico's history and identity. He frequently offers "the other point of view," the image that foreigners have about Mexico, by intercalating some of their opinions within Mexican history. From one perspective, this is an open critique of the Eurocentric version of reality provided by these characters, who speak about a country they barely know, describing it in European terms. However, it is also a self-evaluation of Mexican history, politics and society, an evaluation that highlights the mistakes that Mexicans have made in order to avoid making them again in the future.

For instance, Napoleon III speaks about the paradox of a President that rejects a French Intervention but is constantly looking for European models in order to establish the political theory of his party:

«Juárez», continuó, «se nutre con el espíritu de Rousseau como nosotros y no con la filosofía política de los aztecas o de los incas, si es que tal cosa existió alguna vez»²⁷

²⁷ Ibid., 52.

This statement is used by Napoleon III to justify the intervention: if Mexicans follow European ideas it is because they admire Europe and, in that sense, they should be ruled by a European monarch. However, Del Paso is also criticising the simplistic Eurocentric view of reality that believes Europe to be superior to the rest of the world. Napoleon III continues defending the legitimacy of the intervention by saying that

los intelectuales y los políticos mexicanos, así los conservadores como los liberales, se pasaban la vida ofreciendo su país, o parte de él, a las potencias extranjeras.²⁸

Again, Del Paso condemns a European expansionism that takes advantage of a country's weakness in order to control it. However, it is also a self-critique of national mistakes that have to be avoided.

There are also some ironic references to the limited insights that Europeans had into Mexico. For example, Jean Pierre tells his brother Alphonse that not all Mexicans wear feathers as illustrated in a painting in Paris' Tuilleries. Del Paso also ridicules the titles of European nobles when Juárez starts joking about the word "archiduque." He says, "¿Por eso me voy a llamar yo "archipresidente," el "Archipresidente Benito Juárez"?"²⁹ However, he also extends his critique to Mexico by saying "¿Sabe usted? Al único que creo capaz de darse este título es a Santa Anna: Su Alteza Serenísima Antonio López de Santa Anna, Archipresidente de México."³⁰ In sum, *Noticias* serves to condemn the Eurocentric current of thought that has attempted to explain foreign realities without trying to understand them: "La historia ha sido medida con una sola vara: la barra de hierro con la que el hombre europeo ha

²⁸ Ibid., 83-84.

²⁹ Ibid., 152.

³⁰ Ibid., 153.

subyugado a las naciones.”³¹ But, at the same time, Del Paso suggests that Mexicans have to be responsible for their own mistakes and “controlar la corrupción interna que, *ésa sí*, le abrió las puertas del país al imperialismo yanqui.”³² They need to be aware of their history in order to change the present and, furthermore, to avoid repeating the same mistakes again and again.

3.4. The parody of the historical novel

As mentioned above, the even chapters narrate, in a chronological order, the historical events surrounding Maximilian’s Empire. This period covers its root cause - the suspension of payment of external debt ordered by Juárez-, followed by the development and fall of the Empire. But it goes further, portraying Juárez’s death in 1872, as well. In these chapters, Del Paso’s book mainly follows the model of the traditional historical novel. Time is lineal and the reader knows that it advances to an inevitable moment and place: the end and fall of Maximilian’s Empire. The events are predictable, especially for those who have a previous knowledge of the French intervention in Mexico. For those that never heard of it, the picture painted by Del Paso is so clear and delightfully detailed that any reader is capable of forming a very accurate mental idea of the meaning of Maximilian’s Empire. The purpose is didactic. This is the reason for the exhaustive analysis of the historical era and the enormous accumulation of historical data. The historical period is the framework within which the different characters of the era live, from the illustrious figure of Juárez to the last witness of the battle of Camarón. The structure and style of these chapters is reminiscent of Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. Tolstoy included a last part called

³¹ Ibid., 327.

³² Ibid., 639.

“Epilogue” in his book. Within this, he recounts the lives of the characters when the action of the novel is over and the French army has left Russia. Del Paso also prolongs his novel beyond the historical events relating to the Empire, covering Juárez’s death. Tolstoy himself becomes a critic on numerous occasions in his book, criticising acts of war, analysing political decisions whose repercussions are felt in the future or quoting the opinions of historians. Del Paso also analyses different sources and contrasts opposing versions of the events. The narrator is typically an omniscient figure in the third person, although there are several chapters narrated in the first person told by eye witnesses. It can be argued that the even chapters follow the methods established by the traditional historical novel, although this does not preclude the possibility of these chapters being subverted by the author on occasion. This narrator is also a self-conscious one that reminds the reader of the *fictitious* nature of every piece of work.

The odd chapters, set in 1927 in Bouchout castle are closer to the model of the more recent historical novel developed towards the end of the twentieth century. The Empress uses the interior monologue following the model of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. She is the narrator of her memories, but she is, nonetheless, mad. When she cannot remember something she invents it, and she is unable to distinguish between what she has lived and what she has dreamed. She thus becomes the most unreliable of narrators. In this sense, this is a metaphor of the way literature works: filling the gaps, inventing material when there is no historical evidence -and even when there is. Charlotte’s speech is full of exaggerations and she consciously distorts history. However, as stated above, Del Paso relates Charlotte to Mexican history, confirming the unreliability of history. In this sense, Del Paso suggests that history and literature

are the same and that they are both products of insanity. As such, it is the combination of these two insane disciplines that can offer the solution to recapture the past.

Separating both parts of the novel, there are two novels that could be perfectly dissected one from the other and transformed into two separate books: on the one hand, the historical novel about Maximilian's Empire; on the other hand, its caricature, written by a lunatic. Del Paso's proposal is not to limit the novel to one sole tradition or discipline, but rather to embrace everything that could be useful in laying the foundations for our future and help explain Mexican reality. Neither discipline is useless if it serves the objectives of clarifying identity and improving the country's self-understanding.

4. WHERE THE BAROQUE MET BAKHTIN: THE *OTHER* HISTORICAL NOVEL

Del Paso applies, in *Noticias*, the ideas explored by Bakhtin with regard to the dialogical novel. Del Paso's objective is to bring together all of the voices that could bring news about the Empire in order to create an illuminating debate about the significance of that era. To this end, he uses a marginal protagonist and narrator, Charlotte, who employs a baroque and liberated language. In this sense, Del Paso does not delimit the margins of the novel, considering it a hybrid genre in which everything fits and where anything is possible.

4.1. The dialogical novel

Noticias offers both the European version of the events as well as the Mexican one. Thanks to Del Paso's writing styles, his use of counterpoint technique and the different disguises he adopts, a dialogue is created between different cultures within the space of the novel. The protagonists reveal their opinions with the aim of reaching a conclusion. Del Paso concludes that, in history, nobody is either innocent or guilty. He warns that "no todos son héroes o traidores todo el tiempo ni cien por ciento."³³ The final judgement in history is never reached as any judgement will always be contingent upon contemporary interpretations. Hence, it will not be history's judgement, but rather the judgement of historians that will predominate - and how much less so some supposed objective historical "truth". Del Paso seeks to establish an eternal dialogue between every single stance, so they can draw closer to each other. In any case, this approach implies the opposite of the establishment of a definitive and absolute version of history.

Another dialogue takes place between Charlotte and the official versions of history. Her staggeringly long monologue is, paradoxically, a monologue of dialogic nature, as the Empress attempts to refute and, consequently, to construct a dialogue with the versions of the events that she considers untruthful. She proposes to Maximilian the creation of a past together, a more favourable one in which there is no place for lies. Some sections are lyrically beautiful and the Empress' passion for her husband is made clear in these passages. However, she states her frustration on numerous occasions, denouncing to the world the injustices suffered by both herself and her husband. Charlotte would like to have changed the past and now she is able to do so by using her imagination. As such, the monologue has the goal of talking to the

³³ Ibid., 643.

past and to the versions about this past that she considers false. Benito Juárez is drawn to Voltaire's phrase: "La historia es una broma [...] que los vivos le jugamos a los muertos."³⁴ The joke is even greater in Charlotte's case because she is the only living witness of these events. In this sense, her monologue is an exorcism and revenge. It is an exorcism because she attempts to expel all her demons before she dies so she can at last rest in peace. It is also an act of revenge because no one can contradict her story since they are all dead.

A further dialogue takes place between history and memory. Charlotte responds to history through her memory. The mad Empress initiates a voyage through time by means of her memory and imagination. Her folly represents man's frustration when faced with the impossibility of remembering all of his past. She recognises the impossibility of recovering it all, as the only people capable of recovering the past are, "sólo la historia y yo, Maximiliano, que estamos vivas y locas. Pero a mí se me está acabando la vida."³⁵ Charlotte suggests to Maximilian that they invent the past, "ándale, Maximiliano, levántate, que vamos a inventar de nuevo nuestra vida,"³⁶ forget what occurred and lie to the past, converting history into poetry. As in *Terra Nostra*, Del Paso offers a second chance to history through fiction. Charlotte relies on her story to reinvent the past and create a new Maximilian who delivers Juárez's death sentence and not the other way around.³⁷

In *Noticias* a dialogue between different books and novelists take place. Stavans, in an interview with Del Paso, hints that Del Paso and Fuentes "maintain a trans-textual, trans-temporal dialogue."³⁸ For instance, Del Paso parodies

³⁴ Ibid., 622-623.

³⁵ Ibid., 27.

³⁶ Ibid., 76.

³⁷ Ibid., 125.

³⁸ Ilan Stavans, "A conversation with Fernando del Paso," in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 16, 1 (Spring 1996), 130.

historiographical methods, quoting French writers such as Charles Baudelaire or Victor Hugo who criticised the Bonaparte dynasty. Later on he refers to the historical novel published by Flaubert, *Salambó*, from which the Countess of Castiglione has taken the idea for her disguise. There are also direct or indirect references to Latin American authors such as Borges, Usigli, Rubén Darío or Riva Palacio. In one of Alphonse's letters to his brother Jean-Pierre, the former observes that "la enciclopedia universal de la infamia ocuparía muchos volúmenes,"³⁹ referring to Borges' book. Later on, Del Paso mentions one of Rubén Darío's most famous poems when, speaking about Charlotte's childhood, he says of her: "La princesa estaba triste."⁴⁰ The nickname "Mamá Carlota" was given to her by the poet and *juarista* general Vicente Riva Palacio and she adopts it in her monologues. Del Paso also includes a poem by Riva Palacio.⁴¹ With regard to the titles of the chapters, there are two that refer to names of novels. In first place, "La ciudad y los pregones"⁴² reminds us of Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *La ciudad y los perros*. Towards the end of the book, the chapter "El último de los mexicanos"⁴³ refers to the novel *The last of the Mohicans* by James Fennimore Cooper. Thus, the intertextual dialogue permeates the entire novel, as Del Paso considers that all writers inherit a previous novelistic tradition that they are unable to ignore. He understands literature and history as an eternal palimpsest in which writers recreate and reconsider what has already been said by other writers before them. This intertextual dialogue extends to any discipline and, in this case, it extends to history as, for Del Paso, both are complementary. In this sense, the incorporation of these intertexts is also a warning to readers to make us aware of the necessity of remembering the past and understanding previous traditions.

³⁹ Del Paso, *Noticias*, 224.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 462.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 627.

4.2. Diachronic and synchronic heteroglossia

Del Paso's novel is a compendium of languages, a space in which the registers of different narrators go from the most formal, like those of the Emperor and Empress, Charlotte and Maximilian, to the most vulgar, such as that of the anonymous witness of the Camarón battle. There are different registers of languages belonging to the same historical period. These characters are witnesses to the history they narrate and these languages belong to the periods that they describe. Maximilian's language is an elevated one, as befits any Emperor, the language of an educated man who has been taught how to speak and how to act "correctly". Charlotte's language is very similar, somewhat artificial, with an extravagance of vocabulary and a meticulous, almost obsessive, concern with grammatical precision in the use of words when expressing her ideas. This language contrasts with that of the different first person narrators who recount their own experiences. The clarity and simplicity of these narrators contrast with Charlotte's baroque and ambiguous style within her monologues. At the same time, despite the fact that so many of Charlotte's monologues, as with the rest of the first person narrations, are intended for a speaker - such as Maximilian, Juárez or the reader- Charlotte makes it clear that her monologues are being written and not told. The great lyricism that emanates from certain sections of Charlotte's monologue almost refutes the notion that her monologue is an improvisation. This style appears more fitting for a diary written by the Empress. However, in the case of the battle of Camarón, the story is told to a public audience and its narrator's objective is to convince this public of the veracity of the story so that they buy the alleged souvenirs from the illustrious battle. In another example, the priest who had sexual relations with the wife of a French soldier, is confessing to the Archbishop, giving the narration, once again, the character of a

spoken testimony. Such too is the example of the lawyer who works on Maximilian's case and tells his girlfriend Esperanza all the details of it. The language used by all of these characters is colloquial and, in the case of the lawyer, colloquially familiar. There is also Juárez's language. The president's language is also colloquial when speaking with his secretary, focusing his attention on the most trivial aspects concerning Maximilian and the European monarchies. But his language is contradictory. Even though he is the enemy of the Europeans, his admiration for all that is European is nonetheless quite evident. He even affirms that his children are beautiful because they were born, "mucho menos prietos"⁴⁴ than him, although he himself mocks this prejudice surrounding the colour of skin. Despite the familiarity with his secretary that leads him to use colloquial language, a certain protocol still exists between the two of them, as Juárez is the President, after all. This feature is underscored by the secretary's constant marks of respect and by his sycophancy.

In this aspect of the novel, there is also a diachronic heteroglossia. Thanks to Del Paso's presentation, modern historians maintain a dialogue with nineteenth-century critics. Primary sources maintain a dialogue with secondary sources harmonising in the common space of the dialogic novel. The grandiloquent language in which Maximilian draws up his letters and official edicts is presented alongside of Del Paso's scientific and analytical language in the same novel. The parodic chapter "Ceremonial para el fusilamiento de un emperador" is a tribute to Maximilian by means of which Del Paso reinvents a solemn death for the Emperor. Nevertheless, it also has a sarcastic tone with regard to the language used by Maximilian in the official documents and to its prolific details. This also refers to the present, as it can be extended to all current official documentation whose obscurity often renders them

⁴⁴ Ibid., 161.

unintelligible. In addition, when Del Paso acts as a historian, he adopts the appropriate historiographical discourse by analysing the data. His speech flows through the exposition of the theories of different sources and scholars of the era, analysing their contributions and arguing either in favour of or against them. At the end of each narration, Del Paso does not establish a particular theory but rather he permits the reader to reach his own conclusions by letting him know the details of the historical event and all that surrounds it: evidence, opinions, rumours and lies.

Nonetheless, Del Paso's heteroglossia not only refers to the use of different registers and voices. Also, some different languages are quoted within the novel. Del Paso spent many years in London and Paris⁴⁵ and both the French and English influences are obvious in *Noticias*. The author himself states that "while re-reading my third novel, *Noticias del Imperio*, I have discovered a tendency to imitate English syntax, a struggle between Spanish and English, and even an inclination to Anglicize and Gallicize."⁴⁶ The fact that Del Paso lived for many years in these countries, has been the necessary catalyst to create his own "new" language in which Spanish is freed by other languages. Del Paso creates a "new" language in which the author feels more comfortable expressing his ideas.

As such, in *Noticias* Del Paso uses everything: different languages, registers, voices, impressions, creations, dreams, lies and realities, to create a novel that says *nearly everything* about Maximilian and Charlotte's Empire. For this, each witness, each historian, writer or inventor, has a voice in Del Paso's novel: because the messenger brings *news of the Empire* and news can be anything.

⁴⁵ Fernando del Paso lived in London from 1970 to 1985 where he worked as an editor and broadcaster for the BBC. Then, he lived for eight years in Paris where he worked for Radio France Internationale and as a Mexican consul.

⁴⁶ Stavans, "A Conversation," 125.

4.3. The baroque and the fear of empty spaces

Del Paso describes his novelistic style as a baroque style. However, the concept of baroque is a broad one and there are so many definitions that it is necessary to clarify what is actually meant by the term “baroque”. According to the author “the simplest definition of baroque is a style that tries to saturate space by abusing curves to the point of hyperbole.”⁴⁷ Also, the baroque brings with it a questioning of appearances and of reality closely related to the premises of postmodernism.

Del Paso’s baroque style is especially relevant in Charlotte’s speeches. The Empress is conscious that time is pressing on her and that her death is drawing near. Charlotte feels, in the last moments of her life, the impelling necessity to leave her version of the story/history. In her narration, the Empress mixes different past events and her speech is that of someone who improvises a narration, threading certain anecdotes with others as they are produced by their brain. Nevertheless, Charlotte’s most extreme and grotesque delusions are related to sexuality and physiological needs:

Sentada toda la noche, con las piernas abiertas y el camisón arremangado, me masturbo hora tras hora, sin parar, y la baba que me escurre de la boca se junta con la baba que me escurre de las piernas y forma un solo hilo espeso y blanco como tu esperma.⁴⁸

Del Paso offers an image of Charlotte as a completely insane person. She loses any sense of decorum and is incapable of containing herself from discussing her most

⁴⁷ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 65.

basic needs. It is at these moments in which Charlotte stops being the Empress and becomes a crazy woman imprisoned in a castle.

Nevertheless, Charlotte's monologues have such a high level of emotion and are of such an overpoweringly affective nature that the reader begins to feel pity and sympathy for her. In spite of her madness, the reader identifies her/himself with Charlotte. The great lyricism and tenderness displayed in numerous sections of the novel create some complicity between Charlotte and the reader, a complicity that destroys the unreliability of Charlotte's narration. The reader, then, becomes the accomplice of a woman who is no more than the victim of her own destiny. At one point, Charlotte says:

Tengo aquí, Max, en mi recámara de Bouchout, un cofre lleno de mentiras que me trajo el mensajero. Algunas mentiras son tan inocentes, que se parecen a la paloma de Concha Méndez: si levanto la tapa del cofre se escapan y cuando quiero pescarlas por la punta de un ala se vuelven nada, como se me deshizo en las manos, en cenizas, la carta de papá Leopoldo.⁴⁹

Charlotte's prose borders on poetry while the enormous sensitivity it demonstrates is paired with a feeling of huge anguish over the happy childhood that has been lost forever. At the same time, her speech also shows great intuition. According to her, all those who have died up to this point have been poisoned. What at first sight can appear to be another of her mad ideas turns into a revealing fact the moment in which the Empress identifies poison with lies and hypocrisy:

Todo estaba emponzoñado con el mismo veneno. Pero cuando te hablo de veneno, Maximiliano, no te hablo del veneno de la Hidra [...] La lluvia y el

⁴⁹ Ibid., 349.

agua del mar, todo estaba impregnado con la misma ponzoña que acabó contigo y con tus sueños y con mi razón y tu vida, y con nuestra devoción y nuestras ilusiones y con todo lo hermoso y lo grande que queríamos para México: la mentira.⁵⁰

It is at this point that Charlotte stops being a madwoman and becomes a visionary. She herself states that the only person who understood her folly was her nephew Alberto when he was a child, although now that he is older he does not understand her any more.⁵¹ This produces an identification between the language of children and that of the insane Charlotte: they both tell the truth. Or, at least, what they consider to be true. Del Paso shows the possibility of her being the only character capable of understanding. Hence, Charlotte's baroque language, almost encoded and full of confusing images, is nothing but the sole weapon she possesses to combat and overthrow the hypocrisy and lies that have poisoned the world. In her madness, Charlotte has come to understand the true nature of human beings: the world is a trick and this lie is what corrupts our lives. For Charlotte, this revelation is atrocious and she needs that verbal unconstrained articulation of every thought, that baroque language and stream of consciousness to fill every gap, every empty space and every moment of her unfortunate life.

As a consequence, Charlotte's language becomes a liberated language. One of the principal preoccupations of Latin American writers in the twentieth century –with Carpentier at the forefront- has been that of the search for a new language for Latin America, a new form of expression, particular to Latin America, that can better express the nature of Latin American reality. Magical realism and the use of the baroque are demonstrations of an attempt to create this language in literature. When

⁵⁰ Ibid., 306.

⁵¹ Ibid., 361.

she goes to Bouchout, Charlotte's language is freed of all social conventions and will serve as a perfect vehicle to express her pain. She subsequently loses any sense of decorum. She is not worried about being a princess anymore. It is at this point that she becomes a liberated being completely free to say: "Dile, Maximiliano, que el brillante Koh-i-Noor de la Corona Inglesa, dile que se lo meta por el culo."⁵² After a life following rules and begging others, Charlotte liberates her language to offer her version of history that, like herself, is mad. The contained language of the even chapters overflows every time an odd chapter arrives. In those passages in which Del Paso turns into a historian, the narrator uses a dead language, a scientific, aseptic and formal language whose final objective is to convince the reader that he has researched enough to be able to tell *the truth* or, at least, to provide an objective interpretation of historical reality. In the case of the novel's characters, Maximilian's language is that of imperial protocol. It is the language of an Emperor destined to fulfil a role in the great theatre of the world, educated to accomplish his mission. Instead of appearing as a real person of flesh and bone, Maximilian is portrayed as the tragic protagonist of a farce in which he had to *represent* rather than *live*. All these languages are constrained, either by circumstances or by social conventions. The characters do not live their own lives, but rather a lie, representative of a role in "el carnaval del mundo, la fiesta delirante de la historia."⁵³

Del Paso combines the aseptic and scientific language of history with the baroque language of literature in order to create the total historical novel. This novel is not a novel that tells the truth but a novel about *the truth* and the impossibility of recovering the past.

⁵² Ibid., 663.

⁵³ Ibid., 115.

4.4. Centring the margins

Charlotte is the novel's principal narrator and her monologues constitute the centre of the book. The chapters about history are enriched and counterbalanced by the chapters in which the mad Empress lets her imagination fly. Charlotte starts and finishes the book and becomes the primary organiser of the novel. However, Charlotte is not a *central figure*. Her status as a woman, and even more so, her madness, converts her into an unreliable narrator who finds herself at the margin of society. From the point of view of the research about the past, nobody can take the version of the past given by an elderly madwoman seriously. The "normal" centre of this narration should have been Juárez, Maximilian or one of his generals. But Del Paso is interested, above all, in giving a voice to those who did not have one: the Emperor's wife, always on an inferior level but much more efficient than her husband. From the point of view of a Mexican reader, Charlotte is even *more marginalised* as she is a European. The official Mexican version of history that appears in text books, presents an almost saintly Juárez, full of virtues and a man who fought honourably for his country. On the contrary, European historians defended Maximilian who, full of good intentions, had gone to an unknown country after renouncing his rights to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Del Paso demystifies both and offers the Mexicans and the world Charlotte's version (European in Mexico, woman in a patriarchal society and mad in a "sane" world) so as to explain the gaps in history and destroy the stone statues that official history had converted Juárez and Maximilian into.

Apart from Charlotte, the first person narrators that recount their experiences during the Empire are all marginal figures in some form. The first chapter narrated by a witness of the events, and not by a third-person narrator, is the battle of Camarón. The narrator was present at that battle. However, this man is not a soldier, but rather

someone accompanying Juárez's army to strip the dead of their belongings after the battles. His own speech is discredited at the end of the chapter when he introduces himself as a rambling salesman who has sold on numerous occasions the "true" hand of wood that Captain D'Anjou lost. It is even possible that he was not present at that battle and he is inventing it to sell his products.

In another chapter, "Seduciones: (I) «¿Ni con mil avemarías?»," a parish Priest confesses to an Archbishop how the wife of a French soldier "tempted him" so that he would absolve her of sin and he ended up having sexual relations with her. From the text's ironic tone it can be understood that the Priest intended it from the first moment and he did not pardon her sins until she offered her body in return. In the chapter "Seduciones: (II) «Espérate, Esperanza...»," one of the lawyers who is due to prosecute Maximilian in court tells his lover how the interrogation developed and how he will demonstrate his guilt. The passage's humoristic tone works by juxtaposing the woman's desire to make love to the lawyer with his efforts to concentrate on the trial without success. Lastly, in the chapter "Corrido del tiro de gracia," Del Paso intercalates a popular *corrido* that narrates the execution of Maximilian with the narrative of the same event by one of the most direct witnesses: one of the soldiers who formed part of the firing-squad. He confirms the morbid details that surround his story and makes the reader doubt the veracity of his tale when he states "allí les dejo, señores, la verdad y la mentira."⁵⁴ A dark humour surrounds each one of these chapters, and in all of them, with the exception of the Priest's confession, death is present at all times. But the solemnity of the events is caricaturized through the use of marginal narrators whose miserable mundane lives are not comparable with the magnitude of the events that they are experiencing. Del

⁵⁴ Ibid., 583.

Paso shows here how anonymous characters are also the protagonists of transcendental historical events.

Del Paso uses marginal narrators, such as Charlotte and the other anonymous narrators, to connect History with intrahistory in the same narrative space. He presents the great epic of the history of humanity along with the small anecdotes of anonymous people's every day lives. History is then demystified by the act of joining forever with its other half -what the French refer to as *la petite histoire*– the intimate history of small, personal events that official historiography had never taken into account.

4.5. The loss of boundaries and the totalizing consciousness

The search for the past and for Mexican identity is the ultimate aim of Del Paso's narrative. To attain this goal, the search goes beyond the limits of the novel and it uses other genres and disciplines to transmit the author's message in an efficient manner.

Del Paso believes in the concept of the novel as a hybrid genre. The novel is a genre with multiple possibilities and it can integrate all of the rest. In *Noticias*, it has already been explained how certain parts of Charlotte's monologue are full of lyricism, verging on narrative poetry. The chapter "Así es, Señor Presidente"⁵⁵ looks like a theatre script, as it covers the dialogue between Juárez and his secretary and there are barely any notes on the narrator's behalf that could be considered as stage directions. In the "corrido del tiro de gracia," Del Paso uses a narrative poem full of popular characteristics. The witnesses' narration is supported by the corrido and vice versa. In another case, Del Paso employs the epistolary genre to contrast the feelings

⁵⁵ Ibid., 145.

and beliefs of two brothers, one in México and the other in France. This also serves to portray the subjectivity that lies behind any analysis of reality.

As with *Terra Nostra*, Del Paso has written an encyclopaedic novel in which the entire information of humanity is present. In the first place, it has been seen how Del Paso use historiography and its techniques with a didactic purpose. From the beginning he synthesises a text from different documents. This act of collage makes it abundantly clear to the reader that she/he can trust the essential truth of the story, while simultaneously presenting a detailed understanding of the historical facts. For example, after Charlotte's first monologue, Del Paso describes Mexico's political situation when Juárez assumed power. For this, he quotes different primary sources such as the Count of Gabineau's essay, Thomas Corwin's letters and an article by the journalist Charles Bordillon, and so on.⁵⁶ Del Paso recovers the opinions of these bibliographical sources, as a historian would have done. However, he also introduces ironic comments more suited to a novel than to a history book, like when he states that

*Míster Corwin hacía mal las cuentas cuando afirmaba que en esos mismos cuarenta años México había tenido sesenta y tres presidentes, porque no sólo habían sido menos, sino que entre esos menos hubo varios que volvían una y otra vez a la presidencia y que eran como una fiebre terciana que vivía el país.*⁵⁷

Del Paso's aim thus consists in creating a new historical novel that takes an approach between historiography and literature, so that literature is not left as a mere anecdote and historiography stops being a discourse of uniformly constrained relevance.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 32-33.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 32.

On the other hand, Del Paso incorporates linguistic notes surrounding the mistakes committed by the Emperor and the Empress, dedicating almost a page to the subject.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the fact that Del Paso began studying biology is remarked in the novel. When the doctor is examining Maximilian, Del Paso demonstrates his knowledge of anatomy and plants by explaining in a detailed manner how the doctor prescribes him plants to combat his illness and studies the effect of the altitude in Mexico City. Del Paso has created a novel in which all that is useful serves to help us understand the past: from a letter to a note that appeared in an editorial column. In his desire for unattainable totality, in his search for the past, any source of knowledge is considered as relevant.

5. CONCLUSION

The debate regarding Mexican identity was internationalised in *Noticias*. It shows Mexico as a country with a tragic destiny that has been transmitted from father to son and is still very present in modern day society. However, the image of the rest of the world is not much better. It shows Europe as a continent in decay, inexorably losing force and controlled by dynasties overloaded with tasks that they feel divinely appointed to undertake. Europe is seen as a region full of pride, incapable of understanding that the world is larger than its own reality. The United States does not offer a much more positive prospect than is the case with Europe: with its devouring expansionism it has taken half of Mexican territory.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 374.

Along with the author's didactic intention, *Noticias* offers a model of what Fernando del Paso understands as the contemporary novel: it is strikingly similar to the dialogical novel, as proposed by Bakhtin. In the dialogical novel, all spaces and times are placed together, and different languages are presented in order to establish a dialogue that enriches the story/history. As such, no voice from history is silenced and the author's aim is to create the most complete version of the events achievable. Furthermore, in the dialogical novel, the writer is not an original creator that invents a story from scratch, but belongs rather to a tradition from which he has inherited most of the material, ideas and structures employed in his novel. Hence, in *Noticias* each paragraph is not a text but rather an intertext that serves the overriding aim of establishing a continuous dialogue with that tradition.

Through the fusion of history and literature, *Noticias* becomes the novel that "asalta la historia oficial"⁵⁹ and shows the path to follow in order to obtain the harmony that Mexicans need to be able to understand their present reality.

The following chapter will deal with a hybrid novel that combines history with the thriller. Paco Ignacio Taibo II creates in *La lejanía del tesoro* a historical thriller that tells the story of a government on the run and the search for a treasure. The treasure is a metaphor of Mexican's own search for identity and the risk of losing it when faced with the threat of foreign imperialism. Taibo creates a novel in which history is presented as a mystery that Mexicans are trying to unravel. The gaps within the story multiply as a metaphor of the impossibility of completely recounting the past. However, the search must go on and Mexicans will defend the treasure of their identity against the foreign menace.

⁵⁹ Fernando del Paso says: "Propongo el asalto de los novelistas latinoamericanos a la historia oficial", in Paso, "La novela," 322.

CHAPTER 6: LOOKING FOR A TRUTH ON THE RUN IN

LA LEJANÍA DEL TESORO

1. INTRODUCTION

*La lejanía del tesoro*¹ forms part of the extensive literary production of one of the most highly regarded writers of the latter part of the twentieth century. However, critical studies dedicated to his novels are scarce and focus generally on his detective novels. Paco Ignacio Taibo II (b. 1949)² won the Planeta-Joaquín Mortiz prize, in 1992, for *La lejanía*, a novel that is, to a large extent, a hybrid born of the blend between the historical novel and the thriller. Taibo, a historian and writer, utilises history and literature in a novel that is a seminal investigation about the mysteries of Mexico's past and soul.

On the one hand, historiography involves the research of past events to attain a relative truth and a partial reconstruction of a set moment or character. Once re-created, the facts of the past as they were lived and experienced become a purely historical, usually written account, the husk of experience. However, the book of history, is sometimes too complex to be read and the stories told too bare as to be identified as "our past." At least, that is the implication of the recent historical novel when it creates a metafictional statement. Following the tradition set by previous novels such as *Terra*

¹ Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *La lejanía del tesoro* (México: Planeta DeAgostini, 2003). All the quotations of the book will be taken from this edition. From now on, the title will be shortened to *La lejanía*.

² He was born in Gijón, Asturias (Spain) in 1949 but has lived in Mexico since 1958. He was naturalized in 1980.

Nostra and *Noticias*, Taibo rescues some historical figures from the fate of being dehumanized by official history and gives them a second, literary life in an attempt to bring history closer to people who are not immersed in professional, academic history. Indeed, obscure characters such as Vicente Riva Palacio, Guillermo Prieto and Achilles Dupin are portrayed in this novel with the intention of turning them into *humanized* characters from the past: people that not only appear in books of history but who also had a personal life of their own beyond the bare historical account.

On the other hand, the main aim of a thriller is to resolve an enigma, and to this end they often have a closed, deterministic structure. However, some writers leave the door open to a sequel, even when the protagonist-detective has solved the case.

In *La lejanía*, Taibo mixes both genres and produces what might be termed a “thriller historical novel”, in which the author sets about disentangling the story of a mystery which took place a century ago. In this sense, the novel’s two main literary objectives will be, firstly, the search for the truth and secondly, the importance of recovering the past and preserving the collective memory. Taibo seeks to reconstruct the past by means of exposing particular, salient facts. However, he extends the mystery far beyond the limits of the book to offer the reader the chance to create different stories her/himself. As an excellent creator of detective novels, Taibo solves the mystery of *La lejanía*, discovering the nature of the *juarista* treasure hidden in the mountains. However, the thriller continues and the reader is left to fill in the remaining gaps, deliberately left by Taibo.

This chapter will show how Taibo creates a hybrid between the historical novel, history and thriller that is a metaphor of the Mexican search for identity. However, this search in *La lejanía* will obey a wider socio-political aim: the need to maintain and

defend the right for self-determination of a nation whose identity is being questioned and put under pressure by the challenge of a foreign invasion.

2. THE MYSTERY OF HISTORY AND THE STORY OF THE MYSTERY

La lejanía is a historical novel that belongs to the tradition of hybrid novels developed during the second half of the twentieth century. The novel's hybrid nature resides in its character as a thriller, using this term in a loose sense.³ As this chapter will show, the peculiarity of *La lejanía* belongs to two aspects related to the question of genre.

Firstly, the historical novel at the end of the century is mainly a parody – at times satirical – of historiography as a “social science” and of the classic historical novel as a wholly self-contained genre. The historical novel demystifies the remoteness of the events where historical figures are turned into monuments by official history. This demystification is achieved through the incorporation of anachronisms, “possible reconstructions”, and scenes of daily life based, to a certain extent, on the ephemeral concept of historical reality. In addition, the thriller is a genre positioned halfway

³ The term “thriller” comes from *thrill*, sensation of excitement, pleasure or emotional shock. In this sense, the thriller novel will be considered as a book that depicts crime, mystery, detective inquiry, or espionage in an environment of suspense. According to the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, the thriller in fiction is “a tense, exciting, tautly plotted and sometimes sensational type of novel (occasionally a short story) in which action is swift and suspense continual. Sex and violence may often play a considerable part in such a narrative, and they have tended to do so (often gratuitously) since the 1960s. Very broadly speaking, such fiction might include the crime novel, the police procedural, the *roman policier*, the cloak-and-dagger story, some ghost and horror stories, a multitude of novels of adventure and, of course, what is known as the politico-military (thriller).”

between what critics consider a literary and a *popular* genre.⁴ Hence, by adding a new element to the genre, Taibo can be seen as attempting to prove that today's novel absorbs from other genres and subjects every aspect it finds useful. The boundaries of the recent novel are becoming more and more permeable and therefore it is not appropriate to apply the concept of "pulp literature"⁵ to a whole genre, but rather to certain works only. In this sense, Taibo advocates a democratisation of the historical novel in order to make it more accessible to all types of readers.

Lastly, the influence of cinema and television is evident in all of Taibo's novels. In *La lejanía* the structure borrowed from the mass media serves to give history a more contemporary aspect. History is presented to the reader through the camera lens of a contemporary TV documentary-maker. As such, the novel resembles a very accurate documentary film about an unresolved mystery of the past that has become a timeless legend. The author's presence is limited, in this sense, to that of a compiler-researcher who investigates a mystery of the past with the aim of presenting a documentary that lives by itself, independent from its creator's will.

2.1. A question of genre: the historical thriller

Thriller fiction has been -and is still- considered by numerous critics as *pulp fiction* and part of popular culture, when compared with other, more elitist genres. It is relevant to refer to the distinction drawn by Tzvetan Todorov between "popular art" and "high art" with regard to the detective novel.⁶ To discuss adequately the cataloguing of

⁴ For more information on the topic see Leonardo Acosta, *Novela policial y medios masivos* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1986).

⁵ According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, the term "pulp literature" has been borrowed from journalism. Originally, "pulp magazines" were periodicals that became very popular in America during the 1920s. They not only spawned the American detective genre but also published horror and science fiction stories. Nowadays, this term has negative connotations and is a synonym for worthless, "trash" literature.

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction," in David Lodge, ed., *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (Harlow: Longman, 1999).

thriller fiction as a minor genre is beyond the scope of the current work. However, it is important to make some limited, pertinent observations on the subject for the purposes of this chapter. The thriller novel has been exploited by some publishing houses and writers with the sole purpose of reaching a mass market. The culture of capitalism, the pressure of distribution departments, and the demand for light material by readers with ever more hectic lifestyles, have created a system in which numerous authors have quotas to meet. With ever shrinking deadlines, many authors feel forced to create books that will top the best-selling lists but are of doubtful artistic merit. In this supply-chain of writer, editor, publishing house and reader, the books with the easiest route to the bookshelf are thrillers, in all their various forms. The shelves of high street bookshops abound with thrillers written to feed a particular market. However, this does not mean that this subgenre implies literature of a lower quality. According to Taibo, the success of the detective novel is due to

the allure of adventure, the virtues of enigma, an incredible capacity for discovering cities and ancient mysteries, a set of characters in limited situations. A good novel is a good novel, but if it has a detective plot, all the better.⁷

Furthermore the incorporation of whodunit or mystery elements does not change the quality of a novel and, yet, makes the plot more attractive.

As seen in the second chapter, the historical novel is also experiencing a similar “success” in our days. When a novel’s plot centres on past events –whether or not those events have been documented-, the reader identifies himself with these known events, thus making her/his reading of the novel more gratifying. A process of “recognition”

⁷ Ilan Stavans, *Conversations with Ilan Stavans* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2005), 204.

takes place, in which the reader familiarises her/himself with the events being recounted, provides his own prejudices and knowledge of history, enriching it with his own personal reading. In this sense, it is not strange to understand why the most successful novels in the present day are those that combine both elements: history and thriller. Some examples of books that can be found in bookshops nowadays are bestsellers on a global scale, such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) or Kate Mosse's *Labyrinth* (2005). The literary quality of these books is debateable, and their enormous distribution can extend their "bad reputation" to the whole subgenre of historical thrillers. This results in some scholars considering thrillers as sub-literature, which, it can be argued, is unjustified. While it is true that many of these novels are of little literary or artistic quality, it is also true that there are many truly outstanding authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Raymond Chandler, or Umberto Eco amongst others who have cultivated and continue to develop the genre of the literary mystery or thriller novel with outstanding results.

La lejanía is a historical thriller, in which the protagonists trace a path through their enemies' conspiracies to reach their final objective: the restoration of the Republic and the preservation of the national treasure. At first glance, the combination of these two disciplines appears to be a risky undertaking. However, the combination of these genres forms a potent weapon, as the work of historians and writers of historical novels has a lot in common with that of a detective. The detective follows clues that criminals leave behind to solve the mystery –be this a theft, an assassination, a conspiracy, or some other unexplained event. For her/his part, the historian follows clues that the protagonists of the past have left for posterity with the aim of unravelling the mystery of *what really happened*. If this proves impossible, then the historian will try at least to provide a valid explanation of the facts that fits into the puzzle of the past. Both the

historical novel and the thriller play a sophisticated game with the final interpretation and often leave the reader to fill the gaps with her/his imagination. In addition, the reader frequently anticipates the resolution of the plot. In both cases, the ideal reader is an active reader, who is immersed in the story as it unfolds. In the thriller, red-herrings are thrown out to confuse the reader or detective. In the historical novel, the reader is responsible for choosing between the alternative versions of the past, or recognising and appreciating the anachronisms –intentional or not-, the false documents or the testimony of unreliable witnesses. The historical novel often implies an assumption of the reader's prejudices that are normally related to the protagonists or the events. In the case of the thriller, the reader is sometimes informed of the nature of the mystery at the beginning of the novel while the protagonist-detective attempts to clarify what is happening. In both cases, the reader will judge the quality of the novel with regard to the manner in which the author unravels the plot and the revelation of the elements either unknown to, or deliberately withheld from the reader throughout the novel.

All these elements help to make the historical novel and the thriller closely related genres. Nevertheless, the most important trait shared by both historical novels and thrillers is the prominence of research, of the unearthing of the truth. In *La lejanía*, Taibo is a historian and detective who brings together all the clues from the past to unravel the mystery. The author-compiler's work is, in this sense, twofold: he attempts to recreate an era, a moment, an event of the past and, at the same time, he unravels a mystery. At the end of the first part of *La lejanía*, the nature of the treasure is revealed: it is that of the Archivo de la Nación. At this point, the mystery ceases to be a mystery just for the sake of it and becomes the motive for the thriller. But the mystery is only resolved for the reader, as the protagonists will continue to try and reveal the nature of the treasure. Hence, the author-compiler will use the reader's pre-existing knowledge –

which gives her/him an advantage over the characters in the novel- to recount, with a great deal of irony, the legends, rumours, adventures and sufferings that have attended this much-desired treasure. Also, the reader already has quite a good idea of how the novel will end, as it refers to a period of Mexican history: Juárez regains power after expelling the Imperial troops and executing their leader, Maximilian of Hapsburg.

But, if all mysteries are revealed from the beginning of *La lejanía*, how can the novel maintain any suspense? According to Tempo Giardinelli,

the principal values on which the detective genre is based are first and foremost power and money. By association one can identify, uncontrolled ambition, personal heroics, hypocrisy, machismo, sexual conquest, an ominous cruelty that humiliates and subdues, and infinite ephemeral forms of the illusion of glory. Having stated this, it should be clear that we are simply speaking of human nature.⁸

All these elements are found in *La lejanía*. The novel pivots around these two forces. On the one hand, the liberals attempt to regain power and, to do so, it is essential that the Archivo de la Nación is preserved. The enemies of the liberals try everything within their power to gain access to this unknown treasure. Despite being unaware of its true nature, the conservatives at least know it is related to one of these two parameters: power or money. On the other hand, the legend surrounding the Republic's treasure links it to riches acquired through "sacking" cities in war, acquisitions and inheritances. This renders it universally sought after. However, despite the fact that the story of the treasure is placed at the centre of the novel, the mystery surrounding it fulfils two further narrative functions. First, it is a device to ensure that the reader maintains her/his

⁸ Tempo Giardinelli, "Introduction: The Hard-Boiled detective Novel in Latin America," in Darrell B. Lockhart, ed., *Latin American Mystery Writers. An A-to-Z Guide* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), xii.

attention throughout the book but, more importantly, it is an excuse to present an ontological theory of human nature. If, as stated before, the ultimate purpose of the recent historical novel is to look for the origins and development of the national identity in the nation's past, then the combination of both subgenres appears to be the perfect formula to realise this objective. At the same time, the demystification of official history is taken to an extreme in *La lejanía*. The novel leaves aside the great epic achievements against the French to focus on its protagonists' fears, and concentrates on the search for an imaginary treasure.

Taibo attempts, therefore, to present a vision of human nature in order to understand what it means to be Mexican within a historical context. Mexican identity is being formed. The self-determination of Mexico as a nation is at stake and the most important treasure that needs to be saved and stored away is the history hidden for centuries in the national archives. However, the fact that *La lejanía* deals with an issue of such importance for Mexicans as the creation of their identity, and the origins of their nation, does not mean the story has to be treated in a stuffy or purely worthy manner. On the contrary, Taibo is aware of the reader's attraction to mystery novels. By introducing the suspense element into the historical novel, Taibo tries to bring a potentially daunting subject to a broader public because all the Mexicans must be the trustees and caretakers of their national past.

2.2. History and cinema

Taibo is known as being a film buff, a trait that he inherited from his father, a critic who specialised in television and cinema. The result of this legacy is a significant cinematic influence within his novels. On the one hand, Taibo transforms the reader's

experience by bringing him closer to the experiences of the spectator who witnesses the action. At the same time, he transgresses the boundaries of the novel as a narrative genre and establishes a dialogue with other art forms.

In *La lejanía*, Taibo incorporates elements of thrillers and historical novels in with the aim of maintaining the reader's attention: the reader becomes "hooked" and wants to know more and more about the story. The novel's structure is very peculiar, as it differs from the typical structure of both the thriller and of the classic historical novel. *La lejanía* is structured like a television documentary. In the novel's first chapter the mystery of the treasure is revealed. For this, the author intercalates fragments of Guillermo Prieto's diary with anonymous testimonies about the possible identity of the Republic's treasure. The documentary value of these testimonies is indisputable and even though they seem to be false, they are essential to explaining the creation of myths and legends in Mexican society. The counterpoint structure serves to highlight the contrast between the version of the "reliable" witness and the versions of some "unreliable" witnesses who speak of what they heard, suspected, or invented, in a similar fashion to Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. The author disappears from the story, leaving the narrative to follow its course, thus creating the sensation of watching the scenes of a documentary. The written documents alternate with the oral ones, to present as complete a story as possible. The written documents refer to the reliable witness, while the oral documents are of dubious provenance and belong to the oral tradition. The oral character of the latter endows the novel with a documentary-like form, as they re-create the discourse of an interview. Despite the absence of the author, these chapters are the responses of different "witnesses" to the questions of a detective-researcher about the nature of the treasure. Later on in the book, this researcher compiles the product of his investigation so that the reader can decide and create her/his own version.

From the start of the second part, however, the documentary treatment is abandoned and the author uses the creation of different scenes to present simultaneously different spaces and times. These different scenes refer to pertinent aspects of the plot such as what is happening with the treasure, Prieto's adventures and worries, and the war between Riva Palacio's guerrilla and Dupin's counter-insurgent. The documentary surrounding the treasure occupies the centre of the story but also serves as a pretext to examine topics relating to historical and national identity. For instance, the different versions about the nature of the treasure are ironic representations of the Mexican tendency to "create" stories out of rumours. Also, the use of the counterpoint technique serves to create a global historical portrayal of the period, since the story is presented from different angles and multiple points of view.

On the other hand, the main dialogue established between the novel and cinema refers to the Revolution's documentary cinema. Taibo attempts in *La lejanía* to do something similar to what Hollywood did with Pancho Villa, but focusing instead on the figure of Riva Palacio. In 1914, Pancho Villa signed a contract with Hollywood's Mutual Film Company to film newsreels on Villa's campaign to depose Huerta. This situation brought Villa closer not only to Mexicans, but also to foreigners who, for the first time, were able to be witnesses of a war. After this, Villa became a myth, not only in Mexico, but also abroad and fantastic stories about his life started to develop.⁹ The Mutual Film Company also created a fictional film about his life called *The life of General Villa* (1914) in which reality was transformed in order to suit America's taste for the lurid and the bizarre. These newsreels and movies brought international attention

⁹ Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 324-326. He explains that the stories about this contract started to take on a life of their own. For instance, one rumour said that when the battle scenes were not filmed properly, Villa had to re-enact them and he also had to carry out his attacks during day light. Katz highlights the fact that such clauses were never included in the contract. However, he states that Villa was normally willing to change his usual dress and "wear a uniform provided by Mutual Film Company," when the circumstances required it.

to the Mexican revolution and its leaders became “celebrities”. In the case of Emiliano Zapata, Hollywood brought his story to the big screen in the movie *¡Viva Zapata!* (1952). The existence of cinema contributed to consolidate both Villa and Zapata as legends or living myths and made them known beyond the Mexican frontiers.

In the case of *La lejanía*, Taibo focuses the camera’s lens of his narrative on Riva Palacio and Dupin, presenting them as a revolutionary hero and anti-hero respectively. Through the dialogue between cinema and literature, the author brings characters to life that up to that moment had only, for most readers, lived in the pages of history books. Villa and Zapata were presented by Hollywood as heroes mounted on horseback that fought for what they believed. In the case of Villa, the movie *The Life of General Villa* enhanced considerably his popularity in the United States. Needless to say, these films contributed to the creation of myths and not to the representation of real revolutionaries engaged in an active struggle against the forces of oppression and reaction. In Mexico, the legends of Villa and Zapata are still alive today and Zapata was even used by the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas as their ideological mentor. However, even if Villa filmed newsreels, these were manipulated by Hollywood, depicting a heroic Villa rather than the real one. In this sense, *La lejanía* questions, cinema’s deformation of reality especially with regard to its treatment of the leading figures of the revolution of 1910. The presentation of Prieto and Riva Palacio in the novel as real characters insinuates a criticism of the tendency and necessity that Mexicans, as well as Hollywood, have to create myths from nothing. This leads to the falsifying of history and contributes to the perpetuation of self-delusions about Mexican identity. The chapters dedicated to Riva Palacio have a nostalgic tone. The romantic hero is demystified and presented as a normal person with his fears and doubts. The same phenomenon occurs with Prieto’s character in the novel, who ceases to be just the

subject of a written biography, as one might find in a history book, and becomes a committed person within the Juárez government. Thus, Taibo's objectives are twofold: firstly, restoring the admiration denied to unknown revolutionary heroes such as Prieto and Riva Palacio and, secondly, subverting the process of *mythologization* developed through the treatment of other revolutionary heroes.

Related to this is the ideological interest that underlies the text. Taibo is a writer of the left and his partiality is expressed by the author himself towards the end of the book: "Por culpa de Guillermo Prieto pues, está escrito este libro, por mi fascinación ante su enloquecida prosa, su populacherismo irredento, su fervor insurgente."¹⁰ The author admires the heroes, the "reds", the "chinacos," of which Prieto is one of the principal representatives and who Taibo calls "mi santo patrón ideológico."¹¹ In this sense, the author's appeal to a wider and popular audience can be understood as a mechanism of historical propaganda in order to introduce to the world some of the least well-known heroes of the war against the French. The greatness of Juárez's figure has, on a number of occasions, overshadowed other protagonists of the nation's history. In this sense, it is possible that Taibo attempts to recover the stories of these supposedly minor figures and justify their historical relevance. This is definitely the case with Juan de la Cruz Borrego, custodian of the Archivo de la Nación during Juárez's absence and an unknown hero for the vast majority of Mexicans. Whether he existed or not, is irrelevant: the emotional truth rather than the bald historical facts of the story is what is important and De la Cruz is, in this sense, essential. As a consequence, Taibo aims for his book to reach the widest audience without sacrificing literary quality. The documentary treatment combines with the thriller elements to give the novel a mesmerizing hold over the reader, who is motivated, from the beginning, with a desire

¹⁰ Taibo, *La lejanía*, 311.

¹¹ Ibid.

to know more. The indisputable power of visual media is used in the novel to strengthen the impact and widen the appeal of its message. Anecdotes or irrelevant secondary references are eschewed in favour of a direct narrative approach. As such, the author gives the reader only as much information as necessary at each moment to propel the story. This is very much a technique that belongs to the thriller genre. Taibo constantly changes the object of attention, so that the characters that are out of the limelight continue with their lives when they are not relevant to the development of the plot, in order to appear suddenly from the wings, as required by the author's dramatic intent.

In conclusion, what Taibo does is to deploy the combined weapons he possesses to create a novel. Instead of rejecting historiography as a false science with pretensions of absolute truth, he uses it as a necessary medium to comprehend human nature. Following this, he demonstrates that fiction is required to fill in the gaps when we are reconstructing the past. He also offers different versions of the past for a nation hungry for histories, stories, rumours, and legends. The author uses suspense to maintain the interest of the reader, who is constantly surprised by the plot's twists and turns. Lastly, the dialogue with cinema contributes to the updating of a past that has been buried and which, if not recovered in a sensitive and conscientious fashion, could fossilise into myth and folklore, rather than something that forms part of a living national identity.

3. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY AND THE LIMITS OF INVENTION

The problem surrounding the concept of truth has been key to the development of the historical novel since its very beginnings. Is it possible to recover the past

completely? Can a historian fill history's unknown gaps with his own imagination? In what ways does a history book differ from a historical novel if both are based on documentation and imagination? These questions and many others surrounding the concept of historical truth are explored by the recent historical novel. Each author gives her/his answer but, as the twentieth century drew to a close, the stance that confronted both disciplines took a step towards reconciliation. This rapprochement sought to bring out the best in both historiography and literature. Such is the position that Taibo adopts in his novel, due in part, no doubt, to his roles as a novelist and a historian. *La lejanía* begins with an introduction to Guillermo Prieto's ideas about the limits between history and literature when recovering the past; the novel finishes with an epilogue by Taibo himself in which he quotes all his sources, admits his doubts and anachronisms and establishes a relatively clear line between that which has been documented and that which has been imagined. The whole novel is itself a poetic of the historical novel. For Taibo, this genre must have both a documented part and an invented one. This section will examine Taibo's ideas about the conflict between reality and fiction as sources for reconstructing the past.

3.1. The treasure of the truths

La lejanía opens with an apocryphal chapter attributed to Guillermo Prieto, one of the ministers of the Republic who accompanied Juárez during his time in exile. The clue to the document's apocryphal nature is given by its title: "El manuscrito perdido de Guillermo Prieto," although it could also be that the author-compiler found the document, which had been lost. The chapter's first page is a reflection about history, literature and Mexican identity, which introduces Taibo's ideas perfectly and anticipates

and explains the novel's structure and plot. Taibo sums up what the historical novel means to him:

Es la Historia, en cambio, una novela de la verdad, hecha con materiales de bordes vagos y deshilachados, despeñadero de ilusiones, gran tela repleta de remiendos, impreciso trazado de carreteras. Y sin embargo también es afortunadamente la historia, literatura del fulgor inexacto. Y más aún la nuestra, y majestuosa, aquella que por fortuna nos cupo vivir como generación empeñada en construir una patria de los despojos coloniales, protegiéndola de la voracidad de la sotana, la rapiña imperial, el egoísmo natural al conservadurismo.¹²

History is not perfect, as it is impossible to know exactly what happened in the past. There is no absolute truth and gaps always remain. Some of these gaps are filled through intense labour and some are just left empty. Historians are not omniscient and, nevertheless, history is necessary when making an approximate, but never definitive, reconstruction of the past. In this sense history is a discipline closely related to literature in that it enriches this past with an imagination that covers imperfections, and fills gaps in which the reader could lose her/his way. Consequently, two tasks are interwoven in this novel: documentation and invention of the events of the past, limited and aiming at verisimilitude. At the same time, Prieto presents the problem of reconstructing the identity of a country that has been dispossessed and despoiled of history. Prieto is of the generation that had to fight to maintain their country, a land which has inherited the problems of the colonial era and which is trying to combat the greed for wealth of three united forces, namely foreign powers, the Church and the conservatives. The readers of these *azarosas* memoirs of Prieto can understand through this the origins of their

¹² Ibid., 9.

national problems, which remain unresolved up to the present. Prieto explains in a single phrase that the reader should understand this novel “como una novela de la historia o como una historia de la novela misma.”¹³ The believable and unbelievable are mixed together to create a picture, potentially more appropriate, of that period of national history. Reality and fiction go hand in hand in Prieto’s memoirs and the story of what occurred is embellished with the fiction of what was imagined by a popular consciousness. In conclusion, Prieto inspires the reader to cross “la ilusoria puerta de las memorias azarasas.”¹⁴ This door is imaginary, since it does not exist in the physical world: it is a convention created by human beings to enable them to recover a part of the past that escapes in the moment of its occurrence. Consequently, these memoirs will be “unlucky”, random, as it will be down to the author-compiler’s judgement to decide, sometimes unconsciously, what to tell and what to forget, and to select which events are worthy of being remembered and which should remain lost in oblivion.

From this moment the mystery starts to develop. Taibo’s double character as historian and writer of fiction gives the text an almost schizophrenic nature. On the one hand, the author accumulates, in an organised manner, versions of events with an almost scientific tone. The author tries to untangle the mystery of the past: an historical fact has been converted into legend by oral tradition. The narrator-compiler accumulates all the facts progressively to reach the conclusion that the closest version to the truth is that of the protagonist Guillermo Prieto. Prieto asserts that the treasure everybody speaks about is no more than the archive of the nation, which has been taken by pro-Juárez supporters in their rush to avoid it falling into the hands of the French. As Prieto would have us believe, and as the clue in the novel’s title suggests, the treasure is the centre of the novel, the mainspring of the story. However, the mystery surrounding the treasure is

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

solved at the end of the first part, in which Prieto speaks in his memoirs about this archive as “un metafórico tesoro.”¹⁵ According to Prieto, Juárez gave a farm worker called Juan de la Cruz Borrego, “la custodia de esas tres carretas donde viajan los documentos del archivo de la nación, estos tesoros inestimables que recogen nuestra historia pasada y reciente.”¹⁶ All references to silver, gold or shares in foreign countries are nothing, according to Prieto, but a product of a misunderstanding that has been blown out of proportion by popular imagination. The mystery solved, the novel finishes.

However, this is only the first part of the book. From this point on, attention centres on the adventures of different characters during the war with the Imperial army, in which the defence of the treasure is one of the main objectives. The treasure now assumes a symbolic value and its preservation becomes a matter of State; a question of vital importance for the future of the nation and Juárez’s government. Its symbolic value is related to the identity and history of Mexico. In an era such as this, when Mexico’s integrity as a nation is threatened by a foreign power and the government finds itself bankrupt, the country’s greatest treasure is its past. The archive of the nation is the route by which Mexicans can come to know the individual truths. But not even the sum of all the truths that are recounted in it can create the absolute truth. As Taibo demonstrates in his novel, with one part documented, one part legend and one part imagination, a writer can create a world, a character or an event, that transports the reader to another time and enables her/him to understand the past. As such, if the archive falls into foreign hands, the past -and with it the identity and history of Mexico- will be lost. The author creates *La lejanía* with a special interest in the fictional part, although the solid research does not go unnoticed by the reader. Taibo states that “si esta historia tiene alguna característica como historia, es la infidelidad al detalle en la búsqueda de la fidelidad al

¹⁵ Ibid., 125.

¹⁶ Ibid., 124.

ambiente y a la creación de personajes.”¹⁷ However, the extended bibliography that the author presents in the epilogue, refers to exhaustive documentation. Taibo’s narrative theory relates to a blending of the two disciplines in order to attain a more complete truth than either can provide individually. The historical novel is nothing without the foundation supported by documentary evidence: if the national treasure is lost, the past will be lost for ever and history will be nothing more than pure legend. Conversely, historiography can miss the emotional significance of an apparently insignificant gesture and the transcendence of an anonymous hero. The combining of historiography and literature will be an unconditional union of both disciplines, but one that offers the key to comprehending the past.

3.2. The archival metafiction

La lejanía is a historical novel whose parodic structure imitates that of an archive. Documents accumulate progressively and the reader begins to piece together the various historical scenes that the author presents. However, *La lejanía* is a fictional novel, as the author himself admits:

Aquel que quiera seguir históricamente la gesta de los chinacos michoacanos debe acudir a esas páginas [de los libros de historia] y abandonar éstas, que en lo que a la historia se refiere, son una pálida imitación.¹⁸

Within the novel, documents of all types can be found, where distinct languages live alongside each other all the time and various parallel actions occur in diverse spaces. For this, Taibo incorporates experimental narrative techniques such as the disjunction of

¹⁷ Ibid., 311.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the point of view, the use of deliberate anachronism and the incorporation of intertexts with the aim of emphasising the problem of understanding the truth in a country controlled by a foreign power that wants to change the nation's identity through the destruction or manipulation of its past. In this way, Taibo creates a novel that is a self-conscious textual experimentation that begins as an archive and becomes an historical thriller.

La lejanía is the story of a war and of the adventures of a treasure, but it is also a metaphor for the process of historiographical investigation. In the novel, everyone searches for a treasure that represents the national past and which is Mexico's greatest treasure. Historians, in the same way, try to understand the past, and to do so they research and investigate using books and documents that sometimes yield little significance. The reader shares with the historian the task of judging which documents that appear in the text are worthy of study, and which are not. Despite Prieto's version of the facts appearing to be truthful, he does not wish to state that the others are false. It could be that they all occurred just as their protagonists narrate. Or, indeed, it may be completely otherwise. It is down to the reader to judge this. The irony of the novel resides in the fact that, at the end, when the last survivor of those protecting the treasure attempts to return it to its owners, this task proves far from easy: Juárez has been surrounded by bureaucrats and getting close to him is almost harder than protecting the treasure.

The author uses the modernist device of the multiple narrators to recover the infinite versions of reality, the accumulation of which is the only way to approach the truth. The disjunction of the point of view has the effect of informing the reader about what is happening simultaneously in different places, or the same periods seen from several characters' point of view. Taibo incorporates sections using the first, second and

third person depending on who is narrating. In this way he offers a panoramic view of the story that permits the reader to see it from all angles, including the false angles. For instance, the chapters in which the author recovers some parts of Prieto's diary are mainly written in the first person, as the narrator is telling his memoirs. The chapters that centre on the figure of Riva Palacio are written in the second person and have a laudatory tone: the author sings the achievements of the Juarist hero as if he were in front of him and he was paying homage to him. With regard to the chapters dedicated to other characters such as the keepers of the treasure, Lord Mandi, Leo Leenhof or Colonel Dupin, these are recounted in the third person by an omniscient narrator. The chapters of the first part that offer different versions of the identity of the treasure are narrated by several anonymous narrators, usually in the third person, and these narratives are directed to an interlocutor within the novel, who is not the reader her/himself. All these voices in the novel contribute to the impression the text gives of being an archive. Indeed, the novel presents itself as a historic mosaic with the treasure at its centre. When the investigation is concluded, the author-compiler presents, in chronological order, the documents he has found so that the reader is able to understand the plot without being bogged down in unnecessary details. Each narrator, each protagonist and each witness play their role and are either more or less important to the plot, as the case may be. However, the main thread is the treasure and the individual stories are relevant only as and when they add something to the treasure's mystery. The fact that the narrators may or may not be reliable, will not influence the author's decision to include their stories if their versions are relevant for the plot.

The author's deliberate use of anachronisms is related to the idea that faithfulness to the story does not necessarily preclude being unfaithful to history. These small infidelities to history serve, paradoxically, to offer a more faithful version of

history. At first sight this may appear to be a contradiction, but on closer inspection it proves not to be. Taibo states that writing *La lejanía*,

implicó la creación de frecuentes y voluntarias ucronías [...] si esta historia tiene alguna característica como historia, es la infidelidad al detalle en la búsqueda de la fidelidad al ambiente y a la creación de personajes.¹⁹

So the union of the two does not imply, for Taibo, an imposed faithfulness to historical detail. Such considerations are frequently irrelevant for the reader who is left with the essence of a novel that portrays a historical moment with great fidelity. Without being unfaithful to the novel's principal engine –the custody of the treasure– Taibo jumps from fiction to reality, from historical documents to the most uncertain field of the apocryphal text and the lost memoirs, to create a novel in which history and literature unite without either of them having preference over the other. The criticism of history books' univocal character no longer interests Taibo. On the one hand, his identity as a historian puts him in the middle ground between both sides. He knows the advantages conferred on those engaged in the investigation of the past, privileged professionals who are in search of possible truths. He also possesses the secrets of inspiration and the virtues of applying imagination to the aridity of the historical document. On the other hand, the author knows that positivist historiography has been left behind and historians themselves are now the critics of concepts such as "absolute truth" and "lineal progress." Therefore, instead of criticising the falsification of history or the invention of literature, Taibo takes on the responsibility of creating from both disciplines a novel that is a metaphor about the risks of losing the national collective memory. The novel's substantial debt to documented history is made obvious through the sources used and

¹⁹ Ibid.

discussed by the author in the epilogue. The fictional and apocryphal character is manifested at the beginning of each chapter with headings such as “El manuscrito perdido de Guillermo Prieto,” “El tesoro, como se habla de él (versión tercera)” o “La correspondencia perdida de Guillermo Prieto (que habla de inexistentes tesoros).” These headings refer to the apocryphal (or even fictitious) character of the information included in the book. Nevertheless, as Taibo states, the chapters attributed to Prieto were the fruit of an intensive investigation of this character, to whom he attributes the inspiration for writing this novel. Taibo researched extensively the facts relating to Guillermo Prieto in order to be able to recreate his life and personality in these chapters. According to the author, the chapters were written

recortando y copiando, tomando una narración completa aquí y un fragmento de otra, un punto de vista y un adjetivo, un modo de usar las palabras o una visión de un amigo; imitando y buscando pensar el idioma como él [Prieto] lo entendía.²⁰

So Taibo’s inspiration is also capable of creating letters and memories that, if not written by Prieto himself, could have been written by him, or at least the reader might believe them to have been so. According to Taibo, “podría decirse también que Guillermo Prieto nunca tuvo tiempo, aunque sí intenciones, de escribir el Tomo Tercero de sus *Memorias*,”²¹ and the author, a great admirer of the minister poet, gives him this opportunity to recompile his memoirs and publish them after his death.

Also, the accumulation of intertexts and diverse types of materials serves to strengthen the novel’s archival aspect and its heterogeneous nature. Documents of all types can be found in the novel, from letters to official papers, political pamphlets,

²⁰ Ibid., 310.

²¹ Ibid., 309.

poems, theatre scenes, historical accounts, and interviews. For example, the author intercalates some of Prieto's own poems in his memoirs, despite the politician not usually mixing the two genres. According to Taibo, this small violation allows him to show a new side of Prieto. Taibo even incorporates fragments of a newspaper in which Prieto wrote a historical account, quoting it word for word in his memoirs: "Copio de un pequeño diario que conservé en el azar de aquellos días la siguiente anotación."²² As such he mixes memoirs with historical documents, incorporating a degree of verisimilitude into the apocryphal document. Taibo also uses intertexts that are narrative subgenres such as the epistle or the interview, and even other literary genres such as poetry and theatre. For example, the author recovers some letters that are part of the "lost correspondence" between Prieto and Riva Palacio with the aim of presenting a new aspect of the relationship between these characters. He himself states in the book's epilogue that "aunque amigos y caracteres históricos paralelos, no lo fueron tanto."²³ However, the author exaggerates their friendship in order to portray the wider process of the republican resistance against the Imperials. Taibo also uses the interview to introduce new theories about the nature of the treasure. Although the interviewer is unknown, the interviewee assures he is Jerónimo Chagoyán, the nephew of a republican who gave Juárez's government a gold mine, from which they obtained the gold which today constitutes the treasure.²⁴ Lastly, in the book a scene from a play is also included. This is the passage introduced as "tema verídico para una pieza teatral breve,"²⁵ in which Prieto –named Fidel in the scene– and Juárez are the protagonists.

Taibo thus contributes in a very personal manner to the debate about truth in the context of history and the historical novel. *La lejanía* is a thriller in which the detective-

²² Ibid., 53.

²³ Ibid., 311.

²⁴ Ibid., 62-63.

²⁵ Ibid., 52.

narrator-compiler searches in the historical records and in the national past to confirm the veracity of a mythical treasure created by popular imagination. At the same time, the novel's plot progressively unravels the mystery of the treasure and the curse that appears tied to it, and to those who try to protect it. The author solves the mystery in the first part. However, the same does not happen with the mystery of history. Taibo offers his vision about the problem of truth, separating himself from the most radical postmodernist ideas that proclaim a radical doubt about any type of objective truth and supposed representations of reality. To do so, he fuses the proposals of all subjects, genres, and schools, without adhering to any single one, but at the same time without discarding anything that could be useful.

4. THE NATIONAL TREASURE AND WHAT THE FRENCH COULD NOT CONQUER

The French troops close in on Mexico City and Benito Juárez, the President of the Republic, flees with his family, secretaries, ministers, assistants and some wagons full of papers. Juárez, considered an austere character by history, decides to take few things with him when fleeing from city to city with his errant government. Of all these things, the most important is the national treasure. However, this is not a real treasure in the sense of riches and relics, but rather it is a symbolic treasure. The archive of the nation: the past, Mexico's history, the one thing the French cannot -or should not- take away from Mexico; the only valuable thing that remains in a country condemned to a perpetual state of war since its independence. This section will show how this symbolic

treasure is the centre of a story whose principal theme is not the search for the treasure, but rather the dissection of the soul of a nation which is still searching for itself today.

4.1. The mystery of the treasure

As seen before, the mystery of the treasure is resolved at the end of the first part of *La lejanía*. However, the novel contains a twist and incorporates into its structure a new element: the thriller. The treasure is handed over to its custodian who is charged with hiding it and looking after it until the government returns and expels the French. According to Jerry Palmer, in the thriller novel “there are only two elements which are absolutely indispensable: the hero, who is intrinsically competitive; and the conspiracy, which is intrinsically mysterious.”²⁶ The hero is Juan de la Cruz, and the conspiracy consists in the French trying to find the treasure. This conspiracy is mysterious not because the nature of the treasure remains unknown, but rather because the identity and the motives of the treasure-hunter remain unknown.

The fact that Taibo is a novelist and a historian at the same time means that he is ideally positioned to extend the debate about historical reconstruction, a debate that seeks to resolve the tension between reality and fiction. Taibo considers the roles of writer and historian as necessary and complementary. As such, he is able to go some way to abolishing the epistemological doubt prevalent in previous writers surrounding the concept of truth. Even if the apprehension of an absolute truth and the total reconstruction of history are impossible, the attempt to clarify it is vital to the understanding of the nation. The final objective will always be that of reaching a truth, even if it is a partial one and even if it is a fraudulent reconstruction. Legends are a source for history and sometimes they can change the course of history. This is why

²⁶ Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 82.

historians should continue trying to untangle the truth of this past amongst the myriad versions on offer from the available sources. And, even if it is impossible to totally recover the past, there are sections of it which are recoverable through research and study. This explains why, at the end of the first part of *La lejanía*, the reader is informed that the treasure is the archive of the nation, a treasure that President Juárez has decided to take with him upon fleeing the National Palace when faced with the imminent arrival of the French troops.

Nevertheless, the novel's great mystery remains unsolved. This mystery is not whether the treasure is the archive or the stamp of the nation, but rather the motives which move Toribio Regalado and his gang to search so determinedly for the treasure. After the presentation of the different stories and legends about the treasure, the first references point to the fact that Toribio, who also uses the alias El Perro, and his followers are looking for the treasure which they have heard people speak of. The narrator tells that "las consejas y leyendas de que algo se cocinaba por el rumbo de La Soledad atrajeron a la gavilla de El Perro por los primeros días de octubre del 64."²⁷ However, they appear to be linked with the French counter-insurgents and what at first seemed to be motivated by greed, little by little becomes the centre of a political thriller. If the French steal the archive of the nation, Mexico's past will be theirs to destroy: the French will be free to create a new history for Mexico as they please. The motives of Toribio's group are never revealed as, like a good thriller, the protagonist is saved at the very last moment in an unexpected manner: Zacatillo, the apache Indian, stabs Toribio in the temple just as he is about to shoot De la Cruz. Thus, it is left to the readers' imagination to reach their own conclusion about Toribio's motives and to interpret the principal mystery in the novel.

²⁷ Taibo, *La lejanía*, 161.

4.2. The identity of the treasure

The treasure is important to some for its identification with a material treasure. All the stories surrounding the treasure identify it with money -a treasure robbed from the sacking of Puebla, the riches of a *gachupín*;²⁸ or with power- the stamp of the nation. The enormous expectations created by a nation's consciousness, left bankrupt after years of war, is understandable, to say the least. Given these expectations, one of the custodians of the treasure, the highway man Vicente Rodríguez, cannot hold back his laughter when he is told about the treasure's content: “¿Pinchis papeles? Pinchis papeles pa' tantos rumores...”²⁹ But for Juárez and his fugitive government, the symbolic value of these papers is enormous, as they represent the past of a nation subjected to a foreign power. On the one hand, it is a clear illustration of the character of Juárez's government. Paradoxically, despite Mexico being an illiterate country in which the majority of people do not know how to read, the most sought after treasure are papers that hold the secrets of the past. Prieto highlights in his memoirs that “el presidente viaja más que modesta, pobremente,”³⁰ confirming Juárez's fame as an austere man. Although this treasure is not a collection of paintings or gold extracted from a mine, its symbolic value is incalculable. With a government fleeing from city to city throughout the country, the need to preserve the identity and common past of the Mexicans is imperative. Mexican identity cannot fall into French hands. Nevertheless, there are many stories, legends, and rumours that have been created around the treasure and the interest generated has resulted in a national paranoia. This unfounded but endemic suspicion has led to different groups of people flocking to search for the treasure they have heard so much about. The irony of the situation is introduced in the

²⁸ Spaniard.

²⁹ Taibo, *La lejanía*, 145.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

novel through certain sarcastic comments from Prieto himself: “¿Acaso por ahí no se habrá perdido un tesoro y nosotros sin saber que lo tenemos?”³¹

In contrast to other recent historical novels that attempt to understand the historical process through the examination of the motives, ideas and feelings of all the parties involved, *La lejanía* favours the government of the Republic. The heroes Prieto, Riva Palacio, and De la Cruz, belong to the liberal side, while the conservatives and imperialists are the villains, those who sold their country to the French, the torturers. The chapters dedicated to the imperialists focus on extremely negative figures like Colonel Dupin or Manet's brother-in-law, Leo Leenhof, characterised by their cruelty and greed. In contrast, other characters such as Riva Palacio and Prieto constantly show mercy to their enemies. These characters also demonstrate an unconditional loyalty to the Republic, as well as their absolute fidelity to Juárez himself. The description of the protagonists as romantic heroes and the imitation of a nineteenth century novel serve to reinforce the verisimilitude and the character of *La lejanía*. It is a broadly documented novel that appears to be a text written in this century by a historian or novelist of the era. Added to all their virtues, the identification of their greatest treasure with some papers that contain the national history confirms their heroism and increases the value of their selfless cause.

Conversely, the historical ambiguity created by intercalating rumours and legends breaks with the potential Manichaeism of the novel: “Nada era cierto, todo era rumor y con igual seriedad y conocimiento de causa se daba una u otra información.”³² In those times, the only access that people had to news of what was happening in Mexico was hearsay, and the power of rumour in the novel is almost magical: the various myths concerning the treasure are also rumours; the stories about the state of

³¹ Ibid., 256.

³² Ibid., 247.

war and the location of their president are rumours. History is an unverifiable discipline and, as such, can be altered, perverted or embellished by the tremendous power of rumour. Memory is sometimes the greatest source of rumours, as it distorts the image that people have about their previous experiences. However, the past, instead of being falsified, is enriched with this rumour. Prieto explains that

a veces la Memoria no traiciona sino que ordena la realidad en realidades. Arbitrariamente designa los recuerdos y los mezcla. Confunde las sensaciones tenidas, con las versiones reposadas que da el tiempo. Con harta frecuencia la memoria tañe campanas de iglesia que nunca estuvieron allí. A veces estoy ahora y otras veces estoy entonces, y que el lector decida si la vivencia de lo vivido no vale la pena como pretexto para escaparse a la sintaxis de los tiempos de los verbos.³³

Memory selects among the events of the past in order to create history. This is a version of what happened, never less false or less true. Each historical account of the facts is partial. This is the beauty of history and, in this context, the reader is the accomplice and creator of the text.

4.3. The remoteness of the treasure

If the treasure holds the secret to Mexican identity, its remoteness is a metaphor of the distance that separates Mexicans from their self-discovery and self-knowledge. Throughout the novel Taibo leaves clues about what he understands to be the principal problems of Mexican identity.

³³ Ibid., 166.

First of all, many Mexicans do not know their own history. It is quite ironic that the last custodian of the treasure and one of the heroes of the story is a humble farmer called Juan de la Cruz Borrego. But even more ironic is the fact that, during his stay in the Cueva del Tabaco protecting the archive, he reads all the documents that it contains. In the first place, this fact could be interpreted as a criticism of the elitism of certain scholars who do not preoccupy themselves with ensuring that the information reaches everyone, justifying it by arguing that most of them have a lack of interest: De la Cruz is interested. The heroes in *La lejanía* are the *chinacos* who courageously confront the people. The people have sold themselves to a foreign power due to their prejudices and their refusal to accept their own identity. Through their leaders' articulated ideas, they aim to extend this culture to the entire nation. Their magazine, *La Chinaca*, is written

única y exclusivamente para el pueblo. En suma, para los que poco o ningún hábito tenían de leer [...] Por eso el diario abundaba en noticias de combates, versos satíricos, apócrifos, burlas, sainetes, cartas jocosas y mucha chunga del imperial y sus nativos aliados.³⁴

Taibo, who admits to having admiration for the historical Prieto, recovers his liberal ideology as an altruistic attempt to finish with the elitism of the bourgeoisie. This endeavour is also to ensure that the culture reaches everyone so that they can be keepers of their own history.

Another important aspect of the novel and one that is closely related to Mexican identity is the notion of the party and of masks. Taibo sums up the Mexican philosophy in the following quote, which he attributes to Prieto:

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

El nuestro ha sido siempre un país en proceso de hacerse, a medio camino entre la terrible verdad de su existencia y el baile de máscaras que todo lo oculta con el fandango y la broma macabra.³⁵

In this quote he explains the trauma of a nation born as the result of a rape –the conquest. This is the story of a nation attempting to hide its own identity behind a mask and to forget its problems through the power of the party, in the sense of a festive occasion. The direct link between these works can be found in the philosophy of *lo mexicano* articulated by Octavio Paz in his book *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) in which he explains that Mexicans’ greatest trauma is to consider themselves the product of a rape –an “hijo de la chingada”. Consequently, their defence would be a mask they put on for interpersonal relations, a mask which covers everything with hypocrisy. However, this mask only serves as a mechanism for hiding their true identity and not as a real answer or solution to national problems. According to Prieto, “bajo la superficie animosa de la fiesta popular, se encuentran soterradas las tensiones,”³⁶ and it is not enough to bury their heads in the sand and hope that problems will solve themselves. The fact that Taibo attributes these ideas to Prieto is a deliberate anachronism that obeys the author’s intention of offering the greatest number of Prieto’s *possible* memories. In these moments in which national identity is being forged and Mexicans are fighting for self-determination, Paz’s ideas explain perfectly the problems of identity of a country in the process of forming itself. Thus, while Prieto fights against the French and the conservatives with his pen, he deems necessary a self-valuation of their own mistakes and establishes some defects that he classifies as inherent in Mexican being: “el caos, la desorganización, la imprevisión, las carencias, las improvisaciones.”³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., 33.

³⁶ Ibid., 167.

³⁷ Ibid., 22.

The traditional problem with the Indians is examined in one of the chapters dedicated to Riva Palacio. Indians are not part of any of the political factions. Riva Palacio considers them selfish and careless although he recognises that they have been the victims of history. Riva Palacio asks himself:

¿Eran ellos México también? Desde luego no eran culpables de una historia en la que habían jugado el papel de derrotados. Pero tampoco cabía la conmiseración ante sus vicios, su postración, el alcoholismo y la religión como barbarie primitiva.³⁸

Riva Palacio's thoughts reflect the difficulty of delimiting a Mexican identity in which the Indians have a place. This problem exists today and the vices attributed to the Indians, which the author has Riva Palacio articulate, are serious problems for part of the indigenous communities in Mexico in the present day. However, the ambiguity of his reflections is evident. On the one hand, the liberals made the indigenous past their own, rejecting their European roots. On the other hand, the fleeing president, Benito Juárez, is an Indian. Riva Palacio thinks about how to resolve this dilemma: "Para hacer de México un país había que incorporar a los indios, te decías. Y nunca ibas a desentrañar la clave."³⁹ How could they create a definition of what the Mexican was in order to include the whole racial mix? Furthermore, how could they integrate the Indians into the concept of nation if those in power did not understand them? In these pages of *La lejanía*, all the contradictions of the Mexican soul are exposed in order to find a definition for such an heterogeneous nation.

The repetitive and cyclical character of history is also seen in *La lejanía*, although Taibo's version is a lot more optimistic than that of other writers. This is due,

³⁸ Ibid., 76-77.

³⁹ Ibid., 77.

in part, to the fact that in the historical moment that he is recreating, the Mexicans are victorious. Referring to the conservatives, Prieto says that

sus traiciones ofrecían al francés, que en el fondo los despreciaba por vándalos y retrógrados y porque le parecían soldaditos de trapo, lo que éste no hubiera podido obtener de otra manera: conocedores del terreno, exploradores eficientes, traductores, ayudantes de todo eso, carne de cañón para las vanguardias... Eran los nuevos tlaxcaltecas.⁴⁰

Prieto compares the reactionaries who aid the French with the tlaxcaltecas who helped Hernán Cortés in the conquest of Tenochtitlán. Ultimately, they were all Indians that were, finally, dominated by the Spaniards. Now, the conservatives are helping the French to defeat the liberals, but if the French win everyone will be subject to the will of a foreign country again. Despite their ideological differences, they are all Mexicans and they should be united against a foreign invasion. Indeed, the liberal propaganda of the era established a parallel between the two historical moments: Cortés' conquest and the French invasion. At last, Juárez, the Indian, had the opportunity to defeat Maximilian, the white, European usurper and, thus, avenge the Indians' defeat by Cortés. Historical destiny has been broken for once and all. It is true that the errors of the past influence the future, and that certain historic events repeat themselves over and over again, but a nation always needs to be prepared to try and change the tragic destiny of its history.

This historical movement does not imply progress nor advancement for Taibo, but rather a small, surprising and random move which sometimes produces amazing coincidences worthy of being recounted. According to one of the people who narrate several stories about the treasure, history “marcha hacia delante, hacia los lados, y a

⁴⁰ Ibid., 46.

veces hacia atrás.”⁴¹ So history would not move in a linear, circular or spiral direction, but rather in any possible direction, constantly changing. This explains its unpredictability and its random character. In the same line as previous authors, Taibo proposes the understanding of history as a weapon to break that repetitive fatality of Mexican history: “Mala es la memoria, y abundan los desmemoriados. Y a lo mejor después de tanta sangre la patria se descompone y llegan más franceses, o gringos o escoceses, tanto da.”⁴² The preservation of the past is important in terms of understanding a nation’s identity. Thus, history must exist, so the past can be remembered. Nations must learn from their historical mistakes, because if they forget their past there is the risk they will repeat them.

4. CONCLUSION

La lejanía is a thriller that opts for the union between history and literature with the aim of gaining knowledge about the past and understanding Mexican identity. The post-1968 Mexico is a shattered nation, one that is no longer shocked by anything. Anything is possible and any excuse is valid to invent a conspiracy. However, the epistemological doubt surrounding the concept of truth does not seem to be the main problem for Taibo. He doubts what he sees. In this world, everything is possible. Literature enriches history and, in that sense, it changes history. However, while it is possible to change history, manipulate it or turn it into legend, the past itself cannot be changed. What is done remains and has consequences for the future: it is this past that should be known. If, in order to apprehend this past, we have to blend reality, fiction,

⁴¹ Ibid., 55.

⁴² Ibid., 308.

myth and legend and produce a historical novel, then this genre would have found its *raison d'être*. But if the historical novel moves away from history and leaves documentation to one side, then it would not be a historical novel. At the same time, if the popularising of literature through the intercalation of devices or forms usually associated with commercial or popular fiction – such as mystery or suspense - makes culture available to a wider audience, then the literary establishment should welcome the end of elitism. Each nation should be the trustee of its history and the historical novel is a medium of expression for the search for Mexican identity.

In the next novel that we consider, *La corte de los ilusos*, it will be demonstrated how its author adds a further dimension to this theme of history and Mexican identity in the context of the historical novel. In this novel, woman becomes the protagonist and the stellar centre of history, displacing the patriarchal figure, assigning him to the margins of society. Macho historiography is demystified in an attempt to offer a feminine version of the past and the female ideal maintained and desired by macho society is also criticised. Ultimately, the power of laughter destroys and exorcizes the traumas of Mexican history.

CHAPTER 7: LA CORTE DE LOS ILUSOS:

CARNIVALISATION OR BARBARISM?

1. INTRODUCTION

Rosa Beltrán (b. 1960) won the Planeta-Joaquín Mortiz prize with her first novel, *La corte de los ilusos*¹ (1995) in the same year that it was published. This prize had never been given to a woman and was decided by a tribunal comprised solely of men. This could have been due to its status as a historical novel, a genre traditionally employed by men. Or it may have been that finally a jury of men recognized the worth of literature written by women.²

Whatever the judges of the Planeta-Joaquín Mortiz prize may have pondered most in their deliberations, *La corte* can stand on its own merits as a work of literature. Beltrán's novel is worthy of study in the sense that it positions itself within a limited group of historical novels written by women, where parody, demystification and the satirizing of official historical discourse, written by men, takes place. The author creates a satirical-burlesque novel in which the issues that constitute patriarchal discourse are ridiculed. The official and patriarchal version of history is subverted by the author, to show the grotesque or *esperpéntico* character of the Mexican national past and to give *the other* version of history, that written by women.

¹ Rosa Beltrán, *La corte de los ilusos* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1998). All the quotations of the book will be taken from this edition. The title will be shortened henceforth to *La corte*.

² This jury was composed of the following critics: Alí Chumacero, Julio Ollero, Gustavo Sáinz, Manuel Lombardero, and Arturo Pérez-Reverte.

In this sense, Beltrán creates a novel in which *herstory* is confronted with *history* and the two of them live together as different approaches to the past. The constant mix of reality and fiction, as well as the falsification of history, found in most of the historical novels of the end of the twentieth century, will also be encountered within this novel. Furthermore, Beltrán takes advantage of the gaps of history in order to create her own story.

The two most original aspects of *La corte* are Beltrán's use of humour and the carnivalization of history. This chapter will show how *La corte* presents a carnivalesque sense of the world through the literary assimilation of devices derived from carnival. The term *carnivalization* was first developed by Bakhtin in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*³ and it refers to the transposition of the language and the forms of carnival into the language of literature. Some of these literary forms borrowed from the carnival are the use of laughter as a renewing force, the transgression of social rules and hierarchies and the incorporation of the *eccentric* into the text. Through the development of these topics, Beltrán offers a carnivalesque version of the past in which self-critique and laughter are used as exorcising devices. The author selects a key moment in Mexican history and caricaturizes it to the point where it appears to be a parodic performance interpreted by its own historical characters. Furthermore, this carnivalistic performance will be directed by women, providing a very particular version of history: we are presented with a marginalized version of the past in which the real motivating forces of Iturbide's Empire are women. The official version of history, the version that has traditionally presented an anti-heroic and barbaric Iturbide, is *feminised*⁴ to provide a literary, carnivalised

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

⁴ Here we use the term "feminise" as the transformation of the patriarchal discourse into a feminine discourse that parodies, subverts, and mocks it.

version of Iturbide's court with the aim of subverting the univocal patriarchal vision of the past. In this sense, *La corte* can be considered as an attempt to debunk the notion of the historical novel as a genre traditionally created by and for men. *La corte* is an example of a new literature created by women in order to demonstrate their own version of the past.⁵

Thus, this chapter will attempt to show that Beltrán's novel is, firstly, a challenge to the macho-oriented official history that has silenced the voice of women and, secondly, a familiar version of history where the barbaric anti-hero Iturbide is crowned as the king of carnival in a satirical parody of official history.

2. PARODY, CHALLENGE AND DISTORTION OF OFFICIAL HISTORY

Talking about novelists' intentions when writing a historical novel, Hebe Campanella states that

muchas veces el novelista, preferentemente en obras que apelan a la parodia burlesca, al grotesco deformante, muestra evidentes propósitos de desacralizar los relatos oficializados, "desacartonar" a los héroes nacionales, americanos o españoles: la crítica social, enmascarada en la retórica literaria, apunta no sólo al pasado sino también al presente.⁶

⁵ The number of female novelists that have adopted the historical genre has increased during the last decades. Some examples are Brianda Domecq, *La insólita historia de la Santa de Cabora* (1990), Carmen Boullosa, *Son vacas, somos puercos* (1991) and *El médico de los piratas* (1992), Elena Poniatowska, *Tinísima* (1992), and Ángeles Mastretta, *Mal de amores* (1996).

⁶ Hebe N. Campanella, *La novela histórica argentina e iberoamericana hacia finales del siglo XX (1969-1999)* (Buenos Aires: Vinciguerra, 2003), 29.

This is very much Rosa Beltrán's intention in her novel *La corte*: to demystify official history while offering a social critique of the present, especially with regard to the inferior role assigned to women in Mexican history. In previous chapters, we have shown how other novelists looked to reconstruct history with the intention of re-examining a concrete historical event -as in the case of *Noticias*-, or as an attempt to invent a past for a nation within uncertain roots -as in *Terra Nostra*. In the case of *La corte*, the status of history is downgraded to a supporting role and attention is focused on Iturbide, giving the Emperor a human face. Patriarchal discourse has traditionally portrayed Iturbide as a villain who abused his power and created the first Mexican Empire. In *La corte*, Beltrán recreates the story of his Empire from the point of view of the women that formed part of it and who were oppressed by it.

Hence, the preoccupation of authors from previous decades with creating worlds and offering solutions is subordinated in *La corte* to a lucid and deeply ironic conception of writing as deconstruction and social critique. Destabilisation is the device that Beltrán utilises in a novel that rather than taking an existential approach to the past, regards the process as a game. Beltrán tries to break free from the rigid canons of historiography and the historical novel written by men and, to do so, she uses parody and grotesque.

2.1. The feminine parody of male discourse

Parodic writing has a particular character in the case of novels written by women. Linda Hutcheon points out that the main use of irony in postmodern culture refers to "the strategic use of irony as an effective way of speaking *within* and *to* a

dominant culture, while still subverting its authority.”⁷ Elzbieta Sklodowska speaks of the “*potencialidad paródica de la escritura femenina*,”⁸ stating that a simple change in the narrative subject implies a challenge. The use of irony and parody is, consequently, an effective weapon in the hands of a female writer who is prepared to write a historical novel. Women authors question the authority of a dominant discourse, including both historiography and the traditional historical novel. The recent historical novels produced by women are written from the margins of a subject traditionally excluded from historiographical discourse: the role of women in history. The concept of “parody” does not necessarily imply a humoristic or ironic recreation of the parodied pre-text. It may simply adopt the tone of voice or typical techniques of the discipline or method being pilloried. But, in the case of *La corte*, Beltrán uses humour to create a burlesque parody with the Empire of Agustín I as a backdrop.

The parody used by Beltrán in *La corte* is especially significant as it is a parody with two objects in its sight. On the one hand, the historical referent is subverted, insofar as the novel covers *la petite histoire*, the minutiae of day-to-day life. By focusing on the anecdotal, the political events of the first Mexican Empire are relegated to take second place in the novel’s concerns. On the other hand, this revision is extended to the historical novel as a male-dominated genre. Men are, after all, history’s principal protagonists. *La corte*, thus, becomes a parody of both history and of historical novels themselves by making women history’s main subject. As such, Beltrán creates a novel that inverts the macho canon in which women have a secondary role and transforms her into the true maker of history. Iturbide I’s Empire crumbles, as Beltrán suggests in her novel, due to the Emperor’s failure on a familial

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony and the Power of the Unsaid* (Newfoundland: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1992), 9.

⁸ Elzbieta Sklodowska, *La parodia en la nueva novela hispanoamericana (1960-1985)* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1991), 145.

level and the fact that his major decisions are motivated by his relationships with the women in his life. Through this, the author criticises Mexican patriarchal society, which condemns women to live in the shadow of their husbands, fathers or brothers. According to Amalia Pulgarín,

la crítica y la práctica feminista, regresan a la historia para recuperar lo que ésta ha omitido o mal interpretado. Una de las formas de recuperarla es estableciendo una re-evaluación de lo personal frente a lo público, o mejor dicho, rompiendo la diferencia y privilegiando otro tipo de discursos: biografías, autobiografías, cartas, confesiones, etc. De esta forma también se ponen en cuestionamiento otras dicotomías como la de cultura popular y alta cultura.⁹

Beltrán reconstructs Iturbide's private life and, at least in this context, women are the protagonists of history. The novel weaves a wider criticism not only about the fact that women have been paid little attention in national history, but also about a society where machismo relegates women's contribution to that of home and the family. At a dinner at the Emperor's house, Don Domingo says: "Las mujeres tienen el hábito de creer que el tiempo que no existe es el mejor. Nunca están conformes con lo que tienen."¹⁰ Beltrán exploits the stereotype of the submissive and silent woman, in Mexican society where they are expected to remain silent and limit themselves to brief interventions. For instance, when Joaquinita de Estanillo begins to complain against the state of the nation, this provokes an abrupt response from her husband: "En boca cerrada no entran moscas, señora."¹¹ This saying, which was also used in *Recuerdos* with the same intention, becomes a weapon of control over women's right

⁹ Amalia Pulgarín, *Metaficción historiográfica: la novela histórica en la narrativa hispánica posmodernista* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1995), 154.

¹⁰ Beltrán, *La corte*, 31.

¹¹ Ibid.

to express themselves. Muñoz the delegate, dives into the conversation, immediately putting women in their place: “¿Por qué no atender a las labores del bello sexo y dejar que sus maridos se ocupen de estos engorrosos asuntos?”¹² The bishop of Puebla pretends to silence them through adulation and he calls them “los ángeles del hogar.”¹³ In general, this is the image that women have had within Mexican society and which is still maintained to a degree up to the present day. However, as a premonition of what will happen later on in the novel, Rafaela anticipates: “No debe menospreciarse el poder de los ángeles, don Domingo –dijo, con una voz dulcísima-. Recuerdo a usted que también hay ángeles caídos.”¹⁴ Consequently, Beltrán uses a discourse full of macho connotations in a humoristic context with the aim of subverting it, while at the same time orientating women’s quest for identity in a world highly charged with oppressive, patriarchal language. Further on in this chapter, it will be shown how the liberation of the language is necessary to obtain the self-realisation of the woman. This liberation takes place through the reduction and absurdum of the pre-existing models written by a patriarchal society. It is by this means that the patriarchal language, a language created to confine and silence women’s voices, is instead turned by Beltrán into a form of liberation.

The author’s choice of this particular historical referent is deliberate. Machismo was the norm in nineteenth-century Mexican society and any form of feminine intervention in the public arena was rejected. Nevertheless, in Agustín’s case, ironically, women are those who dominate the private and public affairs of the Empire, and those that first predict its downfall. Despite the feminine focus of Beltrán’s novel, *La corte* does not centre on the life of a woman, but rather on that of a male protagonist and an Empire built on the principle of patriarchy. Beltrán offers a

¹² Ibid., 34.

¹³ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

message warning against the dangers of ignoring the importance of women's role in history. In the next section the process of "feminization" or "familiarization" of history will be thoroughly explained. However, feminine discourse is, at the very least, ambiguous in the case of *La corte*. According to Sklodowska, "la intención didáctica de la sátira [...] lleva hacia la desambiguación y nitidez del mensaje, mientras que precisamente la ambigüedad es el principio constitutivo tanto de la ironía como de la parodia."¹⁵ Later on it will be shown how Beltrán's criticism of a society in which women were only a mere decorative element, is not incompatible with the grotesque characterisation of these same women.

Needless to say, no female reader is able to identify with *La corte's* female characters. Beltrán carries out what Sklodowska calls a "parodia satírica como (auto)destrucción grotesca."¹⁶ In this type of parody, the narrative's female subject is reduced to "la categoría de un objeto (su "cosificación") y producen una anulación de su identidad hasta convertirla en un fanteche grotesco."¹⁷ If the principal object of Beltrán's criticism is the patriarchal discourse that has silenced women's self-expression, then everyone that tolerates or colludes in this discourse, both women and men are to be considered. In this sense, Beltrán characterises and mocks all characters equally with the aim of not falling into the dualism of a context of opposing genres in which women are good and men bad. Beltrán demonstrates in *La corte* that the search for female identity and self-affirmation within a patriarchal society is an imperative which is only attainable through feminine self-parody. This self-parody, however, implies a mocking, ridiculing and eventually a direct challenging of predetermined notions of female identity. The final aim is the destruction of the paradigm of woman created by patriarchal society. Thus, *La corte's* ultimate objective is to throw the

¹⁵ Sklodowska, *La parodia*, 52.

¹⁶ Ibid., 146.

¹⁷ Ibid., 148.

spotlight on the absurd control exercised by patriarchal society over the feminine person, while simultaneously recalling that women are an intrinsic element of the system she is criticising.

2.2. The familiarisation of history and the challenge to power

As stated in previous chapters, what appears in books of traditional history consists in the narration of fundamental events of the national past. This history includes great historical figures, such as Iturbide, but leaves aside millions of individuals whose anonymity thus permits this figure stand out in history as a character. Garro in *Recuerdos* was responsible for giving a voice to all those unknown characters that form part of a town's intrahistory, the secondary protagonists of the Cristero Rebellion. In that novel, the town as an anonymous mass created a voice of its own to tell its unfortunate past. In Beltrán's case, the voice is given to the women surrounding Iturbide's government: Ana María Huarte, Nicolasa, Rafaela and Madame Henriette. Hence, *La corte*'s story is told by a third person narrator whose focus of attention jumps mainly from one female character to another. Consequently, a familiarization of and with history is produced through an intimate, subjective and feminine narration.¹⁸

The fact that the plot is focused on Agustín de Iturbide's government, brings with it certain peculiarities in the relationship between the reader and the writer. In the first instance, the history, and legends about the Iturbide's Mexican Empire were forgotten until Timothy E. Anna published his study *The Mexican Empire of Iturbide* (1990). In a survey made in the late 1990s, the majority of Mexicans questioned said

¹⁸ In this context "familiarization" is understood not as the representation of characters or situations known by the reader, but rather as the reconstruction of the story of Iturbide's Empire focusing on his family and his private life.

he was a *caudillo* but did not know he had brought about Independence. In any case, the reader has a preconceived notion of the implications of that historical period and knows broadly what history books relate about it. Bearing this in mind, the author uses the prejudices and previous knowledge that the reader might have about Iturbide's Empire to deconstruct patriarchal discourse and at the same time reconstruct a new history of the Empire from a female point of view. Beltrán is, however, not interested in merely subverting official history, but rather in creating a feminine version of the past. Thus, in contrast to other historical novels, the major events are not the centre of the narration, as these have been covered by historiography. On the contrary, Beltrán focuses on the facts of Iturbide's domestic life. The family life of Iturbide, hitherto largely ignored, is placed centre-stage in *La corte*, where women are the main focus in a national history that had silenced them. In addition, through the presentation of Iturbide surrounded by his family, and not in a public environment, Beltrán resuscitates the man behind the petrified mask created by official history and transports the reader to a real era in the past that has been fossilized by patriarchal official historiography.

This familiarisation and humanisation of the Empire and Iturbide respectively comes about after the incorporation of a feminine point of view in the story. As seen previously, in a book that is largely a caricature, feminine characters perpetuate the roles that have been imposed on them, even as they transgress those very roles. Furthermore, the women in the novel rebel against oppressive values that alienate and marginalize them from public life: Rafaela, through the amorous fantasy, Nicolasa through madness, Ana María through silence and the Güera Rodríguez through sex. Women in *La corte* are not heroines oppressed by patriarchal power but rather they

bow to it, imitating the models prescribed for them by convention, at the same time that they rebel against these stereotypes.

The clearest example of this is the case of Rafaela. Her job as a Camarera Menor in the palace and her condition of widow and cousin of Iturbide turn her into one of the most admirable characters of the novel from the very start. The author always presents her as a patient person, attentive to the needs of others. She is the only person worthy of the Emperor's trust in domestic matters, especially when it comes to looking after Nicolasa, Agustín's elder sister. When Nicolasa gets lost in the city, Agustín asks her to find his sister and, when she finds her crazy cousin, she treats her with tenderness, and even hides the evidence of her thefts. According to Rafaela, with the terrible state things were in the Palace, "no había necesidad de acrecentar el desprecio y las murmuraciones."¹⁹ The reader sympathises with this character who appears to be the only sane person in the Palace of the deluded. Rafaela is presented, as such, as the prototype of the submissive woman in patriarchal society whose intentions are honest and generous. Nevertheless, it gradually becomes clear that this character has a secret, utopic and shameful love for Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, one of the principal opponents to her cousin's government. From the moment she meets with Fray Servando in the Imperial Palace, her dignity begins to disappear and the opinion that the friar is left with after meeting her is that he was "frente a una posesía."²⁰ Hence, the only character that had enjoyed a certain level of moral solidity loses her integrity and is caricaturised. From this moment on, her loyalty to the Imperial family changes and she becomes a traitor within her own family who sacrifices it all for love.

¹⁹ Beltrán, *La corte*, 123.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

In Nicolasa's case, her madness serves to caricaturise the archetypal image of a young, beautiful noblewoman. The title of "princess" that Nicolasa bears, brings with it unconscious connotations of dignity, youth and moral rectitude, qualities which are virtually absent in Nicolasa's character. On the one hand, Nicolasa seems to be unaware of her having been made ridiculous when proclaiming her love for Santa Anna or when she insists on using a dress worthy of a young lady during her brother's coronation ceremony. On the other hand, her degenerating mental state leads her to become a kleptomaniac who takes all types of objects from the aristocratic houses she visits. The image presented to the reader through the figure of Nicolasa –that of a grotesque princess–, serves to destroy the idealised character of the princess of fairytales and romantic novels, an image that has been perpetuated in popular iconography, as well as patriarchal discourse.

The Güera Rodriguez, Iturbide's lover, represents the prototype of the aristocratic woman. She knows perfectly how to act appropriately in society; everyone respects her; and the most important people in Mexican society are regulars at her meetings. However, far from being a virtuous woman the Güera Rodriguez has a dark past, full of adultery and cruelty. According to Ana María, her first husband died of a broken heart upon learning of her infidelity with her confessor, while her second lover was a seventy-year-old man on the verge of death. Iturbide, himself, describes her in the following manner: "[Nunca] había visto un rostro tan perfecto ni tan en desacuerdo con el carácter de su dueña."²¹ Iturbide admits that the hardness and cruelty of her character is not reflected in the sweetness of her face. Consequently, she is another of the women who do not fit the label of "angel of the house" that Bishop of Puebla had spoken of.

²¹ Ibid., 214.

Lastly, Ana María, the Emperor's wife, is the archetype of the resigned spouse and mother. She has eight children with Agustín, worries about domestic issues and sacrifices her life for her husband. Nevertheless, the reader learns early on in the novel that Ana María, rather than being a support to her husband, is viewed as a hindrance. La Güera's strength and her air of being a *femme fatale* contrast with the blandness and the infantile nature of Ana María. Agustín has to deal with her crises and breakdowns and, finally, decides to send her to a convent while he deals with the country's political situation. However, this decision will be proved to be erroneous. The Ana María that returns from the convent is stronger, more mature and has distanced herself from the sweetness that characterised her in the past. The uncontrolled verbosity that characterised her before she entered the convent has been replaced by a deafening silence which, as seen in *Recuerdos*, is one of the elements of female subversion in a patriarchal society. Soon, Agustín realises that his decision to send her to the convent was not the correct one, as Ana María has stopped being the prototype of mother and wife. In sum, what Beltrán does with the female characters is to portray a series of models -examples of womanhood, as it were-, consolidate their existence as key characters in Iturbide's court, and then turn their moral authority into a sarcastic grimace against patriarchal society and its system of power.

With regard to the Iturbide of the novel and his apparent "power" over his women, it is necessary to make some observations. While it is true that the historical Iturbide has been considered as an anti-hero in national history, his character remained a myth susceptible of being demystified. It is important to remember that Iturbide participated in the war of independence against the Spanish, and was the first to enter Mexico City in triumph. Nevertheless, the fact that he created an illusory and unsuccessful court, converted him into the pathetic representative of a bogus court.

Without debunking this vision of the Mexican anti-hero, Beltrán reconstructs him as a family figure surrounded by false friends and women who were those who orchestrated from the shadows and without knowing it, the government of Mexico's first Emperor. In this sense, Beltrán's intention is not to defend or condemn the historical Iturbide but rather to provide the reader with a new version of the Emperor's life: Iturbide as a family man trying to lead a court where carnival has overturned the established order.

An example of the power that the women of the novel exercised from the margins can be seen in the passage about the election of members of the Order of Guadalupe. According to historian Timothy E. Anna, only one noble title had been created following independence in 1821 and this had been that of Marqués de la Cadena, bestowed on the person who held the regency before Iturbide was crowned. Therefore, the notable characters of the Empire who were deserving of a noble title would be rewarded through the privilege of a membership in the Order of Guadalupe.²² Consequently, the election of men who would be honoured with membership of the Order was a task for top ranking and skilled politicians. The irony is filtered by Beltrán in her novel by the fact that the women of the house are given this task. In a meeting with the Bishop of Puebla, the pregnant Ana María has whim: she will decide the first member of the Order, cousin Rafaela the second and Nicolasa the third. If this was not enough, the ultimate insult is dealt when Nicolasa, who is in love with the young brigadier, López de Santa Anna, gives him her vote provoking the anger of her sister-in-law. This passage represents the questioning of the legitimacy of a government whose decisions are taken on the basis of the mood of the women from the royal family. At the same time, the fact that the Emperor's sister

²² Timothy E. Anna, *The Mexican Empire of Iturbide* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press 1990), 83.

constantly falls in love with soldiers who are younger than her contributes to the *esperpéntico* and grotesque character of Iturbide's court. As such, the society portrayed is one in which women are prohibited from commenting on issues of state but, nevertheless, control power from the shadows. The fact that Mexico's first Emperor, one of the main protagonists of the War of Independence, is controlled by his family life and by the women of the house, is, by itself, ironic enough. This irony, however, is reinforced by the degradation of the hero through the use of the grotesque, ridicule and burlesque satire.

In conclusion, historical events are diluted in the mass of details about family life and life in the court, becoming in this way subordinated to the importance of the minor events of daily life. This daily and private life in which the Emperor is represented is related to the family space, traditionally organised and dominated by women. Men rule the country, but women are regents of their houses and it is from this space that the women of Iturbide's life influence decisively the Empire's future. Overall, the idea of male power and women's defencelessness is reversed by Beltrán, who addresses the development of the Empire with Iturbide's everyday life controlled by women. *La corte* offers a portrait of the failure in Iturbide's public and private environment and subordinates the former to the latter. Apparently minor factors determine the fate of the Empire, which crumbles, according to Beltrán's version, due to secondary causes related to the Emperor's private life, such as Rafaela's love, Nicolasa's madness or the amorous relationship between Iturbide and the Güera Rodríguez.

3. STYLISING HISTORY: DIALOGIC DISCOURSE AND INTERTEXTUALITY

Beltrán uses intertextuality to present a dialogue with other books, other disciplines and other eras. Faced with official, monologic and univocal discourse, which focuses its attention on male historical figures, *La corte* offers a feminine response to history, establishing a dialogue with the past, history and the historical novel.

In the first instance, the multitude of sayings and colloquial language transports the reader to the eighteenth century. While all these expressions are taken from the past, the majority still exist today. Therefore, instead of giving the text an exotic tinge, they bring the reader closer to this past as something *that really happened*. At the same time, when the reader appreciates that the language used in those days persists today, an identification of that period as the pre-history of the present is produced –using Lukács’ terminology– and the reader is conscious of the influence of the past on our present. As such, a process of analogy takes place through which the reader learns that present day actions will have repercussions in the future.

In addition, this colloquial language is presented within the context of the family environment. Beltrán’s language is not only a means of expression but rather a tool that serves to debunk patriarchal discourse. Colloquial language is related to family and private life, which are environments traditionally associated with women. While public language follows official protocol and is artificial, private language is spontaneous and natural, as it is used in situations of trust, in which what is said is more important than how it is said. As stated above, Beltrán’s novel is a parody of historiography and the classical historical novel, both genres traditionally dominated by men. Feminine discourse is composed of the familiar and daily language, and

Beltrán uses it for two purposes. On the one hand, it is an attempt to criticise and destroy the patriarchal language that has condemned women to live on the margins of history. On the other hand, Beltrán establishes a dialogue with history and with historical novels, constructing a new feminine language with which to revise received historical accounts of past events.

The interpolation of texts and documentary sources give the novel an aspect of realism. The identification of the novel's referent as something *that really happened* means that the joke is more effective, as the reader easily identifies the parodical lead. For instance, the paratexts that head each chapter are heterogeneous. Beltrán compiles extracts from precepts of etiquette, dance lessons, popular sayings and prayers from books of the era. These paratexts bring an element of truth to the narration which in turn provides the reader with the opportunity to contemplate the real customs of the era. However, its ironic undertone becomes obvious as the novel develops, as the protagonists are far from following these behavioural maxims. For instance, chapter four is introduced by a maxim regarding the preservation of female honour. In contrast, this chapter shows the firm decision made by Nicolasa to support her lover's candidature as a member of the Order of Guadalupe. Thus, these pieces of advice appear to be more like a theatre script for a society that does not know how to behave itself correctly. Despite the characters' attempts to hide their mistakes in society and play up their virtues, the reality is a very different matter.

The spontaneity of the discourse is another demystifying device. The colloquial twists and formulas of treatment of the period not only proliferate in the paratexts, but are also integrated in the discourse itself, giving it an authenticity and the character of a testimony. The first and last chapters in which Madame Henriette is the central focus are a good example of this, as this character's spontaneity when

expressing herself in front of the Emperor and her numerous French formulas make the readers feel they are standing before the Emperor's authentic dressmaker. Madame Henriette's character is key in the novel, as she appears at both the opening and closing chapters. At the same time, by introducing a foreign character, Beltrán opens the door to a comparison of the two Empires and an indirect criticism of Eurocentrism and French chauvinism. In the first place, the superiority which this character possesses represents a criticism of the societies of both Mexico and of France. Iturbide's Empire is a fake Empire for Madame Henriette and it is unworthy of comparison with Napoleon's Empire, which was both genuine and legitimate due to its greatness and military conquests:

La idea parecía un escándalo a quien había seguido muy de cerca la historia de Bonaparte, su compatriota, pero una modista francesa no se contrata para oírla externar sus opiniones sobre política.²³

It is true that Iturbide's bankrupt "Empire" is absurd when compared to the great Empire of Napoleon. Nevertheless, Beltrán destroys Madame Henriette's authority by revealing the chauvinistic features attributed to her being French, and by extension of the entire nation. In the first place, Madame Henriette speaks of Napoleon as "su compatriota" forgetting – perhaps deliberately – that he was Corsican and Corsica only became part of France in 1768, barely a year before Napoleon was born. Also the fact that Napoleon was a self-appointed Emperor who snatched the crown from Pope Pius VII's hands does not appear to unduly bother Madame Henriette when questioning the legitimacy of Iturbide's Empire. In addition, Madame Henriette describes Mexico City as a city where "las calles cambiaban de nombre a su arbitrio,

²³ Beltrán, *La corte*, 10.

la gente no sabía cómo comportarse y poco tenía que hacer una modista francesa en tierra de caníbales.”²⁴ The European version of Mexico City is offered through this character’s eye which, full of prejudice, adheres to the Eurocentric version which associated Europe with all that is civilised and America with the barbaric, while measuring everything in relation to the European canon. The authority and reliability of this character is questioned by introducing doubt about her origins and past. The narrator relates that she “había tenido buen cuidado de no hablar de las verdaderas causas que la hicieron salir de Francia, metida en un barco carguero por casi ochenta y tres días, bebiendo incontables tisanas para el mareo y dándose baños de alcanfor.”²⁵ Lastly, the criticism extends to a society in which European conditions and customs were clearly admired, while the autochthonous values were rejected for being related to the Indians. For instance, Iturbide’s mother hires Madame Henriette as her dressmaker for the simple reason that she is foreign since, for her, “la altanería y el acento francés eran síntoma inequívoco de superioridad y experiencia.”²⁶ This contradiction between the recently acquired independence and the rejection of native values is made explicit when Madame Henriette starts to design the suit that the Emperor will use in the coronation:

Por tanto, puso manos a la obra y comenzó los diseños de unas túnicas aztecas con aplicaciones plumarias que habrían de usarse sobre batas de algodón teñido con cochinilla. Al ver que Madame Henriette estaba decidida a vestir al Emperador de huehuenche, Ana María puso el grito en el cielo.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 8.

²⁷ Ibid., 10

As such, there is a rejection combined with an aping of foreign values. Despite the fact that they are all Mexicans, the creoles and, especially, the aristocracy of *La corte* want nothing to do with the Indians. Nevertheless, this does not signify that they cannot take advantage of this indigenous past to make it theirs, especially when it refers to distinguishing themselves from the *gachupines* and creating a political demagogy. When faced with Ana María's rejection of creating a genuinely Mexican uniform for the coronation, Madame Henriette decides that the only way of creating a true Empire is by copying the dresses used at Napoleon's coronation, an idea that Ana María loves. This represents the first sign of the Empire's hypocritical facade that is about to be formed. The fake Emperors will dress like Bonaparte to provide the authenticity to their own lie.

The discourse of *La corte* is strewn with intertexts from the era portrayed in the novel: journalistic notes from *La Gaceta Imperial*, popular expressions, sayings and critical burlesque poems pitched against the Emperor, serve to reinforce the verisimilitude of the text. At the same time, this strengthens the demystification of the Empire, which is shown as a wholly normal event whose protagonists are common people. When Rafaela is searching for Nicolasa, she finds a poem that someone has written against the government at the Cathedral doors:

Un obispo, presidente,
dos payasos, secretarios,
cien cuervos estrafularios
es la Junta Instituyente.

Tan ruin y villana gente
cierto es que legislarán
a gusto del Gran Sultán,
y un magnífico sermón

será la Constitución
que estos brutos formarán.²⁸

Rafaela picks it up and keeps it. Later on in the novel, she reveals that she is secretly in love with Fray Servando Teresa de Mier and the poem has been written by him. This intertext used by Beltrán is genuine: the poem was written by Mier while he was in jail and Beltrán copies it word for word in her novel.²⁹ The burlesque satirical poem is perfectly integrated in the body of the novel, whose humoristic tone is strengthened by the use of this intertext.

Consequently, Beltrán's novel fosters an intense dialogue with history and the principal source used as a pre-text is Timothy E. Anna's book on Agustín de Iturbide's Empire. According to this author, some of Iturbide's actions were excessive, but he has also been "the victim of a concentrated effort to demonize him in the literature, to dismiss him as the usurper and tyrant, the petty grasper and posturing fraud."³⁰ Official historiography has turned him into a "nonperson." Since Iturbide is such a key element for the development of Mexico as a country, Anna attempts to recover the figure of the ruler, who within a couple of months enjoyed both complete support and experienced absolute rejection from his compatriots. In this sense, both authors, Beltrán and Anna, try to destroy the myth surrounding the figure of Iturbide so as to rescue the man and to shed some light on the events that surrounded the Empire. This task, however, is carried out by both authors from widely differing stances. Needless to say, the intentions of both are different since Anna is writing a historical monograph and Beltrán a novel. Anna wants to clarify *the* truth and Beltrán attempts to offer her version of the truth. From this point on, the focus of

²⁸ Ibid., 107.

²⁹ Anna, *Imperio de Iturbide*, 121.

³⁰ Ibid., x.

both authors diverges. In the first instance, the rapid destruction of Iturbide's government is explained by both authors in markedly different ways. For Anna, Iturbide's Empire soon started to find opponents among people returning to Mexico with new political ideas.³¹ In his book Anna contends that the reasons for Iturbide's failure were not solely due to his own incompetence, but were also the result of external political-economical factors, which contributed to his downfall. In addition, according to *La corte*, Iturbide's Empire had started to disintegrate from the time of the failure of the Emperor's family life and his neglect as a family *paterfamilias*. The references to the state of bankruptcy that the country was in and the relevance of Iturbide's political opponents lies in their being related to Iturbide's private life (like the relationship between Fray Servando and Rafaela or that of Santa Anna and Nicolasa). Consequently, Beltrán focuses primarily on the internal causes of the downfall of the Empire, in contrast to the external causes presented by Anna.

At the same time, Beltrán incorporates and poeticises some of the historical aspects of Iturbide's government picked up by Anna in his book. For example, the carnivalesque condition of Iturbide's coronation is manifested by Beltrán through the portrayal of the ceremony.³² In contrast, Anna refers to the opinions of different witnesses in the following paragraph:

The U.S. consul to Mexico, William Taylor, called the five-hour ceremony a tiresome pantomime, clumsy and tinselled, and Carlos María Bustamante described it as a theatrical farce. Alamán thought the coronation not only did not contribute to the dignity and authority of the new monarch, but actually diminished them.³³

³¹ Ibid., 87.

³² This aspect will be discussed in the next section.

³³ Anna, *Imperio de Iturbide*, 81.

What Beltrán does is to rescue Anna's investigation and give it a new lease of life in such a way that his comments could be applicable to the ceremony described by Beltrán in her novel. It is important to highlight the fact that these interpretations are not incompatible but, rather, complementary. Beltrán is not interested in discussing Iturbide's political life and, consequently, does not reject Anna's interpretation but rather enriches it. Both interpretations, however, confront the official version of the events that presents an Iturbide guided solely by personal interests. Anna offers a documented monograph that rescues Iturbide from oblivion and proposes a new approach to the study of his Empire. Beltrán creates the story of a family, an important one, a family in which the influence of its women provoked the fall of a Empire.

Beltrán deliberately alters history at certain points. For example, Anna states that the sermon at the coronation homily was rendered by Bishop Antonio Joaquín Pérez of Puebla. However, Beltrán denies him this honour in her novel. The falsifying of this historical fact is, in Beltrán's case, deliberate and is related to the caricaturisation of the novel's main characters. The Bishop of Puebla is presented as a false friend of Iturbide. In order to break his authority and legitimacy, Beltrán denies him the privilege of giving the sermon during the coronation. According to Beltrán, the reasons for not allowing him the honour of conducting the ceremony is related to some sheets sent from Rome excommunicating him due to the fact that, according to the Holy City, the Bishop had brought "de Cádiz, a dos jóvenes mozas con quienes vivía y a las que sus padres estaban reclamando."³⁴ The ridicule suffered by the Bishop is carried out from the beginning and there are constant references to his uncontrolled greed and his flattering personality. Beltrán deliberately changes a

³⁴ Beltrán, *La corte*, 57.

historical event with the aim of degrading one of the Empire's key figures even further. At the same time, in previous chapters of this study it has been demonstrated how the deliberate falsifying of historical facts is one of the main features of the new historical narrative of past years. Beltrán transgresses the norms of historical accuracy to the sources as a wink to her/his accomplice, i.e. the reader. At the same time, she takes her stance in the debate about the liberty of literature to recreate past events with complete freedom.

In conclusion, Beltrán uses the space of the novel to create a dialogue about history and the role of women in it. The intertexts, paratexts and pretexts, are used in *La corte* with a demystifying and reconstructive intention of history. Thus, the author attempts to mock the univocal versions of the past in which women played only a secondary role. Without rejecting these previous versions, Beltrán offers her own interpretation, converting the revision of history into a defence of women as the protagonists of history.

4. THEATRICAL EFFECTS AND THE USE OF THE GROTESQUE

The caricaturisation of situations and characters as well as the burlesque satire of *La orte* are conducted in particular through the theatricalisation of novelesque situations and the use of the grotesque. Theatrical devices are used by Beltrán with the aim of satirizing and deflating her targets. The grotesque caricaturisation of characters and situations helps to serve Beltrán's interest in deconstructing the myth of a

barbaric Iturbide created by official history and offering an alternative, carnivalesque version of the first Mexican Empire.

According to Bakhtin, carnivalization is “the determining influence of carnival on literature and more precisely on literary genre.”³⁵ He also states that “the primary carnivalistic act is the *mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king*.”³⁶ In this sense *La corte* constitutes the story of a carnival that lasted a year, a carnival that started with the coronation of a king and ended with his *decrowning* and subsequent execution. This section will show how, in *La corte*, carnival forms are intricately woven into the fabric of history, giving birth to a carnival of history that represents the feminine version against the patriarchal version of the past.

4.1. Performing the Empire: eight months of carnival

In *La corte*, the traumas of the past are demystified and revisited from a humoristic point of view: that of an extremely acid but highly comical take on events. In this sense, the election of Iturbide as the protagonist is no coincidence. With an infamous reputation, Iturbide has traditionally been demonised by official history and branded as an opportunist. Thus, Beltrán does not have to bring any hero down from his pedestal: Iturbide is already an anti-hero, marked as such by national history. History tells how Iturbide abused his power, became Emperor and, due to his weakness, was unable to deal with the country’s problems, a man preoccupied more about the Court’s ostentation than about the Mexicans’ needs. His name has been practically wiped from school books, which prefer to exalt other figures such as Priest Hidalgo, Morelos or Benito Juárez. In this sense, official history depicts a villainous Iturbide who created a fake Empire which led to Mexico’s demise.

³⁵ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky*, 122.

³⁶ Ibid., 124.

Beltrán rebels against this version of history, not to deny it, but rather to offer an alternative, and much more lucid, history: the story of a carnival court, a great theatre set up for and by Mexicans in which the characters themselves ignore the way they are supposed to act. In official history, Iturbide is a villain; in *La corte*, Iturbide is the king of carnival whose unavoidable destiny is to be decrowned at the end of the *carnavalesque* year. He is, in this sense, a victim of his own destiny, a king of carnival whose reign has expired. He cannot get over this fact and he returns to Mexico after his exile in Europe. However, this time Mexicans are not ready for another carnival and he is executed.

In this court, the Emperor and the Empress do not recognise protocol, the women of the court do not know how to behave in society and the advisors do not understand politics. It is not unusual to see that dresses designed for the coronation are a replica of those used in Napoleon's coronation –due to the lack of native models– and that the royal jewels are imitations. Iturbide's court is a false court because it is a court of theatre and its characters are not dames or ministers, but rather stand-ins hired solely for the function. For instance, Ana María's exercise of naming the dames of the court is more similar to a casting session than a distribution of honours. Some of those selected even reject the "honour" with which the Empress rewards them, as is the case of the Güera Rodríguez or Doña Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, "quien había mandado decir que lo sentía muchísimo pero que no pensaba ir a la prueba ni aceptar el cargo de Dama de Honor porque quien era soberana en su casa no podía servir en casa ajena."³⁷ Lacking women of true aristocratic pedigree, worthy of the role of dame of the court, Ana María is obliged to name for the sake of naming. However, neither she nor her dames know the protocol,

³⁷ Beltrán, *La corte*, 24.

nor do they know how to behave in the Palace or what is expected of them. On the day of the coronation, the scene is similar to that of a theatre in which the actors do not know their role and for that reason, “nada decían por temor o discreción o quizá porque ninguna sabía palabra de ceremonial y protocolo.”³⁸

The examples of carnivalization and theatricalisation of Iturbide’s Empire multiply in the novel. For example, Iturbide’s coronation is a farce and is more like a play in the theatre than a real coronation. Nevertheless, the Empire’s authenticity must be maintained at all costs. From a Bakhtinian point of view, the expulsion of the soldiers from the Church, where Iturbide has been crowned, can be interpreted as a last attempt to avoid the carnivalization of the Empire. According to Bakhtin, during carnival, social hierarchies were suspended for a moment and everybody mixed regardless of class differences. When Iturbide is being crowned, soldiers of low rank come into the Cathedral to see the “espectáculo”³⁹ and everybody fears that the event could lose prestige as a result:

El asentista vino corriendo y reclamó al Mayor de Plaza que las hordas estaban desluciendo el evento, lo que hizo que éste fuera con la queja al capitán general, quien a su vez vino a dar la orden a la turba de que todos salieran inmediatamente. Pero al cabo y los soldados mandaron decir que no tenían intenciones de salirse, y que, con todo respeto, se fuera el capitán a su general chingada.⁴⁰

Soldiers demand the right to attend the coronation of Mexico’s first Emperor, the first time *one of their own* has attained ultimate power in Mexico. However, the low ranking soldiers cannot be in the Cathedral for two reasons. Firstly, the equality that

³⁸ Ibid., 57.

³⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 61.

the Trigarante army had promised during the War of Independence was hollow. Creoles did not have anything in common with *mestizos* and even less with Indians: as such the class-based society would be maintained. Don José Ramón Malo explains this in the novel by stating

que en efecto Su Alteza había propuesto que todos serían iguales, pero que esto no quería decir, de ningún modo, que plebe y gente de bien vivirían igual. Lo que el Varón de Dios había promulgado era la promesa de que todos gozarían de los mismos derechos ante la ley, lo que, bien visto, no tenía por qué implicar igualdad ninguna. No en el sentido al que doña Ana aludía.

Secondly, the legitimacy of the coronation is needed by an illegitimate Emperor because his government's aim is not to create an Empire, nor does his court have sufficient grandeur to obtain credibility and real power. In this situation, the coronation's regal dignity is of such importance that grandeur has to be manufactured and, consequently, it is necessary to exclude anyone who could raise doubts about its legitimacy, including the soldiers. The great irony of this sequence is that when the captain is unsuccessful in his attempt to get rid of the soldiers, General Ontibáñez starts throwing some coins outside the Church and the impoverished soldiers flee the Church to fight over the money. An Empire has just been created, but there is no money to pay the soldiers.

The meeting that Iturbide has with his two closest assistants, General Negrete and the Bishop of Puebla is a humoristic parody and a deflating version of a classic government meeting. Bishop Joaquín Pérez is too tired to offer an opinion and his ideas do not contribute to affairs of state. General Negrete himself perceives the unconscious humour and stupidity of the Bishop's comments and cannot hold back a

cackle when the Bishop makes one of his interventions: “Tanta repulsión me causa Don Miguel en lo público como seguramente le provocará a las damas en lo privado, Alteza. Con todo respeto, nunca he visto un hombre más feo.”⁴¹ The Bishop’s ineptitude for anything of a political nature is evident in this passage and the reader begins to understand that Iturbide’s government is doomed to failure, since it is comprised of people of this low calibre. General Negrete perceives the theatrical nature of the scene and finds it strange that protocol demands that he venerates someone he fought alongside in the war of independence and who, until the previous day, was just a friend.

The greatest performance within the novel is given by the Imperial family on the day of coronation. This is related to the carnival category of *eccentricity* that Bakhtin describes as “the violation of the usual and the generally accepted, life drawn out of its usual rut.”⁴² In this sense, Iturbide’s coronation is an *eccentric* one that mocks and subverts the expectations of the reader with regard to the crowning of an Emperor. Flattering aristocrats surrounding Iturbide toast “por el Imperio más glorioso y por el hombre más grande de él, su Emperador,”⁴³ despite the fact that Mexico is not an Empire, but rather a bankrupt nation following years of struggle for independence and its Emperor has no idea of what is expected of him. The jewels that the Imperial Family use on the day of coronation are costume jewellery and are more like theatre props than the relics of an Imperial house. Faced with Joaquinita de Estanillo’s fear that the common people will try to rob some of the Imperial jewels, Rafaela confesses “que todas las insignias juntas no sumaban ni siete mil pesos porque, la mayoría, eran de imitación.”⁴⁴ Joaquinita cannot hide her disappointment

⁴¹ Ibid., 112.

⁴² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky*, 126.

⁴³ Beltrán, *La corte*, 29

⁴⁴ Ibid., 52.

and exclaims “¡Un imperio de pacotilla!,”⁴⁵ putting the readers’ suspicions into words. Later on, during the ceremony, none of the protagonists know the protocol and the comical situations multiply:

Cuando terminó el gradual, el obispo Cabañas hizo como si fuera a dar otra bendición, que en realidad era una seña. Los obispos asistentes la interpretaron a destiempo y condujeron apresuradamente a los soberanos a pie del altar [...] Se hizo un silencio que comenzó a parecer irremediable. La Emperatriz no sabía si era pertinente o no hacer, ella también, una reverencia ante el altar. Comenzaba a inclinarse, cuando el obispo Cabañas la detuvo por el brazo derecho y, como si ésa hubiera sido su primera intención, le ministró la unción sagrada entre el codo y la mano, y la llenó de bendiciones. Los asistentes aplaudieron.⁴⁶

As none of those present have ever been at a coronation ceremony before, they all acclaim the solemnity of the act. However, the reader and the narrator are accomplices in the improvisation of the events. The irony is introduced with a misunderstanding at the end of the ceremony between the Bishop and the Emperor:

El obispo Cabañas [...] se dio cuenta de que Iturbide tenía la corona algo ladeada [...]

-Que no se le caiga la corona, señor Emperador.

-Descuide, señor obispo –respondió el Dragón, creyendo que Cabañas lo decía con mala leche-. Yo cuidaré que no se me caiga.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 64.

The Emperor perceives the Bishop's comment to be sarcastic when it is not. However, the reader receives it as an anticipation of what is to come and an indication of the speed at which Iturbide will lose his crown and his prestige.

Lastly, the fact that Madame Henriette *acts* only at the beginning and at the end of the novel is a device that affects the structure of *La corte*. On the one hand, through this device, Beltrán extends the line of novels with a circular structure, so common in the second half of the twentieth century in Latin America. The novel opens and closes in the same way, coming full circle and creating the feeling of the greater cyclical repetition of the past. In this sense, the implicit message that the reader receives is how nonsensical was all the cruelty that the Empire brought – including the final execution of the Emperor himself. Nothing has changed, so all that occurred in the novel could have been omitted. However, within the theatricalisation process that Beltrán conducts, a second interpretation of this circular structure can be made. The fact that the novel opens and closes with Madame Henriette's character contributes to the theatrical character of the novel. The character of the narrator in a theatre play tends to be the person in charge of introducing and concluding the representation. It is this character on the margins of the story that usually knows what will happen and is the link between the spectator and the action developing on the stage. Normally, the narrator starts by introducing a series of relevant points about the context of the story to the audience and, at the end of the play, will sometimes make some form of moral reflection. On other occasions, the narrator warns the audience about the dangers of certain conduct, anticipating what is to come in the play. In the case of plays about aristocratic families, the narrator is, frequently, a person close to the family, often a maid or a butler. Applying all of these conventions to *La corte*, Madame Henriette's character carries out the same function in the novel

as the narrator in a play. This method used by Beltrán serves to give the text a theatrical shape that reinforces the reader's sense of watching a play when faced with a carnivalesque court whose protagonists have no life outside the character they represent.

Beltrán thus moulds theatre, novel and history in her book to create a carnival court in which the protagonists attempt to follow their roles in the most natural way possible. Challenging a petrified, unchangeable past, created by official history, Beltrán offers a version of history that changes even as it is being represented: each character seems to make up their role as they go along. When faced with the historic image of a barbaric Iturbide of official history, Beltrán presents an *esperpéntico*, carnivalesque and caricaturised Iturbide presiding over a court of carnival where women are the *makers* of the story.

4.2. The grotesque and the distortion of official history

The use of the grotesque is exploited in such a way in *La corte* that it becomes one of the principal factors for the demolition of official history and its pre-established values. Following Bakhtin's ideas on the carnival and the grotesque, there are some elements traditionally used in the "system of grotesque images" that are immediately identifiable within *La corte*: "copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment."⁴⁸

For instance, Ana María is pregnant throughout most of the novel and the reader is aware of her constant state of pregnancy. She is the prototype of the mother whose only mission in life is to give birth: "La Emperatriz estaba encinta desde que él

⁴⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 25.

tenía memoria, siete hijos en tan poco tiempo y ya el octavo venía en camino.”⁴⁹ The burlesque irony arises when it is discovered that the reason for this prodigious fertility is due to the Emperor’s nocturnal activities:

De todos era conocido el hecho de que su Alteza Serenísima era todo lo contrario del título que pronto portaría. De ningún modo era alto; mucho menos sereno. Dormía mal y a sobresaltos, y si alguien entraba en su habitación, así lo hiciera sin emitir sonido alguno, el Dragón se sentaba en la cama de un salto y preguntaba, alarmado: «¿Hay novedad?» [...] La mujer del Generalísimo se acicalaba un poco, guardando bien de componerse el moño, de aflojar un tanto el escote y, contoneándose como una pava suculenta, se acercaba a responder a su marido que no había más novedad que ella.⁵⁰

The references to sex in this passage are very clear; the description of the characters’ behaviour serves to caricaturise, in a grotesque manner, the intimate relationship between the Emperor and his wife.

With regard to the physical descriptions of the characters, references to old age and obesity are frequent. Nicolasa is described as “elefantiásica” and the references to her old age contrast with her *penchant* for young soldiers such as Santa Anna. Her physical aspect, her old age and her sexual appetite convert her into the novel’s most grotesque character. At the same time, her madness can be identified as a “disintegration of the mind,” that serves to underline this character’s grotesque nature. In Iturbide’s case, when he is trying on the coronation robes, Madame Henriette is aware of “la gallardía perdida a causa del sobrepeso. Por más que quisiera conservar la elegancia de sus años mozos, a ella el pecho de Agustín le recordaba el

⁴⁹ Beltrán, *La corte*, 38.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 37-38.

de una codorniz digna de las mesas más exigentes.”⁵¹ Needless to say, Ana María’s continual state of pregnancy has the effect of constantly distorting her natural body shape.

However, the use of the grotesque in the novel is a calculated act. The choice of this negative characterising of the nation’s history is deliberate. Iturbide’s court was sufficiently grotesque on its own. It was a court confronted with a bankrupt Empire whose independence had just been declared, and whose nobility was based not on family tradition but, rather, on the luck of the *arriviste*. The caricaturesque deformations and the pitiless mockery extends itself to all of the novel’s characters. Nevertheless, the ambiguities of the historical Iturbide and his Empire are obvious in the novel. Even though the Empire was a disaster, the Emperor and his family went into exile with the cheers of the exalting masses still ringing in their ears. Furthermore, while some condemned his performance, other eulogised his bravery. Anna highlights that when the Imperial family left for exile, the people still supported Iturbide, and there were mass confrontations between the masses and the “liberating army” that opposed him.⁵² In a discussion of the grotesque in Valle-Inclán’s novel and his character Max Estrella, Diane M. Almeida states that the modern hero is not a tragic hero, but rather a grotesque version of the heroes in Greek, Shakespearean or Golden Age tragedies.⁵³ Iturbide, in *La corte*, is presented as a grotesque hero. His evil nature -if malign at all- is not so extreme as to turn him into a *bête-noire*. Nevertheless, the reader does not mourn his death at the end of the novel. Rather, his actions are so ridiculous and absurd that it is not surprising that his Empire lasted for such a short time. According to Almeida, “the potentially heroic modern poet is

⁵¹ Ibid., 17.

⁵² Anna, *Imperio de Iturbide*, 200.

⁵³ Diane M. Almeida, *The Esperpento Tradition in the Works of Ramón del Valle-Inclán and Luis Buñuel* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 2000), 7.

ineluctably metamorphosed by his infernal surroundings and thus may only be rendered as a malformed and preposterous travesty of the classical archetype.”⁵⁴ This is what happens to Iturbide in *La corte*: in an Empire that does not exist, its leader can only be a false Emperor, and in a grotesque court in which the man of the house is unable to establish order in family concern, its patriarch is nothing more than a grotesque caricature of the great figure at the helm of a great Empire.

A clear example of the lack of authority of the patriarchal figure represented by Iturbide, is his relationship with the Güera Rodríguez. There are three scenes in the book which refer directly to the relationship between the two characters. The first is when Iturbide decides to change the itinerary of the parade after the coronation to pass by his lover’s house so she can see him in his new uniform. In the second, Iturbide remembers how he met his lover and the immediate fascination that he experienced towards her. Lastly, when Iturbide leaves Ana María in the convent, he goes to the Güera’s house but she is “unavailable” and does not open the door to him. The conclusion that the reader makes from these scenes is that Iturbide is head-over-heels in love with her, but it is an unrequited love. The only references to the Güera in the novel are negative –with the exception of some references to her extreme beauty– and the only time that she contacts Iturbide directly is to ask him for money. Beltrán makes a contrast, as such, between the Güera’s personality and Iturbide’s weakness. The absurdity of the hero reaches its lowest point when, after having left his wife in the convent while his Empire is collapsing, he waits in vain at the Güera’s door for someone to open it for him, which never happens. When his Empire begins to crumble, the Güera loses interest in her lover. Iturbide’s patriarchal figure that brings

⁵⁴ Ibid.

with it a double authority since he is the head of the family, as well as the leader of the country, is left completely discredited, foreshadowing the collapse of his Empire.

As stated above, Beltrán's grotesque caricaturisation does not exclude women and the description of some of their excessive physical characteristics and personalities are a good example of this. In some ways, the grotesque caricaturisation of these characters is intimately related to their lack of identity. For Mary Russo, the carnival and grotesque female body are closely interrelated, since "the carnivalesque has translocated the issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess, to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system."⁵⁵ Carnival has been of interest in recent feminist approaches to literature, not only as an act of resistance but also as an insurgency, as "the masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society."⁵⁶ In this case, patriarchal discourse and the history created by and for man is the "high culture" that is being challenged.

The paradigm of the carnival is applied in Nicolasa's character which, at the same time, is the only genuine character in the novel. This could be due to her madness and the relationship that madness conventionally has with truth. The embodiment of carnival takes place, in the novel, through this female character who has a grotesque female body and works as a destabilizing device. The grotesqueness of the character is related to both her physical aspect –old and obese- and her actions –motivated by her insanity-. Nicolasa is an old madwoman who dreams of having a young lover. Beltrán represents her first encounter with Santa Anna as such:

⁵⁵ Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist studies/Critical studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 214.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

El brigadier observaba atentamente el bigote del padre del Dragón, confeccionado con un manojo de pelo más grueso que el de la coronilla, cuando oyó una risita. Era Nicolasa, la anciana Princesa de Iturbide. Santa Anna hizo una profunda reverencia: se ponía a sus pies. Nicolasa sonrió y el brigadier pudo observar el pozo oscuro de la boca sin dientes. Ella lo invitó a tomar asiento. Quizá podrían conversar un poco, antes de que bajara Agustín. El brigadier tomó la iniciativa.⁵⁷

The passage is a parody of the first encounter of two future lovers in classic novels. A brigadier and a Princess find one and other, fall in love and hide their love for fear that the Princess' brother, Emperor of the kingdom, opposes it. However, the grotesque element is introduced by means of Nicolasa's age. Her madness leads her to live a dream about youth, but the reality is very different. The comic effect, that Beltrán seeks, is attained through the understanding that exists between the author and the reader, who are witnesses to both Santa Anna's social climbing and Nicolasa's madness.

The carnivalisation and the grotesque portrayal of these women support the author's attempts to find a genuine identity for them. In a macho world where women can only adopt a secondary role, their personalities can be nothing but grotesque. If they cannot be true women, at least they can be carnival women, crazy women, rebels who, finally, control the Empire's destiny. Ana María understands that women's options are limited and says to Nicolasa:

Hace tiempo que dejé de juzgarte [...] En el fondo siempre te comprendí [...] nunca hice porque lo supieras y ¡me he arrepentido tanto, tanto...! [...] La locura es el único lugar soportable de esta tierra.

⁵⁷ Beltrán, *La corte*, 53.

Ana María realises that the world cannot be changed. Women, as a social group defined by gender, will only survive if they are united, and the only escape and form of rebellion against the rules of patriarchal society is to be found through madness.

The grotesque is therefore used by Beltrán as a weapon to weaken the patriarchal figure and as a tool in questioning the pre-established roles in a male-dominated society.

5. CONCLUSION

From the point of view of feminist criticism, *La corte* signifies the reclaiming of a genre traditionally dominated by and addressed to men. The main aim of this act of reclaiming is to create a space for women within a predominantly male microcosm. Burlesque parody, intertextuality and the deliberate falsifying of history serve to challenge a discourse traditionally employed by men whose subject of narration has been other males. In *La corte*, the hero, the masculine patriarchal figure, a symbol of maleness and Mexican pride, is demystified and converted into a human being with human feelings and frailties. The use throughout the novel of colloquial language and the accumulation of intertexts from the period, serve to strengthen this demystifying effect and to portray Iturbide as a man of flesh and blood that has just been crowned “king of carnival.”

The vision that Beltrán offers of Iturbide’s court represents a ludic approach that challenges the patriarchal version of the past by creating a carnivalesque parody of history. Beltrán proposes that Iturbide’s Empire was a carnivalesque Empire, a

performing court run by grotesque characters that did not learn their roles for the opening day. Taking this version of history, the author wants to subvert the petrified version of a demonised and barbaric Iturbide created by official historiography and, instead, to offer a more humoristic, feminine, and absurd version of the past. In this sense, Beltrán believes in the cathartic power of laughter and offers irony and sarcasm as weapons to fight patriarchal discourse.

In sum, the combination of techniques employed by the authors whose works we have examined in previous chapters, are all found in this novel, but as part of a radically different approach to that taken by the traditional historical novel. The search for a female identity is one of Beltrán's preoccupations; but humour, playfulness and entertainment are also key in a novel belonging to a period of social disenchantment. In this context, *La corte* offers an example of how to overcome historical traumas by means of humour and self-criticism, without, of course, forgetting that the negation of one's own identity can be the gravest of mistakes in the creation of a national past.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has shown that the role of history in the recent Mexican novel is ultimately concerned with the origins, foundations, traumas, growth and nature of Mexican identity. To illustrate this, the authors under consideration offer us different solutions to the problem of reconstructing historical events. These authors subvert and challenge the premises that had previously been considered “untouchable,” such as the univocal concept of truth about the past offered by official history or the traditional – and sometimes quite predictable– structure of the historical novel modelled by Scott.

While the preoccupations of one writer differ from those of another, and the differences between generations are evident in the use of diverse approaches to historical materials, the search for identity and the attempt to understand the Mexican psyche are found in all the novels covered in this study. With this aim, the Mexican novel has tried from the beginning to search for a personal form of expression, particular to the countries of the new continent, which is nothing less than a means of expressing the nation’s identity. Taking their cue from magical realism, Latin American authors found their language, a language peculiarly suited to Latin America: a baroque language that could express the realities of these countries, and that was not simply an attempt to imitate European models. With writers such as Juan Rulfo, Gabriel García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, Augusto Roa Bastos or Juan Carlos Onetti, Hispanic America showed the world that it had its own literary language, and that this language had been instrumental in forming an autonomous literary identity. However, with the advent of postmodernism came an exhaustion and crisis of the values of modernity and,

with it, the conclusion that perhaps it was not possible to speak of modernity in Latin America at all. The doubt surrounding the meaning of reality, the necessity to discover a common past that defined everyone as members of a nation and the awareness of the deliberate falsification of history by governments and leaders, led writers to revisit a genre that, while carrying the baggage of the historical novel of the nineteenth century, was nonetheless a world away in its aims and assumptions from its predecessor.

The novel has always been linked with the need of the individual to express him/herself within a social context. The absence of this tends to be associated with some type of repression. The development of the novel has a tendency to come about through an act of narrative rebellion against the suffocating constraints that have periodically been imposed on freedom of speech. In this context, the rise of the historical novel in Mexico gathers momentum after the significant date of 1968 and the infamous killing of students that took place on the 2nd of October in Tlatelolco square. Prior to this, the historical novel was written in a traditional style and its preoccupations had a social and indianist orientation. In *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963), social disenchantment coloured a novel in which magic and imagination are presented as the only escape. From 1968 onwards, however, the historical novel underwent a seismic change. The questioning of official historiography along with the disillusionment of a society which believed that the era of poverty had been left behind, were both fused with the postmodernist currents flooding the culture. The historical novel became a strategic cultural weapon in the undermining of the concept of history as an unquestionable discipline. The genre not only sought to criticise the concept of absolute truth, but also threw into doubt the positivist dream of human beings coming, one day, to know fully the reality that surrounds them.

The first historical novels of a postmodern character have a consciously experimental form, as in the case of *Terra Nostra* (1975), while more traditional techniques and less elaborate styles are developed over time, as writers seek to appeal a broader public. *Terra Nostra* is one of the first historical novels whose questioning of official history is so extreme that it sometimes complicates its categorisation within the historical novel group. The historical facts on which it is based –the reign of Philip II, the discovery of America, the Mexican conquest– are deliberately distorted by the author. His objective is not to offer a loyal reconstruction of history but rather to put in doubt the existence of historiography as an absolute discipline. In a novel written ten years later as it is *Noticias del Imperio* (1985) the radical initial epistemological doubt of postmodernism subsides and gives way to a more conciliatory attitude between history and the novel. Del Paso is attached to the postmodernist thinking and, as such, rejects the possibility of encapsulating reality in a book and reducing the world to words. However, Del Paso does not adopt a confrontational posture in which history and literature become two rivals in the task of reconstructing the past. Rather, Del Paso as a novelist takes advantages of the benefits of both, without forgetting the limits of a book which discusses past events from a fictional perspective. Del Paso reminds the reader that the novel will always be richer since it also covers the possible versions that never took place. However, the author undertakes an exhaustive research of the historical sources in an attempt to present an accurate portrayal of the Empire of Maximilian and Charlotte of Hapsburg.

Lastly, the most recent novelists have become aware that the days of formal experimentation have passed, and they have begun to focus on making their message accessible to a wider audience, one more familiar with the conventions of popular literature and other media than with narrowly highbrow art forms. Without forgetting

questions of style, *La lejanía del tesoro* (1992) and *La corte de los ilusos* (1995) offer versions of history that, while assuming the extensive plurality of reality, suspend this fact to offer an engaging reading that at the same time reaches as many readers as possible. Their gaze towards history is deeply ironic and treats reality as a series of coincidences that should not be disregarded simply because they are due to random contingencies. As such, Taibo presents the ease in which history can be manipulated up to the point of changing a country's route. Taibo attributes many of the historical events, which determine the future of a country, to chance. Nevertheless, these chances, despite being the determining factors of history, are not frequently recounted by history books. Thus, the historical novel is more capable of presenting an arbitrary overview of historical events, frequently covering its casual character and its banality. However, Taibo also advocates a combination of the two disciplines when reconstructing the past and recommends historiography books to those who wish to approach history from an academic point of view. *La corte de los ilusos*, develops the action from a different point of view. Rosa Beltrán takes *history* and converts it into *herstory*, approaching the historical past from a feminine point of view. Her treatment of history proposes using humour as a weapon to underline the errors of the past, offering them to the reader from the *other* point of view and trying to avoid them in the future. Thus, the message common to these historical novels concerns the danger of forgetting the past while repeating its errors or even suppressing the future, since a nation without history can find itself culturally and psychologically disoriented.

After studying the phenomenon of the Mexican historical novel of the second half of the twentieth century, we find the following comment by Borges' famous character Pierre Menard about *Don Quixote* seems highly appropriate: "El texto de Cervantes y el de Menard son verbalmente idénticos, pero el segundo es casi

infinitamente más rico. (Más ambiguo, dirán sus detractores; pero la ambigüedad es una riqueza.)”¹ The novelists that this study has covered are re-writers of history and their principal distinctive hallmark is ambiguity. At first glance, nothing could appear to be more contradictory than the concept of ambiguity applied to a book about history. History, attempts to untangle the chaos of past events to give them meaning, a coherent interpretation and a comprehensible configuration acceptable to the human mind. Men are thus capable of creating a rational account of what happened in ages past. The novel, and especially the recent historical novel, however, is frequently, the space in which the plurality of voices, meanings and readings can be found, thus creating a product that is essentially ambiguous. Hence, these novels engage in a dialogue with official history and with some historical novels. The Manichean view found within official books of history and some traditional novels is challenged by the recent historical novel whose dialogic nature lies in the fact that it presents different versions and perspectives while questioning them all. When history and imagination meet to inform a historical novel, the novelist takes this ambiguous history and turns it into plurality. The actions of unpredictable characters, and events that occur at random, as well as the narrative smiles, winks and self-hugging satisfaction of the author, fill the novel with challenging nuances and bring the work to life. This need to capture every nuance has, consequently, implications for the nature of the historical novel. The historical novel as a genre seeks to push its own boundaries to such an extent that it starts to take over some tasks associated with other literary genres, as well as non-literary disciplines such as history, art, or cinema. The novel ramifies outwards uncontrollably, covering everything in an attempt to capture a reality that simultaneously slips through its fingers. To this end, it adopts techniques and strategies from theatre, cinema, and

¹ Borges, “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote,” in *Narraciones*, 93-94.

poetry. It cannibalises parts of any discipline, demonstrating that the novel is not a solipsistic genre and, much less so, the historical novel. The conjunction of these two features, ambiguity and hybridism, is what defines the recent historical novel in Mexico.

As has been demonstrated throughout this thesis the role of history in the Mexican historical novel is not principally that of recreating a historical period as accurately as possible. While there are authors that have a narrowly didactic intention in mind when they write a historical novel, there are others for whom the historical novel is nothing less than an alternative way of understanding the human condition. The process of writing a historical novel is more similar to starting on a journey towards the self-understanding of the Mexican subject than to the search for an approximate historical account of a set-piece event in national history. The understanding of history is perceived by the authors covered in this study as key to the self-discovery of the Mexican people and the explanation for their being. The centrality of this quest to Mexican culture and society explains why authors have preferred the historical novel over other narrative subgenres. History a pretext for something much bigger: the resolution of the problem of Mexican identity. Given the background of the philosophy of *lo mexicano* of the first half of the twentieth century, different historians, critics and philosophers have for many years tried to find the answer to this question. However, the fruit of this intellectual labour proved too partial or too vague. The notion of the *mestizo* as a symbol of the Mexican race remained just that: a symbol that did not explain what it really means to be Mexican. 'Mexican' does not refer to a race, and much less something that can be categorized within the limits of a single word, despite the many and various shades of meaning that this word may have. In addition, fiction has, from its very beginning, been nothing less than the search for an identity in an imaginary or wish-fulfilling context, but always one that is applicable universally. In Mexico, the

return to history was necessary but, this time, from a fictional stance that is not limited by the constraints of the discourse. It is a commonplace that the study of history contains the key to understanding the present. Once it has been demonstrated that Mexican identity is only partially explained by theoretical studies, it is then necessary that fiction adds its point of view and contributes its power to evoke possible worlds. It may be that by inventing the past, Mexicans will remember a positive future in which recurrent mistakes are not repeated.

The great development of the recent historical novel in Mexico has been driven by the debate about national identity. However, it is also part of a unique literary and cultural phenomenon that has taken place in Latin America. The historical novel exists in all parts of the world and it has existed in some form or other at all times. However, the enormous proliferation of this genre in Latin America is a phenomenon peculiar to the region, due to the special relationship that the countries of Latin America have with history. In this sense, processes of democratisation and globalisation are two major trends that have affected the region in the last fifty years. With the world becoming more and more aware of the cultural and historical backgrounds of far-away countries, the creation of our own culture becomes one of the main preoccupations of contemporary societies. With globalisation, Latin American countries rebel against the risk of losing their national identities under the pressure of other cultures such as that imported from the United States. Thus, these countries revisit a history in order to reinforce their unique identity in an attempt to preserve their culture. In a parallel way, the progressive democratisation experienced by the region has facilitated the creation of an environment in which writers feel that they can engage in a dialogue with their history without the pressure of any censorship. The models of the recent historical novel in Mexico are applicable in a generalized form to the historical novels published in

other Latin American countries. The term “in a generalized form” is employed deliberately since it is precisely the historical-social differences what drive the Mexicans to try and understand their history, and the Chileans to find answers in the events of their more immediate reality. The proliferation of the historical novel is especially significant in the case of Argentina where, due to its bankrupt economy, it has seen the cultural panorama of its country enriched with an endless number of historical novels. These novels are, in a certain manner, a means of expressing the grave problems affecting the country. At the other extreme, in Central American countries the cultivation of the novelesque sub-genre is much more restricted. Nevertheless, the existence of a new historical novel on a global scale in Latin America, as classified by Seymour Menton, and a movement on a continental scale is undeniable. After all, America’s history begins with the trauma of the conquest. This trauma and the self-consciousness of being a new continent have made the proliferation of the historical novel in these countries even more potent. However, the primary impulse behind the historical novel in Latin America appears to be finding a way of confronting official versions of history that deny a common past of repression, lies and reprisals. Rebelling against the manipulation exercised by official history, writers offer the revelation of the non-official history, the version of those who never had a voice in history. Against historiography’s one-dimensional viewpoint, literature recovers the common chorus of the voices of history. Against the absolute and static truth of the past, the historical novel advocates a heterogeneous re-reading of the past, and asserts that an understanding of the past from multiple points of view is essential in a search for a genuine future.

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