

## AMERICAN HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION AND EUROPEAN TRADITION: THE CASE OF MARLOWE'S *THE MEMOIRS OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS*\*

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Traditionally history and the novel have been running along parallel paths, a fact that has usually happened out of sheer necessity because historical research commonly manifested itself in *narrative* historiography and novels frequently presented stories that took place in settings –and times– that can be qualified as being «historical.» Despite the emphasis traditional historiographers put on the *fictional* component of the novel to differentiate it from their own more *faithful* reports of past events, in later years contemporary critics have been highlighting more the coincidences than the differences between these two cultural manifestations (*cf.* LaCapra 1985: 115-34), a shift that somehow has also coincided with a revival of historical issues in novels written in the 1980s in many parts of the Western world. In a survey of the Italian fiction published in this recent period, Michael Caesar points out the importance that history has again acquired in the fiction of his country and offers as proof of it well-known titles such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1983) or Roberto Pazzi's *La Principessa e il drago* (1986). But Caesar also affirms that in this new revival of historical fiction «the reader is not allowed to take the authenticity and authority of the historical material for granted» (1991: 85), a feature that somehow seems to contrast with the older historical novel. As the reader may know, similar characteristics also appear in the contemporary Spanish novel. To such a

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degree Spanish readers seem to be interested in historical issues that even the powerful publishing house Editorial Planeta started some years ago a series entitled «Memoria de la Historia» where, as happens in the case of Italy, the historical material cannot be taken for granted: what seems to be peculiar in the stories published so far in this series is the fact that many of them are accounts of the lives of famous historical personages with their own –newly invented– voices narrating their old deeds and glories, a characteristic of overt fictionality dealing with historical issues that may also be recognized in other best-selling contemporary novels ranging from Torrente Ballester's *El Rey Pasmado* (1989) to Pérez-Reverte's *La Tabla de Flandes* (1990) or *El Club Dumas* (1993).<sup>1</sup>

This peculiar combination of fiction and historicist research can also be recognized in recent British novels, especially since the 1980s. Cases such as Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985), Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (1989), or Lawrence Durrell's *The Avignon Quintet* (1974-85) have become the center of attention also among Spanish critics (Onega 1992, Plo 1992) precisely because these novels overtly expose this mixture of fictionality and historicity above mentioned, a combination usually enhanced by narratorial self-consciousness that had already been perceived by Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), where she used the by now well-known phrase of «historiographic metafiction» to refer to a group of popular, recent «novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages» (Hutcheon 1988: 5). Already in this book Hutcheon suggested the poststructuralist underpinnings existing in this particular type of novels, being «narrative representation» her key notion to understand not only the similarities existing between the novel and historiography but also the means to undermine the impression of authenticity apparent in *scientific* historiographic analysis. One year later, in *The Politics of Postmodernism* Hutcheon extended her study to other postmodernist manifestations but insisting again on the socially subversive capacity that seems to exist in the books that she has qualified as «historiographic metafiction.»

In our contemporary society there is a cultural tension –Hutcheon suggests in *The Politics of Postmodernism*– between traditional humanist values and the most recent theories of cultural analysis,

The equivalent on the literary scene has been the hostile response of some critics to the mixing of historical and fictive representation in historiographic metafiction. It is not that the fact of the mixing is new: the historical novel, not to mention the epic, should have habituated readers to that. The problem seems to reside in its manner, in the self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of the familiar pretense of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing. The self-reflexivity of postmodern fiction does indeed foreground many of the usually unacknowledged and naturalized implications of narrative representation. (1989: 35)

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1. I have dealt with this issue in more detail in Collado 1997 and 1998.

In 1991, being already a well-established critic, Hutcheon furthered her analysis on this type of fictional narrative that calls into question «the factual grounding of history-writing» reaffirming its –intentional or unintentional?– attack on humanist values and its foregrounding of the ideological component that mediates all human discursive practices. However, this time –paranoia or textual mistake?– she extended her concept of «historiographic metafiction» to virtually all postmodern fiction (1991: 106).

Certainly, historical issues were becoming important in some of the fictions written in English if we are to believe Hutcheon, and certainly she was not alone when affirming the important role played by ideology in contemporary historiographic studies. It is already a well-known fact that the 1960s signaled a profound disrespect for the dominant capitalist values of the time, a disrespect that became clearly manifested in a number of remarkable events such as the university revolts in the USA, especially in Berkeley, or in similar revolts in France, and in the hippies' movement. But the 1960s also signaled the beginning of poststructuralist theories that soon either *suggested* the ideological as inseparable from all discursive human practices (Berger and Luckmann 1966) or *clearly* pointed it out (Derrida 1967a, 1967b). Their theoretical notions originated within a social context characterized by the attack against traditional ideological values or, more specifically, against the existent master narratives that have controlled our perception and understanding of reality for several hundred years (see Lyotard 1984). This cultural revolution, currently manifested in the gradual importance of class, gender, and race issues, also came to the grounds of historiography even if its arrival was not so quick as one could have expected.

Following the radical observations of young Derrida, which he presented to the American public in the Johns Hopkins symposium «The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man» (October 1966), came the development of American Deconstruction and the progressive collapse of Structuralism with the subsequent emergence of a post-structuralist assault on traditional discursive manifestations. However, in the first deconstructive studies (perhaps best represented in the activities of the Yale School of Criticism) «History» was still deferred as an object of analysis. The first deconstructive critics did not pay much attention to the historical referent, but a few years later an early metahistorical criticism began, at last, to be produced. Historians and cultural critics like Hayden White gradually became aware that even the historiographer is trapped inside his or her own discourse, unable to achieve unmediated contact with an objective historical referent. With no transcending master code for the writing of history, the historian also becomes a metahistorian, a writer about writing; and narrative discourse, White affirms,

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. (1987: ix)

What follows soon after White's first metahistorical criticism (1980) is a necessary distrust of traditional historiography. Even a scholar like Michael Ryan (1982) soon focuses upon the destabilizing play of class differences that he finds in Marx's historical theory, and designs a model for a committed criticism dedicated, as J. Fisher Solomon comments, «to the constant undermining of political and textual authority in the name of différance itself» (1988: 15). Deconstruction (but also Lacanian thought, as shown in the above quote from White) becomes then, in the hands of some critics, socio-politically committed; no matter on which side one is, the human being cannot escape discourse or so it seems to be implied by the American New Historians,<sup>2</sup> whose main concern still appears to be the redefinition of the canon while questioning the values implied in traditional discourse.

Contemporary American criticism of traditional historiography, as stated above, seems to be very effective, but can we say the same of the US fiction written in the 1980s and early 1990s? Is there such a thing at the time that we may qualify as an US postmodernist historical novel –or historiographic metafiction– that parallels the results of recent historiographic criticism and of its European literary counterpart? The first impression one may have when consulting critical books on the subject may be a little disappointing. Contrary to Hutcheon's –perhaps– overstating arguments on the importance of history in the recent American novel (1991), critics like David Seed (1991), Tony Hilfer (1992), or even Malcolm Bradbury in his new edition of *The Modern American Novel* (1992) pay no attention whatsoever to a possible relationship between history and the novel. But this first impression will soon be dispelled when one considers some other essays on contemporary American fiction such as Heinz Ickstadt's «Plotting to What End? Doctorow, Coover, and the Invention of History» (1991) or Molly Hite's contribution to *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (1991), where she asserts the existence of American novels that are at the center of the postmodern canon but that are also fundamentally concerned «with the construction of recent American history and ideology» (1991: 699). Hite cites as examples of this type of postmodernist and historical fiction Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Coover's *The Public Burning*, DeLillo's *Libra*, and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: clearly she sees the necessity to take for granted the –radical– metafictional quality of this kind of fiction before labeling it as «postmodernist,» an aspect that also seems to preoccupy other critics who, nevertheless, also suggest the possibility of a «postmodernist realism» (Ickstadt 1988: 108-9), an option that in any case would clarify the status of some contemporary historical novels such as

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2. The boundaries between White's Metahistory, the kind of historical criticism practiced by some other critics like Dominick LaCapra (1985, 1987), and the New Historians' methods are not precisely clear-cut, as all of them rely on deconstruction and other poststructural methods of criticism. Compare Giles Gunn's definition of the New Historicism with the above-mentioned views: The New Historicism is an attempt «to unmask ideological factors that have influenced the shaping of the canon, to deconstruct the idealized oppositions between innocence and experience, machine and garden, civilization and wilderness, or novel and romance by which the canon has been established and defended, and to resituate texts in the sociopolitical and economic sites of their creation and reception.» (1992: 163)

Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* or *Ragtime*, or Kennedy's *Legs*, books that look like «postmodernist» even if their technical experimentation is not so overt as, let us say, the kind of metafiction one may find in novels written by Barth or Sorrentino. I must confess that in this dialectical argument I prefer to side with the ones who define postmodern fiction more for its coincidences with poststructuralist thinking (Pfister 1989, Hutcheon 1991) than for the deployment of a set of experimental devices that can also be frequently found in modernist texts.

As we considered above, whereas some contemporary critics enhance the relationship between fiction and history in the present moment, some others simply ignore such link. But even if we affirm the importance of this relationship and argue that many contemporary American novels refer to the necessity of deconstructing traditional historiographic views, we cannot escape the fact that most American novels of this kind refer to a historical past that is still very close to our own time. In other words, the postmodernist –therefore, in a sense, poststructuralist– historical novel in the USA seems to differ, in this respect, from the European type of historiographic metafiction that I mentioned earlier: *The Name of the Rose* takes place in the Middle Ages, *La Tabla de Flandes* refers to some events that took place in the fifteenth century, whereas part of the narrative in *Hawksmoor* is set in eighteenth century London. Why that particular difference between the fictional historical works being written in both sides of the ocean? The answer does not easily come to mind: it could be suggested, as the critic John Brown already did many years ago (1956), that the American tense is, *par excellence*, the present; or that Americans do not have much history behind, contrary to what happens in the old European countries and therefore, although they are ready to use classical themes as, for instance, the story of *The Last of the Mohicans* in a film remake, they will not use it in a new parodic novel... whatever the reason the fact remains that fiction in the USA –at least *canonical* fiction– does not frequently feature the kind of historiographic metafiction rooted in the old past that seems to characterize European literary grounds. There are some apparent exceptions to this rule, such as Joseph Heller's *God Knows*, or Gore Vidal's *Live From Golgotha*, but even these cases can be better understood as biblical parodies than as historical novels. On the other hand, writers such as Reed, Doctorow, Coover or Kennedy appear to be more interested in drawing their historical *exempla* from recent –at the most *ninety-year-old*– events as if the American mind needed the twentieth century as a background to apply postmodernist practices. Even postmodern guru Thomas Pynchon waits till 1997 before releasing his so-long-expected novel on pre-Revolutionary US, *Mason & Dixon*. However, there seems to be –at least– one genuine exception to this rule: some of the novels written by a restless American who has been a visitor to several European countries for many years, a contemporary American expatriate with a very ancient name of literary echoes, Stephen Marlowe.

Some of Marlowe's novels are historical narratives and among his most recent works the reader may find two long books that also refer to the Spanish past, *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* (1987) and *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* (1991), both of which could have found a place in Planeta's series «Memoria de la Historia» because in both cases the two famous historic personages are also the narrators of their respective lives and deeds. It is my belief that Marlowe's

novels have also a place in the context of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, and that happens despite the fact that they do not «look» as experimental as other American works that, moreover, are concerned with more recent historical events: in Marlowe's fiction the reader can also find that apparent realism that covers nothing but an effective deconstruction of traditional humanist values. The writer, as often happens in contemporary American fiction rooted in the recent past, also becomes, in his fiction, the poststructuralist «critic» that contests the traditional notions of originality, unity, coherence, subjectivity, and rationality that have become the target of professional criticism for the last twenty-five years (Hutcheon 1991: 111). Despite the fact that he sets his stories in the times of the Spanish fifteenth century and Golden Age, Marlowe incorporates, in my reading, a conscious type of deconstructive criticism. In order to put into effect this type of criticism he uses certain devices that operate to relocate his works in the context of the –American?– postmodern novel.

According to many contemporary critics, in the 1980s and early 1990s postmodernist US fiction and the critique of humanist values went hand in hand. Some specific literary devices are frequently mentioned to enhance this critical capacity of current postmodern literature. Techniques such as infinite regress, the breaking of narrative frames or levels, the mixture of literary genres or registers, characters' fragmentation, parodic references, or the use of unreliable narrators are all of them elements frequently referred to as being common in postmodern fiction (see Waugh 1984, McHale 1987, Stonehill 1988, or Hite 1991). These techniques, although most of them were already operative in modernist or late modernist times –we may consider Borges' or Flann O'Brien's fiction–, may also produce a deconstructive and anti-humanist effect both in their overt –metafictional– exposition of the *ideological* character existing in all types of human discourse and also in their more subtle erosion of discursive *totalization*.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that a book like *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* does not follow the current grounds of US historiographic metafiction in its dedication to the European past and in its –for many pages– apparent realism, by featuring the postmodern techniques above mentioned this novel ends up being not simply a very entertaining and highly acclaimed narrative but also a serious warning against human totalizing excesses. Frequently, the story Columbus tells –his own life– is hilarious, although at times humor gives way to tragic events, some of which are already part of the Spanish Black Legend. A summary of the book's story easily discovers the recurrence of the above mentioned devices. At the beginning of his autobiography, Columbus assumes that he is a New Christian whose «marrano» family has to flee

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3. With the passing of time even critic Hayden White seems to have moved from less radical [although contemporary] views of discourse as being simply the producer of moral values (1980) to a more poststructuralist stance that affirms the fallacy of the humanist belief in a stable human subject: «What is 'imaginary' about any narrative representation is the illusion of a *centered consciousness* capable of looking out on the world, apprehending its structure and processes, and representing them to itself as having all the formal coherence of narrativity itself.» (White 1987: 36; my emphasis.) On the related notion of a totalizing history, see LaCapra 1985: 25. Cf: Sarup 1993: chapter 6.

Spain –for obvious religious reasons in Inquisition times– when he is still in his mother’s womb: as a result, Columbus will be born in the middle of the Mediterranean sea, aboard a ship that sails to Genoa. Therefore he will be neither Spanish nor Italian: his nationality will be anything but clear-cut, this particular incident being the beginning of his postmodern confused identity.

Once in Italy Christopher starts a roundabout life for a few years till he enters the service of Spanish Cardinal Borgia, the would-be Pope, as his food tester. A love affair leads him close to his death but Cardinal Borgia eventually saves his life and gives him a letter for the House of Centurione –a powerful bank at the time– ordering them to assist the carrier of the document at any moment: and so, with his life at stake (a society of secret killers have been paid to kill him, this being the first Pynchonian motif in the novel), the letter and a navigator’s chart that his brother Bartholomew gave him –and which turns later on to be a palimpsest–, the protagonist starts a long period of wandering: first to England (where he will fall in love with maid-disguised-as-boy Tristram), Iceland (where he will know about Erik and his journey to Greenland and about Erik’s son’s journey to America), Ireland, Portugal, and finally Spain, where he comes to offer the Catholic Monarchs Fernando and Isabel his project of the Great Venture. Influenced by his brother Barto, Columbus wants to navigate West till they can find the East: Cathay and the Indies, one of the most genial historical errors of all times. But at the Peripatetic Court of Fernando & Isabel he will first have to be a spy in Granada and help in the conquest of the city. Finally, they give him the money and name him Admiral, Viceroy, and Great Captain, and Christopher starts his first voyage. What follows in the novel is the account of his adventures in the four voyages. In his own words, Columbus tells the reader about all the events that many Spaniards may have read about in any of the available biographies of the famous discoverer: the lack of discipline of the Spaniards in Hispaniola, their terror when facing the «hurricanes,» the greed of many, the craziness of his brother Barto, his own incarceration and return to Spain in chains by order of Hispaniola’s new Governor Bobadilla, the Monarchs holding of his share, and their taking away from him his titles of Viceroy and Captain General... But soon those apparently historical events start to be mixed up with Columbus’ problems with the Inquisition and his love for the Spanish Jewish spy Petenera Torres... whose secret name is «The Blue Pimpernel» (yes, a predecessor of the Scarlet one!). The reader also knows about Christopher’s Pynchonian «Whole Sick Syndrome,» a strange malady that impedes tears in his eyes –among many other symptoms– and produces strange reiterative, Chinese box dreams in him. These dreams are about a book that concerns the story of the Wandering Jew, that keeper in Pilate’s palace who treated Christ in a harsh way, being thereby condemned to eternal wandering. The protagonist even thinks –or dreams?– that he has a conversation with God, who also seems to be very concerned with the motif of infinite regress, to such a point that, as Borges did, He even tells Columbus about the possible existence of another superior world ruled by a God above Him, and so *ad infinitum*. But finally this God comes to Columbus’ rescue when he is close to die at the hands of the Indians in his fourth and last voyage to America.

Back in Spain, he receives from King Fernando the promise that his elder son Diego will inherit his title of Admiral of the Ocean Seas (that he historically did), and

finally escapes from the house in which his family is expecting him to die: but his voice has now changed, he is again a young boy who, sometime after the Admiral's death, tries to buy an expensive navigational chart signed by Columbus himself (and *it is* the real cabalistic signature of the great discoverer): our narrator and protagonist is none other than the Wandering Jew, our adventurous Columbus shall have to go on, navigating towards new discoveries.

As will happen in Marlowe's 1991 novel about Cervantes, Columbus in his role as narrator is gradually understood by the reader as a decontextualized postmodernist figure who repeats famous quotations («I suffered the slings and arrows of -», 1987: 547), focuses on ideas that suggest infinite regress (448, 503), finds palimpsests (40), or even knows about future historical personages, from Drake (27) to Mussolini (14). But his role as «postmodernist exposé» is perhaps best enhanced in two aspects of his *persona*, as both narrator and character, that directly recall poststructuralist criticism: his notions about history and the instability of his own being.

As a biographer of his own life, Columbus parodically asserts that «History is, mostly, a toss of the dice» (1), an opinion that will be followed by continuous comments that try to undermine the reader's confidence in any possible sound historical report of events in his life, whether the reports are written by any of his well-known biographers or by himself: «History flows not into but from the pen of the historian, so who can say that I am right and Las Casas wrong?» (21). At times he will overtly confess that he is consciously lying to his readers, as happens in the only, highly metafictional footnote the book contains:

\*This is the only footnote you will find, occasioned by the single inaccuracy in these pages. The famous rock horseman actually stands on a headland on the island of Corvo, westernmost of the nine Azores, not at Calheta Point on Porto Santo. But I claim poetic license for placing him there. I did in fact see the Corvo horseman on a different voyage, when nothing else of interest transpired. (90)

And, in fact, this is the only *geographical* inaccuracy in the whole book. But in his role as critic and historiographer Columbus even dares to interpret the Book of Genesis as a «story» («God's amanuensis apparently wasn't interested in 'psychology, motivation and all that.' » 167), and furthers his poststructuralist attack on traditional historiography by finally obliging the readers with his narratorial reflections about the aims of history:

What's the purpose of history?

According to the father of all historians, Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c. 480-425 BC), it's to perpetuate the memory of 'great and wonderful deeds.' I guess history's become a lot more sophisticated since then, because its practitioners are equally inclined to perpetuate the memory of mean and awful deeds. Not that they seem to get any closer to the truth, whatever truth is. (462, my emphasis)

On the other hand, as I have already mentioned, in the middle of his adventures as discoverer of the New World, Columbus becomes affected by a strange disease that he himself names as «the Whole Sick Syndrome,» of unknown origin and multiple symptoms, but forceful enough to expose the protagonist «to the supernatural» (538), a characteristic that allows him to sustain the conversation with that God so fond of infinite regress (540-53), and that perhaps may also explain the presence of stigmata in the Admiral's hands. But his stigmata do not bleed, and his eyes are also dry, because the Whole Sick Syndrome ends up being nothing but a supernatural means to announce Columbus that, as written in *The Chronicles* of Roger Wendover of St. Albans (historiography again!), he is none other than the Wandering Jew, a diffused fragmented self that dissolves, at the end of the novel, into a new voice who, as happened to his «predecessor,» also longs to visit far-away lands. In this way, Columbus ends up adding to that list of postmodernist heroes who, like Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* or Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, have to become fragmented and dissolved in order to epitomize the postmodern condition of the human self... However, in a certain –postmodernist– way, Columbus may also remind the reader of Stephen Marlowe himself, a novelist who has lived, so far, in some twenty countries, including Spain. And from Spanish lands, in the Golden Age of Spanish letters, novelist Miguel de Cervantes will also travel to the British Isles and meet a certain author called, of all names, *Christopher Marlowe*, although this event will take place in *Stephen Marlowe's* twelfth novel, *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes*, a book where the protagonist and narrator also has to keep on moving or wandering... But even so, notwithstanding the American country in which his author was born, fictional the Columbus' quest and identity are European, in this way suggesting that contemporary critical views may still fly the other way... or that, even if fragmented, the postmodern self is supranational.

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