CHAOS AND MADNESS: THE POLITICS OF FICTION IN STEPHEN MARLOWE'S HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

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Stephen Marlowe (born Milton Lesser 1928-2008) is mainly known for his detective stories. Despite his prolific output as a writer, the attention paid to his work from within academia has been scarce, the result, perhaps, of prejudice held by many academics against pulp novels, as Mónica Calvo-Pascual indicates (4); and possibly the result too of the assumption that high sales figures in the world of books are incompatible with quality. Calvo-Pascual is the first scholar to develop a monographic study of three of Marlowe's historical novels, which she examines as exemplars of the evolution of the genre. Succinctly, the author explains that "the texts move from a traditional (pre-postmodernist) model of the historical novel *Colossus* (1972), through *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* (1987) as a perfect example of postmodernist historiographic metafiction, to *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* (1981), another, less radical, instance of historiographic metafiction where fiction eventually defeats and takes over history —from which the story victoriously departs" (6).

The historical novel emerged toward the end of the 18th century —Calvo-Pascual hails Sir Walter Scott as "the father of the historical novel" (20)— with the purpose of contributing to the propagation of knowledge of the past by making its study accessible and attractive. This it did through an enlivened style, the combination of historical with fictional events and characters, and by focusing on the daily lives of ordinary people. Even though it mixed fact and imagination,

in no way did the historical novel challenge the authority and objectivity of historiography: the novelist focused on the silences of historiography, he did not pretend to be a scientist or a historian, nor did his work, however realistic in detail, aspire to truth. It was in the course of the 19th century that the status of historiography was called into question. Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the main interrogators at this trial. In *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* he claims that "To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses. That is, we need it for life and action" (2007: 7). Two implications derive from this assertion. One: against the "consumptive historical fever" afflicting his age and forcing everyone to hold onto the past (8), Nietzsche demands that the look backwards be used to understand the present and desire the future. To a certain extent, this was precisely what the historical novel was doing. Scott, in fact, saw history as the convenient frame in which to stage a contemporary narrative (Lukács 1962: 30). Two: The spoilt idler he refers to, lacking needs or distresses, can assume an objective stance on reality, which becomes untenable when the past is used for living. Nietzsche continues: "Insofar as history stands in the service of life, it […] will therefore […] never be able to (and should never be able to) become pure science, the way mathematics is, for example" (15). In other words, historiography designates the subjective interpretation of events, conditioned by the interests, the passions and the specific circumstances of the historian. The disaster of the two world wars and the development of mass media in the 20th century, which offered different histories of what happened, proved Nietzsche right in his dissociation of history from truth, making it clear that total systems of knowledge no longer held.

With the poststructuralist theories of the 1960s the historical novel gave way to what Linda Hutcheon called 'historiographic metafiction' which imparts the lesson that "the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted" (1988: 123). Historiographic metafiction, thus, offers to the reader a play of signifiers without referents, posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality via devices such as irony and self-reflection. Certainly, metafictive devices are not new; some were already present in the traditional historical novel, as Calvo-Pascual rightly points out. Novelty resides in the self-conscious attention of the historiographic metafictional novel to its status as an artifact and its exposure of the truth of history. As Hutcheon puts it, the novelty "seems to reside in its manner, in the self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of the familiar pretence of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing" (1989: 35).

The novelty of Calvo-Pascual's carefully crafted work resides both in the choice of an American writer who, unlike most of his compatriot authors of historical novels who locate their works in the recent past of their country, has opted for the remote past of Europe; and in supplementing the fact/fiction with the order/disorder binary. Calvo-Pascual draws a parallelism between literary artifacts and microscopic molecular systems as theorized by Nobel Prize winner Ilya Prigogine and her co-worker Isabelle Stengers in *Order Out of Chaos* (1984), where they describe how far-from equilibrium systems are constituted by particles that interact with each other. Before they collide the molecules behave independently, constituting what they call "the molecular chaos assumption" of the system's initial conditions. Collisions "produce, as if by a preestablished harmony, and apparently purposeful behavior" (246), which results in large-scale coherence, "as though each molecule were 'informed' about the overall state of the system" (171). As in Prigogine's self-organizing system, a literary work is not a closed, isolated structure. It exists as a non-equilibrium system within the context of a multiplicity of discourses that on colliding cause a feeling of purpose that, in its turn, brings a measure of coherence and harmony to its superficial disorder. So, if fiction is based on and combined with fact, which is, ultimately, a form of fiction, order lurks behind a facade of chaos which is, ultimately, a subtle form of order.

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The structure of Calvo-Pascual's book follows a clear pattern. It consists of seven chapters preceded by an introduction setting out the aims of the book and the definition of the subject, followed by some concluding remarks, two appendixes (the first lists the novels published by Lesser under different pseudonyms; the second his short stories), an extensive bibliography and an index. Each chapter is inextricably related to the rest but is also self-contained and can stand alone. Chapter One offers a precise overview of the relationship between history and the novel that could have benefitted, however, from a longer elaboration of the relationship between history and romance (Calvo-Pascual offers only a passing reference to this on page 16). The information in Chapter Two is useful for an understanding of *Colossus: A Novel about Goya and a World Gone Mad*. Close in style to Sir Walter Scott, its plot is structured around historical episodes presented through an omniscient narrator who identifies with Goya. According to Calvo-Pascual, these are dexterously combined with invented happenings and personages with two purposes: to fill gaps in historiography and to "add suspense" (24). Unfortunately, although the author brings up the ingredient of suspense, she does not investigate in that direction, despite Marlowe's expertise in the mystery formula. Be that as it may, unlike Scott, who relegated historical figures to the background, Marlowe chooses a historical person, Francisco Goya the painter, as protagonist and renders his life in a realistic mode, which is enhanced by references to specific places in Madrid and Saragossa, to traditions, and to eating habits, and

by the use of expressions in Spanish. That Marlowe follows the traditional model of the historical novel is also evident from the lineal and teleological design of his story line, solely disturbed by the introductory chapter to each of the six Books *Colossus* is composed of.

Chapter Three revolves around Goya's mental disorder and the close liaison between madness and art. Ingeniously, Calvo-Pascual posits that madness arises as the response to the cruel socio-political context that led to the War of Independence, but that it also operates as a strategy of survival. Phrased differently, Goya's departure from reason was the only reasonable and responsible way to cope with the irrational reality surrounding him. Eloquently, the author expresses this in the following terms:

> When his master Francisco Bayeu criticizes both the lines Goya draws as being "pure chaos" and his baroque excess of color in contrast with the "reason", order and sobriety of neoclassical line and sobriety, the protagonist expounds his belief that Bayeu does not understand reason —since reason for Goya, is color […]. In other words, the protagonist's conception of order is the chaos of the neoclassic. Hence, the critiques of Goya's paintings as chaotic acquire a new, positive dimension, since this chaos appears as the new order of reason that enables the artist to discern and cope with the chaotic, disastrous reality he reflected in those paintings. (46-47)

Finally, Calvo-Pascual reflects on how Marlowe, through this text, presents an indirect critique of Spanish reality in the twentieth century, when the novel was written, whose reality he experienced firsthand, having lived on and off in Spain for ten years, gathering information. Likewise, in *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus; with Stephen Marlowe*, Marlowe uses events of the past to illuminate those of the present, but the anachronisms this time are forthright. Chapter Four delves deep into Columbus' life so as to gauge Marlowe's fidelity to historical records. His accuracy and thoroughness over matters of historiography is counterbalanced by sundry comparisons to the French revolution, literary references and descriptions of later periods —Columbus himself alluding to Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, Samuel Coleridge, and Sigmund Freud—, which are used to ponder on the nature of time as an uncertain and sinuous structuring device. Just like *Colossus*, this narrative loses any claim to historical truthfulness by fictionalizing the lives of historical personages and by introducing characters that did not exist and events that never occurred. But Marlowe goes further in breaking the sequential, cause-and-effect presentation of reality through the use of irony, contradiction, philosophical digressions, fragmentation, juxtaposition of different voices, collage of genres, shifts in style, overlays in time and place, and a multiplicity of formats, all of which combine, in Calvo-Pascual's view, to invalidate Columbus' reliability both as a narrator and a historian, as well as to demystify the grand and heroic

element of the discoverer. Springing from the non-linearity of the narrative is the element of chance, whose interrelation with the hidden pattern of order behind the apparent randomness of the events related in the novel is investigated in Chapter Five.

The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes; a Novel by Stephen Marlowe begins with the undocumented friendship of Cervantes' great-grandfather and Christopher Columbus, whereby Marlowe connects this novel with his previous one. In Chapter Six, Calvo-Pascual focuses again on the mixture of historical truth and fantasy and examines in detail the representations of persons, objects and customs out of place in this novel. Significantly, she revisits Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" in order to apply it to the notion of time outside of time. Defined as the space with "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect", heterotopia provides a useful tool of analysis for historiographic metafiction insofar as the latter echoes texts and contexts of the past while querying them through parody. The anachronisms in *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* are more subtle than in *The Memoirs of Cristopher Columbus*, yet, Calvo-Pascual promptly points out, the effect is stronger. In her words, "The subtlety of these elements entails that the readers' suspension of disbelief is not constantly disturbed by the narrator's outrageous comments […]. Consequently, the larger degree of involvement in the reading process produces a greater impact when the fiction that sustained the suspension of disbelief is dismantled" (153). This dismantling occurs at certain moments in the book, mostly in "Part Second", which covers the period of Cervantes' liberation from captivity in Algiers until his death in 1616. Marlowe does not respect the few existing historical records existing on the writer's life during this period, and imagines a spurious course of events which, of course, did not take place. This speculation about an alternative work gives the work a science-fiction quality that paradoxically accentuates its "Cervantesque feeling of authenticity" (149).

Chapter Seven explores the science-fiction elements that, "like atomic particles" (155), rearrange themselves to create parallel realities, to later focus on the alternative mental order of Marlowe's Cervantes, who is read in the light of Don Quixote. It is important to note the dependence of chaotic systems on initial conditions, the potential of any system to fall into chaos, and the fact that chaos theory deals with the behavior of dynamical models (Kellert 1993). This accounts for Calvo-Pascual's careful attention to "the motif of the protagonist running away from his hometown with the help of a powerful man after an accident" (186) that sets the three novels in motion, and the nomadic trait shared by Cervantes and Marlowe. A summary of the most important aspects of the chapters serves as a conclusion.

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Chaos and Madness is theoretically engaged. The author has an admirable ability to explain abstruse concepts in simple terms. Her analysis is sophisticated, yet clear and fluently written. As a rule, Calvo-Pascual works with precise definitions, leading readers interested in the complex world of Stephen Marlowe by the hand. Part of the book's interest lies in the exhaustive and careful documentation of Marlowe's texts. Calvo-Pascual has searched through numerous historical databases, proving to be an excellent historian, despite the distrust of fact that is axiomatic in her writing. She succeeds in demonstrating the fictional/disorderly potential of history/order and thus adds a highly relevant perspective to the vast bibliography on historiographic metafiction.

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