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**LITERATURE AND THE DICTATORSHIP.  
HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION  
IN ANTONIO MUÑOZ MOLINA'S  
*A MANUSCRIPT OF ASHES***

“Este material había que convertirlo en épica,  
en literatura, en ficción<sup>1</sup>.”

Antonio Muñoz Molina

Human rights are always violated in dictatorships. The trauma of non-democratic regime always has its repercussions that resonate through generations of writers. Antonio Muñoz Molina is a Spanish writer born in 1956 in a little Andalusian city. He experienced the dictatorship of Francisco Franco himself as a child and teenager. But the force of this experience and the need to tell the story of his motherland and family made him debut with this historical novel. His parents needed to give up an education to help their parents at work in the midst of Spain's raging civil war. Silent republican spirit of the family was the base of Muñoz Molina's later tribute to all the victims of Franco's dictatorship (Muñoz Molina 2015). The narrator in *A Manuscript of Ashes*, an apocryphal writer from the Generation of '27, has a similar childhood to that of the author himself. The novel is a postmodern attempt at narrating the story of Muñoz Molina's homeland, but acutely conscious of the fact that it is impossible to reach the truth. As said the author himself: “the only way to do this was to convert it all into literature, into fiction” (Vidal-Floch 1989: 48). This is also the way to cope with the national trauma of the civil war and subsequent dictatorship. As such, in *A Manuscript of Ashes* Muñoz Molina uses the historiographic metafiction strategy and omits all direct references to historical facts. Because this is not a novel about the Spanish Civil War, it is only its image seen through the eyes of the new generation (Navío Castellano 2011: 2).

Historiographic metafiction is the brainchild of Linda Hutcheon. Her essay (1989) explains that it is a label given to postmodern historical novels, like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, which contain metafiction, to underline the

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<sup>1</sup> Tr. This material should be converted into epic, into literature, into fiction.

difference between them and classical ones; postmodern novel is once metafictional and rooted in history. Metafiction, a device to emphasize fictionality of fiction, makes one doubt veracity of the recounted affairs. The difference between a classical historic novel and a postmodern one is the problem of veracity. A metafictional novel takes notice that fiction is only fiction. Historiographic metafiction is a tendency to open up literature to the “real world” where, previously, it had been locked into the world of fiction. But not in an innocent way. Postmodern impossibility to reach the truth makes new literature forms appear. Postmodern parody is that history and fiction have equal status to the study of the past. Pasts of literature and reality become equal. The reference is still fiction, but with the Borgesian notion that the real world is also only fiction. In this way, fiction inserts itself into the historical discourse, but not losing its autonomy as fiction (Hutcheon 1989: 3–5). At this point the reference to Hayden White’s theory of metahistory (2003) is needed. It is not about rejecting history at all, but the way that facts are made known. White does not negate the existence of historical facts like the French Revolution or the Second World War, but the way in which we are informed about them. White observes that all historical texts are narrations. The author while writing a historical text is not free from his or her worldview. It is not inherently good or bad, it is merely a fact of our human nature. We have our point of view and our own means of access to knowledge. All historical texts are narrations. Historical facts are real, but the way of conveying them is only a narration. We cannot know just pure facts; it will always be somebody’s interpretation (White 2003: 108–139). The only thing we can do is trying to access as many versions as we can to try to make our vision more complete, but without forgetting the fact that there is always more than one truth. Narration is always influenced by state of author’s memory. But it can also be written for very conscious manipulation, e.g. political or official discourse.

This ontological problem is the main focus of the new historical novel. Metahistory is the triumph of the novel as a new form of relating history, with the same ontological sense as historical discourse itself. The only way to relate the past is by words, and it is impossible to relate all knowledge as it is impossible to reach the truth. Both historical and literary narration are only discourses, and for this reason it is impossible to tell the truth in both cases. It is a direct realization of ontological and epistemological postmodernism’s obsessions with history. In the moment when there is no truth, negative ontology of the past appears, what equates the historical skepticism. An author tries to relay history through fiction because both are modes of narration (Winter 2012: 14–15). In this situation historical novel is also a legitimate form of conveying historical facts. And metafiction emphasizes that characters and plot are fictional, because “it’s just a novel”. Historian recounts historical facts from his or her point of view, but s/he cannot add fictional characters. Writer does not have this obligation.

As the past is one of postmodernism's obsessions, novel about history is its natural literary genre. But novel about history does not have to be equated with historical novel. History appears as a nostalgic background to the action. And as the truth no longer exists, nobody cares if the story is real. It is more important to relate a good story, which is pleasant both to write and to read. Postmodernism is no longer only a modernist, avant-garde style of experimental writing.

*A Manuscript of Ashes*, in its original version titled *Beatus Ille* (1986), the novel that is the topic of this essay, is Antonio Muñoz Molina's literary debut. The title is a quote from Horace that alludes ironically to the joy and bliss of rural lifestyle.

Beatus ille, qui procul negotiis,  
 ut prisca gens mortalium,  
 paterna rura bubus exercet suis,  
 solutus omni faenore,  
 neque excitatur classico miles truci,  
 neque horret iratum mare,  
 forumque vitat et superba civium  
 potentiorum limina.<sup>2</sup> (Horacio Flaco 1995: 388)

The title itself provides a clue to interpretation of the whole novel. The use of epode, a component of ode, is ironic. Horace describes pleasures of rural life, but from the perspective of urban usurer who, finally, prefers his money to his carefree country life. The ancient author presents a typical concern of human race: dissatisfaction with what we have and constant yearning for what we do not have, but without any concrete plan for change (Cristóbal 1995: 386). However, Jacinto Solana's conduct is a continuation of the active attitude in facing the problem mentioned in the Epode. He is a protagonist unsatisfied with his agricultural life, the one who tries to change his destiny. As it is recited in the classical text, Jacinto was at first a friend of the son of a local noble family, but fell out of favor with them. Then his escape to the city failed because of the war, and the war itself found our hero in the countryside. Horace's honest vision of rural life was, in this case, uncertain. The countryside cannot protect you from

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<sup>2</sup> "A man is blessed who, free from any business deals,  
 As were the mortal race of old,  
 With his own oxen works among ancestral fields,  
 Free from debts of any sort,  
 He hears no martial trumpet calling him to war  
 Nor fears to face the angry sea,  
 And he avoids the forum and the haughty gates  
 Of influential citizens."  
 (Horace)

the dangers of military conflict or from the persecution of dictatorial regime's police. Nevertheless, the English title of the book, *A Manuscript of Ashes*, refers more to the content of the novel than to the metaphorical sense of the book.

The form of criminal novel reveals to the reader a deeper sense of the work. Criminal novel is a genre of modernism *par excellence*, because the aim is to find out who is the murderer. Perpetrator, in this case, means as much as truth and justice. In postmodern world, such a convenient situation is no longer possible. Given the impossibility of reaching the truth, Antonio Muñoz Molina reuses the genre in a metafictional way. An active reader is also important, but in a different way. By trying to figure out who is the murderer, the reader follows the author's reflection about literature, process of writing and its limits. Sharing and appropriating the act of reflecting about what is being read makes the addressee of the text its co-creator, an indispensable part of the text. And the form is only an excuse for reflecting the impossibility to reach the truth. Minaya, the protagonist, is a detective not from his own vocation but by the Solana's manuscripts manipulation "founded" by Inés.

The novel also enters into an intertextual relation with Cervantes's *Don Quixote* through the motif of lost manuscript, which explains the English title of Muñoz Molina's novel. Minaya, the protagonist, tries, against his will, to find out the truth about a family secret. He discovers new facts by finding lost manuscripts in impossible places. The motif of manuscripts puts into doubt the veracity of recounting of affairs. But in *Don Quixote* the manuscripts are an attempt to justify, in a perverse way, the quest to recount the truth. In Muñoz Molina's case they are a pretext for a reflection on the impossibility of reaching the truth. Through this narrative device the writer justifies his chosen method of relating history, hiding the real world behind fiction. If I cannot tell the real, historical truth, I will write a novel; I will convert it into fiction: "I couldn't have invented it all, and other voices that aren't always mine guided you. I didn't invent Mariana's death in the pigeon loft or Utrera's guilt and the letter you found this afternoon through the mediation of Inés wasn't falsified by me either, but it's possible that I wasn't the one who found the cartridge of the pigeon loft or that it didn't come from Utrera's pistol, or that the way I discovered the murder wasn't as exciting and literary as the one I suggested to you" (Muñoz Molina 2008: 299–300).

Muñoz Molina applies elements of historical novel—retrospective narration, extant names, places and events from the era—as the anecdotal base for his novel, while constantly questioning within that narration the veracity of the protagonist's memory and underscoring the subjectivity which plagues the act of remembering (O'Neill 2011: 49). The novel is, in a paradoxical way, realist and metafictional at the same time, which is exactly the nature of the proposed historiographic metafiction. It is an attempt to destabilize the notions of history and

of fiction. It does not deny the reality of the past, but it is posing a question about how the past was interpreted. In the case of *A Manuscript of Ashes* it is demythologizing of the anti-Francoist hero and the severance with the official discourse of the dictatorship: "The war and prison helped me learn I couldn't be a hero or even a victim resigned to his misfortune. But in the six months I spent shut up in Manuel's house (...) I discovered I wasn't a writer either. (...) most of those burned sheets had no writing on them, and it was I who set them on fire a few minutes before they came. As I burned all the rough drafts and all the blank sheets to deny myself the possibility of continuing to pretend to myself that I was writing a book" (Muñoz Molina 2008: 299-300).

Another reason for Antonio Muñoz Molina to use historiographic metafiction in his novel was the political situation of Spain at the time of publication. On the one hand, there is a need to recuperate historical memory, on the other, the legislation of the new democracy. *Pacto de silencio* was a law that, in fact, prohibited Spaniards from talking, writing and publishing works about the civil war. The attempts of the democratic government to build a new society were considered to be bolstered by not talking about the war in order to prevent a new one. As such, there could not be a direct reference to history. The only possible acceptable form is to write fiction, reinterpret history in a fictional way.

But the need to write about the war and dictatorship was very strong in the generation of the young writers. Thus Muñoz Molina, at the very least, makes use of the historical background and makes a passing reflection on the impossibility to reach the truth. This is also an attempt to dissociate himself for his own novel. By introducing metafiction his responsibility is made smaller, because it is underlined that all the content is fictional. From a personal and social point of view it is very convenient to limit responsibility. The author can write about a history that has been demythologized, where neither warring side is innocent. *A Manuscript of Ashes* is not a novel about heroes; it is about the author's family land and the amazing trap of a small city. The novel is historical, but the wounds of war and dictatorship are still fresh. This is the first generation of writers to tackle the subject, to try to work through the trauma. Historiographic metafiction is a safe way to try to pronounce what is indispensable to start to get over the non-democratic political system.

From a technical standpoint, metafiction starts with the type of the narration. In *Manuscript of Ashes* the narration varies between 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person, but with the sensation that some omniscient narrator controls the story from above. At the end it is revealed that it is the textual author of the novel, Solana, the forsaken writer (Morales 1996: 33). The assumed diaries of Solana, *the manuscripts of ashes*, whose fragments comprise the major part of the novel, follow the same strategy of the narration as the novel itself, as it is explained directly: "at times Solana wrote in the first person, and other times he used the third, as if he wanted

to hide the voice that was telling and guessing everything and it's way give the narration the tone of an impassive history" (Muñoz Molina 2008: 94). The narrator hides himself or herself behind constant alteration of the narrative voice in trying to make chronicle from his diaries. The veracity of the manuscript is confirmed in the final scene, where the whole metafictional technique is uncovered. By this point we have a silent, shy "I" intertwining with the third-person narration. This is the first clue to solve the second mystery of the detective novel, the identity of the narrator, the textual author of the novel. Paradoxical third-person, a type of narration drawn from the realistic, historical novel, turns out to be a voice from within the novel. It is a voice of a fictional being, from the world of fiction. On the other hand, the plot is deeply realistic, perfectly contextualized into the historical reality of the civil war and the dictatorship of Franco's Spain, which constitutes an indispensable element, in the historical novel, to make the historiographic metafiction appears. The characters are also realistic, as after the war there were numerous students struggling against the system or secretly republican aristocrats. The main character, Solana, was inspired by the real writer from around the era of the Generation of '27, Miguel Hernández.

The narration has numerous layers. There is a historical author, Antonio Muñoz Molina, who writes the novel. Inside the text there is Solana. He is a forsaken writer, the author of lost manuscripts who pulls the strings of all characters, and the author of a novel called *A Manuscript of Ashes*. Then, in the textual world there is also Solana, the young writer, the unwanted in Uncle Manuel's house and the old, ill man, miraculously saved from death at the hands of the Guardia Civil. He is the narrator and the main character of his own novel, a voice speaking in 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person at the same time. He is also a source of all the changes in Minaya's life, guiding all his steps by putting in his way the manuscripts. In this way we have a writer, murdered by the dictatorship, who turns out to be alive. Moreover, he is so alive that he ends up as the creator of the whole novel, the author of his own past as contained in the manuscripts and the director of the present. This is another metahistorical moment. I recreate my own history through a new narration to make myself braver, more heroic. To create new me for the generations to come: "There was nothing but the ashes of blank pages and a besieged and cowardly man (...). Literature did not absolve me, as you supposed, as I helped you just a little to think. (...) When you come back you acquire the privilege of being another man or of being no one forever, which is what I chose. (...) You came here to look for a book and mystery and the biography of a hero. (...) Let's build him the labyrinth he wants, I thought, let's give him not the truth but what he supposes happened" (Muñoz Molina 2008: 298-299).

For this reason Minaya acts under his will, directed by the manuscripts. Solana provokes the entire action of the novel. This is a very postmodern way of viewing history. One single narration can turn out to be true, probable, almost

real, but also entirely wrong. There is only one, personal version. And nobody can assure us that we cannot find another manuscript that reveals the new truth: “perhaps the history you’ve found is only one among several possibilities. Perhaps there were other manuscripts in the house” (Muñoz Molina 2008: 300). Our seemingly independent investigation can have an author who is guiding our steps to lead us to his own truth, the things he wanted us to discover. But we can never be sure that we have thus arrived at the ultimate, last and complete version of the story, to THE TRUTH, because it is no longer possible in a postmodern world. This is a perfect way to deal with history and the trauma of the dictatorship in the highly divided society of the post-dictatorship years. Showing that there is no truth, and that it is very easy to modify somebody’s steps without them noticing, makes the society more confident about its difficult history. No one is innocent, but also no one is fully guilty. There is no truth but points of view, only people who want to make each other believe in their respective versions. But in this situation there is no point in finding the one and only truth—we have to move on, abandon Mágina and go to Madrid for a better life. Leave the past in the past and start to live the present, the freedom of a democratic country.

This technique is also an amazing weapon meant to show the mechanisms of the official discourse of the dictatorship. And not only the dictatorship. Every society has its own history, an official version written by the victors. To build a conscious and thinking society it is indispensable to wake up social consciousness, to make the people see that it is important to know as many versions as possible to reach the truth. Because if not, we can be easily manipulated by the official version, prepared by somebody for reasons unknown. A conscious society is more difficult to manipulate. Antonio Muñoz Molina wanted to write a novel for a new, democratic Spain, but with a new society. To wake up from its official, Francoist version, but keenly aware of manipulation from all parts. The democratic government can also have its official version because they want to promote their own cause. We have a single, tiny fragment of the truth and it is important to never stop exploring—because we can never be sure if there are not any more manuscripts of ashes to relate the history from a new point of view.

*A Manuscript of Ashes* is a striking example of postmodern novel. Under the accessible guise of detective novel it re-counts the history of non-democratic Spain, following the idea of rescuing the pleasures of narrated oral history: “It doesn’t matter if a story is true or false, it only matters if you know how to tell it” (Muñoz Molina 2008: 300). The story seems credible because of its realistic character. At the same time, it reinterprets history using a device of historiographic metafiction. The forsaken writer turns out to be alive and the author of the story that is unfolding. In this way, the novel shows the problem of credibility in historical narratives. A novel, as a way to recount history, is as valid as historical essays because there is always an author behind every text. And the author writes

from his or her point of view. Nevertheless, nobody expects literary fiction to transmit historical truth. In a postmodern world the truth is impossible to reach because there is always a discourse needed to relate it. The new society has to be prepared for life in such an unfriendly environment and learn how to not be manipulated by some mysterious manuscripts or official versions of the one and only truth.

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### Summary

#### **Literature and the Dictatorship. Historiographic Metafiction in Antonio Muñoz Molina's *A Manuscript of Ashes***

The human rights are always violated during the dictatorship. The trauma of non-democratic regimens always has its repercussion into generations of writers. The paper examines *A Manuscript of Ashes* of Muñoz Molina; a novel based in Franco's Spain, published in 1986. Young Antonio Muñoz Molina is reinterpreting in a postmodern way the history of his region. He is working a social trauma of dictatorship by showing the alternative versions of the history and the impossibility to reach the truth. The author needs to fictionalize the history, feeling that what happened in Franco's Spain was possible to be told only as literature, as a fiction. The novel describes the civic war, post-war years when the republicans were still being pursued by the government and the 60', during the students strikes.

But there is no direct reference to any historical fact of this period. All the protagonists are fictional. The novel is a postmodern try of questioning the official version of the history, which makes it a perfect example of historiographic metafiction, a concept developed by Linda Hutcheon as one of the characteristics of a postmodern novel. The novel, with full conscience of the impossibility of the reconstruction of the past and through the subjective narrative voice is discovering a new truth. New, but not the only one, nor the final one.

