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**Searching for personal identity through shadows of the past:
literary fantasy in novels of Carmen Martín Gaité and Javier Cercas.**

Fantasy, history and human experience make up many of Spain's contemporary historical novels, as was the case in the magical realist fiction of Latin America. In Spain's case, postmodern speculative fiction has often served to settle accounts with the nation's traumatic, dictatorial past. An example of this is Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room* (*El cuarto de atrás*, 1978), a multi-layered fantasy novel with autobiographical details that laid the foundation of subsequent Spanish historical novels in which memories and realities, both personal and collective, deal with a recent past that for several decades was forcefully silenced. In so doing, they bring certain existential and ethical matters to the fore, e.g. the individual's stances and choices in circumstances more or less beyond his or her control.

Personal identity, the search for truth and the uncovering of past experiences are at the core of contemporary Spanish novels, oftentimes molded in non-linear time sequences and with elements of metafiction, imagination, dreams and fantasy, thereby appealing to the historical and personal conscience of the reader.

My paper discusses some of the main characteristics of such novels, in particular Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room* but also more recent novels such as Javier Cercas's *Soldiers of Salamis* (*Soldados de Salamina*, 2001).

Keywords: memory, trauma, conscience, ethical and existential stances

Introduction

The fantastic genre as such has not been prominent in Spanish literature, at least not if the fantastic is understood as a genre of supernatural or science fiction. However, several literary historians point to the abundant presence of allegory, of the marvelous, of magic realism, of horror stories and of folkloric tales in Spanish literature since the Middle Ages until the present, suggesting that all of these may be classified as fantastic to some degree (Fernández Riquelme, 2003). The fantastic elements found in earlier literature often contained struggles between good and evil, God and Satan, in times in which supernatural interventions in people's lives or in nature 1) were not questioned and 2) served a didactic moral purpose.

Interestingly, dialectic forces between good and evil (or more precisely what narrators perceive as good or evil) continue to appear in contemporary Spanish literature, although the moral and religious parameters have changed significantly. As Ricoeur (1996) puts it, no text is ever ethically neutral; it necessarily presents matters as worthy of approval or disapproval.

During the XXth century fantastic literature competed with social realism in Spain as a means of subversion. Both genres sought to depict the dismal reality of an isolated, poor nation subjected to a narrow-minded, repressive and totalitarian dictatorship. Both strove to reveal the individual's situation of aloneness, lack of communication, boredom and sense of belonging or not belonging to a social group (Fernández Riquelme, 2003). While social realist novels explored the gloominess of existence in an authoritarian and bigoted society in which all was regulated by religious, patriarchal norms; fantastic novels, on the other hand, would use allegorical characters such as animals (vultures, birds of prey and wolves are recurrent) to create the sense of fear, threat and meaninglessness that prevailed during the years of Franco's dictatorship. It must be remembered that censorship kept the writers from being too open about things; hence there was no direct criticism in their writings, only parabolic circumscription intended to awaken the reader's recognition and conscience of the state of affairs.

When Franco died in 1975 censorship was lifted and Spain began its democratization process. Literature saw an upsurge of memoirs and novels about the Civil War, the postwar years and the exile of many Spaniards. Memory became the primary literary theme that conveyed the message that the past must not be forgotten; on the contrary, the lies of the dictatorship and the long-imposed silence must be addressed. It is in this context that Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room* appears in 1978. Born in 1925, Carmen Martín Gaité had become known as a social realist writer during the 1950's but chose to take on a fantastic literary approach when writing her more or less autobiographical account of her youth in wartime and postwar Spain. We shall see in what way she does that. However, first a few words about a more recent novel that also makes use of fantasy in settling accounts with the past.

Nearly 25 years after the publication of *The Back Room* a writer named Javier Cercas won popularity by publishing *Soldiers of Salamin*, a novel that continues the tradition of memorial literature about the Civil War and the dictatorship. Contrary to Martín Gaité, Cercas did not himself experience the war, as he was born in 1960. He thereby belongs to the generation of "grandchildren" who now recount events and circumstances that they have heard about from earlier generations. Cercas' novel begins with an investigation into the life of a historical person, the founder of the Spanish fascist movement, and ends with the search for a lost hero. While the historic fascist is depicted as a villain, the fictive hero is given the attributes of an admirable man fighting for a just cause, so much so that fantasy and imagination come into play.

These novels have a few things in common. First, they hold important elements of metafiction and, moreover, their main characters carry the names and some autobiographical elements of their authors (autofiction). Second, they deal with contemporary Spanish history in an attempt to settle accounts with the past. Third, memory, dreams and fantasy appear alongside time

movements of analepsis (flashbacks) and prolepsis (flashforwards), creating a mosaic of episodic sequences that finally make up a story. Finally, there is in both these novels a search for identity, personal and collective, and an ethical tension between good and evil.

METHODS

As a primary theoretical basis I use Todorov's *The Fantastic. A structural approach to a literary genre* (1975). In this study Todorov explains that the fantastic requires three conditions:

1. "The text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described."
2. "This hesitation may also be experienced by a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work [...]."
3. "The reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations." (Todorov, 1975:33)

Hesitation is at the core of Todorov's understanding of the fantastic. It is the twilight zone between the uncanny (scary or horror-like) and the marvelous (the wonderful, full of wonders). The fantastic elements leave characters and readers alike doubting whether events are plausible or not, whether they belong to that which could represent reality or not. It is here that dreams and the subconscious play an important role. Furthermore, in *The Back Room* Todorov's book is mentioned: it lies on the bedside table of the main character, known as C., who narrates the story in the first person singular.

As a secondary theoretical basis I use Pedro Fernández Riquelme's studies of the fantastic genre in Spanish literature¹. Riquelme states that it is not possible to apply Todorov's strict norms to Spanish fantastic literature as it is "heterogeneous" in that it includes magic, horror, allegory, the grotesque the marvelous and a particular Spanish science fiction, thereby creating a suggestive world of contrasts." (Riquelme, 2003b). In making this statement Riquelme is considering the history of fantastic literature in Spain, from the Middle Ages to the XXth century. Earlier Spanish literature certainly was heterogeneous in this respect as it combined didactic morals (in which the supernatural usually was of religious origin) with popular legends and themes. To some extent it may be compared to Latin American magical realism as far as the inclusion of folklore, tradition and popular beliefs are concerned.

However, a particular aspect of Spanish fantasy is its memorial character, and this element is prominent in contemporary fiction. Fantasy serves as a refuge and as a way of coming to terms with the past by "a symbolic and magical enchantment with the specters of memory" as Riquelme (*ibid.*) puts it. The reasons for this are historical and social: many writers of the XXth century lived through the horrors of the Spanish civil war and the Franco dictatorship. Some were exiled, others survived by creating imaginary spaces of freedom. This was

¹ A) "Consideraciones generales sobre el género fantástico" (2003) and B) "Breve historia de la narrativa fantástica española" (2003), *Revista Empireuma*, <http://jardinumbrío.jimdo.com>

particularly the case of Carmen Martín Gaité, who has her main character in *The Back room* say that “Invention comes from the need to survive...in the isolation of imagination I learned to convert the loss (of freedom) into literature” (*El cuarto de atrás*, 182). For Javier Cercas, on the other hand, the “specters of memory” do not have to do with personal experiences of war or dictatorship. In *Soldiers of Salamin* the narrator relies not on personal but on collective memory. As Spain only recently (in 2007) passed a law enabling the opening of archives and mass tombs from the past, Spaniards lived for several decades under an imposed silence and ignorance concerning the fate of hundreds of thousands of citizens. Cercas’ book was published in 2001, some years before the law on historic memory was passed.

Analysis

1. *The Back Room*

The plot of *The Back Room* is as follows: the main character, C. (a fictional version of Carmen Martín Gaité), has difficulty falling asleep and is worrying about her daughter being out late. She takes a sleeping pill and falls asleep but is awoken in the middle of the night by a telephone call from a journalist who says he is coming to interview her. Minutes later he arrives at her apartment. Throughout the story he is called the man in black. As he asks her questions he encourages her to look into her past and write about it. He even gives her a magic pill from a golden box to revive her memory. C. proceeds to tell him of her childhood and youth, particularly mentioning the back room of her Salamanca apartment which served as a haven of freedom, disorder and child play until the war years forced her mother to convert it into a smelly food storage room. Other memories that come to the surface concern imaginary islands which served C. and her best friend as imaginary venues of escape during years of repression, fear and poverty. Another telephone call, while the man in black is there, is from a hysterical and unknown woman called Carola who accuses C. of taking her lover, Alejandro (supposedly the man in black) away from her. In the course of the confused conversation there is mention of a double-layered suitcase containing books, an allusion to writing about the past, a silenced, hidden past. At the end of *The Back Room* C. is awakened in the morning by her daughter, who has returned home. In the living room a pile of freshly written papers that was not there previously indicate that the memories that she spoke to the man in black about are now in written form; the pile of papers“ is the novel the reader is reading” (Davies, 1998:237).

Was it all a dream then? Perhaps, but two cups on a tray as well as the golden box from which the man had given C the memory pill are there to testify that it was not a dream. How then, did the spoken memories come into print? Who was the man in black? And what was the purpose of delving into past memories?

“Toda literature es fantástica porque está hecha de símbolos y de sueños” (all literature is fantastic since it is made up of symbols and dreams) said the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges. This statement may be discussed but it certainly applies to *The Back Room*. The symbols include islands (isolation, loneliness), golden boxes (valuable secrets), colors (the man in black, a black cockroach, a poster of Luther as the devil, the darkness of the night), a double-layered suitcase and a symbolic back room. As for dreams *The Back Room* is oniric in

that it unfolds in the course of a night of insomnia and medically produced sleep. It is the time for the unconscious to emerge, an unconscious of mixed-up, none linear memories and experiences.

Many researchers have discussed the role of the man in black. Was he an ideal interlocutor, considering Martín Gaité's many writings on people's needs to find a good interlocutor to whom they may tell their stories? Or was he an alter-ego of the main character, or her unconscious personified? Was he a symbol of something evil, dreaded, or a force of attraction, physical and mental? No answer is given in the novel, yet there are indications in the text that he is all of these. It is up to the reader to interpret this character.

The hesitation of which Todorov speaks affects the main character, C., and the reader alike. Both wonder if the night spent with the man in black took place or was a dream, and both are left not knowing given the evidence left of cups on a tray and a golden box on the table. The same applies to the pile of written papers lying on the spot where the man in black had deposited his hat. Were they there all along? No mention is made of that. However, Todorov's book is on the bed-table because C. plans to write a fantastic novel. The plan to write a book (in the future) becomes a something already accomplished, and moreover under strange circumstances.

In spite of the darkness of the night, of the demiurgic figure of the man in black and the claustrophobic atmospheres of C.'s present apartment and former back room, there is nothing uncanny or marvelous in the story. The spaces depicted are not unusual, quite the contrary. As Davies (1998:240) suggests, they may represent the private and liberating space of the home as compared to the oppressive public spaces of the past. The times covered are real enough in a historic perspective. The conversations (with the man in black and with Carola) are highly personal, but not threatening nor intimidating. Rather, they unleash withheld memories of a traumatic past, and, in so doing, they reveal "the day to day lives of ordinary women and girls who, like Martín Gaité, grew up in the stultifying atmosphere of the 1940's and 1950's" (*ibid.*:239).

Apart from these more or less fantastic elements, there are continuous flashbacks into the past and flash forwards into the present. Episodes of the past such as C's years of childhood, adolescence or adulthood are intertwined with moments of the present. Actually it is the present (in the story) that makes it possible to reveal the past. Martín Gaité said at the time the novel was published that seeing Franco's funeral on TV gave her the impulse to write this book. Franco's death meant the end of his authoritarian, patriarchal and repressive regime with its censorship etc. C's account, therefore, serves two purposes. One public or collective, to uncover some aspects of the situation of women in Franco times, and the other, cathartic and personal, to deal with the past in order to overcome it and move forward.

The question of identity is present as well, as C, and Spaniards in general had to find or create their identity in an entirely new and different situation. By weaving together threads of the past while viewing them from the present, a narrative identity is created, as Ricoeur says (1996). A narrative identity necessarily implies an ethical stance as well, as the narrator will approve or disapprove of certain things. In C's account, for instance, there is a clear ethical

stance against the lies, the superficiality and the patriarchal authoritarianism of Franco's forty year regime. Likewise, there is an approval of the liberties of democracy, of women's rights and freedom of expression. But it would be incorrect to reduce the ethics present in *the Back Room* to a past seen as evil and a present seen as good. The narrator is careful to nuance such matters.

The shadows of the past are brought to the fore by recounting them. The act of recounting brings with it knowledge of oneself, an identity that is created by linking past and present to one another. In that way *The Back Room* makes use of fantastic elements as a means of rekindling memories that should not be forgotten.

Soldiers of Salamin

This novel is divided into three parts, first a background introduction to why it was written, second, an account of the life and actions of Rafael Sánchez Mazas and third, a search for the unknown hero who supposedly saved the life of this historic fascist. As with Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room* this novel is one of autofiction, with certain autobiographic elements and identical names of the authors and their main characters.

In *Soldiers of Salamin*, the narrator named Javier Cercas is a journalist and unsuccessful novelist who, following the death of his father learns of the curious fate of a fascist of his own father's generation, Rafael Sánchez Mazas and wishes to investigate it. This nationalist ideologist had been captured by the republican militia towards the end of the Spanish Civil war and sentenced to death. The execution of this and other prisoners was to take place in the woods of Catalonia. Sanchez Mazas somehow managed to hide in the woods at the moment the firing squad was preparing to shoot but was tracked down by one of the militiamen who, for some reason, decided not to turn him in. Sánchez Mazas survived for some time in the woods thanks to the help of local people, some of them deserters of the republican side. Once Franco had taken power, Sanchez Mazas was made a minister, but eventually lost his power and influence in Spanish politics. In order to complete the novel, the narrator sets out in quest of the anonymous militiaman who let Sanchez Mazas live. In doing so, he creates a fictive hero who represents the losers' side in the Civil War, a mercenary in other wars and finally an ageing man in a home for the elderly in Dijon, France. A hero invested in qualities such as unselfishness, courage, simplicity and dignity that contrast with the lesser qualities of the fascist ideologist.

Soldiers of Salamin does not easily qualify as a fantastic novel if one looks for supernatural elements. But it does leave the narrator and the reader in a state of hesitation and doubt when it comes to the character Miralles, the supposed militiaman who saved Sanchez Mazas life. Some readers have believed that Miralles, like Sanchez Mazas, existed in reality and have even tried to get in touch with him. Others have seen him as a fictive, ideal character, a counterpart to the fascist ideologist, a character that gives a certain balance to the story. The narrator tells of him as if he were real, but even he remains uncertain if Miralles indeed was the good-hearted soldier. The narrator's curiosity and longing to find this unknown hero makes him assume he has indeed found him in a home for the elderly in Dijon. But when he asks Miralles if he did save Sanchez Mazas life, Miralles keeps him in suspense but finally, at

the end of their conversation, answers “no”. The narrator leaves him and returns to Spain with a feeling that his own personal life has taken a turn for the better thanks to their encounter. He daydreams of a happy, fulfilled life, a family of his own and a circle of close ones including Miralles. So ends the novel.

Is this doubt sufficient to consider *Soldiers of Salamin* a fantastic novel? Theoretically speaking, perhaps not. But considering Borges’ aforementioned words, “all literature is fantastic since it is made up of symbols and dreams” and the heterogeneity of Spanish fantastic literature, certain fantastic attributes may certainly be attributed to this novel. One of the main symbols is that of movement, travel, a symbol of ongoing change, progress and new horizons, not least new intellectual and emotional horizons. It is not only the narrator who travels, Sanchez Mazas, a symbol of the loathed Franco regime, travels as well, first in an attempt to escape the civil war, then erring in the woods in search of safety. His movements were neither particularly glorious nor heroic, quite the contrary, whereas Miralles movements from one militia to another, perhaps more as a way of making a living than for ideological causes, are depicted as being heroic.

The dreams present in this novel do not take place during sleep nor are they made up of miscellaneous memories and experiences. Rather, they are life-giving impulses that impel the characters (the narrator being one of them) to pursue their objectives. Sanchez Mazas was not only an ideologist, he was also a writer. The narrator unwillingly identifies himself with him as he feels he is a mediocre, unpublished writer. Cercas realises that Sanchez Mazas also dreamt of writing successfully and understands that even “bad” people can have noble dreams. Thus the ethical aspects are somewhat nuanced insofar as the “disapproval” of Sanchez Mazas is somewhat mitigated. Nonetheless, there remains an ethical polarization between the fictive hero Miralles (who, incidentally, has no dreams or aspirations) and the historic antihero Sanchez Mazas.

As was the case with Carmen Martín Gaité’s *The Back Room* the novel of Javier Cercas carries a search for identity molded into the metafictional elements. But whereas C, in *The Back Room*, sought her identity on the threshold to a new reality by delving into the shadows of her own past being, Cercas, in *Soldiers of Salamin*, seeks his identity in former generations that represented a divided Spain, as though the decades that have passed have not healed the wounds of that division. Cercas, like C., writes in order to put the pieces of his personal jigsaw puzzle into place. In doing so, he takes on a collective quest for identity by investigating the shadows left by two ideological representatives of the past.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the common denominators of these two novels can be summarized as metafiction, autofiction, memory and identity. Fantasy is not so much a goal as a means to form engaging stories that may touch readers individually and collectively. Thus, traumas and wounds of Spain’s historical past are brought to the fore by imagination, dreams and symbols. The quest for identity, for something that gives a sense of belonging, of being and of pride, was profoundly severed by the civil war and its aftermath. These two authors, of different

generations, bring out the emotions such as fear and anger, but also hope of their contemporaries.

Returning to Todorov's emphasis on hesitation or doubt as a central element of fantastic literature, I believe it is possible to conclude that *The Back Room* and *Soldiers of Salamin* leave narrators and readers alike in a state of hesitation when it comes to judging characters in ethical terms of good or evil.

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