

**“PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF
HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION: TEMPORAL
INSTABILITY, ‘AUTHORITY’ AND AUTHORSHIP
IN *THE MEMOIRS OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS*;
WITH *STEPHEN MARLOWE*”^{*1}**

Mónica Calvo Pascual**

Abstract: After presenting Stephen Marlowe’s 1987 *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* as a prototypical example of ‘historiographic metafiction,’ this paper focuses on the features that make it a special case in the U.S. trend of postmodern historical novel. The positioning of a historical personage as autodiegetic narrator and critic of earlier historiography on his life and enterprise brings about a radicalization of the attacks upon the authority, efficiency and ‘objectivity’ of History. This innovative strategy is used to further not only the novel’s de-legitimatization of traditional historiography but also the self-deconstructive challenge it launches against the concepts of authority and authorship in Marlowe’s novel itself.

Keywords: History, Historiographic metafiction, temporal instability, authority.

Resumen: Tras presentar la novela de Stephen Marlowe *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* (1987) como un ejemplo prototípico de ‘metaficción historiográfica’, este artículo estudia las características que la alejan de la tradición norteamericana. La posición de un personaje histórico como narrador autodiegético y crítico de sus propios biógrafos trae consigo una radicalización de los ataques contra la autoridad, eficiencia y “objetividad” de la Historia convencionalmente vertidos por la metaficción historiográfica. Marlowe utiliza esta estrategia innovadora para llevar más allá no sólo la deslegitimación de la historiografía tradicional, sino también el desafío auto-deconstructivo de los conceptos de autoridad y autoría en la propia novela de Marlowe.

Palabras clave: Historia, metaficción historiográfica, inestabilidad temporal, autoridad.

Hegel came, and writers found that Aristotelian guarantees of mimetic seriousness for art were subsumed under the category of the past. From this teleological perspective history is in effect to be understood as logos itself, with a temporal dimension; and if art or literature once offered access to that logos, to that realm of

* Date of reception: October 2005

Date of acceptance and final version: June 2006

¹ The research carried out for this paper has been funded by the D. G. I., Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, Dirección General de Investigación, through research project HUM 2004-00344.

** Assistant Professor, Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Universidad de Zaragoza.

✉ mocalvo@unizar.es.

the true and the real, it could only be in the past. To the historical mind, to the *Geist* that realizes itself by thinking itself, art was now a *Vergangenes*, overtaken by the historical development of, logically enough, history. With Hegel, and then Marx, history becomes the master discourse that can by definition lay claim to a grasp of the totality of what is and therefore of what was. (Thiher 1990: 11)

History became an Absolute in the nineteenth century. Even though each historical period was characterized by its own profile, collectively there could be but a single History. The incorporation of historical events in fiction never questioned the authority and ‘truthfulness’ of History as an academic discipline. On the contrary, the ‘participation’ of historical novels and history plays in History did “compensate for the abstract quality of academic history by bringing the past to life,” by making history seem “natural and imaginable in concrete human terms” (Steinmetz 1995: 90-91, 82).

However, from the early twentieth century, the authority of History as a master discourse started to be questioned due to several factors. For a start, the experience of two World Wars awakened critical attitudes towards all historical concepts. Twentieth-century writers became aware of the ideological character of language and narrative (Steinmetz 1995: 92-94). For its part, the development of mass media like television brought to light the existence of different cultures and histories previously invisible due to geographical distance (Benedict 1995: 119). As David Bennett argues, all the teleological master narratives “which once provided historiography with such grounding universals as human knowledge or reason, labour, class, and capital” –i.e., the humanist Enlightenment, the Marxist and the liberal capitalist metanarratives of emancipation– “have been revealed as the fallible projections of local rather than global interests” (1990: 262). With the destabilizing of these grand narratives, “the very grounds of social and cultural periodization have seemed to dissolve. [...] History has been radically “relativized,” fissuring into a multiplicity of contingent, ‘local’ narratives or ‘micro-histories,’ discontinuous and incommensurable ‘times,’ whose interrelations are –in the absence of universals– uninterpretable” (262).

The end of History went hand in hand with the fall of historiography, which became inevitable after the advent in the 1960s of post-structuralist theories that put forth the autonomy of language as a social construct totally independent from the realm of reference. This general questioning of History as a global notion and its parallel dissemination into a multiplicity of (*hi*)stories has been accompanied by a change in the relation between the realms of factuality and fiction in the contemporary ‘historical novel.’ Linda Hutcheon explains that, in the postmodern historical novel that she denominates ‘historiographic metafiction,’ “History is not made obsolete: it is, however, being rethought –as a human construct” (1988: 16). “The postmodern,” she proposes, “appears to coincide with a general cultural awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation which do not *reflect* society so much as *grant* meaning and value within a particular society” (Hutcheon, 1989: 8).

This awareness materializes in postmodern historiographic metafiction and its exposure of narrative as a linguistic artifact. Metafictional works self-consciously call attention to

their ontological status as a play of signifiers without referents by purposefully combining historical and fictional events and characters. The resulting confusion of attested historical fact and invention brings to the fore the erasure of the limits traditionally imposed between them.

Stephen Marlowe's 1987 novel *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus; with Stephen Marlowe*, like so many contemporary examples of historiographic metafiction, challenges traditional views of the authority and objectivity of History in a variety of ways. For a start, the narrator's exposure of the ideological nature of historiography and its manipulations of 'facts' in order to suit the historian's interests are recurrent and straightforward. For instance, he says of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, one of the first biographers to recount the discoverer's life and enterprise –“that pious old fraud, [...] primarily a local colorist and plagiarist:” “How could he have written of my strange service to the man who one day would mount the throne of St Peter? Still, it should be apparent to anyone who's read this far that the Roman years were crucial to my development” (Marlowe 1992: 12).

From beginning to end, historical and fictional events and characters acquire the same status in Marlowe's novel through a combination that makes it difficult to distinguish them. Historical figures like the Pinzón Brothers, Bobadilla, the Duke of Medinaceli, Luis de Santángel, Guacanagarí, Juan Cosa, Pope Alexander VI or Tomás de Torquemada are brought to life in a net of interrelations with fictional characters like the pro-Jewish activist Petenera Torres (also known as 'the Blue Pimpernel'), Yego Clone (Columbus's Indian adopted son) or the ludicrously named 'Duke of Chispa de Cienmaricones.'

As has become conventional in writings of this kind, plots develop in a highly metafictional narrative frame. Self-reflexive comments permeate the novel. For instance, the narrator explains to his advantage the intertextual echoes brought in by his (fictional) lover's pseudonym:

‘How can this be?’ Perhaps you [the reader] are asking the same question. A Blue Pimpernel, in the late fifteenth-century Spain? But wasn't the Pimpernel scarlet, and didn't he (it was a he, wasn't it?) rescue eighteenth-century noblemen from the French Revolution –at least according to the 1905 Baroness Orczy novel? This later usage of the Pimpernel has to be more than coincidence. All I can conclude is that the secret network at whose head stood that reckless beauty Petenera Torres was not entirely forgotten through the centuries, and that the bestselling baroness recognized a good subject when she saw it. She simply changed the Blue Pimpernel to Scarlet. Fair enough. Anyway, that was all after my time though before yours. But your before is frequently my after, and we shouldn't let it cause confusion. (273)

The narrator's self-consciousness extends also to his literary style on certain occasions: “Some time later... Here I had better resort to the ellipsis or three-dot school of writing, which I try to avoid except for special effects. But I had a ship to catch” (288). In others, he allows himself to emulate the English forefather of metafiction, Laurence Sterne, in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767), as when he warns: “(The reader may wish to refer to pages 331-2 before going on)” (352).

Not only the narrator's playful self-consciousness but also the deliberately eclectic, anarchic quality of the novel are made evident when he advances some possible complaints about the work he is in the process of writing:

Sooner or later some well-meaning critic is bound to ask, “Are you writing an autobiography, a historical novel, a romance, or what?”

To which I’ll answer promptly, “Or what.”

He’ll say, “But why all the anachronisms? Can’t you at least stick to your own century?”

I’ll try to explain that my anachronisms are intentional. For isn’t capturing the essence of a bygone day something like translating poetry? Doesn’t the spirit of the original matter more than mere vocabulary? [...] “But you’re flouting all the rules.” “My voyages of discovery didn’t exactly follow the rules. So why should my memoirs?” [...] This book is certainly historical, and I hope even historic. I like to think it’s romantic sometimes, too. (377-378)

The passage above declares a wish to avoid worn-out conventions and generic classifications and, once again, it goes a step further. As Abigail Lee Six explains, flouting the rules “indicates their arbitrariness, demonstrating what Lyotard sees as the consequences of the postmodern process of delegitimatization: “The classical dividing lines between the various fields... are thus called into question –disciplines disappear, overlappings occur at the borders.... Frontiers... are in constant flux” (1990: 36; dots in the original). The limits between history and fiction appear definitively eroded in Marlowe’s novel, even more so when the distinctions between life and text dissolve –or, rather, when the first is reduced to the second, as can be inferred from quotes like “as my parents did in Chapter I, scene one [...]” (320).

The demolition of History is launched, simultaneously, from yet another front. In one of his self-reflexive, philosophical musings, the narrator resorts to a classical authority to define the import of History: “What’s the purpose of history? According to the father of all historians, Herodotus of Halicarnasus (c. 480-425 BC), it’s to perpetuate the memory of ‘great and wonderful deeds’” (462). It is most ironic that this assertion comes by the end of the novel, when its foundations have been undermined in advance by the continuous deconstruction of the importance of historical events and characters, which are reduced to a play of sheer chance occurrences. The sentence that opens the book parodically replies to one of Einstein’s most famous assertions:² “History is, mostly, a toss of the dice” (1). The life of Christopher Columbus is presented as a series of lucky accidents that happen “in the right order” for their outcome to lead to other accidents in a sort of chain reaction. In this context, Marlowe’s Christopher Columbus is right when he ponders that “some pages back I wrote about glory and destiny, but at times I can’t help thinking these words mean only that the accidents of life happen in the right order” (96). He subsequently produces a series of questions in an attempt to decide if the ‘accidents’ that led to his becoming a sailor were “fate or happenstance” (96), which reinforces the readers’ view of the narrator’s life as a series of well-timed coincidences. Just to mention some of the initial examples: everything begins when a man in the Italian Court pays a society of assassins, ‘the Brotherhood of the Golden Stag (or Hind),’ to kill teenage Columbus after his discovery of the adolescent’s sexual relationship with the man’s wife (25). Columbus sails for England in his escape from the assassins (27), but his ship sinks (36) and he arrives at the Portuguese coast (36) where he meets Captain Perestrello –a defender of the round-earth theories– and his little daughter, Felipa (40). It is the girl’s precocious desire for Christopher that

² ‘God does not play dice with the Universe!’ (in Prigogine and Stengers 1985: 271).

precipitates their wedding when he arrives *just in time* to witness the frustrated wedding ceremony of the girl and his brother Barto, and the discoverer's ensuing inheritance of Captain Perestrello's letters and charts –which consolidates his yearning for reaching the Indies by voyaging West (81).

The novel's challenges the authority of historiography and the importance of historical deeds and heroes are recurrent and demolishing. However, what makes *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* an outstanding case within the category of historiographic metafiction stems from the special features that locate it closer to the European tradition of the postmodern historical novel than to the North American trend. As Francisco Collado puts forth, *The Memoirs* clearly departs from the average American historiographic metafictional text as the narrated 'history' does not center on the twentieth-century U.S.A., as usual, but on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe (2000: 107). Furthermore, the autodiegetic narrator of *The Memoirs* is the historical character himself –Christopher Columbus. But it is a Christopher Columbus that apparently inhabits a dimension where temporal limits have dissolved. As he often puts it, his wandering “off the map of time” (451) allows him to mingle the account of past experiences with comments on twentieth-century concerns like Freudian psychoanalysis (355), “Cape Canaveral and the race for the moon” (39) or the sanctification of Joan of Arc in 1920 (24).

The narrator's playful stance toward temporal categories plays an ironic game with the philosophers of history B. Croce's and E. H. Carr's beliefs that “all history is contemporary history” and that “history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems” (Carr 1983: 21). Furthermore, this use of blatant anachronisms, a commonplace in postmodernist literature, can be read as an ideological tool. Late nineteenth-century writers of historical novels found themselves constricted by the risk of psychological anachronism if they set to analyze or evaluate their characters' inner motives, because the authors' commentary would be informed by their own norms and values (Wesseling 1991: 58). However, these strictures are completely banished by Marlowe's free, self-conscious use of anachronism, which allows him to launch judgments from the point of view of his times' own moral standards.

Moreover, as Six states, to comment on present events is a transgression of the fundamental rule of historiography that the contents of history relate only to the past (1995: 35). Likewise, this strategy endows *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* with a more radical ideological position. As Amy J. Elias puts forth, “postmodernist historical novels break up the teleological line of history [...] in order to unmask the ideological assumptions and cultural dominations resulting from emplotted, linear historical storytelling” (1995: 111). In turn, historiographic metafiction attacks, through its disruption of linearity, “the notion that linear *narrative* is the mimetic counterpart to linear, progressive *history* (and hence attack the validity of traditional representations of history)” (110).

In addition, the first person narrator openly adopts the role of one more historian writing, in this case, his 'memoirs' and expecting “to be judged on equal terms with my biographers” (421). His position as both historian and 'autobiographer' grants him a vantage point over previous historians. Engaged in the task of filling in the gaps left by his biographers, Marlowe's twentieth-century Columbus unveils in a convincing manner the

inefficiency of traditional historiography. For instance, History Professor Valerie I. J. Flint complains that “the impossibility of establishing any direct link between Columbus and Behaim is one of the great frustrations” of historians (1992: 5). Marlowe’s Columbus accounts for it—fills in the gap—creating a kind of tragic romance subplot: “Martin Behaim of Nuremberg, a student of Regiomontanus, the world’s leading authority” arrives at Christopher’s house as “the emissary of the Florentine Ser Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli” (94) —and will get Columbus’s wife tragically pregnant. Likewise, Columbus explains how he disappeared from History during the two years after the Catholic Monarchs’ first refusal to sponsor his voyage to the Indies and how, in opposition to historians’ various speculations (cf. Manzano, 1964), he spent that time working as a spy for the Monarchs and drawing the maps that helped their conquest of Granada (139-141). History’s amanuenses are thus exposed as “readers of fragmentary documents” (Hutcheon 1989: 87) who ‘interpret’ their materials resorting to speculation or pure invention in order to make up for the occasional lack of factual proofs (cf. White 1986: 51). Curiously enough, not only does this attack bring documented facts and fiction to the same level, but it also becomes a self-aimed attack, as the narrator’s explanations of the ‘real facts’ are, of course, equally invented.

Going a step further, as a historical character returned to right the wrongs made upon his figure, the Admiral of the Ocean Sea denounces the lies historians have written about him through the centuries. Expressions like “this is one of those places where my early biographers really go off the deep end” (34) or “so much for my biographers” (19) are recurrent when the narrator explains, for instance, that it was not Christopher but his brother Bartolomé as a child who believed that the earth was round and one could reach the East by voyaging West (10, 14). Columbus even shows his anger in refutations like the following:

A word here about the so-called New World. I know that locution is preferred to my ‘an Other World’ —but why should it be? This world I discovered wasn’t new; it was since God or whatever created them. I mean, we’re dealing with two hemispheres of a single spherical planet, after all. My detractors, led by the champions of the Florentine Vespucci, claim I never realized I’d found the New World. This is a malicious semantic quibble, and my letter to Their Majesties is refutation enough. (424)

Columbus’s privileged position allows him to amend the mistakes made by historians, portrayed as the poor manufacturers of second-hand stories based upon partial written sources. Yet, the novel’s anti-totalizing intent extends also to the figure of the first person narrator, who frequently acknowledges the untruthfulness of some of his statements and writings as a character in the past: “Some historians claim I’ve been guilty in recounting my early life. Maybe. What autobiographer isn’t? Or even what biographer? One Bartolomé de las Casas, the next scribbler after my son Fernando to write about me, is a case in point” (8); or “I wrote elsewhere (not altogether accurately) that I went to the sea at the age of fourteen” (6). He discloses how he manipulated the distance between the Portuguese coast and the Indies in order to ‘sell’ the project of his enterprise to John II of Portugal (104) and how, in the First Voyage, he came to believe his own lies about the distance to cross so as to reach the land. He even admits to having lied to his son Fernando when he told him that

he had studied in the University of Pavia in an effort to embellish his humble, illiterate origins (502). This confession to the readers puts at the stake Columbus's reliability both as a narrator and as a historian –and by extension challenges any claim to truthfulness on the part of any historical record. Furthermore, this moment of sincerity brings doubts about any of Christopher's critiques of previous historiography, as it conspicuously undermines the narrator's earlier complaints against his son's biography.³

The narrator finally shatters his own reliability as a historian when he admits that, “of course, it is possible I imagined all this. In my day there was no clear demarcation between objective reality and the subjective experiences variously called metaphysical, mystical, delusional” (359). All the more so, when his attitude towards the validity of History gives a radical turn according to his interests; after constantly denouncing it as provisional, ideological and manipulating, he asserts: “*History will attest* what a thorn he was in the sides of these bold, simple, visionary men. So I think you may regard *my account* of our clash as *objective*” (417; emphasis added).

The destabilizing use of the first person narrator is brought to the extreme in the last pages of the novel. His deathbed reflections reveal his dubious status not only as the *author* of the book we are reading but also as the historical Columbus himself: “When I do get better, I'll write my memoirs. That's how *you'll* know. No memoirs and it means I died right here. [...] Or will you? Because some opportunist even crasser than Amerigo Vespucci could exploit this situation, couldn't he? Write a book in my name, and “prove” I wrote it by writing what I'm writing right here this minute” (564). One unquestionable conclusion, at least, may be arrived at: no matter the intention or status of historians, we can have access only to texts and, more often than not, they can only remit us to themselves or to other texts. This final assumption comes to corroborate Linda Hutcheon's assertion that one of the major intents of historiographic metafiction is not to “deny the *existence* of the past [but to] question whether we can ever *know* that past other than through its textualized remains” (1988: 19-20).

To conclude, an analysis of the features that make of *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* a special case in the North American tradition of postmodern historiographic metafiction reveals how they provide the novel with a sharpened ideological commitment. The thoroughly documented contextualization of the plots in a well-known historical period studied by generations of historians, together with the adoption of the role of autodiegetic narrator by a twentieth-century-minded fifteenth-century historical character allows for a radicalization of the critiques of traditional notions of History and historiography generally developed by the American postmodern historical novel. Thus, Marlowe's work goes beyond the confusion of fiction and documented factuality within a self-conscious narrative frame that has become conventional in the American trend. And it does so through the authoritative presence of the historical figure that can denounce the partial, interested, and insufficient use that History has made of his trajectory –an authority that, for its own contradictory, impossible idiosyncrasy, cannot but deconstruct itself.

³ Cf. ‘My own son Fernando put it otherwise. Young Fernando, unwilling to spring from the loins of a semi-literate nobody who ran off to the sea at fourteen, sent me in his biography (a book I don't recommend) to the University of Pavia so I could become a suitable father for the illegitimate son of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea’ (6).

REFERENCES

- BENEDICT, F. 1995. "From Story to History and Back: History in North American Literature in the 1980s." *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*. Eds. T. D'HAEN and H. BERTENS. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 115-132.
- BENNETT, D. 1990. "Postmodernism and Vision: Ways of Seeing (at) the End of History." Eds. T. D'HAEN and H. BERTENS. *History and Post-War Writing*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 259-279.
- CARR, E. H. 1983 (1961). *What is History?* Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.
- COLLADO-RODRÍGUEZ, F. 2000. "American Historiographic Metafiction and European Tradition: The Case of Marlowe's *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus*." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 7: 103-113.
- ELIAS, A. J. 1995. "Defining Spatial History in Postmodernist Historical Novels." *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*. Eds. T. D'HAEN & H. BERTENS. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 105-114.
- FLINT, V. I. J. 1992. *The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- HUTCHEON, L. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge.
- 1989. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- MANZANO MANZANO, J. 1964. *Cristóbal Colón. Siete años decisivos de su vida. 1485-1492*. Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica.
- MARLOWE, S. 1992 (1987). *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus*. London: Bloomsbury.
- PRIGOGINE, I. & I. STENGERS. 1985 (1984). *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue With Nature*. London: Flamingo.
- SIX, A. L. 1990. "Breaking Rules, Making History: A Postmodern Reading of Historiography in Juan Goytisolo's Fiction." *History and Post-War Writing*. Eds. T. D'HAEN & H. BERTENS. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 33-60.
- STEINMETZ, H. 1995. "History in Fiction – History as Fiction: On the Relations Between Literature and History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*. Eds. T. D'HAEN & H. BERTENS. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 81-103.
- STERNE, L. 1985 (1759-1767). *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. London: Penguin.
- THIHER, A. 1990. "Postmodern Fiction." *History and Post-War Writing*. Eds. T. D'HAEN & H. BERTENS. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 9-31.

WESSELING, Elizabeth. 1991. *Writing History as a Prophet. Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

WHITE, H. 1986 (1978). *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.