



# At the Edge of History: Notes for a Theory for the Historical Novel in Latin America

José de Piérولا

To cite this article: José de Piérولا (2008) At the Edge of History: Notes for a Theory for the Historical Novel in Latin America, *Romance Studies*, 26:2, 151-162, DOI: [10.1179/174581508x287446](https://doi.org/10.1179/174581508x287446)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1179/174581508x287446>



Published online: 19 Jul 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 85



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

# AT THE EDGE OF HISTORY: NOTES FOR A THEORY FOR THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN LATIN AMERICA

JOSÉ DE PIÉROLA

*The University of Texas at El Paso, USA*

*This paper presents a theory for the historical novel in general, and for the late twentieth-century Latin American historical novel in particular. Drawing on the theories proposed by Manzoni, Lukács, Alonso and Menton, this paper argues that the historical novel, rather than a genre with a fixed number of attributes, is a 'mode of writing' that creates and maintains tension between fiction and the agreed-upon historical record. By creating a productive tension between the reader's knowledge of the past — or 'historical competency' — and fiction, the historical novel makes the reader aware of the difficulty of deciding where history ends and where fiction begins. This difficulty, which is a moment of hesitation, produces in turn 'historiographical consciousness' — the awareness that history is amendable, partial, and ultimately culturally produced.*

In 1979, Yale University organised a conference to discuss the historical novel, and to pay homage to Alejo Carpentier, perhaps its most important practitioner in Latin America. In his keynote speech, Carpentier argued that, contrary to the Eurocentric view, Latin American literature had been more often than not the avant-garde, from the feminist writings of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in the seventeenth century, to the Romanticism initiated by José María Heredia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, all the way to the technical innovations of the literary boom of the 1960s. Then, he made two daring predictions. The first one was political. In the following years, he argued, Latin America would massively shift towards the left. He was probably foreseeing the impact of the 'Revolución Sandinista', the first pro-Socialist revolution to take power in Central America. The second prediction was literary. In the next twenty years, he argued, the fields of technology and academic theory — 'the fateful T', he called them — would become more and more specialised, a development that would exclude fiction writers. The field of history, on the other hand, would remain open, because the fiction writer will always be part of its 'mechanism'.<sup>1</sup> The following twenty years would put these two predictions to the test.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, with the subsequent break-up of the Soviet Bloc, was seen by some as the empirical demonstration that left-wing projects of a classless society were mere utopian dreams. The economic decline of Nicaragua after ten years of

Address correspondence to: Dr José de Piérola, Department of Creative Writing, University of Texas at El Paso, 500 W. University Avenue, El Paso Texas 79968, USA; e-mail: [jdepierola@utep.edu](mailto:jdepierola@utep.edu)

the Sandinista Revolution, as well as the increasing number of Cuban asylum seekers, seemed to support this view, producing a fatal crisis of confidence among left-wing political parties in Latin America.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1990s, as the dictatorships of the Southern Cone gave way to democracies, the void left by left-wing political parties was rapidly taken over by the political right-wing, which promptly implemented ultra neoliberal policies that increased the social divide and decreased political representation. There were liberation movements during these years — notably, the Zapatista uprising in Mexico and the Indigenous mobilisation in Ecuador, just to name two — but these political struggles sought to protect the rights of Indigenous peoples at the local level without the kind of restructuring of society envisioned in the 1960s. The period following the fall of the Berlin Wall seemed to balk at Carpentier's first prediction. Nevertheless, his prediction about the future of literature was right on the mark.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the historical novel, along with the 'novela negra', the Ibero-American version of the detective novel, experienced an unprecedented flourishing. In fact, more than 155 historical novels were published during the 1980s alone, with this number increasing in the following years.<sup>3</sup> The need to explain this phenomenon prompted critical attention, but the published studies were not completely satisfactory, as they refused to engage with the nature of the historical novel. The two studies most often quoted in the field focus on a number of aesthetic traits shared by these 'new' historical novels.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, responding to the postmodern scepticism of totalising theories and grand narratives,<sup>5</sup> these critics refuse to discuss the nature of the historical novel, a move that creates at least one methodological problem — how to delimit the field of study. Compelled to tackle this difficulty, Menton borrows a definition (p. 16), whereas Juan José Barrientos attempts one,<sup>6</sup> but in both cases their definitions exclude some historical novels. Most recently, Margoth Carrillo hints at the nature of the historical novel, calling it a 'hybrid', a term already in use at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but which hardly explains what a historical novel is.<sup>7</sup> Despite the unprecedented number of historical novels published in Latin America during the past twenty-five years, we still do not have a theory for their study.

Why is it so difficult to theorise the historical novel? The historical novel is a special case in literature. It seems to combine 'facts' taken from the historical record with freely invented fictional elements. The first difficulty is the problematic status of historical facts: they do not 'exist objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian',<sup>8</sup> but rather the historian selects them and shapes them into a narrative structure that will give them meaning through a process that Hayden White calls 'emplotment'.<sup>9</sup> I would argue that although we cannot ignore White, in the realm of the historical novel 'facts' can be understood in a more restrictive way, as those belonging to the accepted historical record, however transitory the latter might be.

In the historical novel, the combination of fiction with 'facts' from the historical record is done in a way that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate which is which: it seems to be a hybrid of two genres, but refuses to be read as either. Complicated by the perceived opposition of its components, the historical novel caused much concern among its early critics. Heredia, for instance, wrote in 1832 that the historical novel is a 'faulty genre' because it brings history down to the level of fiction, and fiction, he argues, is just lies. Heredia sees history and fiction as a binary pair in which history is the privileged element.<sup>10</sup> This was a prevailing view in the nineteenth century because historians such as Ranke were successfully claiming that historiography be granted the status of science.<sup>11</sup>

Heredia's view was partially shared by Alessandro Manzoni. In 1850, after writing one of the most influential historical novels for Italian literature, Manzoni argues, unlike Heredia, that there is value in fiction. While history delivers 'positive truth', fiction delivers 'poetic truth'.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, this distinction leads him to argue as well that the historical novel fails as history because it includes fictional elements, and it fails as fiction because it includes historical elements. Manzoni, troubled by this undecidability, argued that the historical novel is not viable. It leads to deception (p. 70) because there is a fundamental contradiction between the materials — history — and the form — fiction — in which they are presented (p. 72). This problematic aspect of the historical novel would remain unaddressed for almost one hundred years.

György Lukács, writing in the late 1930s, ignored the issue altogether to focus rather on the social function of the historical novel.<sup>13</sup> In one of the most cited works in the field, Lukács argues that the massive historical changes during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in conjunction with the new technologies of dissemination of information, produced the necessary 'historical consciousness' — the awareness that human existence is 'historically conditioned' (p. 24) — that was required for the rise of the historical novel. In this context, the historical novel is the symbolic site where characters representative of social and historical forces meet and resolve their tensions (p. 34). Usually focusing on characters that represent a 'middle of the road' hero (p. 38), Lukács argues, the historical novel resolves this tension on neutral ground, usually arriving at a 'middle course' (p. 37). There is a hint that the historical novel would have a role to play in the late twentieth century, when the 'form' renewed itself in a dialectical manner — 'a negation of a negation' of the early historical novel (p. 350). The 'form' of the historical novel remains undefined almost throughout the book. When Lukács finally gets around to explaining what the historical novel is, he resorts to using a convoluted definition. The social novel, he argues, is the historical novel of the present, therefore, 'we cannot separate the historical novel from the novel [in general]' (p. 169). In a striking lapse for such a comprehensive work, Lukács concludes that the historical novel, which serves as a title for his book, is no different from other kinds of novels.

In 1942, Amado Alonso made a solitary attempt to address the nature of the historical novel.<sup>14</sup> His main project was to solve the problem set out by Manzoni almost a hundred years before. When the historical novel uses fictional elements, Alonso argues, these have to express a 'poetic truth' — which he sees as the 'universal laws of [human] existence' (p. 111). On the other hand, when the historical novel uses historical elements, these are selected so that they also express a 'poetic truth' (p. 113). This approach allows Alonso to solve the problem of hybridity by diffusing it. Since both fact and fiction express the same kind of truth, then, there is no incompatibility between the two elements of the historical novel. In a very well known metaphor, Alonso argues that the historical novel is not made of pieces of copper and tin welded together, but instead copper and tin are fused into a new metal: bronze (p. 11). This metaphor could have solved the conceptual problem by moving the discussion of the nature of the historical novel away from history and fiction. But perhaps due to a strong Aristotelian heritage, Alonso makes a conceptual mistake. The historical novel, he argues, cannot be judged by the criteria of history; it has to be judged with the criteria of 'poetic truth' (p. 11), which is to say the criteria of fiction. This conclusion is surprisingly close to that of Lukács. It is not difficult to see at least three problems in Alonso's argument. First, he undermines his own project by not defining the

historical novel, and by suggesting that it should be read as a work of fiction, which, by his own admission, is clearly not the case. Second, he excludes historical novels that contain elements that do not present a 'poetic truth'. Finally, perhaps more importantly, he relies on 'poetic truth', a concept that suggests an unchanging human nature, which goes exactly against one of the main features of a significant number of historical novels — the radical historicisation of time and place, and, hence, of epistemological difference.

Interest in the nature of the historical novel lapsed for many years. Meanwhile, during the late 1970s, Hayden White made an argument which could have impacted on the understanding of the historical novel. Contrary to a practice which had seen 'history [...] as a kind of archetype of the realistic pole of representation' (White 1978: 42), he argued that history was a 'literary artifact' which resorts to fictional structures when it comes to organise its elements.<sup>15</sup> In fact, according to White, 'histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation called "emplotment"' (White 1978: 46). It is not difficult to see that historical novels rest on a process similar to emplotment. This should have contributed to the understanding of the historical novel for, as I will argue below, one of its effects is to question the writing of history. Nevertheless, during those years theorists were more concerned with the aesthetic traits that characterised newer historical novels.

Aínsa (1991), Menton (1993), and Barrientos (2001) review a wealth of novels, concluding that they share a number of postmodern<sup>16</sup> traits that make them different from historical novels published before. Menton proposes 1949 (*El reino de este mundo*) as the beginning of the 'new' historical novel, whereas Barrientos proposes 1969 (*El mundo alucinante*). Menton argues that Carpentier's novel is the first to incorporate a non-Western epistemology. Barrientos, on the other hand, argues that Arenas's novel is the first in which the narrative point of view shifts to that of a historical character. According to these critics, the 'new' historical novel, by using postmodern narrative techniques, proposes alternative accounts of history that question the agreed historical record. Yet, while their contributions are finely nuanced, none of these critics pauses to discuss how this is possible. Not surprisingly, when it comes to define the historical novel, they not only disagree, but they also have to make do with partial definitions. Menton borrows his from Anderson Imbert: 'We call "historical novels" those whose action happens before the lifetime of its authors' (1993: 16). Barrientos solves the problem by extending this definition to include novels that recount memorable events (p. 21). These two definitions are bound to exclude a number of historical novels in addition to those which do not use postmodern narrative techniques.<sup>17</sup> Thus we arrive at the end of the twentieth century without a consensus about the nature of the historical novel.

I am not dismissing the work of these critics. Each one has made a significant contribution to the field — Aínsa's coinage of the term 'new' for a clearly identifiable group of novels, Menton's incorporation of Bakhtin's ideas, and Barrientos's nuanced analysis of point of view shed light on several aspects of the historical novel. Nevertheless, I do argue that their contributions are limited by their failure to define the historical novel in a way that does not exclude novels which unquestionably belong to the group. If we do not understand what the historical novel is, it is difficult to make a case for its impact on, or relationship with, reality. What is the historical novel? How is it possible that it can have any effect on reality? What are we to do with its apparent hybridity? These questions must be answered before we can make complete sense of the historical novel.

It is not difficult to see that the theories proposed in the last one hundred years could be grouped into three different categories: theories that deal with the ontological status of the historical novel, or what the historical novel is, such as Alonso's; theories that deal with the relationship between the historical novel and its own historical context, a category that for simplicity I will call ethical; and theories that deal with the aesthetic features of the historical novel, such as Menton's. I would argue that it is impossible to theorise the historical novel without having some conception of its ontological status to begin with. What follows is an attempt to engage with that problem by developing a theory of the historical novel. Aware of both the pitfalls of totalising theories on the one hand, and the need for a theoretical framework on the other, I propose a model that does not define a 'form' with fixed and predictable effects on reality, but rather one that allows us to understand what the historical novel is, how it works, and how it relates to reality.

I believe that it will be useful to go back to Alonso's forgotten metaphor. He said that the historical novel is not the copper of history, nor the tin of fiction, but an altogether new metal, bronze (p. 112). Metaphors sometimes straitjacket concepts. In this case, however, the metaphor provides a much-needed opening to understand the historical novel. In the context of the voice in the novel, Bakhtin argues that when two different discourses are present in the same text, they come together 'not in a mechanical bond but in a chemical union'.<sup>18</sup> Keeping Bakhtin in mind — and the fact that his proposition bears a striking resemblance with Alonso's — we can theorise about the nature of the historical novel.

There are, in fact, two discourses in the historical novel: that of history and that of fiction. Therefore, in order to read a historical novel as such, we need to be able to identify both, but especially the historical elements. If we cannot see them, then we will read the historical novel as a fictional work. We can still historicise it, and read the projects that inform it, and so forth. In fact, many fine analyses of historical novels have taken this route.<sup>19</sup> But we still need to account for the process through which the reader differentiates history and fiction. Jonathan Culler coined the term 'literary competence' to explain the knowledge of literary devices and conventions that a reader needs in order to make sense of a literary text.<sup>20</sup> I suggest that the historical novel requires a reader to have 'historical competence', the minimal knowledge necessary to identify history in the historical novel. In this context, 'history' is not the unproblematic record of the past, but rather what is most commonly accepted during the reader's time — the agreed-upon historical record. This 'historical competence' will allow a reader to understand the historical references in a historical novel — although not without some hesitation — and, at the same time, 'historical competence' will make the reader aware that he is reading a historical novel. If this is so, then we have two effects. The immediate is that the reading of the historical novel is a hermeneutic act. In other words, the historical novel depends on the active participation of the reader to 'be' a historical novel, which explains why previous attempts to define the historical novel without considering the reader were bound to be incomplete. The second effect is a new problem.

For argument's sake, let us call H the elements from the agreed-upon historical record identified by the reader with the appropriate 'historical competence'. And let us call F the fictional elements identified by the same reader. As Manzoni pointed out, the problem is that the historical novel does not signal where H ends and where F begins. Put another way, H and F are mixed together in a seamless continuum. This forces readers to keep

asking themselves, whether consciously or not, how much of what they take as H is in fact F, and how much of what we take as F is in fact H? This questioning, which is a moment of pause, or hesitation, comes from the tension between fact and fiction in the historical novel. When Alonso argued that the historical novel was not copper nor tin, but bronze, he abandoned his metaphor because he saw this problem. On the one hand, we can still see pieces of copper and tin in this 'bronze', and, on the other, to complicate matters, we cannot see the seams. In fact, the latter are always moving, shifting, refusing to be stabilised. Therefore, instead of seeing the historical novel as a genre with specific attributes, it would be much more fruitful to see it as a process in which the reader has an important role, a process that depends on the tension between history and fiction. I must hasten to add that, as I will argue below, this tension is productive.

This allows me to propose a working definition. The historical novel is not a genre, as it was previously believed, but a 'mode of writing' that creates and sustains an unresolved tension between history and fiction.<sup>21</sup> This definition has an immediate advantage. The problem of classification of the historical novel disappears. In the first place, we cannot call it a genre, unless we are willing to review our understanding of the term itself. In the narrowest sense, genre is usually understood as a group of texts that share the same traits, such as detective novels, for instance, in which we always find a crime to be solved, a detective and a criminal. The historical novel, as Aínsa has pointed out (p. 82), adopts the literary currents of the moment — romance, realism, and so forth — but more importantly it can also adopt a number of literary conventions that belong to the so-called genres, going from the metanarrative to the detective novel. In a way, we can paraphrase Aristotle, and say that historical fiction in general can be written in any genre, and any form, as long as it creates and sustains tension between fact and fiction. The historical novel, or, as some critics prefer to call it, 'historiographical fiction',<sup>22</sup> is one instance.

This working definition, nevertheless, does not quite explain how the historical novel works. To this end, I would like to go back to Manzoni, who went to such lengths to dismiss the historical novel. Manzoni argued that historians sought to represent what he called 'positive truth', whereas fiction writers sought to represent 'poetic truth' (p. 69). These two concepts still enjoy currency. Historiography is much more self-conscious about its methods (White 1978), and more cautious about its findings,<sup>23</sup> but it still aims to uncover the truth about the past. On the other hand, the idea of the poetic truth, despite its overtones of Romanticism, is still part and parcel of the discourse of Latin American writers. Vargas Llosa, for instance, revels in his hyperbolic statement that fictions are lies that tell the truth.<sup>24</sup> Conversely Carlos Fuentes, on more than one occasion, has declared that fiction is the only means to uncover the lies of history (Carrillo P. 2004; Aínsa 1991). I understand that, in the wake of postmodern philosophy, the term truth has to be treated carefully. I would agree that most of what is circulated as 'the truth' is a construction created and sustained by discursive practices that reinforce certain structures of power.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, when it comes to the historical novel, it is difficult to bracket the concept of truth. What do historians and writers talk about when they talk about truth?

Considering the two most important currents among the theories of truth, I would like to propose a rough, but I hope, useful distinction. One current is the theory of correspondence. Something is true if in fact it is the case. The sentence, 'Columbus arrived in Guanahani in 1942', is true if there is enough evidence to support it. This is the kind of truth sought by historians. Theories of coherence, on the other hand, argue that something



is true if it belongs to a system of beliefs. The sentence, 'democracy guarantees representation', is hardly observable empirically, but it is true within a system of beliefs. This is the truth fiction writers talk about. This may sound very close to the 'eternal verities' to which Faulkner referred to in his Nobel Prize speech. Yet, when Vargas Llosa argues that fiction can deliver the truth, he is certainly talking about what we believe to be the case for human behaviour, a belief that belongs to a system anchored in a specific epistemology. This is not to say that historians do not resort to coherence, or fiction writers do not believe in correspondence, but in a broad sense, the truth of correspondence of historians is different from the truth of coherence of fiction writers. The historical novel, which does not fit in either camp, has been, understandably, the source of worry for critics and fiction writers. Which one of these kinds of truth does a reader of historical fiction choose?

Before I answer that question, I would like to propose a previous, much more neglected one. How is it that a reader knows that there is 'ambiguity' — as Cristine Mattos puts it — between history and fiction?<sup>26</sup> The term 'history' is a problematic one, as White has shown in several of his books, most notably in *The Historical Text as Literary Artifact*. But, as I argue above, when it comes to the historical novel, we can understand 'history' as the agreed-upon historical record. Furthermore, in order to experience any kind of ambiguity, the reader needs to have a sense of such a record — a sense that I have called 'historical competence'. This is precisely why the historical novel, by creating and sustaining tension between history and fiction, elicits active participation from the reader. Every time that we, as readers with 'historical competence', pause to ask ourselves where does history end and where does fiction begin, we are placed in a position of questioning the accepted historical record. This moment, being a moment of ambiguity, becomes an opening that produces several effects.

First, in the case of major differences between what we take as the 'most accurate' historical record and what the historical novel affirms, we entertain the possibility that things might have happened differently in the past, and, therefore, that we may need to change the historical record. Second, in the case of minor differences, we see the possibility that what is known about the past is only partial, and, therefore, in need of amendment. Finally, and perhaps the most disturbing effect, when some fictional elements bear that 'effect of reality'<sup>27</sup> that could make them pass as historiography, we become aware that history is ultimately written in the present by fallible human beings. This questioning in the mind of the reader springs from the tension between history and fiction that the historical novel creates and sustains. For lack of a better term, I call this effect, 'historiographical consciousness'.

The historical novel, thus, is a mode of writing that by creating and sustaining a constant tension between history and fact, creates a potential truth which in turn produces in the reader a historiographical consciousness, the awareness that the historical record is amendable, partial and ultimately written in the present. The advantage of this theoretical framework is that it focuses on what is particular to the historical novel, the tension between fact and fiction, providing at the same time a necessary entry point to any critical study. I would agree that it is possible to read a historical novel as a text that can be historicised to reveal, for instance, the underlying ideologies of the time of its writing. Nevertheless, I would argue that such analysis would be incomplete if it did not consider how the tension between fact and fiction is created, and why. I propose above that the theories of the historical novel can be grouped in three categories: ontological, aesthetic and ethical. I



argue that the tension between fact and fiction, central to the production of 'historiographical consciousness', is created through specific aesthetic choices, which in turn reveal the ethical project that informs a given historical novel. In fact, no study of a historical novel can be complete if the tension between history and fiction is not adequately addressed.

The post-Utopian historical novel is a case in point. This is a novel written after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, up to the first years of the turn of the century, a time in which utopian projects such as those embraced in the 1960s did not seem possible.<sup>28</sup> I am reluctant to call this novel 'new', in the sense coined by Aínsa, Menton, and Barrientos, in part to highlight the time of its writing, but also to encompass every historical novel regardless of their aesthetics. Written at the end of the twentieth century, when Latin American writers of the 1960s, influenced by Anglo-Saxon Modernism, created their own brand of postmodern literature, the post-Utopian historical novel uses traditional narrative techniques as well as borrows postmodern literary devices to reinvent itself as a mode of writing. Thus, we see historical novels written in the form of journals, memoirs, faux history books, or even as chronicles of historical investigations, in which the structure resembles that of a detective novel. These postmodern techniques are deployed to create tension between fiction and the agreed-upon historical record. In addition to the awareness that the historical record is partial, amendable and culturally produced, the post-Utopian historical novel produces a historiographical consciousness that engages with problems of our time.

There are many post-Utopian historical novels that could be used as an example, from *Estrella distante* by Roberto Bolaño published in 1996, to *En busca de Klingsor* by Jorge Volpi published in 1999, novels which both create a productive tension between fiction and the historical record while commenting on the issue of ethical commitment. For limitations of space, I have chosen *Santa Evita* by Tomás Eloy Martínez, published in 1995, as a representative example.<sup>29</sup> *Santa Evita* falls right in the middle of post-Utopian Latin America, and, in addition, it questions a model of nation that failed in the twentieth century.

Following years of ultra neoliberal policies implemented by Saúl Menem, Argentina was confronting a new economic and social crisis by the mid 1990s. Although the country appeared to have recovered from the Malvinas War in 1982, mainly due to the hopes raised by the democratic transition, growing unemployment, together with widening social divisions, set in motion a crisis that would explode in 2001, when Fernando de la Rúa resigned before the end of his term. It is in this historical context of a society deeply embedded in corruption, economic crisis, and the apparent failure of the democratic transition, that Martínez revisits the early years of Peronism through Eva Perón.<sup>30</sup>

The novel is constructed as a three-tiered non-linear narrative that contrasts the present with the past using a technique similar to that of cinematographic montage. One story is about the life of Eva Perón, from her departure from Los Toldos, her hometown, to the day of her death. The second story is about the many relocations of her body, from the time of its disappearance in 1955 to its exhumation in 1971, two years before it was permanently buried in Buenos Aires. The third story is the arduous process through which the narrator, following some conventions of detective novels, unearths clues, testimonials, and documentary evidence, trying to put together the pieces that would reveal Eva Peron the person, as well as Eva Peron the disappeared body. I would argue that, of these three stories, the last two are not only symbolically more relevant, but they also reveal the tension between fact and fiction that characterises the historical novel. In *Santa Evita*,

the female body, narrated with postmodern literary devices, becomes the aleph through which we can see the vertiginous relationships between the Argentinean present and past.

In fact the main character in these two stories is not Eva Perón. In the first one, Colonel Eugenio de Moori Koenig, is instructed to dispose of Eva Perón's embalmed body, and becomes obsessed with it. In the second story, the investigator, ostensibly a writer who shares a strong resemblance to Martínez, also becomes obsessed with Eva Perón's body. In this symbolic triad it is not difficult to see the Colonel as the Argentinean military and the writer-investigator as the Argentinean intellectual — which seems fitting, because as we might expect, although the object of their obsession is the same, the ends are quite different. The military are obsessed with the possession of the body, while the intellectuals are obsessed with knowing the body. In both cases, I would argue, it is the body that becomes the site for the conflict between desire and the possibility of re-imagining a troubled nation, but, at the same time, and fittingly so, the body is also the site for the conflict between fact and fiction.

Thus while the historical record agrees that the Colonel received the order to make the body disappear,<sup>31</sup> there is no documentary confirmation that the Colonel, reviewing the embalmer's records, 'no pudo apartar los ojos de las fotos que retrataban a una criatura etérea y marfilina, con una belleza que hacía olvidar todas las otras felicidades del universo' (p. 24); neither is there any record that, while viewing the body, he actually saw 'el cutis de porcelana y un rosado indeleble en la aureola de los pezones' (p. 26). It is quite possible that this happened. Then again, there is no historical record to confirm it. But, if we suspend disbelief for a moment, this obvious beginning of an obsession could explain why later the Colonel, disobeying his orders, keeps the body thereby re-enacting the disappearance that remains a mystery in the historical record. In the case of the narrator, we also read about his obsession: 'yo también en busca de su cuerpo perdido (tal como se cuenta en algunos capítulos de *La novela de Perón*)' (p. 64). In fact, Martínez published a novel by that title in 1985, but we will never know if the narrator corresponds to the author. Yet, if we suspend disbelief, perhaps we can trust the narrator when he interviews minor historical characters to show us the possibility of recreating the historical record from the margins (p. 64). Even in this case, the narrator's ostensible main intention is not to rewrite history, but to find out what happened with the body. These two moments of tension between the historical record and the fictional world of *Santa Evita* point in the same direction: the obsessions with the body of Eva Perón. In the recreated dialogue between the Colonel and the embalmer, the former says, 'Vaya a saber cómo el cuerpo muerto e inútil de Eva Duarte se ha ido confundiendo con el país' (p. 34). He probably meant, or had in mind, the body of the nation.

In *Foundational Fictions*, Doris Sommer argues that during the nineteenth century, a number of fictional works were the site of the symbolic representation of nation-building projects.<sup>32</sup> Using the form of romance, these fictions are 'stories of star-crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties, economic interests, and the like' (p. 5), whose union consolidates the nation, and whose erotic attraction ensures the production of the children of the nation. If in these unions, the female body, in addition to being the 'matter' that will bear children,<sup>33</sup> also symbolises the nation, one has to wonder about the implications of the obsession of the military and of the intellectuals with such a dead body. In fact, in post-Utopian Latin America, the female body no longer seems to be able to represent the nation.

Yet we see in the Colonel's obsession a relationship with the body of the nation that is quite different from that proposed by the nineteenth-century romances. It is a relationship based not on the union of 'star-crossed lovers', but in a vertical power structure, in which the body is possessed with a sense of ownership and control that betrays a certain anxiety. This perfect 'docile body' will be impervious to many forms of discipline and punishment.<sup>34</sup> The Colonel will possess this body, and mutilate it, carve on it, chastise it, and, towards the end, bury it in a vertical position as a final punishment. Nevertheless, Eva Perón, the person, seems to be beyond this 'terminal form of power'.<sup>35</sup> The Colonel, and some other members of the military who collaborate with him, will eventually experience some sort of madness as they realise that the body does not fulfil their expectations. In a way, they are punishing Eva Perón for taking a male role when she entered public life to become the first woman in Latin America to attain such political influence. On the other hand, they were disciplining the female body to force it back into a familiar power structure, yet, though they did possess the perfectly docile body, they never possessed the person. Moreover, given that this erotic attraction is never reciprocated, it was unable to produce the children of the nation. This seems fitting, if we consider that from 1973 to 1982, Argentina, subjugated as the body of the nation, became subject to many forms of discipline that included torture, imprisonment, and disappearance. The relationship between the Colonel and Eva Perón's dead body becomes chillingly allegoric. In both cases the extreme form of possession failed to consolidate the union that was necessary for its nation-building project.

But this is not the only kind of possession we see in the novel. Eva Perón's dead body is also the object of the narrator's obsession, yet he does not want to possess it physically, but rather through knowledge. In a search that spans more than thirty years<sup>36</sup> the narrator reads archives, interviews people, watches all the footage available about Eva Perón, but his interest does not stop the day of her death. One can say that it starts with her death, because in the beginning, for the narrator, Eva Perón was no more than 'una mujer autoritaria, violenta, de lenguaje ríspido, que ya se había agotado en la realidad' (p. 79). The whereabouts of her dead body becomes an obsession that in 1975, for instance, takes him to Berlin to search in the Argentinean Embassy's records (p. 308). If the Colonel resorted to the 'terminal form of power' to possess the body, the narrator resorts to a more subtle method: possession based in his case on the amount of knowledge accumulated about the body. The female body, as the body of the nation, is again the perfectly docile body, the perfect subject of knowledge for the male knower who controls how that knowledge is deployed. This post-facto realisation of their relationship with the body of the nation is telling. Whether the intellectuals are obsessed with knowing more about the disappeared bodies during the military regime as a means of reintegrating them into history, or whether they are accepting their failure to have known the nation before, there is, in both cases, an intention to intervene in history through Eva Perón's body. In de Certeau's words, 'between a *will to write* and a *written body* (or a body to be written), this writing fabricates [...] history' (p. xxvi; italics in original).

This is just a glimpse of *Santa Evita*, but I hope that it is suggestive enough to show that the tension between fact and fiction is a necessary entry point for the study of the post-Utopian historical novel, an entry point that also proposes a relationship between the present and the past. Unlike history, that can be understood as a way of making the past intelligible to the present (de Certeau, p. 3), the historical novel makes the present

intelligible in the light of the tension of fact and fiction set in the past. In the case of post-Utopian Latin America, this means to confront the possibility of an end of national liberation projects as they were imagined up to the early 1980s. In *Santa Evita* we see this as a double layered critique, firstly, of the model of the nation of the nineteenth century, based on a patriarchal power structure that is no longer viable and has become a dead body; and secondly, of the failure of the military regimes and the intelligentsia to re-imagine the nation towards the end of the twentieth century. Perhaps post-Utopian Latin American historical novels such as *Santa Evita* — along with other novels such as *Amuleto* by Roberto Bolaño (1999) and *La multitud errante* by Laura Restrepo (2001) — are asking us to re-imagine nation building projects following a thorough re-evaluation of the patriarchal structure that has informed them thus far. This is why the historical novel matters.

<sup>1</sup> Alejo Carpentier, 'La novela latinoamericana en vísperas de un nuevo milenio', in *Historia y ficción en la narrativa hispanoamericana*, ed. by Roberto González Echevarría (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, CA, 1984), pp. 19–48 (p. 179).

<sup>2</sup> This generalized decline of the left also prompted some parties to take extreme positions. The civil war in Peru during the 80s and 90s can be regarded as the last and most violent attempt to pursue some kind of utopia — although, within the Peruvian context, the term would need more than one qualification.

<sup>3</sup> Seymour Menton, *Latin America's New Historical Novel* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Menton 1993; Fernando Aínsa, 'La Nueva Novela Histórica Latinoamericana', *Plural: Revista Cultural de Excelsior*, 240 (September 1991), 82–85.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Juan José Barrientos, *Ficción-Historia: La nueva novela histórica hispanoamericana* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Coordinación de Difusión Cultural, Dirección de Literatura, 2001), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Margoth Carrillo P., 'La novela histórica: Las posibilidades de un género', *Conciencia Activa*, 21 (October 2004), 1–32, <<http://www.concienciaactiva.org/ConcienciaActiva21/conciencia6/0606.pdf>>

<sup>8</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: MacMillan, 1986), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 41–62.

<sup>10</sup> José María Heredia, 'Ensayo Sobre La Novela (1832)', in *Los novelistas como críticos*, ed. by Norma Klahn and Wilfrido H. Corral (México: Ediciones del Norte : Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991), pp. 609–17 (p. 615). Unless otherwise stated, translations from the Spanish are mine. The equation between fiction and falsehood still enjoys currency today, mostly among fiction writers, even though several works have convincingly settled the issue. See, for example, John R. Seale's 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse' in 'On Narrative and Narratives', *New Literary History*, 6.2 (Winter, 1975), 319–32, and Gregory Currie's *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Heredia's vision is most surprising, considering that González Acosta has argued convincingly that Heredia was the author of *Jicotencal*, the first Latin American historical novel. Alejandro González Acosta, *El enigma de Jicotencal: Estudio de dos novelas sobre el héroe de Tlaxcala* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México: Instituto Tlaxcalteca de Cultura, Gobierno del Estado de Tlaxcala, 1997). Brickhouse nuances this finding arguing that though Heredia might have written the bulk of *Jicotencal*, it was someone else who gave the novel its final form. Anna Brickhouse, *Transamerican Literary Relations and Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Whatever the case, Heredia played a significant role in producing *Jicotencal*. This disavowal of the historical novel by one of its authors is not unique, as Manzoni would prove a few years later.

<sup>11</sup> John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Alessandro Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> György Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965).

<sup>14</sup> Amado Alonso, *Ensayo sobre la novela histórica. El modernismo en 'La Gloria de Don Ramiro'* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires: [Imprenta y casa editora Coni], 1942).

<sup>15</sup> *Metahistory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> I follow Hutcheon's conceptualization of the postmodern historical novel. See below, note 22.

<sup>17</sup> I have argued elsewhere (José de Piérola, 'El envés de la historia', *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, 65, forthcoming) that there is no structural relationship between the questioning of narrative devices and the questioning of dominant ideologies — mainstream historiography among them.

<sup>18</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 340.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Kohut, *La Invención del pasado: la novela histórica en el marco de la posmodernidad* (Frankfurt Madrid: Vervuert Iberoamericana, 1997); and Ana Rosa Domenella, and others, *(Re)Escribir la historia desde la novela de fin de siglo* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Iztapalapa, División de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, Departamento de Filosofía: M. A. Porrua, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan D. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 114.

<sup>21</sup> History, understood as the agreed-upon record that a specific reader takes as such, will vary depending on the reader.

<sup>22</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 10, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, *La verdad de las mentiras: Ensayos sobre literatura* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990).

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972).

<sup>26</sup> Cristine Mattos, 'Una poética de la incertidumbre', in *La otra realidad* (Antología) (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), pp. 7–17.

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900–2000*, ed. by Dorothy J. Hale (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 230–34.

<sup>28</sup> More recent developments — the re-election of Hugo Chávez in 2000 in Venezuela and the election of Evo Morales in 2005 in Bolivia — have shown that social change inspired by socialist ideals still enjoys currency, but not in the way envisioned by the revolutionary movements from the 1960s to the 1980s.

<sup>29</sup> According to Martínez, the novel was rewritten several times during the last three decades of the twentieth century; but the last version, published in 1995, places this novel at the centre of post-Utopian Latin America.

<sup>30</sup> Tomás Eloy Martínez, *Santa Evita* (New York: Vintage Español, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, *Eva Perón* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1995), p. 489.

<sup>32</sup> *Foundational Fictions: the National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Judith P. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 138.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 92.

<sup>36</sup> According to the novel's internal chronology, the narrator interviews Alcaraz in 1959 (p. 85), he begins writing in 1989 (pp. 64, 385), and finishes in 1992 (p. 390).