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The representation of military dictatorship in female narrative of the Southern Cone

There is a topic that is recurrent throughout the last two centuries in Latin American Literature, this is the representation of the dictator as a pivotal figure on the Latin American political stage. Indeed, even before the advent of independence in the early 19th century, the dictator is already a strong character in early chronicles of the conquest that depict Spanish conquistadores who reminisce the behavior of contemporary tyrants when it comes to gain access to gold and power.¹ Nonetheless, it was not until the middle of the 19th century, when the incipient Latin American republics emerged as independent states, that the true novel of the dictator appeared as a literary genre within the realms of Latin American literary tradition.

There are four identifiable stages in the development of the novel of the Latin American dictator. The first one ranges from 1845 to the end of the 19th century. The second stretches from 1925 through the mid 1960's. The third and fourth steps take place within a very short periods of time, during the second half of the 20th century, namely between 1968 and 1975 and from the mid 1970's to the late 1980's. These stages are very distinct, each pointing out different aspects of this social phenomenon. I will briefly summarize the main characteristics for each stage, after which I will lay out some conclusions about the significance of this literary genre for Latin Americans who belong to the intellectual community as well as those who are peripheral to it.

In the first period there are three works that stand out as representative of the novel of the dictator, I think of Facundo (1845) by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Amalia (1851) by José Mármol and El matadero («The Slaughter House») (1871) by Esteban Echeverría. All three works portray the dictatorship of Juan Manuel Rosas (1835 -1852) whose bloody tyranny synthesizes the political chaos that followed the wars of independence fought in the South American Spanish colonies. Facundo and Amalia mainly focus on the ideological roots of the Rosas' tyranny, both novels suggesting that the crucial factor in the development of the dictatorship in Argentina - as well as in other Latin American republics - was the clash between the primitive and the civilized. This confrontation stems from efforts of Latin American bourgeoisie and intellectual elite, that were geared towards the creation of strong central governments, whose main objective was to civilize the primitive components of Latin American society, a goal that was at the stake because of the opposition of rural caudillos, who felt more comfortable with a federalist system that would preserve the freedom and self determination of rural areas. Indeed, men like Juan Facundo Quiroga (Sarmiento's antihero in Facundo) would rather see the country burst in flames than to accept the imposition of European civilization.

At this point, it is necessary to say that Sarmiento's work centers on a conflict of remarkable consequences in the evolution of Latin American nations; this is the marginalization of the native/mestizo component of society, represented in the novel by two men on horse back, the «gauchos» Juan Facundo Quiroga and Juan Manuel Rosas.

Unlike Facundo, that focuses on the gaucho's struggles to keep the pampas open to the individualistic gaucho spirit, José Mármol's Amalia concentrates on the maneuvers of

¹The link between the Spanish conquistador and the dictator has been suggested by Aida Cometta Manzoni in her article "El dictador en la narrativa latinoamericana." *Revista Nacional de Cultura* (Caracas) 234 (1978) 90-99.

the opposition exiled in Uruguay to overthrow Rosas, an opposition which did not hesitate in asking for the intervention of a foreign power like France and England in its efforts to evict the tyrant.

Two novels are to be mentioned in the second period; Tirano Banderas (1925) by Ramón del Valle-Inclán and El señor presidente (1946) by the Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias. Although Valle-Inclán is not a Latin American writer (he is a member of the Spanish literary generation of 1898); his Tirano constitutes a milestone in the development of the character of the dictator as it contributes with a satirical insight of the fictional tyrant, who is typified by his animal like physical features and behavior.

Although Valle-Inclán's depiction of the dictator does not establish a correlation with a defined historical referent, a close reading of the text suggests some resemblance of the main character to Mexican strong man Porfirio Díaz, who Valle-Inclán met personally during his visit to Mexico in 1892.² As for El señor presidente, Asturias's novel represents what literary critics still consider the prototype of the contemporary novel of the dictator.

Stylistically influenced by Valle-Inclán's Tirano Banderas, El señor presidente alludes to the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera in Guatemala (1898-1920), bringing the reader a hallucinating view of dictatorship from within the inner circles of power. Indeed, the vision of the tyranny represented in the text is filtered through the disturbed minds of the dictator and his closest collaborators, giving the reader the opportunity of grasping dictatorship from the perspective of the those who are in power.³

The third cycle of the novel of the dictator coincides with the outburst of Latin American fiction that came after the publication of Gabriel García Márquez's Cien años de soledad (1968), a novel that brought international attention and recognition to Latin American narrative, initiating what is known as the "Latin American literary boom."

Three major novels about dictatorship were published between 1974 and 1975. I think of El recurso del método (1974) (By Reason's of State) by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, Yo, el supremo (1974) (I the Supreme) by the Venezuelan Augusto Roa Bastos and El otoño del patriarca (1975) (The Autumn of the Patriarch) by Gabriel García Márquez. Besides introducing new literary techniques, which enriched the portrayal of the dictator's character, the three novels brought a new perspective of the tyrant and his world. Unlike in previous novels in which the representation of dictatorship stemmed from the impressions of tyrant's collaborators, in the narrative of the «boom,» particularly in El otoño and Yo, el supremo, this is built from the perspective of the dictator himself, thus adding a psychological insight to the character, who is capable of expressing feelings and emotions.

Unlike its predecessors, the narrative of the «boom» also innovated thematically, as it not only explores the historical roots of Latin American dictatorship, but also the links between dictatorial regimes and foreign governments and international corporations. The manipulation of Latin American governments by foreign interests is satirically represented by García Márquez in El otoño when the patriarch sells the Caribbean Sea to the United States, in exchange for political protection. This is also present in La fiesta del rey Acab (1964) by Chilean writer Enrique Lafourcade, a novel whose referent is the tyranny of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in Santo Domingo (1930-1961), where the French ambassador is granted exclusive rights for the exploitation of sugar cane in the country.

²Although not a novel, Facundo, and José Marmol's Amalia are the models for the future representation of the dictator in Latin American literature. For a detailed discussion of this aspect of the genre, see Adriana Sandoval. Los dictadores y la dictadura en la novela hispanoamericana (1851-1978), México, UNAM, 1989.

³For additional comments on the dictator as character in latin American literature, see Martha Palewy Francescato "La novela de la dictadura: nuevas estructuras narrativas". Revista de Crítica Literaria 5 (1979) 99-104.

The last phase in the development of the novel of the dictator starts in coincidence with the overthrow of the constitutional governments in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina during the second half of the 1970's. Indeed, after the military coups in Uruguay and Chile (1973) and the fascist take over in Argentina (1976), a different type of narrative emerges in the continent. This, new narrative, that I will call «the novel of the dictatorship» — in order to differentiate it from its predecessors — has three main characteristics. First it is a novel that constitutes a reaction to the of the military regimes of the Southern Cone, its main function being the representation of the aspects of life under dictatorship, that are generally omitted or censored by the <<official>> discourse of those in power. Secondly, because of its denunciatory nature, this narrative generally represents episodes that recreate experiences of individuals who were persecuted, imprisoned and ultimately eliminated by the repression. Third, unlike the traditional novel, centered in the character of the tyrant, the new novel is built around the testimonies and experiences of the victims of political persecution. The result of the shift in narrative perspective, which incorporates perceptions of the dictatorship that are absent in traditional novels, is a corpus of literary texts that are far richer in terms of their perspective, narrative technique and denunciative/subversive value.

There are two main types of texts within the category of the «novel of the dictatorship.» On the one hand, there are those that were written by people who personally suffered the excesses of dictatorship and wrote testimonial accounts of their experiences, such as Tejas verdes (1975) by Hernán Valdés and Prisionero sin nombre, celda sin número (1981) by Jacobo Timmerman.

On the other hand, there are texts that recreate events of the historical referent that constitute milestones in the social and political development of the nations which, because of their relevance, affect the foundations of national idiosyncrasies.⁴ For example, La noche de Tlatelolco (The Night of Tlatelolco) (1971) by Elena Poniatowska, a novel that denounces the Tlatelolco student massacre in Mexico City in 1968, during the Díaz Ordaz administration.

Because of its denunciatory quality and political commitment, some scholars and literary critics consider most of this narrative as political propaganda, or panfletary discourse at best.⁵

Nonetheless, a small number of works - mainly written by women authors of the Southern Cone - constitute exceptions to the general rule during this period. I think of the narrative of Argentine writers Marta Traba and Luisa Valenzuela and Chilean novelists Isabel Allende and Diamela Eltit, whose works have been broadly recognized for their innovative quality. Indeed, besides sharing the peripheral perspective of the dictatorship seen in the works of their male contemporaries, the female writers of the Southern Cone subvert the testimonial model in three different areas. First, they distance themselves from their political views, avoiding the overt political and ideological commitment so common in traditional model. Secondly, they integrate different forms of discourse, whose voices build a polyfacetic view of the dictatorship that sharply contrasts with the more or less monoform discourse found in testimonial narrative that emerged in Argentina and Chile after the military coups. Third, the narrators and protagonists are female characters that tell their stories from a «feminine» perspective, laying out a completely new vision of Latin American dictatorship.

⁴For a detailed description of testimonial narrative see, Miguel Barnet, "La novela testimonio: socioliteratura." Testimonio y literatura. Ed. René Jara. (Minneapolis: Institute for the study of Ideologies and Literature, 1988). 281-302 and Renato Prada-Oropeza, "De lo testimonial al testimonio: notas para un deslinde del discurso testimonio." 7-21.

⁵Ariel Dorffman discusses the defects of the testimonial narrative that emerged during the dictatorship in Chile, Dorffman criticizes its lacks of artistic quality as well as its sectarian perspective, when it comes to representing dictatorship. See, Dorffman, "Political Code and Literary Code." in Some Write to the future:Essays in Contemporary Latin American Fiction. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 159-60.

Four works stand out among the most relevant examples of the female narrative of the Southern Cone, I think of Conversación al sur (1981) by Marta Traba, Cola de Lagartija (Lizard's Tail) (1983) by Luisa Valenzuela, Por la patria (1986) by Diamela Eltit and La casa de los espíritus (The House of the Spirits) 1982 and De amor y de sombra (1984) by Isabel Allende.

Marta Traba's Conversación is built around the conversation of two women who meet after a long separation, their dialog allowing the reader to learn about minute details as well as most transcendent aspects of life under military dictatorship. In her novel Traba alludes to the systematic violation of humans rights under a dictatorship, representing the situation of the thousands of dissidents who disappeared during the regimes of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, (1973-89) José María Bordaberry in Uruguay (1973-1985) and Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina (1976-84).

“¡Y qué infierno Dolores! Un infierno nuevo, inventado, que hasta ahora no se le ocurrió a nadie. Sin decir nada, sin gritar, las mujeres levantaban las fotos lo más alto posible.
¿Para qué si nadie las veía? Calculé que no pasaría mucho tiempo antes que esas caritas casi infantiles fueran irreconocibles a fuerza de estrujarlas y sobarlas. Cerca mío, una vieja levantaba con las dos manos una foto de esas de estudio artístico de barrio. La muchacha de la foto sonreía tiesa, ladeando la cabeza como seguramente le habría exigido el fotógrafo. Estaba sentada con las piernas cruzadas, medio ocultas por un traje de tul. Otra llevaba una foto de carnet en la palma de la mano, protegiéndola como si se tratara de un huevo que acabara de empollar ahí mismo...
Justo al lado, una sacó de la cartera una fotito enmarcada en un óvalo. Me miró y se sonrió como excusándose. No tenía más que fotos sacadas cuando era chico, ¿quién iba a pensar? “ (Conversación 88)

As for Luisa Valenzuela's Cola de Lagartija, the novel is a highly elaborated representation of dictatorship, where the struggle for power between the Peronista Party and the military is symbolized by the struggle for power between the two main characters of the novel, one being an insane former member of the dictator's cabinet who has fled persecution, hiding in the jungles of southern Paraguay and the other, a female writer who is writing a novel about dictatorship, where the main character (the insane member of the cabinet) is gradually taking control of the process of writing, overriding the authority of the narrator.

Yo, Luisa Valenzuela, juro por la presente intentar hacer algo, meterme en lo posible, entrar de cabeza, consciente de lo poco que se puede hacer en todo esto pero con ganas de manejar al menos un *hilito* (énfasis mío) y asumir la responsabilidad de la historia. No la historia de la humanidad sino esta misma historia del brujo que se me está yendo de las manos, acaparada por él que fue gurí de la Laguna Trim ... (Cola 139)

Besides its testimonial quality, Valenzuela's novel's merit takes root on the constant questioning of the authoritative quality of literary **discourse**, **making it all but possible** for the reader to trust its meaning, thus subverting the message contained in official discourses.

Another important novel coming from the Southern Cone is Por la patria, by Diamela Eltit. This is a text that represents years of hard repression during the Pinochet regime in Chile. In this novel the writer represents the referent using a technique that relies heavily on a fragmented discourse and a dispersed plot. Both stylistic devices constituting an extended metaphor that represents the fracture of Chilean society during the 70's and 80's.

“Los camiones, con los caballos de fuerza de sus motores, parecían en estampida por praderas lejanas y gringas, [norteamericanas] como en una película del oeste aunque era de verdad que era el barrio que lo cercaban, custodiaban que nadie saliera indemne de la redada. Estábamos presos por máquinas en movimiento. En ese tiempo forzaron la puerta a culatazos, y sin que mediara vacilación alguna, le dieron el golpe de gracia a mi papá. No me me perdí uno de los detalles, como si fueran mis ojos y a mí el suplicio. Después me arrastraron afuera, donde el principio de la amanecida no escondía la suma de bultos atracados a las paredes, suplicando, doblándose ante las armas.” (Por la patria 43)

Isabel Allende's The House of Spirits, represents tyranny in a more conventional way. The novel tells the story of an upper middle class family in a Latin American country (certainly Chile), allowing the reader to grasp the process of political evolution and the underlying social situation that culminated in the free election of Salvador Allende, the first Marxist president of the Western Hemisphere.

Isabel Allende's portrayal of the dictatorship is particularly subversive, regarding the role of women under dictatorial regimes. Nívea, Blanca and Alba in The House of the Spirits as well as Irene Beltrán in De amor y de sombra battle for the rights of those living in the margins of society, endure the atrocities and finally denounce the crimes perpetrated during the military regime in Chile. This particularly poignant in De amor y de sombra, where Allende recreates the finding of human bodies in a deserted mine in Lonquén, a village near Santiago. This finding represented a historical milestone during the dictatorship in Chile, as it was the first time the government admitted responsibility in the assassination of political dissidents.⁶ Talking about her novel Allende remarks:

“My second novel is based on a real story.

In 1978, in Lonquén, a village about 50 kilometres from Santiago fifteen bodies were found inside a quarry. These were the bodies of fifteen peasants, killed by the military during the military coup.

This was the result of an investigation conducted by the Catholic Church in 1978, when I was already in Venezuela.”⁷ (Entrevista 41)

⁶In addition to the testimonies gathered by Allende through interviews and recordings, she also used information contained in reports on the finding of bodies in Lonquén, such as: Lonquén, (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Aconcagua, 1980) by the lawyer Máximo Pacheco from the Vicaría de la Solidaridad.

⁷For an insight of Allende's perception of the role of the writer under dictatorship, see Michael Moody, «Entrevista con Isabel Allende,» Discurso Literario 4 (1986) 41.

The number of novels and authors quoted above, as well as the presence of the dictator[ship] for more than a century as a character/theme in Latin American literature, allow us to draw some conclusions around this phenomenon.

The first is that, unlike any other genre, this novel has manifold qualities when it comes to assessing the significance of Dictatorship. Indeed, the novel of the dictator[ship] is a literary corpus that, besides representing fictional characters and their voices interacting in a text, also mirrors a perennial conflict of interest among opposing social classes in Latin America - namely the bourgeoisie and the middle/lower classes - whose disagreements about the distribution of wealth and power, have inevitably led (and probably will continue to lead) to violent reactions on both sides. If we are willing to accept this premise, one could suggest that, besides its artistic merits, the novel of the dictator[ship] plays a role that is similar to the one assigned to historical and sociological discourses, as it explores the roots of the phenomenon and represents the social and psychological effects of political violence generated by it.

Also, from a political perspective, one may posit that the discourse of the novel of the dictator[ship] constitutes a response to the rhetoric of dictatorial regimes as it subverts the version of the official discourse of the tyranny on politically sensitive matters such as, economy, health, education and human rights, which are usually omitted or grossly distorted by the media controlled by the government.

In conjunction with the aforesaid we could also suggest that parallel to its artistic goal as literary discourse, the novel of the dictator[ship] has a social function, this being exposing to an expanded audience what has been omitted by the tyranny, thus becoming the object of research by critics and scholars in institutions of higher education and intellectual fora, as well as source of information of common readers around the world.

In closing, the most significant corollary about the novel of the dictator[ship] is that this narrative is not exclusively about men seizing power as it is generally assumed. On the contrary, it is a rather complex literary genre that successfully subverts forms of authoritarian discourse, representing stories of men and women and how they relate to each other from positions of power and marginality.