

HARD-BOILED NOVEL AND REWRITING OF THE STORY IN *LAS ISLAS* BY CARLOS GAMERRO AND *SEGUNDA VIDA. LA GUERRA NO SIEMPRE TE CONVIERTE EN UN HÉROE* BY GUILLERMO ORSI

MARCELA MELANA*

ABSTRACT. In this article we attempt to compare two novels that belong to the hot-boiled genre regarding the Malvinas War. Our objective is to contrast the two ways of bringing back the memories of the war and some of its consequences from the fictional novel in *Las Islas* by Carlos Gamerro (1998) and *Segunda vida. La guerra no siempre te convierte en un héroe* by Guillermo Orsi (2012). We will start from the idea that the crime novel is the narrative genre par excellence, since it is structured according to conflict and enigma categories. According to Daniel Link (2003), the crime genre is seen as a model of the functioning of all plots which contain, as others cannot, such categories and allow it to develop. In this way, the problem of the truth, closely related to the issues mentioned before, allow the narration to continue as the initial mystery is uncovered. Regarding the memories of the Malvinas War, the literature still questions the way in which this experience should be told, thirty years after. That is why we consider that the comparative methodology, in this corpus of novels, may be adequate to make visible the processes that make up the memories of a military epic achievement, to reveal the power mechanisms, and to order, at the same time, its representation.

KEY WORDS: hard-boiled genre, Malvinas War, survivors, history, identity

All the syllables that were once omitted, come back.
Rodolfo Fogwill

Introduction

Several critical studies regarding novels about Malvinas War¹ and its survivors show that most of them have been studied together with works that

* MARCELA MELANA is coordinator of the Licenciatura en Lengua y Literatura at the Universidad Nacional de Villa María, where she is teaching an introductory course to the academic genres, and is responsible for the Texts Production Workshop. She is currently pursuing the Maestría en Culturas y Literaturas Comparadas at the Facultad de Lenguas of the Universidad Nacional de Villa María, Córdoba, Argentina. E-mail: marcelamelana@gmail.com.

1 Military conflict between Argentina and Great Britain in 1982 because of the quarrel about the Malvinas Islands sovereignty, Georgias del Sur and Sándwich de Sur. The clash between two nations with differences in their military power lasted from April 2nd

state the problem of the military dictatorship that took place in 1976 in Argentina. From that approach the topic of totalitarianism is illuminated- illegal repression, people missing, political prisoners, etc.- including the military conflict with Great Britain due to the islands sovereignty, as one aspect among others which are considered state terrorism.

According to some critics, such as María Teresa Gramuglio (2002) literature was present among the discourses against the dictatorial power, especially, in the early 1980s, and the democracy accession brought reconsiderations about the recent history of the country and the way in which it could be told. Besides, she affirms that the novels about Malvinas tended to reject an epic discourse about the situation because the nature of the events- almost unbelievable- led to a satiric, exaggerated vision, different from what happened with the literary works about people missing during the dictatorship mentioned before.

Meanwhile, Martina López Casanova (2008) studies a corpus of novels about Malvinas so as to revise the way in which romance literature has been representing, from different ideological and aesthetic framings, the state terrorism, and exploring, at the same time, how such war is represented; namely: how the Malvinas event is told, understood and evaluated within the literary discourse. The author concludes that the different works studied have similar visions since they show the problem implied in the way in which what seems to be unexplainable about such war should be narrated.

In this article we will try to compare different ways to construct the memories of the Malvinas War and some of its consequences from fiction, according to hard-boiled novel genre. To do this we will analyze the following novels: *Las Islas* by Carlos Gamerro (1998) and *Segunda vida. La guerra no siempre te convierte en un héroe* by Guillermo Orsi (2011). In our study we will start from the vision that literature brings up questions about how extreme experiences should be told, in this particular case of the recent history in Argentina-Malvinas War and its projections in time. Likewise, we understand that in both works the presence of the crime genre, as a structured discourse on the solution of an enigma, is an adequate plot to make visible the processes that make up the memories of a military epic achievement, to reveal the power mechanisms, and to order, at the same time, its representation.

To delimit the relationships established among novel, crime genre and recent Argentinian history, we will first analyze some aspects about the structure of the genre; following we will deal with the problems on the nar-

to June 14th in that year, day in which the Argentinian troops surrendered. Our country is still claiming its rights on the islands in international organisms.

ratives of the past. Finally, we will study how the categories showed operate in the novels of our corpus.

Architecture of the Crime Genre

The crime novel is a story about the crime and the truth; in this way, it reveals the way in which the whole narration works, by singularly articulating enigma and conflict categories, absolutely essential in crime novels (Link, 2003). In this way, the crime genre goes through a wide variety of discourses, it relates journalistic issues with political, moral, religious and social issues, and it gives new meanings to diverse expressive forms.

In crime stories, the truth is adjusted from a double discursive/referential game, in which the information from the crime world, evident or believable, is adjusted to the story regime. That is to say, while the crime case is similar the ones belonging to press series, the enigma resolution and the closeness to the truth belong to the discourse order and they only exist within it. This double game seems to bring the crime genre closer to the nonfiction logics.

Both in the classic or mystery series, linked to the English crime tradition, and in the hard-boiled novel, which comes out after the United States crisis in the 1920s, the character in charge of understanding and revealing the truth to the reader is the detective. So we can say that the detective provides a meaning to the brutal reality of the events, transforming things in signs, correlating information that isolated has not value. In this way, the inviolable and dark signs can reveal their truth through a clear mind which puts together the unconnected and fortuitous parts which are hidden by reality. However, according to Žižek (2002) there is an important difference between the two traditions precisely because of the way in which the figure of the detective is constructed:

the classic detective [is differentiated] from the hard detective in the hard-boiled novel according to the exteriorization position (...) The classic detective is not compromised with the story he/she is investigating, he/she is apart from the interchanges that take place in the group of suspects; on the contrary, the hard detective, as it is Marlowe, is trapped in the libidinous circuit of the people who are investigated: it is this commitment which defines his subjective position (Žižek 2002: 88, in Mattalia, 2008: 54).

Crime novels are also defined by the presence of the Law, that is to say, the guarantee of the existence of the state. The Law is related to two well defined characters from the beginning of the story: the police (institutional character and generally collective) and the detective (individual character). These actors act as a reference frame to organize the logic games of the investigation. In some moments they are close and mutually collaborate; in

other moments, they move away, whereas the state and its security institutions seem not to be able to solve the case. In light of this, the detective puts up the legality of his/her practice, only subjected to values of his/her own consciousness. In this way, the crime story “stabilizes a series of functions—the criminal, the enigma, the investigation, the enigma solution— promoted by two main characters: the criminal and the investigator, whatever character they take on (crime detective, doctor, journalist)” (Mattalia, 2008: 26).

The decisive aspect in the characterization of the genre may be the presence of a death, as a consequence of a crime, that is to say, a social anomaly; something that disturbs the order of a community (cultural, historical, geographical) and needs to be explained. This is how a discursive web which links crime and truth is articulated; a truth which sometimes cannot be reached by the state control structures and surveillance and which justifies the presence of a particular agent we have mentioned before: the detective.

In this way, discourse and truth are closely related through the expository work that the crime plot should have. A story is told by a series of guidelines stereotyped by the genre itself—at least in the two main traditions of mystery and hard-boiled. Likewise, according to Tzvetan Todorov’s (1974) considerations we can say, in general terms, that every crime novel articulates two narrations: the narration of a death which had already happened and that the enunciator displays in the first pages of the story; from this death there is only a body as a sign to be interpreted, and the narration of the investigation, which implies the concrete expository work showed in the text, that is to say, the moment to put a sign to an explanation to the readers, with the aim of justifying the presence of such crime.

On the basis of the mystery novel we can find a duality which guides us in its description. This novel is made up of two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. In their purest form, these two stories do not have a common link. The crime story has concluded before the second starts. And in this one, that is to say, the investigation story, a few things happen, the characters do not act, they learn. What is more, we can characterize these two stories by stating that the crime story tells “what effectively happened”, while the investigation story explains “how the reader (or the narrator) is aware of the events” (Todorov, 1974: 63, in Link, 2003). It is about two stories, the first is absent but it is real (crime story), the other is present but it is trivial (investigation story). The presence and the absence explain the existence of the two stories in the continuity of the plot (63).

From this point of view, the hard-boiled genre is different from the mystery series because of the way in which these two stories are related. While in the mystery series the second story starts when the first has finished; in the hard-boiled series the two stories have common links, and they also happen at the same time. The crime story goes on while it is being investi-

gated. The reader and the detective are in the same scenario and they are spectators who take part in the revelation process of the case.

To sum up, the crime genre is a “Reading machine” (Link, 2003), in which the events have new meanings from imaginary aspects subjected to the crime logic that the genre boosts to show registers other than real: violence, organized crime, corruption in all levels of contemporary society, etc.

Past Narratives

Some of the categories taken from the theoretical approach about novels related to history will allow us to study the works in our corpus, since, as we have anticipated, both address issues closely related with historical Argentinian events of the last decades of the 20th century and the first of the 21st century.

To begin with we will say that the traditional historical novel has been first studied by George Lukács (1937, 1976) based on Walter Scott’s works. The novels framed in the Romanticism or the Realism provide evidence of a descriptive style with a psychological deepening, and we find them associated to social change processes, especially, to the emergence of the national states and closely related with projects about identity in the 19th century. According to this author, the historical novel is born and it suffers modifications because of the bourgeoisie emergence and decline processes, and in this way, it notices about the historicity of the genre.

In this kind of novels the fictitious elements added to the historical representation should maintain the coherence of the documented story; in fact, the limits between history and fiction are remained clear, and the fiction can only fulfill the empty spaces of the official history.

In line with its historical dynamic, the historical novel has experimented consecutive changes, in the last decades of the 20th and 19th century, to finally become what is called the New Historical Novel, Contemporary Historical Novel, among others. These new narrative modalities are characterized by a critical rereading of the past which is brought into play through the rewriting of the history and, in this way, the reproductive ability of the historiographic discourse is questioned, especially, concerning the official versions.

So, we should do some observations regarding the discursive nature of the history and its proximity to literary fiction. In this aspect the work of Hayden White is highlighted since he started the discussion about the fictional statute of the history in his work *Metahistory* (1975). Framed in the context of ideas generated by the “Linguistic Change”, plus the academic tradition of the United States during the fifties, this author expressed his ideas from the elaboration of rhetoric taxonomy of tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. From the use of these strategies which are

appropriate for fiction emerge the possible ways to tell a story, as kinds of “events configurations” available for the historian in the culture he/she shares with his/her audience. Although the events are “neutral”, when he/she decides to insert them in a narrative plot, they are not.

From this view, historical documents are a conglomeration of multiple possible texts that must be interpreted. Likewise, the relationship established between the past and the historical works obtained from the study of the documents is “paradoxical” White (2003) adds, since “the more we know about the past, the more difficult it is to generalize it” (122). The past is seen as unfinished, to the extent that, from the changing perspective of the present, the perception made about it is not definite but it varies, since it can be rejected, enlarged, etc.

From this approach, it is necessary to consider that the perspective from which the past is dealt with is always ideological because it implies a selection and interpretation of the events and a way to represent them. A comprehensible past story is constructed from the decision of abandoning certain control of the events that could have been included in this story. Another characteristic of these novels emerges because of its close relationship with the political aspect, since they adopt a position regarding the documented history. In this way, the historical moment is selected, organized and interpreted from a specific ideological perspective, which questions or legitimates the hegemonic discourse supported by the historiographic discourse.

Besides, we should highlight that not only does the novel with historical matters imply a way of rewriting the History, but also a way of reading it. There is a supposed “reading agreement” made by readers Jauss (1972) claims that the reading contract regulates the process of making sense from the natural norms established by the genre as a convention, based on a “pre-comprehension” or pre-concept of what this narrative modality implies.

Las Islas and Segunda vida. La guerra no siempre te convierte en un héroe

As well as José Pablo Feinmann in *Estado policial y novela negra argentina* (1991) and later in *La narrativa policial y novela negra argentina* (1996) we consider that in the current crime narration there is not a character representing a classic detective due to the repeated corruption acts that join the police and the politicians in Argentina. So, the idea of the presence of a detective connected with the state structures disappears, and an independent subject assumes the pursuit of the truth and the solution of the enigma, by vocation or even by chance.

In this way, the novels we will analyze are based on the absence of a classic detective character. The plot constructs itself from the accounts of the

characters. “El Porteño²” in *Segunda Vida* (2011) says: “I can’t talk about you without telling this story, without reading at least up to the last pages, without coming back—in my way, the only one possible—to Malvinas” (229). While the main character of *Las Islas* (1998) understands at the end of his memory that “when I noticed that (...) I knew it: I was the only survivor who can tell what had happened” (572).

We can see that although there is not a detective, we can find a meaning in the story; the problem of the truth still exists, the difference will be the way in which the mystery will be cleared up, since it is about the formulation of questions that, as they allow the narration to continue, they delimitate a way to link the literature reading and writing processes as a way to explain the new configurations of Argentinian criminology.

In *La Invención de lo cotidiano I Artes de hacer* Michel De Certeau understands the city as a text that can be read in its many everyday manifestations and in this way he distinguishes between the ones who see the city from the cupolas of the highest buildings and the ones who walk in the lower part: “the crowd”. So he asks to himself: “To which erotica of the knowledge is the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos linked to? As I enjoy it violently, I ask to myself where this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole’, dominating, totalizing the most enormous human text is originated” (De Certeau, 1990: 104).

This distinction separates the ones who can enjoy the “visual and Gnostic impulse”, the ones who are risen and look from above, and they get “the fiction of knowledge” from the ones who are in the lower part, the ordinary people living in the city. The ones who are in the lower part are the walkers, whose bodies obey “the bold and thin print in an urban ‘text’ that they write without being able to read it” (De Certeau, 1990: 105). This is very important in the novels analyzed since it is possible to observe how these categories we have mentioned operate. Firstly in *Las Islas* (1998) the presence of two imposing and dominant tween towers (similar to the ones knocked down in New York in 2001) in Buenos Aires landscape is highlighted. Both buildings belong to the businessman Fausto Tamerlán and they literally guard Buenos Aires city from the exclusive spot of Puerto Madero, a privileged center of the neoliberal rage in the 1990s in Argentina, at the peak of Menem’s ruling period.³

That is why the most significant of these towers is their function as Foucauldian “panopticon” (1976), both are visual mega-devises built with transparent glasses and glass walls with secret doors and many mirrors that

2 Nickname given to the main character of the novel. It refers to an informal way of addressing people living in Buenos Aires.

3 This expression refers to the two presidential ruling periods of Carlos Saúl Menem between 1989 and 1999.

endlessly multiply the vision of what happens within the company (Gamerro, 33). That is to say, to be above implies having knowledge—apart from the businessman, only a few have this privilege and all wish it, a knowledge which means power, which controls the others, the ones who work for him, the subordinates. So, in Tamerlán's interpretation we can clearly see the symbolic dimension the character plays as a totalitarian subject, when he affirms:

Mirrors have their own power. They are primitive and elemental. The presence of a camera can be uncomfortable, it can fuel fear, but it cannot bring terror. Mirrors can. Even if you know that behind the mirror, behind what you see-yourself- there is always somebody else. The master watches us through our eyes (Gamerro, 34).

These literary representations can be read as representations of the violence and repression related to the military dictatorship that ruled in Argentina between 1976 and 1983 and caused terrible ideological, cultural and economic disasters in our country. Among the events that took place during those years we can find the war against Great Britain because of Malvinas sovereignty. In the novel *Segunda Vida. La guerra no siempre te convierte en un héroe* (2011), the spaces operate differently, there is not surveillance to watch the people living in the lower part, however there are intelligence and espionage webs with police officers moving around the streets recognizing people: the criminals. In particular, the look detects some of them, it is selective, it is aimed at a group of criminals, the ones that besides being criminals—they are charged with minor robberies- they are also ex-soldiers of a war without political and social legitimation from the country which started it.

Conclusions

It can be stated that both novels are closely related to the hard-boiled genre, as a complex text with many meanings in which we can read, besides the problems related to the current crime issues, deep political, historical and social questionings. Such is the case of *Segunda vida. La guerra no siempre te convierte en un héroe* (2011) y *Las Islas* (1998) which—although they were written in different decades- contribute to unmask the deep social differences caused by the neoliberalism in the 1990s in Argentina, the corruption in certain official areas (police-militar institutions and connivance of the ruling political forces, as well as the judicial power), in a corrupt society. Both novels constitute a particular way of representing issues linked to the current socio-historical and political problems in Argentina and the importance they are given, in the middle of strong social convulsion processes, to certain characters that have remained invisible during a long time: war veter-

ans. These soldiers that have been called in different ways through the time, from “the guys of the war”, ex-service-people, ex-soldiers, to veterans, finally understand and accept—as they tell their versions of the story—the “new life” they have. Without doubts, this involves feeling guilty of being alive with their “ghosts”.

Once more, Argentinean society, facing a generalized crisis process—as it was the military dictatorship in 1976, and as it was, within the frame of the books analyzed, in the 1990s and the 2001 crisis—is thrown into confusion and experiments deep changing processes, it needs—as well as these veterans—a second chance. As the main character of *Segunda vida* (2011) says: “Dolores, the whole country has dashed, not only the General Belgrano cruiser. Look at the streets, this bar, all shipwrecked people” (Orsi, 308).

However, 30 years after the Malvinas War, there are still many questions, may be because the problem may still be how the story should be told. In this view, the hard-boiled literature is a privileged aesthetic to rewrite stories that had remained in the memory, in the letters, in the soldiers and writers’ notebooks, and make visible complex sociohistorical and cultural process that Argentineans have lived.

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