

Present-ing the Past:
The Historicized Turn in Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness*

Frans Weiser

In an essay first published in 1989, Louise Montrose argues against pigeon-holing himself or other critics within the classification of New Historicism, maintaining that the theoretical concerns of this understood group are too heterogeneous to be reduced to a single movement. Instead, he suggests, what links these Renaissance scholars, and within the last decades an increasingly interdisciplinary group of researchers whose interests span various historical time periods, is a new orientation towards the study of literary history that highlights its textuality as a construction, but that can take on many distinct forms. He describes this approach as ‘the historicity of texts and the textuality of history’ (2004: 588). The notion of historicity he defines as ‘the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing—not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them’ (588). In other words, he calls for a meta-disciplinary awareness within literary studies in much the same spirit that Hayden White’s *Metahistory* prescribed such awareness for historians and historiography (1973). Inverting the phrase to create the second term, the textuality of history, Montrose goes one step further, stressing that we understand how ‘textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the ‘document’ upon which historians ground their own texts, called ‘histories’ (2004: 588).

Horacio Castellanos Moya’s 2004 novel *Insensatez* (translated in 2008 as *Senselessness*) is precisely about the process of making such documents and such histories, as well as the tensions inherent in the claims by literary critics regarding the capacity of fictional narratives to more effectively educate about the historical record than historiography. By incorporating real

documents into his fictional one, the Salvadorian author, in parallel fashion to Montrose, calls for a meta-disciplinary awareness by fiction writers relating to the role of intellectuals in the construction of memories, collective and personal. And yet his text is not an example of a distant historical novel, recreating the colonial or post-independence era of Latin America, but rather of historicized fiction, a term I will return to shortly in order to contextualize and define. In other words, it is Castellano Moya's orientation to the representation of history that I wish to explore in this article, for the author does not merely reference documents and histories in the above manner, but rather he appropriates them, suggesting a new direction in the textual historicization of Latin American culture and politics via its literature. Barbas-Rhoden argues that Central American authors face a particular challenge in constructing historical fiction that supplements, rather than supports, the historical record: '[s]ince in Central America, history has carried enormous weight in the construction of national identity, supplementing is a dangerous move. It threatens not just the past but also the present and the future' (2003: 2).

If Nicaraguan Sergio Ramirez has overtly incorporated recognized documents into *Castigo Divino* (1988, 'Divine Punishment') to facilitate the apparent veracity of this fictionalized history, and Argentine Tomás Eloy Martínez has incorporated written and recorded documents in order to demonstrate how the past has been falsified by the government in *La novela de Perón* (1985, 'The Peron Novel'), then Castellanos Moya incorporates excerpts from documents for a different purpose: to analyze how readers react to textualized traces of the past and in turn incorporate these historical narratives into their present experience to make them meaningful. Gloria da Cunha has suggested that there are in fact two types of fictional narratives about the past: historical, or those texts that affirm the official or accepted version of history, and intrahistorical, those which question the official version (2004: 25). She suggests that writers belonging to socially marginalized groups—often stemming from issues related to gender, ethnicity, or class—are more likely to interrogate the dominant perspective as a response to oppression, thus consistently producing the intrahistoric type of narrative.

Although Cunha is ultimately interested in theorizing historical fiction rather than making claims about historiography, her distinction has notable implications for the role of *testimonio* literature, a form of writing most closely associated with these marginalized groups in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. Jörgensen provides a basic overview by noting that '[t]hroughout Latin America, events of the past three decades have created both the need and the

conditions for the writing of what is commonly referred to as *testimonio*, or testimonial literature [...] a broad, flexible category of nonfiction texts which record contemporary events from the perspective of direct participants or witnesses' (1994: 68). An interesting shift occurs, for while witnesses may speak of the recent past, their testimony becomes a supplement to the unofficial histories—a window into the past—that have been concealed by dominant groups, which explains the association of *testimonio* in Central America particularly with women who belong to ethnic or social groups excluded from political participation. While some *testimonio* are authored by individuals, such as the work of Mexican writer and journalist Elena Poniatowska, frequently the witnesses are illiterate or lack the means to publish, and thus work with an editor who transcribes their oral histories. As an example of the collaborative approach, Jörgensen names the most famous *testimonio* in Central and Latin America, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia* (1982, 'I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala'). After catapulting into the spotlight, Menchú would go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize a decade later and even (unsuccessfully) run for president in Guatemala. Ironically, despite the best of intentions, the hegemonic power-relation is maintained in such testimonial collaboration, with the witness still dependent upon the editor, a representative of the dominant culture, to have agency, or a 'voice' regarding the past. This issue has received greater attention in the wake of the Menchú controversy (Arias 2001) that has raised questions over the accuracy of her personal history, as well as Menchú's own accusation that the anthropologist who compiled her *testimonio*, Elizabeth Burgos, purposefully misrepresented her. Nonetheless, despite the tensions evident in the process, Jörgensen maintains that:

[h]owever it is produced, most testimonial literature shares an explicit commitment to denounce repression and abuse of authority, raise the consciousness of its reader about situations of political, economic, and cultural terror, and offer an alternative view to official, hegemonic history. As such, it necessarily foregrounds issues of power, powerlessness, resistance, and subversion in the interconnected discourses of politics, history, and literature. (1994: 68)

I dedicate space above to testimonial literature because its conventions and its reception form the context out of which *Senselessness* is constructed. Alternately characterized as 'post-testimonial' (Sánchez Prado 2010: 79) or 'meta-testimonial' (Kokotovic 2009: 559), Castellanos Moya's narrative follows an unnamed narrator who is one level removed from the witness-editor

relationship apparent in the product of *testimonio* like Rigoberta Menchú's text. Exiled from El Salvador for his political writing, the narrator is contracted to copy-edit a report compiled by the Catholic Church in an equally unnamed country, although Castellanos Moya is careful to provide enough political and geographical allusions to suggest Guatemala City as the setting. The intrahistorical report in question consists of a collection of testimonies by indigenous Mayans regarding the atrocities and human rights abuses committed by the military during the country's prolonged civil war (1960-1996) and is similarly unnamed in the novel. Yet it too points to a real referent, in this case a document published in 1998 by the Archdiocese in Guatemala, entitled *Guatemala: Never Again!* Subtitled 'The Recovery of Historical Memory Project' (REMHI). The text marked the first time that specific individuals from the Guatemalan military were publicly named in association with crimes against humanity during the civil war. Bishop Juan Gerardi, the authority in charge of the project, was assassinated under military orders just days after the collection was published, a testament to the perceived power of the text to reveal purposefully suppressed histories. Castellanos Moya attempts to continue the process of recovering historical memory by incorporating short testimonial fragments, many taken virtually verbatim from the REMHI report (Kokotovic 2009: 548). Interestingly, the partial information and persistent allusions to political referents force the reader to become an active agent in, rather than a passive witness to, the narrator's deferral of political engagement.

Yet the issue at stake in the novel is not simply that of reproducing the words of these witnesses to torture and murder, but rather questioning the process by which these emotions can, if they can, be textualized and consumed out of their initial context. Alluding to the disappointment after testimonial literature's failure to create the political change that critics had initially hoped for, Kokotovic rhetorically asks how 'is a novel to capture the magnitude and consequences of the horrors inflicted on Guatemalans, particularly the Maya, in a way that will engage readers rather than leave them overwhelmed, desensitized, and indifferent?' (2009: 545). The answer, it would seem, is to dramatize that very desensitization, the senselessness that provides the title of the novel. From its first ironic line, the narrative evidences a divide between testimonials of the recent past and the intellectuals who interpret that past from the perspective of present. Castellanos Moya makes salient the distinction in style between the indigenous witness' concise reaction to military brutality and the narrator's verbose, if not insensitive, internalization of this statement:

I am not complete in the mind, said the sentence I highlighted with the yellow marker and even copied into my personal notebook, because this wasn't just any old sentence, much less some wisecrack, not by any means, but rather the sentence that astonished me more than any other sentence I read that first day on the job, the sentence that most dumbfounded me during my first incursion into those one thousand one hundred almost single-spaced printed pages placed on what would be my desk. (Castellanos Moya 2008: 1)

The narrator further trivializes the testimonio by appropriating it to his own situation as an analogy, demonstrating his complete distance from the meaning behind the words he reads. He does this by:

reaching the overwhelming conclusion that it was the entire population of this country that was not complete of the mind, which led to an even worse conclusion, even more perturbing, and this was that only somebody completely out of his mind would be willing to move to a foreign country whose population was not complete in the mind to perform a task that consisted precisely of copyediting an extensive report of one thousand one hundred pages that documents the hundreds of massacres and proves the general perturbation. (2008: 2/3)

For indeed, the narrator has not accepted the job offer for humanitarian reasons; his single interest is to be paid in American dollars, and he initially feels absolutely no relation to the words he casually glosses over. In the process, through the narration of his selfish endeavors and bizarre fascination with the syntax and style of the fragments, the unidentified narrator creates his own parodic testimonial of the editing and vetting process. His version of events is characterized by a hyper-awareness of and an absurd paranoia regarding both his literary task and the explosive political context surrounding the publication.

Gloria da Cunha has noted that writers producing within politically instable Latin American countries have a tendency to resort to historical themes and representations (2004: 19). Certainly this historical representation has provided just as much a means to avoid censorship under dictatorships as it has taken the form of an allegory of the present, as in works such as Brazilian Aguinaldo Silva's *No País das Sombras* (1979, 'In the Country of Shadows') or Chilean Francisco Simón Rivas' *Martes tristes* (1986, 'Sad Tuesdays'). Yet Castellano Moya's novel is not an example of historical fiction by purist standards. Instead, it interrogates the way that historiography as well as historical fiction is constructed by using recent history as a bridge

between colonial attitudes and the present. Speaking to the Bishop in charge of the project to expose military atrocities, the narrator lauds the report as a ‘text that was precise in its analysis and with some very moving testimonies, fascinating, especially that richly expressive language, on a par with the best literature’ (2008: 56). He sees his job as nothing more than an exercise in aesthetic practice. As the narrative progresses, however, the narrator begins to incorporate more and more excerpts from the testimonies into his own mode of writing. Without focusing on the past so much as how the past is constructed, *Senselessness* may be better understood as a historicized, rather than a historical, novel, and it is this particular strategy that marks the newest direction taken by literary representations of history and of historiography. This is most clearly evident in the consistent, perhaps even obsessive appearance of characters engaged in the act of writing along with the texts supposedly created—an acknowledgment of the textuality of history—in the metafictional novels that characterize this new attitude, whether analyzed under the guise of hybrid histories, new historical fiction, or historiographic metafiction.

From Historicism to Historicization

Montrose’s declaration that the ‘post-structuralist orientation to history now emerging in literary studies may be characterized chiasmatically, as a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history’ (2004: 588), lays claim to similar territory contemporaneously carved out from a postmodernist orientation by Linda Hutcheon via historiographic metafiction. She coined the term in response to the ‘assault’ of literary theory upon the conventions of traditional modernism, believing this type of literature to ‘situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction’ (1989a: 4). It is characterized primarily by parody, which is designed to open up previous texts (rather than close them down). This parody is related to the second central aspect, an overt intertextuality that, in the spirit of Roland Barthes’ definition, ‘replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance’ (1989a: 7). In other words, intertextual parody is designed to make readers aware of what has happened to the very same textual traces that Montrose refers to.

And yet, historiographic metafiction, like New Historicism, does not take on a single or all-encompassing form. Montrose argues that attempts to lump the heterogeneous critical

approaches to literary history under a single rubric such as 'New Historicism' have 'threatened to undermine any attempt to distinguish a new historicism from an old one' (2004: 586), and Hutcheon herself dedicates much space to distinguishing between the polarized views regarding postmodernism as either a complete break with modernism or a logical continuation of its practices (1989b: 26). Yet perhaps Montrose best articulates the critics' shared concerns. While recognizing that New Historicism has gained academic currency, including himself among those scholars now recognized as part of this orientation, he suggests that 'it remains unclear whether or not this latest 'ism,' with its appeal to our commodifying cult of the 'new,' will have been more than another passing intellectual fancy' (2004: 587). His points regarding the increased awareness of the textual construction of historical representations, as well as the problematic desire to see a critical practice as radically breaking with an existing practice are well-taken, and the concerns he highlights have reappeared under a number of different guises of literary history.

If New Historicism is a form of cultural criticism associated with scholarly practice, then the 'new' historical novel has been claimed as a literary practice by artists themselves engaging with the growing awareness of the textuality of history. Shortly after Montrose penned his article on new historical orientations, Seymour Menton published *Latin America's New Historical Novel* (1993). In it, Menton traces a new type of historical fiction that subordinates mimetic representation of events, in other words celebrating its own fictionality, while consciously distorting accepted history through omission and an eschewal of linear time (1993: 22/23). These works, he claims, are additionally metafictional and intertextual, which is to say both self-referential as well as referential of other literary texts and historical fictions, demonstrating an awareness of their own existence as (fictional) texts.

In delineating the new historical novel, however, Menton encounters an old problem (though it bears similarities to issues faced by Montrose and Hutcheon on the critical side of the fence): how to define historical fiction? He acknowledges that this is no easy task, for the parameters have been repeatedly contested, from the nature of the centrality of a historical moment (versus its usage as merely a backdrop for historical romances or adventure tales) to the relationship of the author to said historical events. Nonetheless, although the subgenre of the new historical novel that he details is experimental in nature, especially when it comes to rejecting the understanding of historical time developing in linear fashion, Menton ultimately advocates a more conservative definition of historical fiction that stipulates that all action occur previous to

the author's birth, a declaration with which he must promptly break in order to analyze Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980, 'Artificial Respiration'). The problem of strict temporal faithfulness, which Menton fully recognizes, lies in the fact that not all narratives locate themselves in the past, so that 'more difficult to exclude from the historical category are those novels in which the narrator(s) or characters are anchored in the present or in the recent past, but whose principal theme is the re-creation of the life and times of a clearly distant historical character' (1993: 17). Gloria da Cunha wishes to avoid the binaric association of old and new historical fiction by referring instead to the distinction between the nineteenth century 'birth' and twentieth century 'rebirth' of the historical novel when cataloguing the undervalued texts of female writers in Latin America (2004: 14/15). Cunha acknowledges the self-reflexive role of metafiction in this shift just as Menton does, as she believes her terminology brings into play the novelty of contemporary fictions' extraliterary intentions to involve the reader—just as Castellanos Moya does—yet she too opts to only include works whose plots could not have been lived by the author (17). Yet, if interpreted literally, this would directly conflict with the denotation of several well-recognized historical novels claimed by feminist scholars such as Julia Alvarez's much-lauded intrahistorical revision of recent Dominican history during the Trujillo dictatorship, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994). Both Menton and Cunha therefore compromise their claims regarding experimental historical fiction, which supposedly breaks with convention, since the critics then attempt to judge these rule-breaking texts under the aegis of the previous formalistic parameters.

While Menton is not the only critic to theorize that the dominant trend in Latin American literature has been a new form of historical fiction—Aínsa (1996) was in fact the first to use the appellation 'new'—within the last three decades, the parallels between his model and Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction are unmistakable. Hutcheon, however, differs in her claims in two important aspects. First, she presents historiographic metafiction as a global phenomenon, rather than analyzing it in relation to a specific region or culture. Second, she places no conventional limitations upon the relation of the fiction writer to the past. Instead, the emphasis is upon noting how the past is re-constructed textually, irrespective of the distance of the events narrated or parodied. She argues against a portrayal of postmodernism as relative or ahistorical. Instead, what is at stake is the control over whose, rather than what, version of the

past is ultimately told, for, as she explains, ‘the past really did exist, but we can only know that past today through its texts, and therein lies its connection to the literary’ (1989a: 10).

Once again, her conclusions parallel Montrose’s own regarding the textuality of history, and this suggests that Menton and Hutcheon, rather than staking claims to the formalistic components of classical historical fiction, are ultimately interested in calling attention to the centrality of writing in contemporary fiction, be it labeled modern or postmodern. In other words, the relationship of the author to the past is not really the central issue for dispute. Rather than the author, it is the relationship of the *reader* to the past that they are interested in highlighting—more specifically, the reader’s interpretation and his or her understanding that history as much as fiction is a mediated construction. With this in mind, I would like to highlight, as a means to link these two positions, Steven Connor’s nuanced take on the distinction, not between new and old, or past and present, but rather the ‘distinction between *historical* and *historicized* fiction, between fiction about history and fiction about its own historically relative construction of history’ (1996: 143). Now, it must be pointed out that Connor is talking about contemporary British fiction, yet his observation is applicable to the self-awareness evident in multiple national and regional literatures. Connor’s point is not that there is only a single way to historicize, but rather, paralleling Montrose’s characterization of New Historicists’s multiplicity of criticisms, that these types of literary texts share a general orientation towards history, a self-awareness of their own construction, irrespective of where they locate themselves in the historical record.

Castellanos Moya’s *Senselessness*, then, is neither a new nor an old historical novel. Instead, it builds upon existing conventions in order to analyze the role of textuality in constructing our understanding of a past to which we do not have access. Precisely because the novel is so difficult to categorize, an emphasis on its historicized orientation may be more appropriate than trying to see it as a form of historiographic metafiction. As Grinberg has noted, the REMHI Report is the most important intertext in the novel (2007: n.p.). Yet, while Castellanos Moya parodies the testimonial, his use of intertextuality here is distinct from that of historiographic metafiction, which more frequently incorporates other novels and forms of fiction as intertexts; in this case, the REMHI Report is a real document from which real citations and summaries are interpolated. At stake then, is not the *status* of the document, but rather the *use* of the document. To that end, *Senselessness* does not revel in its fictionality in

historiographic metafictional fashion. Its strategy runs counter to this tendency. The narrator attempts to view the report as literature, a means of lessening its impact as merely ‘fiction,’ rather than fact, but he fails in this endeavor. Rather, the dramatization of this failure allows the reader to watch the copyeditor’s shift from a disengaged senselessness to emotional overload.

Ignacio Sánchez Prado has argued that the novel inverts testimonial literature, as during the 1980s and 1990s the ideological-revolutionary nature of a given work of literature became the legitimating factor for its canonization or rejection by Latin and North American critics (2010: 82). Yet, given that the testimonial by its nature is already a very self-aware literary genre, it is the self-reflexive manner in which Castellanos Moya does so that is particularly novel. Sánchez Prado could easily be updating Montrose’s characterization of the textuality of history when he suggests that if *testimonio* is designed to make the reader confront him or herself within the world, Castellanos Moya instead creates a narrative where the reader instead confronts him or herself ‘in the text’ (2010: 83). In this way the author turns both the models of *testimonio* as well as historical fiction on their heads. Sánchez Prado goes even farther to suggest that *Senselessness* forms part of a new tendency of Central American writers to reclaim literary writing, both fictional and nonfictional, as a means to transcend the value accorded only to revolutionary or testimonial ‘imperatives’ (2010: 82).

The Diary of a Madman

Although not immediately apparent, there is great irony in the narrator’s initial claim regarding his precarious mental stability, for as the novel progresses he does become consumed by the central intertext, the report that he initially treats as the stuff of literature. As previously noted, the narrator reminds the reader that the very first sentence of the testimony he is to edit begins with the declaration of not being ‘complete’ in the mind, and we cannot but notice the irony that his own testimony, the novel itself, also begins with those very words. Writing down numerous phrases from the testimonies into his personal notebook, he repeats the lines to a friend and explains that they are ‘powerful sentences spoken by Indians for whom remembering the events they told about surely meant bringing back their most painful memories, but also meant entering the therapeutic stage of confronting their past’ (2008: 18).

His true interest, however, belies this apparent discourse regarding the psychoanalytic nature of the relationship of trauma and memory, for his greatest desire is to treat the testimonies

as if he were a disengaged literary critic analyzing a text; he wishes to show his friend ‘the richness of the language of his so-called aboriginal compatriots, nothing more, assuming that he as a poet might have been interested in their intense figurative language and their curious syntactic constructions that reminded me of poets like the Peruvian César Vallejo’ (2008: 20). He is openly disappointed that nobody to whom he preaches his appreciation of the fragments’ language, rather than content, can share his enthusiasm. Indeed, his prejudices become evident when he is not paid for his initial work. As he berates the accountant, his admiration of indigenous verse seems to vanish: ‘Didn’t he realize that I wasn’t just another miserable Indian like he was used to dealing with?’ (2008: 27). The rhetorical question is spoken with anger rather than irony, and it is telling for what it reveals about both the hegemonic system that continues to exclude indigenous Mayans as well as the narrator’s own socialized preconceptions regarding the equation of class with ethnicity.

Castellanos Moya’s narrator is clearly an anti-hero (Coello Gutiérrez 2009: 16), a satirized intellectual who values words but who has little intention of acting upon them. The reader is not meant to identify with his cynical discourse, yet he ultimately earns our pity. If the testimony he reads is insufficient in terms of communicating the horrors committed by the government, the narrator himself suffers from various issues of insufficiency, relating sexual and psychological mishaps that develop from his neurotic behavior (Sánchez Prado 2010: 80). Perhaps most importantly, however, he is also incapable of putting a literary spin on the testimonies, despite his persistent attempts to make fictional the real referents.

Two moments within the novel are particularly telling regarding that failure, which can also be seen as the failure of textual forms to do more than point to the historicity of the text, without imparting the emotional urgency required for the representation to have humanitarian value. The first instance is an indirect barb aimed at writing, irrespective of the country or individual, that is subordinate to ideological rhetoric. The narrator, now only able to laud the poetic sensibilities of the Mayan survivors to himself, has labeled those who don’t understand the literary value of the fragments as ‘insensitive,’ rather than vice versa. As if searching for an analogy, he notes the gap in quality between the oral testimonies and ‘those horrible verses written by mediocre left-wing poets, hawkers of hope, verses written without humility’ (2008: 30) in public spaces. Given his reasons for his own exile, he seems somewhat hasty in criticizing

the left-wing political scene in Guatemala without recognizing his own relationship to—and dependence upon—those very politics.

The second example finds the narrator shifting genres. Instead of poetry, he soon discovers a ‘testimony that seemed like the plot of a novel I had once read and that [...] in fact no such novel existed, only the desire to write it’ (2008: 59-60). After providing a detailed synopsis of the imagined novel, poking fun at the conventions of magical realism in the process, he concludes that the fiction project is a lost cause, for ‘nobody in his right mind would be interested in writing or publishing or reading yet another novel about murdered indigenous peoples’ (2008: 62). As Kokotovic points out, in a sense, we are already reading a novel about precisely this tragic situation (2009: 545), although I would suggest that this is more than cute metafictional reflexivity. As the narrator has duly noted, no individual taking part in the narrative, from indigenous witnesses to narrator or even reader, is in his or her right mind. In other words, rather than worry about market value, such fiction is precisely what is needed to shed light upon the historical and political erasures that continue in Central America.

Indeed, Castellanos Moya points out issues with other forms of media as far as communicating anything resembling truth. First, the narrator discovers that he has been the victim in a newspaper smear campaign on trumped up charges designed to make him appear unreliable to his Church employers and the community. It is only in speaking with a friend that he learns that various column writers maintain associations with the military, suggesting that the media is not a reliable source of objective information, but rather represents partisan interests. This revelation appears to be intended more for the reader’s edification than the narrator’s own, for the latter is ultimately more interested in ruminating on his damaged pride than he is in thinking through the consequences of such unreliable forms of print journalism for public knowledge. He also sarcastically refers to the politics behind media practices in a spontaneous tirade in which he refers to Rigoberta Menchú, once again not naming the historical referent yet providing ample hints regarding the identity of the ‘short round chubby indigenous woman’ (2008: 78). Far from promote her message of political tolerance, he seems to suggest that international governments used the opportunity to promote themselves. This can be easily read between the lines of his lauding of Spanish humanitarianism as well as ‘all the other European monarchs, who not only welcomed the aforementioned indigenous woman with their most

exalted protocols but also had their pictures taken with her and allowed those pictures to be published in nothing less than the magazine *Hola!*' (2008: 78).

And yet, the narrator is not ultimately immune. The more he repeats the testimonial fragments, the less he mentions their literary quality. In fact, rather than consuming the lines, he becomes consumed by their message, and he enters into a paranoid world of military persecution where he imagines he is being hunted for his role in the editing process of the report. Fleeing the city for the countryside at a secluded spiritual retreat, he begins to nightmarishly identify himself with the torturers he has read about. During a panic attack, he in turn flees the retreat and then the country without having finished the editing job about which the book is ostensibly written. As he continually sees the face of the torturer in the mirror, it would seem that he is actually running from himself, although whether Castellanos Moya is suggesting the narrator's culpability is a consequence only of his inaction, despite his privileged position, is not clear. Sadly, the narrator must truly be incomplete in the mind to finally feel the emotional impact of the testimony.

If it is not testimony or print media that can effectively present the emotion of the past to a present audience, then is there a textual, historicized genre that can? As Kokotovic notes, although *Senselessness* may parody the conventions of the *testimonio*, it cannot function itself as a testimonio, for it 'remains an appropriation of indigenous voice' (2009: 560). Neither does it question the nature of the testimonies presented in the REMHI report, instead simply inscribing them into a new context (Grinberg 2007: n.p.). Nonetheless, it is fiction that Castellanos Moya would appear to suggest as most able to provide a vehicle for communicating the emotional imperative necessary for identifying with the past, for if we do not 'present' the past, as it were, by making distant and recent history recognizable not just in the present, but more precisely recognizable in *this* present, then history's message becomes nothing more than an accumulation of the textual traces that Montrose and Hutcheon both discern—with no group to meaningfully interpret them.

The power of fiction in *Senselessness* does not lie in the narrator's attempts to make literary the nonliterary. Nor is it limited to fiction's freedom to point out the contradictions of nonfiction discourse precisely because the former does not need to adhere to the conventions that historiography or journalism must follow. What Castellanos Moya does in effect is dramatize what John Horton and Andrea Baumeister have argued regarding the importance of narrative for

political philosophy. They follow the lead of other critics to argue that ‘we understand our own lives in the form of a story. Our sense of who we are seems inseparable from the sense of the story of our lives [...] Similarly, many of the myths, and what passes as the history, of our political identities are embedded in the stories about origins and foundations, heroic deeds, struggles and the like’ (1996: 15). Fiction, they suggest, has a unique ability to illuminate dilemmas when faced with moral choice or conflict. Because the novel is not at the service of a particular institution in the same way that the discourses of science or media frequently are, it can dramatize the moral choices that individuals make to provide a model for comparison, irrespective of whether the reader agrees with the characters’ choices or not.

In *Senselessness*, this is precisely the relationship between narrator and reader that Castellanos Moya sets up. Through his failure, not only a witness or an engaged intellectual, but also an interpreter of history who cannot emotively identify with the textual traces of the immediate past, the narrator provides just such a negative model. When the novel ends, he is in a new place of exile, drunkenly repeating a new testimonial fragment as a refrain—far from poetic—for an audience that does not understand Spanish: ‘We all know who are the assassins!’ (2008: 140). Knowledge and action based on knowledge, of course, are two separate matters, and the narrator’s testimony is sadly still separate and individual, rather than attempting to positively represent a collective group. Convinced he sees the military intelligence’s head torturer in the mirror, he spits in the man’s ‘face.’ As much an act of self-loathing as it is delusional, this action speaks ironically to the need for self-reflection before historicization can take place. In his new place of exile, his particular experience means nothing to the inhabitants, who drunkenly revel into the night in an ignorance that the narrator can only dream of. The novel ends, however, by returning to a textual trace, a final textuality of history within the text. When the narrator checks his email, he learns that the Bishop in charge of the project has been murdered after publically presenting the report, demonstrating the danger that reimagining the past presents—whether in the form of intrahistorical, new historical, or historicized narratives—for both those groups that seek to hide behind officially constructed versions of history and those groups that attempt to create new histories and new documents.

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