SUSANNE KNALLER (ED.)

WRITING FACTS

INTERDISCIPLINARY DISCUSSIONS OF A KEY CONCEPT IN MODERNITY

[transcript] Lettre

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A 'Real' Novel?
Narrating Facts in *El hombre que amaba a los perros*

Iyari Martínez Márquez (Universidade Católica Portuguesa)

A couple of weeks ago, I moved to Giessen in Germany. New city, new language, new name for almost everything; new all. This experience, as a whole, is not only mine. Many people find themselves in such a situation every day. However, what is special to me is how much relief I felt when I saw a Woolworth store in the mall near my new home. I was born in a small city in Mexico, where Woolworth did not exist. I lived there for almost 30 years until I moved to Madrid to study. The last Woolworth store in Spain closed in 1980. This was 34 years before I arrived in Spain's capital. There is certainly not a single Woolworth in Lisbon, where I moved afterward. But now there was one. So, how come I felt calmer when I saw the big red letters on the billboard? Letters that I had never seen in real life until that moment?

In 1975 Judith Kerr published *The Other Way Round*, the second book of her *Out of the Hitler Time* trilogy, in which the main character Anna and her family experience the most intense German air raids on London. At some point in the novel, Anna goes to a Woolworth store to buy something, because it was the cheapest store around. This memory stayed with me for years. I must have read the novel when I was 15 years old, and the recollection came back the moment I saw those big red letters. "This is a cheap store," I thought, "it is the same store where Anna used to shop." Why did I know that for a fact? Because a mixture of reality and memory, straight from a narrative work, had just saved my day.

This is, of course, a very private story, and it involves only a minimum number of facts. Or what could be considered to be facts. Or, even better, a double layer of 'factual' events. On the one hand, I undoubtedly moved to a different town in a different country, and I definitely (and awkwardly) did not speak the local language. At the same time, the Woolworth store is there, at the Neustädter mall. On the other hand, Kerr's book exists. You can easily get

a copy and read it. Furthermore, in the book, Anna, in fact, goes to a store that exists in her world. A small but important detail here is that such a store 'also' exists in our world. But not only the store. It is a fact that her context too refers to a real event in history, namely London being bombed by Nazi Germany's forces during WW2, while her story as a Jewish refugee resembles countless similar stories from that period. Like many other things and events that exist in both worlds, hers and ours.

A couple of questions comes up here: If I am aware that Anna does not exist in my world and that her story is a fictional narrative despite the many correlations with our world, why was I able to relate her Woolworth to my Woolworth? By which means did Kerr's depiction of London meld with my reality of a German city? How does such a process of mixing fiction and fact work? Can this process be applied to narratives in general?

I would like to answer these questions by starting with the last two of them. A good way to do so is to look at a genre that is deeply related to narrative forms: historical novels. This particular genre allows a closer view at the described 'overlapping' process, since it appeals to factual events while also filling up the spaces between them. The long tradition of the genre gives an idea of the importance of reporting such events in a narrative form and the need to relate them to characters, feelings, and actions. Hence, narrative "might be well considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific."[1] Furthermore, "[w]e may not be able fully to comprehend specific thought patterns of another culture, but we have relatively less difficulty *understanding* a story coming from another culture,"[2] or, if I may add, *about* another culture.

Yet another important trait of the historical novel, that adds to make it suitable for the purposes of this study, comes from the process that determinates our reading process: "[i]n order to understand and evaluate a story, we often implicitly decide which genre it represents. In the semiotics of stories, genres are the analogs of species in biology – we apply them for fast and useful categorization."[3] Thereby we expect certain inputs from any given text, according to the category we establish for them. We enter, then, in the realm

1 White 1980: 5.

2 Ibid.

3 Brandt 2009: 6.

of 'possible worlds,' and these possible worlds created by literary artifacts are affected by forces that may create the plot and lead the story forward, on a larger or smaller scale. Which forces are they? Following Brandt, these elements are what gives each text a worldly context, what determines the rules of each world, from a middle ground to the 'real' world. Adding magic locally or globally will lead us to the realm of the fantastic while the addition of fatal forces leads us to the grotesque or the absurd. It is not the interest of the present paper to discuss the nomenclature or nature of such divisions and genres but to be aware that distance and proximity from the 'real' world create a set of different scenarios in which stories develop.

Within these possible worlds, we must acknowledge that there are a variety of ways to create and develop them. Some stories can take place in entirely imaginary places and with imaginary characters. Other stories 'reproduce' a certain reality that vaguely reminds us of any city or character through narrative strategies such as never mentioning a name or avoiding details. One can think of Dostoyevsky's cities or Kafka's characters. Some other species of stories, as Brandt would put it, place fictional characters in 'real' contexts, as in the story that served to introduce the present paper. In the case of historical novels, the strategy is to present all these elements in order to create a relation with reality: verifiable characters, places, and events. The blank spaces, or 'the missed scenes,' between events are filled through the authors' imagination, their artistic practice, and the intentions behind their narrative work. In this sense, a historical novel makes use of a strategy that puts the genre in a close position to historical writing, according to Hayden White.[4]

However, it is important to remember that neither of the previous, and inconclusive, possible ways to approach a story play entirely by the rules of our reality. Each of the given examples belongs to a particular space, with a particular set of rules that make sense and work accordingly to the logic that builds up the narrated world. This is especially obvious in the case of a wholly fictive universe, where 'imaginary' or 'non-real' forces such as magic are overall present and dominant. But as these forces shift towards a zero degree of their agency in the stories, following Brandt's idea on genres, the narration starts taking place in (a) 'reality,' or to what can be understood as a 'real world' that seems to mirror our own world, and one might forget that every fiction belongs to a realm of its own. This inclination to relate fiction to

4 White 1981, 1980.

our own reality has been called "pseudo-mimesis"[5] by Czech critic Lubomir Doležel. In the case of historical novels, the narrations propose a "transworld identity"[6] within the possible world semantics domain, which

> claims that Tolstoy's fictional Napoleon or Dicken's fictional London are not identical with the historical Napoleon or the geographical London. It insists that fictional individuals are not dependent for their existence and properties on actual prototypes. Still, persons with actual world "prototypes" constitute a distinct semantic class within the set of fictional persons; an ineradicable relationship exists between the historical Napoleon and all fictional Napoleons. However, this relationship extends across world boundaries, fictional persons and their actual prototypes are linked by transworld identity.[7]

It is within this frame that an overlapping of fiction and reality is possible. Ever since they belong to two different dimensions but do, however, maintain a transworldly identity that makes it possible to identify one *in* the other. Furthermore, and continuing with Doležel, it is also important to keep in mind that "[t]he fiction makers practice a radically nonessentialist semantics; they give themselves the freedom to alter even the most typical and well-known properties and life histories of actual (historical) persons when incorporating them in a fictional world."[8] The overlapping becomes clearer by following this train of thought.

In order to illustrate the ideas regarding the superposition of fiction and reality presented so far, I would like to consider Leonardo Padura's essay *La novela que no se escribió: Apostillas a El hombre que amaba a los perros* (2013-2018) which is a reflection on the writing process of his novel *El hombre que amaba a los perros* (2009) and provides an example of the construction of a historical novel that engages with the aforementioned narrative strategies. As for the novel, Padura presents a three-fold narration, in which different perspectives converge around a major historical event: Liev Davidovich Trotsky's assassination by the hand of Ramón Mercader in 1940 in Mexico City. To begin with, we are presented with a thread that narrates Trotsky's life from the moment of his exile from the USSR. We are 'witnesses' of his dislocations between Turkey, France, Germany, Norway and, finally, Mexico. We follow his thoughts on the

5 Doležel 1998.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.: 16–17.
8 Ibid.: 17.

global political context of the time but also take a look on his daily life and his preoccupations and relations with his family and friends. Secondly, we are faced to Ramón Mercader's story, one that took him from his involvement in the Spanish Civil War to a collaboration with the Stalinist secret police and the execution of one of the most discussed crimes of the 20th century. And, finally, we have a third story line that refers to an entirely fictional Iván Cárdenas and his encounters with Ramón López, Ramón Mercader under a false name, in La Habana. Within this thread, we 'hear' the narration of Ramón Mercader's story.

As for the essay on the process of the novel, Padura presents the personal interests that led him to write down such a text, but he also describes his approach to the writing of the characters. Furthermore, Leonardo Padura gives an insight into his journalistic process that allows him to obtain information and to be as close as possible to 'reality.'

The best way to present my argument is to split it in two parts: A first section will take a look at Padura's construction of his characters and the novel by departing from his own exegesis of the work and by following his opinions on how his artistic work shaped an alternate, possible, world for these characters. In this section, thus, it is my aim to show that Padura is very aware of the limits of his desire to be as 'faithful' to reality as possible, and, also, of the limits of the narrative to build up the tension between the characters. In the second section, I would like to discuss an idea on the process through which these transworld characters integrate into reality via the reader's cognitive process which involves their imagination, but also both their episodic and semantic memory. In other words, I would like to argue for a two-way gaze regarding the relation between our world and the possible world: one that comes from the author's writing and codification process, and another that depends on the decodification (and recodification) that takes place on the reader's end.

1.

A first element to which I would like to bring attention in *La novela que no se escribió* is the resonance between Padura's personal take on the drawing of his characters and on the nature of such characters that are based on historical, real, figures. Let us take a look at his first reflection on the different degrees

of difficulty when it came to fictionalizing both historical characters in order to create their transworldly mirrors:

> […] how to deal with the writing of a novel with one character able to fill it with information and another blurred behind a barely known, and hardly real, biography that has been fictionalized and distorted in many of its passages by the subjectivity and the informants' search for limelight, but also by other interests (political, family, sectaries)?[9]

It is a central question when storytellers face the complex task of mixing their own vision, their world making activity, with facts in order to give the reader a deceiving perspective that can confuse them, a *trompe l'oeil* created entirely for the illusion to be part of our reality. In this way, the transworldly nature of the characters, and their context, is a masquerade behind documented events and characters (which do not lose their transworldliness in any case but appear to be real and relatable to their 'real' pairs; a sort of doppelganger between their world and our world).

Padura argues that his approach was different for each character. Due to the amount of information about Liev Davidovich Trotsky's life, his own autobiography and Isaac Deutscher's work particularly, Padura's strategy is to narrate Trotsky's inner life, giving weight to his private thoughts and inner dialogues concerning his context, which are "essential elements of his individuality, so important for the *creation* of the character but barely decisive for the *historical frame* […]."[10] In this sense, the facts are not only given in contextual form but also in the known events that involved Trotsky in person, his dislocations around the world as exiled, the houses where he lived, the people he talked to, all the elements that surround the character and that cannot be changed to maintain the 'real' mask. Hence, the fiction comes in the form of his inner life. A different situation appears when dealing with Mercader's character:

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9 Padura 2019b: 130. "¿Cómo lidiar en la escritura de una novela con un personaje capaz de atiborrar con la información y con otro difuminado tras una biografía real a duras penas conocida y en muchos de sus pasajes bastante ficcionada o distorsionada por la subjetividad y hasta la búsqueda de protagonismo de los informantes y por los más diversos intereses (políticos, familiares, sectarios)?" All translations from this book are my own.

10 Ibid.: 131. "[…] los componentes esenciales de su individualidad, tan importantes en la *creación* misma del personaje pero apenas decisivos para el *cuadro histórico*, […]." My emphasis.

> Ramón Mercader, on his side, is an absolutely literary construction, elaborated from a few reliable bibliographical references and many contextual elements that should or could influence him: the epoch's conflicts during his lifetime. In this way, the bibliographical elements are inserted in real events such as the establishment of the Second Republic in Spain and the Civil War (1936-1939), in which Mercader took part, his becoming a Soviet secret agent and the political and ideological environment of the time […], which allowed me to sketch a character from what *actually* happened in his life and, over all, *what could have happened accordingly to that historical context*.[11]

It becomes clear that Leonardo Padura is aware of the transworldly nature of the characters in his novel and of the *possible world* they inhabit and in which the events 'could have happened.' Ever since his writing strategies are in line with the idea that

> [p]ossible worlds semantics makes us aware that the material coming from the actual world has to undergo a substantial transformation at the world boundary […] actual-world (historical) individuals are able to enter a fictional world only if they become possible counterparts, shaped in any way the fiction maker chooses.[12]

At this point one can come back to Hayden White's idea of narration as problem solver which touches the question of knowing and telling. I would like to consider this in connection with the analysis of Leonardo Padura's reflections on his own work. What is the problem that is being solved by this story? What exactly is coded here? The answer to this question relies on the third narrative thread: Iván Cárdenas. The character's importance can be seen in two ways; first, as a sort of 'key master' that opens and closes the doors in the narration,

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11 Padura 2019b: 131–132. "Ramón Mercader, por su lado, es una construcción absolutamente novelesca, elaborada a partir de unos pocos referentes biográficos creíbles y de muchos elementos contextuales que debieron o pudieron influirlo: los conflictos de la época que le tocó vivir. De este modo, los datos biográficos son insertados en acontecimientos reales como el establecimiento de la Segunda República en España y la Guerra Civil (1936-1939) en la cual Mercader participó, su conversión en agente secreto soviético y el ambiente político e ideológico del momento […], con lo cual pude ir moldeando un personaje a partir de lo que realmente ocurrió en su vida y, sobre todo, *de lo que pudo haber ocurrido de acuerdo a ese contexto histórico.*"

12 Doležel 1998: 21.

allowing us to approach Mercader's story. However, Cárdenas' role goes beyond a purely literary consideration, he is a representation of an entire Cuban generation, deprived of means to access the events outside the island, and, furthermore, outside the official pro-Soviet perspective of the world: "Iván is a fictional entity, built with elements from many different lives, real or possible, known by first or second hand, since I decided to make him into a synthesis of many experiences lived by a specific Cuban generation, to the generation to which I belong."[13] Padura encodes the answer to the problem of knowing and telling as such: The novel links isolated dots of information and events of the 20th century to which a whole generation only gained access through narrative and fictional means. Beyond the documented facts, Padura reaches back to the people that met Ramón Mercader during his time in Cuba, like doctors and family members. Thus, the possibility to fill in the blanks is a result of this form of writing facts. Hence, the last words in Padura's essay:

> […] through emails, phone calls, face-to-face comments, and, also, letters received through postal service, dozens of Cuban readers expressed, in their own words, the same reaction to the book: they thanked me for writing the novel, because, by reading it, they have learned many stories that they did not know, and even they have learned many things from their own and personal history.[14]

Leonardo Padura codifies these elements, and it becomes the readers' task to decodify and recodify them by their own means and through their own cultural frame. This involves a series of knowledge that functions as a 'tool kit' to perform the task of making sense out of the text.[15] Thus, it is necessary to understand that a part of the responsibility concerning the overlap between

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13 Padura 2019a: 59. "Iván es un ente de ficción, construido con elementos de muchas vidas, reales o posibles, conocidas de primera o de segunda mano, pues me propuse convertirlo en una síntesis de diversas experiencias vividas por una generación específica de cubanos, la generación a la cual pertenezco."

14 Ibid.: 172–173. "Porque a través de correos electrónicos, llamadas telefónicas, comentarios cara a cara e, incluso, cartas recibidas por el correo ordinario, decenas de lectores cubanos me expresaron, con sus palabras, la misma reacción a la lectura del libro: me agradecían que hubiera escrito la novel pues, leyéndola, habían aprendido de muchas historias que no conocían e incluso, habían aprendido muchas cosas de su propia y personal historia."

15 Cf. Bruner 1991.

facts and fiction relies on the reader's own strategies and abilities to approach a fictional narrative.

2.

If on the author's side the overlapping between fiction and reality forms part of a strategy, a well-crafted *trompe l'oeil*, in order to cross the line between actual/empirical/historical and possible worlds, the reader's side is no less interesting in terms of the decodifying strategies that need to be followed in order to understand the world created by the writer. How do the readers enter such a world? Where does this process take place? Is it in the reader's imagination? Is it a matter of purely understanding of the text? The language? Are there different ways to understand a certain narrative by different readers? How does this de(re)codification process affect the reader's reality? How do fictional facts overlap with real facts? Lubomír Doležel offers an answer to all these questions:

> Readers access fictional worlds in reception, by reading and processing literary texts. The text-processing activities involve many different skills and depend on many variables, such as the type of reader, the style and purpose of his or her reading, and so on. But possible-worlds semantics insists that the world is constructed by its author and the reader's role is to reconstruct it. […] Having reconstructed the fictional world as a mental image, the reader can ponder it and make it a part of his experience, just as he experientially appropriates the actual world. The appropriation, which ranges from enjoyment through knowledge acquisition to following it as a script, integrates fictional worlds into the reader's reality.[16]

Some of Doležel's points need to be further explored in order to clarify the process that permits the reader to 'appropriate' the author's proposed world. For this purpose, I would like to argue that a way to understand such processes can be found in the cognitive theories' approach to literature, particularly by simulation theory.

Simulation, as a cognitive process, takes place within the mirroring activity that is performed by our brain when a mental image is projected, either by imagining an activity we need to perform, the act of reading, or any other

16 Doležel 1998: 21.

mental process that involves our imagination. In this sense, we *picture* ourselves making coffee, for instance, taking into account all the elements that will sourround such activity. Furthermore, we can also imagine any possible obstacle to our goal. This is a very simplistic example, since simulation is also used to prepare ourselves for interactions with other persons, calculating possible outcomes, and predicting the other's feelings towards our actions.[17] In this sense, we can distinguish between goal-oriented simulations and interpersonal simulations: "When we simulate objects, we tend to follow prototypes. When we simulate actions, we often follow scripts – at least if the actions are limited and routine enough to be covered by scripts."[18]

In this way, the reader enters a mental *simulation* of the writer's world in which he or she adopts a proper point of view, provided by the writer in the form of the narrator, and by putting oneself into the story. This creates the possibility for the reader to not only *experience* the fictional world but also to create experience from it. Turning whatever event takes place in the story into a personal event to be used to project future outcomes is what we do with our real-world experiences. This passage between worlds is discussed by Gallese and Wojciehowski:

> It appears therefore that the border between real and fictional worlds is much more blurred than one would expect. This finding opens interesting scenarios for a neurocognitive approach to art, in general, and to narrative, in particular. As the Italian philosopher Alfonso Iacono recently proposed, entering into the fictional world of art implies the inhabiting of an intermediate world whose fictional character is naturalized, henceforth it acquires a natural character, in spite of its artificial nature.[19]

Furthermore, according to Turner,[20] human beings have the ability to blend with their imagination. In this way, we can position ourselves into the other's perspective in order to understand their acts, to feel empathy but also to try to figure out their perspective on things, events, and beings. Such a blend is necessary to make the events and characters in the narrative fiction plausible for the readers since it will turn them into 'real' entities, capable of feelings, will, and able to perform actions. This process, then, blurs the line between fiction

17 Cf. Hogan 2013.

18 Ibid.: 11.

19 Gallese/Wojciehowski 2011, in: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jg726c2 (21.05.2022).

20 Cf. Turner 2007: 90–115.

and reality even more, since the readers have the ability to blend themselves with characters and places in their imagination, which adds to the inherent relation between transworldly elements and their real models, creating the intermediate world, as proposed by Alfonso Iacono: "One enters the picture through the frame forgetting about having entered. This process, which takes place while being in an emotional state and which can be ritualized (actually it is necessary for rituals), is at the origin of the process of naturalization […]."[21] As such, we have a series of steps that lead to an overlapping between fiction and reality: the readers project a simulation of the fictional world, once 'inside' this world, the reader blends with the characters obtaining in this way an experience that can be extrapolated to the reader's reality. One can now see the impossibility of separating an experience obtained in a transworldly space from its real model. An experience that seems to be applicable to an actual situation. Building up a narrative that allows the reader to project into 'reality' knowledge taken from fiction. Storing this as memories that fill blanks in the reader's view of the world.

However, other elements are necessary to make fictional facts blend with real facts, namely, our previous knowledge about the world. In this sense, we know that building simulations is related to our memory, whether it be "episodic memory" [EM] or a larger and more general "semantic memory" [SM].[22] In this sense, we rely on our past experiences to predict future outcomes, Hogan, exemplifies this by picturing a coffeehouse: if we talk about a known coffeehouse, we will call on our memories of it to simulate it, and any specificality will come from these episodic memories we have of this specific site. However, when we talk about coffeehouses in general, we might also use this episodic memory but only for comparision and to set a series of characteristics shared by what should be called a 'coffeehouse.' Hogan states:

> Thus we may distinguish two levels of simulation – general and particular. These are associated with distinct, although interrelated means of simulation – semantic and episodic memory. Of course, semantic and episodic elements are not fully segregated. In any complex simulation, real or literary, we make use of both. Perhaps even more important, both are integrated with emotional memory. Emotional memories are implicit memories that revive the relevant emotions when they are activated (see LeDoux Emotional). Thus

21 Iacono 2010 (quoted in Gallese and Wojciehowski 2011 and translated by the authors).

22 Cf. Hogan 2013. My abbreviations.

> an emotional memory of a frightening event will, when stirred, give rise to fear.[23]

Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate between the process involved in the *representation* of unknown spaces and the *recreation* of those spaces that we are familiar with; this is particularly important in the case of a text such as *El hombre que amaba a los perros* that works with transworldly characters and spaces that can be 'lived' and 'verified' with their actual counterparts.

By following the aforementioned difference and Doležel's emphasis on the type of reader, I would like to distinguish two possible readers to illustrate this point: one who *represents* the text entirely (RR1); this means that he/she possesses no information regarding the characters or the spaces which is why they rely on the description of the narrator and on his/her semantic memory. In the case of *El hombre que amaba a los perros*, this is a reader that does not know about the historical person Trotsky, nor about his fatal end. Since for this reader the entire story is a fictional work, he/she would have no problem to separate any information from the real world and to accommodate the gained experience into the proper semantic memory. A second type of reader (RR2) who is familiar with the character's factual history can rely on his/her episodic memory in order to understand the textual information and the adjacent subtexts within it. These readers will bring the experience gained through the text to the real world and apply it to their knowledge about it. Here, the frame to enter and exit the transworldly space and characters is not strictly defined, as the episodic memory will be affected by the information coming from the text. Adding thoughts to the historical figure of Trotsky or filling the blanks in Ramón Mercader's life is part of a strategy that mediates the space between knowing and telling in the sense that Hayden White[24] has proposed. It is a narrative way to construct a story around facts and to anchor fiction to a plausible, yet fictional world.

As one can easily see, the questions coming with the processes of reception and the focus on the role of readers provide notable and significant insights into the processes through which writing (fictional) facts affect the real world and vice-versa. An insight that shows the impact of literature and fiction on our knowledge of the world and the way we learn about it.

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23 Ibid.: 12.

24 Cf. White 1980.

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