

EL JINETE POLACO
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION
OF ANTONIO MUÑOZ MOLINA

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Riders on the storm,
Riders on the storm.
Unto this house we're born.
Into this world we're thrown,
Like a dog without a bone,
An actor out on a loan.
Riders on the storm...

You gotta love your man,
Girl you gotta love your man,
Take him by the hand.
Make him understand.
Riders on the storm,
Riders on the storm.

Jim Morrison, *Riders on the Storm*

The young man's self-absorption is similar to that of the artist's, as if his thoughts were momentarily distracted from the purpose of his journey.

Arthur Bailey, *The Polish Rider*

In *La realidad de la ficción*, Antonio Muñoz Molina offers an explanation for his employment, in all of his novels, of a narrative voice in the first person:

Hasta ahora, en las tres novelas que yo he publicado, y en la mayor parte de mis relatos, he sido incapaz de contar la historia si no era a través de la mirada y la voz de un

personaje. La he comenzado siempre en tercera persona, y siempre, metódicamente, han fracasado al cabo de unos pocos capítulos, y he tenido que volver al principio para encarnarlas en una voz que participara de los hechos y limitara, en el ámbito desordenado de la ficción, un espacio invariable. (63)

In his fourth novel, *El jinete polaco* (Premio Planeta, 1991), Muñoz Molina carries this predilection for the first person narrative one step farther, when he experiments more directly with the autobiographical form, creating a character, Manuel, who, together with his family, differs little from the real author and *his* family, in his native Ubeda, from which the fictional Mágina is created. The author doesn't, however, completely abandon the novelistic techniques of the less personalized fiction of his earlier works, and on combining the two novelistic formats, in order to constitute thus a self-definition of a real author filtered through a fictional creation, he instructs us clearly as to the system that serves as his artistic point of departure as well as the personal life that has led him towards that system¹.

One of the technical aspects of Muñoz Molina's previous production is his particular utilization of temporality in the novel, and in the autobiographical form this utilization is essential. Ultimately, autobiography maintains a certain relationship with chronology, as well as the creation of a direction and conclusion, albeit temporary, of a particular life. In an attempt to establish a structural basis for the autobiographical format, William L. Howarth underlines the importance of resolution, since the autobiographer is still alive at the end, and death is an impossible conclusion:

In its broadest sense, the theme of autobiography is *life*, since the story cannot legitimately end in death the hand must pose while forever in motion. An autobiographer needs some other form of narrative resolution, linking his personal ambitions with those of a reader. As we shall see, thematic conclusions are the clearest indication of differences in autobiographical strategy. (88)

¹ The autobiographical process develops further in *El dueño del secreto*, and becomes pure autobiographical memoir in *Ardor guerrero*, where Muñoz Molina brings to fulfillment his «desire for resemblance,» in the words of Barbara Johnson, «the desire to create a being like oneself —which is the autobiographical desire par excellence» (146).

These concepts are found constantly also in the theoretical writings of Philippe Lejeune, who, in seeking to define the structure of autobiography speaks of it as «retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality» (4). He stresses the importance of thematics and dialectics over chronology, and finally the perception of the past as a function of the present. Using Sartre's *Les mots* as a model, he states further:

It is meaning that dictates, and never chronology: if we do not have, for the moment being talked about, materials capable of illustrating the meaning that we want to produce, we will take them two years before or three years after, while pointing this out to the reader however... (96)

To this thematic vision it is helpful to add the following aspects of Jean Starobinski's definition of autobiographic style:

Let me add this remark: one would hardly have sufficient motive to write an autobiography had not some radical change occurred in his life —conversion, entry into a new life, the operation of Grace. If such a change had not affected the life of the narrator, he could merely depict himself once and for all, and new developments would be treated as external (historical) events; we would then be in the presence of the conditions of what Benveniste has named *history*, and a narrator in the first person would hardly continue to be necessary. It is the internal transformation of the individual —and the exemplary character of this transformation— that furnishes a subject for a narrative discourse in which «I» is both subject and object. (78)

These critical positions revolve around one basic point: the formulation of a particular —and particularly transcendent— aspect of a personal history that justifies the format of autobiography, and the awaited resolution of that phenomenon in a conclusion, although that conclusion be by necessity temporary.

Howarth later returns to the role of the resolution of autobiography when he writes of those authors he categorizes as dramatic autobiographers (Franklin and Cellini, for example). His concept here seems to describe clearly the vital situation of our fictional autobiographer, Manuel:

If everything in life serves the artist, then he will value his native soil as highly as his personal talent. The dramatic

autobiographer always pays special tribute to his earthly locale, whether Florence, Dublin or Paterson. But he never bows to superior forces; for he is superior who acts his part well, at a given time and place upon the stage of life. His commitment is solely to life, so he never speaks of death at the close of his book. A play cannot end with its final curtain; in another performance it will always come to life again. (104)

All these commentaries are extremely important when reading *El jinete polaco*, a novel with a curious temporal construction, in which the protagonist returns constantly to his past while he clarifies as well a present whose importance and continuation can only be understood as based on that past, narrated in an antichronological pattern. The concept of a plot resolution, of a definitive tying of strings, has always been important in Muñoz Molina's earlier novels, even in the case of *El invierno en Lisboa*, where the failure of the lovers to unite is equally as conclusive as if they had lived «happily ever after,» and in *El jinete polaco* it achieves an even greater importance, because what must be considered the conclusion of the story begins long before the end of the narrating, in this manner creating a new and unexpected temporal reality that converts one originally autobiographical work into another, in which the narrator and reader² create and live simultaneously in the present, in a Jamesian type narration that is generally denominated equiscent.

Before analyzing in detail this curious structure and its role in the creation of the meaning of this text, let us return to the three previous texts —*Beatus ille*, *El invierno en Lisboa* and *Beltenebros*— in an attempt to characterize the endings that Muñoz Molina invents. Muñoz Molina does not simply bring these novels to a conclusion (a more traditional ending is to be found, however, in his later works), but, on the contrary, *cultivates* that conclusion as an independent aspect of his work, and his novels therefore tend to acquire their essential meaning at the point of closure of the work.³ This is very obvious in the first novel, where the end is

² Lejeune emphasizes the role of the author as his own reader in autobiography. Therefore, when we speak here of the reader we refer, necessarily, to Manuel as reader of his own writing, Muñoz Molina, as reader of his own quasi-autobiographical text, the implicit, and the explicit reader. The reading of the text must be understood as being as complex as the multiplicity of readers that participate in that reading.

³ In a special issue dedicated to closure in literature, David F. Hult refers to closure as an act, definitely distinguished for this reason from the end of a work:

anticipated from the outset, but without the reader's realization of its future function as a conclusion. It will not be until the final pages that a repetition of what is narrated at the beginning achieves full meaning, a meaning that subverts the activity of the protagonists during the prior narrative movement.

The sensation of futility at the moment of closure's transition into end is repeated in the second novel, and in a much more anxiety-ridden form. After a long narration in which two lovers seek each other in vain, and when at the end, the possibility of a permanent union arises, the internal narrator (a character modelled upon the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*), destroys that possibility, lying to the woman and advising her to disappear once again. The poetry of the final paragraph demonstrates the tragedy of this unrealizable love:

Cerré la puerta y volví a llenar el vaso de bourbon. Tras los cristales del balcón la vi aparecer en la acera, de espaldas, un poco inclinada, con la gabardina blanca extendida por el viento frío de diciembre, reluciente de lluvia bajo las luces azules del hotel. Reconocí su manera de andar mientras cruzaba la calle, ya convertida en una lejana mancha blanca entre la multitud, perdida en ella, invisible, súbitamente borrada tras los paraguas abiertos y los automóviles, como si nunca hubiera existido. (187).

The romantic pathos of this passage more than suggests the often mentioned influence of Juan Marsé on the style of Muñoz Molina, particularly *Últimas tardes con Teresa* and *La oscura historia de la prima Montse*. The concept of the unattainable woman, and of love made impossible by uncontrollable external factors, combine to form the sad lines that bring this paragraph to its conclusion.

Beltenebros also finds its full meaning at the very end, in the

Essentially a verbal form, «closure»... stands in stark contrast to the nominal of the Germanic word «end.» It implies, first and foremost, an *act* (of closing) and thus the intervention of a subject effecting the work's completion. The ground is subtly but no less definitively shifted from that of the work's *essential* unity to its contingency as a discrete object of investigation. «Closure» comes to interrogate not simply predetermined units (those «having» and end) but rather what it is that manages to determine or delimit a given artistic unit, what in fact defines and constitutes its very boundaries. Thus, to make a simple but useful equation: «End» is to «meaning» as «closure» is to «interpretation».

David F. Hult, «Editor's Preface», *Yale French Studies* 67 (1984).

final pages of a long conclusion, when Darman discovers the true identity of the policy commissioner. Contrary to the rest of the novel, in which the active participation of the reader is sought through the evocation of the Madrid of the 1960's (Muñoz Molina's description is generally inconcrete, inviting each reader to evoke his/her own experience or recollection of the period), the ending belongs only to the narrator; the ultimate destination of the narration is impossible to anticipate.

In all of these constructions, the reader will perceive the detailed importance that Muñoz Molina attributes to the closure and ending of his novels, which develop into much more than the simple logical conclusion of what had been evolving during the earlier novelistic movement. The tactic persists in this fourth novel, because an autobiography must have a particular objective, must base itself on the ending as the explanation of a transcendental act of the life whose story has been worth telling. Once more, the ending is separated from the general movement of the novel, as we see in the structure of the final lines, where Manuel anxiously awaits Nadia's arrival. Meeting this woman constitutes the origin of the novel. The story is narrated from Nadia's apartment in New York, and begins at the textual moment at which Manuel meets her. The photographs that belong to Nadia's father constitute the *señas de identidad* from which Manuel's recollections are produced. Nadia is the direct narratee of the life that Manuel relates, just as Manuel serves that purpose for her; Nadia's story is told through a Manuel/interlocutor who is converted into the narrative voice. Now, at the end, in love and longing for a happy life together, Manuel awaits her anxiously in the bus station in Mágina, where the death of his grandmother has taken him; the past disappears, the future replaces it:

tú que la hiciste a la medida exacta de todos mis deseos, que modelaste su cara y su cintura y sus manos y tobillos y la forma de sus pies, que me engendraste a mí y me fuiste salvando día a día para que me hiciera hombre... no permitas que ahora la pierda, que me envenene el miedo o la costumbre de la decepción... y si a pesar de todo me la vas a quitar, no permitas la lenta degradación ni la mentira, fulmíname en el primer segundo del primer minuto de rencor o de tedio, que me quede sin ella y sufra como un perro pero que no me degrade confortablemente a su lado... pero si es posible, concédenos el privilegio de no

saciarlos jamás, alúmbranos y ciéganos, dicta para nosotros un porvenir del que por primera vez en nuestras vidas ya no queramos desertar. (576-77)

This anxiety and insecurity is a repetition of all the anxiety the narrator has suffered in affective relationships throughout his life. Even while he desires a successful relationship, it is difficult for him to conceive that he is going to achieve it. The lines that follow, however, and which end the novel, constitute a hymn to happiness, and a break with the affective alienation of the 576 previous pages. In these lines we observe how Nadia, with her spontaneity, diverts Manuel from his anxious uneasiness:

Recuerdo lo que aún no he vivido, tengo miedo de ser plenamente quien soy, en el vestíbulo de la estación de Mágina un altavoz anuncia la llegada del autobús procedente de Madrid, abrevio el tiempo para estrechar ahora mismo tu cuerpo ávido y delgado, vienes hacia mí con una bolsa al hombro y una maleta en la mano, apareces delante de la cama en la habitación del hotel con el pelo suelto sobre los hombros desnudos, no me acuerdo de nada, no me he dado cuenta de que empezaba a anochecer, no sé si estoy contigo en Mágina, en Nueva York o en Madrid, dice Nadia, pero me da lo mismo, no sienten más que gratitud de deseo. (577).

This sentence, in its very structure, is significant, because it begins with Manuel's uneasy interior monologue, is converted into Nadia's soothing words, and ends as a third person plural narration that refers to the two characters in a moment of pure happiness. What the protagonist/narrator desired has come into existence even at the level of syntax.

As was the case with the earlier novels, this ending was not the direction taken during the narrative, and we might say that even the direction taken during the conclusion seems not to lead toward this ending. The concept of a rider has been one of a voyager with no specific route, and if there is a direction in Manuel's life once he has met Nadia, it is kept well hidden, even from the narrator, in order to maintain the hermeneutic tension of the novel. Manuel's life has been, like his symbol, the rider, a life without a destination, and although the present, a positive, functional relationship with Nadia, gives his life meaning, it is necessary that the reader not realize this, so that the autobiographer may represent

the anxiety of his existence until the final moment, when he will create a happy and unexpected resolution. It is unexpected not only because of the manner in which this text is narrated, but also, if we accept an intertextual reading, because of the many failed relationships that are found throughout Muñoz Molina's prose, notably in *Beltenebros* and *El invierno en Lisboa*, but equally in his stories and folletines.⁴

The basic tension of the novel is, therefore, that which exists between the lack of direction of the thematic level and the artistic necessity to develop that resolution—whether it be thematic, chronological or structural—that all autobiographies demand. Characters similar to Rembrandt's rider,⁵ and Jim Morrison's—especially Manuel, Nadia and Major Galaz—travel mentally and physically throughout the novel in an almost casual manner that defies the concept that a realist novel—any novel, but especially an autobiographical one—may be an imitation of life as we know it. Frank Kermode writes very clearly on this subject:

The novel will end; a full close may be avoided, but there will be a close; a fake fullstop, an 'exhaustion of aspects,' as Ford calls it, an ironic return to the origin, as in *Finnegan's Wake* and *Comment c'est*. Perhaps the book will end by saying that it has provided the clues for another, in which contingency will be defeated, the novel Marcel can write after the experience described in *Le Temps retrouvé* or Roquentin at the end of *La Nausée*. (145-46)

El jinete polaco is emblematic of this dilemma. Aside from constituting the novelized recollections of a young *ubetense*, it is a disquisition on time and space in the novel form. If we analyze the market scene (304-05), where el Praxis takes Nadia to make purchases and Manuel appears subsequently as a salesman in his vegetable stand, we see that, apart from its novelistic function, this passage constitutes a temporal-spatial commentary, since the narrator controls the movement of the characters in time and space

⁴ Even when writing in a humorous vein, in a folletín published in *El País* in the summer of 1995, Muñoz Molina's first person narrator bewails his general lack of luck with the opposite sex. The failed relationship is part of both the tragic element of the early works and the antitheroic element of the later ones.

⁵ Studies in recent years suggest with much assurance that this work is really the product of the brush of Willem Drost, a disciple of Rembrandt. On this matter the reader may consult Anthony Bailey, «The Polish Rider», *The New Yorker*, March 5, 1990.

as he deems necessary for his narrative task. In fact, in this novel one finds a diffusion of the phenomena —time and space— into an amorphous superphenomenon that denies the temporal and spatial aspect of that very time and space. Characters reappear, either as themselves (Ramiro Retratista, who appears at Galaz's house with his photos, allowing for the last and definitive repetition of the events of July 18) or as palimpsests of other characters (Manuel dreams of himself as a modern Galaz, Nadia replaces the figure of Marina). Manuel, as narrator, places his characters in time and space as he wishes. The objective is to narrate a past, but a past that does not exist in his memory in a linear form, and a strict adherence to the linearity of time and space would contradict the novel sensation caused by this first serious confrontation with his past. Instead of degenerating into simple historical time —the danger suggested by Starobinski— the temporality of this autobiography, as the text itself declares,

gira huyendo y regresa en una tenue perennidad de linterna de sombras en la que algunas veces el pasado ocurre mucho después que el porvenir y todas las voces, los rostros, las canciones, los sueños, los nombres, sobre todo las canciones y los nombres, relumbran sin confusión en un presente simultáneo. (25-26)

This key moment in the text, then seen as a fragment, serves as a clear example of the disjointed nature of the entire novel as a representation, in turn, of the disjointed nature of the recollection of the past when viewed consciously from the narrative present. Manuel, as narrator, undertakes the task of disclosing the hermeneutic of Nadia's encounter with el Praxis and the explanation of the latter's clandestine activity. But when the couple arrives at the market, the autobiographer interpolates his own story, including a description of the market. The description of the market is as disconnected as the narration in which it is encased:

Los sábados por la mañana, el día de la venta grande, el mercado de abastos de Mágina tenía un escándalo y un hormigueo de zoco, había almacenes de mayoristas de frutas y churrerías y tabernas en los callejones de alrededor, y puestos de vendedores ambulantes de hortalizas, de especias, de macetas, de cubos de plástico, de mantelerías de tejidos sintéticos y vajillas de duralex... (303)

To this recollection Nadia joins her own, though it is soon reframed within the larger primary narration enunciated by Manuel:

ahora sé que aquella mañana en que el Praxis la llevó al mercado yo estaba allí y pude verla y la he olvidado: con una chaqueta blanca de mi padre, de pie tras el mostrador de su puesto de hortalizas, atontado por las voces de las mujeres, pesando patatas o cebollas o coliflores en la balanza y no acertando a cobrar el precio de cada cosa ni a dar el cambio con la rapidez de mi padre... (304)

The narrator never abandons the notion of confusion in the past existence (here symbolized by the products that he sells), without which he would have remembered Nadia's presence in front of him. Meanwhile he rebels, as character, against his own interpolation as narrator in the story:

Pero no quiero que ella interrumpa su narración, le pido que siga, que me cuente qué ocurrió en aquel encuentro con el Praxis, me pasa igual que ella cuando me pregunta cosas sobre las mujeres con las que he estado y al principio me resisto a contestarle, que tengo celos y sin embargo quiero saber. Él le había pedido que no le llamara José Manuel, sino Manu, pero a ella le sonaba raro y excesivamente familiar, señalaba las cosas y él le iba diciendo sus nombres españoles y le ayudaba a pedir las... (305)

When the narration once more seeks a forward chronological movement, it reassumes a third person narrating form, but now connected to those *things* that symbolized, moments before, the confusion that reigns throughout the text. The past is converted into the present, the narrator into a character, and everyone lives in a narrated world in which everything seems to be fortuitous, a product of the same fate that the young Manuel hoped would provide him with an encounter with his beloved Marina. The character seeks and fails due to the contingency of life, and the narrator bases his narrative on that same contingency. The world of the novel and the reality that it supposedly imitates are in opposition to each other, however, because artistic imitation, in that it is a fictional invention, cannot in the end avoid a prefigured structure. The author finds himself, therefore, faced with the problem of how to end this novelistic product without subverting the concept of a world that is totally fortuitous. A linear narration would destroy the interrelation of the phenomena as Manuel/character reads them; on

the contrary, a true appreciation of personal experience results from the tension produced between real time and space, perceived in the historical background of the work, and that novelistic time and space which is not subjected to the contingencies of reality.

The lack of a traditional dialogical form is another essential textual aspect that supports the circularity and arbitrariness of the narrative voice. All dialogue is subordinate to Manuel's Proustian interior monologue, and thus functions as a factor of his selective memory. A traditional dialogue would subvert the entire tone of this text, because it would fix the characters and their actions in a series of spaces governed by another series of linear temporal sequences. The two most important notions of the text would be totally lost: the anguish of the autobiographer, lost in an arbitrary world that he does not control, not even in his manner of describing it, and the total identification between the present and the past, to the point that the past ceases to be defined as such, and acquires an active function as part of the present.

Since the novel begins in a present, in an apartment on the East Side of Manhattan, the reader always assumes that this circularity and arbitrary nature has a point of resolution: that point at which all of the essential past will have been related, will have been integrated into the present, and the narration will rest permanently in that present. But at a particular moment of the text, and as if it were a comet's tail, a new chronological sequence begins, after the encounter with Nadia, and, contrary to everything that has preceded, this long final sequence is totally linear. A long *dénouement* begins here, and because of its linearity the reader finds him/herself faced with an as yet undecipherable future. The circularity of the earlier text led the reader time and again towards the telling, retelling and resolution of the past. Here, however, it is not a question of filling in blanks in the past, left by previous incomplete anecdotal narration, but, in a very Jamesian manner, of inventing a new future, in which neither the reader nor the narrator participates.⁶

This future will be based upon the affective state of the protago-

⁶ This is not the first time that the influence of Henry James in the work of Muñoz Molina has been mentioned. Andrés Soria Olmedo has pointed out that *The Aspern Papers* may be found behind *Beatus ille* in «Fervor y sabiduría: la obra narrativa de Antonio Muñoz Molina», *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 458 (1988), pp. 107-11. James's influence on Juan Marsé's *La muchacha de las bragas de oro* might also be noted here, given the importance for Muñoz Molina of Marsé as a novelistic precedent.

nist. Manuel's youth has been very marked by a love that never transcends the level of fantasy; Nadia may or may not constitute an accesible substitute for Marina. But the character's tendency has been towards pessimism until this moment in the text, and in a climactic section, the discovery of Rembrandt's «The Polish rider» in the Frick Collection, this pessimism is underscored when Manuel connects the rider to «Miguel Strogoff, el correo del zar, que en el curso de su viaje secreto conoció en un tren a una muchacha rubia y la perdió y la volvió a encontrar y fue salvado por ella cuando ya no podía verla porque unos tártaros salvajes le habían quemado los ojos con un sable candente» (442). Why does he choose this reference? It is almost a metonymy, that depends on the double existence of the painting —the original and the reproduction— which brings the reader back to the conflict that exists between reality and fiction. The painting and its reproduction travel through the text with separate chronologies. Although the encounter with the reproduction is chronologically posterior to the visit to the museum, the first sight of the reproduction is found at the beginning of the written text, since the novel works from a present towards the past. In the moment of confronting the painting, therefore, Manuel is the only character who is unaware of its importance for the novel (including the reader, who has already seen the painting and its title even prior to opening the book). Nadia's father bought a reproduction in Mágina; he left it to Nadia; Manuel will see it later, in Nadia's house. Manuel sees the real painting, before coming across the reproduction, relating it to a literary hero of his youth and, by extension, to his untimely relationships with women, causing us to wonder with contagious anxiety if the forthcoming relationship with Nadia (that has already begun in the chronology of the textual writing) will prosper. The dénouement of the sentimental theme is thus temporarily determined by these contingencies, and both the protagonist and reader are still under the effect of a pessimistic emotional tone. The text refers to «la atracción de la angustia» (503), and in what follows, the painting once again controls the emotion of the protagonist, as a sign that maintains the metonymical path towards failure in love:

Lo acucia el reloj, tiene que irse y le da la espalda al jinete polaco, y en el umbral de la sala piensa que quizá no lo vea nunca más y se vuelve por última vez, pero desde esa distancia la luz se refleja como una pantalla opaca sobre

el cuadro y él no puede repetir en sí mismo la conmoción de unos segundos antes, de nuevo es el que era cuando aún no lo había mirado, y el regreso tan rápido a un estado anterior se parece un poco a la decepción sexual y al descrédito que la luz del día arroja sobre el entusiasmo de la noche pasada. (442)

The encounter with Nadia adds what seems to be the final ironic turn to the predestined failure. She turns out to be, in reality, the much desired Allison whom Manuel was seeking, but this reality is constructed in such a way that the reader is left almost entirely out of the writer's confidence. *Almost* because there is one clue: her hair is dyed blonde. Neither her eyebrows nor her pubic hair (that she covers in the shower) are of this color. Manuel has mentioned this earlier, but without realizing its significance, creating the same lack of reaction on the part of the implied reader.⁷ At the end of the passage he explains to us that she is not Allison, and we begin to realize who it must be, but until the end of this sequence the reader anticipates a failure, consequent with the pessimistic tone of the entire novel. At first we are aware of the night spent with Allison, but as one *night*; there then appears a long monologue in Evanston and New York that convinces the reader of the futility of the attempts to rejoin her; at the conclusion of this long despair she appears, when it seems that it is too late, because Manuel is about to leave for the airport. It is not until that moment Manuel decides to relate adequately the previous night spent with Allison, which makes the earlier encounter in the hotel cafeteria (previous in novelistic, but not real time) all the more conclusive. When Allison reappears as Nadia, Manuel decides not to leave New York, and the novel directs itself even more rapidly towards its long home stretch.

In spite of this sentimental dénouement, which constitutes logically the temporal resolution of the life being chronicled, this resolution cannot be defined simply as the amatory success of the narrator, and it is here where, once more, one must connect the arbitrariness of the narrative to the contrastive necessity of a conclusion. Here a character as determinate for Manuel as was Nadia enters: Major Galaz. Manuel identifies himself with Galaz for a variety of reasons, the most important being his symbolic encoun-

⁷ It is important to introduce this term here because we must point out that when everything about the double identity of this character is revealed, it is understood that Muñoz Molina has carefully established a specific sequence for its comprehension.

ter through the painting of the horse rider. Both of them identify themselves with the concept of a rider that travels with no specific destination, whether it be Rembrandt's rider or Jim Morrison's. Galaz is a perennial exile, inside and out of his country, with no home he can really call his own; his two marriages, like all his life experiences, have been unsatisfactory. Manuel is a bachelor, a translator who earns his living thanks to others' thoughts wherever he is sent. But Galaz gradually acquires mystical dimensions as the text progresses, because of his actions on the night of July 18, 1936, that the narrative has portrayed at first only fragmentarily. And in the chapter that finally recounts the totality of his activity that night, the author creates an impressive counterpart to all those who, like Manuel, or any other rider, have been drifting without a destination. The chapter begins precisely with the words «Un acto» (318). With these words the moribund Galaz begins to explain to Nadia what he did the night of July 18. «Un acto, dije, o soñó que decía, un solo acto verdadero, el más mínimo, el más desconocido, puede cambiar la rotación del mundo y detener el sol y hacer que se derrumben las murallas de Jericó» (319). And in what follows is recounted the valiant action of Galaz, who remained faithful to the Republic and put a halt to the uprising in Magina. Galaz's bravery, as well as his commitment to an ideal, saves him, while the lack of the same commitment on the part of his superior, Coronel Bilbao, leads the latter to another act, diametrically opposed, that brings the chapter to its conclusion:

Mirando fríamente a los ojos al capitán Monasterio el comandante Galaz le ordenó que formara con rapidez el batallón y le diera novedades. Pasó revista luego a las filas inmovilizadas y tensas en posición de firmes tan lentamente como si el tiempo y la realidad no contaran. Les dio la espalda, corrigió con las puntas de los dedos la inclinación de su gorra de plato y abrochó la funda de su pistola, y mientras caminaba solitario y erguido hacia la escalinata del ayuntamiento se extrañó del silencio y le pareció el preludio de un balazo que le acertaría en la espina dorsal. Estaba seguro de que iba a morir, le dijo a Nadia, casi lo esperaba, con una oculta avidez sin temor. Hacia las seis de la madrugada, después de una noche de borrachera y de insomnio, todavía solo en el cuartel, el coronel Bilbao, que había escrito el encabezamiento de una carta dirigida tal vez a uno de sus hijos, se abotonó la guerrera, se ajustó el correaje y se disparó un tiro en la boca. (337-38)

What Galaz did defines his particular life while it creates, at the same time, a concrete historical significance for the novel. The central role of this essential chapter is representative of what Muñoz Molina wants to tell the reader about the importance of the past in order to understand the present:

Me interesa la memoria como posibilidad de plenitud del presente. Si el presente verdadero es la suma de todos los instantes del pasado, la memoria es una manera de explicar el presente. En mi vida personal, y en la de cualquiera, si eres lúcido, vuelves sobre tus pasos para saber dónde cometiste el error. En lo político o civil eso tiene un sentido de lucidez colectiva, porque no se puede explicar la situación actual de España, o de Andalucía concretamente, sin recordar el pasado.⁸

As in other parts of the novel, the thematic and structural aspects interconnect. With his one action, Galaz carries out his thematic function. But this thematic function, at the same time, has a structural value. It reminds us that the plot is unable to continue erasing the differences between past and present, between reality, probability and possibility. In a novel in which the narrator has returned constantly to a mythical past, to the personal grief and the collective legends of his native town, Galaz's life stands out as a reminder of the inevitable historicity of life. As a novel, the work has to come to a resolution, and Galaz is the character who, from the vantage point of his novelistic as well as his historical role, causes Manuel to conclude his narration of *his* as of yet indecisive life.

In the same manner in which Galaz, on his death bed, understands and explains his only action as what led to the logical conclusion of his life, although that conclusion was going to have a long dénouement, and that act belonged to the destiny of a collectivity, Manuel, at the conclusion of *El jinete polaco*, finds in his future relationship with Nadia *his* only act that will finally provide sense to *his* life. The reader finds a double action, the collective and the particular. Galaz, alone, confronted his destiny. Manuel returns temporarily to a town that he now perceives as his paradise lost, and emotionally and symbolically bids it farewell, as he does his past, while he begins a new affective life. In the two cases, the historical-collective and the individual, the author is confronted

⁸ Ángeles García, interview with Antonio Muñoz Molina. *El País*, December 25-26, 1991.

with the necessity to grant a destination to a life of wandering that during so many years appeared to him not to have one. Faithful to the circularity of his novel, the conclusive elements are not found solely in its ending, and a complete understanding of the work rather demands that we observe the resolution of the individual autobiography on the basis of the collective destiny now resolved in the past through the more ample element we have denoted as closure. In the double resolution, historical and personal, we find the author's message. As a narrator he feels the necessity to recount the drama of his individuality, but that individuality, no matter how connected it may appear to contingency, may not be separated from the consciousness he feels as forming part of a historical collective process whose influence he will never cease to feel.

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