Tragedy in *Ardiente paciencia*

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Hayden White's pioneering work in the narrative disposition of historical understanding underscores the often unexpected intersection between traditional literary forms and conventional works of history. In White's assessment, historiography utilizes a rich array of tropes, genres, and modes generally understood as literature's domain. White's theory treats the historical work as "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse," laying bare the rhetorical, epistemological, and most especially, literary structures that contribute to historical imagination (*Metahistory* ix). White identifies recognizable literary patterns within historical accounts of events and consequently constructs a theory of discourse that suggests that our understanding of the historical process is grounded, to a greater or lesser degree, in a literary apprehension of this reality. This theory of historical understanding rests largely upon the premise that historical writing is a type of narrative expression that shares a common language with literature. White's work since the 1970s characterizes a sharp rhetorical turn in virtually every form of humanistic studies that places particular emphasis on the linguistic and literary structures inherent in nearly every manner of narrative discourse. In this sense, historical writing, not unlike literature, relies heavily upon an abundant repository of poetic, dramatic, and narrative devices to communicate a complexly textured message. White thus illustrates how historians focus past events through a literary lens, an interpretive strategy that reveals an intricate variety of choices that render their texts somewhat imaginative in nature (but certainly not to say "untruthful"). Historical texts might therefore be satiric, tragic, or comedic in their "mode of emplotment," and may also reflect any number of ideological or explanatory positions (*Tropics of Discourse* 70). Historical writing is by its very nature narrative in character and consequently subject to the same features that shape and inhabit all literary texts.

White's poetics of history has particular resonance with modern Latin American novels that explore the effects of major historical events and processes in any number of countries. Antonio Skármeta, perhaps Chile's most widely-read and celebrated contemporary novelist, has a particular affinity for telling stories against the backdrop of his nation's recent volatile history. *Ardiente paciencia* (1985), Skármeta's story about Pablo Neruda's friendship with a modest mail carrier in the costal town of Isla Negra, takes place between the heady years prior to and following Salvador Allende's election in 1970 until the fall of the Popular Unity government in September of 1973. Like many Latin American historical novels, *Ardiente paciencia* tells multiple intertwined stories. In this case, the novel is about Mario's coming of age, manifested by his friendship with Neruda and marriage to Beatriz, and Chile's political life, illustrated by Allende's initial success and fateful demise. Skármeta's historical vision, tempered by years in exile, is essentially tragic. The events culminating in the September 11 *golpe* suggest an interpretation of the historical process as tragedy, manifested not only on the national stage with Allende's death, but also in the novel's characterization and story line. Language, symbols, and plot structure form a basis for understanding Chilean history of the early 1970s as a national tragedy. The novel's tragic rhythm functions in harmony with the local story of Mario's rise and fall and the more global story of the collapse of the western hemisphere's first popularly-elected Marxist head of state. *Ardiente paciencia* is thus a novel about a simple man's path of discernment and discovery as well as a text that casts Chilean history in the tragic mode. As White writes, tragedy implies "that men are indentured to an ineluctable fate by virtue of their participation in history" (*Metahistory* 27), a sense of inevitability that people are carried away by events beyond their power. Such is the case with Mario and, ultimately, with Chile. *Ardiente paciencia* functions as both novel and commentary on the historical process that concludes with Allende's death and the beginning of Pinochet's brutal dictatorship.

Most tragic literature shares a few essential qualities, despite the many varieties of tragedy that have evolved from its roots in antiquity. In his classic essay "Tragedy and the Common Man," playwright Arthur Miller writes that "the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity…the underlying struggles that of the individual attempting to gain his 'rightful' position in his society" (148). Miller's preoccupation is, not surprisingly, with the "common man," and states that the tragic hero is often someone who has an "underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of who we are in this world….In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best" (149). Tragic literature generally identifies an individual who, through forces outside his or her control, suffers isolation from the rest of society. This character becomes a victim, a *pharmakos*, or scapegoat, to use Aristotle's terminology. This individual is not completely responsible for the actions that ultimately undo him or her. As Northrop Frye observes, "He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence" (41). Raymond Williams questions the term "hero" in modern tragic literature, preferring to see the individual more as a victim (87). Tragic individuals must confront forces in the world that eventually become their undoing. The destruction of the tragic character clearly identifies a severe malfunction in the rightful operation of a society. As Miller writes, "his destruction…posits a wrong or an evil in his environment" (149) And what exactly is this "wrong"? Miller reduces society's failings to this: "The wrong is the condition which suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love a creative instinct. Tragedy enlightens and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts" (150).

The quest for freedom, autonomy, self-expression and the flowering of Miller's "creative instinct" characterizes Mario's growth in the novel. From his humble beginnings as a naïve, bumbling mail carrier, to his acceptance of responsibilities as a father, husband, and provider, the novel focuses intently on Mario's emergence as a maturing young adult. And it is Mario's ongoing relationship with Neruda that instills in him an appreciation for the potential of language to bring about change in his current status, though his principal goal early in the novel is to use poetry solely to seduce the winsome Beatriz. Hayden White's insistence on the rhetorical, linguistic and literary dimension of historical understanding complements the emphasis throughout the novel on language and its inherent capacity to create or alter reality. The opposition between what Stephen Henighan calls "the metaphor war and the proverb artillery" symbolizes the leftist struggle for recognition and standing against the traditional conservative political and social hegemony (177). On the side of Miller's "creative instinct," those for whom metaphor is a privileged language, are Neruda, Mario, and the workers who support Allende's candidacy and ultimate presidency. The other side, clearly identified as those who stifle creativity and freedom, is made up of Beatriz's mother, Labbé, and anyone else whose interests are best served by those who defend the status quo. On a purely linguistic and literary level, the inexhaustible richness of metaphor counters the tired and sterile clichés of proverbs. Mario casts his lot with metaphor and finds that he must pay a very high price if he chooses a life of creative pursuit and authentic self expression.

Mario's conflict with the prevailing powers is seen quite clearly in his first encounter with Congressman Labbé, an event that sets the stage for his tragic fall. Labbé comes to the fishing village campaigning for Jorge Alessandri, the right-wing presidential candidate. Everything about Labbé and his party depicts a conservative, dulled vision of the Chilean reality. Stephen Henighan points out that Labbé's very name suggests celibacy and lack of fecundity: the French *l'abbé* (the abbot) (178). The men who accompany him dress in white and their entire presentation, replete with pictures of Alessandri, is nothing more than a repetition of worn clichés rather lacking in any real political or contextual discernment: "Un hombre con experiencia en el gobierno: Jorge Alessandri Rodríguez" (41). And "A parar al marxismo con el candidato de Chile: Jorge Alessandri" (41). Even Alessandri's picture on the flyers connotes an exhausted and unimaginative political reality: "[el] anciano ex mandatorio, cuya expression calzaba con sus prácticas y prédicas austeras" (42). The scene between Labbé and Mario intensifies somewhat when Mario announces to Labbé that he plans to support Neruda as president. Not content to deride gently Neruda's qualifications for the presidency, Labbé publicly humiliates Mario with his sarcastic remarks about Mario competing with Neruda as a poet. The scene ends with an enigmatic gesture on the part of Labbé. Appearing now to support Mario's nascent ambitions as a poet, Labbé gives him a blue leather book with blank pages for his poetry. That the pages are blank is highly symbolic. Labbé, incapable of producing anything original or creative, gives up ownership of a book of emptiness, in total contrast to the books that Mario carried to the rally: Neruda's *Obras completas*. Unfortunately, Mario's muse is reluctant to inspire him to fill the pages of the album, and the book's pristine whiteness remains chaste and unchanged, not unlike Labbé. If Mario and Labbé are in fact oppositional characters in the novel, Mario's successful transformation of the book would represent a kind of victory of the creative over the static, a triumph that does not occur. The novel's underlying tragic rhythm prevails and Mario's efforts to realize his dreams as a poet ultimately fail. The book is a kind of gauntlet thrown by Labbé and Mario is unable to respond accordingly. This scene is a harbinger of Labbé's final appearance in the novel as the one who orchestrates Mario's disappearance.

While Mario never effectively overcomes Labbé's taunts and challenges, at least one character courageously stands up to Labbé's diatribes against the political left: *compañero* Rodríguez. Labbé appears in the village to denounce Allende's government, holding the socialists responsible for the economic crisis by accusing the government of deliberately halting production and creating shortages. Labbé's accusations are more than Rodríguez can take. A committed socialist, Rodríguez vigorously debates Labbé point by point and offers a competing interpretation to Labbé's charges: the shortages have been caused by hoarding and complicity with the imperialists. Rodríguez is a natural orator who speaks vibrantly with no need of Labbé's megaphone. He is a powerful antidote to Labbé's Gardelian unctuousness. And as if to defy the reality Labbé describes, the local fishermen, "mejor equipados gracias a créditos del gobierno socialista," increased their production of local hake and fill the refrigerated truck in its daily trip to Santiago (95).

But Rodríguez's victory over Labbé is small and fleeting. The end of the socialist experiment is near and the forces of conservatism and tradition eventually overcome the innovative yet flawed populist government. The novel's historical vision is tragic and thus depicts the central character as a victim of the deficient and corrupt institutions in his society. Howard Barker's comment on the fate of the tragic character is illustrative: "he experiences the moral condition of dying at the apogee of his vitality" (99). Mario, perhaps at or close to the "apogee of his vitality," is finally inspired to write poetry to celebrate his baby son, and wants to enter "Retrato a lápiz de Pablo Neftalí Jiménez González" in a poetry contest sponsored by a magazine, *La Quinta Rueda*. In a final commentary on the tragic nature of Chile's historical process, the epilog recounts an encounter between the narrator and one of the former editors of *La Quinta Rueda* who had no memory of Mario's poem. Not only does Mario fall to the dictatorship overrunning the country; memory of his futile gestures as a poet is obliterated as well.

Memory is one of the novel's ostensible themes. The emphasis on language throughout the work, illustrated by the competition between the power of metaphor against the proverb, Mario's loose apprenticeship to Neruda, and Neruda's Nobel acceptance speech, suggests that memory is the province of language. Both liberals and conservatives struggle to control both language and memory: Neruda with his poetry and speech; and the dictatorship with its censure of "revistas subversivas, " including *La*

Quinta Rueda. Years later Beatriz seems particularly consumed with preserving Mario's memory. In a somewhat Cervantine fashion, the narrator relates that Beatriz González, "con quien almorcé varias veces durante sus visitas a los tribunales de Santiago, quiso que yo contara para ella la historia de Mario 'no importara cuánto tardase ni cuánto inventara'" (12). Perhaps recognizing that history is also the province of language, Beatriz willingly invites the narrator to "inventar," not unlike Hayden White's charge that historians' modes of emplotment and argumentation are fictive in nature.

Beatriz is a pivotal and symbolic figure in the tragic configuration of the novel. As Rafael Lampugnani, Mary Addis, and Mark Salfi have pointed out in their articles, Beatriz is allegorically Chile, the nation that both liberals and conservatives want to control. The highly-charged sexual courtship that Mario undertakes with Beatriz, complete with metaphors purloined from Neruda's vast *ouevre*, is countered by the widow's crude but effective rhetorical armory of proverbs. Mario wins the first few skirmishes with his sexual conquests but ultimately loses the war. Beatriz, like the country that she figuratively embodies, dallies with a titillating but risky flirtation as she takes a socialist lover, yet she eventually accepts the teachings and traditions of her *demócratacristiana* mother with regard to marital and sexual propriety. Four months after the wedding Rosa González finally tires of the couples' loud lovemaking and barges in on the unsuspecting pair, declaring "Cuando consentí que se casara con mi hija, supuse que ingresara a la familia un yerno y no un cafiche" (77). Yet when Mario turns to his young wife for support, "no encontró otra respuesta que un mohín severo de ella" (78). In a brief yet unmistakable turning point, Beatriz aligns with her mother: "'Mi mamá tiene razón,' dijo, con un tono que por primera vez le hizo sentir al muchacho que en sus venas corría la misma sangre de la viuda" (78). In a sense, Beatriz's transformation symbolically signals the beginning of the end for the socialist regime. Momentarily seduced by the passionate utopian dream of the Popular Unity, Neruda's *espléndida ciudad*, Chile allows its latent conservatism to triumph, setting the stage for the tragic September 11 *golpe* and all that follows.

Despite her role as a secondary figure, Beatriz is nevertheless a dynamic character. As a metaphor for Chile, she moves from apolitical innocence to liberalism, next to conservatism, and finally to a position of mature enlightenment; she wants her husband's story told and seeks integrity in the historical process. History for Beatriz is more than a rhetorical strategy; it is a tool of justice. If Beatriz is one of the primary informants for the events, then we have to assume the novel is, to a degree, her story, and the tragic recitation of those events is hers as well. She, like millions of Chileans of her generation, now must bear witness to the atrocities and injustices of that era. It is important to note that Beatriz makes several visits to the *tribunales*, perhaps a reference to the hearings held regarding the many *desaparecidos* or allegations of abuse committed during the Pinochet regime.

Pinochet's rise signals a tragic reversal of fortune, Greek drama's *peripety*, which occurs on three levels almost simultaneously in *Ardiente paciencia*: Allende's decline and demise; Neruda's death; and Mario's disappearance. Mario's situation is perhaps the most poignant of the three. He has lost his mentor and father figure, Pablo Neruda, while witnessing the disintegration of the socialist enterprise he supported. And the inevitable separation from his wife and young son intensifies the loss. Like many tragic heroes from classical dramatic literature, at the conclusion of the work the main character finds himself isolated from the rest of society. The novel's final scene makes clear who is responsible for Mario's isolation: Congressman Labbé has returned to assert his authority and to seek retribution for the disrespect he has had to suffer from the people in and around Isla Negra. With the backing of a powerful military dictator, Labbé feels empowered to rectify the chaos and disorder that have grown out of the socialist government. Labbé's earlier humiliating experiences in the village have led him to identify Mario as the appropriate *pharmakos* for society's ills. Even though Mario is nothing more than a humble letter carrier, he was a known associate of socialists; don Cosme, his boss at the local post office, was a committed leftist. And Mario was also Pablo Neruda's friend. We also have to assume that Labbé's involvement in Mario's disappearance is personal and vindictive. Labbé is interested in vengeance and thus singles out Mario for persecution. If, as the saying goes, all politics are local, then Labbé's private issues with the small Isla Negra settlement are a microcosm of the powerful historical forces unleashed on September 11, 1973. Mario is a tragic statistic among the thousands of people tortured, exiled, disappeared, or killed.

Ardiente paciencia does double duty, first as a novel about an imaginary relationship between Neruda and his lowly mail carrier, and also as a historical allegory about Chile's descent into a military dictatorship. Literature and history share the stage in a tragic rendition of the irreconcilable forces that rip apart nations, families, relationships, and individuals. Skármeta's choice of the tragic form to narrate these stories allows him to present an incisively critical account of the events that have shaped modern Chile.

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