

The Literal and the Literary: A Note on the Historical References in Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*

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“Porque las estirpes condenadas a cien años de soledad no tenían una segunda oportunidad sobre la tierra.”

—García Márquez,

Cien años de soledad (448)

Ever since *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*) was published in 1982 it has been impossible to escape the critical comparison of Allende's first novel with “that other” well-known Latin-American piece of literature. *La casa de los espíritus* has been a novel critics love to question, whether what they question is its thematic and structural originality, its borrowed generational procession of characters, its copied use of *pergaminos* as a narrative basis or its inexperienced portrayal of Magical Realism. Critics¹ have asked so many similar questions about the novel that the answers are no longer polemical, and the worn-out critical approaches to the novel have become formulaic, predictable, and less than objective. There are reasons for this. In the first place, a great number of critics have used *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) merely to reiterate a series of platitudes obvious to anyone even vaguely familiar with the two novels. Secondly, the little critical latitude given to the later novel is perpetuated by critics who either defend “the masterpiece” by attacking Allende's novel as “outright plagiarism” (Gould Levine 15) or “un ejercicio de pastiche realizado en el colegio” ‘an exer-

cise in pastiche done at school' (Cánovas, "Los espíritus" 120), or champion the "popular romance" (Price 57) as a "story of women's emergence in contemporary Latin American society" (Bassnett 252). Based on this, it is hardly surprising that a consensus exists among nearly all critics that *La casa de los espíritus* contains pale reflections of *Cien años de soledad*. Stripped of much of its individuality as a piece of literature and relegated to the niche set aside for women writers, *La casa de los espíritus* has sometimes been critically condemned as all but a facsimile of García Márquez's seminal Latin American novel.

This is not to say that critics have discarded the novel as lacking interest. On the contrary, the novel has been a contentious one for a number of years, especially with regard to its use or depiction of history. On the one hand there are those who believe Allende had a vested interest in portraying her fictionalized version of history with a Latin American left-wing mixture of "romantic idealism and revolutionary zeal" (Hart 68) as "a cursory whitewash of Allende" (68). The fallacy of this argument is that such critics presuppose a political agenda on the part of the author, which may or may not be true, and suggest that the author sought to produce a work of political science at least, and a "metaphorical history of Latin America" (Hart 66) at most. On the other hand, there are critics such as Coddou who highlight a more purposeful use of history where "muchos hechos que constituyen realidad histórica en el continente, pero muy especialmente, de Chile" 'many facts constitute the continent's historical reality, but most specifically, Chile's' (Coddou 144), facts that serve to provide "una intensificación gradual de la presencia de la Historia, lo que respondía—sugeríamos—a lo efectivamente acontecido en la existencia de la comunidad social que sirve de referencia y al que la novela remite" 'a gradual intensification of History's presence, in a response—we would suggest—to what actually occurred in the community life that served as its referential to which the novel addresses' (Coddou 147). The difference is that while the first group of critics sees a blunt propaganda tool, the latter group sees Allende's novel as synthesizing not only her own experiences in Chile but also sensitizing that country's reader

to its social and political changes through a high incidence of traceable historical references. This essay will consider how Allende uses historical incidents from Chilean history to present a plausible version of what could have happened. The aim is to examine to what extent the fictionalized representations in *La casa de los espíritus* concord with the existing historical documented facts. For this purpose, and for the sake of brevity, I will limit my focus on the events surrounding the fall of Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973, as depicted in the “El terror” chapter of Isabel Allende’s novel.

What is understood by traceable historical references in *La casa de los espíritus*? When Alba witnesses a presidential electoral victory in the novel by “el candidato, los socialistas, aliados con el resto de los partidos de izquierda” ‘the candidate, the socialists allied to the rest of the leftist parties’ on “una luminosa mañana de septiembre” ‘a bright September morn’ (Allende 310), to the dismay of her ultra-conservative grandfather’s prediction that “ganaremos los de siempre” ‘the same people as always will win’ (301), there is little doubt that reference is being made to Salvador Allende’s *Unidad Popular*’s victory over the Nationalists on September 4, 1970. Again, when the reader comes upon the “jakarta” graffiti mentioned in a later chapter it is immediately recognized as the slogan that appeared on the streets of Santiago at a specific period in history;² similarly the description of *El poeta*’s death in the novel evokes memories of the death of Pablo Neruda. It is clear in these cases that the author superimposes the literal (history) on the literary. When Allende endows her fictional characters/personas with real, traceable historical elements she recombines the two. At the same time she presents familiar images of a closer-to-the fact fictionalization which are identifiable and provoke a strong identification. This resultant associative imagery creates a more credible characterization and historicity in the novel.³

“El terror” opens with a direct mention of the events that were to unfold: “El día del golpe militar amaneció con un sol radiante, poco usual en la tímida primavera que despuntaba” “The morning of the coup started under a radiant sun, a rarity for the

mild springtime that just beginning to bloom' (323). Jaime gets a phone call at seven in the morning to present himself at the Presidential Palace (*La Moneda*) along with "todos los médicos" 'all the doctors' (323). He arrives at *La Moneda* and, before being allowed access, has to identify himself to soldiers as the President's doctor. He is followed within the hour by ministers and political leaders who arrive just as telephone negotiations with the leaders of the coup are taking place. In the fictionalized version, negotiations break down shortly after and people are encouraged to take refuge: "empezó a retirarse todo el mundo" 'everyone started to make their way out' (324). Shortly before the bombing begins in the fictionalized version, the President orders his daughters to leave; they refuse categorically and have to be removed forcibly. Before the bombing begins "quedaban alrededor de treinta personas" 'there were about thirty people left' (324), including Jaime. In stoic fashion, the President makes a heroic radio broadcast after which, having refused a plane to safety, he awaits the attacking forces which are determined to overthrow his government.

To what extent is this fictionalized version based on historical facts? In *The Last Two Years of Salvador Allende*, Nathaniel Davis points out that "one by one colleagues, family members and friends of Allende made their way to *La Moneda* to join the GAP (*Grupo de Amigos Personales*) defenders already there" (247) at approximately 8:20 in the morning. This flood of people included ministers, the President's mistress and secretary, his wife and "half a dozen physicians" (247). The arrival of Allende's doctors in *La Moneda* at around this time is also mentioned by Freed and Landis in *Death in Washington* (20), and Taufic in *Chile en la hoguera* (67). Kaufman in his book *Crisis in Allende's Chile: New Perspectives*, on the other hand, places the number of doctors at five (316). This would coincide with the fictionalized version quite closely. However, there is no mention of Allende's colleagues, family members or bodyguards needing to identify themselves upon arrival, despite the fact that troops had been stationed outside the Palace since 7:10 that morning in view of the people going in to work. Unlike the novel's account, there was no mass exodus of around thirty people leaving *La Moneda* prior to the

bombing. In fact, everyone who came to Allende's side remained behind closed doors even after the telephone negotiations to end the military overthrow began in earnest at 10:00 in the morning. More importantly, Robinson Rojas's post-coup scenario counts ten civilians dead, and 32 survivors including 14 wounded in *La Moneda*; this suggests that many people had stayed behind.

As we can see, Allende has created a composite of real facts and superimposed them over her fiction. She does this again when, in a particularly poignant scene, Salvador Allende strikes a noble pose: in the middle of the heated battle "sólo el Presidente se mantuvo de pie, se acercó a una ventana con una bazooka en los brazos y disparó hacia los tanques en la calle" 'only the President remained standing, he drew close to the window holding a bazooka and fired toward the tanks on the street' (325). Robinson Rojas mentions in his book *The Murder Of Allende and the End of the Chilean Way of Life* that "It took five hours to capture *La Moneda* and subdue 42 civilians armed with machine guns and one bazooka" (4; my emphasis), while Davis's book had 23 members of the GAP armed with no less than *three* bazookas (240). A newspaper reporter from *El Mercurio* indeed photographed a bazooka lying on the street after Allende's fall; Allende's act of heroism was a matter of hearsay and gossip in Santiago as well as a much quoted example of bravado in the national and international press.

There is documented evidence in Davis that the source of Allende's actually firing the bazooka was a Dr. Bartulín who years later confessed he had not seen anyone firing the bazooka and had merely witnessed a bazooka protruding from the President's office window. Moreover, when witnesses inside *La Moneda* were asked about the event years after the coup, they tended to quote the newspaper version verbatim or thought little of the incident's importance. In fact, no documented evidence exists that conclusively says Allende fired anything but a sub-machine gun during his last stand in *La Moneda*. What Isabel Allende has done is to use an unsubstantiated historical fact combined with a myth perpetuated by popular hearsay to create a dramatic scene that is immediately familiar to her target audience. Again, the compos-

ite effect of these elements provides her readers not with the “truth” but with recombined image that calls upon individual schematic knowledge. By superimposing unsubstantiated or distorted fact and local myth, Allende calls into play an understanding of traceable historical referentials and creates a sense of associative identification between the reader and the text and the characters within. This recombined image also provides a reinterpretation of what happened, a plausible scenario with which one can negotiate or interpret the varying shades of “truth” associated with the events as they may have occurred in reality.

Let us take a closer look at the character of Jaime. Allende herself confesses to using factual people in the creation of her characters. In Celia Correas Zapata’s series of interviews with the author, she openly admits that her character Jaime shares attributes such as his “buen corazón, ocupado siempre en ayudar a los demás, amigo de cuanto desamparado cruzaba su camino” ‘his good heart, always trying to help others, friend to any helpless person he met’ (71) with her own Uncle Pablo who died in an airplane crash over the Atacama desert. But when “Jaime gateaba entre los muebles rotos y los pedazos de cielo raso que caían a su alrededor como una lluvia mortífera, procurando dar auxilio a los heridos, pero solo podía ofrecer consuelo y cerrar los ojos de los muertos” ‘Jaime crawled amongst the broken furniture and the pieces of ceiling that showered down around him like deadly rain, attending to the wounded, and only being able to console and stroke close the eyes of the dead’ (Allende 325), and is superimposed as a doctor onto a fictionalized version of a factual historical event, the question arises as to which historical person the author was intending the character to be depicting.

According to Robinson Rojas, at 2:07 pm. on September 11, 1973, a patrol of the San Bernardo Infantry School burst into the second floor of *La Moneda*. Charging up the main stairs, using FAL machine guns through the smoke and debris of the bombing and the shells of Sherman tanks, they moved towards the *Salón Rojo*, the State Reception Hall. There Captain Roberto Garrido found a group of civilians armed with sub-machine guns. The captain of the advancing group fired on the armed defenders and

wounded one of them in the stomach. He almost immediately realized the fallen civilian was President Allende and shouted “We shit on the President” (21). Confusion ensued and further shots rang out, many of them hitting Allende. Robinson Rojas writes:

Some of the civilians returned to the Salón Rojo to see what could be done. Among them was Dr. Enrique Paris, a psychiatrist and President Allende’s personal doctor. He leaned over the body, which showed the points of impact of at least six shots to the abdomen and lower stomach region. After taking Allende’s pulse, he signalled that the President was dead. (2)

Kaufman’s book reads:

Allende had no option but unconditional surrender. Thus, he began to convince those in *La Moneda* to leave, stating apocalyptically, “Go down, go down all of you. I shall go down last of all.” With a tablecloth serving as a white flag, they began to give themselves up, lead by Allende’s personal secretary. The only ones to remain with Allende were his personal body guards and a *physician*, all ready to fight to the end. (my emphasis; 307)

Now, if we are to believe Kaufman, and accept that only one physician remained behind with Allende during the final assault, Dr. Paris represents a strong possible source for the fictionalized doctor in the novel. Robinson Rojas also offers further corroborating historical evidence which has Dr. Paris losing his temper with the soldiers who shot Allende, being placed face-down on the floor, beaten and ordered to be taken away to the basement of the Defence Ministry for detention. In the novel Jaime does not witness the death of Allende or see “*el Presidente’s*” body, but is beaten and taken to the Defence Ministry for detention. Like Dr. Paris, the fictional doctor is kept in the boiler room (basement) “sin acabar de comprender lo que estaba sucediendo, atormentado por los gritos que se escuchaban a traves del muro” ‘unable to understand what was happening, tormented by the cries that could be heard through the walls’ (Allende 326). Allende’s choice of where her character is taken and terrorized is historical fact, as the armed forces in Santiago had set up 17 concentration camps to deal with

insurgents and dissidents of which the basement of the Defence Ministry was one. Despite some discrepancies between fact and fiction (such as Dr Paris's being outside the President's office during the raid and Jaime within, or Dr. Paris's being bludgeoned to death by soldiers four days later at the Stadium and Jaime's being shot near the airport), there are close parallels between the two to suggest a possible composite recreation of one in the other.

Another possible source for the fictionalized doctor in *La casa de los espíritus* is Dr. Patricio Guijón Klein. Dr. Guijón Klein, according to Robinson Rojas, was Allende's personal surgeon and "one of a medical team of seven" (2); he was also, the doctor said, a witness to Allende's alleged suicide made famous by conspiracy theorists. What makes this factual character so attractive to this study is that he is one of the best documented witnesses to the events in *La Moneda* on the day of the coup. There are also a number of significant parallels between Dr. Guijón Klein's real experience and Jaime's fictionalized one: both were personal friends of the President, both were with the President during the bombing and were both asked to leave and so were not directly engaged with firing on the advancing group. Most interestingly, Dr. Guijón Klein was asked in no uncertain terms to stand in front of the cameras and tell the world that Allende had been found with a high level of alcohol in his blood and had committed suicide with a rifle given to him by Fidel Castro (Robinson Rojas 21). In the novel Jaime is asked to do exactly the same thing: "sólo queremos que aparezcas en la televisión y digas que el Presidente estaba borracho y que se suicidó" 'we just want you to appear on television and say that the President was drunk and committed suicide' (Allende 327). This fuses the fictional character with the historical person into a perfect composite immediately recognizable by the reader familiar with newspaper or similar accounts, which provides the reader with a fictionalized facsimile of the events as they might have occurred. Critics seeking a more political explanation for Allende's characterization might also maintain that although the real Dr. Guijón Klein lived to tell the tale, the reader could interpret Jaime's refusal to betray his presidential friend and his ultimate sacrifice as an indirect

criticism of Pinochet's attempt to cover up what many saw as Salvador Allende's murder. Again, the literary goes some way to approach the literal.

This said, any analysis of a plausible fictionalized version of history is, of course, a contentious point. History and fiction make strange bedfellows. A historian will say that fictionalized characters are imaginary constructs and therefore detached from real time and space. Again, any claim that Allende's exile gave her access to the historical information needed to create the composite fictional characters discussed above would necessitate a direct statement from the author; otherwise, it remains mere conjecture. It is, however, safe to say that there are critical studies, interviews with the writer and autobiographical material that attest to the fact that many of Allende's fictional characters in *La casa de los espíritus* have been drawn from the writer's own life and her country's national history. For this reason alone, *La casa de los espíritus* does merit attention as a plausible albeit fictionalized version of a subjective and personal view of Chile's history. *La casa de los espíritus* is not an historical novel in its own right; more a (her)story about a tragic family's history. In this respect, a study of the traceable historical evidence therein does contribute to a better understanding of what the author wished to convey to her readership about what might have plausibly have occurred on a fateful day in Chile's history. Perhaps if critics were to re-examine *La casa de los espíritus* as a piece of fiction in which its writer attempts to give voice to, and achieve personal closure of, historical events so tragically real for her, its persistent comparison to that "other" Latin American novel might slowly fade. It is time for history, at least on this matter, to finally stop repeating itself.

Notes

1 For interesting discussion on this see Juan Manuel Marcos's "Isabel viendo llover en 'Barataria'" and Mario Rodríguez's "García Márquez/ Isabel Allende/Relación Textual."

2 The graffiti “djarkarta” was used in reference to the 1965 Indonesian coup after which thousands of innocent civilians were systematically tortured and killed in the government’s bid to “fight communism.”

3 There is less accuracy, unfortunately, in the chapter “La conspiración” when Allende suggests that “la idea de eliminar al nuevo Presidente, sin embargo, no estaba en mente de nadie” ‘the idea of killing the new President, however, wasn’t on anyone’s mind’ (303). If Allende was seeking a verisimilitude with historical fact, this is simply not true. As early as June 1970, the United States (and especially the CIA) had feared that a possible Allende victory was equivalent to a Communist takeover and that “this troublesome priest” had to be dealt with (see the *U.S. Congress, Senate, Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders, Interim Report to the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities*. Washington, 20 November [legis. day 18 November] 1975, 224). According to eyewitnesses in Nixon’s White House at the time, CIA Director Helms had a number of scenarios for stopping the perceived Communist threat in Chile in September 1970 including instigating a military *coup d’état* against the government before Allende could be confirmed by Congress, kidnapping the Chilean Army commander-in-chief Gen. René Schneider Chereau (who was subsequently assassinated) and forcing a military state of emergency by assassinating Salvador Allende. The Chilean military was fully conscious of these options.

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