FICTIONAL TRUTHS & HISTORICAL ENGAGEMENTS. TWO NOVELS BY HORACIO CASTELLANOS MOYA AND SANTIAGO RONCAGLIOLO

Greg C. Severyn

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Romance Languages (Spanish).

Chapel Hill
2011

Approved by:

Dr. Oswaldo Estrada
Dr. Emilio del Valle Escalante
Dr. Juan Carlos González Espitia
ABSTRACT

GREG C. SEVERYN: Fictional Truths & Historical Engagements. Two Novels by Horacio Castellanos Moya and Santiago Roncagliolo
(Under the direction of Oswaldo Estrada)

With recent 20th century violence still impacting Latin American societies today, namely the Guatemalan indigenous genocides and Peru’s guerra interna, there tends to be a reflection in contemporary fiction that mirrors this history. Horacio Castellanos Moya’s 2004 novel Insensatez has an anonymous protagonist in an unidentified Central American country editing the testimonial accounts of survivors of widespread trauma. As his mind drifts, his imagination seems to be running wild, yet the reader is later shocked to realize that he has been observing reality all along. Santiago Roncagliolo’s Abril rojo (2006) similarly entices the reader to explore the past in a manner comparable to the detective investigation carried out by the main character, Chacaltana, throughout the narrative. Each text requires a distinct approach to history, encouraging the reader to engage with the past and seek truth. Both fictions perpetuate the remembering, reconstruction and rewriting of history in this regard.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The continued support from a number of people throughout the creation of this thesis deserves recognition. My parents, Ed and Terri, have always been supportive of my work and have offered their much appreciated encouragement all along the way. Similarly, the contributions of the entire reading committee are certainly deserving of gratitude as well. Juan Carlos González Espitia and Emilio del Valle Escalante and their distinct approaches to literature have helped to make this project well-rounded and more comprehensive. I would like to single out Oswaldo Estrada, my thesis director, for his utter dedication to my work and the enormous time commitment that this study has entailed.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

II. FICTIONALIZING TESTIMONY IN HORACIO CASTELLANOS
    MOYA’S INSENSATEZ .................................................... 11

III. A THRILLING ENGAGEMENT WITH HISTORY IN SANTIAGO
    RONCAGLIOLO’S ABRIL ROJO ........................................... 35

WORKS CITED ............................................................................ 58
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

History is inescapable, and this holds true for its inclusion in all literary genres as well. There is always some history to trace, a certain domino effect that leads backwards through time. History exists, then, not to bring the past back to life, but rather to be recomposed and reconstructed (Ricoeur, *History and Truth* 23). In this regard, history is always more than the recollection of days gone by. It allows a more complete understanding of contemporary society, namely politically charged violent tragedies such as those exposed in Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *Insensatez* (2004) and Santiago Roncagliolo’s *Abril rojo* (2006). By rummaging through the past we are able to find solutions to questions that we have today, expanding our knowledge, awareness and comprehension. Thus, history “is a relationship between past and present,” one that seeks to aid in the interpretation of “cultural orientation and [simultaneously] charges it with norms and values, hopes and fears” (Rüsen 3).

Given the unavoidable pervasiveness of history, there is constantly a direct overlap with past events or ideas and modern fiction. Undoubtedly, some works deal directly with historical events, some keep them on the periphery, and others neglect to mention them at all, though this still does not deny their presence. The two novels discussed in this thesis interact with history in such a way that the historical referents are constantly engaged, yet the main plotlines stray and formulate the primary narrative in a loosely detached manner.
It soon becomes clear that the inclusion of historical discourse in novels forces reality and invention to overlap; the two cannot be separated (Manzoni 67). Such a distinction between factual history and authorial creativity would completely fracture the text if these elements were pointed out with any consistency, resulting in an illogical and burdened work (Manzoni 68). Therefore, the fictional plotlines are dominant in these two instances (or presumably are for a majority of readers) while a concrete, national history encircles the characters. By the end of the novels, however, it is appreciable the amount of dialogue that is required with the respective violent histories presented in order to reach any sort of reasonable, meaningful or awareness-increasing conclusion. This is true not only for the protagonists of the novels, but something I will also discuss as being pertinent to the reader’s life as well by extension.

Hayden White makes a clear indication that, generally speaking, the content of a work has much to do with its form (xi). The novel, as a result, presents many opportunities that simply do not exist in other formats. Academic discussions are still revolving around the difficulties in defining and categorizing what a novel is precisely, which really opens the door to possible ambiguity and the potential for tremendous experimentation. John Halperin comments that the first theories on the novel as a genre only appeared as of the 18th century (4). Since then, the definition and cited characteristics have continued to evolve, with some critics reaching the conclusion that we “could save ourselves much trouble by agreeing that a novel is a fictional prose narrative of a certain length, which allows for a great deal of variation between novels” (Kermode 155). Unfortunately, as the critic himself admits, this would be a much too simplified description. What remains, then, is a “flexible and indeterminate…form” (Stevick 2).
Though both of the works that are dealt with in this study are clearly novels, their specific genres are difficult to establish with any accuracy. The term “hybrid” comes to mind when considering the various components of each text. *Insensatez* draws from real testimonial accounts (possibly extracted from, or having their genesis in, the Guatemalan report on human rights, REMHI), yet the relations have been fictionalized. Thus, the novel is more than pure fiction, but cannot be considered testimonial in nature. Additionally, some of the historical parallels are clearly comparable to actual events in Guatemalan history, such as the compilation and release of the REMHI report under the Catholic Church, though Castellanos Moya does not merely offer us a classic historical novel. Likewise, *Abril rojo* foregoes precise pinpointing as well. Roncagliolo’s journalistic work is obviously interwoven throughout the fictional work. Mixing in actual quotes from official historical documents adds a new level to his literature, which will be discussed more fully in chapter two. Similarly, the novel cannot be branded as a common historical novel either, though these elements are certainly present.

Nevertheless, the fictional atmospheres fostered in *Insensatez* and *Abril rojo* draw the reader in to begin or to further his or her own relationship with the past. It is important to keep in mind that when confronted with a fictional work that deals with history in the way these two novels do, the reader is generally attracted by an absorbing story, then questions the numerous gaps or blank spaces in the plot (consistent with the sub-genres of the novels, the psychological thriller and the detective novel, respectively), and will eventually steer the line of questioning away from the fictional elements and direct his or her inquiries towards real events as fiction and reality merge at an ever increasing pace.
Part of the “history” for this project goes back to Linda Hutcheon’s thoughts on historiographic metafiction and the problematizing of history. She describes certain works as “resolutely historical” and “inescapably political” (3), requiring subsequent exploration and analysis of the involved themes. This concept of problematizing, an at times “playful” interrogation with the past, acts as a fundamental concept that should be kept in mind throughout the reading of both chapters of this thesis. Subjecting history to scrutiny can oftentimes yield fruitful results, given the significant role it plays not only in our individual lives but in our collective societies as well. Recent episodes of government- or revolutionary-induced violence where countless people were slaughtered, such as the indigenous genocides in Guatemala during the second half of the 20th century or Peru’s struggle with Sendero Luminoso in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in the deaths or disappearances of nearly 70,000, surely have much to offer in terms of relevance today.

Fiction as a genre encompasses certain aspects that non-fiction struggles to compete with. The realm of fiction is powerful and open-ended with an infinite number of possibilities. To this end, the (re)presentation of history and a violent past are able to be conveyed much differently than they would be in like-minded non-fictions. Strictly speaking, non-fiction is primarily limited to the real, whereas a fictional work may blend real and imaginary events, adjusting the amounts of each as necessary to tell a more complete story. This produces quite a distinct effect, then, on the reader. In a sense, the author can idealize the history and what it comes to mean for the reader; the plot is much more malleable and permits liberties otherwise unacceptable. This celebration of the merging of fiction and reality is clear in Patricia Waugh’s dealings with the concept of metafiction, which illustrates the pervasive insecurity between fiction and reality, potentially
presenting these components in a work as parodic, playful, excessive or even naïve (2). As an ever-changing medium, fiction has come to have the capacity to represent the past in a unique manner. The two novels examined here have evident shifts from practically pure fiction to an intermittent stage where the lines between fiction and reality blur, coming to a head towards the conclusion in each case, where reality begins to take a commanding lead, finally leaving the reader transformed after having experienced the distinct narrations, yet returned to his or her old, familiar world.

Still, if it weren’t for the work of recollection, there would be an unmistakable lack in the interrogation of history (Ricoeur, “Memory” 14). The process of discovery makes this apparent and it is also exemplified in the two novels pertinent to this discussion. Castellanos Moya leads the reader through an imaginative labyrinth, leading one to wonder what is truly happening and what is merely a product of the anonymous narrator’s mind. When, at the end of the work, it is finally revealed that the protagonist was observing reality all along, there is much for the reader to reconsider in the way of how the past is related and understood today, due to the conversion of irrational and illogical thoughts into truth. Likewise, Roncagliolo entices the reader to participate in the solving of a series of murders, where the questioning ultimately turns from fictional characters to real figures, leaving the reader to speculate on how the State has molded its own “official” history and what the consequences of such exploration of said history may be.

Nevertheless, all of these responses and reactions to the novel that carry over into the real world mandate reader participation. Erich Kahler is very clear when he emphatically states that “history can come about and develop only in connection with consciousness” (22, original emphasis). Additionally, without an active reader, says Wolfgang Iser, none of this
will really be plausible (xi). A majority of readers will most likely succumb to apathy, laziness, misinterpretation or some form of these elements meshed together to deny taking concrete political or social action after the reading of the novels to advance their own dialogues with the past. Though much is lost when the reader takes such a stance and refuses to question the past or confront it in such a manner, even the reader who does not take it upon him or herself to be called to action is perpetuating knowledge in a way in which he or she may not be aware. The fact that someone has read and digested one of these novels means that they may have a fresh perspective or a new grasp on the Guatemalan genocides, Peruvian internal civil war or Latin American violence in general – as portrayed by Latin Americans. This awareness fosters contemplation, thoughts and, possibly, proactive ideas. Though a much more passive stance, this type of reader still has the power to influence others and him or herself through reflection, outward conversation and other such modes of communication.

Each of the protagonists in the novels referenced in this project takes it upon himself to be an active respondent and react to what he encounters. On multiple occasions, the words “obsesión enfermiza” surface, both in regards to the anonymous and paranoid narrator of Insensatez who pushes forward even though he knows that this type of violent, testimonial work will drive him crazy (31), and to Chacaltana from Abril rojo, who stretches the bounds of the limitations placed on him by the government and military’s “official” history and by his own psyche as well. Neither character surrenders himself to the ongoing mental battle which, at times, actually results in physical harm. Once the current struggle has been terminated, there is a period of reflection on the recent events. In Castellanos Moya’s work, the main character flees the country because his imagination has
overwhelmed him with fear where he soon finds out that his imagination, which he (and we) thought to be running amok, was in fact perceiving reality. Likewise, Roncagliolo has Chacaltana ostracized from civilized society at the end of his text, allowing him to collect himself and compose a militia to wage war against the State and, symbolically, against the “official” history. In both cases, nonetheless, there is no definite conclusion; each ending is also the start to a new cycle of exploration and questioning – the problematizing and quizzing of the past do not cease so effortlessly. Each character must continue by distinguishing “official” history from reality, eliminating their (mis)perceived and self-created “truths” along the way. This endless process, as well as these types of truth necessitating exploration, will be further explored in the following chapters.

The main characters of the novels represent for us as readers, in a certain sense, models to imitate. The doors have invitingly been swung wide open and there is potential to be gained with the knowledge conveyed through these works. It is ultimately up to the reader to choose the passive path or assume a more active role. Nicole Caso has identified the fact that the employment of original documents, which places the same words in a new context, oftentimes has a beneficial overall effect when destabilizing truth in Central (and by extension Latin) American literature (10). Coincidentally, the two novels evaluated here both have roots in real, original documents. Indigenous testimonies do exist, especially after State-controlled violent episodes in Central America; Guatemala is not the only country to be considered when contemplating Insensatez due to the purposeful ambiguity of the setting, permitting a more universal coverage. Similarly, Roncagliolo plainly states in a note at the end of Abril rojo that he extracted various quotes and lines of text from official, historical documents when penning his novel: “Muchos de los diálogos de los personajes son en
realidad citas tomadas de documentos senderistas o de declaraciones de terroristas, funcionarios y miembros de las Fuerzas Armadas del Perú que participaron en el conflicto” (327).

Such an explicit statement strengthens the bond between fiction and reality, additionally supporting my hypotheses that the novels resituate the reader and redirect his or her questioning from the fictional realm to the real world as he or she realizes that they have been intertwined all along. In Insensatez, after discovering that the imagination of the main character has been an accurate perception of reality, the reader will no longer ask him or herself what is real within the text, but is more likely instead to aim his or her thoughts towards the violent indigenous testimony and the resulting government and military conspiracy that still impacts society today. Similarly, after the murders are resolved in Abril rojo, the reader is left wondering about the effects the government has had on the creation of an “official” history, what role Sendero Luminoso has in contemporary society, and to what extent the truth has been muddled. The reader, then, returned to his or her own reality, is left to contemplate the history that they may have once “known” so well, realizing its many flaws and tendency to mislead. An active questioning with the past will be the only way to rectify this situation. Thus, our journey into the past to understand the present and future on a greater level begins, since history is, after all, inescapable.

*   *   *

The first portion of this thesis examines Horacio Castellanos Moya’s novel Insensatez and its role in supporting the exploration of all potential versions of the past. To accomplish this task, two levels of fictionalized testimony are included within the work: that of the anonymous narrator who reads the indigenous reports and, in turn, that of the reader
who receives the testimony from the narrator’s words, thoughts and actions. With only one text, the fictional metatextimony still arrives directly to the reader without being inhibited by an intermediary. I propose that the fictional approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the past and a higher level of truth to be recognized, due to the reconsideration of the past from a new angle, which adds to the overall discussion and elicits new critical and creative thinking. As a result, we are able to follow the narrator’s increasingly active imagination and paranoia, exploring multiple possibilities and outcomes surrounding each issue within the course of the novel and, by extension, history. The imagination therefore plays a prominent role in this work because not only will many readers not have personally experienced such trauma, but they will need to rely heavily on this mental tool to grasp the fact that truth is elusive and demands that even the fringes be examined. Role-play, paranoia and hallucinations aid the protagonist as they blend with reality so he may continue to explore the past and make discoveries. The central character, then, acts as an example for the reader to follow. He demonstrates that problematizing the past is necessary and that the imagination is one of the only possible ways to comprehend certain extremes that have actually occurred in reality.

Part two of this project examines Santiago Roncagliolo’s Peruvian novel *Abril rojo*. The framing of recent history within a contemporary context here provokes an interesting response. Roncagliolo draws upon the violent past of the 1980s and 1990s when the *guerra interna peruana* was taking place, yet the novel itself takes place in 2000 – supposedly after *Sendero Luminoso* had been considerably dismantled and the threat of resurgence, perpetuated by the Fujimori regime, was dying down. The re-examination of the past is sparked by the *fiscal distrital adjunto* Félix Chacaltana Saldívar, who is called to solve a
murder and, soon thereafter, a series of interrelated killings. Chacaltana’s investigative techniques reveal how formulating a dialogue with the past can function and what may be in store for he or she who chooses to problematize and confront an “official” history. The same tools that Chacaltana uses at his discretion are fittingly applied to our own circumstances as well, whether we choose to pursue the uncovering of a national past or favor a more individual experience. Thus, what Abril rojo offers is not only a detective story for entertainment purposes, but it also serves as a guide of sorts to engaging with the past. Roncagliolo’s persistent main character parallels his own tendency to push the reader in the same direction – to want to question, to want to find out more, to resolve particular issues, and so on.

What both works have in common is the underlying theme of utilizing a violent past to tempt the reader to practice further questioning and analysis of history on his or her own accord. The reader is prompted to begin with easy and familiar tasks, like pointing out holes and signaling the various ambiguities within the fictional plots. Both novels then lead the reader towards reality so that eventually he or she will be pointing out those same flaws in a known history and, presumably, will be able to use the techniques presented in these novels as inspiration to convert “known” (or even previously unknown) history into reality through the process of problematization of the past. By no means are these novels definitive when considering the vast field of history and literature, but each is a strong step onto solid ground in terms of a new approach to the rethinking of history, pressing forward into the hazy realm of the past.
CHAPTER II
FICTIONALIZING TESTIMONY IN HORACIO CASTELLANOS MOYA’S INSENSATEZ

Horacio Castellanos Moya, rising to become one of the most important writers of the period, has significantly marked postwar Central American literature. *Insensatez* (2004) contributes to his success and reveals history and violence in an extraordinary fashion, employing aspects from multiple genres including the historical novel, the thriller and pieces of fictionalized testimony as well. Castellanos Moya recurrently asks readers of his work to consider it not as a “novela política,” although he admits to strong political inclusions in his fiction, because, ultimately, he offers a new way of perceiving the world that extends beyond such sub-genre categories (“Apuntes sobre lo político” 9). Still, *Insensatez* seems to have an undeniably present political agenda. The author brings “official” Central American history to the public domain in an easily accessible format – the novel. This type of aesthetically pleasing literature allows a broader readership to strengthen their awareness of the past, when they most likely otherwise would not have taken the trouble to read through historical documents and official reports. The effective vehicle of the fictional novel additionally encourages readers to reconsider Central American literature, especially after having been dominated by the *testimonio* for so many years. Though *Insensatez* is a clear departure from the testimonial genre, it complements the existing corpus of Central American literature, permitting new lines of creative and critical thought to emerge.
As a base for venturing into the world of the voiceless, partly based on the writer’s personal life grounded in politics even from childhood (López 89), the reader soon realizes that the author’s particular insight into the subject matter contained within the novel is far from superficial. Similarly, the novelist himself feels that the language in which we write is of utmost importance (“Breves palabras” 2), and the encompassing command of his native Spanish certainly draws us nearer to the Latin American violence. The novel also comes at a time when, with the 20th century and armed conflicts in the recent past, an opportunity has arisen to examine the extent of the impacts of the previous one hundred years and to begin to reconstruct politically, economically and socially (Rodríguez 195). Nevertheless, I propose that Castellanos Moya’s eclectic approach to the past requires the extensive use of the imagination. Only through the imagination can all possibilities be reflected upon and all potential versions of history be explored when one considers the horrors recounted within the novel. Relying on his imagination to guide him throughout the course of the work, the narrator finally comes to realize that what he has imagined is, in fact, reality. Therefore, the imagination is to be deemed an appropriate tool when discussing the past, as it may help further knowledge and understanding by allowing the consideration of previously discarded ideas.

The anonymous protagonist of the narrative acquires a temporary position editing an enormous volume of indigenous testimony that he must trim down into a manageable work, presumably a novel or similar-sized report. As he takes in the traumatic accounts, from day one, line one, his life is forever changed. Reality begins to decay and crumble and is soon replaced with a vivid imagination and an intense paranoia. Suddenly, everyone is out to eliminate him; everyone becomes a spy eyeing his every move, or so he thinks. Bringing
this damning, violent testimony to public scrutiny when the government and military are clearly to blame does not bode well with the anonymous editor. As the story progresses, the protagonist seems to lose his mind and obsess over trivialities in the testimonies. Not long after the opening of the novel, we also find ourselves in a continuous struggle to distinguish between truth and fiction. Nevertheless, the protagonist does not give up his work, even in the face of outright danger. After escaping the grasp of those he believes to be pursuing him as he nears the end of the project, he eventually flees to a European safe-haven, where, though some truths are revealed, the upholding of the indigenous testimony does not necessarily terminate. Soon thereafter we learn that the delusions and wild imagination of the main character have been valid all along. As the narrator utilizes his imagination to finally exact the truth, so must we, too, employ the same technique if we are to understand the messages contained within the novel.

Fiction, history and violence unite in *Insensatez* to erect the foundation which acts as a centrally located stage that ties all aspects of the novel together. In many cases, the real violence is so brutal that the novels “parecen *light*” (Castellanos Moya, “Apuntes personales” 3). Additionally, this book is not the only work by Castellanos Moya that evokes strong images of senseless violence.¹ Likewise, the indigenous testimonies are completely entrenched in Central American history. Valeria Grinberg Pla suggests that Guatemala is the only plausible setting for the novel given the parallels between the Guatemalan genocides in the second half of the 20th century and their surrounding circumstances presented within the text. Although two-thirds of *Insensatez*, the violence and the testimony, are firmly rooted in reality, fiction dominates and reigns supreme, for if it

---

¹ Other works by Castellanos Moya with memorable episodes of violence include *El asco* (1997) and *La diabla en el espejo* (2000), among others.
weren’t for the calling into question of truth, putting the imagination to use as a tool of discovery would have been a futile project.

To illustrate the copious amount of imagination that can be appreciated throughout the novel, it is crucial to highlight some key instances. There is no evidence that the narrator had paranoia problems nor imaginative issues prior to his arrival to undertake the project for the Arzobispado, yet both set in relatively quickly. Upon arrival, the narrator feels an increasing sense of danger and fear for his life while wandering the city – his paranoia has now made him the hunted, the tortured victim; anyone could be a military informant, though it is impossible to tell (32-33). Soon thereafter, the narrator returns to the safe haven of the archbishop’s palace, only to switch roles and imagine himself violently stabbing Jorge, another employee (39). The vigor behind the imagined scene makes the narrator breathe heavily and he has to consciously calm himself down (40). The boundaries between fiction and reality melt and subsequently blend following this early instance of role play, which will be explored below more thoroughly. After such a nerve-wracking experience, he decides to head home. Once in the street, some military informants pursue him in a vain attempt to assassinate him (40). Lost in a world of fantasy, the narrator calls one of his only friends, Toto, to relate the stresses and threats surrounding him, but not without first cautioning Toto that military officials were listening to their conversation; they could hear all of his conversations (62). Later, after witnessing secrets supposedly being shared between some members of the archbishop’s palace (86), the narrator steps out for a breath of fresh air to clear his head at a local café where the waitress, too, is a spy (88), and the obsessive thought of precisely in what manner the military is going to slaughter him
pervades his entire state of being (102). The enveloping disorientation is constantly compounded with each new line of text.

As the work draws closer to a perceivable termination, the Archbishop offers the narrator a stay in a house outside of the city, well shrouded by forest and tranquility. The anonymous protagonist readily accepts, only to recall that at a house party he witnessed more secrets being shared and that the General Octavio Pérez Mena himself was present (128). Pérez Mena is responsible for the deaths and torture of countless individuals. The narrator flees to the solace of his room, but Pérez Mena and his faithfuls soon follow, encircling the only possible escapes, ready to continue the massacre (136). Believing all of this to be pure fantasy, the narrator forces himself to return to his writing. However, no longer does he fear Pérez Mena, for he has now become Pérez Mena (138). At this point, the protagonist has not only taken the testimony to heart, but he has responded to it, essentially reaching a point of no return. The narrator then enters a hovel with the only possible release of his aggression the brutal murder of a baby; he approaches the infant with haste, grabs it by the ankles and swings it so forcefully that when its head collides with a wooden post, brains splatter (138). This disturbing image arouses the consciousness of the narrator more rooted in reality to return to his senses. He feels better, even refreshed and liberated (138-39). As the novel concludes, he seeks refuge in Europe, presumably a German-speaking nation. Here, he continues to see Pérez Mena and live the testimony, yet all of his words and phrases pertain to “nosotros” (154); he has finally conceded that he is a victim after living both sides of the terror.

It must be kept in mind that the above examples are predominantly sourced from the imagination of the narrator. There are no indications throughout the novel that they contain
even a hint of reality. That is, until the very end. Toto, the friend with whom the narrator has maintained intermittent contact, writes him the following message: “Ayer a mediodía monseñor presentó el informe en la catedral con bombo y platillo; en la noche lo asesinaron en la casa parroquial, le destruyeron la cabeza con un ladrillo. Todo el mundo está cagado. Da gracias que te fuiste” (155). The narrator was saved only because his paranoia/imagination permitted him to contemplate all possibilities and, therefore, arrive at a more accurate truth. Luis Pérez Simón disagrees: “Al final de la novela, vemos hasta qué punto la mente humana no está dispuesta a aceptar ciertas realidades que de una manera u otra contradicen su marco de referencia moral” (262). Still, the narrator has earned his salvation; he has ultimately solved the puzzle. Though his state of mind may appear somewhat chaotic as the novel concludes, we know not whether his idiosyncrasies will reveal yet a deeper truth, nor can we extrapolate to say that he has officially gone mad. I, then, take the opposing stance of Pérez Simón, arguing that the human mind is capable and very adaptable to circumstances beyond our own moral frame of reference.

Having been saved by his imagination, the question concerning reality and unreality must be visited in greater depth. Rafael Lara-Martínez proposes that when attempting to distinguish between fiction and truth that “[l]a única salida de este callejón es reconocer que no existe frontera fija entre testimonio y ficción, entre historia y fantasía” (6). To further qualify his statement, he says that the reader needs to really reflect on the narration and not believe everything on a first read (6). Regardless of the bounds of fiction, however, literature has the potential to bear significant messages and hold considerable meaning, especially as it pertains to our reality. Hayden White comments that “[o]ne can produce an

---

2 This incident parallels the historical events surrounding the presentation of the Catholic Church’s report that Monseñor Juan José Gerardi helped bring to the public’s attention, who was subsequently brutally murdered in a similar fashion.
imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less ‘true’ for being imaginary. It all depends upon how one constructs the function of the faculty of imagination in human nature” (57). Narratives, then, play an important role in the (re)conceptualizing of history. Real and fictional elements join forces to convey meaning on a deeper level. Still, the real events should “simply be,” acting as referents in the narration, though they “should not pose as the subjects of a narrative” (White 3). And this is precisely what occurs in Insensatez; the main focus of the narration is on the anonymous reader, how he consumes the indigenous testimony and how he copes with, and reacts to, the violent history. The referents to the actual testimony pose not as the subject, but rather as a motor constantly fueling the actions of the narrator, which aims the reader’s questioning towards the fictional portion of the text (the plot) and not to the historical elements (past horrors). This, in turn, allows the novel to be viewed much more as a historical discourse (White 43).

Yet there is a constant struggle happening in the narrator’s mind, an endless battle between reality and fantasy. The unnamed speaker has not personally experienced such violent and disturbing trauma like the indigenous population had, though he will have some exposure as his wandering mind leads him down a tortuous path to arrive at a temporary final destination. It is no easy mental journey, but it is crucial to his own salvation and greater understanding of history. At one point, fraught with fear and hardship, he cannot help but think that the mind is truly hell; nothing of the flesh compares (93). Just prior to his flight to Europe, the narrator’s own writing becomes burdened and incoherent – only bizarre commas and confusing sentences spill forth (139). The work described in such a manner is not extremely distinct from the novel itself, Insensatez, where meandering sentences and drawn-out thoughts trail each other to construct the text in a postmodern
fashion. Finally, refuge is found overseas, as is the truth: “Todos sabemos quiénes son los asesinos” (153). This becomes the narrator’s new phrase, and he latches onto it with passion; he will not let the truth escape him this time. Moments later Toto’s message is received, shattering not only the fantasy world but reality as well. The roles had been completely inverted; everything we believed to be true was not, and the overwhelmingly active imagination of the protagonist proved to reflect a reality that we were not prepared to accept. Yet, it all makes sense with only a few, seemingly minor, closing words.

John Beverley reminds us that in testimonio literature the sense of what is true and what is false is key (7). He defines the genre as something we are “meant to presume that its narrator is someone who has lived…the events and experiences that he or she narrates” (3). Therefore, the “temporal sequence of those events” and the “sequence of the life of the narrator or narrators” become crucial (4). Though Insensatez is certainly not capable of being labeled as such due chiefly to the unconcealed fictional nature of the work and the narrator never having been purported as a real individual, some minor characteristics do overlap sufficiently to make testimonial theory a valid consideration for this novel as well. Castellanos Moya maintains the truth versus lie viewpoint, yet makes a distinctive shift, changing which truth and which lies are being debated. The simple fiction approach never has the reader calling into question the indigenous testimony that the narrator intently absorbs. What the question becomes, then, is not if the testimony is or is not true, but rather if what the protagonist is experiencing represents actuality or not. Insensatez parts entirely from traditional testimonial literature, yet does not completely sever all ties. There is no longer one, tangible individual’s story presented through an interlocutor, as has oftentimes been the case, but instead an anonymous narrator who shares pieces of his experience with
the reader and who maintains a constant stream of thought within his own mind. This type of exposition also helps by “destabilizing the authority of the State’s monologic narrative of the past” through the interjection of other voices (Caso 74). As Central American literature continues to move in new rhetorical and representational directions in an attempt to define the postwar period, previous boundaries and lines will become increasingly blurred and distorted (Arias 24).

Focusing on the novelty of the approach to fictionalized historical testimony, and this label applies whether Guatemala is the specific culprit or the anonymity is calculated and the novel is widely applicable to any Latin American country, the role of the reader transforms to accommodate this presentation. Even before we are able to pronounce the first word of the actual text, an unexpected disclaimer springs from the page: “Éste es un libro de ficción. Nombres, personajes, lugares e incidentes son producto de la imaginación del autor o utilizados de manera ficticia. Cualquier parecido con personas reales, vivas o muertas, es una coincidencia” (6, my emphasis). Though the book is fairly inconceivable as anything but a novel, this warning is an additional clue indicating the importance that fiction assumes, removing doubt from the historical portion of the text only to cast it elsewhere, which is not necessarily an aspect in and of itself unique to Castellanos Moya, especially in recent years. As readers, our main questions are not directed towards the credibility of the violent testimony that the nameless protagonist constantly pores over, but rather they are centered around the reality of the narrator’s world – Is the military really watching him? Is he in danger? Where do his bizarre wanderings of the mind stem from, if not from the testimony with which he works? The narrative places the author, who utilizes his own imagination to persuade us into attempting to reveal truth for ourselves, into the role of
mediator and forces us to contemplate the incomplete testimonies offered in the text (Sánchez Prado 79-80). Filling in the gaps is certainly an open-ended proposal on the part of Castellanos Moya, leaving us with no direction other than to consult historical documents or, more likely for the majority of readers, to consult our imagination.

As we are coaxed closer to the violent past, the varying elements of reality are not muddled. Castellanos Moya represents “un lúcido contrapunto a las versiones edificantes del pasado reciente” (Pliego 69), and, in agreement, Pérez Simón adds that *Insensatez* participates in “el desafío de la historia oficial” (256). Misha Kokotovic points out that post-war Central American novels have tended to be largely urban fictions, then proceeds to differentiate between neoliberal noir and *testimonio*, purporting that “*testimonio* has virtually been forgotten” as of the 1990s (4). I am forced to disagree with this statement, mostly concerned with the strong testimonial presence within *Insensatez*, a novel only published as of 2004. Even though the genre of the novel may be considered a hybrid mixture, there are undeniably traces of the *testimonio* genre present that cannot be ignored, even if they are represented in a more parodic manner.

The anonymity throughout the work, including that surrounding the narrator and the place settings, has been lightly touched upon already, yet deserves a bit more recognition as having a prominent role in the formation of the text. Nathalie Besse points out that with no specific mention of Guatemala, the most likely source for the novel, the country in question could very well be any other within the region (3). The ambiguity in regards to the nation in which the narrator is working may easily be accepted as metaphor, representing all of those Central (and to a greater extent “Latin”) American nations that have survived such terrible bouts of government-induced violence, adding a certain degree of universality to the text.
Also, the fact that the narrator is anonymous makes him an easier character to relate to and identify with due to the lack of concrete specifications, while we simultaneously observe his own development as a person through the testimonies that he encounters.

As the novel progresses and the narrator evolves, Castellanos Moya employs a number of metafictional techniques to convey the protagonist’s experiences as a reader of testimony. Many of these insights involve the potential to glimpse what is going on inside of his head, namely his thought processes and imagination. At one point in the novel, the narrator acknowledges that “convivir con esos textos las veinticuatro horas del día podría ser fatal para una personalidad compulsiva como la mía, dispararía mi paranoia a niveles enfermizos” (31). Soon thereafter, his reflection proves to be quite accurate. He begins to record various quotes extracted from the grotesque testimonies in a little notebook that he constantly has on hand. Whenever speaking or meeting with another character, he then recites ad nauseam the excerpts that he finds particularly poetic or insightful. Grinberg Pla suggests that this activity marks the transformation from mere reader of testimony to active participant; the narrator has placed the original testimony into his own mouth and now brings it to the attention of others. Language, then, comes to be an essential ingredient in the presentation of testimony, whether original or reproduced. This permits metaphysical experiences that are laden with intense use of language to allow a being to “superarse y recuperarse” (Pérez Simón 254).

These metafictional techniques have their recognition and identification thoroughly explored in some of Patricia Waugh’s thoughts that date back more than two decades ago. Waugh celebrates the insecurity between fiction and reality and signals language as arbiter
between ourselves and the reality of the world (2-3). A key component to successful metafiction, at least according to Waugh, is seamlessly incorporated in *Insensatez*; there must be a great degree of familiarity before departing from known territory and forging paths onto unfamiliar terrain (86). Waugh explains this as a fine balance between traditional and innovative approaches. Castellanos Moya corresponds with this belief, stating: “Me parece que una de las formas más sugerentes y efectivas de abordar lo político es por medio de la técnica del thriller o novela policiaca…” (“Apuntes sobre lo político” 16). The stylistic endeavor of Castellanos Moya presents familiar fiction, yet proceeds to play with language and genre until producing an original novel. This play, says Waugh, is imperative because it allows the “discovering of new communicative possibilities” (36). Consequently, the historical and fantastic (that is, imagined) worlds merge. As with metafiction, so, too, with *Insensatez* – the reader must abandon preconceived literary notions and social conventions (Waugh 67), consenting at times to a metaphoric slap in the face, forcing the reader to really dig until pulling the issues out by their roots.

The anonymous narrator of the novel does not restrict himself either. Instead, he plunges head-first into the testimony and never looks back. He not only obsessively replicates lines of the indigenous testimony, but imagines himself as both torturer and tortured, only to return to his reality after these momentary lapses. Waugh demarcates this as “role-playing” (116), which is billed as stage one in the convergence of fiction and reality. The protagonist soon enters stage two, where we as readers feel a grave concern for

---

3 Though I will not explicitly be incorporating Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), it is still a fundamental work in the area of metafiction whose concepts regarding “historiographic metafiction” and the “metafictional paradox” (that is, both reader involvement and detachment in a text), as well as the whole idea of problematizing the past, are essential. These concepts, at least a basic understanding of them, should be kept in mind throughout the reading of this paper. I have opted to discuss Waugh not only because she is a predecessor to Hutcheon, but more so due to her analyses that can be directly related to numerous elements observable within *Insensatez*. 
him (Waugh 119), for at any moment the militant spies could capture and mutilate him, just the same as they treated the indigenous peoples years prior. As we continue to read, we also become absorbed in the text, entering the later stages of an indefinite reality. The only escape, as evidenced by the narrator surviving and having accurately identified a true reality, is through the extensive use of imagination.

All of these elements have visible effects that directly impact the reader. Roberto Pliego is quick to call attention to the reader’s early disorientation: “No hemos terminado de leer la segunda página y ya estamos en el corazón de las tinieblas” (69). However, we push forward in an attempt to illuminate the distinction between fiction and reality. The protagonist, however, has no decision in his participation: “any reader who takes to heart testimonio’s call to action faces substantial risks – psychological, economic, and possibly even physical” (Nance 52). The anonymous speaker experiences severe paranoia and hallucinations elicited by his vivid imagination, lives a meager lifestyle (hence the reason for accepting a temporary position; the worst part is that his pay is late and inconsistent!), and also fears death or grave injury for the work he is performing. All of the implied risks that come with handling testimony have effectively been forced upon him in one way or another. We, on the other hand, have a choice to make. We can allow the literature to take us to one extreme or remain idle at the other. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado feels that there exists a certain lack of utility with such writing because there are no aftereffects and the guilty roam free (86). Still, this ultimately becomes our decision as readers to exhibit just how the text has affected us.
The imagination and its rippling side effects are observable throughout the course of the novel, where it also proves to be a necessary tool to comprehend the testimony that is not always so applicable to our own lives:

A otro nivel, en la novela de Castellanos Moya se propone que aquellas personas que no han vivido la guerra directamente tienen la posibilidad de entender la dimensión de los sucesos ocurridos por medio de la imaginación simbólica en su dimensión cognitiva. En otras palabras, la imaginación se perfila en *Insensatez* como un camino posible para colocarse en el lugar de las víctimas y lograr así una identificación con las mismas. (Grinberg Pla 3)

Moving one step further with this line of thinking, fictionalization must not be understood strictly as an aesthetic practice, but rather as an element that permits a greater attempt at understanding the trauma and horrors that others have lived through (3). The opening line, as well as a recurring theme in *Insensatez*, is “Yo no estoy completo de la mente” (13). The idea of completeness is effectively unascertainable; thus, all readers (the narrator included) must perceive through imagination to encounter all actual possibilities and results, constantly struggling to make the pieces of the puzzle of the past fit together.

As readers of the novel reflecting on this work by Castellanos Moya, we must consider the outcome a success; a fresh look at history has effectively supported the transmission of the past to us via the text, and, adding to the pleasure of the conclusion, the narrator survives. From this point, it is only logical to mull over just how we have arrived at this point of revelation. The answer always circles back to the imagination. With serious thought and contemplation, blind acceptance of the past fades away and determined decision-making advances significantly. The insight gained through the usage of the imagination, then, forces the reader to critically think about even the most minute details or obscure possibilities until a greater comprehension of the events is realized. This type of encouragement is purposefully induced by the author: “lo más importante es el tono, el
ritmo y la intensidad de la voz narrativa, la estructura y la velocidad de la prosa, antes que la capacidad para describir espacios o caracteres” (Ortíz 4). Likewise, through the persistent use of imagination, we are able to call into question all elements of the novel and push for their exploration: testimony, history, violence, fiction, reality, and so on.

Even so, we must always be prepared to “rewrite the encyclopedia” (Eco 21). With this mindset and readiness, the fact that the novel is a work of fiction does not detract from the truths that can be extracted from it. Recalling the misplaced notions that Christopher Columbus had, for example, before departing on his epic journey, or the conquistadors trying to reach El Dorado or the fountain of youth, we also remember their great achievements and discoveries. Once realizing that “history has been largely the Theater of an Illusion” (Eco 3), we are more prepared to question what we have previously believed as true. Offering this immense task to the imagination can certainly prove fruitful, and the great “serendipity” of the entire act is that known falsities such as works of fiction and the products of the imagination can result in a very accurate and coherent truth, forcing forgotten or neglected history to shift to the foreground.

Lara-Martínez directly connects the elements of fictionalized testimony and imagination, noting that the first-person narrative style of Castellanos Moya is conducive to conveying actual testimony and, in the present case, furthers the novel’s roots in the real:

Se trata de historias de vida o de biografías que usan la primera persona singular como vehículo presencial de las experiencias y de los hechos relatados en el texto. El "Yo" que inaugura ambas novelas se nos ofrece en cuanto garante fidedigno de la narración. Como en el canon testimonial, ese "Yo" nos asegura que el relato más que una elucubración ficticia, posee un fuerte arraigo histórico en lo real. (4)

This swings right back into the truth versus untruth riddle, though with some imagination we may conceivably identify one from the other. Nevertheless, the novel still contains
many truths pertinent to the real world, regardless of whether or not they are straightforward, symbolic or allegorical. Oftentimes, proposes Mario Vargas Llosa, the novel is the only form of communicating certain truths. A relevant disguise or fresh dress allows for new perspectives and original modes of expression when transmitting ideas (6). As a result, the novel allows the reader to step closer to this formerly unknown aspect of humanity through judging, understanding, and experiencing it in a manner distinct from, yet similar to, an actual experience (10). Employing this technique gives the reader an opportunity to live not just one life, but many. Therefore, fiction/nonfiction is not the dichotomy that determines whether or not a work is distinguishable for its truths or disposable for its lies; the relativity of the work in regards to the human condition and the work’s ability to communicate that human truth and meaning is what deems a work truthful or not (8).

Castellanos Moya takes his fiction one step further, asserting in a recent article, “La recuperación de la memoria histórica no es una idea exclusiva de los grupos vinculados a la defensa de los derechos humanos y de las víctimas de abusos y barbarie por parte del poder estatal” (“Elogio” 91). A number of characters, namely the anonymous narrator prior to accepting the job as editor of the collection of testimony, seemingly had no interest in human rights. Yet, in regards to the protagonist, all of his wandering thoughts, paranoid fantasies and role-playing eventually return him to his own reality. Once placed back into this personal reality, he, as well as we, can proceed to take action and accept responsibility to react however we see fit (Nance 79). The ranting proclamations at the close of the novel suggest that the narrator will pursue the truth and continue to share his knowledge and awareness with those around him, even if they do not desire to participate or wish to pay
much attention. These actions, in essence, fulfill what he originally set out to do when he arrived at the archbishop’s palace: recuperate the memory of the hundreds of survivors and witnesses of the massacres between the guerrillas and the military (Insensatez 17). The pure density of the original volume, 1,100 sheets (13), implies the urgency that so many stories are waiting to be told, simply resting on the brink between publicity and obscurity.

Though the speaker of the story has a tendency to react in an atypical manner, we are similarly expected to have some reaction after becoming conscious of such violent realities. Sánchez Prado offers some advice to help guide the reader when confronting such works as Insensatez. First, he says, there must be a “colapso del sujeto intelectual moderno” (85) in order to come to terms with the “new narrative” of Latin America in general, referring specifically here to the newer literary styles seen throughout the generation of Castellanos Moya, including Insensatez. This breakdown of the intellectual subject is pivotal to understanding such novels due to the fact that preconceived notions and constructions must be abolished prior to undertaking an endeavor such as the present case. Once traditional concepts have been thoroughly reduced, we are encouraged to accept the fact that “la memoria no es redentora” (85). We can rely neither on previous knowledge nor past memories to see the truth; this type of project requires all-around preparation, reflection, and, most importantly, an open (and imaginative) mind.

Castellanos Moya’s innovative approach is also taken into consideration: “Mientras el testimonio debe re contar la experiencia del individuo como alegoría o representación de las experiencias de una comunidad, Insensatez restituye al individuo, en toda su imperfección, el carácter único de su experiencia frente al abismo de la historia” (Sánchez Prado 85). And what remains clear in the end is the memory of the victims. The ultimate
goal of recollecting, reconsidering and rewriting the past, then, is achieved, at least to a
certain degree. Again, relating Beverley’s thoughts to the novel permits further
understanding of its capacity for social and/or political change. He considers testimonio an
“art of memory” not only directed to “memorialization of the past” but rather to the
“constitution of more heterogeneous, diverse, egalitarian, and democratic nation-states”
(24). This same potential for progress is observable in Insensatez, even though the work is
centered around a wholly fictional account. Paralleling Castellanos Moya’s own beliefs,
Silvia L. López states that “[a] sign of cultural development would be precisely the fact that
a nation has recovered and assumed its history to such an extent that it serves as a source of
fiction for its writers” (89). Though Insensatez is just one example of such fiction and there
is still much ground to be covered, it plays an essential role in the perpetuation of memory
and history. Consequently, there is undoubtedly more room for progress and development
(historically and literarily speaking) within Central America, the setting for the novel. As
such, new visions like that of Castellanos Moya are needed to stimulate stagnant cultural
and political affairs.

Supplementing these theoretical thoughts are some ideas heavily relying on the use
of imagination to fully comprehend the gravity of such literature. For a greater likelihood of
success, the reader must imagine himself in the same situation (Nance 63). Although this
approach enters from a different angle than the one I have been maintaining, it still aids in
overcoming the same obstacles, contending that when it comes to reality versus fiction,
ultimately, one is true and one is not. The testimonial account of Rigoberta Menchú is
brought up to explicitly point out that “[o]nly the ‘imagine yourself’ instruction promoted
positive feeling toward the victim” (Nance 74, emphasis mine). To generalize this
statement and to similarly apply it to the present case would not be unreasonable, especially for the reader who cannot directly relate to the speaker or their situation. Thus, the imagination is a key factor in understanding and even in empathizing with the speaker.

Kimberly Nance draws some conclusions based on Melvin Lerner’s “just world theory” to further aid the reader in processing the text and beginning to grapple with the idea of responding to it, purporting that readers tend to gravitate towards a more spontaneous and oral style (89). However, Nance is also quick to point out that “the appearance of spontaneity is not to be confused with the real absence of editing” (89), though in either case the reader is more compelled to respond. The “obsesión enfermiza” (151) that we find in the novel stems directly from the indigenous testimony, originally recorded from natural, oral interview sessions and later transcribed to document form, maintaining their originality to a large degree. The words that spring off the pages seem poetic and profound to the narrator, perhaps because they remind him of “poetas como el peruano César Vallejo” (32).

Had the text been presented to him in a less “oral” or seemingly “spontaneous” style, the consequences reaped may have been drastically different, not only for him but for us as well. Nevertheless, the (fictionalized) testimonial accounts exist to offer redemption and rectification against the injustices. The speaker, therefore, runs the serious risk of speaking out against those in power, whether it is the government, military, or some other group. Constraints on the speaker may even be immediate and physical; assassination and imprisonment are not uncommon practices. These fears similarly afflict the narrator of the novel, for he has been converted from reader into speaker of testimony, so that we may recognize the violent history being presented. The anonymous narrator, then, must react accordingly – the speaker will take steps to save himself and continue to speak (Nance 101,
emphasis mine). The speaker of the novel flees the country and ends up in Europe, where he insists on making his voice heard, even at the dismay of others who find themselves in his company.

Using the imagination to seek and uncover the truth in this manner is one of many tools that a critical reader should have stowed and at the ready for such occasions. Other works beg more direct approaches, tackling the text without having to scour for a true reality. The obligatory contemplation that comes with Castellanos Moya’s writing forces the reader into more of a critical and imaginative thinking pattern. Though I propose that this type of writing has much to add to current discussions surrounding the past and its recuperation, it is not intended to replace any part of the existing body of literature, but rather to complement and enhance what we already have. The reader must still decide for him or herself whether or not this more indirect and eclectic approach to history is going to be beneficial and to what extent. After all, the reader has been, as with any novel, actively participating in the construction of a reality other than his or her own and, in turn, becoming directly involved in their otherworldly creation. The reader has presumably been attempting to identify what is truly happening, all while relating with, and possibly fearing for, the protagonist. The separation of real and imaginary entities within the novel helps to displace the reader, who then “moves into the presence of the fictional world and so experiences the realities of the text as they happen” (Iser 286). This explains much of the behavior and many of the events in the narrator’s experience as well, yet it is left up to us as readers how far we will take our own involvement and subsequent response. The story may act as our “map” to aid us in “delineating the options that can be imagined for resistance and
redemption in times of trauma” (Caso 73). Speaking about the past, then, allows the imagining of a distinct future.

This active process of discovery within the text and ourselves opens up new worlds to which we may have never been exposed. It is in these alternate worlds where the reader can be liberated from his or her own life, norms, and social restrictions; the reader can also exercise his or her mental faculties – both the emotional and cognitive (Iser xiii). Yet all of this requires one fundamental element – the imagination. For without the imagination, there may be no fruition or revelation. A text needs to be paired with such a faculty in order to be interpreted and, more importantly, to have significance (Iser 279). At times, the imaginative component can become so stimulated that the reader essentially becomes involved in the text at such a level that he or she believes the events to be pieces of his or her own life. The role-playing observed throughout the novel represents one such instance of this phenomenon. Though the reality of the indigenous testimony was in fact temporally distant to the anonymous reader, it became his reality. So, too, for us as we read and become involved in the text. Arturo Arias indicates that after the 1990s readers were more central to an author’s success in Central America (19). This dual role is applicable not only in terms of book sales, but also in regards to the social projects found within works such as this, where, in the end, the reader bears much of the burden.

The hybrid approach, that is, the incorporation of elements from multiple genres such as the thriller, historical fiction, testimonial and so on, witnessed in Insensatez, has some distinct advantages when unearthing the past. First, the history and violence are fictionalized, not making them immediately suspect as the target for the reader’s questioning. Instead, the focus on fiction versus reality is relocated elsewhere to more
trivial (and truly fictional) aspects. Second, the reader is compelled to think critically, exploring the text from multiple angles using his or her imagination to formulate questions and simultaneously find the answers. Third, the anonymous narrator does not restrict our capability to apply these horrific episodes to more than one region of Central or Latin America. He also allows us to visualize a variety of reactions to the trauma and violence and lets us understand more fully the extremity to which many nations have gone when exterminating their indigenous peoples. Fourth, the novel is an exciting and enthralling read. The testimony and violence are not presented in a typical, at times tedious, fashion; through the play with language, the distinct narration techniques and an entertaining fictional plot, the reader encounters a certain past and may even be accosted by it without having been prepared to stumble upon it, yet presumably continues to read (and make him or herself more aware) due to the attention-grabbing novel. The effectiveness of the novel format at reaching a wider reading public also reaps benefits here.

Though it is the imagination that plays a significant role in *Insensatez*, consciousness is the overarching entity that encompasses this personal asset. Literature is quite possibly the richest and most complete record of human consciousness that we have (Lodge 10), and, when considered as such, the anonymous narrator from the novel is further transformed and may represent a guide and an archetype. He tends to steer us down the same path of self-induced fantasies only to come out ahead with knowledge and awareness in reality. The protagonist can therefore also be interpreted as a model for this type of literature. Humans, though, oftentimes shelter true emotions and thoughts. David Lodge explains this trend by noting the fact that, in a sense, all novels deal with the differences between appearance and reality, or the progression from innocence to experience, which consequently stirs certain
tendencies to mask true thoughts and feelings (42). This is due to the partial or complete misleading of the reader, wherefore readers and characters are both potentially deceived as the characters (and author) attempt to meet their goals. Yet the imagination is certainly one way to counter this occlusion of truth by attacking a concern from multiple standpoints, allowing reflection from within and without. As a result, the imagination comes to be a tremendously versatile tool, having uses not only in the literary world, but in the real world in which we live as well.

Having taken into account the numerous elements weaved into the novel, it is plain to see the triumph of the fictionalization of testimony in this case. Castellanos Moya’s way of penning the novel and process of discovery are unique, and to apply the same techniques of imagination for past works could be anachronistic due to the construction of prior texts that may be situated differently either due to genre or literary movement. With similar fictions in the future, imagination may very well play a vital role in their unraveling of the past. The imagination, then, must be used to consider alternative realities and to preserve a fuller and truer portrait of reality itself. Nonetheless, Insensatez fulfills the many goals and objectives that the author seems to have had on his agenda: the reader (narrator and ourselves) is made aware of Central American violence, then reacts in some manner to the text, who in turn perpetuates knowledge (actively or passively), and, finally, the reader may then choose to attempt to rectify the injustices committed, depending upon his or her will, resources, and many other contributing factors. Regardless of the outward or inward reaction to the novel or the reader’s final conclusions, he or she still does not lose the simple joys that only literature can produce – vivid imagery, a momentary escape from reality, or the simple, pleasurable flow and combination of words.
Castellanos Moya, in large part, has contributed to the body of postwar Central American literature by formulating a new stylistic approach to familiar subject material. His work is also much more a work directed towards the masses than some previous ones.\(^4\)

Witnessing new direction in Central America will be exciting over the next few years, especially as more critics add their contributions, on not only *Insensatez* but on Horacio Castellanos Moya’s production in general, to the currently limited discussion. This particular novel may have helped to mark the onset of a trend, or it may very well end up being an isolated case of fictionalized testimony relying on somewhat unusual reader practices. Nevertheless, this novel will continue to bridge the old and new generations of literature, as well as mark other genres due to the intrinsic nature of the hybridity of *Insensatez*. Only time will reveal the reliability and effectiveness of such tactics to spreading knowledge on violent history. It certainly seems a rather refined and practical approach and will be a welcome transformation and evolutionary step in the existing literary progression.

\(^4\) I make this claim for a number of reasons, including the prompt international recognition and reception of the novel. Looking towards previous generations, testimonial works, including the accepted first work of the genre, *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966), received similar international notoriety (Sklodowska 1). Even so, recent novels like this one of Castellanos Moya inherently have more “globalization” power – they reach greater numbers of people (Arias 25). Furthermore, the anonymity that contributes to a more universal setting and series of events within this novel inhibit the correlation between the text and specific politics. In the end, the reader is not specifically called to a concrete, definite action or to any one justification of a particular event. Additionally, the presentation as a fictional novel permits a reading for entertainment’s sake and does not necessarily imply critical thinking, (re)new(ed) awareness, reactions, etc. for all readers.
CHAPTER III
A THRILLING ENGAGEMENT WITH HISTORY IN SANTIAGO RONCAGLIOLO’S
ABRIL ROJO

The young Peruvian writer Santiago Roncagliolo has produced an impressive
corpus of literature throughout the past decade, gaining additional international notoriety
after being awarded the Premio Alfaguara de Novela for his 2006 novel Abril rojo.
Though Abril rojo brings recent Peruvian violence to the world scene, it is not his only
work that does so – La cuarta espada (2007) is a non-fiction publication that further
explores the years of the guerra interna peruana, spreading predominantly from 1980 to
the year 2000. Just as Insensatez overlaps fiction with parts of Central American history,
Abril rojo likewise has two decades of violence embedded in it. The civil war that lasted
across the presidencies of Fernando Belaúnde, Alan García and Alberto Fujimori resulted
in the deaths or disappearance of nearly 70,000 citizens, and this history is subsequently
uprooted and examined under a more contemporary lens in the present text. Incorporating
true facts, quotes and events into the novel, Roncagliolo explores the insurgent faction

Though many consider “la literatura de la violencia” to have its origins dating back
to 1974 (Faverón Patriau 66), the modern thriller and detective novel pair effortlessly here
to produce a work that could equally be considered worthy of such a literary label. Simply
due to interest in the genre, Roncagliolo asserts in an interview that he wanted to use a
murderer to speak about the whole of society (Wieser 223). He also claims that he believes
such an approach utilizing popular fiction may help break down the “miedo a la libertad” he sees Peruvians suffering from – the self-denied ability to critically think and analyze, resulting in a blind following of a dictatorship or presidency (“Cocaína” 103). What Roncagliolo also allows is the presentation of “official” history to a public that most likely would not have taken the effort to carry out their own explorations. His novel permits an effective transmission of ideas in a rather pleasing form, parting from a traditional broadcast of the violence as is more visible in his journalistic-based endeavor, *La cuarta espada*.

Nevertheless, the blended genres in *Abril rojo* can pack a significant punch: “la novela negra [es decir, la policial] no es un género menor, de mero entretenimiento, sino parte integral de la literatura significativa” (Wieser 12). Horacio Castellanos Moya has similarly commented that confronting politics via the techniques used in the thriller is “una de las formas más sugerentes y efectivas” (16). Throughout the novel, Roncagliolo tends to remain unaligned with neither the rebels nor the government or military, creating an atmosphere conducive to an “ambigüedad moral” as he appropriately calls it (Wieser 224). This ambiguity, which tends to provoke questioning and continued prodding of the past before siding with one group or the other, will help form the basis for this chapter.

*Abril rojo*, surprisingly only the first novel that “toma a Ayacucho como escenario, el senderismo como sospecha, la guerra interna como marco y la violencia represiva como fantasma social” (Faverón Patriau 73), begins with the *fiscal distrital adjunto* Félix Chacaltana Saldívar investigating the mysterious death of a charred corpse with a severed arm. After spending many years in Lima, Chacaltana has recently returned to his hometown of Ayacucho not only to continue his line of work, but to be closer to his mother.
– who we soon learn to be nothing more than a spiritual presence with whom he speaks and interacts throughout the novel. With few friends and little support, Chacaltana befriends Edith, a waitress in a small café and someone he can open up to. Soon after encountering this charming, young girl, the higher-ups send Chacaltana to the provincial town of Yawarmayo to oversee an electoral process where he finds remnants of Sendero Luminoso still active in the surrounding hillsides. Alarmed, he expresses his concern, only to be censured by the response that they are nothing more than “algunos payasos que revientan fuegos artificiales, pero son inofensivos” (113). As Semana Santa fast approaches and the bodies start to pile up, some truths begin to unfold. Chacaltana learns that Edwin, the brother of Justino (and suspect believed to be involved with the first murder), was detained, tortured, and then executed – not set free as was reported. Later, when forced to peer into a mass grave, Chacaltana witnesses the mother of Edwin and Justino frantically searching for her missing son. Many of these episodes are actually based on true occurrences, which I will explore more thoroughly below.

As it turns out, the military commander, and Chacaltana’s superior, Carrión, has been behind the murders all along, constructing his own version of the Inkarri, or “inca rey” – the reunited body members composed of two arms, two legs and a head that represents resurrection and salvation for not only many indigenous people, but for those of Sendero Luminoso as well. Having walked into a trap and allowed the head, the final piece of the “Frankenstein,” to be added to the “body,” Chacaltana flees civilized society because all five of the murders now rest on him. Though he remains on the outskirts of town preparing his “milicias de defensa” (325), the officials find no reason to pursue his capture since there is “paz” and “seguridad” (326).
Yet, in sharp contrast to the conclusion of *Insensatez*, there is no closure whatsoever and we as readers are left with more questions than answers, wondering to what extent the “official” history has permeated society, what the actual presence of *Sendero Luminoso* is today, or what the true consequences of exploration and challenging of the past may be. I propose that, due to this profound lack of closure and the numerous questions that inevitably remain, *Abril rojo* helps to stimulate the process of re-discovering the past. In other words, Roncagliolo guides the reader in problematizing the past through the main character of Chacaltana and his investigative techniques. I tend to use “problematize” in the same way that Linda Hutcheon presents the term when discussing historiographic metafiction, that is, a play with, questioning and exploration of, and subsequent analysis of history (ix). The reader must be wary, however, since the imagination may lead him or her astray in this case. Even Chacaltana realizes that “[s]i todo es mentira…nada lo es” (200), suggesting that the bounds limiting fiction and reality are far from clear-cut or well-defined.

Still, the detective procedures are much more revealing than they first seem, providing insight into the methods of dialoguing with the past. Chacaltana employs various approaches to extract truth and deftly sidestep obstacles along the way. He consults official history records, just like the anonymous narrator of *Insensatez*, including police and military reports and documents, as well as having conversations with the coroner about the circumstances surrounding some of the deaths. There is also a clear effort to establish contact with those who were directly involved with the past that is so relevant to him at the moment, including a visit with Hernán Durango, a *senderista* terrorist currently in prison. Along with persistent contemplation and reconsideration of the facts,
Chacaltana actively discusses matters with another, in this case Edith, his girlfriend of sorts. Though multiple angles are worked with these tactics, they by no means represent a definitive list of recommendations, but rather pose as a starting point for the interested reader to embark on his or her own journey.

Finally, not only is there some pressure to explore the past lingering within the text, there is certainly an external driving force as well. Having lived for over a decade in relative peace and tranquility, Peruvian society faces the challenge to either resurrect the past or let it slip into the clutches of forgetfulness and oblivion. Since Peru has historically been “mucho más callado” (Roncagliolo “Cocaína” 104) than their Southern Cone neighbors who survived similar episodes, Roncagliolo pushes for change, indicating that the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (active from 2001 to 2003) and even his recent publications (Abril rojo and La cuarta espada) do not suffice by any stretch of the imagination.¹ It’s all about putting “el dedo en la llaga de un modo u otro, lograr cierta incomodidad” he says (Navarro-Albaladejo 233). Jo-Marie Burt also points out that with the return of a democracy and citizen-elected presidents beginning in 1980, that the Peruvian people do share (or at least feel as if they do share) some responsibility for the horrors witnessed during those years (Political Violence 29). Just like the novel’s open-ended conclusion, however, the process of questioning and uprooting the past is cyclical and perpetual – there is no definitive point of termination and, though some questions will be satisfactorily answered, many more will be raised. Nevertheless, the qualities that make Abril rojo such an excellent model for contemporary readers are universal ones; there is no

¹ Argentina’s estimated number of deaths and disappearances between 1976 and 1983 ranges from 9,000 to 30,000, while Chile’s between 1973 and 1990 falls around 1,000 to 3,000 murdered and many thousands more tortured. In the face of these atrocious statistics, with Peru’s death toll placed officially at 69,280, Roncagliolo asserts that Peru has kept too quiet for too long.
reason that the same techniques cannot be similarly applied to other societies, cultures, individuals, and so on.

Recognizing the four types of truth that exist within the novel will further aid the reader in distinguishing fact from fiction, reality from fantasy. Oftentimes when fiction and reality mix, the State, as unfortunate as it may be, holds the upper hand in formulating their own versions of reality (Kassimeris 8). Not only is this visible in dictator-like rule in Peru a few decades ago, but even more recently here in the United States post-9/11. The State combined a reality (a grave terrorist attack) with many citizens’ irrational fears to pass a slew of privacy-invading and rights-reducing legislation. Playing their cards wisely, the government conformed reality and fiction to meet their needs, ultimately creating their own version of reality. Likewise, this is precisely what Alberto Fujimori intended to accomplish when perpetuating the threat of a resurgence of Sendero Luminoso and terrorism as a maneuver to gain votes in the popular elections leading up to the year 2000 (Burt, “Playing Politics” 73).

This first type of truth then, the “official” truth, must be identified and deconstructed. Though history books and authoritative reports may have always rung true with us, they must be scrutinized and possibly discarded when undertaking such investigations. Without an effort to oppose the “official” history, Chacaltana would never have discovered that Edwin, the brother of Justino who was reportedly released after an unsuccessful interrogation, was in fact brutally murdered and dumped into a mass grave: “…el teniente se inventó un informe de liberación y lo declaró clandestino días después. Enterraron su cuerpo en un basural cercano” (176). Even Chacaltana, who is always so uptight and by-the-book, subjectively edits an official report and thinks nothing of it:
“Ahora estaba perfecto, con la conjugación apropiada y las pausas correctas” (79). He then makes the required number of copies of the report and sends them to the corresponding offices – unintentionally spreading an altered “official” history, which ultimately has resulted in a skewed, one-sided presentation of the facts. Thus, even with a supposedly credible source or one that is pervasive throughout society, some degree of questioning and attacking to determine the integrity of the information is still necessary.

The second type of truth to consider is that of a perceived truth, which is rooted in our personal experiences, yet may contain an element of misinterpretation. As Chacaltana makes his way to the town of Yawarmayo to oversee the electoral process, he is unsure of whether or not his happiness is real or imagined (93), leading to the possible conclusion that the following events will also be open to false impression. Upon arrival, there are gutted dog carcasses hanging from lamp posts (96), and this “imagen de varios perros callejeros muertos colgados de los postes” (La cuarta espada 21) just happens to be Roncagliolo’s first memory after returning to Peru from an extended residence in Mexico. That night, as Chacaltana tries to fall asleep, the shouts and explosions from the surrounding slopes turn it into an impossible task (105). Terrified, he makes his way to the police lieutenant Aramayo and expresses his fears and concerns that Sendero Luminoso may still be operating to a large degree in their region. The seemingly imminent threat of violence is readily dismissed soon after talking with another knowledgeable person; Aramayo casually quips: “¿Operando? Ja, ja. Un poco, sí. Jodiendo más bien” (98). Though Chacaltana’s concerns were not misplaced, his conceptions of reality were altered until he reached out and sought reassurance and support for his imaginative conclusions.
This third type of truth, the imagined one, permeates an individual’s mind, resulting in a self-fashioned version of reality.

Since the imagination is free to put together its own creation from apparently logical conclusions, this self-convinced truth has the capability of spiraling into many different directions, some of which may not ever help in nearing the elusive truth called reality. The most outstanding example of this is surely the relationship that Chacaltana maintains with his deceased mother. He smells her clothes, speaks to her out loud and even solicits her opinions. Edith, acknowledging the peculiarity of this behavior, refuses to marry him unless he relents and accepts the fact that his mother is no longer with him: “Escucha, Félix… Te quiero mucho pero… en verdad… para casarme contigo… necesitaría que ella no estuviese ahí” (269). Shocked, Chacaltana blurts out “¿Cómo?,” only to immediately retort with “Ella está” (269). It becomes clearer, then, that as the investigation of the murders takes on multiple facets and engages in a variety of truth-finding tactics, so, too, must we assume an eclectic approach. Chacaltana’s imagined truths are slowly corroded with the passage of time and interaction with other characters, eventually resulting in the complete breakdown that occurs during the finale. The military commander Carrión pushes until Chacaltana remembers killing his father, whom he vehemently denied ever knowing, and the memory of the accidental and simultaneous murder of his mother surfaces as well: “Pero el torbellino de recuerdos no iba a dejarlo en paz. No iba a dejarlo en paz nunca” (319). This episode of individual break-through is representative of what may possibly happen on a larger, nationwide scale should the truth be persistently pursued.
Though some truths are told to us, some we experience and yet others we fabricate ourselves, reality, the fourth and only proper form of truth, remains unchanged. Despite what misgivings or incorrect beliefs we may hold, the past will stay unaltered and, at the same time, open to exploration. As the novel draws to a close, it is evident that Chacaltana’s early suggestion that Sendero Luminoso was the culprit of the murders was misplaced and the laughs he produced (43) were not unreasonable. Likewise, we realize that Edwin was never set free but instead killed off (177), and his mother who constantly searches for his body is a reflection of another, real mother who truly does seek her son’s remains (Roncagliolo, La cuarta espada 110-11). Similarly, a number of other truths are exposed, including Chacaltana’s family history and the fact that, although he was attempting to combat the murderer all along, he became Carrión’s “mejor cómplice” (316). So, many loose ends are tied and the investigation produced some fruitful results, but, as was previously mentioned, the questions that are still hanging in the air jump from the fictional work of literature into a more concrete reality – What has the government done to manipulate the recovery of the truth? Does Sendero still have any role in contemporary society? And, what is the next step after finishing the novel? Thus, the way to arrive at reality is through an inquiring process, one that leads to questioning and examination of numerous sources from plentiful points of view just as Chacaltana demonstrates for us.

Considering Abril rojo as a fictional thriller and as a guide to problematizing the past may be somewhat disconcerting for readers genuinely interested in the recuperation and rewriting of history. Nonetheless, many critics and theorists have already contributed their thoughts on this very subject, revealing that fiction can in fact be an incredibly valid source in regards to the presentation of history. Throughout the 1980s, Hayden White was
developing his ideas envisioning the benefits of narrativizing history. At the most basic level, White shows that narration is a natural part of human life and it represents a familiar and easy means of translation between knowing and telling (1). In support of his reasoning, he cites some of his contemporaries who are in agreement: “Where there is no narrative, Croce said, there is no history” (5) and, in the words of Peter Gay, “Historical narration without analysis is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete” (5). The fact that a narrative can express a completeness that preserves history in a superior manner is what really puts some weight on the scale in favor of White’s convictions. Only in a narration, that is to say, a fictional account, can the “coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life” be exhibited (24). Naturally, then, the imaginary component when conveying such history or reality is essential and does not necessarily detract from the transmission of truth. What it boils down to is how the reader constructs and utilizes his or her imagination within and without the text: “One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less ‘true’ for being imaginary” (White 57). This aspect permits further flexibility when working with history and its varied pieces, allowing a reworking, restructuring and reconsideration not possible with all forms of expression. The investigative procedures and general problematizing that Roncagliolo proposes demand this lack of rigidity in order to be successful, for fiction lets various angles be dissected where other approaches may be too constricting. Finally, as was mentioned in chapter one when speaking about history as a referent secondary to the main plotline in Insensatez and the advantage of placing it as such, the same holds true when applied to Abril rojo – real events “should not pose as the subjects of a narrative” (White 3).
Seymour Menton describes the *nueva novela histórica latinoamericana*, chiefly written during the late 1970s through early 1990s, in terms relatable to the much more recent *Abril rojo*. The principal characteristics that compose one of these works include the mimetic reproduction of a certain historical period, the conscious distortion of history, the fictionalization of historic figures, the use of metafiction, and intertextuality (42-43). *Abril rojo* meets these basic standards, taking place in the year 2000 and causing reader reflection on the decades prior, changing historic details as Dante Castro pointed out, weaving in the obvious application of metafiction, and using real documents from which to draw quotes, creating intertextual links and giving the words of past figures new life. Thus, not only is the novel an entertaining read, but it can also be considered a work with inherent historic value. Some critics agree that the historical component of the novel is decidedly important, even extending this belief to claim that such a book may be a better form of instructing than traditional classroom methods given the appropriateness of the approach (Veres 5). In further support of this idea, others tend to see Roncagliolo’s literature as free of excesses, arriving to the point without many obtrusive obstacles (Marín 174).

Along similar lines Umberto Eco qualifies his notion of serendipity, clarifying the tenet that just because something is inherently false (as with a work of fiction) does not mean that truth and other accuracies cannot be gleaned from it (viii). Coincidentally, Eco’s ideas seem to inadvertently incorporate features of perceived and imagined truth, as evidenced from an example that he provides in his text. To illustrate his point, Eco remarks that Christopher Columbus sought a quicker passage to the Orient, yet had grossly miscalculated the distance required to successfully navigate there (a great misperception).
Meanwhile, the sages of Salamanca also told Columbus he would never reach his destination due to the vastness of the Earth – nor would he reach any other place either (an assuredly unimaginable concept for some). Nevertheless, both sides of the discussion proved incorrect and, to the delight of many, Columbus reached the New World (7). Thanks to serendipity, much good (and, I concede, much bad) came from this happened-upon place. Fictional texts have the ability to work in much the same way; even though a story’s falsity may have begun deliberately, its unintended consequences could spill forth into reality (Eco 17). *Abril rojo* embodies one such work where this phenomenon is clearly observable. Just as Columbus scrutinized and put the ideas surrounding his voyage to the test, so, too, can the reader place history under the microscope for closer examination. Such stories from history allow us to understand that, in actuality, much history is based on falsehood and tales (Eco 20), especially given the subjective nature of selection, interpretation and presentation. In turn, a logical response would be to question the history we have always believed to be true, that is, the “official” history. Once the three potentially fictitious truths are whittled down and the lies have been shaved off, we are more prepared to “rewrite the encyclopedia” (21), as Eco so graciously puts it.

Despite copious amounts of theory in support of the presentation of history through fiction as *Abril rojo* does with the years of terror and violence in Peru, some critics still maintain an opposing viewpoint, claiming that inaccurate and minute details (in other words, gaps filled in by the author’s own creativity) significantly deteriorate any legitimate qualities of the text. One such opponent is Dante Castro, who even goes so far as to wonder if the novel should be considered a “disparate absoluto” (25). The majority of Castro’s criticism in regards to the text seems to revolve around historical inaccuracies,
which superficially may seem significant, yet the mundane details that are challenged have
no noteworthy impact on the story itself, the investigative technique, or the bringing to
light of the totality of Peruvian history. Some of the main concerns expressed throughout
his argument include the fact that a helicopter cannot move in reverse as Chacaltana
claimed one had (26), there is no official title of fiscal distrital but rather it is fiscal
provincial (27), an antiquated police slogan was scrawled across a shield (28) and, lastly, a
9mm caliber that was mentioned at one point would not have been the appropriate size
bullet (29). Each of these points, though quite possibly historically valid, does not detract
from the text. These details are predominantly rooted in the fictional plot and are not
purported as pertaining to the secondary referent, which is actual Peruvian history. Even if
these elements had been proposed by Roncagliolo as historical truths, history and its later
problematizing by the reader would not have been challenged to any notable degree; if the
helicopter moved in reverse to indifferently mow down Sendero members or an
individual’s execution bullet was .40 caliber and not 9mm, for example, what we are most
concerned with – the deaths, disappearances, terrorism, and violence – remains unchanged.
Still, these details do have their place and should not be written off as worthless in all
cases. The entirety of Abril rojo as a fictional, literary production with distinct goals is
simply not the appropriate forum for these types of details to be recounted with perfection.

Ricardo Virhuez Villafane is another critic who also tends to take Castro’s side,
similarly calling into question the historical relevancy that Abril rojo has. One of his main
corns concerns centers around the fact that with nearly 70,000 deaths during the 1980s and
1990s, Roncagliolo casually places the historical portion of the text as a “simple telón de
fondo” (32). A quick glance at the previously cited work of Hayden White quickly
eliminates this concern; history’s place is, in actuality, better situated on this second plane within the narrative. Villafane also seems disquieted by the author’s “ambigüedad moral,” resulting in speculation about why Roncagliolo denies placing the blame on “una política del Estado” (32). Nonetheless, as the pervasive corruption is explored, much blame is in fact given to members of the State. At least four areas of State corruption are touched upon, leading not only to the questioning of truth, but also to the conclusion that the State may have an equal (if not greater) share in the perpetuation of the violence. Such examples include the production of false police reports, as when the police captain Pacheco agrees to create a bogus draft to satisfy Chacaltana (73), the evidently accepted electoral fraud, plainly visible in Yawarmayo (104), the bribing of prison officials, as when Chacaltana goes to see Hernán Durango (143), and, finally, the fact that a military commander, Carrión, was the one responsible for the five brutal murders.

Not all critics have passed so lightly over the novel to nitpick such details, however. Oswaldo Estrada argues against those like Castro and Villafane, claiming that “importa menos la distorsión de la historia que la novelización del silencio, la recreación del miedo y el desgaste psicológico” (134). Roncagliolo brings such topics to light and effectively depicts the violence, the mutilated bodies of victims, the constant apprehension and the general uneasiness of the people living in such a society, among other things. These pieces of history are what need further consideration, not a discussion on incorrect firearm calibers or the possibility of helicopters moving in reverse. Also observable throughout the novel, a progressive urge is fostered to challenge history, allowing the reader to begin by questioning aspects of the fictional plot. Shortly thereafter, the reader is likely to move forward as he or she attempts to reach reality and see through the “official,” perceived and
imagined truths. With enough persistence and focus on points like the dismembering of bodies or the overwhelming threat of violence, the reader will soon be facing reality and history in a different manner. In a distinct way, then, the novel is heavily centered around truth, especially when Mario Vargas Llosa’s insight is taken into account.

Vargas Llosa is quick to point out that the qualities of “realista” and “fantástico” are not necessarily what differentiates truth from lies (8). A novel permits the reader to approach the material from an original perspective, where he or she is free to judge, experience and understand the text. Just as with the purpose a good story serves for entertainment, so, too, can a good novel function with the same premise – to displace the reader from his or her normal life. Vargas Llosa reaches the conclusion that each good novel tells the truth and every bad novel lies; the distinction is the effect of the displacement that the reader experiences (10). A novel that encourages an escape into a new world where the reader is absorbed and thrives in a setting other than his or her own, familiar place may be among the most truthful of novels. Likewise, a novel that lacks creativity and leaves the reader restless and uninterested may be among the most deceitful. The freedom granted to works of fiction represents an autonomous space where the author is at liberty to create unhindered by the influence of authority (Vargas Llosa 20). Thus, the reader’s relocation into a potentially new realm in Abril rojo, not only concerning Peru’s past but the confrontation with history in general, makes this work full of truth on a number of levels. The coexistence between fiction and history, then, is a relationship that oftentimes flourishes.

Taking into consideration the potential that Abril rojo has for readers to reflect on Peruvian (and by extension their own individual or collective) history, it comes as no
surprise that the novel won international recognition the year of its publication. As a matter of fact, this 21st-century novel is representative of the current “novela latinoamericana,” fictionalizing information and events that certainly could have been someone’s reality, especially during the chaotic years during the terror-filled 1980s and 1990s (Veres 2). An exposition of this contemporary trend within the whole of Latin America shows that Roncagliolo’s work is not singular in the combination of and play between fiction and history. As the novel progresses and our knowledge base expands, we are more able to direct our line of questioning away from the novel and aim towards a marked reality, focusing on society today – where it came from and where it is headed. Of course, this would require admitting that we are enveloped in history and have a role in its production. Chacaltana is able to steer us in the right direction, because, throughout the novel, “va descubriendo que la violencia en el Perú es una realidad cotidiana en la que él también es partícipe” (Vich 257-58), which may lead us to the same conclusion in our own reality.

As I have suggested from the start, Chacaltana acts as a guide of sorts for the reader to mimic when choosing to confront history employing a multi-faceted approach, like that of the investigative technique. His experience is far from perfect and represents some of the difficulties that we may encounter on our own journey. Constant discouragement, as with Carrión insisting that in Peru “no hay terrorismo, por orden superior” (45), or wanting to admit to himself that “[o]lvidar es siempre bueno” (135), does not prevent Chacaltana from uncovering the truth, but rather acts as a compelling force he feels the need to challenge. Upon speaking with Durango in prison, a great discomfort overcomes him and he feels the urge to immediately flee and regrets ever pursuing the investigation (151), yet
each step in the process is a necessary one. The constant wavering between determination and surrender does not dissuade Chacaltana in his thirst for truth. He certainly overcomes a lot in order to “rewrite the encyclopedia.” By the end of the novel, however, some level of gratification and achievement is ultimately gained – he was able to solve the murder mysteries in little over a month’s time, which marks considerable development in his understanding of violence, terrorism and history as well. Again, the questions that linger at the end of the novel are hardly focused on the fictional text anymore, but instead turn towards reality – Will the “official” history win out? What pieces of the puzzle have been left out of written history? Has there been any progress or change in society recently, and where is society heading at the moment? Although the case of Chacaltana assuredly represents an extreme involvement in the problematizing of the past, it does effectively illustrate what a high level of commitment and dedication can accomplish.

Nevertheless, Abril rojo is filled with historical information borrowed directly from primary sources. A note from the author at the end of the novel plainly states:

Los métodos de ataque senderistas descritos en este libro, así como las estrategias contrasubversivas de investigación, tortura y desaparición, son reales. Muchos de los diálogos de los personajes son en realidad citas tomadas de documentos senderistas o de declaraciones de terroristas, funcionarios y miembros de las Fuerzas Armadas del Perú que participaron en el conflicto. (327)

It is no surprise, then, that there is substantial overlap between Roncagliolo’s findings as he researched for La cuarta espada in 2005 with the present novel published the following year. The already mentioned episodes of the dead dogs in Yawarmayo and the mother of Edwin and Justino searching mass graves for her son are evidence of the direct influence of history. The real history enters at times possibly unacknowledged by the reader, for these two instances could equally be pure invention on the part of the author. Yet this overlap
and coexistence fuels the drive to problematize and explore the past, to truly discover which is fact and which is fantasy. Even the importance of Chacaltana’s mother and his girlfriend Edith likely have their origins in history, where women acted as leaders and key figures: “Las mujeres jugaron un rol importante en Sendero desde el principio” (Roncagliolo, La cuarta espada 172). Edith’s name appears to be a reference to Edith Lagos, a 19-year-old senderista girl who was killed by Peruvian forces and whose funeral was attended by thousands of followers. Other more explicit examples of the relationship between history and the novel are manifest in the horrific murders – the dismembered bodies correspond with many photographs that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission obtained, revealing corpses lacking various extremities and other scenes of carnage equally disturbing. By the end of La cuarta espada, Roncagliolo finally admits that he still does not know which side to take after all of his investigations: “Me pregunto si es posible escribir sobre todo esto sin tomar posición, si existe una verdad independiente de su narrador. No llego a ninguna conclusión al respecto” (221). Thus, the cyclical and continuous nature of interacting with the past carries on. Just like Chacaltana separated from society at the novel’s close preparing his “milicias de defensa,” Roncagliolo, and we the readers, are left with various options in terms of how we will choose to react.

Although Abril rojo is by no means a testimonial work, some of John Beverley’s thoughts on the testimonio genre are applicable towards the novel. The novel and testimonial literature each allow the reader to deliberately examine both sides of a story, that is, the “official” history and its opposing stance. Similarly, in each case the reader is called to some sort of social action, either a righting or justification of the wrongs committed, or engaging in a dialogue with the past, sifting through the remnants until the
truth is exposed, as is seen here. Generally speaking, society may reap benefits from either project, given that the literature is “an art directed not only toward the memorialization of the past but also to the constitution of more heterogeneous, diverse, egalitarian, and democratic nation-states, as well as forms of community, solidarity, and affinity that extend beyond or between nation-states” (Beverley 24).

Kimberley Nance reflects on the fact that some literature can promote social change, offering the fact that readers, even when encountering injustice in a fictional text, can feel compelled to respond (67). The project of social change that appears within Abril rojo is a broad one, pushing for the eradication of lies and gaining closure for victims who were either murdered or who simply disappeared. Though the goal is extensive, the method for achieving it is relatively specific – by following Chacaltana’s investigative process of inquiring. Merely writing, says Nance, is a form of speaking out, a way of resisting (34). Therefore, Roncagliolo, by penning his novel, has spoken out against the pervasive silence that makes Peru “mucho más callado” than their counterparts. He has initiated the challenging of “official” history on one front while other authors, academics, citizens, etc. attack the issue from other standpoints. All the same, he speaks not only to the living, but also to the dead – those who refuse to act upon or acknowledge the past. For this very reason, he constantly (and ironically) refers to Ayacucho and its people throughout the novel as “muertos,” for some maintain that Ayacucho actually translates as “rincón de muertos.”

Though the theoretical and literary components of the text offer plenty of insight and permit a more comprehensive reading of the novel, the writing style also contributes to the overall effect. When referring to the writing style, I am more specifically commenting
on the metafictional construction of the work as described by Patricia Waugh as opposed to
the use of descriptive language or personification, for example. This ingredient is
fundamental, given that the real and imaginative join together for a celebration of their
power and insecurity in metafictional texts (Waugh 2). Conceptualized as such, the writing
style sustains the indefinite boundaries between fiction and history, congealing the text in a
manner suitable for subsequent reader exploration. As the real and fictional aspects merge
and the author continues to play with them as separate and united entities, new
communicative possibilities are created (Waugh 36). Though Roncagliolo’s novel may not
be unique in every conceivable way, the purpose Chacaltana serves is distinct in what he
represents and in what he is capable of sharing with us. This stems from, once more, some
of Waugh’s thoughts, indicating that the detective novel or the thriller would be excellent
choices to blend the traditional with a more innovative approach. Coincidentally, Abril
rojo employs both of these genres and, as a result, the reception is varied: “En Europa es
leída como un thriller, pero en América Latina es leída como una novela política” (Wieser
226). As such, Roncagliolo admits that he reaches a wider audience, both those interested
in history and Peruvian (or Latin American) violence, and also those who seek a good
mystery, thrill or murder scene.

Regardless of how the reader chooses to interpret the genre or what the original
motives are for picking the book up, the fiction, as in most all cases, is to be completed by
the reader (Waugh 105). Clearly, the questions that persist throughout the novel and after
its ending beg some sort of reader involvement. Finally, another investigative “technique”
is presented by Chacaltana that was not addressed previously when enumerating the tactics
of his profession that can be applied to the recuperation of history – that of role play. It is
not entirely uncommon, says Waugh, for characters within the novel to act, that is, to pretend to be another; after all, “all the world’s a stage” (116). This partially explains Chacaltana’s relationship with his mother. Still playing the role of a good, deserving son, he speaks with her (33), smells her old clothing (33), and expresses his worry about who will take care of her should he die (74). At the novel’s close, Carrión forces Chacaltana to recall the accidental burning death of his mother for which he is responsible. Not only does this add a psychological level to the novel, but it proves that even after years of denial and refusal to accept the truth, recollection and revelation is possible.

In another instance, the normally placid and timid Chacaltana rapes Edith. Acting out of character, he sees that “la mirada de Edith reflejaba miedo. Inexplicablemente, eso lo excitó aún más” (271). It seems that, given the difference in personality exposed during the rape, Chacaltana was, in a way, role playing. He stepped out of line to physically fight back and aggressively get what he desired, assuming the role of someone other than himself. It appears that lashing out in the manner in which he did against her was due to the extreme stress and even fright produced by the heightened exploration of the past that he had been withstanding for the previous month. This type of interaction, however, did not seemingly result in anything productive and is largely left open to reader interpretation. Without an attentive reader, Abril rojo would be a rather futile project for anything other than entertainment. Most everything depends on the reader to either actively react, beginning his or her own search for truth, or, at a bare minimum, to passively respond and simply maintain knowledge and awareness of the past.

Wolfgang Iser proposes that as the reader becomes more involved with a novel, he or she better understands the world created within the text and, as a result, the reader gains
a greater understanding of his or her own world (xi). Consequently, the narrative then has significance far beyond what is actually written due to its openness to interpretation by the reader (279). Regardless of how the reader chooses to decipher or relate to Abril rojo, there can essentially be no meaning attached to the work without some level of reader effort and participation. Iser qualifies this as a continual process of “discovery,” possibly resulting in esthetic pleasure or taking the reader further to a world beyond his or her life, norms and social restrictions (xiii). Roncagliolo’s work presents the required tools to actively pursue this escape from society-imposed constraints, both in the fictional aspect and the factors reaching into the contemporary culture of today. As the reader leaves behind a familiar world and known experiences, interrelations between past, present and future become ever more apparent (278). In accordance with Waugh’s description of metafiction, the reader is displaced, in the Vargas Llosa sense of the word, due to the construction of a familiar context blended seamlessly with innovation. As the reader’s experience then meshes with his or her own lived reality, there exists a stronger connection that pushes towards the posing of questions. After absorbing the whole of Abril rojo, the reader may feel more equipped to take on such tasks. Whether or not the reader will opt to utilize the novel as a guide to problematizing and exploring the past is another matter.

Even so, examinations of the past become more relevant as time passes. The future of Peru is, at the moment, in relative dispute due to the construction of its past and the possible directions in which the nation may be heading before long (Ubilluz 10). As the novel reaches its termination, the reader is likely to realize that such explorations of the past are on-going and ever-changing propositions. As fiction continues to evolve and terrorism and violence become more universal subjects, so, too, will the impact of literature
and the power of reader reflection and response grow. Though the effort of questioning history may feel as if one must “luchar contra el mar” (Abril rojo 40), truth teeters on the brink of oblivion and awareness, obscurity and knowledge, and, if not caught in time, will fall towards the abyss and never be fully recoverable. There is no doubt that with the novel ending as Semana Santa draws to a close, the reader is again reminded that resurrection is possible – it is still not too late to unearth the decades of senderista terror and State violence.

Individuals, as Roncagliolo proposes, need to begin their journey towards the past before a collective entity like society can witness significant changes. Should we as readers decide to adopt a passive stance and remain observers throughout life, not much will be accomplished in the way of recuperating and reconstructing history. Perhaps the author himself, who is setting examples not only through his works of fiction but in his research and investigations as well, will continue to pressure the international community into embarking upon their own missions. The future will certainly be interesting to watch unfold, for, after all, “Santiago Roncagliolo…es un autor cuyas verdaderas posibilidades están todavía por demostrar” (Marín 173).
WORKS CITED


