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ARTURO PÉREZ-REVERTE AND THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

Although the historical novel had been highly esteemed by Spanish writers from the XIX century through to those groups or generations of writers formed in the post-war period, from 1939 onwards, it remains true to say that it was not essentially until the early nineteen eighties, that the desire to recount past events and to search for latent run-on signs of identity, which had been prevalent for some time in the French and English literary traditions, began to emerge in Spanish narrative writing.

In December 1982 a work appeared in Spain which was to prove decisive for the immediate development of Spanish literature. At that precise moment in time *The Name of the Rose*, by the Italian writer Umberto Eco, was translated into Spanish. Its success, among readers and critics alike, was immediate. Before this, no-one, not even the publishers themselves, would have believed that such an expensively priced book, of over six hundred pages of dense and at times difficult prose, could have reached its tenth edition by 1985. We should also point out here that only months prior to the presence in Spain of *The Name of the Rose*, the publishers Edhasa, no doubt influenced by what had already been said and written in Italy about Eco's novel, had put into circulation the well-known novel by Marguerite Yourcenar *Adrian's Memoires*. Yourcenar's novel was, in a sense, re-discovered for Spanish readers, since an earlier version of the novel had originally been translated by Julio Cortázar in 1955. It was to this original version, almost thirty years later, that Edhasa was to return. It is no coincidence, therefore, that during the decade of the eighties many novels, of a markedly historical character, were published: *Mansura* (1984), by Félix de Azúa; *No digas que fue un sueño* (1986) and *El sueño de Ale-*

jandría (1988), by Terenci Moix; *La ciudad de los prodigios* (1986), by Eduardo Mendoza; *El bobo ilustrado* (1986), by José Antonio Gabriel y Galán; and, among many others, *El húsar* (1986) and *El maestro de esgrima* (1988), by Arturo Pérez-Reverte, the subject of this present study.

From this moment onwards, certain publishers, at times with little regard for even the minimum requirements of quality, became interested in including in their catalogues, the type of novel to which the reading public had become accustomed and for which there was a surprising demand. It is sufficient to point out, in this sense, that from the year 1983 onwards, the well-known, although, for non-literary reasons, not particularly prestigious Planeta book award, was given to works of a historical nature whose contents ranged from ancient times to the recent Spanish Civil War. These works included titles such as *La guerra del general Escobar*, by José Luis Olaizola; *Yo, el rey*, by the late Juan Antonio Vallejo-Nájera; *En busca del unicornio*, by Juan Eslava Galán; and finally, to cut short what would otherwise be an excessively long list, *El manuscrito carmesí*, by Antonio Gala. Recently, Javier García Sánchez, commenting on the Madrid Book Fair, referred to a wide "range of best sellers which create history and are of considerable help in understanding it".¹ Also included in this collection were the Spanish translations of the novels of Patrick O'Brian, Noah Gordon, Steven Saylor, Elizabeth George and Robert James Walker, among others.

However, the type of historical novel that has emerged in the latter part of this century corresponds to certain parameters which have to be taken into consideration in order to fully understand it. In a work entitled "La Edad Media y la novela actual", Francisco Javier Díez de Revenga points out that *El nombre de la rosa*, *El maestro de esgrima* and *En busca del unicornio* are, above all, "generic hybrids of historical, suspense or detective novels" (78). Today's writers, it would seem, with few exceptions, are not interested in History as such. The narrator at the end of the twentieth century tries to make the story he tells relevant to today's society, even though it is actually set several centuries ago. It would seem that what the author ultimately believes is that life, in spite of the passing of time, has

¹ *El mundo*, 3rd June 1995.

changed very little, and that our worries and preoccupations, in spite of everything, remain the same.

The first novel by Arturo Pérez-Reverte, published in 1986, responds to this need to recreate History, selecting from it what the author feels might interest and stimulate his readers. For Pérez-Reverte one of the greatest errors of modern society is our lack of historical knowledge. It is precisely this lack of knowledge which has led us into certain military conflicts which might well have been avoided had we achieved a fuller understanding of their precedents. *El húsar*, Pérez-Reverte's first novel, constantly tries to draw a parallel between the narrative content of the novel and the lessons to be learnt from History. Such is the case that in the early editions of the novel, in the last two pages, we find a curious "Author's note" in which Pérez-Reverte almost apologizes for certain anachronisms present in the work: "It is possible — we read at the beginning of the note — that meticulous specialists may find certain discrepancies in the story I have just recounted. This would not be surprising given that in 1808 no such battle at least of the characteristics described in this novel took place in Andalusia, unless we take into account the battle of Bailén which was fought under very different circumstances" (171). Further on the author includes such an extensive bibliography on the subject that we are given to believe that he actually consulted these works while preparing the text. This bibliography includes books written in English, French and Spanish, in which we even find details referring to the characters' attire.

What was Pérez-Reverte aiming at with the publication of such a work? In our view the quotation from Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Viaje al fin de la noche*, which serves as an epigraph. *El Husar* is vital in revealing Pérez-Reverte's intentions in this novel. In this quotation we read the following: "I have never liked the countryside. I have always thought of it as rather sad, with its endless muddy banks, its empty houses and its paths which lead nowhere. But if to this we add the war it then becomes unbearable" (77). War can be glorious if contemplated on a small scale tableau, however it ceases to be a noble cause when on the battle field one comes face to face with human beings of flesh and blood; men like ourselves who do not always follow ideals, and who, on occasions, barely understand what is going on before their very eyes. They only know that

they have to obey orders, at whatever cost, because their lives depend on it.

El husár is the story of a revelation similar to that experienced by Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. In Pérez-Reverte's work we witness a gradual change of attitude in the two main characters: Michel de Bourmont and Frederic Glüntz, the hussars of Napoleon's fourth regiment posted in Spain. The latter of the two, suffering the anxiety of defeat, kneeling on the ground, his uniform torn and with a sword in his hand which is not even his manages to exclaim: "To hell with heroes and the Emperor's light brigade. None of this was of any importance in the light of that darkness, among the bushes and near the glow of the fire closeby (...) . Mud, blood and shit. That was war for you, that was it, good God. That was it" (158).

One of the main achievements of Pérez-Reverte's work, apart from the development of the main characters, is the analysis it makes of the Spanish as they try to defend themselves against the French usurpers. Commander Berret, contemplating the gutted corpse of one of his men, hanging from a tree, defines the Spanish as animals and swears to hunt them down "for what they are, vermin lying in ambush, without showing any mercy" (26). Even Frederic, in the face of such open hostility on the part of the Spanish, concludes that "it was all a question of more hanging, more gunning down of those illiterate, fanatical scoundrels, to finish off once and for all the subjugation of Spain in order to continue devoting themselves to more glorious enterprises" (28). Pérez-Reverte spares the reader no details about the atrocities committed by both parties, but avoids siding with one or the other. Perhaps the most telling and vividly described of all these passages is the portrayal of the hanging of a priest:

They brought the priest, a middle-aged man, in his early fifties, small and stocky, his tonsure enlarged by encroaching baldness, unshaven, and wearing a shrunken cassock splashed with stains which Frederic, a Lutherite, thought, for some reason, must have been of cheap wine. There was no interrogation, no words uttered among them; an order from Letac automatically became a sentence. They laced a hemp rope through the iron bars of the balcony of the Town Hall. The priest watched them, small and scowling, flanked by two hussars who towered over him, his forehead soaked in sweat and his feverish eyes fixed on the

rope which was destined for his neck. The village seemed deserted; there was not a soul in the street, but behind the closed shutters the priest was aware of the silent, terrified presence of the local people.

When they placed the noose around his neck, only moments before the two corpulent hussars pulled the other end of the rope, the priest muttered through clenched teeth a "sons of the devil" which was clearly audible although his lips had hardly moved. Then he spat at Letac, who was mounting a new horse, and allowed himself to be hanged without further comment. When the last soldiers left the village (...) some old women dressed in black slowly crossed the square to kneel and pray beneath the priest's feet (27).

This description is best appreciated if we consider it as a sketch half way between Goya's well-known paintings, inspired by similar events, and those other pictures, painted a century later by José Gutiérrez Solana, in his own inimitable and incisive style, portraying *la España negra*, a country of pain and of silence.

In one of the flashbacks in *El húsar* we are told of the meeting which takes place between Frederic and the Spanish nobleman don Álvaro de Vigal in the latter's residence in Aranjuez. Pérez-Reverte takes advantage of this meeting to state and analyse the case of the so-called pro-French during the war. We should remember that given the circumstances of the time, to be pro-French was to be a traitor. The attitude of the pro-French was barely understood and largely misinterpreted by their contemporaries. However, as Miguel Artola indicates in his work of the same title, the pro-French took very little, intellectually speaking, from France:

Their outlook was determined mainly by English philosophy and Prussian political theory which they had acquired from France and Italy (...). The French sympathisers — whose ideological origins date back to the time of Charles III — do not see the traditionally absolute French regime as a model to follow. They find the Revolution anarchic and dangerous for the well-being of the state, for the excessive influence it grants to the bulk of the nation in the government (31).

A completely different case is that of the collaborators, whom Artola defines as "people who for various reasons consider it as

their duty to join the invader, to save what they can of the nation and even in some cases to prosper personally" (32). Their loyalty, therefore, was not directed at France or Napoleon, nor even at King Joseph, but solely at everything that represented the possibility of obtaining an effective government. In this sense, don Álvaro de Vigal was one of those who "expressed out loud liberal ideas and did not hide their admiration for the process of renovation that the French intellectuals had unleashed in Europe" (100). Don Álvaro, in his long conversation with Frederic and Juniac, does hide his reservations about Napoleon's complete lack of skill in the handling of Spanish affairs.

Those of us who defend the need for progress — señor Vigal adds further on —, saw in the revolution which overthrew the Borbons in France a sign that the times had at last begun to change. The growing political impact of Bonaparte in Europe and the influence which, as a consequence, France managed to exert on her geographical surroundings, were a glimmering of hope... However, and it is here where the problem arises, the ignorance of this country and the lack of skill shown by their consuls here, destroyed what could have been a promising beginning.... The Spanish are not people who allow themselves to be saved forcibly. We like to save ourselves little by little, without having to renounce those principles which, whether good or bad, we have been brought up to believe in (106).

In the last few lines of the conversation between the two hussars and the Spanish nobleman, the destiny of don Álvaro, his eventual condemnation at the hands of his own compatriots, is hinted at. It is a destiny which he has no intention of resisting and which he fully understands from his intellectual standpoint.

In *El bobo ilustrado*, a novel by Gabriel y Galán published in the same year as *El húsar*, we meet Pedro de Vergara, an assiduous collaborator in the *Gazeta*, "the most perverse of the pro-French mechanisms" (43). Pedro de Vergara, like don Álvaro, is also in favour of progress and enlightenment. His curiosity leads him to the conclusion that it is essential to verify what a monarch, even one accepted by the Borbons, would be capable of doing. However, as with don Álvaro, he is not willing to become an accomplice to the atrocities perpetuated by the French generals. His non-committal attitude, his eclecticism, be-

come, at the end of the novel, the weapon by which he is judged. The ordinary people, whose only aspiration is that of killing one of the French sympathisers, fail to understand the position of these cold patriots. In Gabriel y Galán's novel mention is also made of the work carried out by the priests and friars "carried away by fanaticism who believed in the name of their faith that everything was acceptable, not only killing but also uttering fibs to all and sundry, poisoning the people by spreading false messages" (33).

In *Los afrancesados* Miguel Artola reminds us of the severity with which anyone showing sympathy for the invading country was punished: "The repression has two different aspects, both extraordinarily severe: the legal aspect (...) and the popular one, an uncontrollable movement of rejection and punishment, which caused great harm, often without distinguishing between the guilty and the innocent" (234). The pro-French, in short, would be — as indicated by García de Cortázar and González Vesga —, "the propitiatory victims of the civil war who hid under the cover of the patriotic movement for independence" (419).

Frequent allusions are made throughout Pérez-Reverte's work to the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte. This constant presence in the text has a personal explanation which the author openly recognizes. As pointed out in the work *Arturo Pérez-Reverte: los héroes cansados*, "Jean Gall — a knight of the order of Saint Helen — grandfather of the great grandmother of Pérez-Reverte, Adele Replinger Gall, took part in Waterloo at the early age of seventeen. He stood out in the battle of Quatre Brass and as a result was mentioned in the order of the day as having displayed outstanding bravery" (25). An ancestor who, in an almost novelesque tradition, was later to become a pirate throughout the Mediterranean, eventually settling in the city of Cartagena where he would found a family.

Claude, to whom this author from Cartagena dedicates *El húsar*, is also associated, although less directly, with the Napoleonic era. Pérez-Reverte himself has stated that the surname of the character Frederic is taken precisely from this French war photographer, who, like Pérez-Reverte, also has ancestral links with the battle of Waterloo. In *El maestro de esgrima*, Pérez-Reverte's second novel, which will be later referred to in greater detail, the reference to don Jaime de Astarola's father, whose portrait hangs in the great hall of his house,

leads don Jaime to remind his interlocutor, Adela de Otero, that his father died at the age of thirty-one fighting against Napoleon's troops:

He was — don Jaime adds — an Aragonese nobleman, one of those proud men who always became exceedingly irritated when told to do something... He took to the mountains with a group from Jaca and spent his time killing the French until he himself was killed (...) They say that he died alone, hunted like a dog, insulting those soldiers who cornered him with their bayonets in excellent French" (54).

He may well be, like don Álvaro de Vigal, one of the French followers, capable of accepting the culture of the neighbouring country — thus he dies "insultando un excelente francés" — but incapable of accepting the impositions and the barbaric and repressive methods of the Napoleonic army in Spain

Similarly, Luis Corso in *El club Dumas*, a novel published in 1993 by Pérez-Reverte, turns out to be not only a mercenary for bibliophiles, but also, "a hired book thief" (15), a consummate and able reader of the Memorial de Santa Helena, by Les Cases, and an early Bonapartist, in previous times, "an avid reader of books illustrated with sketches of glorious campaigns, names which sounded doubly important: Wagram, Jena, Smolenko, Marengo" (178). Corso even manages to feel indignation "the miserable end that the victors gave their fallen Titan, stuck to his rock in the middle of the Atlantic" (178).

Several years after the publication of *El húsar*, Pérez-Reverte once more turns his attention to the military affairs of the French emperor. In *La sombra del águila*, the tone and language used are very different to those found in the 1986 novel. However, the initial intention remains the same in that he once again focuses our attention on the negative consequences that any military confrontation inevitably brings. In *La sombra del águila* the author highlights the historical role played by those anonymous soldiers who never receive the acclaim they so rightly deserve. Previously, in *El húsar*, Frederic, as a result of many hours of reflection in which he is able to think over certain aspects of his life which until then had passed unnoticed, realizes that he knows nothing about his troops, not even the twelve soldiers directly under his command: "Those twelve mostly anonymous soldiers, were his colleagues in battle, in life

itself and perhaps even in death. And he wondered, angry with himself, why it had never occurred to him to think about them until that night" (52) In *La sombra del águila* it is Napoleon himself who, while inspecting the French troops, tells one of his generals that they are "dark, anonymous heroes, who with their bayonets forge the rack on which my glory is hung" (20). This novel, first published in serial form in the summer of 1993, narrates one of the most curious and striking periods in Spanish History.² The second chapter of the book, entitled "El 326 de Línea" provides us with the historic antecedents: even in Denmark, where there was a population of fifteen thousand Spanish, the order was received to swear loyalty to Joseph Bonaparte. But, after the events of the second of May, the French allies began to become suspicious. The Marquis of la Romana, on the other hand, managed to persuade those men loyal to Ferdinand VII to swear allegiance, whilst these troops with the help of the English, were on their way back to Spain. However, not all of them managed to escape disaster. Only 9,190 Spaniards made it to Langeland to embark on English boats. The remainder became the first prisoners to inaugurate the prisoner of war camp in Hamburg. These were the events of four years. In 1812 Napoleon decided to invade Russia, "so we veterans of the Northern division who had survived the cold, typhus and tuberculosis, had our chance: to continue rotting there or to fight with a Frenchie's uniform" (35). Little else on the subject is said in the History books. However, if we stick to what happens in Pérez-Reverte's novel, it would seem that the intention of this group of Spaniards, enlisted more from necessity than from dedication to the Napoleonic cause, was to go over to the enemy's side, something which was not to occur as the latter did not fully understand this strange manoeuvre. In the end, the emperor himself, completely unaware of the circumstances, decorated these same Spanish soldiers for their courage and bravery. Although it seems comical to say so, they became heroes by virtue of a mistake. Around three hundred Spaniards survived. Most of them lost their lives on the journey home. "A year and a half after the fire in Moscow — we read in the epilogue to *La sombra del águila* — the afternoon of the last day of April of 1814, eleven men with a guitar crossed the

² Supplement, *El país*.

border between France and Spain. Some were carrying their possessions on their backs and in spite of their torn clothes you could still make out the traces of the French blue uniform" (150)

In this latest novel, in which unlike *El húsar*, we find an almost cynical, grotesque and almost always surrealist humour, the author makes a brief although profound analysis of particular aspects of Spanish society, politics and culture. From Sbdonovo hill Napoleon dictates a letter to his brother Joseph in which he reproaches the latter's frequent complaints about the Spanish and warns him to set about governing a country which Napoleon himself assures will have a great future, in spite of Joseph's indications that, "No two people drink their coffee in the same way, either black, with a spot of milk, weak, extra weak, strong, extra strong, milky, a mint tea for me" (79).

In *El maestro de esgrima* Arturo Pérez-Reverte takes up once more his familiar stance of returning to the past — a past which, as we can see, is not so distant — perhaps in an attempt to find there the roots of our current problems. Although it is also true that the type of heroes found in his work, those tired, stoical quixotic heroes, are difficult to come across in today's society. In this novel, published in 1988, María Josefa Díez de Revenga has recently pointed out that, "the historical setting is a fitting framework in which the characters move" (147). The action of the novel takes place in Madrid during the summer of 1866, "with her Catholic majesty Queen Isabel II, the reigning Monarch in Spain" (15).

From what the reader can deduce, given the events of the following two years, the atmosphere is tense and laden with plots and conspiracies. Some of Pérez-Reverte's passages — perhaps in honour of one of the great masters — recall the well-known novels of Galdós, also set in Madrid. Those places of such obvious Galdosian flavour, the Paseo del Prado, the Carrera de San Jerónimo, the Huertas, Arenal, and Princesa streets cannot be avoided by Pérez-Reverte, although the principle aim of the novel is not to reflect the atmosphere of the capital in which don Jaime Astarola, the strange, anachronistic and modest fencing master lives. The ordinary people live in a world which is completely unaware of the intrigues of the Court. Don Jaime, out on one of his strolls, greets his acquaintances whilst at the same time observing the chorus of uniformed nursemaids, ladies in open-air carriages, water sellers peddling their re-

freshing wares and greengrocers who swat "mechanically the swarm of flies which were buzzing around" (30). In the same way, in this typical atmosphere of the Madrid of the second half of the nineteenth century, the author refers to the meetings which took place preferably in the coffee bars, and occasionally in the pharmacies. The *Café del Progreso* is Astarola's habitual meeting place. Agapito Cárceles, Don Lucas Rioseco, Marcelino Romero and the modest store merchant Antonio Carreño also meet there. It is no accident that these particular characters have been chosen to participate in the meetings. In doing so the author is attempting to convey, through their lively discussions, the very pulse of the nation. Among the members of the coffee set there are those who write radical speeches for minority newspapers; gentlemen from once wealthy families whose only concern is to maintain appearances, and those who, detached from the events which seem to concern the others, mask with their silence an impossible and secret love affair.

When Arturo Pérez-Reverte first embarks on his literary career the historical novel in Spain is at the height of its splendour. The influence of this particular genre on many of the writers of the time may perhaps explain why this author from Cartagena makes his literary debut with *El húsar*, a novel with a distinctly historical flavour. However, it is also undoubtedly true that Pérez-Reverte possesses certain narrative qualities which are essential to grasp for a fuller understanding of his work .

His strong sense of honour, inherited no doubt from ancestors who, as we have seen, date back to Napoleonic times, his vision of war, acquired from the experience of over twenty years as a war correspondent, and his childhood reading of authors such as Dumas, Conrad, Stevenson, Sabatini etc, lead us to believe that, regardless of the trends of the time, the author was destined to become a historical novelist. It is along these lines, without renouncing other narrative styles or approaches, that most of Pérez-Reverte's written and published works have followed.

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