



HAL
open science

A TESTIMONIAL NOVEL OR THE HISTORIAN'S PREDICAMENT : LOS SÁTRAPAS EN OCCIDENTE

Stéphane Michonneau

► **To cite this version:**

Stéphane Michonneau. A TESTIMONIAL NOVEL OR THE HISTORIAN'S PREDICAMENT : LOS SÁTRAPAS EN OCCIDENTE. Catalan Review, 2011. hal-01674101

HAL Id: hal-01674101

<https://hal.science/hal-01674101v1>

Submitted on 22 Nov 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

A testimonial novel or the historian's predicament : *Los Sátrapas en Occidente*

Stéphane Michonneau

As Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Nathalie Heinich have shown, the distinction between a factual account and a fictional account is a matter of intuitive social understanding, spontaneous and treacherous¹. It is founded on several assumptions, none of them objective: that there is a material reality, that there is an authentic 'self' based only on a 'true' reflection of reality, and that there is a language whose function is to transmit information about this objective reality. It is necessary to look anew at those commonly-accepted assumptions, all the while holding on to the indispensable distinction between a fictional account, which is non-referential by nature, and a factual account, which purports to be truth. It is only on this condition that we can apprehend texts of a hybrid nature, combining fact and fiction, even if it appears an impossible task to the historian. In fact history as a discipline incorporates at least two imperatives: one, to evaluate as precisely as possible how close to reality is the information contained in the text; and two, to write a historical account—the factual account par excellence—based on historical documents. In those conditions, how might the historian be able to do his job using such texts? Will he not be forced to ignore accounts the truth of which he is unable to verify?

The example on which this article is based is an unpublished manuscript which was sent to me some time ago. It was brought to the university by a woman who had found it in the loft of her recently-deceased father's house. She did not know what it was about but in view of the dedication she surmised that it would be an account of the Civil War. She did not know who had left it in the home of her father, who was a pastor in the South-West of France and whose presbytery had provided refuge for many Spanish exiles in the 1950s. It is a historical novel entitled *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* [Satraps of the West], consisting of two volumes totalling 500 pages, typewritten and hand-sewn, revised and corrected in blue ball-pen on cheap paper. The manuscript is signed by one Andreu Martí and was written in Catalonia between 1957 and 1958. The main subject of the account is Franco's repression between 1939 and 1944, a marginal topic in civil war literature. Briefly, while aware of the difficulties posed by so contradictory-sounding a statement, we might describe it as a testimonial fiction. What can a historian do with a document like this?

A testimonial fiction

Los Sátrapas del Occidente presents itself to the reader as fiction: On the cover Martí states that it is a "historical novel". The novel tells the story of a man, Losada, who is made prisoner late in 1939, when the Civil War had ended the previous April. The character is taken to a prison in Tarragona known as *Pilatos* from the name of the building that it occupies, and there he is kept until his release on parole in 1944. Then, in a second part of the story, he leaves for Barcelona, where he barely survives in the post-war society: Spain is a vast prison. The novelised part seems to end when he and his companion, Serradell, succeed in crossing the French-Spanish border under cover of night. In the course of their flight, Serradell receives a fatal bullet-wound; dying, he hands over a manuscript to his friend Losada, asking him to publish it in exile.

¹ Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Nathalie Heinich, "...", *L'Homme, La vérité de la fiction*, ???

The value of an account like this as a memoir is obvious: the text bears all the marks of a duty to memory, which is also a duty of justice for the victims, particularly those who perished and whose lives are recounted by those who survived. The author, Andreu Martí, assuredly sought to combat the memory hole imposed by the silence on that terrible repression. Thus, the narrative is composed in such a way as to refute the lies of the Franco regime denying the reality of the repression; the document is intended as an indictment for future war crimes trials. Nevertheless, like all such accounts, this text is not intended solely to hand down evidence to future generations; it is also a tribute to the dead. Suffice it to say for the nonce that the referential thrust of this novel is not necessarily of a factual nature. For the author, it is less a matter of reflecting the reality of the repression than of conveying the experience.

The first question that confronts the historian is in what genre to place the document. Bearing witness in literary form, we know, offers a wide range of possibilities running from the documentary pole to the novelistic pole; we may cite by way of example written reports, reviews, indictments, essays, diaries, etc., all falling within the genre of testimony. But now, why a novel? In the study they conducted of accounts of Nazi camps, Mikael Polack and Nathalie Heinich show that the choice of the novel form was relatively exceptional inasmuch as the the witnesses tended to firmly reject the "literary" option as a means of relating their experience². This fictional option, they note, is found most often in an author who was not a direct witness of the events narrated, like Marianne Schreiber in *La passion de Myriam Bloch*. These conclusions prompt the question of Andreu Martí's status as a witness. The choice of a fictional narrative is indeed a hazardous one: in taking sides the novel blurs the dividing line between "the invented part composed of fictitious objects and the recalled part composed of things that actually happened"³ (Paul Ricoeur). For fiction begs the question not only of veracity, which loses relevance, but also the moral issue. In this sense the novel puts the author at risk of losing credibility, thus depleting the force of his testimony. The novelistic strategy may appear to be at odds with the testimonial intent, unless the author has accepted that there must be "a fictional truth" that is better suited to sharing and conveying his experience, and particularly to mourn the dead he has left behind. In other words, the choice of fiction is only explicable if Andreu Martí believed there was a memorial truth higher than factual truth. We therefore need to explore the reasons that could have prompted the author to opt for the novelistic form, examining the historical context in which he lived. But before exploring the contextual factors, it is essential to look at the formal reasons for such a choice.

Broadly speaking, *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* is a fictional narrative written in realist mode. It meets the requirements of realist narrative⁴: a beginning, an end and a mystery. Another feature of this novel is the heroisation of the main characters, whose actions follow a predetermined pattern of altruism and courage. And yet the structure of the discourse offers some surprises in that numerous episodes are embedded in the main narrative—that is, a series of stories reported from hearsay and rumours, frequently verging on the legendary. Thus, by using fiction the author has been able to lace the plausible with the implausible in order to elicit an emotion; these

² Mikael Polack, Nathalie Heinich, "Le témoignage", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 62-63, 1986, pp. 3-29.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2000, p ??.

⁴ Philippe Hamon, *Texte et idéologie : valeurs, hiérarchies et évaluations dans l'oeuvre littéraire*, Paris, PUF, 1984. P ??

insertions are couched in pathos, serving to engage the reader, sometimes in the very face of implausibility. For example, the protagonist's prison-mates relate the story of Republicans who fled the city of Málaga following the coup in July 1936 and eventually made their way to the port of Gibraltar, where they were hunted down by the British authorities. The Odyssean epic, which belongs in the realm of myth, seeks to persuade without the danger of the reader feeling foolish.

Like all fiction, the convention of plausibility invariably obliges the author to base his narrative on portrayals that are shared through a process of negotiated adjustment to the world of readers to whom the world of prison camps is logically quite alien. The author then portrays a protagonist who matches the reader's moral expectations in order to draw a lesson from the history. We see, for example, how the novel systematically overstates the values of friendship and solidarity among prisoners, thus echoing the readers' mental images. Nonetheless, the prison camp experience generally demands the suspension of the usual axiological codes—in an extreme situation, the theft of a morsel of bread cannot have the same value as in everyday life, albeit the author is forced to compromise with the truth in order to achieve acceptance of his narrative. Moreover, *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* was written in the late 1950s, and Andreu Martí therefore necessarily adheres to the codes of acceptability of his time, which requires some awkward mental adjustment from the 21st-century reader. For example, the novel is fundamentally homophobic, offering a classic portrayal of the virile hero. His gaolers, on the other hand, are effeminate or suspected of homosexual tendencies, which in the moral continuum of the author renders them despicable. Nowadays, however, the reader would surely not be shocked to encounter a homosexual hero.

Again, the need for understanding drove the author to compromise and pass silently over a number of aspects: gainsaying later witness accounts of the Pilatos prison, Martí censored many aspects of daily prison life that would have detracted from the heroic image of the anti-Franco resistance that he sought to exalt—for instance, he has nothing to say about the sexual life of the prisoners, or of rivalries among them. In fact the Franco authorities took care to mix ordinary and political prisoners and to assign supervisory tasks in the gaols to the former. This policy was also aimed at breaking down the identity of "politicals" as such. Rivalries between "ordinary" and "political" prisoners fuelled high tensions which the prison system used to its advantage. Unequal treatment of foreign prisoners, for instance members of the International Brigades, provoked frictions and frustrations that Andreu Martí scarcely mentions. He does nonetheless acknowledge that "foreigners" ran the black market through which detainees were able to supplement their daily diet. What this shows is that the plausibility of the realist novel is based essentially on historical and social considerations. As Jean-Marie Schaeffer says, "What defines fiction is not only the non-referential nature of its portrayals but also the way in which we relate to these portrayals"⁵.

That insight helps us to understand why Martí should have opted for a fictional rather than a factual account. Here we might usefully recall a classical distinction: on the one hand the factual account is a veridictional portrayal founded on a referential belief (here the true/false dichotomy is relevant). The latter is the fruit of an approximation of the object portrayed to "what is immediately present to the memory and the senses", to quote David Hume. Then again, the fictional narrative lies beyond referential belief (true/false is not relevant). On the contrary, it

⁵ Jean-Marie Schaeffer,

entails a mode of reading in which the question of referentiality is suspended, and hence the question of conformance to mnemonic traces does not arise. This prompts the hypothesis that Andreu Martí opted for fiction because he was unable to lay down a solid referential framework, inasmuch as his readers lacked mnemonic traces capable of supporting such a framework. In a context where the Franco regime's prison system was largely unknown, Martí probably wished to avoid falling into the negationism that has so often been a part of the referential narrative of extreme experiences. Moreover, there are several occasions in Barcelona where the protagonist Losada finds himself faced by a daunting incredulity on the part of his fellows. Martí, then, was fully aware that the prison experience was too little known to mean something to his readers. If it was not possible to convey the memory of the event, he preferred to deliberately replace it with a memory of events experienced in the imagination of the reader.

Did the author really think that fiction was essential to convey the memory? Here Andreu Martí opted for fiction in a way not unlike that of Joaquim Amat Piniela in *Reich* (1946), on the return from Mauthausen:

"I opted for the novel form because it seemed to me to be closer to the personal truth of those who lived through it. After everything that has been written about the camps with the cold eloquence of numbers and newspaper reports, I believe that the actions, the observations, the conversations and the state of mind of the characters, *real or not*, can give a truer and more lifelike impression than if I were to confine myself to an objective report of the facts"⁶.

The author, then, opted to "resurrect" the past by means of portrayal, at the risk of seeing his novel relegated to the rank of pure fiction—i.e. discredited in the eyes of historians.

The failure of a long shot.

Had the novel ended with the crossing of the Spanish-French border, the above conclusion would probably be valid. However, the relationship between fact and fiction in *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* is oddly complex, for the manuscript comes in two unequal parts. The first, as noted, is a fictional narrative that ends dramatically. The focus of attention in the account of the night-time escape is the manuscript that Serradell carries under his arm and hands on to his friend Losada before dying. The second part of the manuscript is a verbatim reconstruction of a political essay by Serradell some twenty pages long.

To justify this collage, Martí takes up the narrative at the end of the **second** part of the novel; the narrator inexplicably breaches the realist "contract" with the reader, normally based on his omniscience. Martí explains that on reaching Perpignan, **Serradell** had the essay carried back Spain through a fellow-traveller called Bruch. This evidently begs the question of why the precious essay that Serradell had been at such pains to carry to France should have to return to Spain. However, Martí does nothing to account for the inconsistency and carries on explaining the circumstances that gave birth to *Los Sátrapas del Occidente*: Bruch, the courier, then hands Serradell's essay over to Andreu Martí, having first added his own prison diary for Martí to

⁶ Joaquim Amat Piniella, *K.L. Reich*, Barcelona, edicions 62, 2001. Italics added. **P??**

compose a single story from these documents ⁷, "a properly arranged and ordered story"⁸. Martí, the author designate, confesses his difficulty—what to do with the diary (Bruch's) and the essay (Serradell's) that have come down to **him**? Andreu Martí then resolves to write the novel that we have just read. However, dissatisfied with the result and "incapable of composing an acceptable synthesis", he takes up the narrator's role and decides to append the essay to the fictional account. Then, in the closing lines of the manuscript he wonders (we cannot tell whether he is referring to Bruch's or to Serradell's writings): "I thought of the fate that had befallen my friend's writings and the strange manner in which they would see the light of day".

This surprising ending shows that the word "novel" on the cover is misleading: the novel actually conceals a diary and an essay. But each part is supposedly the work of different authors writing at different times: the prison diary written by Bruch during his arrest; a political essay written by Serradell in Barcelona after emerging from the torment of prison; and a novel written by Martí in Catalonia in the late 1950s⁹. At the end of *Los Sátrapas del Occidente*, the omniscient narrator emerges from behind the scenes to explain that he is incapable of weaving the parts he has received and his own memories into a coherent whole. Pressed by the destructive power of time and the need to honour the memory of his prison companions, he cobbles together various disparate elements. And as a novel, it fails.

The questions that arise then are the reasons for tacking together a work of fiction—the first, novelised part—and a referential narrative—the second part in essay form. Or put in another way, did the author believe that the essay was a better vehicle than the novel to convey the experience? The appending of Serradell's manuscript to the end of *Los Sátrapas* is assuredly some form of consecration: the essay can ultimately serve as proof of the truth of the novel. The purpose of this appendage here is to serve as evidence for the indictment that Martí levels against the Franco regime. By so doing the author binds his narrative to the realm of fact; for the essay is at once a part of the fiction (it is the centrepiece of the final scene of the novel, produced by one of the novel's characters) and an actual fact (tangible evidence that one can read). In this sense its introduction provides a means of retroactively factualising the fiction, following a complex narrative procedure brought up to date by Alexandre Prstojevic with reference to the work of Danilo Kis¹⁰. Through this literary strategy, Martí forges a new relationship with reality: despite its status, the fiction becomes in some way "referential". The novelistic account is thus founded on a self-imposed referential belief that eludes the reader's external perceptions. As we can see, *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* is a hybrid narrative, straddling the borderline between fact and fiction.

Aside from the discursive tricks that it conceals, this manuscript contains a last twist that needs to be straightened out: Andreu Martí is a pseudonym. Long research has at last revealed that the name of the real author is Antonio Ramos. Once again, the author's choices baffle us: does the use of a pseudonym not clash with the purported veracity of the eye-witness accounts? How can

⁷ Andreu Martí, *Los sátrapas de Occidente*, s.e., unpublished manuscript, p. 480.

⁸ *Idem*, p.477.

⁹ At the end of the manuscript Andreu Martí's signature is preceded by the names: "Hostalric, Gerona. 1957-1958". Hostalric and Gerona are two town in the north of Spanish Catalonia.

¹⁰ Alexandre Prstojevic, "Temps de l'histoire : études sur Dalilo Kis", Actes du colloque de Bordeaux III, October 2000, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003. *Le roman face à l'histoire : essai sur Claude Simon et Danilo Kis*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2005.

we trust a witness who does not give his name, and worse yet forges a signature? One hypothesis is that Antonio Ramos sought to hide behind Andreu Martí, the narrator, because he felt that as himself he lacked authority—in other words, the author was not in a position to affirm what the narrator told.

There are numerous shadowy areas surrounding the figure of Antonio Ramos at the present stage of the research. Nevertheless, the little information that we do possess may help to explain the choice of a testimonial novel. As Nathalie Heinich has shown, the use of this literary form belongs in a highly-circumscribed social and political context that we need to elucidate¹¹. The author belonged to the minor Republican intelligentsia. After studying in Madrid, he became a schoolmaster in a village in southern Catalonia, in the Ebro delta. Evincing a fairly high cultural level, his writing shows familiarity with numerous classical literary sources—Don Quixote and the Divine Comedy, for example. This literary bent may have predisposed him socially to setting out his testimony in literary form.

Soon after the coup d'état of July 1936, Ramos joined the Republican army and was appointed political commissar for the socialist trade union UGT, in a battalion of civil engineers. In this uncomfortable position he probably found himself under severe pressure from the communists, who were intent on controlling the political structure of the Republican army—which is possibly the source of the virulent anti-communism he evinced as an officer. Like 40% of the members of the people's Army, Ramos deserted sometime in the spring of 1938 as his battalion prepared to rejoin the Ebro front. He was arrested then imprisoned. He escaped some months later and found refuge thanks to a lady friend in northern Catalonia. From there he tried in vain to reach France. Because of the mistrust that his attitude provoked in the inhabitants of the border region, he was forced to seek hiding in various localities until the end of the war. He was detained for a time by the SIM, the Republican secret police. In the winter of early 1939 he chose to follow the half-million other Spaniards in flight to France when Franco's troops occupied Barcelona. Interned at Gurs, in France, he decided to return to Spain by way of the Basque Country in April 1939: but despite their promises, the Franco forces immediately interned him in a concentration camp near Bilbao. Thanks to the sponsors he was able to provide, he was released in the summer of 1939 and reached Barcelona. On 23 November he was imprisoned once again, betrayed by one of his lovers: after a month in Barcelona prisons, he was moved to Tarragona, the capital of the province where he lived before the war.

In view of these vicissitudes, it is understandable that Ramos should balk at the idea of an autobiography, unless he was willing to gloss over his war years. Also, the principal character, Losada, never evokes personal memories of the war. The novel opens on the scene of his imprisonment in Pilatos, in December; which is exactly when Antonio Ramos was imprisoned in Tarragona (28 December 1939). He was fortunate enough to be sentenced to thirty years in prison on 28 June 1940, while several of his companions were executed. While incarcerated in Pilatos, Ramos performed certain duties: as a teacher, he set up literacy courses for the younger prisoners. This work brought him a few years' reduction of his sentence, as borne out by the records of remissions. Later, like Losada, he gained special privileges with the prison store. At the forced

¹¹ Arxiu de la Diputació de Tarragona and Arxiu Militar Territorial III; Barcelona, n°42526, proceedings n° SU 4217. Archivo Gobierno Militar de Barcelona, Tribunal Militar territorial III, Proceedings SU 4217, Arxiu Històric de la Província de Tarragona, file 91 2708.

labour camp where he was on 27 October 1943, his mathematical skills earned him a position of responsibility in the running of the site where a new prison was being built near Tarragona. Ramos was released on parole on 18 March 1944 but was forced to continue living in Tarragona. He received permission to move to Barcelona in March 1946, at which point he disappears from view. He left Spain in the late 1940s, as we know from a sighting of Ramos in Lyon in February 1950, where he met the pastor Brémond, with whom he would later leave the manuscript. In the spring of 1950 he married a Spaniard whom he had met at the Gurs camp then sailed for Uruguay in August.

All in all, the author's history was one that could have inclined to feelings of guilt, thus precluding the possibility of a literal narrative. This is further supported by the fact that the novel is not dedicated to his prison companions but to the combatants in the brigade of the Republican army that the author deserted. This suggests that the manuscript recounting the years of suffering in the Pilatos prison were a form of expiation. At the time of defeat and then exile, the feeling of guilt may have so demoralised the author as to induce a need of strategies to prop up his authority as narrator throughout the account. For instance, the author states that Andreu Martí, the supposed compiler of the original papers, was personally acquainted with the hell that was Pilatos. The stamp of authenticity as a witness is also placed on the novel's main character, Losada, whom the reader naturally identifies with the author thanks to the subterfuge of moral empathy. Indeed, the account seeks to place Losada in a position of moral superiority vis-à-vis his tormentors, bereft of all humanity and yet inspired by Christian principles. Through identification with the character's moral code, the author succeeds in instilling in the reader a conviction that he himself probably lacked.

The choice of the novel form is not then merely a discursive strategy; it is also a strategy of expression that reveals the conditions of the author's experience. The uneasy weave of fact and fiction in *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* could simply reflect the shortcomings of an amateur writer. It could also be the result of identity and moral uncertainty in a writer who never felt he possessed authority enough to appear as guarantor of the factuality of the account. In that case the hybrid nature of the narrative would presumably reflect a personal tension betraying a complex and contradictory war experience. In any case the author's fictional portrayals reinforced the portrayals that he believed to be true.

The historian and fictional testimonial accounts

In *Los Sátrapas del Occidente*, the factuality of the account cannot be taken for granted. In a narrative encompassing such variegated modalities of truth, the historian's problem is to determine when the account is true and when it is fictional. But the historian lacks the means to divine whether or not the events recounted actually occurred! After all, there have been false accounts of prison experiences, for instance that of Wilkormiski. To raise the question of the authenticity of the account is to question its validity as a historical document.

The researcher can only seek the proof of authenticity in the reality extraneous to the narrative; an objective critique would require, for example, a comparison of *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* with the only two other eye-witness accounts that have been published on the Pilatos prison: *Presó de Pilats*, written by Joan Ventura i Solé in 1993, and *Pilatos*, written by Josep Maria

Subirats in the same year¹². I could meet with the second of these writers who was still alive in the 2000's. I asked him about his experience and sent him Ramos's manuscript to read. He confirmed the facts and recognised some of the novel's characters, but not Losada or Serradell. It is disturbing to find that despite all the work of compiling sources, it is only another eye-witness who can ultimately attest to its reliability. Thus, I have been unable to entirely confirm the authenticity of the document, which is supported only by Josep Maria Subirats's acknowledgement that it matches his own present memories. In the final analysis it is what Paul Ricoeur calls "the small miracle of recall" that lends credibility to that past experience which the historian has not lived.

The next step was a process of laborious field work, following the tracks of a perfect stranger. The search led on numerous occasions through incomplete archives, and much of it was guided by chance. My meagre findings strengthened the suspicion that my examination of the manuscript had aroused: for example, the scene of the execution of a 17-year-old youth, an especially dramatic point in the novel, is probably false since, as far as I know, no minors were ever put before the firing squad. And besides, Josep Maria Subirats had actually stated that this was an invention. The historian's inescapable duty of verification nevertheless fell down in two ways: firstly, he pursued a kind of positivist reduction whereby he tended to accept all the events narrated by Ramos at face value. And secondly, he was looking at *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* solely in terms of testimonial literature—i.e. as a referential account—when the testimonial status of the manuscript was at best dubious. The question ultimately is not only the tendency of historians to view a document as a token of a historical reality, but also their tendency to immediately treat a novel as testimony without taking precautions as to its use. Hence historical research may alter the way the manuscript is read, sufficiently to legitimise it as a historical document. In other words, while the acceptance of a manuscript as testimony depends very much on the conditions in which it was produced, it also depends on the context in which it came down to us—a point that needs to be elucidated.

It is readily confirmed that despite repeated efforts, Antonio Ramos did not manage to have his novel published in the sixties, either in Uruguay where he lived, or in France where the manuscript slept a decades-long sleep. A comparison of the context of reception at the time *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* was written, in 1958, and the present context can help us to understand the way in which the conditions of the manuscript's receivability have evolved. To that end, the works of Nathalie Heinich on the social conditions of reception of manuscripts provide a means of analysing the stance that the reader adopts towards the text via two modes of distancing¹³.

From the standpoint of referential distance, *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* in 1958 was necessarily difficult to accept: as already noted, the literary distance imposed by the production of a realist novel militates against a positive reception by the public, whom common sense causes to associate the literal side of the account with truth, and conversely its literary side with artifice and falsehood¹⁴. It was not until the 1970s that the western public learned to see the truth in fiction, as conveyed for example by the novels of André Kertész. As evidenced by several recent controversies about the literary partisanship of prison camp accounts, the question of the

¹² Josep Subirats Piñana, *Pilatos 1939-1941*, Madrid, Pablo Iglesias, 1993, 243p. P??

¹³ Nathalie Heinich, "Les limites de la fiction", *L'Homme*, 175-176, July/December 2005, pp. 57-76.

¹⁴ Nathalie Heinich, "Le témoignage entre autobiographie et roman : la place de la fiction dans les romans de la déportation", *Mots*, 56, September 1998, pp. 33-48.

relationship between literature and truth has never been finally settled: and that was all the more true fifty years earlier. Moreover, in the case of Ramos the combination of a position of detachment as implied for example by the use of a pseudonym and a high degree of fictionalisation prompts an aesthetic reading of the manuscript, whereas testimony is generally viewed on an ethical plane. The contradiction inherent in the choice of the novel form naturally induces readers to form aesthetic judgements about the literary quality of the work, even if the author's intention is to elicit a moral indictment. In short, the fabric of *Los Sátrapas del Occidente*, resting as it does on a twofold break of discursive continuity, constitutes a shaky foundation that sits particularly uneasily with the reader. For not only does the manuscript cobble together a fictional narrative and a factual essay, but moreover the narrator abandons his initial position of omniscience to explain his predicament, thus breaking all the accepted rules of realism.

As regards space-time distance, historical research has led to the conclusion that the manuscript was at least partially composed in Uruguay. Indeed, the back of the paper used in the second volume of the manuscript is a preprinted invoice form from a Montivideo laundry. This means that *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* was written thousands of kilometres away from the readership it was intended to address, which is probably why Antonio Ramos tried to have his manuscript published by a Buenos Aires publisher. At that time, Argentinian publishing houses, many of them founded by Spanish exiles, were willing to publish narratives of this kind. Spatial distance could then have been one obstacle, while the question of proximity in time to the events narrated was certainly another; for by the nineteen-sixties resistance to the Franco regime was no longer in the hands of exiles but of young Spaniards at home. In the course of the student revolts in Madrid in 1955, a pact for resistance was concluded between the heirs of the Second Republic and some children of the regime who were deeply disappointed by the social evolution of the dictatorship. This alliance, marking the renaissance of the opposition, objectively entailed a setting aside of past disagreements: the Civil War would no longer dominate the conversations of young militants who had not lived through it and were resolved to look towards the future. These developments placed Antonio Ramos, a fifty-year-old exile in 1958, at odds with the majority feeling among members of the Spanish resistance. The divide separating the desire to testify and the mood of Spanish society presented an added hurdle to the publication of *Los Sátrapas del Occidente*.

In short, in the nineteen-sixties conditions were not favourable to the reception of *Los Sátrapas del Occidente*. Now, however, that has changed. The problem of referential distance posed by Ramos's novel is today a source of interest. Firstly, the contemporary reader can appreciate the effect of discontinuity produced by a vagueness of categorisation that feels more in tune with the experience of living in prison camps. As in Chalamov's accounts for example, Ramos's breaks down into a multitude of snapshot scenes suggestive of the struggle to survive. According to Luba Jurgenson, the fragmented structure of the story mirrors the breakdown of the person as a result of the prison camp experience¹⁵. Likewise, a comparison with other accounts of extreme experiences shows that the use of a pseudonym may serve precisely to convey the experience of a split personality in literary form. Today, the narrative features that made *Los sátrapas* hard to swallow in 1958 do not surprise us in the least. What is more, the last two decades of the 20th century saw the emergence of a testimonial genre in literature. One of the consequences of the advent of what Annette Wiewiorka calls the "age of the witness" has been an ironing-out of the

¹⁵ Luba Jurgenson, *L'expérienceconcentrationnaire est-elle indicible?*; Paris, Ed. Du Rocher, 2003. Pp ?

discursive inconsistencies of the narrative (fictionality/factuality) in an entirely new approach to apprehension¹⁶. The awkward features of Ramos's manuscript vanish under the contemporary gaze, possibly too much so.

The vicissitudes of the manuscript itself then become part of the novel when we come to read it. Unsuccessful in having it published in Argentina, Antonio Ramos presumably took the work back to Spain, taking advantage of one of the numerous amnesties offered to former Republicans in the late nineteen-sixties. Ramos was living in Montevideo in 1958, but he was certainly in Spain in 1963. That year for the first time he re-encountered the reverend Brémont, his host during his short exile in France in the late nineteen-forties. The two had never ceased to correspond, and Ramos felt indebted for the pastor's assistance. It is worth noting that during the Second World War pastor Brémont had been at the heart of the resistance to Nazi occupation at Dieulefit, in the Department of Drôme in the Rhône valley. Later appointed to Oullins, in the Department of Rhône, near to Lyon, the pastor continued to be politically active in the anti-fascist struggle. Thus, in Brémont Ramos probably found the interlocutor he so sorely lacked in his country of origin. This closeness begot a solid friendship which induced Ramos to entrust his manuscript to the pastor, either in December 1963 or in April 1964. According to his daughter, who discovered the manuscript, the reverend Brémont had always regretted being unable to have this Spanish manuscript published. However, he had taken care to preserve it in memory of his friend, who died in 1972. Thus, through an odd combination of circumstances, *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* has finally come back to Spain at a time when the country is living a revival of memories of the Franco regime's repression. Silence about the atrocities committed during the Civil War was one of the principal foundations of Spain's democratic Transition, but there has been a growing wave of re-memorisation since 1996. A decade on, Spain is experiencing the unawaited revisiting of a past that is increasingly remote but paradoxically ever more present¹⁷.

Finally, the emotional ties to the Civil War have been weakened with the disappearance of the people involved. With the corpse now cold, it has become possible to accept a fictional treatment. This phenomenon, which in the literature of the Holocaust has so profoundly altered the ways in which prison camp experience is narrated, to the extent of including writings by the children and grandchildren of deportees, has produced several Spanish literary masterpieces which have enjoyed wide public acclaim. *Los Soldados de Salamina* by Xavier Macias, or *La noche de los cuatro caminos* by Andrés Trapiello spring to mind. Antonio Ramos has thus come to join a literary current that did not exist in 1958.

What Antonio Ramos sought was clearly to leave his testimony through a work of fiction which still told the truth. His account, conceived as a vindication of the truth, is less concerned with setting out the facts than with conveying an experience and mourning the victims. In this sense, what we have is a species of memoir that transcends the divide between a fictional and a

¹⁶ Annette Wieviorka, *L'ère du témoin*, Paris, Plon, 1998, p.179.

¹⁷ Mercedes Yusta, "El movimiento "por la recuperacion de la memoria historica" : una reescritura del pasado reciente desde la sociedad civil (1995-2005)". **Pp?**

factual account in order to harness other modalities of truth¹⁸. In short, in this novel the purpose of the description of events is not so much to reflect an objective reality as to make them memorable, be they real or invented (Marielle Macé). In fiction the factuality of the narrative is not an issue; however, in the genre of memoirs to which *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* belongs, the question remains even if the status of the events has changed. If we accept that the author was perfectly aware of the risk to the factual credibility of his account posed by the choice of a work of fiction, then we may conclude that he deliberately opted for memorability in his testimony.

That option is problematical for the historian. If we are to avoid the negationist trap of discrediting eye-witness accounts on the pretext of errors of fact and falling back on a simple matter of discourse, we need to understand what conditions a work of fiction must meet to serve as historical evidence. The case of *Los Sátrapas del Occidente* shows that in the field of testimony, the facts possess the same value as memory and as evidence. We must therefore admit that the factual truth is not decisive for the question of testimony, given that while consistency with the facts is a *conditio sine qua non* for consideration by the historian, it is not sufficient to guarantee recognition as a historical document. For we should not forget that fact can be appropriated by fiction, as evidenced by the false testimony of Wilkormiski. To accept that the value of testimonial accounts lies not only in their factual content but also in their memorability—that is, their capacity to evoke memorable images—is a challenge for historians in that it accords memoirs an unprecedented place in contemporary historical writing.

Stéphane Michonneau
EHEHI-Casa de Velázquez

¹⁸ André Jolles, *Formes simples*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1972. P ??