

# **Understanding through Imagination**

*The President and Ivanhoe: Reading Beyond  
the Facts*

Janneke Kuipers (3233200)  
Utrecht University  
Faculty of Humanities  
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Supervisor: dr. F.X. Nina Rada  
Second Reader: prof. dr. A. Rigney

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## Introduction

The New Oxford American Dictionary describes narrative as 'a spoken or written account of connected events'. This is a straightforward description of an extremely complicated phenomenon. Narrative is not restricted to literature: stories are everywhere. Even personal identity is a story. Paul Ricoeur says: 'Personal identity can be articulated only by the temporal dimension of human existence' (114). Answering the question 'Who am I?' is already a narrative. Identity on a personal level cannot be separated from telling stories. The same applies on a bigger level: the identity and past of peoples and nations are also based upon stories.

An example of a powerful narrative is the White Man's Burden. Since approximately 1500, trade contacts between Africa and Europe grew increasingly imbalanced. Thanks to technological ascendancy European traders were able to control the labor forces and raw materials of the African continent. The African people, however, started to resist as they suffered from the draining of resources. This led to greater suppression and atrocities by the hands of the Europeans (Tignor et al. 739).

But this was not the narrative within the colonizers' societies. In the mid-nineteenth century European feelings of superiority reached a climax. The Europeans considered themselves the winners of the survival of the fittest contest (Tignor et al. 739). These feelings of superiority were so compelling that people started to speak about the white man's burden, after the famous poem by Rudyard Kipling (1899): it was the burden and duty of the Europeans to bring civilization to the Africans. Within this narrative, colonizing seems like a favor towards non-Western people.

The same power of narrative was deliberately applied in the formation and anchoring of modern nation-states. In the eighteenth hundreds cultural scholars were deployed to create a common identity for the European nation-states (Leezenberg, De Vries 124). Like personal identities, these national identities are narratives, stories for citizens to unite under. Ignatieff goes as far as saying nationalism is fiction: only sustained by the willing suspension of disbelief of the citizens involved.

National identities are constructed from a series of historic events, presented with a clear beginning, middle and end. White calls this *emplotment*. These histories create a coherence that can only be seen in retrospect (White 24). Transferring knowledge of past events requires narration, resulting in distorted versions of historical reality. It is this part of nationalism that Ignatieff calls fiction.

The *creational myth* that underlies a nation-state suggests that a nation consists of a culturally homogenous people descending from the same ancestry. The social mark-up of modern nation-state shows a different reality: within nation-states one can identify multiple groups with different cultural backgrounds, and thus with different narratives. These different narratives can cause tension when the narrative of the majority does injustice to the minority.

In our postcolonial and globalized world, people from different cultures are in closer contact than ever. This causes new tensions within nation-states because different cultures carry different narratives. The national narrative does not include the newcomers, which can lead to alienation between majority and

minority. Inevitable cultural mistranslation adds to this problem. What is perceived as normal for the majority, might be incomprehensible for a newcomer raised within a different cultural background.

Right wing politicians turn the national narrative into something actively excluding newcomers; and stereotype entire groups not only as different, but also as damaging to the nation. This rhetoric is effective since minorities are denied a narrative of their own; the majority thus only sees anonymous strangers.

'Learning to see another human being not as a thing but as a full person is not an automatic event but an achievement that requires overcoming many obstacles, the first of which is the sheer inability to distinguish between the self and other' writes Martha Nussbaum (96). In the case of intercultural contact, these obstacles are even harder to overcome since diverging narratives are at play. Familiarizing oneself with foreign cultures and histories can be a tool to get a better understanding of the anonymous stranger. This thesis argues for fiction as a tool to familiarize oneself with the cultural other.

'Sometimes fiction gives greater insight than the most brilliant academic treatise or theory' according to Bernhard Schlink, author of *Der Vorleser* (Steinz 21).<sup>2</sup> Using the novels *Ivanhoe* (Sir Walter Scott 1819) and *The President* (Miguel Ángel Asturias 1946), this thesis shows that representing the past does not solely lie in the hands of historians. Not being confined by academic requirements as objectivity and distancing, art can be an effective tool to provide insight in the cultural other.

Both *The President* and *Ivanhoe* deal with heterogeneity. *The President* is set in Guatemala, during the rule of dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera, from 1898 to 1920. Besides denouncing Cabrera's cruelties, Asturias addressed the complex social make up of the Guatemalan society. All Latin American countries have a complex social situation. Not only are the geographical borders of Latin American nations strongly influenced by European colonizers; also the racial make up of the continent is the result of European presence and politics.

Different peoples have been forced to reside on the same lands for hundreds of years: indigenous people, European conquerors, imported slaves from Africa, the European fortune seekers and the mixed offspring of all these groups are – to this day – living side-by-side. Asturias appropriates this actuality into *The President*. He does not represent the Guatemalan citizens as a homogenous group of people. He takes this appropriation so far, that he fuses western and indigenous styles of storytelling, which ultimately led to magical realism – a genre characteristic for Latin America (Swanson 51).

The different storylines within the novel address the actuality of Guatemalan society as well. Issues like racism and inequality are intricately addressed. In 1967 Asturias was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature 'for his vivid literary achievement, deep-rooted in the national traits and traditions of Indian peoples of Latin

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<sup>1</sup> This article was accessed online. The number in the citation refers to the number of the paragraph containing the quote.

<sup>2</sup> *Der Vorleser* for example broke the habitual perception on Germany's complicated past and opened up new debates in Germany. In *Der Vorleser* Hanna – the SS-camp guard – is a metaphor for the war generation. She is not a metaphor for Hitler's executioners, but she stands for the average German citizen who lived and worked in the Third Reich. Michael stands for the post-war generation, Schlink's generation, entangled in love and horror. Hanna's illiteracy is not an excuse for her involvement with the Holocaust, but it does make her human and accessible. And because the reader starts to sympathize with Hanna, the reader starts to understand what inner conflicts the post-war generation experiences. The novel has deeply influenced the debate about Germany's *Sonderweg* theory (Bartov 182).

America' ('The Nobel Prize in Literature 1967'). When Asturias accepted the prize he said that his work would 'continue to reflect the voice of the peoples, gathering their myths and popular beliefs and at the same time seeking to give birth to a universal consciousness of Latin American problems' (Asturias back cover). This mission is visible in *The President* as well.

Latin America is a clear example of the heterogeneity of the nation-state, its social situation, however, is not unique. In the eighteenth hundreds Sir Walter Scott had already worked through the notion of heterogeneity within a geographically defined territory. Scott believed it was impossible to distinguish a single source for Britain's cultural traditions. Scott was part of an intellectual movement that celebrated the ethnically and culturally heterogeneous formation of Britain out of Celtic, Phoenician, and Roman elements as well as Saxon and Norman, Latin and Germanic and Romance (Duncan xii).

Due to the French Revolution debates about 'the character of the English constitution in a domestic history consisting largely of invasions, usurpations, and revolutions' (Duncan xiii) sparked. Although the novel tells a very old tale, Marilyn Butler calls *Ivanhoe* thematically Scott's 'most contemporary novel to date' (Butler 149-150). Scott uses the medieval to deal with the turbulence the French Revolution caused; he enabled people to understand British traditions as the result of a cultural mix of traditions.

Thematically, both novels perfectly fit the grand theme of this thesis: the daily reality of people from different cultures increasingly encountering and misunderstanding each other. There are of course many more novels which appropriate heterogeneity; problems due to cultural differences like racism.<sup>3</sup> I chose to compare *The President* and *Ivanhoe* because these books have been written and published one hundred years apart, within completely different traditions, and both still are very relevant today.

The first chapter of this thesis explores history in relation to narrative, the nation-state, and otherness. The second chapter shows that *The President* and *Ivanhoe* deal with the past in an alternative way to history proper; and the third chapter discusses how *The President* and *Ivanhoe* provide insight into the cultural other.

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<sup>3</sup> Examples are E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924); Jorge Icaza Coronel's *Huasipungo* (1934); Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Green House* (1966); Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982); J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999); and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2006).

# 1. Setting the scene

## The blurry line between history proper and fiction

Modernity is defined by the swiftness of social change. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, societies transformed at such a pace, that people consciously experienced a gap between past and present. The awareness arose that yesterday is different from today, and that tomorrow will be different again. In a way, the discovery of difference between past and present resulted in the belief that the future is alterable.<sup>4</sup> At the same time a decline of religion set in, which resulted in people losing their purpose and meaning in life. New ways of orienting oneself in life had to be found. Meaning could no longer be found in future redemption. A new temporal anchor was found in the past: history offered people a new sense of belonging. The rapid and intense rise of nationalism can be understood from this perspective: people embraced their nationality to feel part of a larger whole that was developing towards something.

Hayden White however, points out that meaning does not lie within the past. History is just a place in time, and not an eschatological hideout. White theorizes that history provides unity and coherence, the comfort of a world full of meaning that it offers however, is imaginary. History is a 'discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself *as a story*' (White 7). White recognizes that we need stories to make sense of the world, but he dismantles history as a neutral temporal anchor. There is no natural way of writing history. It is not reality that dictates the way one writes about it: but instead is determined by the society in which this history is written.

From this perspective, the distinction between the actual and the imaginary becomes difficult to determine. Historians must narrativize in order to write 'proper histories', as historical events and facts do not tell themselves. But this results in stories that can not be seen as direct representations of reality: '[...] this value attached to narrativity of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary' (White 27). White continues: 'The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origins in wishes, daydreams, reveries. Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see "the end" in every beginning?' (27).

Historians appear to be the guards of reality, and authors of fictional texts seem the guards of an imaginative world. But this sharp division between reality and fiction cannot be drawn that easily, if one looks at the limitations of narrative. The concept of fiction has become a repository for multiple meanings and connotations over the years. Fiction can, for example, refer to that which is constructed – something that is

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<sup>4</sup> Reinhardt Koselleck (1985) describes a shift in the balance between a 'space of experience' and a 'horizon of expectation'. The rapid changes in the 17th and 18th century evoked the sensation of the 'noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous' (cf. Olick 179).

made, rather than found. Fiction is also used to indicate something that is invented rather than real. Thirdly fiction is the particular attitude towards information whereby invention or make-believe is seen as legitimate. A fourth and relevant explanation is that fiction as a literary genre – since the eighteenth century fiction is the arena of make-believe (Rigney, 'Imperfect Histories' 5).

This overview reveals that all histories and stories are fiction, in the sense that they all are constructed. Hayden White agrees that historiography represents something invented rather than something real. The third connotation of fiction, 'the particular attitude to information whereby invention or make-believe is seen as legitimate' represents the first hard distinction between history and fiction: within history proper, make-believe is odious, while it is the very core of the literary genre 'fiction'. It is remarkable however, that the only hard distinction between history proper and fiction can be found in the way historians perceive their own work: as not make-believe, while theorists like Hayden White doubt the very possibility of narrativizing without simultaneously employing the inherent make-believe.

### **The historical discipline challenged**

Hayden White was not the only scholar to question history as a form of knowledge. In fact, the second half of twentieth century has been tumultuous for all the disciplines within the humanities: major intellectual currents have challenged and influenced the practice of scholars (Gunn 3). Cultural and critical theories from scholars from different disciplines – from anthropology to linguistics and from history to philosophy – eventually brought about a linguistic or cultural turn (Eley 186).

An important lesson of the cultural turn is the fact that no study can ever be isolated from theory. This insight led to reflexivity on the nature of knowledge, which has evoked a variety of reactions within the historical discipline. With his discursive theory, Foucault was one of the instigators of change. Foucault described how knowledge (in the form of discourse) produces, regulates and controls power. Individuals are being raised according to and within a system of norms: thereby determining what is normal and what is not. Narrative plays an important role in this process of normalization. Individuals are raised within a society, within a particular discourse. And this discourse is conveyed and justified through narrative.

The cultural turn led to the insight that western historians are grounded in the teleological discourse of 'progress',<sup>5</sup> they fail to acknowledge how much of modern western life is the result of centuries of cultural, historical and theological exchange.<sup>6</sup> The narrative of superiority and the focus on progress shapes their research, which inescapably leads to new self-affirming narratives and *cultural amnesia* (Chambers 51). The West's 'profoundly undemocratic understanding of historical complexities and cultural differences' translates into the 'militarized exportation of "democracy"' and ultimately to the attitude: 'Westernize or die' (Chambers

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<sup>5</sup> Tosh names *nostalgia* and the belief in *progress* as two ends of the scale of historical distortion: 'If nostalgia reflects a pessimistic view of the world, progress is an optimistic creed, for it asserts not only that change in the past has been for the better, but that improvement will continue into the future' (Tosh, Lang 19).

<sup>6</sup> Chambers calls entities like cities and countries sites of collective and contested memories (cf. Chambers 89).

54). This denial of cultural pollination leads to the alienation, exotization and misunderstanding of non-western cultures.<sup>7</sup>

The cultural turn caused a shift in research areas and approaches, and increased attention for the scholar's context, language, representation and the difficulties of interpretation. Sub disciplines emerged like World History and Cultural History.

### **The nation-state as a problem**

Benedict Anderson's book on nations being 'imagined communities' has influenced and encouraged scholars to doubt the rigid concept of the nation-state. Anderson argues that a nation is constructed from popular processes through which residents share nationality in common: 'It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (6). Political and cultural institutions enable people to 'imagine' they share general beliefs, attitudes and help them to recognize a national collective as having similar opinions and sentiments to their own.

The rigid concept of the nation-state is of interest to Étienne Balibar and Ian Chambers. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, when European nations started to expand overseas, the world became increasingly captured in topographic maps (Chambers 3). Chambers identifies this period as the first signs of modernity. Charting modernity through studying maps, movement and mobility enabled him to address the contemporaneous problem of illegal immigrants: 'The very right to travel, to journey, to migrate today increasingly runs up against borders, confines, and controls of a profound "unfreedom" that characterizes the modern world' (Chambers 3). In Chambers' view, borders have become the materialization of authority: by no means do they form the demarcation of different autochthonous peoples. These borders are the cause of much distress.

Balibar is very clear when he condemns the inclusion and exclusion of individuals based on nationality. He is strongly bothered by the practical consequences of concepts such as the nation-state, borders and citizenship. He calls the *nation-form* 'not a community [...] but *the concept of a structure capable of producing determinate community effects*' (Balibar 20, 21). Nations are not given, but a 'social formation' (Balibar 17). The nation-state seems such a rigid concept, but in truth it is extremely fluid:

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<sup>7</sup> Two historians who successfully brought attention to this matter are Edward Said and Eric Hobsbawn. With *Orientalism* (1968) Said denounced the attitude of the West towards the rest of the world. Said pointed out to his readers that Western scholars are operating within a discourse in which Western representations and knowledge of the East serves imperialistic discourse. Consciously or unconsciously, Said argues, Western art and Western science perform as justifications for the illegal Western domination of these areas. Descriptions of the East by Western scholars are continuously a reflection of what the West expects and wants to see. Where Said tried to evoke a change in the stance of Western grounded historians, Hobsbawn, with *Bandits* (1969) opened up the established research field to hitherto ignored areas of study: he managed to spark research into groups at the margins of society.



A given nation (for example, France, Germany, China) is no doubt always a relatively individualized nationality, but *it is certainly no longer a "nation" in the same sense of the word* as it was two hundred years or even two generations ago – not to speak of what it might have been a thousand years ago (a period given great symbolic importance by national “consciousness,” that is, by myth). (Balibar 22)

For Anderson, Chambers and Balibar it is clear that the nation-state is a fixed demarcating tool to control or contain something that is in essence extremely fluid, imagined even. People nevertheless get excluded from or included in nation-states on a daily basis. The problems of the nation-state extend beyond inclusion and exclusion, however.

Nation-states have always been threatened by the tension between the majority and minorities within its own borders. This and new tensions have only grown in the last couple of decades due to immigration of people from non-Western societies into Western societies. Immigration and integration issues put pressure on the balance of modern democracies. The increasing popularity of right wing populists is a disconcerting development. According to Paul Gilroy, the immigration problems that modern Western nation-states nowadays face are a direct result of imperial and colonial history. The mere fact that the current division of the globe into nation-states does not coincide with a complicated reality is the results of peoples conquering and settling in foreign territories in the colonial past (Gilroy 2).

### **Otherness in 1492**

Edward Said was among the first to point out that the Western view of the world was actually a powerful way to keep the East subjugated. As Ian Chambers wrote: ‘the past and the future are in the hands of the victors’ (29). The discourse of superiority and the focus on progress shapes the worldview of the western world, and this discourse inescapably leads to new tainted insights.

In *The conquest of America* Tzvetan Todorov describes how Columbus set foot on the American continent in 1492. Todorov explains this event to be more of an encounter than a discovery. In studying the letters, diaries, beliefs and behavior of both the indigenous people and the Spanish conquistadors Todorov paints a staggering picture of linguistic and cultural mistranslation between the Spanish and the Indians.

The Spaniards failed to see the otherness of the Indians and instead judged them according to their own standards: ‘[...] these are bestial men who believe that the whole world is an island and who do not know what the mainland is, and have neither letters nor long-standing memories, and since they take pleasure only in eating and being with their women [...]’ (Todorov 21). The Indians in their turn misjudged the intention of the Spaniards because they were not familiar with lying, the concept of claiming grounds by naming, or the notion of owning private property (Todorov 40). The results of these cultural mistranslations are shocking: the ‘superior’ Westerners subjugated the ‘ignorant’ Indians and eradicated nearly the entire Indian population within a century. Since the Christian Spaniards were ‘superior’ they had ‘the right’ to claim the lands, enslave its inhabitants and play God over the lives of these ‘wilds’.

According to Todorov, this mutual mistranslation is the result of a failure to recognize each other’s otherness. The Spaniards saw half naked people living very close to nature who traded pieces gold for broken

glass or a scarf. The Spaniards acknowledged a difference between the Indians and themselves, but expressed these differences in terms of superiority and inferiority.

Another compelling argument Todorov develops is the danger of a priori knowledge. Columbus, as a devout Christian, was raised in a discourse causing him to see the world in a certain way. He set out to the Americas in search for gold to finance the militarized recovery of the Holy Land (Todorov 11), and this made him a peculiar interpreter: when his findings did not correspond with the Christian teachings about the location of the earthly Paradise or the existence of mermaids for example. Rather than admitting the teachings to be false, Columbus adjusted them: the earth's curvature must be different; and mermaids do exist, they are just less beautiful than generally believed (Todorov 16). Columbus interpreted the signs to fit his worldview, just like the Indians fit the arrival of the white men within their paradigm. The Aztecs in their turn, kept their view of the world intact by producing new premonitions (Todorov 74).

According to Todorov, Columbus' discovery was one of a kind. Todorov calls the discovery of America the most astonishing encounter of our history: 'We do not have the same sense of radical difference in the "discovery" of other continents and of other peoples: Europeans have never been altogether ignorant of the existence of Africa, India, or China; some memory of these places was always there already –from the beginning' (Todorov 4). Never before did an encounter take place between two groups who were fully unaware of each other's existence. Maybe these kinds of intense encounters can never take place again, but humanity still faces the challenge of dealing with otherness.

### **Endangered humanities**

It is safe to say that an excess of determination leads to an excess of interpretation (Todorov 19, 20) and that judging differences in terms of inferiority and superiority can be dangerous. Linguistic and cultural mistranslation may seem something of the past. The Internet for example, offers large amounts of data about other cultures. And modern computers can help in overcoming language barriers on the spot. Appearances are deceptive, however. Globalization equals intensification of interaction, and wherever there is interaction, misunderstanding lurks – despite technological advances.<sup>8</sup>

Different world views are a given: for the Indians the past and the future are the same thing (Todorov 85), life functions as a wheel; for the colonizers, life is an upward trend towards the final victory of the Christian spirit (Todorov 87). These are two realities. There is not one superior worldview. The West's emphasis on progress is problematic for non-Western players since different societies have different frames of reference; different societies live within different realities. The western discourse ignores or misrepresents this cultural diversity. Therefore, it is even more important for the West to acknowledge how much of modern western life is the result of centuries of cultural, historical and theological exchange.

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<sup>8</sup> In the chapter 'Translation after 9/11: Mistranslating' Emily Apter illustrates how even the best technology could not help the United States in avoiding mistranslation in their warfare. Apter discusses the limitations of technology: the MT devices – handheld computers designed for quick translation – used in the field in the Bosnian war for example, proved to be inadequate. Each of Apter's examples show the complexity of translation (12-15).

It is because of this that celebrated philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum is alarmed by the trend of governments all over the world cutting away or downsizing the humanities and arts departments. The humanistic aspects of science are undervalued: the results of these studies do not directly translate into national profit. Nowadays students in virtually every nation in the world, in both primary and secondary schools and in college and university, are being decreasingly trained in 'the imaginative, creative aspect and the aspect of rigorous critical thought' (Nussbaum 2).

This causes Nussbaum to say that the 'future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance' (2). She states bluntly: 'If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements' (2). Democracies need citizens who are able to think critically about class, race, gender, foreign investments, and inequality in general. Empathetic imagining is also a must. In order to be able to function in a globalized world where people live closer together than ever, individuals must be able to recognize and appreciate cultural differences. This is where Columbus failed. His conservative Christian upbringing resulted in a closed worldview; therefore he was not able to judge the Indian way of life as an objective alternative reality to his own.

### ***The President and Ivanhoe***

The current division of the world in nation-states causes unrest among certain people groups. Gilroy writes that 'the colonial hierarchy that previously specified the proper relation of blackness to whiteness starts to break down' (60). With the fall of former grand empires, societies all over the world are made up out of peoples of mixed origins. 'The previously separated worlds of absolutely different groups can [...] be made to leak' (Gilroy 60). The flimsy boundaries placed round racial and ethnic identity empowers 'desperate political leaders who will try anything to locate the populist pulse of the ailing body politic' (60).

Different groups of people bleeding into one another require political change which causes friction. Current immigration debates in the modern nation-states and the rise of populist right wing politicians like Geert Wilders (Party for Freedom, Netherlands); Filip Dewinter (Flemish Interest, Belgium); Marine Le Pen (National Front, France); Timo Soini (True Finns, Finland); Nick Griffin (British National Party, UK); Pia Kjaersgaard (Danish People's Party, Denmark) and the American Tea Party Movement reveal this.

It would be so much better for societies not to have a story of fear but a story of understanding. Students of art and literature learn to imagine the situation others are in. This capacity is essential for societies pressured by intercultural tensions. Much more than history proper, literary novels can provide us with such understanding. Not because novelists are not grounded in discourse, but because they are able to communicate with the reader on a deeper level. Let us now turn to *The President and Ivanhoe*.

## 2. Mr. President and Ivanhoe – characteristics

Examining the sharp division between history proper and fiction teaches us that historians are claiming to do things no text can possibly do. Capturing the complex reality of this world through narrative and language – without simultaneously constructing the world – is simply impossible. The first part of this chapter explains how *The President* deals with the past in an alternative way through a play with style and form. The second part of this chapter is a discussion of Iser's and Warning's theories on imagination applied to both *The President* and *Ivanhoe*.

### Form

With its fusion of myth and reality; alternating storylines; scenes cut in many parts; and its inconsistent narrator *The President* is an example of a piece of art that works through a defined historical period without solely relying on language. The form of *The President* conveys a message of its own. Asturias mixes present tense; past tense; *prolepsis*; *analepsis*; stream-of-consciousness; visions and empirical imagery. He also jumps between focalizers in an unconventional manner. Asturias' choices of narration make it hard for the reader to determine when the described events occur in the different storylines. *The President's* plot is hard to summarize as it consists of multiple intermingling and sometimes unrelated storylines. Also some storylines or characters are introduced and never referred to again.

While the majority of storylines deal with the events leading up to the fall of protagonist Angel Face as the President's favorite, there are many digressions. The random, inconsistent character of the novel conveys and even amplifies that which is described in the text: living in a dictatorial society is hell. The structure/construction not only resist the formativity of narrative as the reader itself has to actively make sense of the different pieces of narrative. The form of the novel itself evokes a feeling of loss of control, misapprehension, and arbitrariness without resorting to language.

Within the text Asturias actively induces a loss of control, misunderstanding, and unpredictability on a textual level. By making the line between real and imaginary events hard to distinguish, Asturias puts the reader to work. The introduction of Angel Face is an example of the blurry line between different realities. Focalized by a wood cutter the President's favorite appears: "The man who had spoken was an angel: a complexion of golden marble, fair hair, a small mouth and an almost feminine appearance, in strong contrast with the manly expression of his black eyes. He was wearing grey. In the fading light he seemed to be dressed in a cloud. In his slender hands he held a thin cane and a broadbrimmed hat which looked like a dove. "An angel!" The wood-cutter couldn't take his eyes from him. "An angel," he repeated, "an angel!" (Asturias 26, 27).

Layering different realities is something Asturias often does. In the scene in which the puppet-player Don Benjamin fights with his wife Doña Venjamon it becomes only clear after the quoted fragment that the

dialogue is part of a successful play. A second glance reveals that the narrator's comment about Doña Venjamon's habit to add syllables to her words is in fact referring to their actual married life:

'Illogical! Illogical!' decided Don Benjamin.

'Logical! Relogical! Doña Venjamon contradicted him.

'Illogical! Illogical! Illogical!

'Relogical! Relogical! Relogical!'

'Don't let's quarrel!' Don Benjamin suggested.

'Don't let's quarrel!' she agreed.

'But it *is* logical...'

'Relogical, I tell you! Relogical, recontralogical!'

When Doña Venjamon argued with her husband she always added syllables to her words, like safety valves to prevent an explosion.

'Illolological!' shouted the puppet-master, nearly tearing out his hair in his frenzy.

'Relogical! Relogical! Recontralogical! Recontrarelogical!' (Asturias 54)

A third form of Asturias' play with multiple realities is the fusion of two separate realities. In a chapter called 'Tohil's dance' Asturias fuses western and indigenous imagery (252-260). In this, Asturias accomplishes something an academic text never could. By using the imagery of Tohil, Mayan god of fire, living under a dictator's rule is explained in a way Indians can relate to. Readers grounded in western culture can experience the magnitude of the scene as well, because of the lively and sinister description of Tohil's cry. People raised with stories of Tohil nevertheless have an advantage: they can reach a deeper level of understanding since they can draw on their fears of Tohil when trying to understand living in a dictatorial dictatorship.

In a meeting with the President, Angel Face realizes he has undoubtedly lost his position as Favorite. Familiar with the President's practices, Angel Face fears for his life. This fear is depicted through a vision of Tohil demanding human sacrifice. The haunting sound of a native drums 'tom-tom, tom-tom, tom-tom' (259) and later the echo of the drums from under the earth: 'Rataplan! Rataplan!' (Asturias 260) makes the reader feel the drum's pulsation through the ground. This image is stronger for readers who, because of their upbringing, have an internalized fear of Tohil. But for readers who are unfamiliar with Tohil, the unknown itself, the supernatural can result in a deeper understanding of Angel Face's fear as well – an understanding beyond words.

All these different layers of reality and different focalizers together form a colorful picture of a complex reality. The form of *The President* not only defies the formativity of narrative, it conveys a message outside language as well. *The President* needs an active engagement in order to be understood: the process of piecing together the story adds yet another dimension to the text. Life is not straightforward and simple. A defined historical period like Cabrera's rule cannot be made tangible by a simple story narrating events from A to Z.

## Style

*The President's* difficult form/construction imparts a message outside language. The text itself also fights language's representational limitations. Asturias turns the language of the novel against itself in *defamiliarizational* manner. According to Viktor Shklovsky, a novel's function is to recover the sensation of life by making objects unfamiliar: 'And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged' (Shklovsky 4). Asturias frequently applies this technique. The constant repetition of phrases, words and sounds break the habitual perception of the language used.

In many scenes the fictional text's language is no longer actualizing and hence draws attention to itself: 'The general's head – and something else. He uttered the words as if he really held in his hands the general's head – and something else' (Asturias 39). Or: 'Angel Face made his way among the guests. (He was as beautiful and as wicked as Satan.)' (Asturias 96), 'The favorite left with his face half hidden in his black muffler. (He was as beautiful and wicked as Satan.)' (Asturias 38) and: 'Angel Face greeted the staff officers. (He was as beautiful and wicked as Satan.)' (Asturias 243).

The repetition can also be seen in the earlier quoted scene with the puppet player and his wife and in the chapter 'Tohil's dance'. The sound of the drum repeated eight times, and the echo six times – interwoven with the running text: "I am content," said Tohil. Rataplan! Rataplan! Echoed from under the earth. "I am content!" I can prevail over men who are hunters of men' (Asturias 260). The self-referential use of language breaks the habitual perception of words which creates the possibility for the reader to recover a sense of life and leads to a glimpse of what lies beyond words: reality (Shklovsky 4).

Metaphors overcome the shortcomings of language as a medium to capture reality. An author can tell how complex reality is, or can describe what it is to live in a dictatorial society, but the chance is that the reader reads without internalizing the deeper meaning of the text. It is true that metaphors are also used in academic texts to improve the transfer of information, in fiction metaphors can enhance understanding by appealing to the reader's feelings.

It is easy to get numb or dulled by a straightforward transfer of information. A metaphor can make the reader feel the pain behind words. A metaphor can move the reader in a way a simple description could not. An example of this is the earlier mentioned puppet player and his wife. The puppet player fully controls the 'life' and the movements of his puppets, just as the dictator controls the life and the movements of his subjects. The pain and humiliation and injustice of this social construct is felt by the reader. Throughout the story, the puppet player is completely controlled by his wife: 'Doña Venjamon whirled round like a mountain and seized hold of him. "Jesus Maria! I'll lift you up!" she cried. And she picked him up in her arms like a child and carried him to the door' (Asturias 53).

Another example of a metaphor is Angel Face's love interest Camila. Her abduction and subsequent illness can be read as powerful metaphor for the miserable state Guatemala is in under Cabrera's rule. In a chapter filled with descriptions of one of Angel Face's dream state visions, Angel Face imagines what people might think what he did to Camila during her abduction: 'They'll imagine the scene with me undressing her, tearing her clothes, and Camila like a bird caught in a trap with trembling flesh and feathers. "And he took her by force," they'll say, "without caressing her" [...]' (Asturias 142). Guatemala under Cabrera is a nation caught in a trap, trembling under the harsh regime. Descriptions of Camila's illness can be read as a description of Guatemala's plight as well: 'A sudden violent wave of faintness carried Camila far away from this pestilent crew. A sensation of falling vertically and in silence. [...] Then a feeling of cold, as from the feathers of dead birds, enveloped her' (Asturias 144).

Unlike Guatemala in the novel – during the entire novel the regime seems to stand strong – Camila heals because of her new found love with Angel Face: 'Camila wondered if it could really be she who was walking. [...] She seemed to be walking in another world, with her eyes wide open; she was new-born, disembodied' (Asturias 235). Philip Swanson writes that the love affair between Angel Face and Camila is the humanization of struggle of living in a dictatorship. Asturias seems to suggest that political change must come at the most elemental level with human beings learning to love and respect each other (57). Camila gets cured thanks to love. Could Guatemala be equally saved when its citizens learn to mutually love and respect each other?

A metaphor like Camila's illness is extremely subtle. A novel like *The President* needs a second or even third reading for some metaphors to be perceived. The reader can also detect metaphors the author did not realize he put in. Metaphors are thus not only enhancing understanding of complicated issues; they also are an example of the openness and the multi-interpretability of fictional texts.

### **Empathic imagining**

Redistributing the power of language and narrative starts with rewriting and re-presenting the past. By playing with form and style novelists can make readers feel the complexity of reality. Clearly, novelists have at their disposal literary techniques which historians do not (or by convention are not supposed to) use. The question remains as to how this difference results in such diverging effects between readers of academic texts and fictional texts.

According to Iser, a literary work 'cannot be completely identical with the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized' (279). It is the merging of text and reader which brings the literary work into existence. 'The reader uses the various perspectives offered him by the text in order to relate the patterns and the "schematized views" to one another, he sets the work in motion, and this very process results ultimately in the awakening of responses within himself' (Iser 280).

The unwritten parts of a text stimulate the reader's creative participation. A text should 'not only draw the reader into action, but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by the given situations, so that these take on a reality of their own' (Iser 281). The reader's imagination causes a dynamic process: 'The written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too

blurred and hazy, but at the same time these implications, worked out by the reader's imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own' (Iser 281).

Fictional texts can be seen as a message which 'requires "a concretization" on the part of its audience' Warning agrees with Iser (43). The importance lies in the active process of reading and interpreting a text through imagination. 'What constitutes this form is never named, let alone explained in the text,' Iser concludes, 'although in fact it is the end product of the interaction between text and reader' (281).

Warning's *As-If* fictionality imparts that the text's fictional world and the reader's imagination together offer the possibility of broadening the reader's horizon. Reading a fictional text therefore cannot be seen as an 'aimless activity free of consequences' (Warning 43). Warning writes that 'every game has its own earnestness, its own effort, its own costs and uses, and its own reality' (43). Fictional texts may create fictional worlds, but through the interpreter a relationship with the actual world still remains.

Fiction can be engineered to stimulate certain responses; one of the merits of fiction lies in its ability to increase sensitivity. With the help of the reader's imagination complicated issues such as the experience of living in a dictatorial society can be made relatable. A novel like Asturias' *The President* offers the reader an understanding beyond the surface. A text never can offer more than a glimpse of understanding – it would be far too blunt to state that people can fully understand the sufferings of others through simply reading a text – but fictional texts can change the reader's attitude in the actual world.

### *The President*

Warning sees the activity of engaging with a fictional text as a play. This play situation is specifically distinct from the reader's actual world. Engaging with a text therefore requires a pre-agreement. When a novel is being read, the pre-agreement between the reader and the text is: 'This is fiction.' During the reading process however, the reader forgets this pre-agreement. The reader knows he is reading a fictional text, but is not constantly thinking 'this is fake'. The reader's willing suspension of disbelief is employed and irrevocably results in a confrontation.

Since the reader is engaging with the fictional text *as if* it were true, conflicting situations occur. When the internal speech situation opposes to the external reception situation the reader has to solve the conflict. The reader, Warning writes, can 'logically solve such paradoxes by placing one side of the contradiction on a higher hierarchical level, thus making the contradiction meaningless' (43).

Asturias created a fictional society, a society very similar to Guatemala during the rule of dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera. The fact that *The President* is set in an unnamed country under the rule of an unnamed dictator is an example of the pre-agreement between text and reader. During the reading process this pre-agreement is forgotten and the reader treats the story as if it were true. As long as the reader's willing suspension of disbelief is not breached, the act of reading leads to a deeper level of understanding.

When the content of the text opposes the values and mindset of the reader a conflict occurs that demands a solution. In *The President* for example, a conflict arises surrounding the character of Angel Face. He is the



President's favourite and therefore automatically a man with blood on his hands, since: 'A crime will make you friends with the President' (Asturias 175). It is only half way through the novel that the reader gets the affirmation that Angel Face is indeed a criminal himself: 'Angel Face, [...] the man who had driven so many to their deaths' (Asturias 176). Until then, Angel Face is only suspected to have committed crimes: it is common sense to assume that in a society so violent, led by a president so brutal that Angel Face could not possibly be innocent. Hints can also be found on a textual level. From the very beginning Angel Face is referred to as a man being 'as beautiful and wicked as Satan' (Asturias 37).

Despite the fact that Angel Face is no sweetheart, the reader roots for him. When Angel Face receives the assignment from the President to warn General Canales of his upcoming arrest, Angel Face decides to abduct General Canales' daughter as a decoy. Initially this was to cover up his assignment to warn General Canales (Asturias 40-43), however he soon develops a sincere interest in Camila. Through this love affair a softer side of the President's favourite is revealed: "It's over now, it's all over," Angel Face repeated into the ear of a weeping Camila. "Your father's not in danger, and you're quite safe in this hiding-place; I'm here to protect you" (Asturias 84).

No doubt it is this human side of Angel Face that arouses the reader's sympathy. Angel Face is the right hand of a cruel dictator – a person that would be despised in the reader's actual world. But while reading this novel, a hierarchical decision has to be made in favour of the plot: the text seduces the reader to choose the fictional world. As a result, the reader expands its level of acceptance and a discrepancy between the reader's values in the actual en the fictional world occurs.

Reading a book is an investment in time and energy. Therefore, the reader is automatically more willing to suspend his disbelief. Putting the book aside means an incomplete experience. But a very strong internal motivator within *The President* is the dictatorial society's atmosphere. The story and the text itself paint a very violent, random, confusing and paranoid picture. The fictional world is so dangerous and intimidating that the reader loses its footing.

The President for example, decided, in the blink of an eye, to punish a man referred to as 'that swine'. This man has been completely brainwashed through the practices of the President. To such a degree that the victim 'did not think, as anyone else would have done, that the punishment was unjust, but on the contrary that it was right he should be beaten to teach him to be less clumsy' (Asturias 35). The man was punished with two hundred lashes for a crime unknown to the reader. When the President learns that the Swine was unable to stand the corporal punishment, the President could not be bothered: 'Well, what of it? Bring the next course!' (Asturias 35, 36).

This society's violent character is not only shown in the President's brutal punishments. Also random violence on the streets is not uncommon: 'And the patrol would fall on some passer-by for a change, search him to the skin and carry him off to prison, even if he was unarmed, as a suspicious character, vagrant, plotter or (as the leader of the patrol said): "Because I don't like his looks"' (Asturias 55). The random violence attributes to a sense of a fear and insecurity.

Outright criminal activity was also part of the daily lives of the President and his fellow governors. The Judge General for example, does not shy away from selling good-looking female prisoners to local brothels (Asturias 131). He also deals in the selling of 'official stamped paper' (Asturias 130). Asturias completely turns things upside down, when he allowed the Judge Advocate to respond to his servant – who will go out in the streets to try to sell the papers: 'Well be careful not let anyone know. People are so malicious' (130).

The reader grows more susceptible and sympathetic to Angel Face's character, since he becomes increasingly relatable due to the unfolding love affair between Angel Face and Camila, and their hopeless predicament. A paradox arises because the reader experiences a conflict between its actual world-values and what it is exposed to within the fictional world. It might seem strange to use Angel Face – a bad man – as an example of how Warning's *As-If* theory is a solidification of Nussbaum's assertion that narrative imagination (Nussbaum 95) can increase understanding in matters of cultural diversity. It is exactly when the reader has to actively start solving paradoxes that the value of fictional texts emerge.

### *Ivanhoe*

Part of the power of *Ivanhoe* originates in the way the novel opened up new possibilities in the imagination of the people of the nineteenth century. Like Warning asserted, and like we've seen in *The President*, fictional texts can influence the reader's stance in the actual world. The readers of *Ivanhoe* in Scott's own time were upset about Rebecca not marrying Ivanhoe. And that while interracial marriage – Rebecca is Jewish – was unheard of in nineteenth century Britain. Rigney writes that the multiple reworkings of *Ivanhoe* can be explained by the reader's dissatisfaction with Scott's ending: a marriage between Ivanhoe and Rowena ('The many afterlives' 216). Scott's contemporary readers made a hierarchical decision between their values in the actual- and fictional world: and they chose the ending impossible in the actual world of that moment.

The public's disappointment with the romance's ending (Duncan xxv) resulted in different rewritings. In these alternative versions Rebecca mostly did marry Ivanhoe (Rigney, 'The many afterlives' 216). The ending of Scott's *Ivanhoe* reveals a gap between the imaginary and the real. People longed for a happy ending for Ivanhoe and Rebecca, but the reality of history prevented this. A marriage between a Jewish woman and a Saxon nobleman was simply beyond historical plausibility at the time. Though Scott's text did get the readers as far as to overlook the controversy of an interracial marriage.

### **Critical thinking**

Imagination can evoke changes in the reader's views. But Warning discusses another interesting characteristic of fictional texts which further distinguishes it from history proper. He writes of Lotman's theory that every fictional text is made up out of two sub-spaces. Between these spaces runs a border which usually cannot be crossed. A text without 'suzhet' is a fictional text in which the border is respected. For Warning a text becomes interesting when at least one actor in the story crosses this border.

## *The President*

As the President's favourite, Angel Face circulates in the sub-space of the ruling class. Even though he stands at the top of social ladder, his life is never safe. Nobody can ever be trusted, least of all the President. At first, Angel Face is portrayed as a faithful and loyal friend of the President, however cracks appear in this picture when Angel Face decides to marry Camila. As the President's right hand he enjoys a certain autonomy, but marrying the daughter of a – in the public opinion – corrupt general is an unforgivable act, especially since the marriage was unannounced and not dedicated to the President.

Just as in *Ivanhoe* we see that a great deal of *The President* evolves around a controversial marriage. The marriage between Angel Face and Camila constitutes Angel Face's step from loyal subject to enemy of the state – as in the President's mind there is no middle ground. The President tries to control the damage by publishing the announcement of Angel Face's marriage in all of the papers: 'with his own name at the head of the sponsors' (Asturias 224). He also gives Angel Face a new assignment: he is to go to America, to turn the North American public opinion in favour of the President (Asturias 258). Only now in this scene does it become clear how much Angel Face actually despises his so-called friend. After an explosive display of anger from the President, Angel Face 'drank his whisky so as to stifle his own indignant outburst; [...] he had just been on the point of hurling himself at his master and ramming his miserable laughter down his throat' (Asturias 222).

In the beginning Angel Face appears in his element with his high position: a confident and arrogant man who is enjoying the control he exerts over the citizens, blinded by power for the President's erratic behaviour and cruelty. But after his fate has been sealed Angel Face's reveals his true colours: 'He felt sick with disgust, yet he still went on behaving like a well-trained, intelligent dog, content with its portion of filth and full of the instinct of self-preservation' (Asturias 222). When the President mentions America, Angel Face starts to allow himself to dream of building a new life with his beloved Camila, abroad. This journey – a way for the President to remove Angel Face from the public spotlight – could very well be Angel Face's only salvation.

Angel Face's decision to marry Camila without consulting the President is the event marking his crossing between two sub-spaces. The description of Angel Face's real feelings towards the President marks Angel Face's mental crossing of the two sub-spaces. From the President's favourite Angel Face falls into disgrace. The subject of the story however, does not consist of Angel Face's fall, but rather his conscious decisions against the President's will.

Lotman's theory imparts that the crossing event between sub-spaces is an 'attack on an established world picture, it is the deviation from an institutionalized normality, it is a revolutionary element within a ruling classification' (Warning 50). The crossing of the border constitutes a 'battle with the construction of the world' (Warning 51). The friction caused by Angel Face is in part what makes *The President* so compelling, and is something which history proper cannot possibly evoke.

## *Ivanhoe*

By making a simple and clear distinction between Saxon and Normans, Scott cleared the way for a unification full of impact. Scott made the opposition and the unification immanent from the start. In the first chapter is already written that the French language 'the language of honour, of chivalry, and even of justice' and the 'more manly and expressive' Anglo-Saxon would happily blend together in 'our present English language' (Scott 27). Ivanhoe and Rowena's marriage forms: 'A pledge of the future peace and harmony between two races which, since that period, have become so completely mingled that distinction wholly invisible' (Scott 515).

The creation of the dichotomy was necessary for Scott to end his story with a happy, united Britain. Saxon Ivanhoe was marrying a Saxon princess; yet the marriage symbolizes a unification of two races. This is possible since Ivanhoe's had crossed the border running sub-spaces. As a Saxon nobleman, Ivanhoe had left his father's home to join King Richard – a Norman – to crusade. This must have been an unimaginable option for the older generation, Ivanhoe however, managed to escape his designated position in society. Ivanhoe's course of action caused a lot of friction in the fictional world, and can be read as an attack on an established world picture' (Warning 50) and a 'battle with the construction of the world' (Warning 51).

Part of *Ivanhoe's* utmost and long-lasting popularity can be explained by the 'tension between the logic of the plot and its emotional economy' (Rigney, 'The many afterlives' 216). The fictional text is difficult to 'consume, appropriate, and forget, it has invited generations of readers to engage creatively with it (Rigney, 'The many afterlives' 216).

By its open character, *Ivanhoe* invited readers to actively engage with the text, something academic texts could never achieve. Authors of fiction are not bound by objectivism, empirical facts and the scientific norm of distanciation, like historians are. A play with style and form are tools a novelist can use to make the reader feel the complexity of reality. Furthermore, literary language differs from political and scientific language because it is open: it does not try to stabilize meaning. At another register, novels can evoke empathic imagining and stimulate critical thinking. The reader's imagination leads to a deep understanding of the text. Just as with defamiliarization, imagination leads to a sense of the world beyond words. The reader fills in the gaps with imagination; actively linking all traces together. Factuality is not important. In the case of *Ivanhoe* and *The President* a truth is conveyed that transcends mere facts. The artistic freedom novelists enjoy allows them to work through complicated issues like cultural differences without creating monolithic versions of the past.

### 3. A cultural reading of *The President* and *Ivanhoe*

Both *Ivanhoe* and *The President* came to be the beginning of a new genre. *Ivanhoe* is seen as the first big historical novel; and *The President* is believed to be the first example of magical realism. The novels owe these prominent positions to the innovative choices that both Scott and Asturias made. The fact that both authors appropriated the heterogeneity of their societies into a fictional text was groundbreaking in their times. This chapter discusses how *The President* and *Ivanhoe* can be seen as products of their times, and pays attention to the question what Scott and Asturias actually represented in their texts.

#### **Heterogeneity in *The President***

Reflecting on Latin American national identities always goes hand in hand with attention for power relations. Due to the persistent cultural heterogeneity in Latin American societies, the state played a crucial role in the construction of national identities. After the independence wars<sup>9</sup> in the early nineteenth century the countries were hardly integrated; and the ruling classes of these new nation-states decided what was worth preserving as national heritage and what not. The idea was to adopt and combine the best elements and traditions of existing ethnic cultures, but in practice this resolution proved to be too good to be true. Selection had to take place. When Spanish was adopted as the national language, for example, many hundred Indian languages lost their vitality and ultimately went extinct (Larrain 9). In time the process of selection and exclusion in name of nationalization proved to be devastating.

In the first half of the twentieth century attention for the consequences of these cultural selections arose. In this period ideas that had already surfaced before 1900 as a result of the Enlightenment, started to affect change in politics, culture, and the social order. Larrain identifies 1900 to 1950 as the period of the crisis of oligarchic modernity and populist modernization (22); the social question becomes a strong tool for the populist regimes that start to replace the oligarchic order. These newly emerging populist regimes incorporated the middle classes into government. It is in this period that Asturias was born, raised and educated; *The President* clearly shows traces of this context.

Estrada Cabrera, the dictator who modeled for The President in *The President* is an example of a newly emerged populist. *The President* also shows the inclusion of the middle class into The President's administration. Secret policeman Lucio Vasquez is an example of a character that is enabled to participate in government, despite his humble decent. The inclusion of the middle classes into government sounds wonderful, but Asturias shows that Guatemalan reality is not as pretty as the populist's promise seems to suggest. The working class men, longing for participation, were considered disposable. After fulfilling or covering up The President's dirty affairs they more often than not end up in trouble themselves. This is also

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<sup>9</sup> The Wars of Independence were fought more or less between 1810 and 1825, with independence completed in most places by 1828 (Swanson 4).

what happened to Vasquez. After being missing for a long time, the reader learns he has been imprisoned under horrible circumstances: 'Lucio Vasquez was [...] completely yellow with jaundice, with his nails and eyeballs the colour of the underside of an ilex leaf. [...] With his hands cramped by the cold, Vasquez spent hour after hour motionless as a worm [...]' (Asturias 207).

Another development in Asturias' day and age was the doubt that arose concerning the unquestioned cultural supremacy of positivism. These cultural changes were characterized by 'a new indigenista kind of consciousness critical of the discrimination against Indian communities, and by a growing social consciousness in relation to the problems of the working class' (Larrain 94). The indigenista movement (which included politicians, novelists, anthropologists, painters and journalists) was committed to 'change the prevalent negative view of the Indians as backward and called for social reform to favour the impoverished Indian communities' (Larrain 98).

Asturias himself is the embodiment of the reappraisal of the values of *mestizaje* and indigenous peoples. Telling the story of a culturally diverse society under a dictator's rule focalized through people from all classes is the very performance of Guatemalan reality. Asturias' fusion of western style story telling and indigenous mythology is another product of its time. The innovative inclusion of Mayan god Tohil into a literary novel is yet another example of this. Guatemalan society forms the background for all the storylines. Simultaneously however, Guatemalan society can be seen as a main character itself. The character 'Guatemalan society' is implicitly provided with characteristics through the various storylines in which whites, blacks, Indians, Ladinos, mestizos and criollos and surface.

Focalized by Niña Fedina, Asturias displays a commonly held view of Ladinos. When she is on her way to warn General Canales and Camila of Camila's upcoming abduction Niña Fedina thinks: 'I'd bet anything there's one of those miserable ladinos at the bottom of all this – bringing his sly tricks to the city from the mountains' (Asturias 86). The novel is filled with casually uttered, racially charged remarks. Niña Fedina's husband, Genaro Rodas, gets arrested for his involvement in Canales' case, and the Judge Advocate fulminates against Rodas: 'It's no use treating that sort well! What they need is the stick and then some more of the stick!' (Asturias 136).

Instead of describing – what an academic text would do – Asturias lets the reader experience what othering feels like. Mind the 'that sort' and 'what they need'. It is not just the words that are offensive; most shocking is the deep racist reality hides behind these words. The Judge Advocate is talking about a class or racial group as a whole: he leaves no room for subtleties; he does not perceive members of a group as individuals.

Asturias shows throughout the entire novel that Guatemalan society is full of groups of people resenting each other. Niña Fedina resents 'the Ladinos from the mountains'. The Judge Advocate resents Niña Fedina's 'sort'. The two women from the brothel who are waiting to be received by the Judge Advocate General reveal how torn the society is: "Listen, just listen to me," one of them was saying; "you just go and tell him I'm not waiting for him any longer. I'm not an Indian, damn him, to be left freezing my arse on this stone seat!" (Asturias 230).

When the persons involved by a given event get described, their origin and place in society are always casually mentioned. When the nameless Indian helping General Canales describes his adversity to the General: ‘...he [the Police Commissioner] and the mayor, a ladino, divided my animals between them...’ (Asturias 186). The Indian, on his turn, is by the narrator referred to and compared to ‘a faithful dog’ (Asturias 184). In *The President* the heterogeneity of Guatemalan society is shown casually, focalized by the various characters. Another example is Camila’s confession of riding astride as a man. At her sickbed a priest asks whether people were present and if a scandal was caused. Camila answers: ‘No, there were only a few Indians’ (Asturias 170). Asturias continuously challenges the reader by letting him experience racism in all its manifestations, instead of literally addressing the issue of racism.

Through the text it becomes apparent that the heterogeneous mark-up of society causes a lot of friction. The different people groups seem to resent each other. Groups that are looked down upon in their turn look down upon even lower classes. The racism, the hatred is oozing. Besides racial differences, language also performs as a separating mechanism. Not all Guatemalan subjects/citizens seem to be able to speak Spanish, the national language. When the Judge Advocate General enters the room where citizens are waiting for an audience he turns to Genaro Rodas, a prisoner, and asks him whether his guard can understand Spanish. The soldier answers: ‘Half understand’ (Asturias 232).

The heterogeneity of Guatemalan society is not solely shown through the eyes of various characters, Asturias’ also gives literal attention to the exploitation of certain groups in society. The stage is for example given to a nameless Indian. The Indian tells about how the authorities confiscated his mules and imprisoned his children. Only the payment of ten thousand pesos would set his ‘young and tender’ children free. Forced into an impossible situation, the Indian did not see a way out except from mortgaging his land. But upon signing, the officials read out something that was not written on the contract; as a result, the Indian ended up selling his land (Asturias 186). The authorities did take the Indian’s money but never set his sons free: ‘One died guarding the frontier; the other was so badly wounded he’d have been better dead’ (Asturias 186). Left without land, children and wife – his wife died of malaria – the Indian was forced to roam the country for food. The sad account of ‘the Indian’ might very well be the only completely emplotted story in the novel; and this break in style makes it therefore stand out even stronger.

*The President* is a product of its time. Asturias was born and raised in a period in which Latin America was debating its identity and its position in the world from new perspectives. It is this new perspective which enabled Asturias to construct such a strong representation of Guatemalan society. The different storylines and character’s statements together – build up out of countless fictional bits and pieces – enabled the representation of a complex reality. *The President* presents us with an alternative, less formative way of dealing with the past by playing with form and style; and by laying claims on the reader’s imagination.

### **Heterogeneity in *Ivanhoe***

*Ivanhoe* is as powerful as *The President* in working through the heterogeneity of the nation and denouncing societal injustice. Scott did not try to defy the constructing force of narrative by form, as Asturias did.

Nevertheless, he created a very powerful text opening up the minds of his readers toward hitherto unimaginable level of acceptance. Although Scott's emphasis on hostility between the Normans and Saxons 125 years after the Norman Conquest could very well be his biggest factual error (Duncan xiv), it does allow Scott to construct a plot full of colourful characters from diverse cultural backgrounds and social class – just like Asturias actively mirrors the Guatemalan actuality of cultural diversity within *The President*.

In *Ivanhoe*, Scott investigates the direct aftermath of the Norman Conquest (Duncan xii); Scott shows that 'Everyone is an alien, no one is a "native", in time all blend into one greater Englishness' (Duncan xiii). Sir Walter Scott's romance *Ivanhoe* is set in the summer of 1193, and revives the period shortly after the battle of Hastings in which the Normans conquered the Saxons. *Ivanhoe* tells the story of a divided England, 'in which Normans and Saxons are pitted against each other in determining the future of England and where Jews [...] are left on the outside' (Rigney, 'The many afterlives' 207). Through his creative recollection of the Middle Ages, Scott addresses nineteenth century issues like nationhood, British identity and cultural diversity.

*Ivanhoe* begins when King Richard I is detained abroad. The situation in ancient England deteriorates: the nobility is preoccupied with enriching themselves at the expense of the lower classes and the tension between the victorious Normans and the humiliated, disowned Saxons rises. The opening scene of the novel reveals that the Saxons too were conquerors, and that they were not the first (Duncan xiii): 'Hundreds of broad-headed, short-stemmed, wide-branched oaks, which had witnessed perhaps the stately march of the Roman soldiery [...]' (Scott 27) and 'A considerable open space, in the midst of this glade, seemed formerly to have been dedicated to the rites of Druidical superstition; for, on the summit of a hillock, so regular as to seem artificial, there still remained part of a circle of rough unhewn stones, of large dimensions' (Scott 28).

The tension between the Normans and Saxons immediately is established when a group of noble Norman travellers ask directions from Gurth and Wamba – two Saxon staff members of the notorious Cedric of Rotherwood. Wamba intentionally gives the wrong directions, in an attempt to avoid contact between the travellers and his easily flammable master. The travel party reaches Cedric's mansion anyway what follows is an interesting meeting between different cultural groups.

The first five chapters of *Ivanhoe* are ingenious; the carefully constructed beginning forms the foundation of the entire novel. Not only is the opposition established between the Normans and Saxons; the dinner party at Cedric's house also subtly hosts a remarkable amount of cultures and classes, necessary to present England as a country 'inhabited by a hotchpotch of clans and societies and castes: Saxon serfs and gentry, Norman barons, monks, outlaws, Jews and Templars' (Duncan xiii). The dinner at Cedric's mansion is a distillation of the cultural origins of England as Scott imagined it to be: a Norman Prior, a French Templar who spent most of his years in the East and his two Saracen black Muslim slaves, a Saxon princess, a Saxon nobleman and his low class servants, a Jew and a Saxon pilgrim who will later turn out to be *Ivanhoe* – the disinherited son of Cedric the Saxon (Scott 63).

Sir Walter Scott invented the cultural opposition between Normans and Saxons in the Middle Ages in order to construct a tale about the origin of the British people in the 1800's, a mixed origin. Something which



became relevant after the turbulence the French Revolution caused. Just as in *The President* we see that *Ivanhoe* can work through a certain reality without containing himself to facts.

### **The power of fictionality**

*Ivanhoe* did not only captivate and influence individual minds. Historians and cultural critics have shown that the Scottish role in the consolidation of an Anglo-British national ideology was a crucial one. Scott's account of the birth of the British nation has become widely accepted by the public, despite Scott's historically incorrect emphasize on the hostility between the Normans and Saxons. *Ivanhoe* is an impressive example of how literature and history interact in the popular imagination. Together they reflect on, and shape, ideological views of the past.

As a Scotsman Scott influenced the 'consolidation of an Anglo-British national ideology' by appropriating English culture into *Ivanhoe* (Duncan xx). In *Reversing the Conquest, History and Conquest in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* Clare A. Simmons retraces the influence Scott has had on the British view on their national past. Simmons uses the Conquest to show how the interaction of the creative and the factual can change the significance of a particular historical event.

It is not clear where Scott's idea originates that two Norman brothers, king Richard and prince John represent respectively Saxon and Norman characteristics. It is because of Scott's meddling with the timeline – he made the division between the Saxons and the Normans established in 1066 last several generations – which allows Scott to suggest the 'the division is not exclusively one of constitutional beliefs identified with race' (Simmons 78). What is clear however, is the impact Scott's version of the past has had on the perception of the past of Scott's contemporaries and later generations: 'The historical novel's re-creation of specific historical moments proves not to be the deviation from "authentic" history that a distinction between fact and fiction might suggest, but a major source of inspiration for later essays and prose history' (Simmons 75).

Scott successfully constructed a powerful myth, which influenced at least two popular historical works: Macaulay's *History of England* (1848) and Thierry's *Histoire de la Conquête de L'Angleterre par les Normandes* (1825). The fact is, that in the beginning of the nineteenth century knowledge of the period after the Conquest was unsystematic and limited. Both British historian Macaulay and French historian Thierry adopted the *Ivanhoe* distinction: Macaulay to express his horror at the possibility of not being English, since 'John's unhappy reign prevented the "calamities" of Englishmen becoming French' (Simmons 90); Thierry used the *Ivanhoe* distinction as the organizing principle of his book. He went as far as to propose that 'the distinction between Saxon and Norman was of paramount importance in understanding the course of English history' (Simmons 91).

Thierry literally says: a 'romance writer, a man of genius, was the first to teach the modern English that their ancestors of the eleventh century were not all utterly defeated and crushed in a single day' (qtd. in Simmons 92). Thierry applauds the fact that Scott added a continued sense of Saxon identity. Scott's version of the Anglo-Norman history made the events in the distant past part of Britain's present (Simmons 92). Simmons writes: 'At a time when divisions between rulers and ruled were presenting fresh problems for

Britain's new industrial society, any theory that seemed to explain how the British nation had become what it now was had relevance' (92).

Although Scott did not go as far as Thierry in developing a 'serious theory of racial characteristics', the distinction between Normans and Saxons as Scott proposed transformed into an icon. Which played a crucial role in historical interpretation and political theorizing onwards. After his victory in the battle of Hastings and the successful oppression of English uprisings, William I became the first Norman king of England. After his conquest he divided properties amongst loyal French noblemen and thus introduced yet another group within English territory. In hindsight, the Norman Conquest would turn out to be the last of the great alien invasions. At the end of the eighteenth century the French Revolution caused a lot of unrest throughout the world. Also the British – with their history of invasions, usurpations and revolutions, and at the beginning of English Imperialism of the nineteenth century – started to question the character of the English constitution.

Scott's Norman-Saxon dichotomy ultimately led to a racial explanation and justification of British Imperialism. The English were wondering: How can a small island be ruling the world?' Simmons describes that Imperialism is based upon two mandates. The mandate of fiction is based upon *Ivanhoe*, and the mandate of science consist of Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest. Scott's *Ivanhoe* ultimately led to the myth of Saxon superiority. The dichotomy between the Saxons and the Normans – embodied by King Richard and Prince John – served for Scott as a structural device, but it became a scientific means of classification for historians.

What, then, were the Saxons and the Normans? Scott himself seems to hint that the only difference between Saxons and Normans is a sense of difference (Simmons 95). Unlike the later interpreters of the *Ivanhoe* distinction, Scott does not present the Saxons as 'we' and the Normans as 'the other' (Simmons 79). It is thus even more remarkable to see how the novel ultimately led to a justification of Imperialism, while on the level of the story and the text Scott works towards appreciating differences without making judgements based on value.

## **Lessons**

Both Scott and Asturias gave the silenced in society a voice. Scott furnished cultural 'others' with inner lives. The Jewish Rebecca for example, was portrayed as a graceful, intelligent character steeped in dignity. This attention for minorities was uncommon in Scott's day and age. His exploration of the ethnically and culturally heterogeneous origin of the English people was a ground-breaking effort. *The President* went a step further and not only gave people with many different cultural backgrounds a voice, but he also incorporated indigenous imagery. This fusion was groundbreaking as well.

Although *The President* and *Ivanhoe* have been published respectively one hundred and two hundred years ago, the similarities between the two novels are not surprising. Both authors lived in a time in which national identity was no longer considered innate. The daily reality of cultural diversity demanded a rethinking of one's past. Scott lived in a society stirred by the French Revolution; and Asturias was part of a rapidly modernizing, post-oligarchic society. Both in Britain and Guatemala intellectuals debated the nation's

origin; cultural diversity; and national identity; and both Scott and Asturias acknowledged and embraced cultural diversity. Instead of ignoring or condemning heterogeneity, both *Ivanhoe* and *The President* work through these complicated issues.

Filling in the gaps of the past is complicated. The past is not something waiting to be discovered, represented, and preserved. On the contrary, historical events need to be retrieved from oblivion. This can never happen without simultaneously constructing the past. Literary novels succeed in figurating the layered complexity of history, despite their lack of factual accuracy. Both *Ivanhoe* and *The President* recorded sites of struggles and gave a voice to the coexistence of the plurality of ways of life. Scott and Asturias provided the reader with an open, permeable version of the past, a version of the past which enables readers to reach an understanding beyond words.

Literary novels succeed in figurating the layered complexity of history in an alternative manner than historians do. The inherent lack of factual accuracy is not a problem. It does not always matter whether a text gets all the facts right, since sometimes it is more important to look at what a text does right here, right now (Rigney, 'All This Happened, More or Less' 20). *Ivanhoe* and *The President* show us that cultural diversity and consequential cultural misunderstanding is a universal problem for societies of all times. Secondly, these literary novels show us that fictional texts are able to enhance understanding of heterogeneity and concepts like the self and the other. Understanding, empathy and critical thinking can be stimulated without imparting a monolithic version of the past.

## Conclusion

*Ivanhoe* and *The President* show that literary texts can move readers in ways academic texts never could. Novelists have techniques at their disposal which blur the lines between truth and fiction, opinion and fact, feeling and knowledge, knowing and imagining. It is the open, permeable nature of literary language and form that distinguishes novels like *Ivanhoe* and *The President* from history proper.

Given the role *Ivanhoe* has played in British imperialist history, endorsing this specific novel as a valuable alternative to history proper might look contradictory. The novel's reception contains a valuable lesson though: it shows us how uncontrollable the interpretation of texts is. Authors cannot control the meaning or impact of their texts; this applies to both novelists and academics. The difference, however, is that novelists can play with the arbitrariness of meaning, while traditional historians believe in the possibility of writing fixed and truthful representations of the past. The academic code of conduct requires ambiguity and openness to be avoided at all cost: The interpretation of an academic text should be controlled as much as possible resulting in monolithic representation of the past.

*The President* successfully tries to convey the chaotic nature of life – in a dictatorship, but also, in a broader sense, the complexity of the world. Asturias shows the reader that the past does not necessarily need to be represented in a coherent narrative. Traditional historians believe they can capture a past event, a time period, or the situation of a single town in a particular decade in an academic text. Asturias shows the impossibility of this intent: not only within the text, but also through the very construction of his novel. Describing 'wie es eigentlich gewesen' is simply impossible.

The most important thing *Ivanhoe* and *The President* do, however, is that they offer the reader a possibility to familiarize oneself with the narrative of the cultural other. To see the unknown other as a person requires an effort. Both *Ivanhoe* and *The President* furnished cultural others (Jews, Indians) with thought and feelings. These groups had hitherto hardly been given inner lives in novels. Scott's readers responded well: suddenly they did no longer see why marriage between Brits and Jews was forbidden. *Ivanhoe* actively builds bridges between people from different cultural backgrounds; *The President* conveys what othering feels like by describing a society in which no bridges exist between citizens with different cultural backgrounds.

Reading a literary novel is a way to (unconsciously) familiarize oneself with otherness in a way history proper never could. Novelists have the freedom to play with the reader's feeling and both *Ivanhoe* and *The President* educate the reader's heart instead of the reader's intellect. Right wing politicians fill citizens' heads and hearts with fear, *The President* and *Ivanhoe* create possibilities.

In uncertain times, societies are more receptive to populists campaigning against 'foreign' elements. Reading literary novels will not solve immigration issues, border conflicts, or cultural misunderstanding between citizens. *The President* and *Ivanhoe* do however raise questions: they allow readers to explore new terrain; they open doors instead of closing them. By appealing to the reader's imagination both Asturias and Scott enable readers to desire before unimaginable intercultural connections. Scott's readers wanted a

marriage between a Jewess and a Saxon; and in *The President* the reader felt empathy for both elite and underdog. That is something we are also in need of in this day and age.

Whereas *Ivanhoe* became an enormous hit, *The President* – especially outside Latin America – did not enjoy a wide readership. It is stating the obvious, but when a novel is not read it cannot exercise its positive characteristics. This is the very source of Nussbaum's resentment towards the trend of nations all over the world cutting away subsidies for (education in) the arts. The arts provide ways to come to terms with societal complexities caused by globalization; and what do politicians do? They shut off the flow of money towards cultural institutions and artists, impeding citizens' access.

Both *Ivanhoe* and *The President*, despite their differences in style and subject succeed in rewriting and re-presenting the past. They thus not only allow us to come closer to a cultural 'other' through imagination, they also redistribute the power of language. If colleges and universities are forced to close down their humanities departments, when libraries have to close their doors, and when institutions aimed at encouraging young people to read books and visit museums are cut off from government funding, where should citizens go for their 'cultural fix'? Where will citizens be trained in critical thinking and empathic imagining? Where will citizens be enabled to see and learn to appreciate the otherness of the other?

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