Félix J. Palma, *The Map of Time* (Scribe, 2011)

Spanish author Félix J. Palma’s novel, *The Map of Time*, translated into English by Nick Caistor, is a very complex, highly postmodern novel that thematises the notion of history and explores how the use of the imagination shapes our lives, and influences the ways in which we address and negotiate the past, the present and the future.

The first part is set in Victorian England, at the end of the nineteenth century. H.G. Wells has just published his famous novel, *The Time Machine*. People believe that it is actually possible, as Wells describes it, to travel through time, to move along the time continuum, to go back to the past to alter it or to travel to the future in order to prevent certain things from happening. Businessman Gilliam Murray, himself a rather unsuccessful writer, yet deeply interested in profit-making, has founded his own company, Murray’s Time Travel, which aims to transform Wells’s imaginative idea of time travelling into reality by offering journeys into the future: ‘*Now you can travel through time, into the fourth dimension ... and journey to the year 2000’* (61). Murray’s time machine is based on the idea that Murray ‘want[s] people to believe in [his] invention without realising it’s an invention’ (299), thus completely blurring the line between reality and imagination.

The novel consists of three seemingly disparate stories that are, however, connected through the idea of time travelling. In the first part, a young man of the upper class, Andrew Harrington, wants to go back seven years in time in order to save his beloved, the Whitechapel prostitute Marie Kelly, from being brutally slaughtered by Jack the Ripper during the Autumn of Terror in 1888. The second part of the novel tells the story of young Claire Haggerty, who believes that ‘the time she lived in was dreary and uninspiring; it bored her to tears’ (184). The prospect of travelling to the future, where she wants to meet the man of her dreams, presents to her the perfect opportunity to escape the rigid conventions of her time. In the last part of the novel, Inspector Colin Garrett from Scotland Yard, who is on the search for an unscrupulous murderer, turns to Murray’s Time Travel to travel to the year 2000 with a ‘warrant signed by the prime minister authorising [him] to arrest the murderer on 20 May 2000, before he can even commit his crime’ (358).

All narrative strands are connected through recurring leitmotifs, such as the time machine, and the idea of being able to travel along the time continuum, as well as by recurring characters, including the author H.G. Wells and the businessman Gilliam Murray. The lives of real historical figures like famous authors H.G. Wells, Henry James and Bram Stoker; John Merrick, the so-called Elephant Man; and the victims of Jack the Ripper, including Liz Stride and Marie Kelly, are interwoven with the stories and lives of fictitious characters like Andrew Harrington and Claire Haggerty. Yet all of them, whether real or fictitious, are all ‘characters swimming like fish in this story’ (108). That means that even the portrayal of H.G. Wells is based upon the author’s imagination, but, because Wells is a recurring and important character in the story, the narrator tells us that he needs to be ‘a little more precise in [his] depiction of him’ (108). The narrator’s comment already gestures towards and subsequently highlights the deliberate breaking down of boundaries between reality
and the freedom of the imagination that is able to influence, change and alter past lives and events that are commonly considered to be history.

Félix J. Palma’s narrative voice serves to foreground the idea that history is in itself an artificial construct. The novel’s omniscient narrator, who ‘possess[es] the ability to see everything, including what no one else can see’ (183) furthermore functions to emphasise the notion that history is selective and dependent upon the perspective one occupies. Thus he tells the reader that he ‘chose to begin at this juncture and not another’ (13), and that it is also his decision who to consider important enough to be included in his tale. For instance, ‘the coachman Barker is not a relevant character in this story’ (13). And, as the narrator further recounts, ‘I ... see and hear everything whether I want to or not, and it is my task to separate the seed from the chaff, to decide which events I consider most important in the tale I have chosen to tell’ (176). His comments highlight the notion that history and the writing of it is not only selective but also subjective and inform the readers that they will read one specific, subjective version of history. Similarly, the idea of ‘the map of time’ (401), which resembles a spider’s web, suggests that the idea of history and time are mere fabrications. Palma’s narrator invites the reader to become part of his fabrication and to experience the idea of travelling through time and space through the use of their imagination. Thus the narrator is able to jump playfully back and forth in time (1888, 1896, 1938, 1984, 2000) and to even correct the wrongdoings of the past. Because, as the characters in the novel’s various strands experience, and as Palma’s fictitious version of H.G. Wells, explains, ‘[i]n the end, that is what time travel gives us, a second chance, the opportunity to go back and do things differently’ (443).

*The Map of Time*, translated beautifully by Nick Caistor, is a complex novel that plays with the reader’s expectations and knowledge of the past. Attracted by postmodernism’s penchant for playfulness that manifests itself in the use of techniques such as self-reflexivity and hybridity, Palma is able to cross spatial, geographical, and temporal borders separating the past from the present and the future, and to create a map of time that spans across times and generations.

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