

JOSÉ DONOSO, TELLING THE TALE AND RECLAIMING THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ARTIST

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Recibido: 16/09/2009 Aceptado: 05/11/2009

Abstract: The Cuban revolution and the military coups in Latin America, among other things, forced Latin American artists committed to addressing the social problems in their countries to consider transforming their social commitment into socialist commitment. This essay shows how Jose Donoso's novel, *Curfew*, rejects this call and marks a new stage in the relationship between socialism and American literature by being socially committed to the actual political situation in Chile without being a socialist text.

Key words: *Curfew*, Socialism, Pinochet, Donoso, social responsibility.

JOSÉ DONOSO, CONTANDO LA HISTORIA Y RECLAMANDO LA RESPONSABILIDAD SOCIAL DEL ARTISTA

Resumen: La Revolución Cubana y los golpes de estado en Latinoamérica, entre otras cosas, obligaron a artistas latinoamericanos comprometidos con el mejoramiento de sus

respectivas sociedades, a meditar sobre la posibilidad de transformar su compromiso social en un compromiso socialista. Este ensayo demuestra como *La desesperanza* de José Donoso rechaza este llamado y marca una nueva etapa en las relaciones entre el socialismo y la literatura americana al ser una novela comprometida con la actualidad política chilena sin convertirse en un texto socialista.

Palabras clave: *La desesperanza*, Pinochet, Donoso, responsabilidad social.

JOSÉ DONOSO, QUI RACONTE L'HISTOIRE ET RÉCLAME LA RESPONSABILITÉ SOCIALE DE L'ARTISTE

Résumé : La Révolution Cubaine et les coups d'état en Amérique Latine, entre autres, ont obligé certains artistes latino-américains qui étaient engagés dans l'amélioration de leurs sociétés respectives, à méditer sur la possibilité de transformer leur engagement social en engagement socialiste. Cet essai démontre de quelle manière *La desesperanza* (*Le désespoir*) de José Donoso rejette cet appel et marque une nouvelle étape dans les relations entre le socialisme et la littérature américaine, du fait qu'il constitue un roman engagé dans l'actualité politique chilienne sans toutefois devenir un texte socialiste.

Mots-clés : *Le désespoir*, Pinochet, Donoso, responsabilité sociale

1. Introduction

“Tell All the Truth but Tell it Slant” is the title of one of Emily Dickinson’s best known poems. To tell all the truth as it pertained to the realm of literature and to tell it slant, indirectly and gracefully was the aspiration of the Chilean novelist Jose Donoso in his youth. The truth however, included the world beyond the margins of the page, an unruly and a dangerous world of politics and power that Donoso gradually came reconcile himself with. During this process Donoso concluded that the artist could be socially responsible and should be so, as an independent and moral force.

2. The Teller

Donoso is an unlikely spokesman for socially responsible literature because for most of his life he was disdainful of it. His early life of comfort and privilege shielded him from the disenfranchisement and peer pressures that led some writers of his generation to become political, often by aligning themselves with the Left. Donoso grew up without the need for politics, and, for the first decade of his literary career, was able to disregard social and political matters in his work.

José Donoso was born in 1924 to an upper-class family in Santiago, Chile. His father was a physician and his mother, Alicia Yáñez, a woman whose surname could be traced back to the elite class of Chile for hundreds of years. He was educated at The Grange, an English-language preparatory school and one of the most exclusive in Santiago. At the age of twenty-one he dropped out of school and traveled to the Chilean pampas where he indulged his adolescent romanticism by living the rustic life and writing in his journal. From there he hitchhiked to Patagonia, but he soon fell ill and had to be rescued by his parents who brought him back to Santiago. Back home he finished high school and enrolled in the University of Chile where he was awarded a fellowship to attend Princeton University.

Early in his career Donoso recognized his privileged position, albeit without much humility, when he distinguished himself from those authors who incorporated their convictions into their work, artists that he said were “importuned by the realities of the world around them, [and felt] constantly obliged to make statements and take stands” (Ainsa, 1994, pág. 2). He did not, like the idealists, believe that art should have a moral and political purpose.

His novels, *Coronation* (1957) and *This Sunday* (1966), are about Chile’s social classes and its social inequalities but there is no didacticism. *Hell Has No Limits* (1965) and *The Obscene Bird of the Night* (1970), a difficult and elaborate meta narrative experiment, are forays that explore the formal limits of the novel. These four early works are about the needs of the author and deliberately not about responding to the concerns of the society at large. This was not fortuitous; Donoso was actively excluding himself from the tradition of Latin American writers as political commentators and activists. He often stated that he was not interested in politics because politics had not “formed a deep impression on [him]” (Mouat, 1992, p. 14).

Ultimately, his ability to keep the turbulent waters of Latin American politics out of his house of fiction came to an end and his priorities, like those of millions of other Chileans, were rearranged when Augusto Pinochet overthrew Salvador Allende in September of 1973. Allende came to power with the support of a coalition of Leftist and socialist parties which approved his narrow plurality over that of Jose Alessandri Rodriguez in 1970.¹ He implemented socialist reforms that were opposed by landowners and by some sectors of the middle class, these, and his friendly relationship with Fidel Castro brought increased opposition by the United States to his government. By the third year of his presidency the combined effect of his economic policies, a drop in the international price of copper, Chile’s primary export, and a concerted effort by the Nixon administration to undermine his government led to a period of hyperinflation that crippled the country. In June of 1973, a colonel

¹ Allende, as a candidate for the Popular Unity Party, won 36.3% of the popular vote. In 1958 Alessandri had defeated Allende with an even smaller percentage, 31.6% of the popular vote.

in command of a tank regiment made an unsuccessful attempt to unseat Allende. In September of that year Pinochet staged a successful coup that overthrew Chile's first democratically elected socialist government. Allende died during the siege of the presidential palace.

The novels that Donoso wrote in response to the coup are different from those that preceded them in that they allow, and in some instances require, political interpretations; these novels are: *A House in the Country* (1978), *The Garden Next Door* (1979), and *Curfew* (1986).² They are not political novels, but as Donoso said of *Curfew*, they are "committed to the actual [political] situation of the country" (Pereira, 1987, p. 63).³ It is through these novels that I will follow the transition that Donoso underwent as he came to redefine his aesthetic and social responsibilities as an artist. The culmination of this process is *Curfew*.

The first step in the transition from spectator to politically committed artist was to give voice to the feelings of indignation and outrage generated by the coup without allowing them to compromise the aesthetic quality of the novel. The tension that resulted from this is evident in *A House in the Country*, a scathing criticism of Pinochet's violent power grab and Donoso's first novelistic essay into Chile's political life. It is roman-a-clef about the circumstances leading up the coup; a ruthless critique communicated through semaphores. Its tone is distant and anonymous so as to offset the emotional impetus that inspired it. The tension in this novel is between form and subject matter. The latter is emotional, traumatic and personal. The former is a postmodern construction, a circular narrative peopled with fantastic characters that does not adhere to conventions of time and space. Its language is stilted, and like Donoso described it, vain, artificial, and pretentious (Mouat, 1992, p.16). The purpose in this is to assure Donoso distance from, and control over his subject. Distance and control allow Donoso to register his dissent while seeming to hold on to his artistic and political independence.

As with the form of the novel, the plot is careful to establish a semblance of objectivity, to avoid any implication that it is a political novel in the traditional sense. It does this by portraying the Left as victims of injustice and violence but not as a defeated opposition. The distinction is subtle and likely to be overlooked if not for the presence of the style, language, and a narrative structure that also point to the tension between the subject matter and the formal elements of the novel.

The novel is in tune with an allusive style that is uniquely Donoso's. His manner of telling was always metaphoric, always slant, not as a means of veiling the truth but as a way of revealing as many of its facets as could be shown. It achieves a

2 *Casa de Campo, El Jardín de al Lado, and La Desesperanza.*

3 They are committed though not as the term has come to be understood, they do not voice the ideology of any party. They address the injustices of the Pinochet regime.

resolution between feeling and form through the use of metaphors and symbols that inveigh against the political conditions in Chile. These, in turn, form an independent multidimensional reality that makes the novel a complete literary creation.

The distance between Donoso and his subject in *A House in the Country* skirts the violent and emotional consequences of the coup, thus making the novel and inadequate example of protest. Years passed and Pinochet remained in power. In the novels that followed Donoso abandoned his dispassionate voice in search of a more intimate and effective form of opposition.

In *The Garden* the actual social and political situation in Chile is processed in personal and emotional terms. In it, Donoso confronts some of the psychological traumas caused by the dictatorship through Julio Mendez, the protagonist and an exiled writer, and his wife Gloria. Gloria, Julio, and their exiled friends are realistic characters who struggle through the pedestrian obstacles of parenthood and the not so common problem of being political exiles. Donoso believed that distilling personal emotions from political action was an indispensable step to developing an effective political opposition and by engaging his characters' emotions directly, rather than refracting them through the prism of literary conventions He achieves in this novel a kind of purging, for himself and for his characters. The relationship between characters and author in this novel is close enough that the protagonist can be considered autobiographical.⁴

However, aside from the purging, *The Garden*, like *A House in the Country*, lacks a clear path that the artist can take in order to oppose the military government. It took seven years for that path to be drawn, seven years during which the Leftist opposition became irrelevant, the junta consolidated its power, and the ideals of the communist sponsored groups become as bankrupt as those of the generals. Donoso's response to both extremes of the political spectrum was *Curfew*, the most optimistic of the three post-coup novels.

The art in *Curfew* is subtle, committed, and organic. It traces a clear path for the artist, one that begins by exorcising the established reactionary positions of the Left. With this novel, Donoso assumes the role of tribune and critic, and like other Latin American artists before him he speaks for those without power. He abandons the circular and self-referential themes of the pre-coup novels and introduces a new kind of socially responsible artist who works as an agent committed to bringing political change.

Curfew's first step toward bringing this political change is to make it abundantly clear that the form of opposition represented by the Left at the time was ineffectual

4 *The Garden* was conceived in Spain, where Donoso chose to remain after Pinochet took power. Donoso's wife, like Gloria, Julio's wife in *The Garden*, was a translator and eventually wrote a novel on a topic that her husband began researching but later discarded.

and second, that what had been accepted as the social and political responsibility of artists, namely, to oppose the Right by submitting to the Communist Party or one of its scions, was both hypocritical and immoral.

The story of Mañungo Vera, the protagonist in *Curfew*, is Donoso's story. The novel is an illustration of one artist's transformation from cynical bystander to committed participant. The fictional narrative is Mañungo's journey toward becoming an active member of the opposition and the second real life story begins when Donoso returns to Chile and decides to write *Curfew*.⁵ If we conflate Mañungo and Donoso into one person, we can see that their individual narratives are chronologically consecutive. In *Curfew*, these narratives appear simultaneously, however; Mañungo returns from exile and evolves into a socially committed artist, unlike his predecessors, and Donoso, who has also returned from exile having become this kind of artist, denounces the government and establishes himself as a socially conscious writer who is critical of the Left and the government.⁶

Curfew marks a new stage in the relationship between socialism and American literature because it is a novel that rejects the notion that social commitment must involve socialist commitment; it is socially committed to the actual political situation in Chile without being a socialist text. It breaks with the standard realist form common to novels of social protest, condemns the Pinochet government, and criticizes the Left while introducing a new kind of committed artist for his generation.⁷

2. The Tale

The book opens with Mañungo as the disillusioned and cynical outsider who returns to Chile and realizes that what used to be his form of opposition is no longer suitable to the present conditions.⁸ Throughout the novel he proceeds to free himself from the conventional political trappings of his past so that he may become an active and effective opponent of the government. Mañungo was a singer once. He dressed up like a guerilla fighter but carried no weapon other than his guitar. He sang, he

5 Mañungo's narrative can be traced back to Julio from *The Garden Next Door*. Julio experienced an identity crisis while in exile in part because he could not bring his art to bear on the political situation in his country.

6 These individual narratives mirror one another and are the basis for the theme of return in the novel. Three artists-- Neruda, Mañungo, and Donoso-- all spend time as exiles but ultimately return to Chile.

7 New for his generation, because in this century Lionel Trilling had already made a case for sincerity over authenticity. See his political novel *The Middle of the Journey*.

8 Orhan Pamuk's novel, *Snow*, works through the needs and duties of individual artists by incorporating many of the plot elements found in *Curfew*. His novel is centered around Ka, a poet who returns from exile, crosses paths with an old girlfriend, finds himself separated from the world that he has known, and experiences a military coup.

did not take action; the narrator reminds us of the difference between an active and a passive resistance, between words and actions when he states that Mañungo had once “triumphed with the word revolution without having participated in it” (MacAdam, 1988, p.112). The protests that Mañungo had participated in were organized by the Left and were ineffective because they were both ritualistic and rhetorical. As a ritual they unburdened those who participated in them but lacked the power to convince anyone of their message; as rhetoric they quickly wore themselves and their participants out. Donoso emphasized this point by showing an event organized by the communist opposition which has a large turnout because it is fueled by indignation. Indignation can serve as a moral position for the short term but could never be a substitute for pragmatic policies.

In order to become an active voice in the opposition though not of the opposition, the artist, both Mañungo and Donoso, must avoid having their voice co-opted by personal feelings and/or by the established opposition groups. They do this by identifying with an ostensibly apolitical constituency, that of nonaligned artists and intellectuals. By choosing to speak as an artist against the Left, Donoso was continuing a break between artists and the Left which had begun at least twenty five years before. A break illustrated in this quote from 1971 by Fidel Castro, who had a low opinion of authors in general, and would go on to tell the Chilean ambassador to Cuba Jorge Edwards, who happened to be a writer: “I would have preferred it a thousand times if Allende, instead of sending us a writer, had sent us a mine worker [as an ambassador]” and “Bourgeois intellectuals no longer interest us, they don’t interest us at all” (Edwards, 1976, p. 230).⁹

Mañungo is depicted as a bourgeois intellectual who, unlike many of his generation, did not adopt any ideological fathers, not Neruda, not Castro, and even though it was the Marxist group Union Popular that helped him start his career in Chile, he refused to join it and responded to their invitation by saying, “I am with Cuba and with the U.P. (Popular Unity Party), with the revolution, but I am very confused. I want to own my doubts so that I can resolve them from within, because for me being an artist means rejecting all labels” (MacAdam, 1988, p. 112). By not choosing a side and rejecting labels of all kinds, Mañungo shifts the focus from the past to the present. He can see the tragic reality around him without having it distorted by abstract visions of a utopian future or hackneyed retellings of past defeats (Chace, 1980, p. 69). He is a dispassionate and objective force in a place ruled by emotions. In this sense

9 As for writers in his country, Castro stated: “The tiny group of bourgeois writers and artists who have done so little and talked so much up to now, without actually creating anything of value will have no business in Cuba anymore” (Edwards, 1976, p. 230). This is ironic because one of the principal Marxist critiques of capitalist societies is that they reduce the individual to a cog, important only insofar as he can help produce things of value.

he is the antithesis to Neruda, who, in supporting men like Stalin, sacrificed morality to his ideological passions.

Disencumbering himself from past modes of protest and disavowing group affiliations are the first steps in preparing the socially responsible artist. Mañungo substitutes them by reconnecting with his past which provides a source of stability for him and an alternative to the Leftist ideology adopted by those around him. His past (and integrity) has its roots in his homeland of Chiloe, an archipelago in southern Chile where social determinations are guided by an accumulated wisdom stored in folklore and myth. With Chiloe, Donoso introduces the concept of non-rational alternative perspectives to a place that has been disillusioned by ideological utopias founded on reason. Chiloe's culture is an oral culture of songs and stories and, in this sense, antithetical to Marxist dialectics and the rhetoric of absolute truths. Mañungo's birthplace is pre-modern and pre-national so that its identity is defined by standards found outside the two pillars of Latin American identity, the state and the Roman Catholic Church which Donoso saw as counterproductive models for shaping a resistance to Pinochet and to creating a more civil political environment in general.

In making a decisive break from the socialist rhetoric of the past, Mañungo, as Donoso noted in an interview is letting go of ideology and thereby "... exposing [himself] to the elements, [because he is] no longer sheltered by revealed truths from the storms of life" (Ainsa, 1994, p. 1). Donoso has Mañungo expose himself to the elements, to the "storms of life" in Santiago by interacting with those who stayed behind after the coup, because he depends on them in order to understand the reality of the situation in which he finds himself. The characters of Lisboa, Lopito, and Judit give him access to the waters of collective experience in Santiago (and expose him to the truths that Donoso speaks of). They are treacherous waters because, by relying on others, Mañungo exposes himself to indignation, guilt, despair, a desire for vengeance, violence, hate, and indifference, emotions that threaten to paralyze him as they have his sources. However dangerous these might be, they are important because they are superior to the government's narrative of what has happened in Chile.

The collective experience is also superior to that of any one individual in that with it, the artist learns to recognize the importance of learning from, and being in solidarity with, a broad group of fellow citizens who are defined not by their beliefs but by their suffering, victimization, and powerlessness. Mañungo (the artist, Mañungo, and Donoso are terms that I use interchangeably as the last two are particular examples of what is proposed for artists in general) is moved by curiosity and a sincere desire to learn and to assimilate the reality from which he had absented himself. He walks uncertainly, and leans on the experiences of others, this demonstrates a form of co-dependence that is antithetical to how characters that represent the leadership of the political Right and Left carry themselves. These individuals are guided by self-righteous unreflective convictions rather than a principled concern for their followers. Unlike

them, Mañungo rejects the shelter offered by revealed truths and remains true to his own moral compass. He is sensitive to those around him and resists claims made on him by agendas, individual or collective, outside the bounds of what will help to improve the daily situation for all.

The pivotal lesson in Mañungo's development occurs at the center of the novel when he is paired with Judit. Judit was tortured by the military and goes out at night in order to find and kill her torturer but is in fact looking to destroy herself because this would free her from her past. She is a source of knowledge and temptation for Mañungo because she, as a result of victimization, torture, constant fear, and impotence has become masochistic, vengeful, pessimistic and self destructive. During their night walk past curfew she brings him close to the violence and danger that are emblematic of the Junta's rule.

The night is dangerous on two levels, an immediate one, both come close to losing their freedom and/or life, and on a psychological level in that Mañungo may, after experiencing it, become like her and others, paralyzed by hate and fear. What he learns from her ultimately leads to his decision to commit himself to the opposition.¹⁰ When morning comes, it signals that our hero has successfully navigated the dangers presented by Judit and the Santiago night. He has not succumbed to the violence nor the despair or vengeance and is closer to achieving an understanding of the situation in Chile.

Whereas Judit's tragic life helps to move Mañungo toward commitment, Lopito's fate seals his decision. Lopito, a failed poet, is another source of knowledge and temptation for Mañungo. He is filled with rage and self hatred and tempts those who care for him to give in to his kind of paralyzing resentment. He harasses Mañungo into buying him a drink and when Mañungo prepares to leave, Lopito attacks by saying, "You're going because I bore you," and then, "No. I know buddy. You're a good guy! Everybody's got something good to say about you. I'm shit. Take off! Why waste your time with a bum like me... with a shitty failure like me" (MacAdam. 1988, p. 92-93).

Lopito's suicide is foreseen. After insulting a policeman who has ridiculed his daughter, he is arrested and forced to perform hard labor as punishment. He has a heart attack while he struggles to level a field by dragging a heavy cylinder over it.¹¹ Rather than responding emotionally and violently to his death Mañungo accepts it as the catalyst that leads him to declare his commitment to the opposition in front of a

10 Their violation of the curfew is also an act of civil disobedience, self determination, and control; a transgression that could mark a step toward self definition for two people searching for an identity

11 The scene is a complement to Matilde's burial (the center of the plot) as a symbol of the end of the Left in that it shows how the socialist ideal of an egalitarian society, which was to be achieved by the leveling of classes, ends in failure. Lopito's forced effort to level the field ends in his death.

crowd of reporters who meet him outside of the precinct. His response, measured and firm in resolve, has been forged by emotional and personal tragedies. He announces that he has decided to stay in Chile and it is at this point that the formation of a new artist is complete, when Mañungo, having resisted the temptation to flee from his past (self pity, hatred violence and self destruction) accepts that he has arrived home. Mañungo is now Donoso, an artist who returns from exile to act against the Pinochet dictatorship with his art.

As an epilogue to Mañungo's declaration Donoso has him and Judit walk off into the sunset with Don Cesar, the double amputee who rules the streets after curfew, at their side. Don Cesar has lost four of his nine children to the government--which he hates as much as the Communist Party--and devotes his life to sabotage and low-level resistance. The scene is that of a dysfunctional family, a couple that is not a couple and a man without legs who moves on a homemade skateboard. It is the antithesis to the parades organized by the government and the Left.

The image does not appear promising but it does present characters prepared for the present. Judit has broken free from her past and has been influenced by Mañungo to focus on the present, Don Cesar has cut his ties with the Left and lives to oppose the government, and Mañungo has declared his intentions to use his fame and talent to change the present conditions in Santiago. The three of them have abandoned their past loyalties, are conscious of who they are, individuals with convictions shared by the committed artist, and we are hopeful for what they can become, independent dissidents who will denounce the abuses of the government on moral grounds, abuses which they have experienced firsthand. With them Donoso reminds us that the artist (and those for whom he sets an example) must be guided by moral principles and not by ideological or personal agendas.

The novel ends with children, those who can renew society without reliving the past. In this case with Marilu, the daughter of Judit and Ramon, an urban guerilla leader who was tortured and killed, Lopita, Lopito's painfully unattractive daughter, and Jean-Paul, Mañungo's son. Jean-Paul is a sensitive and precocious boy who speaks only French. He is both horrified and bored by what his father tries to teach him about Chile and Chiloe.¹² Apart from her unattractive appearance (which symbolizes her father's comeuppance) and innocent enthusiasm, Lopita's role in the novel is to serve as partner for Jean-Paul, with whom she gets along despite the class and language barriers between them. Their friendship is one of the few but very real symbols of hope. They have been spared their parents' traumas and consequently lack the cynicism, resentment, and self-pity that make person-to-person connections next to impossible for the adults in the novel. The renewal represented by them is

12 He is named after Sartre and not Neruda. He is all reason and abstraction, like his mother and his father's opposite.

an inspiration to the artist and those like him to join together. The final scene of the novel suggests that solidarity may be found through the mythical, the folkloric, and the non-rational. It places the children in a Disney-inspired theme park with Fausta and Celedonio, two old leftists. The park has a model of Chile in miniature, an idyllic representation of Chile in which “free citizens live in peace next to snow capped volcanoes” (MacAdam, 1988, p.306), a scale model where the unpleasant things are left out. The model is a symbol of the official reality as presented by the government, the party line, one that is, like the model, artifice and imagination.

As the three children gaze at the representation of Chiloe, an island off Chile’s southern coast, Fausta tells them the myth of the Caleuche, the transforming ship of art. Her narrative captivates them as well as other spectators and thus the artificial reality before them is subverted by the introduction of an alternate reality, one that is found in the oral culture of Chiloe and is being transferred to a new generation. With this tableau, the novel suggests the need for incorporating traditional communities like those of Chiloe, and other marginal cultures and perspectives into a united opposition, and then as a first step toward accommodation and reconciliation. It is a challenge to the stagnant and violent society produced by actual political and social paradigms.

The opposition that Mañungo (and by extension Chiloe) represents is one that counters the ideology of socialism with ideas about how to improve the everyday lives of Chileans and myths that are part of their collective identity. Mañungo also offers the people a sense of morality and hope which is in opposition to the doctrines of historical determinism proposed by the Latin American Left of his time.

Mañungo, with Lopita on his shoulders, has evolved from being the poster boy for the romanticized Left insurgency into a socially conscious artist whose political independence gives him the critical authority that rightly belongs to the outsider, the rebel, the ideal moral critic in any free society. This role once belonged to nineteenth-century Marxists who promoted ideas that challenged the social and political system of their day, but these ideas hardened into ideology and then petrified into dogma. Mañungo’s evolution is a return to ideas and ideals, moral and ethical ideals of justice and humanist ideas of liberty and democracy. All of this takes place in a novel that organizes the fears, traumas, and hopes of a people under military dictatorship into a collage of representative character traits both sophisticated and compelling.

3. The Telling

I said previously that the art in *Curfew* was subtle, committed, and organic by which I was referring to the story it tells, but more importantly, to the manner in which it is told. *Curfew* confronts history, the official history of Pinochet’s time in power

through the story it tells and the means with which it tells it. Its formal elements have a conventional framework of social, economic, and psychological reality that give it the appearance of a realist novel if not for the complex allegorical construction underneath.¹³ Unlike realist novels that abbreviate the facts of real-life events in order to tell a story, *Curfew* focuses on the sublimation of meanings to convey tone. Donoso's criticism of the political Right and Left is illustrated through a variety of formal elements that complement each other and are allusive rather than realist. By doing so, Donoso shows us how his kind of art can also serve a social role and be an alternative to social realism. By making art that is functional and aesthetically rich Donoso, like Mañongo, fulfills his social commitment.¹⁴

The indirect manner through which the novel conveys these conditions to the reader is in effect the message of the novel ("telling it slant"), the protest against injustice by means other than cataloguing torture victims and disappeared citizens. Brutal descriptions favored by realists can desensitize and thus prove ineffective; Donoso's subtle and artful narration sensitizes us to those things that many have stopped seeing and feeling. It is realist fiction in its own sense in that it depicts real life social problems; it is protest and political literature that is not formulaic or derivative and therefore powerful and effective. It does what art should do, show us what is in front of us, be that the saltiness of the sea or the cruelty of governments. First, Donoso structures the novel around two historical figures of the Right and Left, thus placing the novel in the historical-political genre. It is from these figures, Pablo Neruda and Augusto Pinochet, that the novel's many layers of social and political meaning emanate. Their role in creating meaning is indirect, as is their presence in the novel, which is established through allusion. Neruda's presence is suggested by highlighting his absence (which in some respects is the highest form of presence); the novel is set in 1985 and although Neruda died in 1973, he is present through his wife Matilde, his legacy, and his notoriety as a committed artist.¹⁵ Neruda's name stands for the artistic committed Left of his day. The state is responsible for the pervasive sense of terror and anxiety, and because Pinochet's name is synonymous with it,

13 The social and political censorship common to Latin American dictatorships created a communication vacuum that, in some countries, was filled by literature. In these countries, the realm of the imagination became the kingdom of objective reality (Meyer, 1988, p. 130).

14 Novels try to recreate a moment or a series of moments, in this sense the novelist lies somewhere between the poet, who creates images and the historian, who retells events. The poetical devices that Donoso uses emphasize that it is art (poetry) and not history (social realism) that marshals the present criticism of the government. (Paz, 1994, p. 277).

15 Judit Torre forces her daughter to attend Matilde's burial and explains its importance by saying that Matilde has inspired the people's hope of recovering their lost rights and that her death was like the second death of Pablo (Mac Adam, 1988, p. 217)

he too seems to be everywhere. He stands for oppression in Chile, and throughout Latin America, as one more in a long list of military dictators who assumed power by force and maintained it through fear.

Second, Donoso divides the novel into three sections that are meant to be interpreted as representations of the socio-political reality in Chile on a variety of levels. These sections are “Twilight,” “Night,” and “Day.” On a literal level “Twilight” is the time of day during which the novel begins, but it carries with it other connotations. It refers to the troubled years during which the Allende government enacted radical policies that contributed to the country’s destabilization and set the stage for the coup, an event symbolized by “Night.” On another level “Twilight” is about the demise of radical Leftist elements as represented by the recently deceased Matilde Neruda and the realization by the protagonist that he will not be a Pablo Neruda for his generation.

The “Night” section, which is representative of the coup itself, takes place in the streets of Santiago after curfew. It is a lawless place where the unchecked emotions of citizens meet with police violence and the potential for tragedy is ever present. Like the previous section, “Night” also has three levels of meaning. The first is the actual narrative in which Mañungo takes his walk with Judit, the second is the metaphoric night that was the military coup, and the third refers to the conditions to which the population has been subjected by the military government since the coup. These conditions are recreated through indirect means by the presence of a claustrophobic and harried atmosphere that dominates this section of the novel. By highlighting these conditions Donoso holds the government responsible and asserts the rights of Santiago’s citizens.

In the “Morning” section Matilde is buried and with her, the false hopes about a resurgence of the Left, hopes that had inhibited the response of the people during the last twelve years; the burial suggests the possibility of a new beginning.¹⁶ “Morning” also refers to the present as a time for measured optimism, as demonstrated by the three children who appear in the closing scenes. For the protagonist, who awakens to a realization about the role he is to play in society, “Morning” marks a new life.

The three levels of meaning suggested by “Twilight,” “Night,” and “Morning,” (Chile’s distant past, its immediate past, and the fictional present) are linked by Donoso’s ability to sublimate layers of meaning (Pinochet, Neruda etc.) and to create a textured complexity that results in a realistic representation through non-realist means. The novel deliberately lacks any trace of social realism in that it is not deterministic and has no heroic underclass. It is also not an example of socialist realism because its plot is not teleological nor does it aim to further socialism or communism.

16 Lopito’s death in this section also suggests the possibility of unburdening the people of the hatred and resentment that continues to consume many of them.

These three sections are like Chinese boxes, larger versions of the semantic triad that they contain. “Twilight” represents the country’s descent into darkness, “Night” the coup, and “Morning” the uncertain present in which the protagonist finds himself. The settings for the three sections of the novel also suggest meanings beyond their literal role within the plot. The three primary settings are La Chascona, Neruda’s home in Santiago, which has been turned into an impromptu funeral hall for Matilde’s wake; the streets of Santiago immediately before and up to the end of the curfew; and the national cemetery where Matilde is buried.

La Chascona suggests interpretations similar to those implied by “Twilight”. It is a house of mourning and Matilde’s wake is, in a sense, a second wake for her husband. In it the characters of the novel are introduced. A cross section of Santiago’s citizens who we are invited to see as a people brought together by death, the death of an icon and of the spirit of the movement that he spearheaded.

The dangerous streets of Santiago recreate the tone of life immediately after the coup, when enemies of the new government were hunted down. This is framed by the curfew that is in effect, a symbol of the oppressive state presence. This section of the novel lies at the center of the narrative because the meaning of the curfew is central to understanding the relationship between the people and the government. The curfew is based on a long-abused premise that civil liberties must yield to the need for order. In this case, order is defined and redefined by those in power to suit their needs and disorder is made synonymous with dissent so as to provide a justification for the use of military force against it.

The curfew is a symbol of the Pinochet regime and of the people’s constant state of humiliation and suffering because it is an arbitrary restriction that is expanded and prolonged, at times for political reasons and at times for sadistic ones. Its existence discredits the military government because it contradicts its claim to legitimacy, that the army took power because it was the only institution capable of, at a minimum, securing order. This begs the question, why does it, after thirteen years in power, need to rely on an emergency measure like the nighttime curfew? For Chileans it is more than an inconvenience. It is a nightly reminder that they are less than citizens, that they are prisoners in their own country, wards of the state that tells them when they must retire to their homes.

The third main setting in the novel is the cemetery.¹⁷ In this section the main characters, and the masses of citizens who participate in the burial, are framed by the perimeter of the national cemetery and by the line of security forces just beyond its limits. The setting shows us that the fictional present is one in which death and oppression continue to define everyday life for the citizens of Santiago. The

17 The cemetery setting also works as a counterbalance to any overly optimistic readings that could be made of a section titled “Day”.

cemetery, like the streets and La Chascona, helps to recreate the atmosphere of a particular historical time, undermines the official version of life in Santiago, and calls out for change.

Like the genre, setting, and layout of the novel, *Curfew's* narrative voice and language function on a variety of semantic levels. Throughout the three sections the narrative voice is omniscient, familiar with the circumstances in Chile, and critical of the government. It speaks from a single perspective except for some brief instances when it becomes one of the characters. When it does this, it turns into an upper-class or educated character, and never a member of the masses. The narrator is an artist, an intellectual, and Donoso's alter ego. His language is precise, reflective, and almost always grounded in the action.

This is a representative sample (from MacAdam's 1988 translation) in which the narrator reflects on the climate surrounding Mañungo's fall from fame: "Enthusiasm for the Chilean cause, meanwhile, had shifted to other causes: Central America especially, because in Chile the mass murders that made front-page news had ceased, to be replaced by this long, slow pauperization, this chaos, this fear that was not a Massacre of the Innocents to keep the attention of the outside world, this agony that was too deep to move the audience. To be serious for them meant singing. (p. 117)."

4. Conclusion

The narrator's language is the language of Donoso's constituency, educated, cultured, and reserved. (Donoso believed that "a language [was] always an attitude toward life" (Christ, 1980, p. 43) and that "home for a writer [was] not a place, not a language, but a section of a language, a vernacular" (Meyer, 1988, p. 190).) By using this vernacular Donoso affirms that artists and intellectuals can and should take a pragmatic political position and that protest and opposition are not the sole property of the lower classes or of communists.

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