

# DETECTION, DICTATORSHIP AND DEMOCRACY: SANTIAGO DE CHILE IN RAMÓN DÍAZ ETEROVIC'S HEREDIA SERIES

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*This article examines the ways in which Chilean author Ramón Díaz Eterovic uses his Heredia series to cast a critical gaze on contemporary Santiago, looking at the historical events and socio-political forces that have shaped the modern capital. The author is particularly concerned with the legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship and with the lack of progress in achieving justice for victims of human rights violations under successive Concertación governments. Through the subjective consciousness of his detective Díaz Eterovic it also considers the socio-political impact of the neoliberal policies introduced by the military government and continued into the present. Concomitant with this, the article looks at the related issue of contested historical memory and how Díaz Eterovic, by means of the clear ideological stance of his detective, engages in a process of recuperation of the historical memory of the defeated.*

Santiago de Chile is the setting for one of the longest-running Latin American detective series, Ramón Díaz Eterovic's Heredia series, which numbers eleven novels to date, produced between 1987 and 2006, with a twelfth due to be published in 2007.<sup>1</sup> In Heredia, the author has created a melancholic introspective figure who, though he loves Santiago and identifies himself strongly with the run-down sector where he rents an apartment that doubles as his home and office, feels increasingly at odds with the modern world he inhabits. This sense of alienation is, in part, explained by the detective's left-wing ideological background and the unresolved trauma of the military coup of 1973. In the restored democracy of the 1990s he has been unable to reconcile himself to what he sees as the compromised and mediocre society that is the product of this intervention and he is cynical about successive *Concertación* governments' failures adequately to address this legacy.<sup>2</sup>

This article will examine how, from a deliberately marginal position and from a clear ideological standpoint, the detective serves as a disillusioned witness to the various transformations the city has undergone in the last thirty years, the years of dictatorship and transition to democracy, and will show how, in an increasingly disorientating urban environment, memory becomes an anchor and a site of resistance for Heredia.

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*The legacy of military rule*

General Pinochet dominated the political life of the nation in the latter part of the twentieth century after assuming power in the military coup of 11 September 1973 that overthrew Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government. It soon became apparent that there would be no swift restoration of democracy; instead, all political parties were banned or suspended as the military embarked on a project to depoliticize the nation. According to the discourse of the military government, Marxism was a dangerous foreign ideology, inimical to Chile — a cancer that had to be removed from the body politic. According to this logic, communists and socialists were enemies of the state and Pinochet authorized a savage policy of repression, forced exile, and execution in order to eradicate all left-wing ideology.

In 1980 the General called a plebiscite in order to legitimate his position and introduce a new Constitution that confirmed him as President until 1989. In October 1988 another plebiscite was held to see if voters wished him to continue in power for a further eight-year term. Pinochet lost this time, though polling 42% of the vote, and elections were held in December 1989 following negotiations between the main opposition parties and the military. In 1990 the General handed power over to the democratically-elected President Patricio Aylwin, having been the longest-serving Chilean head of state since the colonial era. Yet Pinochet remained a powerful figure, continuing as Head of the Armed Forces until 1998, the year that for many marks the end of the period of transition to democracy (Cavallo Castro: 1998).<sup>3</sup>

Due to the continued influence of the former dictator and the measures introduced in the 1980 constitution — special status for the Armed Forces, the designation of a significant number of unelected life senators, new election rules that disproportionately favoured the Right — the 1990s have been described as a period of tutelary or limited democracy (Drake and Jaksic 2000: 16–19; Moulián 1997: 49–52). Pinochet had ensured that it would be difficult to use the courts or parliament to attack the military for human rights violations by appointing a number of new judges sympathetic to his regime before handing over power. Yet another obstacle was the 1978 Law of Amnesty which covered most crimes committed by the military prior to that date. Consequently, even when those responsible for murder and human rights violations could be identified, it was almost impossible to pursue them in the courts. The democratic governments of the 1990s were not indifferent to the legacy of human rights violations but, given the near impossibility of achieving justice, official discourse focused on the politics of the possible and concentrated on the present and the future rather than on the past.<sup>4</sup>

During his seventeen years in power, General Pinochet had also embarked on a mission to transform the economic life of the nation, committing Chile — at great social cost — to a policy of neoliberalism which grappled with profound problems in the early years and was perceived to have been effective by the time of the transition. The *Concertación* also acknowledged the success of the military's economic policies and continued pursuing these, though introducing a range of social measures designed to protect the poorer sectors of society. However, despite reduced levels of poverty, at the end of the 1990s Chile still had one of the most unequal levels of income distribution in the world (Meller 2000: 41–64). None the less, the democratic governments have maintained an official discourse of triumph with regard to the economic successes of the nation, positing Chile as a model for other countries to emulate (Moulián 1997: 98).

The commitment to neoliberal policies was part of the military bid to depoliticize the nation, and propose a new project of modernity and a new cultural model that would replace ideological debate and engagement in the public arena with a passion for consumerism and a cult of individual material success (Avelar 2000: 66). In the current period of globalization and late capitalism, politics has ceased to be about competing ideologies. Neoliberalism has triumphed to the extent that it has come to be considered the only appropriate social model and the natural order of things. In this context the very idea of change ‘toma la forma de un sueño imposible de unos ilusos desconectados de la realidad, minoritarios y arcaicos’ (Moulián 1997: 59).

### *Post-dictatorship cultural production*

Although the past may be denied relevance or validity in official discourse, it refuses to go away. A concern with the past and with the recuperation of historical memory linked to the years of Popular Unity government and the period of dictatorship is one of the dominant themes of Chilean literature from the 1990s. In her examination of post-Dictatorship cultural production, Nelly Richard speaks of how memory is linked to absence in a process that ‘anuda la memoria individual y colectiva a las figuras de la ausencia, de la pérdida, de la supresión, del desaparecimiento. Figuras rodeadas todas ellas por las sombras de un duelo en suspenso’ (1998: 35). This also implies ‘la muerte simbólica de la fuerza movilizadora de una historicidad social que ya no es recuperable en su dimensión utópica’. The loss is not just that of the actual victims, but also of the ideals of a generation of left-wing radicals who believed in the Chilean experiment with socialism and who had a utopian vision of a better society that they were engaged in building.

Tomás Moulián argues that contemporary Chile engages in a wilful dismissal of the past because it does not want to face up to its origins: ‘En la matriz de una dictadura terrorista devenida dictadura constitucional se formó el Chile actual, obsesionado por el olvido de esos orígenes’ (1997: 18). For Idelber Avelar, memory allows the defeated to contest the hegemonic discourse of the current neoliberal orthodoxy:

Mientras que la política actualmente hegemónica en América Latina se esfuerza por ‘poner un punto final’ a ‘la fijación en el pasado’, la tradición de los que fueron derrotados para que el mercado de hoy pudiera instalarse no puede darse el lujo de vivir en el olvido. La literatura postdictatorial atestiguaría, entonces, esta voluntad de reminiscencia, llamando la atención del presente a todo lo que no se logró en el pasado, recordando al presente su condición de producto de una catástrofe anterior, del pasado entendido como catástrofe. (2000: 286)

In light of this institutional impulse towards an imposed amnesia, the exercise of memory becomes a necessary gesture of resistance, and a reaffirmation of the past.

### *The early Heredia novels*

Ramón Díaz Eterovic was first drawn to the crime genre in the mid-1980s because he saw the potential to adapt the North American hard-boiled model to provide a vehicle that would permit him to examine the experience of dictatorship in a new way. The

earliest novels in the series, written in the final years of military rule, represent an ongoing negotiation with genre tradition and readily display their debt to North American and Spanish and Argentine crime writers. This is particularly apparent in the second book, which is peppered with quotations from a wide range of crime writers. Unsurprisingly, the cases undertaken by the detective in the early books concern human rights violations and crimes of state committed under the military government. In the 1990s, Díaz Eterovic came to be identified with other writers of the *neopolicial*, a politically-inflected Latin American variant of the hard-boiled.

The very title of the first novel in the series, *La ciudad está triste* (1987) establishes the city as a protagonist in its own right, but without actually naming it as Santiago. The detective Heredia is intimately linked to the city from the outset as the first-person narrative opens with the words 'Pensaba en la tristeza de la ciudad' (p. 9). Heredia goes on to mention 'las calles donde acostumbro a caminar ... reconociendo que, como la ciudad, estoy solo'. In this first case, Heredia is hired to locate the missing student Beatriz Rojas, and a number of conventional possibilities are proposed; she may have run away because of unhappiness in her home environment, or she may have run off with a boyfriend. Gradually a more sinister picture emerges of an oppressed city in which an agency referred to only as the *Servicios de Seguridad* kidnaps, tortures, and murders political dissidents, and Heredia learns that Beatriz has suffered this fate. The lack of specificity with regard to setting means that the novel can be read as reflecting the oppressive political environment of any Southern Cone dictatorship. None the less, anyone familiar with the reality of Chile in 1987 will easily identify the context as that of contemporary Santiago.

In the second novel *Solo en la oscuridad* (1992), a title taken from Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, the setting is explicitly identified as Santiago and Díaz Eterovic names specific places, streets, cafes, and bars, grounding the series in an urban environment familiar to the majority of his readers. For the first time Heredia describes in detail the sector in which he lives, near the Mapocho River and the Central Market. Much of the action of the novel is set in Buenos Aires as Heredia uncovers a drugs-smuggling and money-laundering ring run by secret police agents operating between the Argentine and Chilean capitals. Yet, despite showing some interest in Buenos Aires as a city, Heredia very soon falls prey to homesickness and wishes to return to his familiar haunts. As he himself puts it, 'Necesitaba de mis viejas cosas cotidianas, del aire enrarecido de Santiago y el murmullo barroso de Río Mapocho' (p. 119). The relationship between the detective and his urban environment is further underscored as Heredia describes his occupation: 'Corretear por los callejones es lo único que sé hacer. No es gran cosa. No es agradable ni le dan a uno las llaves de la ciudad, pero es un oficio como cualquier otro' (p. 11). In addition to this, the detective is drawn to the seedier side of city life, its run-down sectors, and more dangerous streets, its strip joints and low-life bars — 'el espacio del deterioro' (García-Corales and Pino 2002: 91).

In this novel we also find the detective's first ruminations on the history and the changing face of the city. When his investigation takes him into his childhood neighbourhood he describes how it used to be an elegant sector occupied by the wealthy, but, as the city grew, they preferred to 'alejarse del bullicio del centro y trepar hacia los cerros en busca de aire puro, aislamiento y mayor seguridad' (p. 36). They have formed new residential suburbs in the foothills of the Andes. Now the elegant mansions are shadows of their former selves, divided up and rented out to provincial students and poor civil servants in a run-down city

centre, which later in the series will begin to be transformed according to the vision of modernity embraced by successive democratic governments.

In the course of the series, Santiago becomes as much a site of memory as it is an actual physical space, and the detective uncomfortably negotiates this dual space of the lived present and the remembered past. This process begins in *Nadie sabe más que los muertos* (1993), which is set in 1989. Heredia describes 'la ciudad con su aparente rostro nuevo, maquillado con carteles de propaganda política, consignas y declaraciones de libertad' (p. 45), which is gearing up for the Presidential elections after the excitement of the plebiscite of 5 October 1988.

This novel concentrates on the legacy of human rights violations in the context of the limitations imposed on the new democracy by the military government. Heredia is hired to discover the whereabouts of a child born to a couple detained and executed by the military. Unlike the first novels, with their vague references to Security Services, this one contains many concrete references to real organizations and events. For instance, in discussions about the case there are references to the 1978 Law of Amnesty, the DINA and its successor the CNI — the intelligence services responsible for most cases of political torture and murder since 1973 — the *Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos*, a body set up by relatives of the disappeared, and the Vicariate of Solidarity, a very active and important Catholic human rights agency. There is mention of high-profile cases such as the kidnap and murder of trade-union activist Tucapel Jiménez Alfaro, and Vicariate of Solidarity workers Javier Rojas and Manuel Guerrero.

In 1993, when this novel was published, the issue of memory and forgetting had come centre stage in political life. A number of histories of the military era, most notably *La historia oculta del régimen militar* (Cavallo Castro et al. 1990) and *Chile, la memoria prohibida* (Ahumada et al. 1989), and numerous journalistic and testimonial works, had documented in detail crimes of state (Verdugo 1989 and 1990; García Villegas 1990a), and the discovery of clandestine burial sites (García Villegas 1990b). Patricio Aylwin had established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission which produced an important report on its findings (1991). Yet, it was already apparent that the guilty would not be brought to justice. General Pinochet himself proposed that the only solution to the problem of human rights violations was forgetting. In this context memory becomes a site of resistance, a point made forcibly in the novel by the grandmother of the stolen child who insists that 'Olvidar es hacerse cómplice de esos crímenes' (p. 39).

In this novel, Heredia encounters two former friends from opposite sides of the political spectrum, Demetrio Gutiérrez and Reinaldo Silva. Gutiérrez was an Allende supporter in the heady days of the early 1970s and was forced into exile in 1976, and has only recently returned to try to make a new life for himself in a city he barely recognizes. In contrast, Silva works in the Ministry of Defence and was involved in trials against opponents of the military. He has all the trappings of material success but finally admits that the compromises made to achieve this may have been too high. Although Heredia and Gutiérrez were on the losing side in the great ideological battle that dominated the twentieth century, being a loser in this context takes on a heroic quality since they, at least, once believed in the possibility of a utopia. None the less, there is little real consolation in this position when the very validity of the project Heredia believed in has been dismissed and consigned to the dustbin of history.

At the end of the novel, as supporters of the *Concertación* parties take to the street and his friend Anselmo repeats their slogan 'Vuelve la alegría y la libertad' (p. 196), Heredia counters: 'Nada es igual. Es otra la época y faltan muchos nombres que no se pueden olvidar.' This is a key moment in the series, marking a preoccupation with the past and a lost idealism that becomes an increasingly dominant feature of the later novels.

*Post-Dictatorship Santiago in the later Heredia novels*

Díaz Eterovic himself sees a clear difference between the early novels and the rest of the series, beginning with *Ángeles y solitarios*.<sup>5</sup> The novel opens with what has now become a fairly typical feature of the series, a reference to Heredia's street, Calle Aillavilú. He refers to the window, 'a través de la cual acostumbro vigilar los movimientos del barrio, el ir y venir de su gente por aquellos rincones que resisten cargados de memoria y pequeñas miserias cotidianas' (p. 13). Part of this burden may be a downturn in the economy that has forced the detective to take on a second job as a taxi driver, but he is drawn into an investigation of the illegal arms trade when a former lover is found dead in a hotel in Santiago. Heredia learns how the Chilean arms industry developed under the dictatorship and the novel offers a brief account of the geopolitical concerns that lay behind this — primarily border disputes with Argentina that brought both countries close to war. Although Chile is now under democratic rule, Heredia is still cynical because, as far as he can see, little has changed, the Transition is merely an ongoing negotiation where the powerful cede considerably less than the powerless, and the new democracy is still heavily influenced by the military.

In this novel, Díaz Eterovic begins to focus more on Heredia's own past. The catalyst for this narrative development is the introduction of Griseta Ordóñez who is to be a long-standing, on-off love interest in the series from this point on. Griseta is a twenty-year-old student whose brother Juan was a friend of the detective. Heredia aided Juan in escaping from a military ambush when the latter was involved in clandestine resistance in the mid-1970s, and Juan subsequently died for his beliefs fighting in Nicaragua. Griseta questions what these left-wing idealists actually achieved since, 'Hoy en día a nadie interesan las consignas ni los discursos. La gente quiere MacDonalds y deudas en los malls' (p. 87). This disaffection is shared by the detective and explains his nostalgia for an earlier time when, 'la gente soñaba sin pensar en cálculos económicos y metáforas sobre jaguares y triunfos de cartón piedra' (p. 21). The criticism of neoliberalism is readily apparent.

We learn more about this previous era in *El ojo del alma* (2001), which is set in 1999. Here the detective is asked to look into the disappearance of Andrés Traverso, a prominent Communist Party member. He eventually learns that the missing Traverso had all along been an agent for the US intelligence services and that he has now staged his own disappearance to try to break free of their demands.

More interestingly, in terms of the development of Heredia's character, the case leads to a series of reunions with other law students with whom he studied at the time of the coup, but has not seen in almost twenty years. Heredia's reminiscence brings us back to the early 1970s, the years of Popular Unity government and the immediate aftermath of the military coup. Overnight the lives of the students were completely transformed and the vision they had for their future ceased to be viable. Once again, there is a juxtaposition of the present with a remembered past that underlines the contrast between the earlier youthful,

enthusiastic idealists and their present middle-aged selves. Most of them have achieved material success but resent the lack of choice imposed on them by the intervention of the military in civilian life. Looking at an old photograph, Heredia observes that it reveals 'la vida de ese grupo de estudiantes retratados antes de que perdieran la inocencia y que cada cual a su modo comenzara a urdir sus propias traiciones en contra del amor, las utopías y de la vida' (pp. 246–47). The detective feels a profound sense of wrongness and frustration. He believes that nothing is as it should have been, that none of those who lived through this period have become the people they might otherwise have been.

The author has spoken of how the events of 1973 and a profound sense of disillusionment marked his entire generation: 'A la fecha del golpe, teníamos 16 o 17 años y un proyecto de vida muy diferente. Hubo que pararse otros 17 años ... deshojando las cosas que uno soñó hacer o las formas en que uno soñó vivir' (Díaz Eterovic 1992b). He has also described the effect this experience had on the writers of this generation, unable to pen the grand narratives that characterized the Boom, lacking the enthusiasm and optimism of the Chilean *novísimos* of the years just prior to the coup, and unable to be truly post-modern because, although disillusioned, they still believe that literature can take an ethical stance (García-Corales 1995: 195).

In Heredia, in keeping with genre tradition, Díaz Eterovic has created a figure who acts according to his own set of ethics and who places himself firmly on the side of the marginalized, including those who fail to meet the competitive standards of the modern neoliberal Santiago. Returning to Griseta's observation that people only want credit in the malls, Heredia too acknowledges that consumerism has come to dominate Chilean society and he sees evidence of this everywhere. In *Los siete hijos de Simenon*, Heredia suffers a physical sense of dizziness and disorientation when he enters a shopping mall, which he describes as 'un templo dedicado al culto de una fe extraña' (p. 238) and in which he is 'un ser sin nombre ni tarjetas de créditos que profanaba los pisos embaldosados'. Meanwhile, the informal sector adds to the colour and noise of the Santiago streets and transport systems. In this same novel Heredia is walking along the Alameda and stops 'en varios quioscos que ofrecían casetes adulterados, calcetines chinos, poleras con la imagen del Che, cortauñas, y una infinidad de chucherías a precios ínfimos' (p. 17). In *El ojo del alma* Heredia describes a bus journey during which, 'En el plazo de media hora escuché las ofertas de los vendedores de helados, lápices, rompecabezas para niños, llaveros, agendas, muñecos de peluche y calcetines' (p. 136). Scenes such as these are common in all the novels and so too are references to those who live on the very margins of society, the chronic drunks, low-rent prostitutes, beggars, and the homeless.

In *El color de la piel* (2003) Heredia delves deeper into the world of the homeless and marginalized when he undertakes to discover the whereabouts of a Peruvian immigrant. He is shocked to find immigrants living in absolute squalor, but he observes that:

La ciudad está llena de gente que sobrevive en un rincón, marginada, sin ilusiones, bestializados. Basta recorrer el centro de Santiago para ver a los vagos que amanecen junto a las grandes puertas del Banco del Estado, en los alrededores de las estaciones del Metro, a los pies de los monumentos de los héroes, a la luz de las vitrinas de las grandes cadenas comerciales. (p. 53)

Heredia is becoming increasingly introspective and nostalgic as the city changes around him day by day. Each novel charts the demolition of old shops and residences in his own

sector, which make way for new apartment blocks, and the detective is troubled by the parallel development of two distinct Santiagos — that of the wealthy and that of the poor. Where previous flights from the city centre led the wealthy to areas such as Las Condes, now small enclaves are appearing throughout the city — modern enclosed condominiums with private security guards. Social divisions remain visible in this move towards urban renewal. Heredia's own sector is under siege, with new apartment blocks appearing in the streets bordering Calle Aillavilú:

El mundo cambiaba de prisa y yo me resistía a cambiar con él [...] Un nuevo siglo se acercaba y me preguntaba por mi lugar en una ciudad dividida entre barrios custodiados y luminosos, y otros arrabaleros, de cuyos rincones salía cada mañana una caravana de seres resignados. Era un extraño en mis propias calles y recorrerlas era un ejercicio cada vez más exigente para la memoria. (2000: 224)

In the most recent novels in the series, this feeling of disorientation and stubborn refusal to conform continue to characterize Heredia's response to contemporary Santiago in the new millennium, and to what is still a divided and unequal society.

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The death of General Augusto Pinochet in December 2006 marked an important symbolic moment in the history of Chile, but also served as a visible reminder of the widely divergent views different sectors of the population hold about his legacy, and of the degree of passion his figure still inspires among his most ardent supporters and opponents alike. Although the vast majority of Chileans simply continued going about their daily business — it was nearly Christmas and they had their shopping to do — sizeable minorities gathered in different parts of the city to express their feelings. While in Providencia thousands of mourners queued to pay their final respects to the man they considered the saviour and father of the modern nation, at the same time, in the city centre, thousands of opponents gathered at Plaza Italia and marched along the Alameda to mark the death of a ruthless tyrant, and there were violent demonstrations in the poorer suburbs that had endured the brunt of military repression. Pinochet's opponents lamented the fact that his death cheated them of the last chance to hold him accountable for his crimes against the thousands of victims of the military government.

These radically different responses to the same event illustrate in a vivid and timely manner that, although these different groups lived through the same era, they do not have a shared past. In this contested arena, Díaz Eterovic's series unapologetically privileges the memory of the vanquished. Even fifteen years after the restoration of democracy, Heredia cannot let go of the past, and a concern about the legacy of military rule continues to inform the series for the simple reason that no adequate closure has been achieved. The detective's increasing sense of alienation and disorientation is a product of the violent termination of the utopian project of the early 1970s and of an uncomfortable awareness of the triumph of the hegemony of neoliberalism. He resists from a position of marginality that represents, uncomfortably, both a form of degraded heroism and a reminder of his status as one of the defeated.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the more general observations about the development of the series in this article are based on personal interviews with the author conducted in 1994, 1999 and in December 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The *Concertación* is made up of a number of parties, the Socialists and Christian Democrats being the largest of these.

<sup>3</sup> After stepping down as head of the Armed Forces, General Pinochet took up a position as life senator in the Upper House of the Chilean parliament. However, after his detention in London in this same year, his legal defence team's argument that he was unfit to stand trial had the corollary effect of making him ineligible to resume his Senate position on his return to Chile.

<sup>4</sup> Patricio Aylwin, in addition to setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, also authorized reparations for families of the victims of the dictatorship (Leen: 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Although *Nunca enamores a un forastero* (1999) was the fifth novel published, Díaz Eterovic numbers it among the first four because of when it was written and because of the period in which it is set. Therefore, *Ángeles y solitarios*, although published earlier, should be considered fifth in the series.

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