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DISCUSSION

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**LIMITS AND HORIZONS OF THE  
CONTEMPORARY NOVEL\***

**with Jose Donoso\*\*  
and David Gallagher\*\*\***

During the months of July and August 1990, a series of literary debates were organised at the Municipal Theatre in Santiago as part of the programme “Arts in the Capital”: on each of these occasions a figure relevant to the arts in Chile and a national political or cultural figure were invited to participate.

In the debate which is reproduced here (in a limited version), entitled “Limits and Horizons of the Contemporary Novel”, the participants were Jose Donoso, winner of the National Prize for Literature (1990) and David Gallagher, essayist and literary critic. The exchange, which took the form of a question and answer session, was presided over by the poet and professor of literature, Federico Schopf.

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\* Literary debate that took place at the Municipal Theatre in Santiago on the 8th of August 1990. This version edited by M. Teresa Miranda.

\*\* Writer. Winner of the National Prize for Literature (1990). “Este domingo”, “El obsceno pájaro de la noche”, “La desesperanza” and “Taratuta” are just several among his numerous works. He has also been awarded the Cervantes prize, the Principe de Asturias prize and, more recently, the Mondello prize from Italy.

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Federico Schopf:

I should like to begin by asking you about the supposed decline of the contemporary novel. It has been said that fiction was in crisis, that there was no future development: when the boom in the Latin-American novel appeared, it was then said that this was saving the genre throughout the world. What do you think - is the novel in crisis?.

Jose Donoso:

It's a theme that has been under discussion for some time. I think that one of the first times it was brought up was in an essay by H.G. Wells in 1902, where he spoke about the total decline of the novel. But the same thing is announced almost every year and each time more and more novels arrive at the publishers: some of them are very boring, obviously, and they are edited and then re-edited. It is obvious that there is a public sufficiently keen on the genre, although maybe less so in Chile, which is a country of poets and essayists.

David Gallagher:

I agree. In countries which have always produced good writers, like England, France and Russia, the situation is the same as in Latin America - the novel is thriving.

The novel has had multiple crises throughout History. There was one when the boom in Latin American fiction appeared. Novelists had begun to write news reports like Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood". And just at this moment, supposedly, along came the saving grace of the Latin American novel.

In general, the intention of writers like Truman Capote to meddle in other fields like, report writing, journalism, documentation, and in several cases, psycho-analysis, has always made very little sense. The reverse is better, i.e. that other disciplines move towards the novel for examples and symbols. The essay which Pepe quotes from H.G. Wells, reminds me of one from Virginia Woolf in which she says that it was rightly necessary to move away from the type of novel that H.G. Wells was writing, where the idea was that the reader, having finished it, would make out a cheque for whatever charity or institution H.G. Wells was promoting in the book. Probably

the novel written for utilitarian purposes has always been in crisis, because the novel doesn't need to have a purpose outside itself and this is a theme that we can touch on more deeply later on.

Jose Donoso

Every novel lives from periods of crises and decline. When all is said and done, *Don Quixote* is a novel that comes from a crisis, the crisis in writing on chivalry, and out of this first crisis *Don Quixote* appears. Then I can think of Laurence Sterne, really very contemporary (it seems to have been written yesterday) who says "in this chapter I am not going to put anything because I have nothing to say" and leaves two blank pages. This happened in the 18th century.

Federico Schopf

Which is the corresponding crisis for *Taratuta*, a novel that evidently makes itself responsible for a genre that at present has no easily determinable channels ?.

Jose Donoso

You want me to say that it's in Post-modernism.....well, crises end when their significance is clearly seen and I still can't say what is the absolute significance of a novel like *Taratua*. I am just about getting used to it myself: I wrote it only a short time ago. But I suppose it corresponds to another of those crises in which the form of the novel is taken apart and restructured.

For example, Virginia Woolf, in "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" says that nowadays no one can write novels like Arnold Bennett who was the God of the novel in his time. After that there's Mrs. Brown, and I think to myself, this lady may be capable of reading to Bennett but she will never be capable of reading me to me. She makes the novel out to be something elitist, as something terribly conscious of its structure, where the idea of structure is almost as important as the material itself. Virginia Wolf renewed the English novel a lot. For example, one thing that is extremely curious, she introduced the full stop and the comma. You can make innova-

tions in the novel simply through doing things like using full stops and commas which is what she does.

Federico Schopf

Sorry but I would like to return to the theme. If the novel is living a crisis, it would therefore be identical to what has been reflected in a continuous succession of crises running from “El Quijote” through “Tristram Shandy”, “Viaje sentimental” and “Madame Bovary” to “Taratuta” - and I would like to go back a little to this novel, which to my mind at least and I imagine to others as well, raises a series of problems as regards structure.....

David Gallagher

I should like to say something very briefly about Taratuta and about the sense of your question. Pepe, probably because of modesty, is not going to answer it directly. It seems to me that Taratuta demonstrates the great strength of the novel in relation to other types of writing. For example it has some parts focusing on the Bolsheviks, exiled in Paris, and some angles on Lenin which to me are much more interesting than any biography I've read about him. Taratuta must be looked at from another viewpoint, because it contains, consciously or not, a type of narrative (another example of which could be “Flaubert's Parrot”) which consists of looking at history's trifles or re-classifying a little the life of a real historical person. Now I believe that a good novel of this type can end up being much more interesting than its sources, possibly because while the historian feels the need to accumulate as much data as possible, and above all, data which another historian has not seen, the novelist can select his data arbitrarily, with the simple aim of always being interesting. Because of this I think that this type of novel, the “post-modern”, or however we want to call it, is a revindication of the strength of the novel.

Federico Schopf

What is it that allows us to keep calling as novels works so different, at first sight at least, as those of Balzac and Joyce, for example, or those of Jose Donoso himself ?. I am remembering at the moment a phrase of Borges which perhaps could serve as a sign for a certain path. On one occasion

when he was asked why he wasn't writing novels, he replied that he was too idle to do so. He preferred to imagine that he had already written them and to sum them up in five minutes in other stories. Is the novel still in this state of being summarised ?. What has to happen for a novel to be a novel: is the plot in the summary, in the atmosphere ?.

Jose Donoso

I remember that when I was at University in the United States, I decided to go with a friend and spend the summer in Mexico. We bought a car for fifty dollars (in the days when one could do those things) and we went on our trip. I was reading "War and Peace", two enormous volumes: on the other hand, he was reading a book (which was also very thick), called "A summary of the 100 best novels in the World". While I was reading the details in "War and Peace" this gentleman, who had read the summary of "War and Peace", was telling me what was going to happen...and spoilt everything.

Federico Schopf

What was he reading then?. Something distinct from a novel. But what is it that separates these works?. For me that's a problem.

David Gallagher

You are asking for a definition of the novel.

Federico Schopf

No. Rather a hint of some characteristics that would allow us to say "Here we are in front of a novel"- a description, the feeling of whether the person is writing a novel or not. In my opinion Taratuta is a novel; however maybe for someone who reads Alexandre Dumas it isn't a novel, but a series of introductions by a writer who is making himself responsible for some characters and who, at the end, doesn't know what to do with them.....and out of that comes the narrative.

Jose Donoso

In previous centuries the story teller was never embarrassed and he used to go out onto the stage and say “ Right. Now it’s my turn” and

“ Now I’m going to hand over to such and such a person”. The author was in charge of all the stage directions, as it were. Today however things flow, even though the novelist shouldn’t do everything. The novelist should go halfway and the reader should meet him the other half by using his imagination.

Taratuta is a short novel, which can be read at one sitting (entertaining enough, I should imagine, for those who didn’t write it). But why is Taratuta a novel ?. I know when the material that I have and in which I am working has to be “nouvelle” and when it has to be a novel. There is material which I would never say belongs to a novel and other material which I would never say is “nouvelle”. It’s like Father Christmas’ sack, where more and more things get put in and where the sack begins to take on more and more shapes, keeps changing shape. The novel has the ability to absorb similar shapes. In a story, on the other hand you need a synthesis which is the opposite to what happens in a novel.

I was telling David recently that I have just finished a book by Jane Austen where there is a conversation between two English gentlemen about the weather which goes on at length for six pages and it’s the most entertaining out.....the marvellous thing about these people is that they are not talking about anything important but only trivialities. However these trivialities are so well plotted, so well focused on the personalities themselves, that they tell us much more about them, and about the atmosphere that they are describing, than a treatise or anything that isn’t a novel. The only way that I can get through to this world is through the novel.

Federico Schopf

You give the impression that you can have novels that can switch themselves off but not stories. In a way Proust’s novel doesn’t have an ending. In the same way neither does Musil’s book, “The Man without Qualities”, a book switched off by the life of the author himself inasmuch as he died and presumably left it unfinished. But unfinished stories, to my knowledge, don’t exist. It seems that the format demands a certain rounding off, a certain closing down.

Jose Donoso

Sometimes writers' widows publish unfinished stories that they've come across in a drawer.

David Gallagher

There are also stories that are only descriptions of situations and, as such, are somewhat unfinished, in the same way that there are others that are aimed at trivia, at details. Many of Chekhov's stories are inconclusive. Vignettes and portraits are genres that also exist in stories. To be realistic, this idea of definitions is always very difficult. There are many types of novels: intellectual ones with great dialogue where ideas are debated, like those by Dostoevsky or Thomas Mann: novels in slow motion, without a plot, like those by Virginia Woolf: novels where there is a search for language going on, an intention to go further than just using normal words or normal word order, which could be the case of "Ulysses" by James Joyce or more obviously "Finnegans Wake". Then there's the opposite, novels which try to map out life and the world, where language practically disappears, like what happens in the novels of Tolstoy.

George Steiner once said that maybe it's in Tolstoy where the gap between the object and the written word most disappears. We really "see" Natasha's ball, we "see" the oak tree that Prince Andrew is seeing. It doesn't interfere with the style, there is no flaunting of style or searching for novelties in language.

Finally there are many types of novels. Maybe the excessive emphasis on one of these searches ends in producing a crisis, because of the exhaustion it provokes and this produces a reaction.

Federico Schopf

Maybe a partial crisis in the genre to do with language.

David Gallagher

A crisis in one aspect of the genre that has become "the genre" at a particular moment.

Federico Schopf

In this sense you would say that the novel continues to exist in spite of it's being mixed with reporting, with evidence and other generic forms of that type. "Taratuta" is an important novel from that point of view because it is constructed in counterpoint to what we would call "reality". Certainly there is a fictitious narrator but he shows himself to his readers as the real author and he relates himself to reality- trying to find the person who financed Lenin and ending up meeting him again in a suburb of Buenos Aires: he shows no interest in being identified as a fictitious narrator, set apart from the real author. Although it is a very wide theme, I should like to ask Pepe about the relationship between fiction and reality, social environment and the novel. What is the novel to do with reality ?.

Jose Donoso

If we think about the Latin American prose novel, it was recently called a "total" novel . In a way I think that this is what has led to a crisis, the novel that wants to say everything, the idea of a book acting like a foundation stone. Nevertheless it appears to me that this claim no longer exists, it's finished. There are critics that say the Latin American novel is great in that it seems like the Russian novel i.e. inasmuch as there is a search for identity in it.....and may be there is this search in the Latin American novel.

Nearly almost all the great Latin American novels have been written outside their countries of origin: "La ciudad y los perros" in Paris, "Rayuela" also in Paris, "Tres tristes tigres" in Belgium, the books of Roa Bastos in Buenos Aires and in Paris. As a result no one takes it for granted that the reality that one has lived and that one is trying to put in a novel must be taken in its entirety and transferred to the book. That is to say that everything has a certain breaking off or finishing point. The great creative Latin American writers have been men who have perceived this affiliation with the Russian novel, such as the desire to destroy one form to construct another from the pieces of the former, but using them in their manner.

Federico Schopf

What would have created a crisis, therefore, is the "total" claim to understand the essence of reality and its difference.

Jose Donoso

I would imagine so. It's one of the things that we are losing, although not completely, because there's still Fernando del Paso, who wrote some enormous books with that idea in mind, some of which were very good, outstanding even, but generally rather sad.

Federico Schopf

I suppose that examples of these "total" novels are "Cien años de soledad" and "Rayuela", the last presenting itself as such despite there being a failure of understanding of the word "total".

David, what do you think about this moment of crisis in the "total" novel and the solutions that are being visualised?.

David Gallagher

Many of those who have written "total" novels, like Vargas Llosa's "Conversacion en la Catedral" or "La guerra del fin del mundo" have reacted to this and, in my opinion, entered the field very successfully. Vargas Llosa, for example, with "Historia de Mayta" apparently a lesser work, but one which says almost more to me than "Conversacion en la Catedral", with a detailed angle on politics, like a novel written by Conrad. In the same way, Pepe's "El jardin del lado" seems to me to represent a milestone in the sense that it's a novel that goes back to the themes of private life, about particular people that live in a specific place and have very specific concerns....I don't know if there was, consciously or not, like the Russian writers, a fundamental mission to complete which was completed. Maybe Pepe can tell us something about that.

Jose Donoso

I've never felt a mission about anything. On the contrary, when I write a book I do it without knowing how it will turn out at the end, I write it in search of an end, in search of what's going to happen to me at the end. The end is an encounter, it's not something that's planned at the beginning. I think a good novel has to end with a series of questions, not a statement.

Federico Schopf

On the same theme, where would you include “Casa de Campo” ?. Is it a novel that intends to be “total”, a novel which explores passages, a novel which ends in questions or answers ?.

Jose Donoso

It’s certainly a novel that ends with enough questions.

Federico Schopf

Was there an intention there to comprehend reality in a “total” way ?. Did you write it from the point of view that you believe that one can comprehend the idea of “totality” ?.

Jose Donoso

Yes, certainly. There is a moment of great ambition in Latin American novelists when they want to be men of the Eighteenth century, to be Encyclopedists. Novelists don’t conform to the old habit of telling a story. So instead of being tellers of tales, they become pamphleteers, convinced that they have to impose a thesis, a theme. But, more than that, one of the crises that the novel is suffering from is that it’s in the process of becoming something else. Suddenly it’s not enough for the novel to be only a novel, it has to be an essay, it has to be poetry, it has to be a critique. Then it has to have other ingredients that have never been known before within the genre. But this is not only happening to the novel: I believe that all the work of contemporary arts is towards this goal. Painting becomes sculpture, sculpture becomes painting. Everything in the same pot. The same things changed into many different things. I think I tried to do this in “Taratuta”: there are historical figures in there who I had to study a lot about. Lenin wasn’t a person I knew too well, so I began to know him and wanted to save him from all those all those terrible statues of him that there are in the Soviet Union and all those busts and heroic things and see him, as it were, naked.

Federico Schopf

I should like to go on a little about the idea of crisis, because this novel, as Jose Donoso has said, wants to be something else: for example an essay. That is to say to introduce another literary species within the existing one. If we look at criticism- maybe not nationally perhaps- we see that critics also want to be witnesses, they want to be chroniclers, they want to expound more about the subjectivity of criticism than about the texts they're supposed to be commenting on. In a way, at this time or in this era of post-modernism there is a crisis which is preventing the novelist from knowing what it is he has to do within a certain framework and which doesn't let the critic carry out his traditional job of talking about a text without concentrating on his own person. I think, in this sense, that we are in a different era from those that came immediately before. In Latin America, for example, different to the euphoria of the boom period where roles seemed to be clearly defined.

David Gallagher

Everything is rather cyclical. I have got the impression that it isn't that there is anything new, or that something has never happened before. I'm thinking about a novel like "War and Peace", a book that contains a great mixture of genres and which also includes a treatise about History.

Jose Donoso

Like "Anna Karenina" has one about Agriculture.

David Gallagher

Exactly. If we go further back and think of Don Quixote, for example, it is impossible to find a novel with more of a mixture of genres. There are novels within the novel, there's pastiche, there are tracts about what a novel is and all this idea of self-reflection which is supposed to be new in the novel is also found in Don Quixote. Therefore I think things happen in stages. A new stage arises out of boredom or a reaction to something before. However the variables are not limitless and because of this we are nowhere near a break off point where everything that is happening in "post-modernism" is absolutely new.

What there is is a flaw in literary theory which confirms what you say: a flaw very typical of the last twenty or thirty years which is to transplant theories valid for one genre or discipline to another. It is very clear to me what post-modernism means in architectural terms- maybe because I'm not an architect. I understand that there is a reaction against "functional" buildings, against the idea of pure architecture, where beauty lies in being functional. So they are beginning to give priority to decoration or at least introducing or inserting it. However when we try and apply this to literature, we find, curiously enough, that all the writers, above all the poets who are defined as modern, are, at the end of the day, post- modern: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound for example should be post-modernists.

Federico Schopf

So who are the modernists ?.

David Gallagher

The modernists would be a caricature of what should be modernism. If we read post-modernist texts on art or on the novel we find a type of theory of what was supposedly modernism- taken from theories on art in the modernist era and based very little on empirical descriptions of paintings which somebody once painted. According to this theory modernism pretends to reduce art and literature to their proper functions. For example, painting is reduced to the materials used and these conform to an autonomous space. I don't know if such a painting exists. It may have been imagined in some essay by Kandinski, but it's not in his paintings. As far as Literature is concerned I am afraid that the term "modernism" contrasted with "post-modernism" simply does not work. I have read a critic who says that the overturning of modernism to post-modernism in literature is the overturning of a text which tries to be autonomous and bears no reference to anything aside from itself to one that tries to do the same but can't achieve it. But we are now entering Byzantine territory.

Federico Schopf

I have the impression- and this is a question I would like to direct at Jose Donoso as a person who creates- that in the Latin Ameri-

can world, or at least in Chile, there is actually an enormous lack of perceptive criticism in judging creative work in the field of the novel, the short story, poetry and even essays. Young writers complain about the absence of this type of criticism in public, in the press. They don't say this but I would like to say it- in other countries, for example in England or the United States, George Steiner writes in journals and magazines, the same as Alexander Coleman and Umberto Eco. Eco, the best known to us here, writes in *El Espresso* and also in magazines. What is happening to the writer and the critic both inside and outside our world ?. What are we missing ?. What could we ask from them ?.

Jose Donoso

There is no authorised voice, the only voice that's missing is one that teaches. Twenty or thirty years ago the situation in this country was very different: in many ways inferior and in others superior. As far as magazines go it was definitely better. In those days it wasn't a question of reading *El Mercurio* or *Fortin Mapocho*, there was a very extensive range of beliefs and political loyalties in each one of the newspapers-*La Opinion*, *El Mercurio*, *La Nacion* etcetra. There used to be around thirty dailies and we used to send the books that we wrote to all of them because we knew that all of them would publish something. however the writer knew that he had an audience, he knew that there were people that used to read the critics a lot and used to form their criteria according to different points of view, not like today when everything is black or white. Amongst these many points of view writers felt secure that they were writing for a public which would partially receive or criticise all or each one individually according to the line they took. All these distinct lines also forged an opinion through which you could know yourself a little better; they acted like a mirror.

Nowadays I don't think that we can speak of criticism in general. On one side there is the newspaper critic, the review as the English would say, and on the other learned and philosophical criticism which has less of an audience but which is maybe much more important. It occurs to me that writers in Chile haven't really gone through the left hand tunnel, which is academic criticism, and which has blinded many for generations and which is playing havoc in American universities today.

Federico Schopf

I asked this question because I can see a very sharp contrast between the situation in Chile, with its lack of a critical horizon which measures or acts as an intermediary between the author and the reception of his work and the lucky situation of a saturation which exists in other countries and where, curiously enough, many critics and researchers have transformed themselves into novelists, such as Julia Kristeva, for example, or Phillippe Sollers.

I would like to ask David for his opinion, about the problem of criticism in Chile and in the European and North American universities, adding perhaps that academic criticism everywhere in the world is in crisis, or at least its prestige is diminishing.

David Gallagher

As Pepe was saying and you underlined, here there are various different things. I believe that in American universities, like in English ones and others an academic career no longer depends on the amount of publications you have. There is an inflation of theories and useless dissertations which have very little to do with literature but, on the contrary, with the imperatives of a profession on the one hand and, in the best of cases, with philosophy. Much of this criticism is especially theoretical and consists of good handling of professional jargon. It can be used to write about any text whatever, the phone book for example: in other words you don't need to insert a novel. Anything that's written, a letter, an official communication would do just as well.

Best not to generalise. Obviously there are some very valuable studies, although I insist that they are nearer epistemology, ontology or philosophy in general than proper literature. Literature tends to convert itself into prime material for another end. What is missing in academic criticism, in my judgement, is the intelligent reading of a book: a perceptive, analytical and creative reading in the old manner.

Another thing is journalistic criticism. There is a large amount in France, England and the United States of an excellent quality. In Chile there isn't. In London five or six very sophisticated newspapers are published every Sunday, with five or six pages dedicated to literary criticism. They are intelligent answers to books which have appeared during the week. Now I think plurality in this case is very important. I don't like the idea of having

one authoritarian, hegemonic figure. It seems to me that Chile has had a lot of this. There is a problem of monopolies- not great conspiracies but certainly monopolies are a fact-because the media is small as Pepe says, and what there is leaves much to be desired. In Chile the first risk that a writer runs is that six months pass before anything about his book appears in the press. In other countries there is the sound practice that criticism appears on the same day as publication: for a newspaper it's a disgrace not to publish a criticism on the same day or on the nearest Sunday to when the book was launched. Even worse is not counting on an intelligent interpretation. Much of what is written in Chile under the name of criticism is disqualification or disproportionate praise, a lot of the time for non-literary reasons. It's hardly a good reply to the work in question.

Federico Schopf

It seems to me symptomatic that from the 18th century onwards there has been so little development in critical activity as far as literature written in the Spanish language is concerned. I should like to ask Pepe if he believes that the novelist or the poet needs the existence of criticism or if it's a completely supplementary phenomenon, lateral or unnecessary.

Jose Donoso

It is very important that criticism is about an interpretation of the book which is published and that the interpretation is a valid one. When there is criticism in Chile, the first thing that happens is that they recount the whole story of the book, so nobody wants to buy it. I would say that we are lacking a critical publication, but not like the old type of thing that Chilean literary reviews are used to having. There isn't a review here like "Babel", a new one which is edited in Buenos Aires and which really picks out what has been published in literature this week, this month.

Federico Schopf

Since both themes appear to be joined together in the discussion on the boom in Latin American novels I should like to ask you, can we talk about a Latin American novel in the same way that we can talk about an

English novel ?. In other words is there something specific about the Hispano- American novel and secondly does a Hispano- American identity exist?.

Jose Donoso

Something which shouldn't be used is the term boom. It's an invented term, totally alien, which doesn't mean anything in itself but refers to an entwining of the moments when various important novels were published. When all is said and done, "Rayuela", "La ciudad y los perros" and the great novels of this type were published in the course of three years: this is something objective, something real. That is how I look at it, the entwining of all these publications and it has no more value than that, to designate something-object A. Afterwards everything dispersed, everyone campaigned for themselves. I believe that the novel today is going everywhere which the novel should do in civilised countries. No one is its teacher, neither Church nor State nor anyone. I have the feeling - I don't know if you share it with me- that it's in these later examples of the great novel that the person, the human being is valued.

David Gallagher

Certainly there is a type of somersault, an interest in the individual. There are new Spanish novels, which even if they're not very good, are trying to capture daily life in Madrid. At bottom, it seems to be a reaction to the "total" novel of before.

As far as the Latin American novel goes it is tremendously difficult to agree as to what is Latin America. These definitions are very difficult. Recently we were speaking about the Russian novel, and, Heavens!, we can have writers as different as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky or Chekhov and Turgenev. Each novelist writes from a combination of very individual things that he has read and lived. Obviously there are coincidences between Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortazar, Jose Donoso and Carlos Fuentes because they are contemporaries, they are living at the same moment and they're probably reading the same writers who, generally speaking, are not Latin American. As Pepe says in his book "Historia personal del boom", they are reading a similar "hodge podge".

All of a sudden there are national characteristics in the novel. Let us take, for example, one resource of the novel which consists of exploring the gap that appears sometimes between what the person is thinking and what

he is saying. In a lot of countries' fiction, the gap is there because a person wants to lie, wants to present an image that bears no relation to reality. It occurs to me that only in the English novel is it there rather because of timidity. I am thinking of those interminable scenes between Dorothea Casaubon and Will Ladislaw in that great novel "Middlemarch" by George Eliot. Both love each other but don't say it during what are years of reticence. This timidity, this modesty or fear of saying what one thinks are characteristics that occur to me as being very English.

And it is at that moment that I say "This is an English novel". But afterwards thousands of other things demolish my hypothesis, like the intellectuality there is in George Eliot, which is not very English at all.

Federico Schopf

In relation to the problem between fiction and reality, I have a lot of questions here from the public. One of them refers to the novels "Casa de campo", "El jardin del lado" and "La desesperanza" by Jose Donoso and asks whether or not they are directly related to historical events that took place in Chile and how you bring fiction and reality together there.

Jose Donoso

The person who asks the question has obviously read the three novels and must have an idea of the answer. I don't really know what is reality very well, every day there is something that makes me contradict this knowledge of reality, this pseudo knowledge. One has said until one is tired of it that Marx is dead, Christ is dead and I don't feel too good in this world..and I believe that to be true. But the novel is such a precise thing, so modest, so caught up in daily life, so at war with the external and so personal that only when it arrives with a sign that says "personalised" is it entertaining, is it interesting. When a novel doesn't have this inimitable voice it isn't worth it. The novel's inimitable voice is what we are searching for in it.

Federico Schopf

There is a question from the public for David Gallagher. Do you not think that the novelists of the distant past, like Rabelais, Cervantes, Sterne

and Gogol, apart from being more entertaining are infinitely more daring in form, style, technique and even content than the post-modern novelists ?.

David Gallagher

The list is quite diverse but very loaded in the sense that they are all good writers. I don't think that literature or art progresses, that it gets better because people experiment more or because there are new goals to conquer. But neither do I think it goes backwards which according to this question is what it's doing. We could also draw up a list of very boring writers from the past who were not daring, the same as we could draw up a list of very daring ones today.

Federico Schopf

There wouldn't be either progress or retrogression, only a heterogeneous development.

David Gallagher

Exactly. Before I questioned if post-modernist writers really existed: the expression seemed to me to be very overcomplicated when used in relation to literature. Manuel Puig, who in my judgement is a great writer, began writing long before the term post-modernist was used and yet is considered by some to be a post-modernist. What is the point of comparing Manuel Puig with Gogol ?. We have had so much more time to read Gogol than Puig who is a contemporary writer. The question seems to me to be tremendously interesting but not at all easy to answer, because the idea of daring must also be put into context. It's extremely difficult to read Cervantes or Sterne within their own context as we tend to give them a modern interpretation. As Borges proved in his marvellous short story "Pierre Menaud, autor de El Quijote", you can't read something without seeing it through a prism of the years accumulated after it was written. I don't have an answer, and, more than anything I don't like comparing writers. I remember that Cabrera Infante once said "We, as writers, are not like melons that can be weighed in the market". It is not easy to say which writer is better than another.

Federico Schopf

We mustn't forget the welcome that Flaubert received in his time for "Madame Bovary" when the writer of the moment was Georges Feydeau, the author of "Fanny", and not Flaubert; the critics were saying "This talks about our society, while Flaubert's book doesn't", and posterity has proved them wrong. I.e. it wasn't as entertaining then as it is now. Pepe, we continue with questions relating to the problems between fiction and reality. "Are the people in the novels that you've written in the last sixteen years, up to "La Desesperanza", real types or archetypes?". And I should like to add, is Mañungo Vera- the character in "La Desesperanza" who returns to Chile after many years and who tries in some way to reproduce a world which no longer existed- one of them?.

Jose donoso

I have always tried not to use archetypes, prototypes or anything similar and, of course, I'm interested in analysing human beings and particular human relationships. When someone says that only crippled, incomplete people live in the upmarket areas, for example, it seems to me so extravagant to make such an all embracing statement. It's one of the reasons why I don't like Octavio Paz, this search for abstract solutions outside the novel. In a way, question, answer, reflection and antithesis have to be within the body of the novel and have to stay there. The contemporary novelist is a good judge of his own writing. Contemporary literature does not exist, I would say, without there being a writer's judgement on his characters in the context in which they're placed. It's a contemporary look: I wouldn't dare to say more.

Federico Schopf

We have a person asking about the valid morality or maybe invalid morality, and pornography in the contemporary novel.

David Gallagher

These are terms which are very difficult to be precise about in novels. In a certain sense this is what we were saying about daring. Daring tends to be

measured in relation to the context in which a writer or a person is operating. In general, because of this, we find the debates over pornography that took place in the past tremendously strange today. It was really extraordinary that for so many years, almost all over the world, a book like D.H. Lawrence's "Lady Chatterley's Lover" was banned, when it is now read on a massive scale, taught in colleges and nobody calls attention to it. Pepe wrote a book "La Marquesita de Loria" which I don't know if you can call pornographic or not, but which, nevertheless, had a lot of charm and humour. Even though I'm a great admirer of Mario Vargas Llosa and think that his novels are almost all magnificent, "El elogio de la madastra" seemed to me to be bad: a book that was almost programmed with the duty of finding out limits. Finally pornography depends on the context, I believe that would be my reply.

Federico Schopf

Out of all of the questions that we have to select, the last one was chosen by Jose Donoso. Do sufficient novelists exist today ?.

Jose Donoso

I believe that Chileans have this mania or lack of character that likes novels to be useful, that they must say something about reality. They think that a novel is serious if it tells us how Europeans dress, how work used to be on the saltpetre pampa, how the old country estates were- that's what they like. And this, which isn't a representation of reality but only a reproduction of it, is what is produced so that people stay happy with what there is.

There are sufficient novelists in the world and an infinite number of ways to choose but not in Chile. However it seems to me that over the past four months the lid has been taken off things in our country, that is to say that there were a number of novelists who were silent and who are now beginning to express themselves. I imagine there will be an explosion in the next few years. If they're good or bad, the critics of the day will say.

David Gallagher

I should like to add that in countries like the U.S.A., France or England where the publishing houses receive around a hundred novels a

week, there is a real growth in novelists as there is in criticism. But we know that the end of the day only a few will last, because human beings, definitely, have a limited time for reading. Obviously time is a filter. In front of this and so much competence, the first intention of sending a manuscript to a publisher's is an act of heroism on the part of the writer.

*Translated by: John Bell*