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The Song Of The Distant Root

E. Subercaseaux

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Introduction

Born in 1945, Elizabeth Subercaseaux is part of what she has frequently called the first generation of Chilean women to put an end to her country's long tradition of relegating their role to the home and the kitchen. When she speaks of the women of her generation as survivors she alludes to the fact that they had to balance two roles: that of housewife and office professional. Many of her peers found journalism to be an attractive outlet for their talents and their commitment to social change. And it was particularly during the seventies and eighties of the Pinochet regime that journalists such as Raquel Correa, Patricia Verdugo, Delia Vergara, Malú Sierra, and Subercaseaux played an important role in bringing to the attention of the Chilean public the human rights violations committed by the regime and in mobilizing public opinion toward an eventual rejection of the dictator in the national plebescite that was held in 1988.

Subercaseaux's journalistic career began in 1975 with her founding of *El Peque*, a magazine for children. Later she wrote for *Cosas* and then *Apsi*, one of the principal publications of the

political opposition during the harshest years of the dictatorship. Today she is a regular contributor to *Vanidades Continental* (Miami), *Caras* (Chile) and *Sábado* (*El Mercurio*, Chile). On a less frequent basis her articles also continue to appear in *Cuadernos Cervantes* (Madrid). Her early journalistic endeavors have produced three important books dealing with Chile's military regime: "Del lado de acá (Seen from this Side, 1982), "Los generales de regimen" (The Generals of the Regime,1983), and with Raquel Correa, "Ego Sum Pinochet" (1989), an extended series of interviews with the General which became an instant best-seller in her native country. In addition to these publications of a more journalistic nature, she is also an accomplished short story writer and novelist and joins an impressive group of Chilean women writers whose careers blossomed in the eighties and nineties that includes Isabel Allende, Diamela Eltit, Ana María del Río, Pía Barros and Marcela Serrano. Subercaseaux's literary career began officially in 1986 with the publication of "Silendra", a nouvelle, followed in 1988 by her novel "El canto de la raiz lejana" (The Song of the Distant Root). Since May of 1990 she has lived in the United States, and the intervening years have been ones of intense literary and journalistic activity. During this period she has published four novels: "El general azul" (The Blue General, 1992), "Matrimonio a la chilena" (Marriage Chilean Style, 1997), "Una semana de octubre" (A Week in October, 1999), and "La rebelión de las nanas" (The Rebellion of the Nannies, 2000).

The first of these explores a theme common in Latin American letters, the figure of the dictator and the exercise of absolute power, while the second parodies Chile's idiosyncratic approach to matrimony in the absence of legalized divorce."A Week in October" is the story of a woman who, faced with imminent

death and a marriage devoid of passion, seeks refuge in a shortlived affair that perhaps may have been a creation of her own imagination and need to be loved. In "The Rebellion of the Nannies" Subercaseaux has written a highly political novel that explores the values of a society still tethered to the vestiges of its former dictatorship and its own exaggerated class consciousness as it enters a new millennium.

Subercaseaux's journalistic activity also constitutes a series of humorous yet profound reflections on the problems confronted by women as they make their way through a male-dominated landscape. These widely read accounts include "La comezon de ser mujer" (The Yearning to Be a Woman, 1994), "Las diez cosas que una mujer en Chile no debe hacer jamás" (The Ten Things a Woman in Chile Should Never Do, 1995), and "Eva en el mundo de los jaguares" (Eve in the World of the Jaguars, 1998). In 1998 she also published Gabriel Valdés: Señales de historia (Gabriel Valdés: Signs From History), an historical memoir of one of Chile's leading political figures filtered through the entertaining and flowing prose of Subercaseaux's journalistic pen.

Elizabeth Subecaseaux spent her formative years near Cauquenes, Chile at her grandparents' hacienda-style home called Santa Clara. For her and her siblings it was a magical place of unlimited spaces and horizons with some new discovery to be made around every corner they explored. Far from the hustle and bustle of Santiago, Chile's capital city, she found herself surrounded by the endless sea of her grandfather's vineyards, the warmth of the workers and their families, the sounds of barnyard animals, the smell of eucalyptus leaves as the wind rustled through the treetops, and the echoes of a nearby stream as it wended its way through Santa Clara's terraced hills. Today there is very little left of the Santa Clara of her youth. Gone are the

vineyards. The land, expropriated by President Eduardo Frei's government in the mid-sixties under his administration's agrarian reform program, is now a sea of pine trees whose toxicity has gradually eroded the fertility of the once productive soil. Left standing is the large family house inhabited now by only the ghosts of the past. It is this past, this space preserved in memory that Subercaseaux frequently resurrects to different degrees in her narrative, but principally in "Silendra" and "El canto de la raiz lejana" (The Song of the Distant Root).

The Song of the Distant Root recounts Salustio's yearning for a place where a sense of solidarity and community prevails, unlike the locale in which he and his family live enveloped by solitude and the overwhelming presence of death. One night he dreams of such a place, called Tapihue, a village filled with the sounds and laughter of neighbors and their children. On the following day he sets out to find Tapihue in the hope of establishing a new community in which human beings might interact outside the confines of a devastating past. While his wife Clarisa perceives his efforts as nothing more that a misguided obsession that can end only in death, Salustio believes that Tapihue represents a genuine possibility to create a reality based on human warmth. In the pages that follow Tapihue emerges and as time passes it is populated by others who, like Salustio, seek an alternative to their solitary lives. Some of its most important residents include a priest, Francisco, who blesses himself backwards, says Mass from the back of the church reciting prayers that no one has ever heard before; a dentist called Esmeraldo but who also goes by the name of Rómulo and sometimes Juvenal; and Fulgencio, an ox that flies.

Whether Salustio invents such a place, called Tapihue, or actually founds it is never completely clear to the reader who,

like the characters, must navigate through a world where myth, dreams and dementia all coexist. Tapihue is a corner of the world embodied by its geographical isolation and the indifference of the modern world's centers of power and influence. While a first reading of the novel does not clarify all that is contained within its extremely elliptical pages, the implications regarding the brutality of military dictatorship become more and more apparent, particularly to the reader acquainted with events in Chile during the Pinochet regime. Tapihue's landscape, rather than externally viewed, is captured from within the interior of its inhabitants. It is this ability on the part of Subercaseaux to construct her story from within that makes her narrative world so suggestive, so powerful, and at the same time so ambiguous.

Similarly, it is impossible to speak of this text without alluding to the lyrical quality of its language, a language that is reminiscent of the great Mexican writer Juan Rulfo. Subercaseaux's narrative, like Rulfo's, is filled with absences and the reader, much like the characters, must go in search of meaning in a world whose language flutters between the real and the hallucinatory. Here time has no definite chronological signposts: hours, days, months, years all come together in a kind of mythic continuum. However, as is typical of Subercaseaux's narrative, death is everywhere and no one escapes its insatiable grasp. Her prose is extremely lean and presents a narrative world that contains a minimum of external description of characters, events and surroundings. The author's talent lies in her ability to suggest rather than describe, to arrive at the essence of the fictional world through descriptive detail. She leaves the reader to fill in the gaps of the narration, and despite the lack of realistic description, we come away with a powerful and unforgettable image of Tapihue and its people.

Unlike the majority of her generational peers, Subercaseaux has chosen a rural setting as her source of inspiration but shows little or no interest in questions of local color or linguistic regionalisms. Instead, she opts for a mode of expression that is highly poetic and fragmented in nature which explores the certainties of a reality governed by the rational only to reduce them to the category of the elusive and the relative. And like Rulfo's Comala, Tapihue is a narrative space in which the past speaks more eloquently than the present, where the line between living and dead is not always clearly discernible, where anguish and guilt devour the moment, and where the search for personal identity and collective solidarity sets in motion an endless journey toward silence and death. In this process resides the fundamental difference between journalism and literary narrative for Subercaseaux. For her a journalist is nothing more than a transparent siphon through which information passes. But in fiction, she points out, the same reality can be reinvented over and over again and in each recreation it is what is suggested, what is not said, that demands the reader's utmost attention and creativity.

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