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## LUIS SEPÚLVEDA: A NEW SENSIBILITY

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**T**raditionally, the protagonists of detective novels and la *novela negra* have been “hard-boiled” men of the “strong, silent” type. They are self-assured and possess an inalterable identity, regardless of their position in society (which is rarely high, in the case of the Latin American *novela negra*). More often than not, Chandler and Hammett’s characters are cited as the models to follow: they are hard drinking loners, heroes; they have no allegiances, especially with women. As Suzanne Young has noted, there is no room for women in their lives, other than an occasional fling. (Young, 314). In the *novelas negras* and detective novels written by Luis Sepúlveda, however, we see the emergence of a different kind of hero. They are almost always exiles, political or otherwise, which is partly responsible for their vulnerable nature. Because their place in society is no longer certain, their sense of identity is in a state of flux. Additionally, some are separated, others divorced, and they may be unemployed as well; they have been stripped of the traits by which they previously defined themselves. In Sepúlveda’s work, we see characters who question their identity and others who will risk it all for the love of a woman. In his latest novel, *Hot Line*, we even see a female character that is central to the plot; without her, our hero would be lost. This article will explore the qualities of this new kind of hero, or anti-hero, in the works of Luis Sepúlveda.

Raymond Chandler was one of the masters of the genre, and perhaps the North American mystery writer most often read by Latin American writers. In addition to his many novels, he wrote “Twelve Notes on the Mystery Story”, in which he described what the perfect detective should be like.

Although he is most often poor, he has acquaintances at all levels of society, and moves comfortably between groups. In Chandler's words, the hero is: "a complete man... a man of honor... and a good enough man for any world. I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin... He is a lonely man..." (Chandler, 992) Because these men seem complete as they are, women are unnecessary to their lives. Chandler wrote:

"Love interest nearly always weakens a mystery story because it creates a type of suspense that is antagonistic and not complementary to the detective's struggle to solve the problem. The kind of love interest that works is the one that complicates the problem by adding to the detective's troubles, but which at the same time, you instinctively feel will not survive the story. A really good detective never gets married. He would lose his detachment, and this detachment is part of his charm." (Chandler, 1008)

Female characters in Chandler's work, and indeed in many detective novels and thrillers, are relegated to one of two extremes: the *femme fatale*, or the pure, chaste woman who wishes to domesticate the protagonist. Either one represents, in her own way, an attempt to control the man, and therefore, emasculation and a loss of identity for the protagonist.

Two of Sepúlveda's middle novels, *Yacaré* and *Diario de un killer sentimental*, published together in 1998, do not break with the norms previously established in the genre, with one exception: the state of flux of the main character's identity. In *Yacaré*, Dany Contreras is in exile in Switzerland; although he was a police officer in his native country, as a naturalized citizen/resident alien, he cannot continue that line of work. Instead, he has become an investigative agent for an insurance company, who must determine whether a wealthy Italian man was murdered, or whether he died of natural causes. While the character seems to have adapted to this change, he is upset by the fact that his wife has left him for another. He is a man who has not always been a loner, a man who has loved and lost. So, while this man is not currently involved with anyone, he *has* experienced a loving relationship in the past. The female character in this novel is representative of the traditional *femme fatale*; she makes advances on him by appearing at his hotel room late at night, and she holds the key to the mystery. Her advances threaten to cloud his objectivity, and almost prevent him from solving the case.

*Diario de un killer sentimental* presents us with another antithetical hero: the main character is an international mercenary, a hit man. Throughout this short novel, he repeats over and over the necessity of maintaining his detachment from others in order to complete his work without being killed. However, he has met a young woman in France, and we also see him repeatedly remind himself that he is slipping. Since he knows that this

woman has caused him to break several self-imposed rules, he has decided that this will be his last job. He is going to sacrifice his "career" to retire with her and live on the ocean. Alas, she too is a *femme fatale*, of a more traditional sort; in addition to breaking his exterior, she has double-crossed him. At the end, he coldly kills her, even though it pains him to do so.

In *Nombre de torero*, from 1994, we see a softer man. While Juan Belmonte is more typical of a protagonist of a Latin American *novela negra*, as described by Mempo Giardinelli, he is also a man who has witnessed changes in his identity's composition. He is now disadvantaged, because he is a political exile from Chile who fled to Germany. Like many others, he has had to suffer changes in lifestyle. Exile has left him in limbo. To begin, he is an educated man who is reduced to working as a bouncer in a strip club that is populated by other marginalized people (a Polish immigrant woman and an African-American male, for example). His previous qualifications as a *guerrillero* have not served him well in Hamburg: "¿Y qué podría aprender un tipo como yo a los cuarenta y cuatro años?... ¿Para qué diablos sirve un ex guerrillero a los cuarenta y cuatro años?... Experto en técnicas de chequeo y contra chequeo, sabotajes y ramos similares, falsificación de documentos, producción artesanal de explosivos, doctorado en derrotas." This character could easily have become the mercenary from *Diario de un killer sentimental*. But here we have a protagonist who will not participate in the above activities coldly, for financial gain; he can only carry out these tasks when they are connected to a cause. Thus, morally and ethically, he somewhat resembles the traditional heroes as depicted by Chandler and Hammett.

The feelings of failure and loss, themes that appear repeatedly in Sepúlveda's novels, develop in part as a result of politics. A leftist, he has seen the fall of leftist regimes in both Latin America and Eastern Europe. This in itself does not, however, make him feel isolated. As he names the authors of the books he keeps in the bathroom, the character notes, "en ellas los individuos que sentía de mi bando perdían indefectiblemente, pero sabían muy bien por qué perdían, como si estuvieran empeñados en formular la estética de la más contemporánea de las artes: la de saber perder." (*Nombre*, 30) He is still part of a group; however, that group has no place in today's world. The man who is pitted against him in a race to retrieve gold coins taken to Chile by former Nazi soldiers is a member of another losing team. Frank Galinsky, a former East German officer, is unemployed, and has been abandoned by his wife; she took both their son and the dog with her, and left him for a man who could provide for her better financially. Since both characters suffer, we see that the collapse of socialism means the dissolution of the "good guys/bad guys" dichotomy; everyone suffers during these times.

Finally, Belmonte's identity takes another hit daily, when he encounters racism throughout Hamburg. It's necessary to state here that Germany has provided refuge to many people from Turkey in the last decades; the word "Turk" is used by ignorant people to refer to any immigrant of dark skin and hair, regardless of origin. Belmonte's neighbors are "bastante peculiares y dados al deporte de otomanizarlo todo. El tipo practicaba una costumbre epistolar con el mayordomo, y en sus cartas denunciaba como molestas costumbres turcas cualquier cosa que yo hiciera." (*Nombre*, 31) Their children, on hearing that it is his birthday in the novel's opening pages, tell him, "Los extranjeros no tienen cumpleaños." (*Nombre*, 32) Because of this treatment, he can identify with other marginalized people in Hamburg, including actual Turks. His identity has changed not only because of his socio-economic status; he has also gone from being part of the hegemony to being a "minority". On his birthday, he visits one of his usual haunts, a restaurant owned by a Turkish couple. A patron, assuming that he is Turkish, asks him why it is that he speaks German with the owners. The wife replies, "Este es turco a la fuerza.", and the following exchange takes place:

"No. Por ósmosis – aclaré.

– No entiendo – dijo la chica.

– ¿Sabes lo que es la ósmosis? Es el paso, forzado o voluntario, de dos líquidos de diferente densidad a través de un tubo. A los turcos los hacen pasar por el tubo del odio a fuerza de putadas. Yo no soy turco, por lo tanto merecería pasar por otro tubo, pero me meten en el mismo." (*Nombre*, 36)

All three of these factors: exile, the fall of the political left, and his condition as marginalized subject in a new land, create a protagonist who is vulnerable and unsure of himself. Yet, in spite of this shock to his identity, he leads a somewhat stable, if not happy, existence. Belmonte's motivation for taking on this case is not financial, however; in this sense, he is also an atypical hero.

On his birthday, a Swiss gentleman approaches him at work. Some young Neo-Nazis have interrupted the strip show, and Belmonte must resort to violence to stop them. The police have arrived, and have asked him with surprise why he's carrying a Chilean passport. They then side with the Neo-Nazis. This social criticism, according to both Giardinelli and Genaro Pérez, is typical of Latin American detective and thriller novels. The Swiss gentleman, Oskar Kramer, saves him from a visit to the police station, and asks to speak with him. He proposes that Belmonte return to Chile for the first time since his exile, to retrieve the gold coins stolen years ago by the Nazi soldiers who were supposed to be guarding them. When Belmonte refuses, Kramer pulls out the big guns immediately: "Vas a trabajar para mí, Belmonte. Sé todo lo que se puede saber de ti. Todo. ¿No me crees? Te daré un ejemplo: hace dos semanas giraste quinientos marcos

a Verónica.” (*Nombre*, 50)

Verónica, we learn, was his partner. She was disappeared by the government, tortured and probably raped, and has since remained in a catatonic state. Since he has no political ideals left to believe in, Verónica has become everything to him: “Si algo me mantuvo hasta entonces fue la certeza de saber que Verónica se encontraba a salvo, segura en su país construido con olvidos y silencios.” She is supported by money that he sends to the woman who cares for her, the same woman who contacted him when her almost lifeless body was retrieved from a garbage dump. He occasionally phones and has the woman place the phone at Verónica’s ear, even though he knows that his words probably do not register with her. As often happens in Sepúlveda’s novels, both Belmonte and Galinsky are trapped by circumstances. Belmonte doesn’t want to accept the job, but “El viejo había tirado la única carnada que yo podía morder: Verónica.” (*Nombre*, 70) Kramer has arranged to have drugs planted in his apartment during their meeting; if Belmonte does not accept, he will most definitely be deported from Germany, and there will be no source of income with which to support Verónica. He accepts, but only on condition that Verónica be transferred to the best psychiatric hospital in Europe when he has completed his mission. Therefore, he returns from exile, and takes on a cause that he does not believe in, because of her.

Belmonte’s sentimentality turns poetic at times. As he contemplates the mission, “De pronto me sentí como el personaje de *El campeón*, de Ring Lardner, un púgil que se enfrenta a la necesidad de ganar un combate, pero no por él, sino por una legión de indefensos que dependen de sus puños.” (*Nombre*, 77) When he reaches Chile, upon leaving the airport, he turns to the south. “En esa dirección, en algún lugar, estaba Verónica.” (*Nombre*, 163) This is not the detached, cold loner of the traditional detective novel; his love for Verónica has made him vulnerable. His reason for this mission is to help her, and to avenge the death of what she once was. He is aware of the effect that these emotions have on him: “y tengo miedo, mucho miedo, porque la sed de venganza determina y dirige cada uno de mis pensamientos.” (*Nombre*, 106) At the novel’s end, his sensitivity and honor almost bring about his downfall; as he stops to rearrange the body of a dead woman he did not know, out of respect, Galinsky sneaks up on him and takes him prisoner.

Verónica herself is not atypical of the feminine characters in the traditional detective novels. We have mentioned the *femme fatale*, whose sexuality and attempt to dominate the male threatens him with loss of control, and therefore, emasculation. Verónica, however, falls into the other category. Because of the state that she is in, their relationship, at the current time, cannot be a sexual one. Therefore, she falls into the category of the pure, chaste wife or girlfriend, whose presence threatens the male with emasculation through domestication. Verónica cannot marry him, but his

love for her places him in a perilous position. He is almost afraid to see Verónica again, because he has no idea of what she's like: "¿Ocurría lo mismo contigo? ¿Era tu silencio ausente un mundo de cristallitos que nadie, ni tú misma, conseguía disponer en su geometría exacta? Pero aquel viejo por lo menos hablaba, en cambio tú, amor, habías perdido hasta la arquitectura de las palabras." (Nombre, 206) For Belmonte, Verónica is like Chile: when and if he sees her again, regardless of what happens, things will never be exactly as they were. Verónica, like Chile, has suffered irreversible damage, and all that he has left is nostalgia for what was.

Sepúlveda's latest novel, *Hot Line*, from 2002, presents the reader with a protagonist and a female character that diverge tremendously from the norm. George Washington Caucamán is a detective by profession, but not of the traditional sort. He is a Mapuche who spends his time on horseback, riding the pampas and tracking rustlers with his knowledge of the natural environment and his acute sense of smell. As was the case with Belmonte, we have a man who is removed from his element. As punishment for shooting a rustler who also happened to be the son of one of Pinochet's generals, Caucamán is transferred to the city of Santiago. His superior, who is reluctant to transfer him, warns him that "ser mapuche en este país de mierda era tan malo como ser negro en Alabama." (*Hot Line*, 22) He is prepared to encounter racism in the capital, and the airport officials' jokes do not seem to shake him: when the agent tells him, "Sabe que tengo una teoría acerca de los mapuches?" he responds with, "No es el único. Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, Todorov, también las tuvieron. Son muchos los que intentan decirnos qué somos." (*Hot Line*, 29) He then engages in repartee with the agent, in which each tries to top the stereotypes of Mapuches put forth by the other. Even the female police officers who work with him in the Sexual Crimes division taunt him with names such as "El Charles Bronson de la Patagonia" (*Hot Line*, 42), and criticize his provincial way of dressing. However, racism and criticism are taken in stride. Caucamán, unlike the other exiles that populate Sepúlveda's work, is typically in control, with a strong sense of identity.

However, the very environment in Santiago works against him. The city's overpowering smell of refuse and detritus and his inability to track by his usual methods leave him out of his element. As he attempts to walk to work his first day, he discovers that he can only walk for half an hour. "Algo espeso y sucio se interponía entre el aire y sus pulmones." (*Hot Line*, 31) Deciding that it is not wise to continue, he decides to take a cab, and "el detective de provincias se puso por primera vez en manos de una conductora." (*Hot Line*, 33) The cabby, Anita Ledesma, recognizes his photo from an article in the newspaper: "Usted le dio su merecido a un miserable hijo de otro miserable todavía mayor" (*Hot Line*, 36). She gives him her card, and tells him to count on her help whenever he needs it.

When his first dinner out results in an altercation with friends of the general's son, he reaches out for that personal contact with Anita: "No supo bien por qué marcó, pero le hizo bien escuchar esa voz amiga al otro lado de la línea." She picks him up, and their relationship begins. Caucamán is given his first case: a couple, former exiles and currently blackballed actors, are out of work and running a telephone sex line out of their home. They have been receiving calls from someone who does not want to listen, but rather to be heard; after revealing that he knows what they are (leftists) and insulting them, they hear the sounds of people being tortured.

In his investigation, Caucamán calls upon Anita to transport him from place to place. Two of these locations are very important. One is a hilltop from which they watch the city shrouded in smog. The first time that Anita shows him this place, the theme of loss emerges. For Anita, it is the failure of the left, her own incarceration and torture, and the loss of her partner, who was Mapuche like Caucamán. For Caucamán, of course, losing is nothing new; by virtue of the fact that he is Mapuche, he is one of Chile's marginalized citizens. He later tells his adversary, "Sé perder. Los indios siempre hemos perdido." (*Hot Line*, 92) When he plays the tape of the phone call for Anita, she almost destroys it; she cannot bear to recall what she experienced. Then, she drives him to a radio station run by women. There, Caucamán goes through sound files, and discovers that the caller is a former general, one of the torturers and indeed, the one whose son he shot.

The relationship between Anita and George is radically different from most detective novels or thrillers. While some North American writers have produced married couples who work on cases together, gender issues have not necessarily been resolved. There was an American writer named David Goodis who apparently wrote open, vulnerable, male characters seeking a human connection; his books are described as steady, if not best, sellers (Schmid, 155). The women in his novels do not appear to have departed from the norm, although Schmid notes that women are "rarely the problem" in Goodis' work (Schmid, 165). In spite of some amazing similarities between Goodis' male characters and Sepúlveda's, there is no evidence that Sepúlveda has read this author. Sepúlveda is always quite happy to reveal his influences, and often includes a list in his work; one of those cited is Paco Ignacio Taibo II, a Mexican writer who created the "independent" detective Héctor Belascoarán Shayne. In Taibo's work, Héctor is often saved by the forever anonymous "la chica de la colita". She is the one who refuses to commit, and Héctor is the sentimental one. When Héctor proposes marriage to her in *No habrá final feliz*, she simply stares at him. Her sexuality does not undo him, so she is not the *femme fatale*; neither does she wish to domesticate him. Other than Taibo, however, this type of relationship rarely appears in detective fiction, and certainly not in Latin American detective fiction written by men.



In *Hot Line*, Anita is the one who initiates the sexual relationship, and she does so quite early in their friendship. "Mire amigo," she tells him, "yo creo en los astros y ellos dicen que usted y yo terminaremos en la cama, de tal manera que, como las cosas están claras, le propongo saltarnos las ceremonias de conquista, seducción y mentiras, y que empecemos en cambio a conocernos de la mejor manera." George's response is, "Supongo que llegó la hora de tutearnos." (*Hot Line*, 52) She also initiates the first physical contact. As with Taibo's "chica de la colita", Anita does not wish to domesticate him, nor does she wish him harm. Caucamán's sensitivity for women, which is attributed to his Mapuche heritage, allows him to appreciate her strength and honesty, rather than feel threatened by it. The relationship presents absolutely no complications in his life. According to Genaro Pérez, women authors of detective literature often invert the power structure, creating a parody of male authority by making the female characters seem more intelligent than the males. What I wish to stress here is that there does not seem to be any struggle for power in the *Hot Line* relationship; rather, it is a relationship of mutual trust and aid, which, at the risk of depicting it as a business relationship, I can only describe as purely beneficial to both parties.

In the end, even though he does not really hope to survive his encounter with the general, George phones Anita to bring as many people as possible to the top of the hill. He is already waiting there, with one of the general's men, the only one he did not kill (he needed someone who knew the city to drive him). He also asks her to make certain that they are all carrying portable radios, tuned in to the same radio station she had taken him to previously. As he hangs up, Anita says, "Indio. Te quiero", and George confesses, "Yo también te quiero, huinca" (*Hot Line*, 86)

Because he is on the hill, George is close to nature again; it is the closest thing to being in his element that Santiago can offer him. Away from the smog and pollution, he is now feeling stronger, and ready to take on the general. As the general arrives, George uses his prisoner's cell phone to phone the radio station, and leaves the phone on. Just as things begin to look grim, "vio aparecer a las docenas de mujeres con las cabezas cubiertas por pañuelos blancos y los retratos de sus parientes desaparecidos levantados como estandartes. Anita Ledesma iba en primera fila." (*Hot Line*, 93) Anita, as well as many other women, has appeared, with their radios broadcasting at full volume the conversation between George and the general. Together, they have saved George.

In Sepúlveda's work, we see the development of a new type of hero. Thrown into unfamiliar environments and a new social order by circumstances, particularly exile, he has to know when to surrender to fate and cut his losses, or fight. His readily admitted imperfections facilitate the reader's identification with him. The macho façade falls away as he seeks

to establish contact with other human beings, including women. While some of Sepúlveda's work depicts some women with characteristics consistent with old-fashioned detective novels, the works I have discussed in detail here propose a new type of relationship. In the past, as Virginia Brackett has noted, "Autonomy on the part of a woman indicates lack of need for male imposed order, a cardinal sin within a patriarchally defined hierarchy of power which eliminates feminine assertiveness altogether." (Brackett, 38) However, Sepúlveda's latest female character breaks away from the angel/devil dichotomy. Perhaps the reason that this works is precisely the "broken" or "torn" nature of his male characters; since they are not afraid to admit to their defects and faults, it is easier for them to admit that they need assistance or the presence of another person in their lives. Taibo and Sepúlveda have substituted the "hard-boiled" detective with a more sensitive, "soft-boiled" one.

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