Antonio Skármeta (1940-)

Jason Jolley (Missouri State University)

Novelist. Active 1967- in Chile

Antonio Skármeta is a major Chilean novelist and a central figure among the group of Spanish American narrative fiction writers now commonly referred to as the Post Boom. Since the late 1960s, Skármeta has published numerous short story collections and novels and has also been active as a frequent collaborator on radio, television and film projects and as an educator, diplomat and literary critic. In the latter capacity, through various articles, conference presentations and interviews, he has been instrumental in identifying and articulating the influences, aesthetic priorities and technical inclinations that characterize the works of the writers of the Post Boom, a group that includes fellow Chileans Ariel Dorfman and Isabel Allende, Peruvian Alfredo Bryce Echenique, Argentines Manuel Puig and Luisa Valenzuela, Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rossi, Mexicans Elena Poniatowska, José Augustín and Gustavo Sainz, Cubans Reinaldo Arenas and Severo Sarduy, and Puerto Ricans Luis Rafael Sánchez and Rosario Ferré, among others.

Skármeta’s first major international recognition as a writer came in 1969 when his second collection of stories, *Desnudo en el tejado* [Naked on the Rooftop], won the prestigious Casa de las Américas award. His best-known work to date is *Ardiente paciencia* [Burning Patience], the bestselling novella upon which Michael Radford’s 1995 multi Oscar-nominated film *Il Postino* [The Postman] was based.

A grandson of Croatian immigrants, Skármeta was born in the northern Chilean port of Antofagasta on November 7, 1940. At the age of seven, he moved with his parents to Buenos Aires, where the family lived for three years before relocating to Santiago de Chile, where young Antonio spent his formative years and attended the prestigious Instituto Nacional, graduating in 1957. Despite his elite private school upbringing, the famously gregarious Skármeta took an inclusive approach to friendship during his years in the capital, an attitude he would later directly link to his aesthetic values, particularly to his preference for working class anti-heroes and other marginal figures:

Hice amigos tanto proletarios como de la clase alta, al otro lado de la ciudad. En los diferentes estrados fui buscando amistad. Esto marca una diferencia, porque la mayor parte de la literatura chilena es una literatura casi enteramente de la clase alta o de gente que aspira a la clase alta.
I made friends in the proletariat and from the upper class, on the other side of the city. I went looking for friendship among the different social strata. This marks a difference because the majority of Chilean literature is a literature entirely produced by the upper class or by people aspiring to the upper class.] (Lafforgue 44)

It was also during these years as a prep school student in Santiago that Skármeta became involved with literature and the arts. He was active in a school drama group and began to write his first stories and essays, winning minor contests along the way.

Skármeta went on to study theatre and philosophy at the University of Chile. During this period he was active in the university's drama society, and his stories began to win national prizes. During summer vacations, he traveled extensively throughout Latin America and once embarked on a cargo ship bound for the U.S. East Coast. The voyage was capped off with a Kerouac-like road trip across country to California, an experience that inspired several stories collected in his first two volumes, most notably the often-anthologized La cénicienta en San Francisco [Cinderella in San Francisco]. The story, about a night of conversation and free love between an aspiring writer from Chile and a young American theatre actress, showcases many of the elements central to Skármetas aesthetic tendencies, especially those of his earlier narratives an autobiographical and highly introspective perspective, a loosely structured plot driven by lyrically infused prose and the plentiful use of stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse, an emphasis on youthful sexual exuberance, and a tendency for the characters to delight in the seemingly banal realities of everyday life. It also features several instances of the technical innovation Skármeta refers to as the *arrebato*, a kind of prolonged lyrical flight, inspired by the perception of an everyday situation or object, that interrupts the immediate narrative flow of the tale allowing the protagonist-narrator to survey the context from a loftier existential or philosophical plane and in more poetic language. With these *arrebatos* Skármeta reveals the dual influence of two very different Chilean poets; they are unmistakably reminiscent of the technique of endowing everyday objects with poetic potential that lies at the heart of Pablo Nerudas odes, but they almost always do so in slang-ridden, street language more appropriately attributed to the anti-poet Nicanor Parra.

After graduating from the university of Chile and working briefly as a teaching assistant in philosophy at the Instituto Nacional, Skármeta was awarded a Fulbright scholarship and completed a masters degree in literature at New Yorks Columbia University in 1966, writing his dissertation on Cortázar, a writer whom, along with Juan Rulfo, Skármeta consistently identifies as a major influence. Upon returning to Chile in 1966, Skármeta taught philosophy at the Instituto Nacional before accepting a position as a professor of Chilean literature at the University of Chile, a post he occupied until the Marxist government of Salvador Allende was toppled by the coup that installed the Augusto Pinochet regime in 1973. It is during this period coinciding with the rise of the Popular Unity party that Skármeta published his first three collections of short stories: *El entusiasmo* [Enthusiasm] in 1967, *Desnudo en el tejado* [Naked on the Rooftop] in 1969, and *Tiro libre* [Free Kick] in 1973. In general, the plots of these stories are free of serious conflicts, featuring instead young protagonists in mostly urban settings rarely
concerned with anything beyond their own immediate circumstances. There is often an emphasis on youthful exuberance and vitality, specifically on seeking corporeal pleasures, which means that activities such as eating, having sex and competing in sports competitions often figure prominently. The settings preferred by Skármeta in these stories are cityscapes tinged with references to popular culture, especially film and music. The use of the *arrebato* technique described above is commonplace, and many of these tales privilege a lyrical discursive mode that complements their highly introspective, existential focus. In many cases the reader is left with the impression that a story is built around a hazy, almost psychedelic image rather than a clear idea. The texts are infused with the informal, colloquial and occasionally vulgar dialects that would be common to their characters. What Skármeta is portraying in these early stories is his belief that everyday life and language are at once utterly intranscendent and exceedingly poetic, an approach he has referred to as *hiperrealismo*, in contrast to what his generation saw as the dry, falsely constructed literary realism favored by Spanish American authors from the nineteenth century through the period of the regionalist novel:

Hiperrealismo, por qué? Porque es una literatura que tiende a moverse dentro de los arduos límites de la realidad. Hiperrealista porque es una literatura que aborda lo real con técnicas irrealistas de expresión y esto lo separaría esto es un punto crítico, grave de todo un tipo de literatura realista-naturalista.

[Why hyperrealism? Because it is a literature that tends to move within the arduous limits of reality. Hyperrealist because it approaches reality through unreal techniques of expression and this separates it and this is a critical point, crucial from an entire brand of realist-naturalist literature.] (Xaubet 87)

Skármeta saw the fascination of his own generation with the banal realities of everyday situations as a major departure from the more detached aesthetic of the Boom writers. In his famous essay Al fin y al acabo, es su propia vida la cosa más cercana que cada escritor tiene para echar mano [In the end, his own life is the closest thing each writer has to grab onto], Skármeta opposes the values of the Post Boom to its predecessors, observing that

nuestra actitud primordial es in-trascendente. No se nos ocurriría, por ejemplo, la absolutización de un sistema alegórico donde el grotesco degrada la realidad, como en Donoso, ni la iluminación de la historia en la hipérbole mítica de García Márquez, ni en la refundación de América Latina como en el realismo mágico de Carpentier. Por el contrario, donde ellos se distancian abarcadores, nosotros nos acercamos a la cotidianeidad con la obsesión de un miope.

[our primordial attitude is intranscendent. We would never imagine, for example, the absolutization of an allegorical system in which the grotesque degrades reality, as in Donoso, nor the illumination of history through the mythic hyperbole of García Márquez, nor the re-founding of Latin America through the magic realism of Carpentier. On the contrary, whereas they distance themselves to take everything in, we approach the everyday with the obsession of a myopic.] (138)
Although the lyrical techniques favored by Skármeta in his early stories persist in his first novel, *Soñé que la nieve ardía* [*I Dreamt That the Snow Was Burning*] (1975), the fall of the Allende government and the violent end of Chile's Marxist experiment led the author to abandon his emphasis on autobiographical introspection in favor of a greater identification with and attention to his fellow human beings. According to Skármeta, it is at this point when concepts such as love and solidarity become central to his fictions:

> Y mi decisión es quedarme con la gente más débil, los más desprotegidos. Es decir, mi amor hacia la humanidad para definir el problema del cambio de estilo ya no puede ser más un amor genérico. Mi amor comienza a ser selectivo. Mi amor es hacia las víctimas de esta brutalidad, y desde allí comienzan a forjarse mis personajes, mi galería de personajes. Yo creo que después del Golpe, más y más me interesan personajes más conflictivos, más sufridos, solidarios, mas desvalidos.

[I decided to stick with the weaker people, those who are the least protected. In other words, my love for humanity to address the issue of a change in style can no longer be a generic love. My love begins to be selective. My love is for the victims of this brutality, and that is the point from which my characters are forged, my gallery of characters. I think that after the coup I become more and more interested in characters that are more conflicted, who suffer more, those with more solidarity and who are more helpless.] (Xaubet 85)

According to Donald Shaw, whose numerous studies on Skármeta are an indispensible reference, the sudden fall of the Allende government and the reality of living as an exiled writer in a non-Hispanic society also affected Skármeta's expressive techniques, bringing his writing closer to what we have come to think constitutes the mainstream of the Post-Boom. With that change came a deliberate return to greater authority on the part of the writer, clear intentionality, reader-friendliness and the ready acceptance of the working relationship between the sign and the thing. (1994: 225)

After the coup, Skármeta resided briefly in Buenos Aires before moving to West Berlin for what would turn out to be an extended stay of 14 years. There he continued to write stories and novels, but also authors numerous, award-winning radio dramas and often wrote for television and produces screenplays. From 1979 to 1982 he taught at the Berlin Film and Television Academy. His 1980 novella *No pasó nada* [*Nothing Happened*] recounts the story of the struggle of an adolescent from an exiled family to adapt to his new surroundings and to make friends in West Berlin. In 1982, Skármeta published *La insurrección* [*The Insurrection*], a novel that alternates the love story of a young poet-soldier who sends poems home from the front to his girlfriend with the efforts of a community to rebel against the repressive forces of military rule in Nicaragua. Skármeta had first written the story as a screenplay for a 1980 film directed by Peter Lilienthal with whom he had previously collaborated on *La Victoria* [*Victoria*] and *Reina la tranquilidad en el país* [*Calm Prevails in the Country*] in 1972 and 1975.
In 1983, a version of what would become Skármeta's most successful literary endeavor, the fictional story of a relationship that develops between Pablo Neruda and Mario, the young postman who first plagiarizes and then emulates the poet's verses to win over a beautiful young woman, began to circulate as a radio drama in West Berlin. A stage version of *Ardiente Paciencia* ([Burning Patience]) was followed by a screenplay and film directed by Skármeta himself in Portugal in 1983. The novella was published in 1985 and became a bestseller that was eventually translated into more than 25 languages. The 1995 feature film *Il Postino* ([The Postman]), directed by Michael Radford, garnered five Academy Award nominations, including best picture, best director, and best actor in leading role. Read allegorically, the text reveals just how decisive Neruda's artistic and political influences have been on Skármeta as a writer. Skármeta's 2004 text *Neruda por Skármeta* ([Neruda by Skármeta]) further documents his debt to the Chilean bard.

In 1989, following the rejection of the Pinochet regime in a national plebiscite and Chile's return to democracy, Skármeta returned to his native land. Since then, he has published three new novels, *La boda del poeta* ([The Poets Wedding]) in 1999, *La chica del trombón* ([The Girl With the Trombone]) in 2001, and *El baile de la Victoria* ([The Dancer and the Thief]) in 2003. The first of these novels relates a series of events involving a cast of characters from an island in the Adriatic Sea who are forced by wartime fighting to emigrate to Chile. The novel thus offers a fictionalized account of how and why Skármeta's Croatian ancestors might have settled in Antofagasta. The second book tells the story of another arrival from the Adriatic, a girl delivered by a trombone player to one of the surviving emigrants mentioned in the first book, a man who may or may not be her grandfather. The fact that a couple of generations have passed since the arrival of the first group conveniently allows Skármeta to document the atmosphere of his youth in pre-coup Santiago and to recreate the energy of the Allende and Popular Unity years via the narrations of his young protagonist whose adolescent experiences coincide with her budding political awareness. In *El baile de la Victoria* ([The Dancer and the Thief]), Skármeta explores an unlikely friendship triangle between a young dancer, a teenage delinquent and a seasoned ex-con in a Chile that has already returned to democracy. In comparison to Skármeta's earlier stories and novellas, these last three novels feature much greater depth and breadth in terms of scope and characters. Gone are the experimental structural techniques, the lyrical *arrebatos*, and the primarily introspective approach. These later texts favor relatively reader-friendly, straightforward storytelling and lots of dialogue, while maintaining the emotional intensity and poetic feel achieved in *Ardiente paciencia* ([Burning Patience]). They revisit many of the topics and themes that have been at the center of Skármeta's commitment to a hyper-real or infra-real aesthetic since his earliest stories: the emphasis on ordinary situations, a preference for urban environs and marginalized even delinquent working-class characters, frequent allusions to movies, music and sports, a concern for the poetic in everyday life, a focus on finding love and sexual pleasure, etc. In addition the constant but rarely foregrounded allusions to Chilean politics, another common thread, present in the earlier fictions but much more salient in these latest novels, is Skármeta's tendency to write about orphaned or fatherless figures as part of a subtle yet sustained meditation on issues such as paternity, adoption and genealogy: an allegorical reflection of the authors constant concern with and search for his own literary predecessors and progenitors.
Since his return from exile, in addition to writing, Skármeta has been active in promoting literary and cultural activities in Chile. He has produced more than 200 articles as the cultural correspondent to Caras magazine, and he has become a household name as host of the extremely popular television program El Show del Libro, which debuted nationwide in 1992. Skármeta also developed and hosted a similar program about literature, Torre de Papel, which aired throughout Latin America on the international cable channel People&Arts. He has also returned to teaching literature, film and philosophy both in Chile and as a visiting professor at institutions such as Washington University in St. Louis and Colorado College in Colorado Springs. From 2000 to 2003 he returned to Berlin where he served as the Chilean ambassador to Germany.

In addition to winning the Casa de las Américas prize in 1969, Skármeta’s film projects have been honored at numerous international film festivals, and his radio dramas have also won various prizes in Germany and Italy. In 1986 the government of France honored him as a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et Lettres, and in 1996 he was welcomed as a member of Italy’s prestigious Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana. In 2003, El baile de la Victoria [The Dancer and the Thief] was honored with the Premio Planeta.

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