

**A LITERATURE OF POSTMEMORY OF LATIN AMERICAN
DICTATORSHIPS: interview with Patricio Pron, author of *El espíritu de mis
padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia***

PATRICIO PRON

Universidad Georg-August de Göttingen (UGAG)

SERGIO SCHARGEL

Universidade de São Paulo (USP)



Patricio Pron, picture of Lisbeth Salas

This interview was conducted via email on June 17, 2022.

Patricio Pron is part of a recent tradition in contemporary Latin American literature: a literature focused on the memory of dictatorships. In other words, not just memory, but post-memory. It explores the relationship that the second and third generations have with the trauma of dictatorial violence. The pain is there, but not lived directly, like a looming shadow, a ghost, a memory passed from generation to generation.

Argentinian, Pron holds a Ph.D. in Romanic Philology from the University of Göttingen, Germany. In 2011, he published the first edition of *My Fathers' Ghost Is Climbing in the Rain* the subject of this interview, in which he works on constructing the memory of the Argentine dictatorship. Specifically, he delves into the attempt of the subsequent generation to understand the spirit of their country, from which the title is derived. In this conversation, Pron answered some questions about his book and some of the concepts and ideas that appear in it.

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Sergio Schargel: First, could you introduce yourself? Tell us a bit about you, who Patricio Pron is, your background, your career, and the focus of your research.

Patricio Pron: My name is Patricio Pron, I'm 46 years old, and I'm an Argentine writer who has been living in Europe for over two decades. Between 2000 and 2007, I lived in Göttingen, Germany, where I earned a Ph.D. in Romanic Philology with a book on the Argentine writer in the French language, Copi. I also worked at the university during that time. Since 2008, I've been living in Madrid, where I work as a writer and literary critic. As for the latter, I contribute to publications like *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, *Letras Libres*, and *El País*. My books have received several awards and have been translated into twelve languages. In 2010, the English magazine *Granta* selected me as one of the twenty-two best young Spanish-language writers of my generation, something that might mean a lot but perhaps doesn't matter at all. I published two collections of short stories and two novels before leaving Argentina. Since then, I've published another four short story collections, five novels, and several essays. My most recent two books are a personal anthology of my work as a short story writer titled *Bringing It All Back Home (Short Stories 1990-2020)* and a selection of my dream diary called *Dreambook (2022)*. Writers tend not to be the best critics of their work because we lack the necessary distance to see it objectively. However, I would say that the theme of my books is the connection between words and the world – which is the same as saying that my literature is explicitly political. They explore how art became political and politics turned into a crime throughout the 20th century and up to the present day.

Sergio Schargel: In addition to being a writer, you are also a scholar in the field of literature. How do these two occupations connect, interact, or even contaminate each other? How does academia influence your fiction writing?

Patricio Pron: I worked only a few years in the university, but these were decisive for me because it was in the university where I learned the procedures of the archival art that my work is usually associated with. I learned to read "against" the established ideas by authors and the market, and I even had the opportunity to learn to read against academia. All my books have what Roberto Bolaño called a "literary shadow", in the sense that—at least in part—they also speak about other books. So acquiring the tools to read better—or not as poorly as I did in the past—was fundamental, and I am very grateful to the German university for that. In a more general sense, I am immensely grateful for having had the opportunity to study there the critical theory that I believe underlies all

my books to date. All of them participate in the "aesthetics of negativity" advocated by Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, among other authors.

Sergio Schargel: *My Fathers' Ghost Is Climbing in the Rain* seems to draw from a recent movement in Latin American literature, a subgenre, if you will, of reconstructing the memory of dictatorship. More than that: it's an opposition between the trauma experienced by the generation that was adults during the region's authoritarianism and the generation that was children at that time. Why did you want to work in this key, in this opposition between the legacy of the previous generation and yours? Why this movement, this subgenre, this attempt to reconstruct the past that we see in works like yours, *Ways of Going Home*, among others? How much autofiction is in your book?

Patricio Pron: I never wanted to write *My Fathers' Ghost Is Climbing in the Rain* or any other text that participated in the subgenre you're talking about, which indeed exists and some already call "the literature of the children". However, the complex, tremendously painful, and conflicted nature of the revolutionary experience in Latin America — and the fact that this experience is also ours, those of us born in Argentina between 1960 and 1980 approximately — confronts us with the impossibility of understanding: not even those of us who are children of political activists who were not disappeared and remained loyal to their youth ideas are sure to fully understand the kind of personal sacrifice they were willing to make at some point. We don't understand their experience, but we know it's decisive, for them as much as for us, just as we know that we grew up in countries that, like Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina, are the direct result of the failure of their political project and the murder and exile of thousands of people. In that sense, the theme of the novel was imposed on me, as well as the idea or conviction that the answers to our questions about the present were in the past. It was not so much about "reconstructing memory" as it was about "building it", since the tragic events of the recent past are subject not only to the incomprehension I referred to earlier but also to the implicit and explicit will of certain actors in the Argentine economic and political life to make them forgotten. The novel, resisting this kind of tacit demand to "turn the page", tries to resist from a place different from the usual in novels on the subject, a place from which memory is not seen so much as a necessary element for the reconstruction of the past but as the place from which to extract examples of a utopian political practice that is valid for the present.

Sergio Schargel: Enzo Traverso, in his book *Left-Wing Melancholia* presents an idea that seems quite interesting to me and that I believe resonates in your book. The author divides the polysemic notion of melancholy into two: active and passive. The active, synthesized in the

Portuguese wordplay "luto e luta" (mourning and struggle), responds to the teleological vision of history, the idea that, regardless of its defeats, Marxism is inevitable. The passive, characteristic of the 21st century, assumes that the political defeat of real communism led to the death of the teleological vision, and communism ceases to be an inevitability to become one option among others. In that sense, it seems to me that this division exists in your book, if I may. Indeed, in this subgenre, if we can think of it that way, in general. The generation of parents, motivated by this active melancholy, and the generation of children, by this passive inheritance. I would like to know from you, if possible, a little about this division. What is melancholic about *My Fathers' Ghost Is Climbing in the Rain*? The title itself seems to imprint this melancholic *ethos*, but so do the reconstruction through newspapers and the search for Burdisso.

Patricio Pron: I am familiar with Traverso's book, although it was published after *My Fathers' Ghost Is Climbing in the Rain* and did not influence its writing. My parents, like the rest of their generation, have a completely teleological view of history, almost Hegelian in its radicalism. Still, my experiences, education, and, not least, the experience of observing not only Latin American politics in recent decades, make me lean more towards those who understand history as a succession of events in which morality and linearity play no role, somewhat in line with the "theory of discontinuity" spoken of by a character in a novel of mine called *The Beginning of Spring*. Personally, I don't believe there is any salvific power in history, but that doesn't provoke any melancholy in me, I believe.

But, at the same time, I think that the demand for more and better life for more people is not an alternative but an obligation, and that this demand may have some chance of success this time if we study the mistakes and successes of the preceding generation. As I say in the novel, perhaps we cannot endorse many of the conceptions and political actions of the previous generation's members, but we can and must endorse their will and dedication, honoring it to the best of our abilities with affirmative and consistent political action. I grew up in a framework where Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" heralded a future without conflict, but I also did so in a country where, as in almost every place, conflict is inherent in practical life and is motivated, among other things, by an extraordinary increase in economic and political inequality, environmental disaster, and the rise of misogynistic, denialist, and racist attitudes. For that reason, I celebrated and celebrate the return of politics; for me, however, it had never really gone away, or it was gone for a very short time. And that's also what *My Fathers' Ghost Is Climbing in the Rain* speaks to.

Sergio Schargel: There is a huge shadow throughout the book, which is obviously the ghost of the dictatorship. In the case of Burdisso, this is very symbolic: when he receives restitution for the crimes he suffered, he is murdered. In other words, reparation is impossible, death precedes it. How did you want to bring and deal with the dictatorship? Why this narratological choice of the dictatorship as a major figure?

Patricio Pron: I didn't find it necessary to talk about the dictatorship directly, since its crimes are well known to everyone; I did seek a somewhat biased approach that, on the one hand, would highlight that we continue to live in the shadow of the dictatorship and the murder and disappearance of thousands of people; and, on the other hand, I tried to make it clear to the reader that our private life is completely crossed by the public, even by the ominous public. This is omnipresent in certain lives like those of the Burdisso: their history, and what it says about the impossibility of mourning and repair, speaks clearly enough about what I think of the Argentine dictatorship to give it something more than the character of a backdrop for the action. Of course, the curtain falls on the protagonists and envelops them until it suffocates them, but that's what this book is about.

Sergio Schargel: *My Fathers' Ghost Is Climbing in the Rain* is a work that captures the best of the historical literature tradition, a fiction that directly relates to history. In this sense, it is symptomatic that the protagonist addresses the absence of memory and his task of reconstructing history through memory. How did you intend to approach this relationship between both fields? Why this choice of the absence of memory in a work that harvests so much from History? How do you see this relationship between literature, memory, and history in the context of Latin American dictatorships?

Patricio Pron: The demand, the call for "memory, truth, and justice," cuts across all Latin American societies and their relationship with the tragic events of their recent past. However, the three terms are complex and problematic when placed together since memory is not the same as truth, and the latter does not always equate to what judicial bodies determine and sanction as true. So, my approach to History — capitalized, but also to my personal history — had to address that complexity, as well as discuss the links between memory and what we judge as true. The novel articulates an explicit questioning of the idea that the individual subject can offer a "true" account of themselves and what happened to them; it suggests instead that we should read all texts — especially those that speak of History — with a significant degree of distrust and suspicion, as if all those texts were detective novels, and we, their detectives. Unfortunately, we must also read testimony in this way,

which until about ten years ago was the dominant genre for narrating the tragic past of our countries; questioning the absolute authority over the facts claimed by those who "were there" was important — and still is — to make room for the voices of the "children", who were also "there" but in a different way, and whose vision of history may be crucial to prevent it from repeating in its most violent, ominous, and terrifying aspects.

Sergio Schargel: In relation to the form, why did you choose short subchapters, generally in paragraph format? Similarly, why the choice of dialogue between fiction and newspaper clippings, which permeate much of the book? Or the descriptions in list formats?

Patricio Pron: I like lists, and also thought that I couldn't reproduce those newspaper articles without leaving the reader some kind of visual mark so that they could see for themselves that the omissions and contradictions in those articles say much more about the ideology of their authors and the inhabitants of El Trébol, where the action takes place, than anything else I could say about it. The brief form, finally, was a result of the fact that, at times, writing was too painful for me, or so intense that I had to stop to catch my breath. The procedure is repeated in other books of mine and is always motivated by that, by an excess of intensity that needs to be tempered to be able to continue writing, first, and reading, later, afterward

Sergio Schargel: What is the importance of the Burdisso case for the work? How does the violence of the past dictatorship connect with contemporary violence? A question that may not be so relevant, but that I am personally interested in knowing: Is the Burdisso case fictional, or did you actually conduct this survey in the newspapers?

Patricio Pron: The Burdisso murders are real, and I became aware of them thanks to my father and in the manner I describe in the book. In that sense, we could call *My Fathers' Ghost Is Climbing in the Rain* a "non-fiction novel". In fact, my father commented on it step by step in *The Record Straight*, a series of emails that can be read in the section dedicated to the novel on my website, patriciopron.com

What was interesting to me from the very beginning was that the two deaths established a symmetry that framed another symmetry, that when I was "searching" for my father in a metaphorical sense, he was also looking for someone. The novel could be articulated as a game of mirrors in which some stories explained others and revealed the background of violence and sordidness in Argentine life, as well as the need for justice.

INTERVIEWED:

PATRICIO PRON

He is the author of six short story collections, including *El mundo sin las personas que lo afean y lo arruinan* (2010), *The Inner Life of Indoor Plants* (2013), *Lo que está y no se usa nos fulminará* (2018) and *Bringing It All Back Home* (2021). He has also written seven novels, such as *The Beginning of Spring* (2008), *My Fathers' Ghost Is Climbing in the Rain* (2011), *We Walk in Dreams* (2014), *Don't Shed Your Tears for Anyone Who Lives on These Streets* (2016) and *Tomorrow We Will Have Other Names* (2019). Additionally, he has authored essays like *El libro tachado: prácticas de la negación y del silencio en la crisis de la literatura* (2014) and *No, no pienses en un conejo blanco: literatura, dinero, tiempo, influencia, falsificación, crítica, futuro* (2022). His work has received numerous awards, including the Juan Rulfo, Cálamo, and Alfaguara prizes. It has been regularly anthologized and translated into twelve languages, including German, English, French, Norwegian, Dutch, Chinese, Italian, and Portuguese. In 2010, the English magazine *Granta* selected him as one of the twenty-two best Spanish-language writers of his generation. More recently, he was the Director's Guest at the Civitella Ranieri artists' residency and a guest lecturer in the Department of Literature at the University of Cologne. Pron holds a Ph.D. in Romanic Philology from the Georg-August University of Göttingen and lives in Madrid with his wife and two cats. His latest book is the novel *The Secret Nature of Things of This World* (2023).

Email: patriciopron@gmail.com

ORCID: -

INTERVIEWER AND TRANSLATOR:

SERGIO SCHARGEL

Substitute Professor at the Federal University of São João del Rei. Ph.D. candidate in Literature at USP. Holds a Master's degree in Literature from PUC-Rio and a Master's degree in Political Science from Unirio. Specialist in Brazilian Literature from UERJ. Awarded the Abralic Prize for the best dissertation in the biennium 2020-2021, which became the book *O fascismo infinito, no real e na ficção* (Bestiário, 2023). His research and artistic production focus on the relationship between literature and politics, touching on themes such as political theory, political literature, fascism, far-right politics, Judaism, anti-Semitism, and the work of Sylvia Serafim.

E-mail: sergioschargel_maia@hotmail.com or sergioschargel@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5392-693X>



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