The Will to Murder

The Nature of Truth
By Sergio Troncoso
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Review by Bryan R. Farrow

Troncoso's uneven first novel begins, provocatively enough, right on its brown, hardbound cover. Has someone discovered it, that elusive nature of truth? Is it, as the Socratics would have us believe, part and parcel of the natural universe, to be divined through an application of reason and reason alone? Or is it a matter of human contrivance, just as shoddy or as sturdy as our prejudices will allow? (Taylor, p. 37-41) Two-and-a-half millennia of debate haven't stifled the impulse to ask. We still pine for answers, especially in the moral sphere, and so it's no surprise that '*The Nature of Truth*,' stamped in Courier over the dingy library card depicted on the book's cover, seduces the hopeful amongst us at first glance. Here it is, we want to exclaim. A treatise on that perennial philosophic prize, offered to us (with some luck) in gritty, page-turning prose.

A disclaimer: if those hopes are in any measure dashed, we nevertheless owe Troncoso the respect for an undertaking as ambitious as this one demands. To write "the philosophic novel" is to risk both oversimplified analysis and watered-down narrative in a single volume. To avoid either, the balance between idea and drama must be perfect, the integration seamless. It's daunting work, long and precarious. But for those who care passionately about rigorous argumentation *and* compelling, character-driven fiction—and Troncoso is obviously such a man—the challenge to combine the two modes must prove unbearable. Where, he or she finally resolves, is the harm in trying?

In *The Nature of Truth*, it's craft that suffers more than philosophy. But in the spirit of according Troncoso his due, we're best advised to start with the novel's most conspicuous strength: its plot. As meta-fiction and the novel of information continue to attract more and more of the literary spotlight, it's refreshing to see a writer like Troncoso put his ranging intellect to work fashioning a powerful, old-fashioned *story*, complete with suspense, rising action, climax and a denouement. No sooner does Troncoso establish his

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Yale setting with lyric, razor-sharp detail—painting a campus of "pale yellow stone walls" (p. 27)—than does his protagonist, Helmut Sanchez, start boldly down the road to crisis. This occurs when Helmut, a handsome, morally scrupulous research assistant of Mexican and German descent, identifies his employer Werner Hopfgartner as the author of an inflammatory article some fifty years old. The handiwork of a revered cultural critic, Professor Hopfgartner's rambling piece of pseudo-scholarship from post-war Vienna extols a virtue ethics of shamelessness and strength for those Teutons still harboring guilt over the genocide committed by their parents. Far worse than this, though, and as Helmut learns while vacationing (and sleuthing) in Central Europe, Hopfgartner has buried a demonic past in his native Austria, a past that, for sheer repugnance, makes his present-day philandering with comely undergraduates appear mere dalliances—at least in Helmut's view. What can't be overlooked in Hopfgartner, what can't even be spoken aloud to his adoring, willful girlfriend, Ariane, drives Helmut to assume the role of metaphysical judge, jury and executioner.

None of this, in Troncoso's hands, reads as the tabloid fodder it might become. If we are shocked by the depths of Hopfgartner's depravity, we are at least primed to accept them. From the initial, work-obsessed exchanges rendered between this villain and his assistant, to the revelation of Hopfgartner's near fascist diatribe from 1949, Troncoso swiftly conjures a Heidegger for the 21st century, an intellectual giant whose guilt extends outside the confines of academia and into living history. He is, in the end, as one-dimensional as he is grotesque, but his past can come as no surprise. Neither, let it be said, can Helmut's decision to exact the ultimate retribution for it. A sensitive, generous lover and natural-born Samaritan who once saved the life of a suicidal undergraduate (p. 25), Helmut betrays an empathy more than capable of reaching into the past, toward a little girl all but obliterated by history and the brutality of her persecutors. Helmut's dark, new knowledge—a knowledge of rape, murder and Herr Professor's one-time Nazi allegiance—is all the catalyst needed for realistic tragedy. When Helmut does set out to assassinate Hopfgartner, Troncoso delivers the scene in precise, evocative language that renders the morally fantastic utterly believable: "He sprinted over snowbanks, sliding and slipping. His face glistened with perspiration. His cotton shirt was soaked under his black leather jacket, which gleamed like shiny plastic." (p. 132)

But distractions, aberrations of craft and technique, abound. How, we wonder, is an old, portly curmudgeon like Hopfgartner, an all but impotent man wielding a "gnarly, impatient claw" (p. 32), able to make love with such

"utter, impossible sweetness" (p. 34) to a woman as young and trim as the grade-conscious Alesha Brown? (As with most of the erotic portions in the book, Troncoso leans woefully on the cliché here. In her climactic moment, Alesha whisks out of the "nether world of New Haven" as quickly as Ariane "careen[s] toward Mars" (p. 20) with Helmut.) Can we really connect to, and thus feel sympathy for, an assault victim whose most personal, unconscious display of self—his trash bin—reveals nothing more than bills, empty food containers and "a gay porn magazine" (p. 209). (The victim, librarian Jonathan Atwater, eventually confesses to a love affair with Hopfgartner, an unlikely coupling rife with verbal and physical abuse. Ostensibly, it's the divulging of this affair that's intended to epitomize the tragic, unforeseeable consequences of Helmut's crime.) Finally, and most persistently, just whose head are we in? Committed to dramatizing the epistemic boons and banes of moral relativism, Troncoso certainly makes the right choice in adopting the omniscient voice. From the author's sexual abuse survivor Regina Neumann to his Indian mathematician Bharat Patel, everyone plays a role in constructing a multifaceted "good"—so goes relativism (in a crude summation) and so goes the narrative. But Troncoso establishes no rhythm in switching between points of view, shuffling us too hastily from one third-person perspective to another.

For this reason, readers may find themselves wishing Troncoso had limited himself to just three voices—that of Helmut, Ariane Sassolini and Detective Jack Rosselli—and to one story. We're thrust into Hopfgartner's head only once, for a few paragraphs (p. 48-51), and what we discover neither complicates nor deepens the revulsion we're expected to feel for a Nazi sympathizer and sexual predator. One subplot, involving Hopfgartner's colleague-accuser Neumann, peaks in contrived, screeching hysteria, with the latter at last revealing the childhood trauma behind her hatred for the former. Another thread, the above-mentioned affair with Atwater, does little more than turn a hard-working librarian into grist for the author's sociopolitical mill. All told, Troncoso employs no fewer than seven point-of-view characters to tell these loosely bound tales. The moral truth, if there is one, may indeed lie at the intersection of these voices, but their crowdedness detracts from the genuine, flesh-and-blood characterization the author realizes with Sanchez and Sassolini, along with his smart, narrative-driving use of Rosselli as a philosophic foil.

It is with this trio that the author excels as both fictionist and moral epistemologist. When Helmut ventures beyond good and evil, Troncoso refuses to leave his reader behind. It is more than a liberating world, Tron-

coso suggests. It's also nightmarish one, inducing the worst symptoms of psychosis even in its most well-meaning inhabitants. In conveying this, Troncoso's powers of characterization and description are equal to his analytic ones: "The blade in his hand glimmered in the moonlight. He sliced into the fatty tissue of his forearm. He felt exquisite pain. Blood, hot blood, ran out of his arm. Helmut clenched his fist, and the red stream became fuller, warmer, quicker." (p. 230) With Ariane Sassolini, Sergio gives us a hero for the story playing out in the novel's subtext. A scholar every bit as inquisitive as Helmut, Ariane yet comes to embody the truth that Helmut has forsaken: that conventional taboos, though conventional, serve a grand ethical purpose. When her crisis arrives, again in the form of knowledge, she must make a life-altering decision, and her one of compassion and forgiveness for Helmut betrays a moral fortitude far exceeding that of her beloved. Rosselli, on the other hand, lacks the imagination required for compassion that large. He's too mired in the data of criminology to ever truly understand the criminal. Unable to identify the real killer, motivated not by vengeance but by idealism, Rosselli allows an innocent man, Atwater, to suffer at the hands of thugs.

Clearly, then, *The Nature of Truth* is no allegory. All three of the characters come to embody more than a philosophic agenda. But operating within the minds of each is a set of epistemic practices that Troncoso deftly contrasts. When juxtaposed, the Nietzschean valor of Sanchez, the Christian pragmatism of Sassolini and the blind inductivism of Roselli make for a sustained, intellectual tension that perfectly complements the narrative one. If Troncoso occasionally tips his hand, as he does when Helmut self-consciously asks "What was morality anyway?" (p. 122), or when the street-wise Rosselli puts forth a rather academic-sounding theory of racial division (p. 179-180), the author is careful never to make the conflict *between* his characters' "truths" too explicit. The subtlety, and fairness, with which Troncoso presents these conflicting frameworks stand as the novel's crowning intellectual achievement, side by side with the artistic one: a convincing tale of murder and ruminating guilt.

Craft counts, and *The Nature of Truth* remains a flawed novel. But if the modern philosophic tale has yet to be perfected, Troncoso's debut, as smart as it is captivating, makes a fine case for the genre.

References

Taylor, R. (2000). *Good and evil*. New York: Prometheus Books.