Two Essays on the Translated Poems of
José Domingo Gómez Rojas

The Murdered Poet
Who Introduced Two Friends in the Next Century:
An Introduction to Raymond B. Craib’s Translation
Of José Domingo Gómez Rojas

THOMAS E. KENNEDY

Domingo Gómez Rojas, the young hope of Chilean poetry,
was tortured and went mad and died in a dungeon. Within
the national context of a small country, the repercussions
of this crime were as profound and far-reaching as those of
Federico García Lorca’s assassination in Granada later.
—Pablo Neruda, Memoirs
(tr. Hardie St. Martin)

After the warden of the County Correctional Facility
south of Spartanburg, S.C., decided in the 1990s that
prisoners should be allowed to read only hardbound books,
someone donated several thousand paperbacks (including,
inter alia, Kundera, Neruda, and V. S. Naipaul) to the prison
library. To enforce his policy, the warden ordered the
paperbacks sent to a thriftshop, which was about to burn
them for lack of space. Word got out, and people tried to
rescue the books. Incensed at the idea of burning books,
particularly by bureaucratic whim, fiction writer Susan
Tekulve stuffed over 2,000 of them into her Toyota Corolla.
This was January 1999. She piled books into the front and
back seats, on the floor, under the seats, into the baby
car seat. She crammed so many into the trunk that the
rear bumper sagged. Then she took them to the Writing
Center at Converse College, where she teaches and where her husband, poet Rick Mulkey, chaired the department of English; there, she announced that she was giving away books. Half their covers had been sliced off and the books stamped NOT FOR RESALE. She asked me, the visiting writer at the time, if I wanted any of them. I had so many books stacked around my tiny Copenhagen apartment I could hardly find a place to sit and was about to thank her, No, when she pushed one at me—a fat, Penguin 20th Century Classic. “Look,” she said. “Pablo Neruda!”

She had found a weak spot. How could I refuse a book by Pablo Neruda? This was one I didn’t know existed, not poetry but prose—Neruda’s Memoirs, which he had been editing when he died in 1973, shortly after the coup that resulted in the death of Allende, the first democratically elected Marxist state leader in modern history. I loved Neruda’s poetry and had visited his marvelous home, Isla Negra, a couple of years before, and seen its museum-like, living archive of all things imaginable—a narwhal horn he had purchased in Scandinavia with some proceeds of his Nobel Prize; a full-sized, old-fashioned locomotive in memory of his engineer father; a fishing boat on the cliff outside his window where he could sit and look at the Pacific and pretend to be sailing, despite his deadly fear of the water; ships in bottles; splendid Oriental and African masks; magnificent jugs and bottles in all manner of shapes; painted wooden figureheads from ships; a collection of huge beetles; naturally ornate sea shells; musical instruments—all almost as fascinating as his poems. Now I could read his prose, too.

Neruda’s Memoirs is a wonderful book, written—as could be expected—with beauty and precision and the comprehensive imagination of a poet about his childhood, his travels, his student years, his years as a Chilean diplomat, his flight from the Chilean police, his exile and his life as a poet. For some inexplicable reason, I jotted down a sentence by Neruda about the torture and death of a Santiago poet in 1920, José Domingo Gómez Rojas. I saved the scrap of paper on which I had written his name; but Gómez Rojas’ poetry had not been translated into English, nor was it readily available in Spanish.

That scrap of paper, however, carried the seed of an idea—an idea set off, through tidy coincidence, by that South Carolina warden, a jailer—that led me to a poet who had been jailed, himself, tortured, and had died in prison. Perhaps also because I had done translation and editorial work for the Rehabilitation and Research Center for Torture Victims in Copenhagen, I had prepared myself for this interest in Rojas’ trials. After editing the Rehabilitation Center’s first psychiatric treatment manual, in the mid-1980s, with its many graphic case studies, I was so unsettled that I felt my soul had been damaged. I had to do something to unburden it of those verbal images of torment inflicted on human beings by other human beings.

What I did at the time was to write a short story about a torture victim and the therapist who was treating him. Then I wondered if it was ethical to make use of this information in that way; but the director of the center—a Danish physician named Inge Genefke—read the story at my request and encouraged me to go on with the writing. I produced two short stories, one titled “Flying Lessons,” published in 1992 in The Gettysburg Review, and the other titled “The Burning Room,” published in 1994 in New Letters.

I knew the topic was not finished with me, however. In 2002, I started writing a novel about a fictional Chilean torture survivor named Bernardo Greene. He was in Copenhagen now, physically rehabilitated, but a therapist at the center was trying to repair the spiritual and psychological damage that had been done to him. I watched Bernardo—Nardo—in my mind, limping around
Copenhagen, asking himself how much of himself he really survived, wondering whether he could ever be a man again. At some point in my reflection on his life, I realized that he had been a teacher in Santiago, and I wondered what he might have done that brought the authorities down upon him, why he had been tortured.

I realized that it was because he had taught the poetry of José Domingo Gómez Rojas in his classroom. One of the young students had been disturbed by the poetry and mentioned it to his parents, and the parents made a phone call to the school principal, who, terrified of what might happen to him if he were seen to sanction this, called the police; Bernardo Greene was arrested for teaching "the dangerous songs" of Gómez Rojas. It didn't seem to matter that I didn't know the details of those songs—it was enough that Neruda had identified him as "the young hope of Chilean poetry" who was arrested and tortured and went mad and died in Santiago's asylum, the Casa de Orates.

My novel appeared in 2004 as one of the four independent novels of the Copenhagen Quartet, each set in a different season of the Danish capital, each written in a different style. This was the one with a social conscience. Insofar as I was able to judge, I thought it was perhaps the best thing I had written in 20 years of publishing—as a friend told me, "This might be your big fish." But as with many books, it received good but few reviews—in Ireland, in the United States, even in Chile—and it seemed about to slip away without a trace when the small Irish press that had published it went under in 2006; fortunately, my publisher—a man of many arts, medical doctor, rugby referee, author, cartographer, publisher—named Roger Derham, made sure to return the copyrights of the four novels to me. Three years later, a rare occurrence took place. My agent, Nat Sobel, one day told me he had sold two of my Copenhagen books to Bloomsbury for worldwide publication. "You can take this to the bank," he said. The money was thrilling, of course, but even more, I was encouraged that Bernardo Greene would have another chance. He came out (in the new edition) for the first time in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand in 2010 in a novel titled In the Company of Angels. Nat Sobel had suggested the new title for the novel. When I asked where he had got it from, he said, "Well, that phrase is used four times in the book."

In his new incarnation with In the Company of Angels, Nardo did pretty well. Lots of strong "major" reviews and a couple of first places on "favorite novels of the year" lists. There were reading tours to many cities and countries with radio and TV interviews, and one large university selected it as required reading for all incoming freshmen.

Meanwhile, in 2005, I received an email from a history professor named Raymond B. Craib at Cornell University. Professor Craib specialized in Latin American history and had seen the Irish edition of my novel and expressed surprise that I knew about José Domingo Gómez Rojas, who had only published—he told me—one untranslated book of poems, at the age of 17, in 1913, entitled Lyrical Revolutions. Gómez Rojas also had written a series of plays and much poetry in the 1910s, as well as in prison in 1920. In late August 1920, he was tortured in jail, kept in isolated conditions, rarely allowed fresh air and light, manacled frequently and beaten. (This was uncannily similar to the treatment I imagined for my fictional Bernardo Greene—particularly the beatings and deprivation of fresh air and light.) Gómez Rojas contracted meningitis and was transferred to the asylum where he died. The meningitis was probably the immediate cause of his death, but I consider him as having been murdered. Clearly, I had chosen the right poet for Bernardo to have been teaching to his students.
Professor Craib told me that he was in the process of translating some of the poems of Gómez Rojas and had researched and written about that period in Chile. He and I continued to correspond and soon became Ray and Tom to one another. The basis of our new friendship, perhaps, was our mutual horror about the fact that torture still existed in our world, perhaps the recognition that were we to write what we were writing in a dictatorship, we would likely either face torture ourselves or feel compelled to close our mouths. He and I also shared—in Ray’s words—“a profound feeling of how language could bear witness, give shelter, and bring people together.” My own rejection of torture and dictatorship had never been put to the test of my body, although in 1992, at a public reading in Copenhagen, I read one of the stories I wrote in the ’90s inspired by the work of the torture rehabilitation center; the event was attended by thugs who heckled me threateningly—apparently agents of Pinochet or the Chilean right wing in Denmark, there to keep an eye on things.

Ray Craib is a historian, and he has the patience to pick through tons of papers to verify the facts; he follows the trail of exiled Chileans to other countries and looks through their archives stuffed into cartons, patiently, folder by folder, in order to tell a story that is true to the past without the hubris of purporting to know it precisely as it was. I am a fiction writer; the primary box I have to pick through is in my skull. Yet we share something, perhaps in a particular way that only people from different disciplines can share, each viewing it from a different angle that is at the meeting point of our efforts—our horror at the fate of brave men and women who have risked their bodies, their safety, their livelihoods and their lives on what, for me, anyway, has never been put to the test: my belief in humanism.

I doubt that I would have the courage to pass that test. “No one does,” says Inge Genefke. “Sooner or later they all break.”

Ray sent me early translations of some of the poems of Gómez Rojas, and a few lines in particular confirmed for me that I had chosen the right poet for my novel: “my songs are red, like dynamite. . . . My poetry, rough and strong, does not sing of women, / or of false loves, or of modern pleasures, / nor are my crude lines mystical ballads, / my lines are of struggle.” In a strange coincidence—I fear that saying more-than-coincidence would be too mystical—one of the poems of Gómez Rojas’ poetry Ray Craib had translated contains the line, “In this heart the stars tremble.” I had never seen that poem, but on the first page of my novel, the first sentence of the second paragraph, in a scene where Bernardo Greene wakes from a nightmare, is the line, “Through the window he could see the stars trembling in the clear black night.”

Reading those translations made me think of the fact that had Susan Tekulve not rescued those thousands of books from being discarded by that South Carolina prison warden 10 years before, and had she not happened to select the Neruda memoir to thrust at me, it would be unlikely that I would ever have heard of Gómez Rojas or have thought of having Bernardo Greene teach him to his students, or have met Ray Craib, or be reading his translations of the Chilean poet murdered by the authorities in prison at the beginning of the last century. How strange it seems that a volume of Neruda’s Memoirs, which a South Carolina prison warden arbitrarily deprived his inmates of having the chance to read, should have wound up, quite by chance, influencing my own book about an arbitrarily imprisoned and tortured teacher of the songs of an imprisoned, tortured and murdered poet a century before.

Of course, this is coincidental; but I find it hard to think of it as mere coincidence—or perhaps coincidence is an intrinsic thread in the fabric of our lives, shaping patterns that are predetermined by forces beyond our ken. Too mystical? I think so, too. And yet . . .
On April 5th, 2010, on my very first reading launch of *in the Company of Angels*, held in Porter Square Books in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Ray Craib appeared in the flesh and introduced himself, and we went out for beers afterward. Now we were really friends, and we agreed that the story of our friendship—made possible by the brave young poet who died in prison in 1920, 90 years before—should accompany the first appearance of his Gómez Rojas translations.

Therefore, it is an honor for me to introduce Raymond B. Craib, presenting poems, published for the first time in English, of a brave Chilean, murdered in his youth, whose humanistic ideals survived the test of his body, of his torment and of his death: José Domingo Gómez Rojas. May his name and his story and his poems be remembered.

**The Firecracker Poet**

Three Poems by José Domingo Gómez Rojas

RAYMOND B. CRAIB

There is a powerful passage from John Berger that has stayed with me for nearly two decades. In *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, he writes, “Poems, regardless of any outcome, cross the battlefields, tending the wounded, listening to the wild monologues of the triumphant or the fearful. They bring a kind of peace. Not by anaesthesia or easy reassurance, but by recognition and the promise that what has been experienced cannot disappear as if it had never been. Yet the promise is not of a monument. (Who, still on the battlefield, wants monuments?) The promise is that language has acknowledged, has given shelter, to the experience which demanded, which cried out.”

Such is the promise of poetry, and, to some, its threat: that it will not forget.

That it refuses forgetting.

José Domingo Gómez Rojas—a university student, a purported “subversive,” and a poet, driven to his death in September 1920 by Chile’s conservative forces—has not been forgotten. There is a monument: A park on the edge of Santiago’s bohemian Bellavista neighborhood, not far from Pablo Neruda’s home *La Chascona*, is named after Gómez Rojas, with a small plaque dedicated to his memory. There are memorials: In the decades following his death,
students in Santiago held annual gatherings honoring him, and the Chilean Popular Front made it a point of honor to read his work. He was a prominent figure in the 1930s and 1940s, and his influence extended beyond literature to politics and social activism.

Rojas' legacy is celebrated in the literary world, with many scholars recognizing his contributions. Among those who have studied him is novelist and filmmaker Isabel Allende, who has written extensively about the influence of Rojas' work on Chilean culture.

In conclusion, Rojas' life and work continue to be studied and celebrated in Chile and beyond. His poetry and political activism have left a lasting impact on the country, and his legacy is a testament to the power of art and thought.
to be the savage shriek of a reckless condor
who takes flight, colossal, toward the sphere of the sun

My poetry, rough and strong, does not sing of women,
or of false loves, or of modern pleasures,
nor are my crude lines mystical ballads;
my lines are of struggle, written with skillful hand
I hurl them daringly into the red fray;
may my untamed lines be cries of rebellion

My lines, coarse and fierce, need not be exquisite,
they are the reflection of my self, frank and direct,
of my love which is sublime, which is sublime passion.
I would like my lines to run swiftly like steeds. My lines ring out like modest chimes,
but at times they mimic the sound of cannon

But, oh, on my forehead I wear a gory stain
it is a red stain, it is a mocking affront,
it is the legacy of the century: civilization!
two-faced lie, ignominious outrage
rather than civilized I would like to be savage
to wash my forehead of all execration.

May my fierce songs be the lyrical menace
May my crude songs be my people’s sacred book
for I, unnamed bard, do not expect recognition
and if I unleash my hymns it is because I now feel
preludes to a new day.

May my lines of the dawn
be the revolution’s call to arms

I, child of this century of two-faced swine,
Forsake my century and embrace the fight
With roars of menace and cries of rebellion
And my songs are red, like dynamite,
Like my pains, like my endless anguish,
Like my eternal thirst for eternal redemption.

Lyrical Rebellions earned Gómez Rojas the nickname “el poeta cohete” (the firecracker poet), and his poems, over the course of the 1910s, resonated for university students and worker-intellectuals in central Chile. Both he and his writings were mainstays in the bars and cafes of Santiago where students and workers, bohemians and wobblies—sometimes indistinguishable from one another—gathered to read poetry and talk politics. At such gatherings, Gómez Rojas was a well-known figure, and he would often urge others to put pen to paper, encouraging young friends such as Manuel Rojas and José Santos González Vera—both future winners of Chile’s most prestigious national literary prize and both at the time young autodidacts cobbling together work and living in Santiago’s tenement houses. During this period, Gómez Rojas wrote a number of plays (never published) and a large body of poetry, much of which would appear only after his death, including this one:

In this heart, the earth trembles...
In this heart the earth trembles...
I am man’s cry heard around the world...
I have felt many stars fall
upon my poor exposed heart

In this heart the stars tremble...
The beauty of the world is in the heavens...
(Exhausted, I will sleep many centuries
With the serenity of an eternal dream)

In this heart death trembles...
We were a song lost around the world...
Poets and men: we were human dust
Drifting in the infinity of the ages

In this heart God himself trembles...
The eternity that trembles before silence...
On closing our eyes we depart
And never again, never again do we return!

This again is a poem that blends the religious and the political. Of God and the eternal, yes, but notice also the reference to “trembling” (tiembla): It is a language increasingly commonplace in poetry of the period in Chile. Pablo Neruda in 1921 will win the Student Federation’s annual Spring Festival poetry competition with a poem that opens with the following lines:

Today as the old earth sways
in a dusty and violent quaking
our young souls go forth swollen
like the sails of a ship in the wind

The earth trembles literally with earthquakes but figuratively with the social and political upheaval of the period. Indeed, as one young attorney at the time would later recall, poets, workers, intellectuals and others “got together, discussed, wrote, prognosticated, and organized themselves into an apocalyptic tide that filled the dithyrambic aristocracy with dread.” By 1920, the aristocracy acted on that dread: As popular protests over the costs of foodstuffs, strikes, electoral competitions, and opposition to Chilean military mobilizations on the Peruvian border shook Santiago, conservative parliamentarians and their president, Luis Sanfuentes, used a perceived slight to the patria (the fatherland) by student leaders of the Chilean Student Federation as an excuse to wage war on labor activists and outspoken university students. Foreigners, when not being deported, were required to register with local officials; supporters of opposition candidate Arturo Alessandri were arrested for shouting “Vivas!” in his name; and Santiago’s security section raided residences and offices of presumed radicals or anyone perceived to be associated with the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers

of the World. It was a mid-morning raid by three security agents that netted Gómez Rojas at his residence. After meticulously searching his home for evidence of “illicit association,” they took him in to custody.

Gómez Rojas was brought before the special prosecutor, José Astorquiza, who asked Gómez Rojas if he were an anarchist. The poet replied: “I do not have, dear minister, sufficient moral discipline to assume that title, which I will never merit.” When the minister then attempted to impress upon him the seriousness of the accusations against him—“a crime against the internal security of the state”—Gómez Rojas purportedly uttered some dismissive words. Enraged, Astorquiza ordered him manacled and to solitary confinement for eight days, with only bread and water. But, like many others, his stay was much longer. A month later—still imprisoned, mistreated and abused—his condition deteriorated. Gómez Rojas was eventually moved to Santiago’s asylum, the Casa de Orates, and died shortly thereafter. The mourners at his funeral numbered in the tens of thousands.

He had continued to write while in jail, and a short excerpt from one of those poems is reproduced here: A proud and unrepentant poet challenges the law and the corrupt bureaucrats who enforce it. They, too, will meet their end: death, that great social leveller. The poet remains: in his poems and in, “the promise that what has been experienced cannot disappear as if it had never been.”

Elegies from jail [excerpt]
August 6, 1920

In this jail where I have been brought
Where the injustice of a law imprisons us:
I thought of the tombs in which rotted
Magistrates and judges, now dust upon the earth

...
And I think that some day upon the face of the world
A new justice will shatter old rules
And an ineffable future, righteous and profound
will impress upon life new paths and new forms.
From this jail I dream of the vast future.
Of the tender cry that still beats in cradles,
Of the divine voices that vibrate in the pure
sky beneath the light of virgin moons.

Translator's Note

The original Spanish versions of these poems come
from Fabio Moraga Valle and Carlos Vega Delgado, José
Domingo Gómez Rojas: Vida y obra (Editorial Ateli: Punta
Arenas, 1997). What is good about these translations I owe
to the advice and intellectual generosity of Jeannine Suzanne
Routier-Pucci and Michael Kidd (and to Michael, I also owe
the powerful suggestion for the title “Cry of the Renegade”).
That I completed them at all, I owe to the encouragement
and example of Thomas E. Kennedy and to Leonardo Vargas-
Méndez. These translations are dedicated to the memory of
Richard D. Goff: friend, teacher, mentor and flower in the
cranned wall.

—Raymond B. Craib