

Donoso's *Obscene Bird*: Novel and Anti-Novel

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José Donoso's *Obscene Bird of Night* [*Obsceno Pájaro de la Noche*], widely hailed as a landmark in the development of the modern Latin American novel, presents a bizarre vision of reality, or rather a multiple display of possible or impending realities, intricately interwoven into a textual fabric in which the characters come and go as if in a dream.¹ The literary techniques which Donoso has employed to achieve these results are many and varied, although the overall impact of the novel derives not so much from exhibitions of technical expertise as from the amazing richness of imagination and detail with which the author has created the numerous interlocking segments of which the text is composed. Nonetheless, as with most modern Latin novels, language plays a central role in the structuring of the entire narrative. While certain aspects of the language used in the *Obscene Bird* are dependent on the peculiarities of the Spanish language, there are other features of the narrative structure which, by virtue of their placement on higher semiotic levels, transcend the linguistic gap separating Spanish and English; it is on these latter features that the substance of the present note will be based.

Fundamental to the novel, which weaves its way among the shattered lives of characters which may best be described as apocryphal, is the ambiguity of action and denouement, resulting from a carefully planned and minutely executed structure which permits the normally distinct boundaries separating textual segments to fuse and disappear, and which allows for implicit contradictions and paradoxes by means of rapidly changing textual patterns which provide the reader no opportunity for reflection until the paradox has already solidified. This characteristic, the constant shifting of narrative point of view, results in the highly unique structural impact effected upon the reader. The dust jacket of the Spanish edition speaks of "a consciousness whose center of vision is constantly shifting, identifying itself in each one of its various mutations with the unique consciousness which is

that of the author (or the reader)." Similarly, Hassett² remarks that "Donoso adds to the complexity of the novel by not making any personal distinctions between one character and another...Mudito (Humberto Peñaloza)...is a mass of flowing consciousness who has the ability to encompass and summarize all of the other characters."

Throughout the expanse of the first-person narrative, which nearly always represents some possible permutation of the varied personality of Humberto Peñaloza (alias El Mudito "the little deaf-mute"), there occur a number of switches of pronominal reference, and with them the grammatical signals which mark gender and number concord. At times the *I* of the narrator refers to Humberto Peñaloza (or El Mudito), or to Jerónimo de Azcoitia, the former's mentor, in which case masculine concord is employed; however, on other occasions, the narrator becomes the "seventh old lady" of the decrepit Casa de la Chimba, joining in the self-defeating activities of the old ladies and rejoicing in the miraculous supposed pregnancy of the young orphan girl Iris Mateluna; in these instances, feminine concordance occurs. The women are collectively referred to by the feminine pronoun *nosotras* ["we"] and the adjectives describing the speaker are all feminine in gender.

The use of possessives also serves to signal the rapid shift of narrative point of view between the personage of El Mudito and the various other metamorphoses which he undergoes. An example of the shift between Mudito and Jerónimo occurs in the following (221): "Jerónimo points to the bitch. He snaps his fingers and *his* dogs shoot off, an instant is enough...a minute, no more, for *my* four black dogs, black like the shadows of wolves, to kill..." The next sentence returns the reader to the clear delimitation between the individual characters, as it begins "Don Jerónimo and I set out for the capital the next day." In another passage (190ff.) the narrative begins with the perspective of Jerónimo, and later shifts, quite abruptly, to that of El Mudito. At a still later instance (449) there occurs a complex interchange of narrative consciousness, as the narrator variously and at times simultaneously assumes the point of view of Humberto, now acting as the fictitious baby of Iris Mateluna, of the pair Iris/baby and of the entire group of old women (*nosotras* ["we"]): "They all treat me with kind looks and consideration. Before, when I was only Iris's doll, I wasn't worthy of them...Enthroned on the gold and crimson damask-covered chair of the presbytery, with me in her arms, we receive the devotions of the parishioners...and the old ladies pray and sew and sing all around us, we have brought the bed and the cradle, we have brought everything to the chapel because now there are so many of us old ladies that we can't all fit in the basement..."

The latter passage also illustrates a further technique by means of which the linguistic signal acts in an antithetic fashion,

serving to diffuse rather than bind the narrative threads, by allowing dialogue fragments representing a variety of different characters to co-occur in the same expanse of text, with no overt signals to denote the transition from one to the next. This device has been employed with great success in many recent Latin American novels, reaching a peak in such works as Vargas Llosa's *Conversation in the Cathedral*, Cabrera Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers* and most recently García Márquez's *El Otoño del Patriarca* [*Autumn of the Patriarch*], with earlier examples being found in certain regionalist novels. The technique consists of rapidly juxtaposing fragments of speech whose style and/or morphological composition allows for the identification of the individual speakers, but where no overt indication of the switches is signaled. Let us consider another example from the passage quoted above: "Iris is laying prostrate among the rest of the old ladies who are asking us for things, let my rheumatism go away, let them give us poroto beans instead of garbanzos next week, have them let Rafaelito out of jail for swindling...look here, here it is so you will believe me, let's pray so Mother Benita won't find us, a credo so the child grows up to be a saint, an Our Father so that he never leaves this House, and the old ladies keep on praying and sewing..." Within this passage, one can distinguish by means of identifiable stylistic markers, the voices of Mudito, Iris, and several of the old ladies; the end result is similar to listening to a number of separate conversations upon entering a crowded room, and the final effect is the destruction of the normally neat divisions in a dialogue and the creation of a multiple narrator who is simultaneously each and every one of the personages deployed in the text.

As a variant of this device, resulting in a somewhat more bizarre and startling effect, there are instances where the narrator *simultaneously* plays two roles in a given expanse of text, or where the narrator's interlocutor is constantly shifted. A vivid example of the first technique occurs in the following passage (127): "Iris spreads Damiana's legs apart. I'm not offended by the ugliness of her exposed sex. Quite to the contrary. The fact that we ladies, who are so prudish and chaste aren't ashamed to show Mudito the most jealously guarded part of our bodies shows that belonging to the circle of the seven old ladies has nullified my sex." The narrative point of view in this passage is at once that of Mudito, the man, represented by the first-person singular pronouns, and the transformed androgenous "seventh old lady," one of the group referred to as *nosotras*, who are collectively acting upon Mudito. It is at such points as these that the narrative consciousness, already dangling by a tenuous thread from the structural beams of the novel, falls headlong into a chaotic unity of plurality, combining the simultaneous cognizance of all conscious beings generally assumed to be the sole property of God. The narrator thus

risers from mere omniscience, a trait which, while apparently marvelous in the real world is nonetheless hackneyed in literature, to a transcendental cosmic state in which all things are viewed in their unity, much as in Borges' *Aleph*. However, as with the flight of Icarus, these aspirations to divinity are short-lived and fleeting, and the author quickly returns us to reality with a more traditional format.

The second-mentioned device, that of switching of interlocutors, creates a style reminiscent of schizophrenia, where the speaker undergoes rapid hallucinations regarding the identity of the person(s) to whom he is talking. An example from the text is (145-6): "You shrug your shoulders in a gesture which mocks my fear of the bad weather that I don't want you to scorn because I need for you to make it a part of you, at least for tonight: I am speaking to you, you are listening to me, I am explaining to you that the whole thing of the Giant was a farce...don't come any closer Iris, don't touch me like that, no Humberto, don't let Iris keep touching you because she will destroy your disguises, if you don't run away you will have to go back to being just another nobody who can't remember where he is nor who he is, bring your thick lips close to my mouth and force your thighs between my poor skinny trembling legs, don't let her turn you into Humberto Peñaloza, with his intolerable load of nostalgia, run away so that the pressure doesn't wake up your sex..."

There are at least two distinct manners of interpreting the narrative structure of this passage, each representing a break with more traditional techniques. The first interpretation places the center of narrative consciousness with Humberto/Mudito, with the interlocutors alternating between Iris Mateluna and Humberto himself, in the form of introspection. The second possibility is that the first portion, clearly representing a real or imagined conversation between Humberto and Iris, is succeeded by another consciousness, directing itself toward Humberto, perhaps, in view of the circumstances surrounding this episode, that of Jerónimo de Azcoitia. In either case the point at which the center of consciousness has been switched is blurred by the fluidity of the passage, with only retrospection remaining to solve the dilemma. Thus Donoso has added yet another technique for blurring the identities of the characters into a single flow of consciousness.

In terms of structural analysis, one may characterize the overall impact of the linguistic/narrative devices just catalogued as a display of paradigmatic interpenetration. The paradigm, or underlying system of narrative possibilities, is normally opposed, across an expanse of text, to the syntagm, or concrete realization. However, it is characteristic of certain authors, in particular of certain modern Latin American novelists,³ to portray, in the (syntagmatic) text itself,

events or segments representing more than a single point of the paradigm at a given syntagmatic moment. Thus the relations of simultaneity (paradigm) and successivity (syntagm) are allowed to interpenetrate and the reader is in effect allowed to perceive a set of alternate realities, to glimpse, as it were, the process of authorial creation. In the *Obscene Bird of Night*, Donoso's constant shifting of narrative consciousness is just such an example of interpenetration, resulting in a homogenization of those individual centers of consciousness normally kept distinct by the consequent function of the syntagm. The resulting ambiguity of character serves to underline the highly fluid and mobile nature of the narrative structure itself, by reinforcing the constant interplay between surface structure and underlying pattern.

Having thus elucidated the superficial devices which Donoso has employed in the creation of his novel, one is now in a position to address the question of the literary significance of the paradigmatic interpenetration. This structural technique, common to many recent novels, has assumed a number of different functions: in, for example, Leñero's *Los Albañiles* [*The Bricklayers*] the mental re-creations of the crime underline the detectives' inability to arrive at a solution; in *Conversation in the Cathedral* the constant shifting of narrative personality serves, among other functions, to tie the individual characters into a single unified web of destiny; in *Three Trapped Tigers* Cabrera Infante's repeated use of paradigmatic displays is merely a part of the ecstasy of the author as linguistic creator, and so forth. In the *Obscene Bird of Night*, the shifts of narrative consciousness, while bearing a superficial formal resemblance to the devices used in the novels mentioned above, nonetheless plays a radically different structural role, a role central to the thematic development of the novel itself.

Above all else, Donoso's novel is a novel of duality. Throughout the expanse of the text, a number of possible events or propositions are narrated, together with their opposites. The ensuing picture is one of total ambiguity, in which it is often impossible to determine whether or not the events in question actually occurred. Let us consider a few of these dual structures, with an eye toward tracing the overall structural patterns of the novel.

One is never completely sure whether Humberto, in the disguise of the cardboard head of "The Giant" ever really seduced Iris Mateluna, whether he himself made love to her, and whether he induced Jerónimo de Azcoitia, in the same disguise, to recover his lost potency at the hands of Iris. Throughout the course of the novel Donoso presents various references to Iris' false pregnancy, an event considered miraculous by the old women of the house, and which is viewed in its proper perspective, and then only in fleeting glimpses,

only by Humberto and Iris. As an example of the ambiguity deliberately inserted into the text we find (142) the line "He is the son of Mr. Jerónimo de Azcoitia, who, animated by my envious gaze, engendered in the daughter of a criminal," followed on the next page by "I'm not an old lady, I'm Humberto Peñaloza, the father of your child," and a few pages later by "come in while you wait for me to return bringing to you the father of your child," and on the same page the dialogue between Humberto and Iris in which she says she will tell Mother Benita that he is the father of the supposed child, although laughing to indicate her own disbelief.

Equally ambiguous is the scene in which Humberto makes love to Inés de Azcoitia/Peta Ponce, while Jerónimo presumably makes love to the other member of the pair, the result of which union is the equally ambiguous birth of the monstrous son Boy. The text is filled with instances of mutually contradictory and at times hallucinatory citations regarding the incidents in question. The reader is left with several alternatives as to the love-making scene: we find (215) Peta's request to Inés to bring Jerónimo to the former's room so the couple can make love in the squalid chamber; this, she assures Inés, will result in a certain pregnancy. Inés, unwilling or unable to convince Jerónimo of this strategy, decides to substitute his servant, the loyal Humberto Peñaloza; later on the same page we find: "when she left me, she told me, without telling me: 'you are he'." Humberto reinforces this supposed switch of identity in his (presumably imagined) conversation with Mother Benita when he affirms (217) "I am Jerónimo, despite everything I am not Jerónimo." Shortly thereafter, Humberto entertains the idea that he may have made love to Peta Ponce instead of Inés, misled by the darkness and the confusion. Finally, the chapter ends with the first description of the birth of the monstrous Boy, the first of several times this description will be repeated. Even this event is clouded by textual ambiguity, for we also find, first the passage (51) "Inés and Jerónimo have not had any children. The family name will disappear with them," followed much later, after various descriptions of Boy, by such counterpoised fragments as (162)... "very few people remembered the existence of Boy, his son who lived in La Rinconada, a distant estate where Jerónimo never went... it's not surprising that the memory of Boy would erase itself from people's memories." The same uncertainty surrounds the fate of Inés de Azcoitia, who, in the passage from which the above extract is taken, is stated to have died during child-birth, while elsewhere is described as traveling to Rome to solicit the beatification of the original Inés de Azcoitia, and at the end of the novel lives in squalor with the old ladies.

Boy, a name which French courtesans had bestowed on Jerónimo years earlier, becomes metamorphosed to the (real or

imaginary) son of Jerónimo and Inés, but also, during the course of Humberto's hallucinatory and delirious mental ramblings, to the fictitious child of Iris Mateluna. While the text continues with descriptions of the outfitting of La Rinconada, the world of monstrosity, for the youngest Azcoitia, Jerónimo apparently feels he is the father of the child: "my impotence since that night when I engendered Boy." (227) In a later section, however, Jerónimo, again apparently a figment of Humberto's diseased mind, appears to speak to Dr. Azula and claims that Humberto forced him to make love to Peta Ponce, thus resulting in his subsequent impotence.

The whole incident of the birth of Boy, the establishment of La Rinconada, and Boy's subsequent escape and self-discovery, is totally clouded in the equivocal terms of Humberto's mental meanderings, thus allowing the possibility of the total non-existence of Boy and the return of Inés to the old house after her supposed hysterectomy at the hands of Dr. Azula.

The above-mentioned passages represent only a few of the numerous instances in which the text of the *Obscene Bird of Night*, by means of the paradigmatic sifting described earlier, allows for totally opposite interpretations of the same series of events. To detail each of these instances would be tedious and fruitless, since it would virtually entail a transcription of the entire novel. The reader will, however, have noticed at least the following contradictory and ambiguous episodes:

1. The conversation between Humberto and the escaped Boy at the police station, after Humberto has been apprehended for having stolen a book of his own poetry from the Azcoitia mansion.

2. The dehumanizing operations supposedly performed upon Humberto by Dr. Azula, including the removal of his sex organ and its transference to Jerónimo de Azcoitia.

3. The scenes involving Humberto, Romualdo, Iris Mateluna, and the cardboard head of "The Giant."

4. The various scenes involving Iris Mateluna and Humberto, in which the former expels the latter from the house, treats him like her baby, sleeps with him, binds and tortures him, and finally abandons him at the conclusion of the novel.

5. The castration of Humberto at the hands of Inés de Azcoitia.

6. The death of Jerónimo de Azcoitia in the fountain at La Rinconada.

In these scenes, the total ambiguity and the textual contradictions highlight the fundamental dichotomy reality/imagination, particularly given the highly schizophrenic nature of Humberto's interior monologues. It is this inherent indeterminacy that leads to the dif-

difficulties encountered in reading the novel, and which gives rise to a number of variant interpretations. Rivera⁴ considers the entire series of episodes of the birth and life of Boy and of the false pregnancy of Iris Mateluna as a metaphor of Humberto's fruitless attempts at writing Jerónimo de Azcoitia's biography, an interpretation also hinted at in other studies. Other critics have, in their attempt to come to grips with the structure of the novel, employed a variety of adjectives such as "fragmented," "supernatural," "allegorical," "mythical," etc. Virtually every attempt at explicating the novel has mentioned the intricate structural patterns as well as some of the verbal devices.

The paradigmatic interpenetrations then serve the purpose of establishing the fundamental polarities and dualities of the novel. The concept of the atomic duality of existence is pervasive in philosophy and religion, from Manichaeism to Hegelian dialectics, from the Yin-Yang to Greimas' semiotic parallelogram.⁵ The essential idea behind such feelings is that nothing exists in isolation, that everything is defined in terms of its opposite, its negative, its contrapositive. Many of the critical commentaries of the *Obscene Bird of Night* have focused on the dualities of the character structures, which pair the individual characters off as polar opposites and at the same time allow for mutual interchange and eventual annihilation. The logical next step which must be taken from such ruminations is to consider the duality of the novel as a whole. Donoso, in an epic-making literary achievement, has created not one novel, but *two*, a novel and its opposite. Just as matter and anti-matter annihilate each other, upon contact, in a flash of energy, so do the novel and the anti-novel, juxtaposed within the confines of a single book, destroy the multiple signifiers and ultimately disappear in a dazzling verbal explosion. Donoso has thus elevated a set of literary techniques from the status of mere technical devices to the driving force behind a paragon of pure creation. The various attempts at interpreting individual segments of the novel merely reflect and reinforce Donoso's own statement⁶ that "a symbol means nothing to me... a symbol stripped of meaning... what I want is that these symbols be dynamic, vague, ambiguous, opaque." By creating not only a series of theses-antitheses, but also a complete pair of novel/anti-novel, Donoso has carried to an extreme degree the format of paradigmatic interpenetration and has mirrored in a very vivid, if grotesque, fashion, the dualities and contradictions which constitute human existence.

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NOTES

¹ Although an English translation of the novel exists, the present note, since it is based on usages of languages, is derived from the Spanish edition (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1970). Page references are to this edition.

² John J. Hassett, "The obscure bird of night," *Review 73* (Fall 1973), pp. 27-30.

³ See, for example, J. Lipski, "Paradigmatic overlapping in *Tres Tristes Tigres*," *Dispositio 1* (1976), and the references given therein.

⁴ Francisco Rivera, "A conflict of themes," *Review 73* (Fall 1973), pp. 24-26.

⁵ A. J. Greimas, "The interaction of semiotic constraints," *Yale French Studies*, 41 (1968).

⁶ Interview between Donoso and Emir Rodríguez Monegal, English version in *Review 73* (Fall 1973), pp. 34-39.