

**The Creative Process in the Works
of José Donoso**

edited by
Guillermo I. Castillo-Feliú

Copyright: 1982
Winthrop Studies on Major
Modern Writers

"Evolution Through Paradox:
El obsceno pájaro de la noche and *Casa de campo*"

Like the majority of other major writers of his generation, José Donoso has been at work creating an extensive intertext, not through overlapping plots and characters but rather by means of a progressive narrative evolution, a gradual expanding and enriching of epistemological and linguistic possibilities as each work gives rise to the succeeding one. Donoso excels in reinforcing thematic elements of his works by the narrative structures in which he chooses to present them and his writing represents a continual confrontation with the reader, whose participation covers an entire spectrum of possibilities. It is particularly useful to explore the evolutionary process exhibited by the structures of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* and the more recent *Casa de campo*, which promises to be equally rich, although exploring other directions. Since Donoso does not separate the thematic elements from the narrative devices these latter may be taken as epistemological statements of the manner of presenting information to the reader, the characterization of the reader and the act of reading, and a complete presentation of the writer vis-a-vis his intertextual production.

Attempting to summarize *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* is a virtually impossible task, and trying to reduce the plot to a one or two line summary is absurdly futile. Suffice it to say that among the variety of innovative structural devices the most salient one is the all pervasive, essential and cohesive use of ambiguity, of textual multiplicity which cannot be resolved from within the bounds of the text itself, but which points ever outward to the non-ending participation of the reader, the endless chain of readers which such a work presupposes. Nearly every plot element is presented in such a way that it is impossible to extract a unique interpretation; at times the text explicitly contradicts itself, and at times partially or potentially contradictory bits of information are scattered throughout the narrative so that only by reassembling all the pieces is the reader able to grasp the magnitude of the indeterminacy. Central to the text is a refined and highly stylized version of the paradox posed by many philosophers and made most famous by Descartes in his 'malevolent demon'. In essence the puzzle asks whether it would be possible to discern a superior intelligence or meta-force whose sole design is to confound our minds into thinking that a certain set of elements, as presented and manipulated by this superior force, represent what we consider as

'reality' (as defined by an objective external observer) whereas reality is radically different from what we have been led to believe. Clearly this puzzle has no solution, at least if we insist on remaining within our own sphere of consciousness, for Descartes' demon would cover its tracks sufficiently well to preclude all possibility of discovering the artifice. If one postulates the possibility of stepping outside of the realm of our own senses then there is no way of avoiding an infinite regress, since each level of observation might just be confounded by a demon on a still higher level, and so forth.¹

Donoso poses this puzzle in the form of the Azcoitia family, their monstrous son Boy and the mythical land of monsterdom that has been created by the novel's manipulative demon (in this case the father) in order to keep him from learning the truth about his own nature. At first it looks as though Donoso is going to place the reader in the position of the omniscient demon, Jerónimo de Azcoitia, to observe the construction, peopling, deterioration and eventual destruction of La Rinconada, as Boy, able in the literary artifice to leap out of the level of the text and into the meta-level inhabited by his father, by El Mudito and the other main characters, makes the devastating discovery about himself. Despite such apparent simplicity, this easy interpretation does not form part of the overall reading, for the essential ambiguity prevents the reader from categorically establishing the very identity of Boy, of the monster kingdom, of the relations between El Mudito and his spiritual double Jerónimo, and of the other double pair Inés de Azcoitia/Peta Ponce. The text contains explicit statements to the effect that Inés did give birth to the deformed child and equally telling testimony that she remained childless throughout her life. The same holds for the veracity of La Rinconada, which according to textual clues may or may not exist. The very narrator shifts identity among a variety of centers of consciousness, some of which are clearly identified while others are much more diffuse. Boy as the monster son is also confused with the young playboy Jerónimo, with the perhaps mythical offspring of El Mudito and/or Jerónimo with Peta Ponce, and with the equally doubtful child of Iris Mateluna. The biography of the Azcoitias which El Mudito has written is similarly placed in a way that defies a single interpretation. As a matter of fact it is possible to characterize the entire novel as a pair, a set of narrative elements and its double, a novel and its corresponding anti-novel.² The reader is unable to extract

a single interpretation and this is deliberate, for there is a continuous epistemological progression from the writer, through the text, to the reader. The reader must participate, not in the explicit formative way as the reader of Cortázar's *Rayuela* for example, but rather as the receiver of intelligence that is not in a format that can be passively digested. Rather than a narrative *fait accompli* the ambiguous structure of *El obsceno pájaro* signals the leap into the unknowable, the possibility of a text whose internal attempts at diabolical deception (Jerónimo isolating his son) are precisely mirrored in the way that Donoso isolates his readers from a single interpretation. Obviously the intent has not been to offer a finished package, nor is the reader free to rearrange the puzzle's pieces to arrive at his own customized version; rather the reader is made to confront the entrance to a higher level of epistemological awareness to which he can never ascend. By implication the author himself is not exempt from this ever-receding set of meta-levels. The narrative universe is presented as open, ever increasing via the impossibility of establishing an omniscient point of reference. Donoso has not offered an answer to Descartes' puzzle, he has merely restated it in literary form and has reinforced the fact of paradox, the impossibility of stepping outside our own frame of knowledge.

Casa de campo, while superficially less complex narratively than *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, offers an epistemological structure equally elaborated around another puzzle. In this case the situation is that of two groups of people one of which, at a given moment, departs on a voyage. Upon returning the second group finds that time has passed much more slowly for them than for the group that was left behind, and the confrontation of the two groups provides a discontinuous epistemological leap. This configuration has become highly popularized in the world of modern physics, in the theory of relativity as now taught in freshman physics courses, and takes the form of the 'paradox of the twins'. Basic relativity theory teaches the essential interchangeability of all frames of reference and the impossibility of establishing any absolute Newtonian point of reference. It also states that for a rapidly moving body (moving with a speed approaching that of light), as measured by an external observer time will be slowed down, although within the internal system of the rapidly moving frame of reference no change will be noted. Suppose now that one man takes off from Earth on a rocket which travels at a very high

velocity, while his twin brother remains behind. If at some point the traveller reverses his direction and returns to Earth he will presumably find that his brother has aged far more than he; in extreme cases, what seems like only a year to the traveller will be 100 years or more on Earth. The paradox, for the physicist, revolves around the need to establish a preferred frame of reference, but the (seeming) paradox for the layman lies in the much simpler fact of *time bifurcating*, so to speak, and then coming back together for comparison at some distant point. The intricacies of this problem have been widely discussed by physicists and philosophers,³ and while no true consensus of opinion exists, most scientists agree that this seemingly impossible situation can indeed occur, and may be observed in the not too distant future.

In *Casa de campo* we are presented with the wealthy and decadent Ventura family, who spend each summer at the country estate Marulanda, a mythical domain lost in the midst of a vast grassland. While the children of the family engage in elaborate fantasies the elders, whose ability to come to grips with the real world is equally underdeveloped, plan an excursion to a fabulous picnic spot which subsequent remarks reveal to have been concocted in the overactive imagination of certain members of the family. The parents, seeking as much an escape from their children as a visit to an enchanting place, arrange to travel without their offspring, and elect to take with them the army of servants, all the carriages and all the usable animals, killing those that are of no use. Their outing is planned for a single day, and they feel that nothing can happen to their children during this short time, particularly given their isolation and the lack of facilities for communicating with the outside world. Right from the beginning, certain of the children, most notably the precocious Wenceslao, doubt their parents' intentions, feeling that they have been abandoned forever. As soon as the adults leave, chaos breaks out, Wenceslao's father Adriano Gomara is released from the cell in which the Ventura family has kept him imprisoned, the indigenous population which had been subjected by the family generations ago regains its hegemony over the region, and the children become split into a group of young savages and a reactionary element favoring the old family system and awaiting the return of the parents. Reckoned from the point of view of the children, a year passes before the parents make their eventual return, first in the form of an advance assault by the servants. The

adults, however, insist throughout that they have only been away a single day and thus adamantly refuse to accept the evidence which continually assaults them that a considerably greater period of time has elapsed. The stage is thus set for the paradoxical and all-annihilating encounter between the two groups whom a unitary time has abandoned and reunited only for this chaotic clash. A variety of elements paves the way for this configuration.

Remaining within the frame of reference of the children in the house, at first it appears that Wenceslao's fears have been borne out, and that the family has indeed abandoned them for more than the promised day. As night is falling on the first day the children refuse to light candles, since this would represent an admission of the failure of the parents to keep their word, an unthinkable occurrence. Eventually they do succumb to the necessities of continued survival and life in the house, while becoming more and more altered from the previous order, goes on. The natives take up the dislodged lances which had formed a fence around Marulanda, Adriano Gomara reassumes his position as spiritual leader of the indigenous population, and the entire house is turned into a commune, due to the necessities of producing food, sheltering the Ventura children and members of the native population, and the growing awareness of the need to defend themselves against the eventual return of the elders. Time continues to pass at the accustomed rate, and the reader of the novel learns, at various points, of the escape by Malvina, who has robbed the family hordes of gold and has travelled to the capital to set herself up in business, of the children's survival of the onslaught of the vast clouds of seeds that signal the beginning of the cold season on the grasslands, of the natives' taking possession of their ancient ceremonial costumes which had been hidden in the cellars of the house, and of other equally valid indications of the normal time scheme. Attention is completely diverted from the adults until the first half of the novel abruptly ends and the second half, entitled 'El regreso', focuses on the vacation party, leisurely beginning the return voyage after having spent a pleasant day at a spot which, while perhaps not the one originally conceived, was evidently beautiful enough to more than fulfill all expectations. No sign of anomaly is evidenced until the group, upon stopping at a chapel, discovers Fabio and Casilda, the two children who had escaped with Malvina in the cart laden with gold and had been abandoned by her. Casilda has given birth to a child, which the

perplexed adults, in keeping with the family tradition of ignoring anything not in their plans, pretend is a rag doll and drown. The adults, unable to accept the double anomaly of Casilda having reached puberty so quickly and having had time to conceive and give birth to a child, assume that this is merely an extension of the children's fantastic pastimes, although this time things have gone too far. The two children, dressed in rags and at the end of their forces, tell of the changes that have occurred in the house, of the takeover by Adriano Gomara and the return of the natives to their rightful territory. At first, although dismayed by the outward appearance of the children, the elders still do not take them seriously. It is only after they mention that the entire yearly production of gold has been stolen and that Malvina is at that time already in the capital disposing of it, that the family tradition of shutting off all unpleasant circumstances within the famous 'tupido velo' must be hastily abandoned. Still the family members do not react as though to a true story, but rather as though checking out a rumor which is probably false but which must nonetheless be investigated. The servants, it is clear, are not so disbelieving, and exhort the Venturas, to hand over to them the entire cache of hunting arms in order to carry out an assault on the apparently entrenched house. The Venturas, ostensibly still refusing to believe the truth of the children's accusation, nonetheless comply, leaving themselves for the first time at the mercy of superior forces. After this abandonment of their undeniably superior position, many more of which will follow, the family decides to take a temporal side-step and await the return of the servants with the news that the way has been cleared. Meanwhile they conceive the idea of selling the entire property of Marulanda to the exotic Nordic merchants who have been their chief clients for the beaten gold.

Returning to the reference point of the house, its inhabitants are well aware that more than a day has passed, and yet in another sense time for them has also begun to stand still, for they have been lulled into thinking that the elders will never return to re-establish their absolute dominion over the children and the natives. Although Adriano Gomara, Wenceslao and a few others keep alive the theme of vigilance, no one seriously takes any step toward formulating an active defense. Since the Venturas had taken all the arms with them, the occupants of the house will rely on the ceremonial lances, now in the possession of the natives. When

the servants at last attack, time begins to move again for the occupants of the house. The servants first attack the nearby village and discover several of the children who, through having defied Adriano's new regime, have been sent there for slave labor. The children greet the servants as liberators while the natives are eliminated almost without struggle. The conquest of the house is almost as easy. Adriano Gomara and most of his lieutenants are killed, the remainder of the children swear allegiance to the re-established old order, or at least pretend to, while Wenceslao and his companion go into hiding to provide the last tangible bit of evidence that the insurrection is not entirely dead.

Throughout the entire 'reconquest', the servants are the only ones who appear to enjoy the perspective of both temporal points of reference. On the one hand they have accompanied their masters on the 'one day outing', have enjoyed themselves and have been allowed extraordinary liberties by their masters. On the other hand, they are aware that what has happened in the house took more than a day to accomplish, and in their greed they are faced with a paradox: if they admit that only a day went by then the Venturas will give them one day's wages, while if they insist that a year has elapsed their very jobs and even existence will be endangered through having broken the ritual refusal to accept facts at face value, which characterizes the Ventura family. Only the Mayordomo and the ambitious and deceitful Juan Pérez cannot see things totally clearly, the former through adulation of the all-powerful family and the latter through extreme hatred. The Mayordomo, in order to consolidate his own power and also in unconscious emulation of the Venturas, tries not only to stop time after his arrival, but also to set it back to the day of the departure: he has the windows painted over so that no one can see daylight come and go, he has the children fed at all hours so that they lose track of the periodic demands of hunger, and he attempts the impossible task of restoring the physical aspect of the devastated house and gardens to their previous state. The children at this stage are still operating within their own framework and although they too sense that something is radically amiss, they are not ready to admit that their parents' absence has been any less than a year. Wenceslao and his companion, hiding in a distant cellar, measure time by the loaves of bread that are periodically slipped to them by a co-conspirator, while other children devise ingenious ways of reckoning the passing of time, but it is still the time of

the house, an extension of the year that has passed since their parents set off for their picnic.

At last the elders themselves arrive, together with a group of foreigners who are potential buyers of Marulanda. The homecoming scenes are reminiscent of the fable of the Emperor's New Clothes, since the Venturas, spearheaded by the empty but yet prescient ramblings of the blind Celeste, pretend that nothing is amiss, while the foreigners, expressing their disdain in a form of Spanish even more stilted and artificial than that of the Ventura adults and children, see clearly through all the subterfuges and comprehend immediately the enormity of the situation. It is only out of a combination of deference and sadism that they prefer to let the Venturas discover things for themselves. Such discoveries are not long in coming. Balbina, the half-crazed mother of Wenceslao and the recent widow of Adriano Gomara, refuses to continue the farce that the destroyed house and its battered and starving inhabitants are merely the result of an exceptionally animated day of fantasies, and hysterically tears open the 'tupido velo' and calls for her husband and her son, whose fate she does not yet know, but surely suspects. She meets the same fate that the Venturas had earlier bestowed upon her husband; she is locked away to keep her madness from becoming contagious, but this act in itself signals that the family has finally acknowledged a discrepancy between their internal perception of elapsed time and the outward appearance of matters at the house.

Another irrefutable proof comes in the form of Malvina, now a dazzling concubine in a fancy carriage who turns on the decadent Venturas the disdain with which they had once treated her. Malvina has formed a partnership with the foreign gold merchants and it is she who masterminded the plot to strand the Venturas in the house to await the onslaught of the choking clouds of seeds which wipe out the final vestiges of the once proud family.

One could multiply and analyze further specific examples of the temporal anomalies, but of much greater interest is the epistemological perspective permitted by the author. The reader of *Casa de campo* is in the same relatively omniscient position with respect to the two groups of characters as the omniscient scientist with respect to the rocket travelling man and his earthbound twin in the relativistic thought-experiment. That is, we are able at nearly all points on the time scale, to make an instant comparison between

the two sets of elapsed times (although we are given far less information regarding the moment-to-moment activities of the Venturas on the outing) and we are also present at the chaotic reencounter when the two time systems are revealed to have slipped with respect to one another. Time has moved slower for the Venturas not because they travelled at velocities approaching the speed of light but because they are characters in a literary work whose author is free to exercise his imagination in any way he sees fit in order to create a situation that captivates the reader's interest. There is no fundamental ambiguity about the outcome of *Casa de campo* (although one could perhaps argue that the Venturas were in fact away a year by anyone's frame of reference and that their reasons for insisting otherwise have nothing to do with incongruent time frames); the reader is placed in a superior position from which he can observe the characters flailing about in their self-created dilemmas. This is the basic narrative distinction between *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* and *Casa de campo*, the exalted epistemological perspective afforded by the latter and thereby the greatly reduced participation of the reader in giving structure and meaning to the work.

Almost from the beginning of *Casa de campo* the narrator, that is Donoso, intrudes ostentatiously into the reader's awareness, offering comments on the literary nature of the work and the necessity of never slipping into the complacent feeling that the narrated events are in any way real. At the beginning of the second chapter (53) Donoso clarifies his intentions even more, stating that he wishes to keep for himself, as author, the entire work, holding the reader at a distance which has been steadily decreasing in many recent novels. "Si logro que el público acepte las manipulaciones del autor, reconocerá no sólo esta distancia, sino también que las viejas maquinarias narrativas, hoy en descrédito, quizás puedan dar resultados tan sustanciosos como los que dan las convenciones disimuladas por el "buen gusto" con su escondido arsenal de artificios".⁴ This audacious statement represents both reaction against empty literary posings and presumptuous readers and an attempt at innovation through refurbishing literary devices which disappeared from common acceptance more than a century ago. At several other points Donoso explicitly returns to this same theme, that of maintaining ever foremost the creative personality of the author and the artefactual nature of the work being read. He admits (372) that the speech and actions of the children and the adults is highly unreal, and that the characters are 'emblematic';

there is even a curious chapter in which Donoso the author, armed with the finished manuscript of *Casa de campo*, runs into member of the 'real' Ventura family, which turns out to be much different from that described in the novel. The 'real' Silvestre Ventura cannot understand why Donoso has had to elaborate the family's history to the point of creating a bizarre plot and insists that the family is in no way exceptional. In addition to providing yet another explicit glimpse of the work in the process of its own creation (very similar to that offered by Ernesto Sábato in *Abaddón el exterminador*) this chapter once more suggests the epistemological freedom enjoyed by the author, who can add as many meta-levels as he wishes and delete them equally easily in order to slip back into the main narrative. The reader is peeking over the author's shoulder, so to speak, and the author is occasionally turning around to tweak the reader's nose. At the end of the novel Donoso even refuses to wrap up all the loose ends, stating that to do so would take too long, and underlining even more definitely the fact that one is reading a novel, a work of fiction, a universe where time does not have to obey any consistent laws and does not even have to flow on forever. It can simply stop, leaving at the termination point a series of uncompleted episodes which while perhaps not a common maneuver, is completely legitimate within the scope of fiction.

In *El obsceno pájaro* the reader could not remain passive, awaiting explanations for the anomalies of the text; he had to constantly sort out the ambiguities and create a total meaning for himself which precluded the existence or at least attainability of any meta-level from which all ambiguity and insufficient information would vanish. The shifting narrative voices, the mutually contradictory elements and the overall Cartesian paradox posed by the plot all work together to open the work, and place the reader in the middle of it. *Casa de campo* presents a diametrically opposed achievement: the text, through the possibility of explicitly observing a bifurcation of time and the parallel existence of two universes, places the reader in a position of meta-knowledge that in and of itself defines a work of fiction. In the substance of the text Donoso makes clear this same fact: that the author has not solicited the complicity of the reader. *Casa de campo* is as much a 'meta-novel' as *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*: we see the novel being written and even discussed, much as we witness the creation of *El obsceno pájaro* in the

tormented imagination of El Mudito and Jerónimo de Azcoitia. Nonetheless, *Casa de campo* presents a vastly different configuration of reader, writer and text. In each novel the epistemological structures themselves define the categories involved; Donoso has exercised his options as author to add explicit commentary in both cases: in *El obsceno pájaro* we have the textual ambiguities, while in *Casa de campo* the author's presence has evolved into the self-interpretative statements which provide a running commentary. The intertext of Donoso's writings provides a scoresheet for the evolution of the narrator as author and of the incorporation of autocritical elements which, with the appearance of creating a hermetic text, yet paradoxically continue to attract other readers.

John M. Lipski
Michigan State University