

MARIE MURPHY

AUTHORIZING FICTIONS
JOSÉ DONOSO'S *CASA DE CAMPO*

TAMESIS BOOKS LIMITED
LONDON

CONTENTS

	<i>Pages</i>
INTRODUCTION	1
I. AUTHORIZING VOICE AND TIME	19
II. NARRATIVE STRATEGIES: RE-PRESENTING (RESISTING) CHARACTERS AND READERS	56
III. INTERIOR DUPLICATION/DISTORTION	80
CONCLUSION	104
LIST OF WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED	108

INTRODUCTION

To open the pages of the book *Casa de campo* by the Chilean José Donoso is to glimpse another century and place. The sensual gold tones of the cover design (based on a photograph and reminiscent of a daguerreotype) beckons to readers, diffusing the precision but not beauty of old-fashioned visages. Perhaps our readerly distance is akin to that gap of time and language, that distance from Chilean land felt by Donoso as he wrote the novel.

The book is not only the object I hold in my hand as I read, it is the manuscript which appears in one scene from the novel under "Donoso's" arm ("la versión definitiva de *Casa de campo* finalmente bajo el brazo" (C. 395)),¹ a *mise en abyme* of the novel which reminds us of the process of writing. The book is a bridge, a little "tablón" perched over the void, the empty space of writing, the rectangular shape and denseness of pages nevertheless eluding solidity and certitude, experiences and realities disguised and deferred. The physical contours of the book are reassuringly familiar but its words do not necessarily reassure. For Donoso, "ideologies and cosmogonies are alien":² his novel rejects fixed ideologies and exalts the act of authoring fictions.

Donoso wrote the book at a time when he began to yearn to return home, feeling guilty for his absence, and the writing was, perhaps, a prelude to his physical return. It was a house in the country, a way of inhabiting a never-never land that was neither a return home nor to the painful Chile presided over by General Augusto Pinochet. By the use of metaphor, the book conjures up what his contemporary experience lacked, the Chile of other times, past and future.

Donoso originally began to work on a project, with the help of a Guggenheim, in which he would research the Bavarian Romantic painter Rugenda's work at the beginning of the nineteenth century in order to write a musical comedy. After Pinochet came into power, the project and his visit to Chile were abandoned. In the

¹ The following is a list of Donoso's novels and novellas to date, together with an edition of his short stories: *Veraneo y otros cuentos* (Santiago: Universitaria, 1955); *Coronación* (Santiago: Nascimento, 1956); *Este domingo* (Santiago: Zig-Zag, 1966); *El lugar sin límites* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1966); *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1970); *Tres novelitas burguesas* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1973); *Casa de campo* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1978); *La misteriosa desaparición de la Marquesita de Loria* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1979); *El jardín de al lado* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981); *Cuatro para Delfina* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1982); *La desesperanza* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1986); *Taratuta. Naturaleza muerta con cachimba* (Madrid: Mondadori, 1990).

² José Donoso, "Ithaca: the Impossible Return", *The City College Papers*, 18 (New York: The City College, 1980), p. 5.

agonizing period of *ausencia*, “*Casa de campo* began to grow out of what was by now a huge space-time void resulting in a linguistic schizophrenia”.³ As a result of this separation from his own language – from what he calls the real homeland of the writer – “sprang the whole travesty of *disguise* in *Casa de campo*. Diction in disguise, locale in disguise, characters in disguise, problems in disguise.” He could thereby bridge the gap of guilt, space and time, giving his long *ausencia* from his homeland a meaning. The distance from Chile, which originally allowed him to become a writer, would thus also eventually call him back to live in Chile in 1980. That year, he tells of his longing to return to Chile to write without a disguise.

He wrote *Casa de campo* in the tiny village of Calaceite (Teruel), Spain, constructing a radiant, even blistering metaphor as he describes it, which would become the improbable but all too real house in the country: “In order to keep our Ithacas at a safe distance we recycle them into metaphors.”⁴ Donoso, like his description of Pablo Neruda, fills the void: “In *absence*, he does not weep by the shore, like Odysseus: out of the void in time and space grows that huge metaphor which he substitutes for the lost world, and fills his absence with it.”⁵

His absence from the scene of Allende’s and Pinochet’s Chile allows Donoso to recreate it by virtue of several substitutions: writing in the Aragonese region of Spain, he invents an artificial language the better to convey his metaphor of Chile. Furthermore, he moves to a Chile of the late nineteenth century, which is also the anachronic and fictional Chile in which his father’s eccentric great aunts and other visitors and relatives steeped his childhood home. The writing temporally and situationally moves sideways, to the space or century next door, in a metaphorical play not unlike that to be found in his novels, *El jardín de al lado* and *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, where second spaces, houses and worlds illuminate the first. He chose aspects of irreality to create a distancing novel, with elements such as his “experience” of the nineteenth century. For Donoso, the nineteenth century was a fantastic, marvelous, and a totally unreal world, with utterly false values.⁶ The nineteenth-century world and its unreal quality as an actual experience of Donoso through conversations and reading, as well as his nineteenth-century relatives, is suggested metaphorically in the fantastic (thus distancing) style of the novel. As Donoso and other critics have said, his metaphors of events are never grounded inside the novel but only function because readers recognize the possible correlatives in reality.⁷ Nothing remotely like his story of the Venturas can be

³ Donoso, “Ithaca”, p. 14 for this and the following quote.

⁴ Donoso, “Ithaca”, p. 5.

⁵ Donoso, “Ithaca”, p. 10.

⁶ Donoso spoke to me about this in an unpublished interview I had with him in Davis, CA, 1988. He also speaks about his childhood and the nineteenth-century world in his autobiographical piece “The Old House”, *The Wilson Quarterly*, 11:4 (Autumn 1987) pp. 152–63. This falseness refers in part to his extended family, as with his wealthy, and in one case, “gone”, great aunts in his childhood. His bedridden aunts, who were wheeled in for mass in their canopied beds, spent their declining years surrounded by hosts of servants, reminiscing about their life in Europe, the court of Napoleon III and the like.

⁷ Donoso spoke about this during my Davis interview with him. Carlos Cerda writes about metaphor in *Casa de campo*, *José Donoso: originales y metáforas* (Santiago: Planeta Chilena, 1988).

attributed to the recent history in Chile, except as allegory and metaphor (by which it then becomes extremely relevant).

If we pick up the image of the book once more, we note that within the pages of the novel wordless books appear as a record of an absence, a mirror of the emptiness which haunts the novel's world. The hypocritical and powerful Ventura family, the protagonists of the novel, possesses a library with fake books whose elaborate leather bindings hide the fact that "adentro no había ni una página, ni una letra impresa" (C. 32). The selection of books was based upon "una lista de libros y autores que compendiaran todo el saber humano" (C. 33). In an obvious parodic register, the empty books refer to an attitude in that world in which knowledge and reading are disdained. Books are only for revolutionaries and pretentious professors, but not in grave danger of being read. The empty books are above all an indicator of the false rhetoric and phony reality of *Casa de campo*'s characters. Within the novel's poetic code, the empty books subtly recall Borges's metaphor of the universe as a great book, in which all physical reality, the deeds of history and all things created by man are like syllables of an immense alphabet. The universe "que otros llaman Biblioteca" includes all books written and those which could be written.⁸ As with Borges's allusions to fictitious titles and imaginary references, where traces of reality are shuffled to produce other possible worlds, Donoso too constructs a universe where there is no clear origin or initiator of stories but rather a space of writing symbolized by the library of books, never completed but momentarily filled with the rumors and inventions of narrators and characters. The layers of artifice cover the imaginary, seemingly non-existent world which fills *Casa de campo*. The library and its books are pure inventions, as the narrator tells us about every facet of the novel.

Thus *Casa de campo* refers to both the object of consumption discussed by the "author" and a character in a scene within the novel, and the process of writing alluded to by the existence of the versions and of variant readings of the novel within itself. *Casa de campo* as object was also the manuscript typed on the same typewriter at the Library of Congress upon which Carlos Fuentes typed *Terra nostra* and upon which Mario Vargas Llosa typed *La guerra del fin del mundo*. It is the book, the books, which found their way into Chilean and many other bookstores. Indeed the book was well received in Chile, even during Pinochet's military dictatorship despite the fact that, as Donoso explains, "people know what it's about. The thing is that in Chile it doesn't really matter. Books are too expensive, nobody buys books in Chile anyway. So, it's self-censored."⁹

The book as metaphor of the world is appropriate in a consideration of Latin American writers since the importance of language and poetics, along with an intense questioning of national identities, has been a crucial aspect in defining Latin American literary trends. The question of the empty rhetoric of dictatorships and

⁸ George Steiner, "Los tigres en el espejo", in *Jorge Luis Borges*, Ed. Jaime Alazraki (Madrid: Taurus, 1976), p. 242.

⁹ Donoso, in "A Round Table Discussion with José Donoso", in *The Creative Process in the Works of José Donoso*, ed. Guillermo I. Castillo-Feliú (Winthrop, South Carolina: Winthrop Studies on Major Modern Writers, 1982), p. 31.

paradigms of power has been central to many “novelas del dictador” and Latin American literature generally. González Echevarría has made a strong case for the interplay between power and rhetoric in Latin American fiction. He refers to the historical circumstances that draw language and politics toward one another, pointing to the fact that “dictators and the language in which their image is cast start simultaneously”.¹⁰ His point is underscored by Cortázar’s suggestion, which he quotes, that the “language of the left . . . wipe off that drool” since there is a need for a new language, distant from the rhetoric of power which according to González Echevarría is “coterminous with power itself” on both sides of the political divide in Latin America. Donoso, in his parody of empty language and empty power, works along the experimental lines which define a great many of Latin American fiction writers, such as García Márquez, Cortázar, Sarduy, Puig or Carpentier. Gutiérrez Mouat refers to the manner in which the verbal fictions of *Casa de campo*, like the fictions of constitutional rule in many Latin American governments, mask and replace truth and reality in a grotesque carnivalization of power, as in dictator novels such as Miguel Angel Asturias’s *El señor presidente*.¹¹ Lucille Kerr and other critics point to Latin American writers’ marginalized status in relation to North America and Europe, born of its specific colonial experience, as one of the reasons why language and the questioning of authority play such a role in its literature.¹²

Furthermore, *Casa de campo*, like many of the contemporary Latin American novels and in particular like other self-conscious novels, addresses several problematics explicitly or implicitly, many of which are issues of great importance in modern criticism and literature. The questioning of realism, representation, language and meaning, and their interrelationship, are issues which have obsessed contemporary writers. Implicit in many of the questions is the challenge to the authority of literary convention, along with challenges to authorities in general. Even though it could be claimed that all novels are self-conscious, some are more so than others. The self-conscious novel can be defined in part by its differences from the Great Tradition of realism. Whereas the realistic novel uses words and literary conventions to give the illusion of a world of characters in a social context, the self-conscious novel insists that it is constructed with words and literary conventions in order to undermine this illusion. The realists’ aim to mirror the world as closely as possible is predicated upon the assumption that one can make objective observations about the world. The self-conscious novelists, however, believe that such objective observation, and even more, representation, is impossible. Since fiction cannot be, as Robert Alter points out, “a transparent container of ‘real’ contents”, a self-conscious novel “systematically flaunts its own

¹⁰ Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1985), pp. 1–2. This and the following quote are on these pages.

¹¹ Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat, *José Donoso: impostura e impostación: la modelización lúdica y carnavalesca de una producción literaria* (Gaithersburg, MD: Hispamérica, 1984), pp. 210–11.

¹² Lucille Kerr, *Suspended Fictions: Reading Novels by Manuel Puig* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987), p. 4.