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Review Of "Understanding José Donoso" By S. Magnarelli, "José Donoso: Desde El Texto Al Metatexto" By E. Luengo, And "The Tension Of Paradox: José Donoso's 'The Obscene Bird Of Night' As Spiritual Exercises" By P. M. Finnegan

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Review
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de *El reino de este mundo*, surge de la lectura de Webb como una figura cuya mitificación del entorno es revolucionaria. El mito funciona, pues, como los ideales políticos que inspiran revoluciones en *El siglo de las luces*. Glissant también convierte los mitos de origen en profundos análisis de la experiencia colonial en Martinique. Hay en Glissant siempre un tono más teórico, y su mundo novelístico se me hace a mí profundamente marcado por el de Carpentier, a quien había estudiado por cierto. Harris, por su parte, es el más introspectivo de los tres, y el más interesado en la vida interior de sus personajes. Según Webb, Harris rechaza la historia, que es la pesadilla de la que los escritores caribeños intentan despertar. Por eso Harris subvierte la historia, subordinándola a la imaginación mítica, en visiones que no están tan nítidamente articuladas como los argumentos de Carpentier. Pero *Palace of the Peacock* y *Los pasos perdidos* son novelas en diálogo la una con la otra, tal y como demuestra Webb en su acucioso estudio de ambas.

*Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction* pone de manifiesto una vez más la unidad del Caribe, a pesar de su aparente diversidad. El libro de Webb es, por su rigor, amplitud de investigación y nivel intelectual un modelo de estudio académico. Es de lo mejor que he leído en el campo de los estudios caribeños, y una contribución de peso al estudio de cada uno de los tres escritores en que se centra.

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Within the past five years the number of dissertations, critical essays and full-length books on the fiction of Chilean author José Donoso has increased dramatically. Donoso is unquestionably one of Chile’s most gifted and widely read novelists and the most prominent figure of his country’s “Generation of 1950.” Winner of Chile’s Premio Nacional in 1990, he is the author of more than a dozen books, with his latest novel due in book
stores within the next six months. These three recent studies of Donoso’s narrative constitute valuable contributions for both specialists and non-specialists. While they differ in critical approach, overall emphasis and the specific texts analyzed, they offer insightful readings of some of the author’s most demanding works.

*Understanding Donoso* is the most recent publication in an excellent series on modern European and Latin American literature initiated by the University of South Carolina. The series was planned as a guide for undergraduate and graduate students as well as for non-academic readers and has as its principal approach an emphasis (though not exclusive) upon the socio-historical aspects of literature. Magnarelli’s book encompasses all of Donoso’s fiction except *La misteriosa desaparición de la marquesita de Loria* (1980); *El jardín de al lado* (1981); *Cuatro para Delfina* (1982); *Taratuta. Naturaleza muerta con cachimba* (1990) and the majority of his short stories. With the exception of her chapter on *La desesperanza* (1986), which tends to be a bit sketchy and lacks the tight organization of the other chapters, this is an elegantly written, well-structured and intelligent study. Indeed, it could serve as a model for this type of critical overview.

Central to Magnarelli’s critical approach is the firm belief that Donoso’s narrative world is never a mere reflection of an external referent and that his texts are much more concerned with how we perceive reality than with what we perceive. Reality in Donoso is, according to Magnarelli, an elusive term constituted by an endless array of masks, voices and perceptions. She views *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* as the embodiment of this elusive narrative world in which the reader confronts a series of packages that are wrapped over and over again. The act of wrapping reflects for Magnarelli the essence of Donoso’s fiction, since there is nothing hidden beneath the layers to be discovered by the reader.

Selfhood in these novels also represents for Magnarelli nothing more than an ever-changing number of wrappings, masks and disguises. Similar to the absence of a specific contents in the packages, there is no final, exclusive identity to be found beneath the masks of Donoso’s characters. Magnarelli links such flux to the rigidity of the social structures portrayed by Donoso, which eliminates consciousness of perhaps a more authentic identity, so that ultimately the imposed mask or wrapping becomes the self.

On the level of technique Magnarelli shows convincingly how the act of layering is also mirrored in Donoso’s use of what Todorov calls *en-chassement* or narrative embedding. Donoso’s texts constitute for Magnarelli an obsessive insertion of one story within another, of one voice within another, all of which produces a narrative discourse that functions much like a *caja china* in which all stories and all characters relate to one
another both metaphorically and metonymically. The end result for Magnarelli is a world whose reality is a continually moving target, blending conventionally exclusive categories and identities, which ultimately underscores our inability to know anything unequivocally. This constant embedding, the lack of narrative reliability, the novels’ action of pure fantasy, lead Magnarelli to conclude that Donoso’s texts embody an obvious rejection and parody of the mimetic tradition. She views his writings as an ongoing dialogue with one another, a kind of mimesis of artistic works.

Enrique Luengo’s study limits its analysis to two of Donoso’s most complex novels: El obsceno pájaro de la noche (1970) and Casa de campo (1978). The years 1950–1969 in Donoso’s literary career represent for Luengo a first cycle characterized by the use of essentially traditional narrative devices. A profound change in Donoso’s fiction occurs for him with the publication of El obsceno pájaro de la noche, a change that he alleges critics have not adequately recognized. In fact, he tends to dismiss (often unfairly) most critical work done on this novel and Casa de campo as either excessively psychological or socio–historical in their approaches, producing remarks filled with vagaries and ambiguities. In spite of such distortions, Luengo’s study is worth the reader’s attention, since it helps to clarify some of the more obscure structural aspects of two of Donoso’s most difficult texts.

Luengo begins by challenging the assertion that El obsceno pájaro de la noche is a novel that cannot be reduced to an objective, rational understanding. While he recognizes the text’s innumerable contradictions, these do not, in his judgment, preclude its being described within a theoretical framework that clarifies the narrative process at work. Essentially, he rejects the notion that the novel has no central core, that it is just a wrapping. In this respect he questions earlier criticism done on the novel by Magnarelli and others. Casa de campo represents for him the inauguration of a new period in which Donoso creates a narrative space that incorporates new literary devices that invite the reader’s sensitivity to the artificial nature of the contemporary novel and the exhaustion of its literary forms.

Heavily influenced by the narratological theories of Barthes, Genette, Lotman and Bal, Luengo undertakes an analysis of each novel’s narrative discourse. He begins by isolating the different levels of meaning within each text and then identifies their unities and the system in which these unities are inserted. Next, he clarifies the meaning that these unities put into play and the nature of the meaning produced. His theoretical framework is composed first of an analytic component and second of an interpretative one. The analytic stage involves isolating and describing the novel’s parts with the goal of identifying the relations established between
them. The interpretative phase, which functions specifically on the semantic level of discourse, corresponds to the relations between the text’s signs and the overall context produced. Within this framework the text is viewed as an aesthetic sign endowed with meaning whose signifiers are linked to the elements isolated in the analytic phase.

Through a close analysis of the narrator and the “narrataire” Luengo shows how both of Donoso’s texts transcend conventional limits of intelligibility and verisimilitude associated with realist fiction. The narrative model constructed in Casa de campo acquires, according to Luengo, a value unto itself that opposes the traditional image of the text in which writing is nothing more than a means to imitate an external reality. Similarly, he views the world portrayed in El obsceno pájaro de la noche as an obsessive rejection of empiric principles as the only means of knowing reality. He demonstrates how in this novel Donoso creates a reflexive space from which it becomes possible to explore a series of processes of human intellection that border on the irrational, the prelinguistic and the prelogical. Finally, he examines how both novels, through the use of narrative technique, question the validity of an écriture whose function is to transmit meaning that is to be consumed outside of language itself.

Although somewhat repetitious in its assertions, Pamela Finnegans The Tension of Paradox is a highly original and readable study of El obsceno pájaro de la noche. Unlike previous studies, it stresses the linguistic and structural importance of the text’s emphasis on spiritual exercises. The novel is seen in terms of a parable of our relationship to language and the world. Recognizing the contributions of earlier criticism on the novel, Finnegans contends that it does not show how the text’s self-awareness reflects the twentieth-century’s quest to resolve the problem that absolute meaning is no longer attainable.

Finnegan agrees with critics who perceive Mudito as the text’s implicit author but questions, as others do not, why this character reigns in muteness. She suggests that muteness is a prerequisite to exercising the spirit and becoming incarnate. In keeping with this logic she analyzes closely the novel’s epigraph and how it embodies a statement concerning human spirituality. For her, the epigraph’s language is pivotal to the thematics and structure of the entire novel because it introduces paradox and oxymoron as the basis of the text. She views Mudito, within his narrative space, as the one who bears witness to the absence of spirituality and to the creative potential of the world. Mudito sacrifices his voice so that we may hear the materiality of life and grasp its lack of spirituality. In this respect, Mudito seeks communion with God through his muteness and this leads Finnegans to conclude that the act of reading symbolizes our participation in our own spiritual exercises.
In analyzing the novel Finnegan employs Hayden White's methodological approach to historical discourse in which he defines four distinct modes of emplotment: romance, comedy, tragedy and satire. Finnegan views the terms romance and satire as characteristic of the essence of Donoso's novel. It is romance, she argues, in the sense that it recounts the quest for "Beauty and Light" while as satire it eliminates the possibility of attaining such a goal. In this respect, Humberto imitates Jerónimo Azcoitia in order to experience the aesthetic ideal of beauty just as Mudito emulates Christ in order to achieve peace and knowledge. There are three recurring metaphors that Finnegan uses in developing these ideas: 1) Mudito, the exorcitant who listens and waits for God's message; 2) Mudito, the prophet who reveals God's Word and 3) Mudito's manuscript in which he records the Word. Each of these clarifies for her the presence of a text whose language is parabolic in nature and communicates a world of linguistic tension that ultimately suggests its own apocalypse. In sum, Donoso's novel embodies for Finnegan a twentieth-century parable of our need to know and to set in linguistic order the experiential world.

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Irrony is a timeless subject, which may explain the ten-year hiatus between the publication of Tittler's book and this review. The most elusive concept in art or rhetoric, irony is saying (in words, images, or sounds) one thing and meaning either the opposite or something quite different.

Textual irony may be verbal: in Exodus, Moses wants to know God's name, but the only name God will give him is I AM THAT I AM, which is no name at all. It may be situational: tragedy's reversal and recognition scenes entail irony because both the protagonist and the audience learn that reality is other than what it seems. Related to these, the traditional Spanish concept of desengaño is ironic because the individual in question finds out this world is a sham. Irony also encompasses the relationship between a first-person narrator and his past self. The relationship between innocence and experience in any character's life is bound to entail irony.

Without irony there could be no literature. And this is what renders Tittler's essays on irony in Spanish-American prose fiction self-evident and incomplete. Why not extend the concept of irony so that it includes...