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2012

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“I HAVE ESCAPED INTO THE INTIMACY OF A FAMILY”: UNA
ENTREVISTA INÉDITA DE JOSÉ DONOSO A FINES DE LA DÉCADA DE
LOS SESENTA

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José Donoso (Chile 1924-1996) estuvo en la Universidad de Iowa al menos en dos ocasiones. Primero, durante el año académico de 1966-1967, cuando se unió al Taller de escritores (Writers' Workshop) como profesor visitante. Más adelante en 1991, mediante su participación en el Programa internacional de escritores (International Writing Program), experiencia a la que el lector de Donoso puede acceder parcialmente a través del testimonio del escritor en su *Historia personal del Boom* (1972).

Los materiales contenidos en los *José Donoso Papers* del departamento de Colecciones Especiales de esta universidad constituyen un valioso legado. La colección cuenta con diversos materiales que cubren desde los inicios de la carrera de Donoso hasta 1967, entre los que destaco las numerosas versiones mecanografiadas de obras publicadas e inéditas. Se trata de 48 cuadernos de trabajo en los cuales el investigador puede obtener una fascinante imagen del escritor en pleno proceso de composición, tanto de sus cuentos como de sus novelas *Coronación* (1957), *El lugar sin límites* (1966) y *Este domingo* (1965). En efecto, 19 de estos cuadernos guardan los primeros ocho años del proceso de escritura de su novela más ambiciosa en términos de experimentación formal: *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1970). Por último, los *José Donoso Papers* de esta universidad también albergan parte de la correspondencia personal del escritor, materiales que dejan –por ejemplo– testimonios de primera mano de la agencia de Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Ángel Rama y Emir Rodríguez Monegal, en la creación y desarrollo de la maquinaria del Boom durante la década de los sesenta.¹

¹ Para una descripción detallada de esta colección, ver http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/msc/ToMsc350/MsC340_Donos0/Donoso_340.htm. Para acceder al índice de los *José Donoso Papers* en la Universidad de Princeton, ver <http://findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/C0099#main>. Para un testimonio del origen de la colección en la Universidad de Princeton, ver “Corresponding Archives: Letters from the Latin American Literary Front”, de Lucille Kerr

Lo que sigue a continuación es la transcripción de una entrevista que José Donoso dio en 1967. Tuve acceso a esta cinta en el 2010 gracias a la ayuda del personal del Writers' Workshop de la Universidad de Iowa, quienes localizaron este material en sus archivos. La entrevista fue transmitida en Iowa City, en el programa titulado "Radio workshop" dentro de la serie "Literary topics". Lamentablemente, hasta el presente, no he podido corroborar el nombre del entrevistador ni su medio de transmisión.

Antes de dar paso a la entrevista, quiero señalar que he optado por ofrecer una transcripción íntegra de ésta en su lengua original, con la finalidad de ofrecer a los lectores una versión fiel al material. Del mismo modo, he incluido algunas notas al pie de página que aclaren o ayuden al lector a seguir la conversación tal como se dio y quedó grabada en la cinta que nos ocupa, en vez de editar el texto. Finalmente, quisiera agradecer a Debie West, de la Universidad de Iowa, por ayudarme a localizar este testimonio significativo no solo de la carrera de José Donoso, sino de la historia literaria y cultural de América Latina. Del mismo modo, a las profesoras Connie Smith y Antonia Delgado, de la Universidad de Mary Washington, por su generosa ayuda en la transcripción de la cinta. Finalmente a Pilar Donoso (1967-2011) y a su hija, Natalia Donoso, por su apoyo a mi trabajo de investigación.

Introducción: Tonight on "Literary topics" is José Donoso, Visiting lecturer in the Writers' Workshop here, at the University of Iowa. Mr. Donoso who is originally from Santiago, in Chile, has published two volumes of short stories in Chile, and his first novel *Coronation* won him the William Faulkner Foundation Prize in 1962. *Coronation* was published here in English translation in 1965. Since *Coronation*, Mr. Donoso has had two novels published in Latin America, *Place Without Limits* and *This Sunday*. *This Sunday* has now been translated by Lorraine O'Grady Freeman and is due out this spring. In this program Mr. Donoso will read part of *This Sunday*.

ENTREVISTADOR: José, how do you see yourself in the context of the writers of Latin America?

JOSÉ DONOSO: I guess it would be easier to answer this question by talking of generations. Latin American literature came into view, into world view, let's say, with people like Borges and Neruda who would be called let's say the great big men of Latin American letters. These are men who must be something like 60-65 years old, almost 70, and their names have now at a very old age become very famous in the whole world of course. Then there comes another generation after them, which is a very interesting generation, because it's the generation which is now in full production

(77). Para una introducción a los cuadernos de trabajo relacionados con el proceso de escritura de *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, ver tesis doctoral *José Donoso, el Boom y El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (2010).

and they are people like Julio Cortázar for instance, the Argentinean. Antonioni just made a film called, what is it now, *Blow up*?

ENTREVISTADOR: His new film?²

JOSÉ DONOSO: Yes. That is made from a Cortázar story, for instance. His novel *Hopscotch* was published here, last year and it is an amazing book, and I think everybody is amazed by the talent of this man. There is another Argentinean, called Sábato, who is between 55 and 60. Then there is Octavio Paz the Mexican, and Juan Rulfo the Mexican. These are people who are on absolute full production of their work, at the peak of their career. And then after that generation let's say, there is another generation to which I would belong, who are making their way still, are still let's say, at the start of their maturity, beginning of their maturity, and that would include people like Fuentes from México, García Márquez from Colombia, Martínez Moreno from Uruguay, and Mario Vargas Llosa from Perú. Now we have begun farther along than the rest, because at a very early age, or relatively early age, we have been translated into many languages. While people like Borges, for instance, had to wait until he was what, sixty? to be translated and for his name to become well known. So I belong to this third generation.

ENTREVISTADOR: Yes, that first generation are virtually classics now, I mean in a worldwide way, aren't they?... Neruda and Borges.

JOSÉ DONOSO: Yes, they are just classics in the world.

ENTREVISTADOR: And there are signs of a three and a half generation coming through now as well.

JOSÉ DONOSO: Yes, there are many fascinating things happening in Mexico for instance. There is a very young generation of people 20-21 and 22 who are doing really fabulous things, and one I would like to hear, the book of one of them called *Gasapo*, that's the name of the book, and the book³ was called Gustavo Sainz who is becoming world trade three has just been won the Harper Row or Farrar Straus and will be published here very soon so they're even earlier than us... to be known in a vast circle of people.

ENTREVISTADOR: I guess we'd be making a mistake so far, and it is a very common mistake. For example, in England all eyes are turned to Latin America as a though it were one big country. Here as well, there is talk of Latin America as distinct from the different countries. How does this... you as somebody -who is slotted right

² El tono de interrogación y la breve pausa permiten deducir que Donoso necesitaba confirmar el título de la película de Michelangelo Antonioni, *Blow-Up* (1966), pero que el entrevistador no pudo corroborar esta información.

³ Donoso se equivoca. Dice “book” en vez de “author”.

there in a particular compartment- how do you see yourself in relation to the whole of Latin America, or do you consider yourself a Chilean?

JOSÉ DONOSO: Oh well I consider myself many things. I consider myself, first of all José Donoso, a very small thing, and then something bigger which is Chilean, and then something which is bigger still which is Latin American, and then something which is bigger still, which is let's say the world. I can't separate all these planes of existence, all of them are me. I write as all of them, I hope...

ENTREVISTADOR: Quite, but in Chile itself, is there a thought amongst critics that there is such a thing as a Chilean school of writing?

JOSÉ DONOSO: Yes, surely. I think this is one of the things that my generation, and I think more so future generations coming after me, is fighting against very strongly. I mean with communications what they are today, the boundaries and differences between countries being so quickly done away with culturally, it's ridiculous to be talking anymore of, let's say, a Chilean school of writing, or a Peruvian school of writing, or any particular school of writing, so far as I can see, I mean. All frontiers are beginning to be blurred, but there is a countercurrent to that, of people who want to keep the identity of their very small countries tight and turned inwards and instead of doing away with frontiers and making the literature of their own countries something general, they tend to use, for instance, a vocabulary which will be more of their own country. A kind of Spanish which would be understood in their country and probably very little in other countries, for instance, because Spanish, you see, is not just one language in Latin America it's thousands of languages. Sometimes I read Mexicans and I hardly understand a word of what they are writing, it is very difficult sometimes.

ENTREVISTADOR: We might slip in here between the series "Writers at Work" in March, there is scheduled a program of two Chilean stories, including "Paseo" by yourself translated very splendidly by Lorraine O'Grady Freeman, and another story by a friend of yours and friend of mine, Cristián Huneeus, also in English.

JOSÉ DONOSO: He would belong to the last generation, to the very young generation, and I think he is making his way very interestingly, as far as I can see.

ENTREVISTADOR: José, you have a strong background as a professional critic, so you are a man not to be metted with, you know what you are talking about.

JOSÉ DONOSO: I hope so...

ENTREVISTADOR: As far as that goes. What is your personal preference in reading and writing, what has influenced you in your novels?

JOSÉ DONOSO: I'm afraid I am terrible man, because the only thing I do know about, the only things I do care to read are novels, I've read very little else except novels. I am a very uncultivated man except through novels. I've been reading novels voraciously since I was a very small boy, and I mean I can't think outside the context of novels. What has influenced me, for instance I wish I knew more about science, I wish I knew some more about politics, and economics and things like that

which people say are terribly important nowadays and I am sure they are, but I am afraid I know very little about that except from what I can get through reading novels.

ENTREVISTADOR: Now, which particular figures in your past reading do you find coming out in your books, I do not mean consciously but ...?

JOSÉ DONOSO: Oh, I think I can point out a few quite definite influences. I think Proust would be one, I am a great Proust reader and admirer. And Dickens I think is probably one of the world's greatest writers and I think not fully appreciated, and not fully understood. And I think, and I hope, the influence of both of these people are apparent in my work.

ENTREVISTADOR: Could we get to something particular in this, because there seems to be a striking common factor in "Paseo", which we will hear later, in *This Sunday*, which you will be reading in a moment and in *Coronation*. All three stories have, this is not unique to your writing, but an atmosphere of a house, a family and a house, perhaps trapped in that house. The house is described in detail, perhaps the house wins at the end of the book, and where does this come from?

JOSÉ DONOSO: It comes from I guess on one side the very strong family ties that exist in Latin America and generally centered in a house and in a place. People in our side of the world aren't as footloose as people are here. I mean here you go to school in one city, and then you go to the university in another city and then you go to work in another city. And I don't know... you spend your summers in another country, and all that sort of thing. That is very difficult to understand for us, I think, because at least my youth --or at least my youth-- has been so rooted to a place absolutely and completely. That place sense comes out in or is symbolized in the house, in the family. We belong to a house, there are familiar ceremonies, like having lunch at the grandparents, things like that. Families are important, are important things, and they are very close knit they fight like anything, they hate each other, we hate each other, but we still would have lunch on Sundays, and I think this is part of what this house means. You use the word trapped, it is the right word, how we were trapped in this and how we had to fight against a milieu which was reflected in these houses. Actually all my novels, almost everything I have written, is about houses or centered around houses. *This Sunday*, of course, is very much centered in a house as is *Coronation* and the other novel, *Place Without Limits*, is also centered around a house, in this case a brothel but anyway a house. But this I think I get through my reading of a lot of Victorian writers. My reading of the Victorian fiction, I've done a lot of it, and it is a strange thing houses are so important in Victorian novels. Think of any Victorian novel, what do you remember of *Great Expectations* if you don't remember Miss Havisham's house, or how many novels in English have the names of houses *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Bleak House*, *Wuthering Heights* and go on and on, and *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*. All of these have the names of houses and I think this is because then again houses where the center of a family, of the conflict, you see?

and as Latin America is still fighting this war which was fought out in the Victorian times. Still I think, or at least in my case, a house is the symbol of something very important and does take up, it becomes alive thing as it does in Dickens as objects do in Dickens, as the Marshalls does in Dickens, for instance, or in *Little Dorrit* or things like that. Places which become alive and intensely alive.

ENTREVISTADOR: Now, Is this the farthest down your roots in the past would go, say, I mean history doesn't become in 1966 for you or the declaration of Independence, not for the US declaration of Independence, so...

JOSÉ DONOSO: Our memories... our past is the nineteenth century. Very little is remembered, I think, of anything else. We began to be people, to have consciousness of what we are, countries and nationalities, and individualities, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. To us history is the nineteenth century; our past is the nineteenth century.

ENTREVISTADOR: Then how does the outer world figure in your novels? I notice in *Coronation* your male character takes a walk through the city's streets and comments on it, he misses something which for example the servants in the house have, the complete freedom of the city. In *This Sunday* your grandmother finally, well we won't give away the ending, but she does take a trip into the slums too. And in "Paseo" the story that we will hear exactly the same thing takes place. Where is the sociological context of this?

JOSÉ DONOSO: Something very strange has happened in Latin American fiction and it's the impossibility or, the great difficulty to get away from sociological writing. We are a continent in formation in such an identity in such of its own feet let's say, in many ways and the most important things going on now in Latin American are not literature let's say it's political strive and its economic strive, the poverty and all that sort of thing. There was a generation who studied this and wrote absolutely sociological tract novels. There was the novel of the Peruvian Indians, of the altiplano. There was the novel of the Brazilian men who planted cacao. There was the novel of the gauchos and the pampas and so on. We feel a sort of compulsion to explain and to place ourselves in a historic, sociological context. And this is very strong, and sometimes I think it mars many novels in Latin America which could have been much better if they have not been so explicitly sociological. As I see it, or as I intend to do it, I have escaped into the intimacy of a family, of what I have known, of my own memories, which are so important in everything I have written so far. And just let them function, and funnily enough, though I know absolutely nothing about sociology, and I care very little about politics and I am accused of being all sorts of things, like an escapist and so on, I come to realize that I cannot write except with at least on one plane having a sociological comment. Funnily enough this is the only thing, or one of the only things that Latin American critics will detect in my novels. To them they are in many ways the novels of the decadence of a bourgeoisie, and the falling apart of these houses which

symbolize the bourgeoisie, certainly a few do go beyond that. But this is the important thing, the useful thing of the novel and things in a continent and in countries which are in formation like ours even literary things have to be useful. And then suddenly, my characters are, let's say, incloistered [sic] in these crumbling houses. They go out for walks as in "*Paseo*", as in *Coronation*, and it is a way I think of trying to get in touch, a desperate way of trying to get in touch with the world which they think will destroy them but which at the same time they envy.

ENTREVISTADOR: Quite. Is this coincidental then that several, well in fact nearly all your characters are elder people, say in their forties or fifties or more?

JOSÉ DONOSO: I do not know why that is. I think I might have picked up geriatrics. I do not know. I don't know, I sort of like to write about people who have been dented and solid rather than about more pure forms of people... I don't know, I wonder why that is.

ENTREVISTADOR: And people who have missed something somewhere along the way?

JOSÉ DONOSO: Yes certainly. Life has cheated people and they are at the last moment trying to capture something which they have not captured through their lives.

ENTREVISTADOR: And very often they end up with some sort of ritual or the ritual is very important throughout to keep them together.

JOSÉ DONOSO: That's right, this is the formation of a tradition, of a little tradition, of a very short little humble tradition which we think is fine, but which we know at the same time is going to crumble as this world has to crumble. On this sociological level, a certain meaning has been read into them. On another level, let's say, something else impinges on, on the meaning of the novel which is my love of the baroque, of the decayed, my affinity with people like Buñuel, my affinity with Buñuel and Dickens who are not really too far apart. My affinity with Goya I think. With a Spanish writer who is not well known in this country and who is called Ramón del Valle Inclán who worked with the grotesque and is just pushing reality just a little beyond reality to make it grotesque and illustrative and I do not know what else...

ENTREVISTADOR: To turn out angels and monster and so on...

JOSÉ DONOSO: Yes, and gargoyles and things like that. The book I am writing now, I have been writing for five years, is about a monster.⁴ About a boy who was

⁴ Se refiere a *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* publicado por Seix Barral en 1970. El estudio de la totalidad de los cuadernos de trabajo relacionados con el proceso de composición de esta novela me permiten proponer que para 1967 Donoso llevaba ocho años. Para un estudio de los antecedentes del proceso de escritura de *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* y las diferentes etapas que conforman su escritura ver la tesis doctoral *José Donoso, el Boom* y *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (2010).

born a gargoyle. You know there are boys who are born and called gargoyles. This is a deformity, a medical deformity, called gargoyle because it looks like gargoyle. The character of my new novel-- the one I have been writing for six years-- is a gargoyle which I guess would also be taken as a sociological symbol of the deformity of Latin American society or society in general and whatever people choose to interpret as.

ENTREVISTADOR: In the extract from *This Sunday*, which you are going to read in a moment, this is a novel about children then, would you say? or the characters here are the adults as seen through children's eyes? How do the children and their innocence or lack of innocence makes in this book?

JOSÉ DONOSO: Well I think, the extraordinary thing is that I tend to write either about old people or about children. I mean, they are my two favorite topics probably or my two favorite kinds of characters. And in this novel I mix both. The novel is divided into five parts. Three of the parts are about the children living their own imaginary lives on a rather fantastic plane, on a rather imaginative plane, and loving the surface of the grandmother and what goes on in the house of the grandmother. That would be one view of what is going on. But the other view is the grandparent's view, who are enacting a tragedy on another level, on a very human realistic and almost brutal level completely unknown to the children, who only see the surface. So it is a counterpoint of this... I would not call it innocence, I would call it, I do not know what I would call it. But it is just this relationship of love and demanding of the children and this fantasy of the children living at the same time as another tragedy is unfolding in the house. Remember it is not their parents' tragedy it's their grandparents' tragedy. So there are two things going on simultaneously in the book, one sort of poetic children's level another rather brutal level of destruction, and end. The children are the beginning; they're in the enchanted Garden of Eden somehow, while the grandparents are heading for hell.

ENTREVISTADOR: Yes, you have in fact divided the book into five sections. Three very short ones dedicated to the children's points of view and the two long sections dealing with the grandfather and the grandmother.

JOSÉ DONOSO: As human beings not as grandparents. As just human beings enacting their own tragedies.

ENTREVISTADOR: Quite, and seen from a different point of view. In fact it is the third of the five sections the middle of the children's section, which we're going to hear now. I think we will go straight into that.

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