

Disrupting the Divide:  
Construction and Rupture in José  
Donoso's *A House in the Country*

Roberta Harris Short

*Texas A&M University*

The walled residence in *A House in the Country*, for me, brings to mind walled haciendas in Puerto Rico, decorated in colorful tile, topped with jagged potshards and shattered glass that glints in the sun. My friends, my Latin instructor, lived behind such walls. I drank my first café con crema behind such walls. Such memories can produce a sense of longing. Indeed, as critics have noted, Donoso fixes “nostalgia in the domestic structure of the house” (González Mandri 13). *A House in the Country* initially is imbued with a sense of nostalgia for vanishing gentility, for safety and apparent permanence, the reassurance of such things as walls and coffee and a sense of place. But I do not think of the houses without the walls, nor do I think such houses can exist without walls.

Nostalgia for home, in Donoso's hands, is complex, seductive, and one of several sites of rupture in the novel. Familiar furniture and possessions are suspended in a decaying, memory-filled landscape. Walls are permeable and shifting. Inhabitants are simultaneously young and old, wise and foolish, “civilized” and “barbaric.” Nostalgia—a sense of heightened sensitivity, memory,

and desire—is transformed to an awareness of a particular political, social, economic, cultural, and literary landscape. The deeply felt sense of nostalgia in the novel does not point to the gentility of a lost life but to the malaise on which it rests. Here, longing is transformed to desire for something less tangible than home—for the Other, for disillusionment, for mitigation of hierarchy.

The house in Donoso's novel is mythic (as are the landscape, his characters, and the cultural context) and becomes, in Barthean terms, a floating signifier—unstable, prescient, able to deliver countless meanings to countless readers. Further, this mythic space is informed by the presence of walls, both metaphorical and literal—within the house and around it, between the characters, separating the Venturas and others from each other and from the outside world.

The baroque metaphor of the labyrinth is apt in the case of *A House in the Country*. The novel combines postmodern, neobaroque and postcolonial elements as Donoso explores fictional process and representation, disrupts time and binary oppositions, and undermines pretensions to mimetic art, while interrogating power, hierarchy, nativism, and repression. The disruption of a cohesive ideological basis for the work also becomes content as Donoso leads the Ventura family and the reader through a labyrinthine system of illusion toward what one may argue is a productive disillusionment.

The literary, theoretical, and political context for *A House in the Country* is complex. Born in 1924 in Chile, José Donoso left school in 1943 and worked as a shepherd and dockhand before completing high school and going on to the University of Chile and then to Princeton (McMurray 9). In 1952, he returned to Chile and began teaching in Santiago. His fiction, first published in 1954, was a departure from Chilean realism, and was influenced by Alejo Carpentier's ideas regarding the baroque in which “the distorted, [and] the excessive could all increase the possibilities of the novel” (González Mandri 14). Donoso subsequently became part of the Latin American Boom, a group of writers that “abandoned a mimetic desire to represent the geography and idiom of their individual countries” and adopted American and European models (14). Novels of the Boom “minimized plot and contained a critical, literary, political, or cultural metadiscourse” that frequently incorporated the story of the narrative and a treatment of authorial position relative to the work

(15). Not all novels of the Boom were mythical or cosmopolitan, however; and writers explored a number of genres including autobiography, narrative, detective, romance, and the erotic novel, frequently as parody (15). As Cuban-born critic Flora González Mandri asserts, *A House in the Country* “combines both the self-reflexive games of the Boom years and a consciousness of a historical context in Latin America that could no longer be ignored” (15). At a time when Augusto Pinochet seized control over Chile in a dictatorship that persisted from 1973 to 1990, Donoso constructs a literary response to military dictatorship and to the phenomena of los desaparecidos and the Latin American exile (15).

In Donoso’s domestic melodrama, characters resist change and the intrusion of society into private space; this is expressed in their retreat to “enclosed houses” (20). Donoso employs masks, illusion, and theatrical expression through an ironically superimposed “magnifying glass” of melodrama, which permits exaggeration, play, and the postponement of resolution (17). Further complicating the construction of the house, windows reflect myriad points of entry for the reader, a technique that may point to the author’s literary dialogue with the ideas of Henry James (19). I would add here additional elements seen in the house—frescos and trompe l’oeil, paintings and architectural detail add a baroque quality, which as we will see, is also disrupted.

Thus, the Donoso labyrinth incorporates ironic treatment of text and political landscape, intertextuality, and exaggeration through baroque detail and melodrama. One of the most prominent features of the work, and a chief focus of this essay, however, is Donoso’s construction and disruption of binary conceptions of center and margin in multiple and overlapping spheres. Through these disruptions or ruptures, Donoso explores the limits of literature in representing multiple others. All of this is best seen “en las entrañas del monstruo” (Beverly 3).

The primary construction of the house reflects the Ventura family as ruling center. The parents in the Ventura family, through edict, through servant surrogates, through containment, punishment, and economic and political control, maintain continuity of and serve as “guardians of . . . civilized order” (Donoso 22). The Venturas gain control of salt, the currency of the natives, and subsequently achieve

dominion (247). The Venturas' realm includes their children (some forty), the servants, natives who worked the gold mines on their behalf, and extensive landholdings in town and in the country, an area called Marulanda. Early in the novel, Donoso introduces the opposition of natives, children, and servants to the ruling center. Ventura family control rests not on the admission of economic hegemonic control but on the construction of the myth of the Venturas taming the uncivilized and dangerous natives and cleansing the region of their cannibalistic practices, "the greatest of collective crimes" and "the most hideous incarnation of barbarism" (18). Here, Donoso's language is the language of the conquest: the Venturas annihilate indigenous people, burn villages, are "triumphant" in their "crusade," until the natives are at last docile, vegetarian, and weaponless, reserving the meats they still trap for the dining pleasures of the Venturas (19).

Into this landscape, young Venturas are born and pose the greatest threat to civilization; they are "capable of anything—name-calling, disobeying, dirtying, demanding, breaking, attacking, undermining law and order through challenge and disbelief" (22). And so, the Venturas control the children with the aid of servants (admonished by Lidia and commanded by the Majordomo, annually replaced), who toe a delicate line: they must "maintain the semblance of total obedience to the children, since in spite of their mission they must never forget that they [are] the children's servants" (22). The children do their utmost to compromise control of the servants through bribery, trickery, and flattery (24). Thus, the scheme of control is at once tenuous, absolute, and essential; underlying the hierarchy rests the myth of native barbarism and cannibalism to which all will devolve if left uncontrolled.

The Venturas, in control of landscape, the economy, and language, define the natives, not only as "lazy" and "criminal" but also as cannibals "whose souls . . . are rotten with vice" (137, 140, 21). These natives—"patch[es] of gloom"—lurk in the "depths of the shaded half" of the yard (139). Their presence is a contamination, and the adults "purif[y] themselves after their daily exposure to the natives" (139-40). Further, natives threaten rebellion at every turn, "conscious of the right and destiny of their race" (147); some favor "an all-out struggle" and know "their ancestors had never been cannibals" (148). The servants fare no better than the natives in the

Ventura's scheme. They are "unruly" and unrefined; they "[croon] vulgar ditties to pass the time" and "[lack] the sensitivity to be content with the contemplation of a heavenly dusk" (137, 171); further, condemnation of their manners and sensibilities is sanctioned on a religious level as well since it is common knowledge that one goes to "hell for being poor" (143).

In fact, religious activity is classed and gendered, rendering it the realm, at least in terms of power and wealth, of men. Anselmo experiences the seminary as "a kind of exclusive men's club, offering contact with no one save the Deity, indisputably masculine, indisputably of their own class" (143). The roles of women are also proscribed in Marulanda: women must not ride in open carriages (144); women have no legal right to money (147); women practice deceit as their sole art (163); women have intuition regarding their children but shallowly permit it to be dismissed (173); women are hysterical and, therefore, must have clitorodectomies (182); women are whores (196); women are manipulators (317); and of course, women are the practical enablers of their husbands' destructive agendas (314).

Donoso's creation of the Ventura's house and land reflects the family's difficulty in maintaining control and is the locus of rupture throughout the novel. The house is bounded by a fence constructed of lances, which is easily disassembled by the children, led by Mauro. The narrator informs us that, even within the confines of the compound, the family escapes religion in Marulanda; the "existence of Hell [is] quite forgotten," they have "no pious duties, no priests or school nuns, no extortionist confessors, . . . no churches" and are "unfettered from God" (143). The landscape represents both refuge and danger; ubiquitous thistle threatens the lives of the Venturas, who, unwilling to learn from the natives how to coexist with the thistle, instead delegate servants to the endless task of beating the feared vegetation back. The compromised, complex space of the house remains the locus of family and, finally, of a thinly surviving coalition of children, servants, and natives.

The novel, laden as it is with the political, social, and cultural detritus of colonization, is also a residence of rupture. Donoso creates and undermines exaggerated stereotype with often-simultaneous

discontinuity. While warning their offspring against the brutality of the natives, the parents fuss over the children in threatening terms:

Teodora, sweetheart, be careful with that candle, you'll go up in flames; Avelino, angel, you're going to fall off that railing and crack your head open on the rocks; Zoé, baby, that knee's going to get infected if you don't get someone to wash it for you, and if you get gangrene we'll have to cut your whole leg off. (9)

Thinly masked aggression is accompanied by ambivalence as the parents fail to return from their picnic before dark (165). When they do return, the condition of the children is a matter of indifference; they take note only when the children report having stolen the gold. Whippings ensue (179).

The parent/child binary is relentlessly under assault in the novel and is revealed in characterization and action. Routinely, the children are represented as more knowledgeable, more sensitive, more inquisitive than adults, and, consequently, less deluded. From the outset, Wenceslao questions the truthfulness and authority of the parents (5). Malvina, the illegitimate cousin who is so touchable, attaches herself to Casilda and her rebellious struggle for the gold and also befriends “misfits and outcasts who, believing themselves descendants of the mythologically perverse cannibals” engage in what they view as inevitable crime (148). Casilda is not alone in her plan to steal the gold; Malvina teaches the concept of stealing to the natives (149); and we learn that Columba, Hermógenes, and Lidia also steal. In the final scenes, the children survive through their openness to information about the thistle gained through contact with the natives, while the parents remain “unable to comprehend” the natural world (338). The Venturas’ interpretation of “reality” becomes another locus of rupture.

In addition to exploring the Ventura family by developing and scrutinizing a parent/child binary, Donoso addresses the failed projects of socialism and dictatorship through the characters of Adriano Gomara and Juan Pérez. Critical of the Venturas’ position regarding the natives and remarking on their tendency to reduce people to decorative objects, Adriano Gomara crosses the divide to

assist the natives and participate in their ceremonies (194). The family views the subsequent deaths of his daughters and his ensuing insanity as retribution for his breaking the taboo against contact with the natives (González Mandri 89).

Rupture is evident in Juan Pérez's assault against the spaces surrounding the house, a demonstration of the need for increasingly militaristic control because of the erosion of authority (Donoso 201). A broad critique of the failed revolutionary metanarrative is implicit in Donoso's construction of Adriano Gomara's attempt at the socialist enterprise and Pérez's enactment of violent repression. As Román de la Campa, in *Latin Americanism*, points out, such failed attempts at revolution are:

a part of the Creole neocolonial order that has perpetuated itself for nearly two centuries through chronic cycles of violence, obsessive claims of national or ethnic identity, and deeply ingrained patriarchal impulses that have stood in the way of liberal democratic republics. (31)

De la Campa asserts "contemporary Latin American literature becomes a postmodern antidote of sorts" (31).

Among the characters, Wenceslao most constantly questions time, authority, and hierarchy but is less disruptive of the novel itself. He performs the role of protagonist and is relentlessly alive for the reader. He is a charming adventurer, a role player who bravely acquiesces when needed, dressing in lace and curls, committing reverent cannibalism, struggling to free himself and his friends. Rupture here is evident in the conclusions he draws regarding the natives; he maintains it is possible to learn from and live with the natives. The reader's identification with Wenceslao, who is so engaging and sympathetic, is, however, checked by the discontinuity represented by his stated age, four, and his pronouncements, which appear to issue from a mature, educated consciousness.

Destabilization of time is not only seen in the characterization of Wenceslao but surfaces throughout the text. Central to the reader's interpretation of the events of the text is the dispute over the length of time that the parents have been away on their "picnic." Was it a year

or a day that passed? While the children feel they have been “a year . . . dying of hunger and fear,” their parents claim to have “left the country house [that very] morning”: “We’ve been away twelve hours, not twelve months,” they assert (Donoso 177). Perceptions of time are directly related to motivations of other characters as well: Juan Pérez ironically notes that, due to pay considerations, “it was best to seem convinced of the shorter version of time” (196). Characters combat the tyranny of time, not only with verbal denial, but also through action. The Majordomo takes away clocks and calendars and paints the windows black to stop “history until the masters come home” (232); Casilda “wish[es] with all her heart that she could sweep aside clocks and calendars, sundials and hourglasses, cancel all chronology” so she can reexperience “the timelessly childlike secret of [her] oneness” with Colomba (142).

Perhaps most intriguing of the novel’s destabilizing assaults on time, history, and identity, is *La marquise est sortie à cinq heures*. The characters’ exaggerated attendance to game playing is absurd, often horrifying, and violent. *La marquise est sortie à cinq heures* is mentioned dozens of times in the novel and is itself both ubiquitous, arguably baroque, and disruptive. I offer three examples. One, from the prologue to Sir Samuel Tuke’s 1663 version of the play, *The Adventures of Five Hours, a Tragi-Comedy*:

*But tell me, Gentlemen, who ever saw  
A deep Intrigue confin'd to Five Hours Law.  
Such as for close Contrivance yields to none:  
A Modest Man may praise what's not his own.  
'Tis true, the Dress is his, which he submits  
To those who are, and those who would be Wits;  
Ne'r spare him Gentlemen, for to speak truth,  
He has a per'lous Cens'rer been in's Youth;  
And now grown Bald with Age, Doating on Praise,  
He thinks to get a Periwig of Bays.  
Teach him what 'tis, in this Discerning Age  
To bring his heavy Genius on the Stage;  
Where you have seen such Nimble Wits appear,  
That pass'd so soon, one scarce could say th'were  
here.*

*Yet after our Discoveries of late  
Of their Designs, who would Subvert the State;*



*You'l wonder much, if it should prove his Lot,  
To take all England with a Spanish Plot;  
But if through his ill Conduct, or hard Fate,  
This Forein Plot (like that of Eighty Eight)  
Should suffer Shipwrack in your Narrow Seas,  
You'll give your Modern Poet his Writ of Ease;  
For by th'Example of the King of Spain,  
He resolves ne'r to trouble you again.*

*As to a dying Lamp, one drop of Oyl  
Gives a new Blaze, and makes it live a while;  
So th'Author seeing his decaying Light,  
And therefore thinking to retire from sight,  
Was hindred by a Ray from th'upper Sphere,  
Just at that time he thought to disappear;  
He chanc'd to hear his Majesty once say  
He lik'd this Plot: he staid; and writ the Play;  
So should Obsequious Subjects catch the Minds  
Of Princes, as your Sea-men do the Winds.  
If this Attempt then shews more Zeal, than Light,  
'T may teach you to Obey, though not to Write. (3-4)*

Two:

In 1938, José Corti published Gracq, Bachelard, Lautréamont. Today, ten years precisely after the disappearance of his founder, the editor-bookseller of the street of Médicis preserved his singularity: coherence, fidelity, the whole except topicality.

INTERVIEWER. *And the novel? It is a French tradition?*

JOSÉ CORTI. To be honest, the novel is not the only literary genre I enjoy. The novel such as Paul Valéry presented it, "the marchioness left at five hours" does not interest me. The novel appeared after Don Quichotte. It dominated during three centuries. I do not think that it is destined to dominate literature in a permanent way. It is too useless. (Savary 2)

And three, a French lesson, randomly garnered from the internet:

Le passé composé, pouvant indiquer des faits passés à un moment déterminé prend fréquemment la place du passé simple (souvent dans les textes littéraires).  
 Les deux phrases suivantes ont le même sens:  
 La marquise *est sortie* à cinq heures (passé composé)  
 La marquise *sortit* à cinq heures (passé simple).  
 (“Conjugaison”)

The game, *La marquise est sortie à cinq heures*, is center stage in the novel, enacted by the children as instructed by their parents. The game is performance, not only as enacted in the novel, but also as mimetic in its disruption of a ludic read (as the citations are here). The game permits suspension of time, disguise of characters, impermissible action, and emphasis, not only on theatrical exaggeration, but also on surface and narrative. The narrator often intrudes to announce the players, describe the setting, and costumes, but also to confuse the actions of the play with those enacted as part of the narrative as a whole, the unfolding lives of those at Marulanda. The game continues even when the parents are no longer at the house to urge its continuance, and the actions rise to a fevered pitch. The children raid their parents’ rooms for make-up and costumes:

sumptuous doublets of Sedan cloth and chamois hose of a light violet hue, embroidered satin and chiffon scarves . . . sea-green and blue and sheer petticoats . . . macfarlanes and farthingales, grosgrain and jacquard skirts . . . fedoras, homburgs, coifs for novices or wetnurses, eyes artfully purpled for grief, kindled by belladonna for passion, long trains of apricot Genoa velvet for mounting the staircase at the opera where a lover lurked in the gallery to fire his single murderous shot . . . mustaches and beauty marks smudged on with burnt cork, a swig of vinegar to bring on the pallor of some aristocratic disease . . . (Donoso 159)

The confusion of costuming and role playing is pervasive and serves to call into question, not only the children’s perceptions, but also the definition and role of history, increasingly seen as instable. The

natives were once rulers, but, under the Venturas, become props in theatrical games (González Mandri 95). As González Mandri states, the “historic flow of events” is theatrical and melodramatic; and “hope for historical progress is replaced by the stagnation of a government that rules by deceit and force” (95).

These ruptures and discontinuities are accompanied by the overarching rupture of the relationship of the reader to the text—Donoso employs a series of devices to disrupt a “natural” or ludic reading, including conflated language and concepts, authorial intrusion, and literary debate. Donoso’s use of language as rupture, already noted to some degree above, is pervasive. Parents repeatedly warn the children against native cannibalism but also attribute cannibalistic traits to the children. Regarding his daughter’s interest in the family gold, Hermógenes observes that “her hunger . . . could devour him like a cannibal’s” (136). Greed becomes a literal, brittle image as gold effaces Casilda: she is “transfigured by her fine coat of gold dust” and becomes a “gilt mosaic,” “stiff” and “frozen” with “yellow flakes” (138); at the same time, Casilda sees this as her “natural state” (140).

The role of authorial intrusion interferes with a ludic reading, qualifies any claims to representation, and drives forward debate, not only regarding multiple versions of the truth, but also literary pretensions to reality, or realism, which in practice perform a universalizing or colonizing function. Donoso’s approach here signals more than the imposition of postmodern literary devices, although the novel does make use of disruptions in time, destabilization of characters, and authorial intrusion. The intrusions point to the instability of truth, the impenetrability of events as recounted history, and the unreliability of storytelling.

The unreliability of truth garnered from torture is treated within one of these lapses into authorial voice. Donoso makes use of authorial intrusion to mitigate the fascination of readers with narratives of torture; the author as narrator intrudes casually on Arabela’s torture by Juan Pérez’s men (243). The reader is not permitted unquestioning engagement with the events; instead, the narrator “drop[s] a dark curtain over these details” since it is “impossible to reproduce such horrors for anyone who has not lived them” (243).

The narrator serves as a guide through the textual labyrinth, explaining the appearance of Malvina as a plot device, or reminding the reader of the previous lack of thistle in the park (204). Humble and self-effacing, the narrator speaks of his “clumsy pen,” admits to invention, not truth, and beseeches the reader to imagine scenes of “desolation and death” just as he refuses to write them (206-207, 212, 218). But this narrator also is wise; he responds to the Majordomo’s statement “Nothing has happened here! Life will go on as before!” (219):

My reader can readily gauge the absurdity of this statement if he will believe me that everything that had happened during the past year, with its triumphs and its inexcusable blunders, along with the pain and humiliation of the assault, had etched into every heart, nature and child alike, a consciousness, an outrage that would never again allow anything to be as before. (219)

The narrator is in command of certain concepts even if the characters are not. Commentary on the construction of social behavior is woven into the text, as the narrator notes that the Ventura children are incapable of taking care of themselves, having been carefully instructed to believe that “it is a sign of good breeding that they should be helpless” (263). Learned helplessness is the requisite condition for the enactment of a sacrificial cannibalism that dares to represent itself as tender, caring, lifesaving, and honorable (274-75). The turnabout is powerful. This act represents a new order, based in necessity and mutual care, not in “madness nor cruelty” (275). Thus, the persona of the narrator is at once a humble construction and one that exhibits astounding virtuosity.

Donoso’s engagement with the text and with the hypothetical reader is purposeful, complex, literary, and political. As the narrative comes to a close, authorial intrusion becomes more extensive and urgent. At last, the reader sees the narrative persona as author hurrying work to his agent, witnesses his encounter with Sylvestre Ventura, who is resolutely unimpressed with the author/Donoso’s work. The exchange is rife with humor and irony as Sylvestre, with sour breath and a soiled shirt, relives the previous night’s debauch and disputes the depiction the narrator has wrought (280-82).

Sylvestre quibbles with the narrator's exaggeration, a central feature of the text and one that mitigates the tyranny of realism: he is not as rich, as controlling, as refined, as snobbish or wicked or stupid as his depiction (283). Author and agent argue about the intent of the literature; the narrator asserts he is not looking for recognition from the ordinary person who insists on "truth" since such "truths," in claiming to define reality, attempt to control it. His argument falls on deaf ears as Sylvestre (true to type?) yammers on about the degree to which Celeste can see and about Eulalia's sluttishness (284). Sylvestre sees only the center of the universe as it has been bestowed upon him by literature, with its "stories and characters and assumptions" intact (284).

Yet if we listen to Sylvestre (a character that claims that his creator does not represent him), we are intrigued by his assertions regarding representation. He tells the story about Cesareón and how his mother discovered the meaning of the word "queer"; instead of judgment and exclusion, Mama is contemptuous of the narrow-mindedness of societal condemnation (285). This moment represents another rupture—this time within a rupture (Sylvestre's denial), within a rupture (authorial intrusion)—the labyrinthine structure of the work surfaces as artifice and content and as a device for deconstruction.

Thus, *A House in the Country*, Donoso's response to Chile's political landscape in the 1970s, becomes both a "cipher of its author's universe" and "a discourse on the definition of the novel" (González Mandri 86-87). From the outset, authority is undermined and questioned as the parents and most of their servants leave and four-year-old Wenceslao entertains the idea that the parents will not return (87). Donoso's work can be connected to that of Borges, not only in its placement in the Boom, but as work that poses and interrogates an enigma but does not seek to resolve it, although a literary end may be predetermined (86-87). Content and vehicle merge as the writer constructs "forking paths" of literary possibility that emphasize the "coincidence of contradictory special and temporal dimensions" and also point to destabilization, not only as elements of literary possibility, but as thematic and political content (87).

John Beverley, in his work *Subalternity and Representation*, offers a complex recounting of various contributions to subaltern

studies and the problem of representation. He notes that “even the ‘boom’ novel of the 1980s and the sort of left-modernist literature . . . were functionally implicated in the formation of both colonial and postcolonial elites in Latin America” and that therefore, the claim that they furthered “cultural democratization” was questionable (8). Beverley discusses the importance of *The Lettered City* by Angel Rama as a “Foucauldian genealogy of the institution of literature in Latin American society” that was “meant to challenge the prevailing historicism of Latin American literary studies” (8). Although Beverley draws attention to the “silences and ambiguities” in Rama’s text, he acknowledges the importance of a recounting of literary history that registers the hegemonic structure of literary production and the creation by subaltern groups in Latin America of “their own forms of history, political economy, and value theory” (9).

Mindful of the need for particularity rather than universal claims, Beverley is cautious about the tendency to imitate the work of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group and the theoretical writing of Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak. He points to the foundational work of Antonio Gramsci, whose *Prison Notebooks* present Gramsci’s thoughts on the failure of the Italian nation state, under the influence of advanced political liberalism, to represent a popular will because it failed to address agrarian reform (11). Cultural production centered in a lettered intellectual community produced a “cosmopolitan and universalizing worldview” which was nevertheless “in thrall to the Church” (12). Communities not represented by the cultural elite, whose interests and dialects were not a part of the dominant scheme, were effaced (12). Beverley concludes that:

Rama’s genealogy of the “lettered city” and the emerging debate over the role of the literary Baroque in the formation of Latin American culture suggested that something roughly similar occurred in Spain and Latin America in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. (12)

At the same time, Beverley points out that for Gramsci, culture is the “sphere in which ‘ideologies are diffused and organized, in which hegemony is constructed and can be broken and reconstructed’” (13). Nevertheless, a vision of culture which defines itself as “high,” remains universalizing and modernist and reflects the interests,

conditions, and daily life of those it represents, thereby increasing their agency while effacing those it excludes. Beverley offers the hegemonic terminology in use by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as evidence of the “catastrophic effects” of such effacement: terms such as the “‘cultural sustainability’ of development” and the “need for ‘social adjustment’” are both seen as byproducts of globalization (13-14). Political and social movements that, as Guha says, attend “to the small voice of history” resist such metanarratives and tend toward rupture (15).

Although Donoso’s work is situated by critics in the Latin American Boom, one could argue Donoso’s novel enacts resistance not only through a postmodern approach, but also through a neobaroque metanarrative that questions representation and points to alternative arrangements with regard to subalternity. Certainly, Donoso points to the limits of his narrative through intrusion and destabilization of time, character, history, and representation. He also points to the impossibility of representing the other, and further, the world beyond the other. The thistle operates beyond the realm of the Venturas, their lackeys, the children, or even the natives, and instead, is “suspended in the air by autonomous laws” (Donoso 338). Here, in this final imaginary realm, hybridity, a notion useful in describing the effects of colonial power, provides a “space in which the colonial or subaltern subject can ‘translate’ or ‘undo’ the binaries imposed by the project” (Beverley 16).

Beverley’s project—and that of Spivak, Bhabba, and others inhabiting the intellectual space of cultural theory—is fraught with pitfalls since, as Beverley himself notes, “binary taxonomies of populations are a feature of what Foucault calls ‘biopower’” which is relieved through “decentered, plural, contingent, provisional, performative” representations (16). Beverley’s approach is grounded in the traditions of the academy and in Marxist theory but presents the arena of Latin American Subaltern Studies Groups as a space within which “various agendas and projects talk to each other . . . around a common concern that is at the same time epistemological, pedagogic, ethical, and political” (22). Certainly, Beverley’s approach emphasizes the destabilizing effects of such a theoretical space, but one might argue that it’s a long way to travel.

Donoso's work can be seen as representative of a complex array of theoretical approaches to both content and form and offers an opportunity to examine links between these approaches. Donoso's use of baroque, neobaroque, and postmodern elements produces, not realistic, but an extended hybrid representation, which addresses a postcolonial landscape, in the process engaging and undermining the authority of the "lettered city."

Gonzalo Celorio, in "El barroco en el Nuevo Mundo, arte de contraconquista," offers a relevant expansion of the delineation of a baroque aesthetic: in his view, the baroque is not a phenomenon pertinent only to surface but one with profound implications (79). In response to the notion that there is continuity between the classical and the baroque, Celorio proposes the baroque as rupture, engendering greater freedom of expression, less adherence to established standards (79). Considering whether or not the baroque can be opposed to the classical, Celorio notes that many view the baroque as deviate and in poor taste ("de mal gusto"); yet, this determination is largely made from an aesthetic position that privileges the classical (77).

Celorio draws on Sarduy's "El barroco y el neobarroco" to reveal the expansion of the baroque as a culturally descriptive term and the use of the term "neobaroque" to describe a wide range of literary production that involves parody and artifice (98). Celorio contributes to Sarduy's attempts at formal definition by concentrating on the implications of parody as intentional content. If the distinctive element if the baroque is artifice, then intentional use of conserved regional artifice points to parody and, by necessity, intertextuality (100). Such a use of parody, Celorio concludes, is a marker of critical distance. The baroque overlaying of culture, parody of culture, and cultural interplay are exultantly elaborate, even wasteful in their abundance, as Celorio would assert, and thus reveal, through self-aware artifice, the presence of critical play and deliberative consideration (104).

For his part, Severo Sarduy, in "The Baroque and the Neobaroque," emphasizes abundant word play and mimicry as aspects of the baroque in Latin American art. Sarduy asserts that the complex play of language, metaphor, meaning, culture, and time comprises the baroque in Latin America; and he locates the basis for



the baroque in nature, in the overlaying of sounds, in complex landscape, and in apparent disorderliness (116). Sarduy places emphasis on the instability of signifier and signified, on metaphorical substitution, and on perturbation and contradiction that seeks deliberately to “disappoint” the reader through disruption and lack of congruence (119). The structure beneath the narrative contains multiple linked, overlaid, or combined elements, which in turn create metaphor. Finally, parody works to disfigure, vary, amplify, invert, or conceal. The result is invention combined with serious intent, meant to confuse and confront (123). The presence of carnival is revealed in the verbal abundance of languages in the Americas, in multiple uses of language, in the cacophony of names, and in the abundance of the named.

Certainly, Donoso’s work qualifies as disruptive in the tradition of the baroque and the neobaroque described by Celorio and Sarduy. Additionally, Sarduy’s characterization of the baroque includes intertextuality, false representation, parody, commentary, and authorial intrusion. These may appear to echo the postmodern, but predate its attention to non-linear time, intertextuality, fragmentation, and multiple voicing.

Sarduy also describes the baroque in linguistic terms, identifying phonetic *gramas*, or typographic lines that permit alternative readings, or readings that attend to sound and artifice rather than meaning; *semic gramas*, which are elements of language that reside beneath the surface of the text, indicated but not specifically stated; and *syntagmatic gramas* or indicators within a text that condense and link segments formerly used to present a “more vast space” or totality to the reader, which, through repeated duplication and self reference, appear in the baroque to be “dead devices” (128-29). One is reminded here of the dialects that remain unaddressed by Gramsci and of indigenous languages that have still to surface in the “lettered city.”

As Sarduy explains, significant components of the baroque are abundance and play. He emphasizes the representation of the object in the baroque as absence rather than presence. The Other is a “nonrepresentable object, which resists crossing over the line of Alterity” (130). The emphasis on play in the European and Latin American colonial baroque, as apparently purposeless gaming, is

characterized by repetition and indicates the infinite evident in a “mobile and decentralized universe”—as demonstrated by the endless repetitions of *La marquise est sortie à cinq heures* (131). In contrast, the neobaroque is characterized by “rupture” and “disequilibrium,” denoted by absence that does not point to unity but to a decentered subject (131). This decentered neobaroque system of repetition and artifice revealed in fragmented language and authority becomes the art and the language of revolution (132).

Thus, Donoso’s *A House in the Country*, so characterized by hybrid identity, contended history, and rupture, employs a complex arrangement of baroque, neobaroque, and postmodern elements to engage failed revolution, problematic representation, and social and political contexts, as particular elements, both localized and broadly indicative, in a postcolonial landscape. The text is marked by labyrinthine interplay; and the resulting transformation of the novel reflects constructed hybridity and rupture, both written into and representative of the land, culture, and politics; the artistic space of music, art, and literature; and the play of language and myth; the gestures and small moments of the day—café con crema inside the crumbling walls of a courtyard.

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