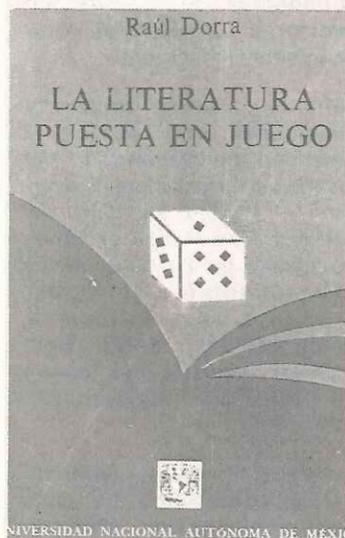


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Unraveling the Novel's Mystery

La literatura puesta en juego (Literature Called into Question) Raúl Dorra, Ediciones de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México, 1986.

In his new book, Raúl Dorra applies a structuralist analysis to *Morirás lejos* (*You Will Die Far Away*), the great novel by distinguished Mexican author, José Emilio Pacheco, recently elected to the National Academy, an honor reserved for the country's most outstanding intellectuals.

The 320-page essay is divided into three major parts. In the chapter entitled "Literature Called into Question," the author attempts to untangle the question of how literature is created, from a theoretical perspective, without entering yet into a textual analysis of Pacheco's novel. According to Dorra, his work will "attempt to situate itself in the dialectics of search and negation; the objective is to analyze this book (*Morirás lejos*)... and through this analysis

be able, then, to reflect on literary discourse... Nonetheless, I want to make it clear from the very beginning that our work will really be nothing more than *one reading*."

The book provides a rich reflection on the fictional and the testimonial in *Morirás lejos*, but also in literature in general. And it also examines the question of the limits of language, an imprecise and conflictive issue.

"Because everything is unreal in this story. Nothing happened as it was told. Events and places have been deformed in the effort to find truth through fiction, a lie." (*Morirás lejos*, p.157).

This could well be the essential point in both Pacheco's novel, as well as in Dorra's study.

In the first chapter we confront the question, "What is literature?" The author tries to respond from the point of view of a literary critic who tries to define the undefinable. He claims that it is necessary to continue to question literature, free from the useless pretense of seeking an exhaustive response, but rather, in an effort to outline some of the elements of an answer, those which make sense in relation to the text under study.

Drawing on the work of Tzvetan Todorov, noted Bulgarian literary critic now living in Paris, Dorra explains the "functionalist" and the "structuralist" approaches to literature. The "functionalist" response to the question, "What is literature?" tries to define art, and in this case literature, in terms of what it *does*, or at least what it *seeks to do*. Therefore, it does not attempt to characterize that which is intrinsic to the esthetic discourse, as such. Rather it tells how this discourse goes on to form part of a much larger set or system of discourses. The "structuralist" response delves into the question of what art *is*, into its specific system of organization, into its internal processes and proceedings.

Raúl Dorra is an adherent of this second approach, and he applies its method with great skill. His analysis is rigorous and well-documented, convincing even to those who are not experts in matters of literary theory and demonstrating his

deep understanding of the theoretical elements that he has chosen to use.

The second part of the essay, entitled "The Dialectic of Literature-Testimony," is subdivided into three sections: "The Testimony of Writing," "Fiction" and "History." Here the author undertakes a closer analysis of *Morirás lejos*, touching on themes such as the fable and discourse, with their respective characteristics and differences, and explaining how the novel brings that distinction into crisis. The writing in *Morirás lejos* is, in the first instance, a testimony unto itself, asserting its own material nature, its significant graphic presence on the page, as if it were a pageant. A number of pages are dedicated to the careful examination of the writing's material nature, before the author goes on to analyze the writing on the writing, that is, the writing which constantly reflects on itself.

The study of the fiction in the novel proceeds through an analysis of the characters in the work and of the imaginative activity. Through this analysis, Dorra reaches the conclusion that in *Morirás lejos*, "if the fiction is the desire to live, the testimony is the presence of death; the presence, then, of that end which cannot be narrated. Once again, 'testimony is shown to be in opposition to literature, 'while at the same time, complementing it.'"

The second part of the book ends with "history," analyzed from the point of view of the unity "testimony-literature." The author insists here on the fact that the "literary" and the "testimonial" are united into one, as dialectical opposites; he explains this, showing both why and how. The analysis rests on a microscopic view into Pacheco's novel, which deals with the Second World War, Hitler, the holocaust and the martyrdom of the Jews.

The third and final part of the essay, "The theme of the subject and the theme of the tale," is subdivided into "Who tells..." and "this story." By comparing the two versions of *Morirás lejos*, written in 1967 and in 1977, the author was able to carry out a truly exemplary study of the text in question. Through theoretical considerations applied to the issues of

the “narrator-all-seeing,” of the narrator and his parody, of the protagonism of the discourse, of the coexistence of discourse and fable, etc....the critic leads us down winding paths of literary analysis without tiring us, boring us, or leaving us behind.

And this is precisely one of the most positive things about the book. Despite the fact that a theoretic analysis of a literary work could easily make arid reading, Raúl Dorra manages to catch our interest and to hold it throughout the entire book. Three factors seem to explain this fact. First, despite his use of specialized vocabulary, the book is accessible, even to readers with limited experience in literary theory because it is written with pedagogical criteria that emphasize the desire to explain and to convince. At the same time, Dorra demonstrates tremendous command of his field; his work is erudite, totally professional and solidly based in theory. Finally, through the analysis *Moriras lejos* is shown to be what the Mexican public already knew; it is a magnum work in contemporary Latin American literature.

We regret the exclusively structuralist focus of Raúl Dorra's analysis. While structuralist categories are necessary for literary theory, in and of themselves, they are not sufficient. Without a doubt the analysis would have been enriched had it incorporated methodological contributions from other currents. For example, the writing of Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtine, increasingly influential even on Todorov's thinking, could help greatly to define the work's context and the relationship of that context to its structure.

Nonetheless, and despite these details, we would like to congratulate the author of *La literatura puesta en juego*, and we recommend that it be read by anyone interested in literature and its theoretical study. ★

Pantxika Cazaux