

Drama to Fiction and Back: Juan García Ponce's Intratext

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Juan García Ponce (Mérida, Yucatán, 1932), though best known for his award-winning fiction and essays, began his career as a dramatist.¹ His *El canto de los grillos*, the 1957 Premio Ciudad de México for best drama, received good reviews. When his second play, *La feria distante*, premiered later the same year, however, the critics bared their fangs. Although both works were later published, as was a third, *Sombras*, and García Ponce received a Rockefeller fellowship to study drama in New York and Europe, his focus had turned to fiction. Only *Doce y una, trece*, a product of his dislike for Lee Strasberg's realistic method of acting, would follow in 1962. Several other scripts exist, but García Ponce refuses all access to them.

He has explained his abandonment of drama in the following manner:

Mi experiencia con él se caracterizó por el inútil empeño de acomodar lo que veía y trataba de decir, dictado en gran parte por el reencuentro con Yucatán, dentro de una forma dada de antemano, un canon, en el que simplemente no cabía o no pudo encontrar acomodo por mi propia incapacidad para descubrir su forma. Esto me obligó a abandonarlo.²

However, almost two decades, and over thirty books later, he returned to it. This unexpected foray back into drama was provoked by the extraliterary influence that should receive more credit than literary historians give it—money. The Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes of México set out to stimulate more dramatic writing by commissioning a group of leading authors, all with previous experience in the genre, to write new plays.³ García Ponce responded with *Catálogo razonado* in late 1979.

My aim here is to study the interchange between drama and prose, the intratextual dynamics at play, and through it to understand the genesis and significance of the unusual hybrid product which is *Catálogo razonado*.⁴

García Ponce's first two plays could be called *costumbristas*. Both are set in provincial southern México and share similar scenery—the central patio of a

traditional home of the monied middle class. The setting captures the sense of the works: action is familial, with the emphasis on this unit's interaction according to societal norms. Just as all the rooms in those houses lead to the patio, individual needs and desires are channeled into the social arena, where they are adjusted to, frustrated by, and sacrificed for the general good. Lives are wasted; dreams abandoned. In neither work is provincial society nostalgically utopian; rather it is a closed, sterile environment, reminiscent of Galdós' *Doña Perfecta*, to offer a point of comparison well known to students of Hispanic letters. Youth is suppressed by tradition, religion and fear—a conflict metaphorical for traditional society's suppression of the individual. Any outside presence, especially from Mexico City, threatens stability through the possibility of change. *El canto de los grillos* encapsulates this world view in the image of the bird cages that are draped at night to keep snakes from devouring the canaries.⁵ Life is smothered out of fear.

La feria distante differs in that the conflict is no longer simplistically set in strict oppositions. It is not clear if the provincial-versus-urban motif lies at the heart of frustration, or, as one character states it, no matter where the lovers might go, “¿No pasaría lo mismo de siempre? ¿No se volvería todo rutinario, triste, sin sentido?”⁶ Time and adult social responsibility turn goals into illusions, a fate given the image of the fair and childhood, both of which are impossible to re-experience—adulthood is portrayed as the suppression of life by society and work. Rebellion is useless; life repeats its cycles indifferently. One couple does escape to another city, but they must destroy the extended family to do so—and even then we know that the man will fail and, perhaps, return as his childhood friend does before him, divorced and alone. In the end, in addition to all dreams having been abandoned, the family social center, the house, will also have disappeared.

Sombras is a microcosm of the other two.⁷ A one-act play set in the living room of a Mexico City apartment, where a provincial student has rented a room for the last five years from an older woman and her young daughter. The student's graduation and imminent departure signal the lost opportunity for life for the young woman. The mother incarnates repressive, alienated society, guided by economic pragmatism, moral propriety, and conformity. The two women sleep together, and the mother states that there is no reason for them not to continue the arrangement. A symbolic break with society comes when the electricity fails, leaving the young people with only the stars and a candle for light. In the shadows the student realizes the woman's attraction and kisses her, but the mother interrupts. The student flees, abandoning the two women to their grim future.

The three works share the common vision of society as repressive per se. Moreover, they showcase young female characters, who most intensely desire an alternative life style and, therefore, suffer most the restrictions of social norms. Men and older women conform to pragmatism, with the former giving up their dreams rather easily, accepting the futility of adult life. Even the husband in *La feria distante*, who sacrifices the family home to finance his escape, seeks socio-economic status, not a non-social alternative of love or art.

All three works pit the traditional foes: eros and thanatos, and society, as usual, is the latter. The plays function traditionally in that conflict is

portrayed in terms of social unrest or breakdown, and resolution comes with the restoration of social norms. However, society is no longer a positive, but a negative factor, perhaps because modern occidental society has lost its traditional *axis mundi*, symbolized by Nietzsche and others as the death of God. Significantly, all three families are fatherless.

What disturbs the reader of García Ponce's fiction is the apparent surrender to social norms, so alien to his mature works. What these plays reveal is a young author struggling with all the elements of what is now his life's work, already siding against society, but not yet having broken the shackles. When he later stated that drama was not the right genre for him, he was correct. For someone who considers society as essentially repressive, the most social of the literary genres, drama, was not suitable.

One is tempted to compare these plays immediately with narratives like "La feria al anochecer," *La casa en la playa*, or even "Imagen primera" and *El nombre olvidado*, because of obvious commonalities of setting and themes. This would be, however, misleading. The prose pieces that coincide with the plays' vision are minor works—"Después de la cita," or "El café."⁸ Both share a mood, a tone, an ambience of repression and futility, and center frustrated women in it. The settings are social gathering places. The change of genre, however, allows the author to move inside the characters to juxtapose more successfully inner personal desires with exterior limitations. In *Sombras* he had experimented with a long soliloquy to establish the context of the action and explore the protagonist's character; narrative prose is simply better suited to the author's goals. Yet the results are the same—life and love are frustrated within society. The author's vision transcended genres.

In the prose works most similar in theme and provincial setting, mentioned above, we begin to find a change from the acceptance of social norms to their rejection as life's determining absolutes. And if I may be permitted a quick, but necessary, digression, throughout his career García Ponce has returned to certain themes and settings in order to respond more positively—in a sense, to correct—his earlier writings; this produces the intratext of our discussion.

La casa en la playa replays the situation of *El canto de los grillos*.⁹ A young woman from Mexico City, married to a *Yucateco*, finds herself desperately resisting her absorption into provincial society. Her friend comes to visit her and sets off a series of crises that threaten to disrupt several lives. In the end, however, with the death of the husband's father, provincial society affirms its standards, the wife accepts her fate, and the visitor leaves. The difference here is that not only is provincial society depicted as stultifying, but the protagonist/narrator is the young woman who rejects social norms and escapes to her life of self-determination. Society reimposes itself, frustrating love and life, but the narrative voice simply leaves that society and its negativity behind. Moreover, the text is not the image of frustration, but of the beauty of the antisocial, perverse affirmation of freedom, movement, love, and eroticism.

The novel genre allows the author space to explore the personal histories of his characters, their childhood dreams, and their fidelity, or lack of, to those dreams. Also, it allows him to develop the theme of reflecting or identical identities, only implied in the plays where theatrical realism

demands well differentiated characters. In *La casa en la playa* the two men are somehow the same person, as are the two women. This possibility can only be played out in an asocial setting, since identity is as basic to society as it is to realistic theatre. The novel allows this.

“La feria al anochecer” brings images from *La feria distante* out of the distance and into close focus by depicting the childhood experience of the fair.¹⁰ The story captures not the loss of the child’s world, but its beauty and permanence as a poetic image. However, this is not escapist utopianism. Childhood itself is subject to the repressive social forces—school, church, and time. The fair interrupts all three orders, opening life to an extraordinary alternative. On the last night of the boy’s last fair, from atop a stalled ferris wheel, accompanied by his cousin and a girl—who imposes an unmasculine calm—the boy experiences a moment of anagnorisis. He realizes the total harmony of the world when it is experienced in an asocial manner. Back on the ground nothing has changed, but the epiphany is lasting, preserved in the story itself as the alternative space outside of social order.

“Imagen primera” repeats what we saw in the plays.¹¹ In a fatherless family, living in an old traditional house—though not provincial in style or location—a brother and sister grow from two inseparable children into young adults entering into society. The girl, Inés, even brings a *novio* home. As previously, the outsider represents danger; but now, danger is the imposition of social norms—values has been inverted. What must struggle to maintain itself is the perverse isolation of the asocial home. In the end the siblings accept their incestuous love, affirming the alternative the author has sought. The story, however, is framed in a social perspective, that of the rejected suitor; he informs us that the house has been razed—society destroys what it cannot abide. Yet the author has discovered the asocial space of literature where what survives is not disappearance, but the permanence of the realized image.

By 1966, although his works still reflect the dynamics of repressive society versus the freedom-seeking individual, García Ponce has again moved beyond his own frame of reference. He is questioning his basic premise. Does society restrain the individual, or is individuality itself—identity—the culprit that limits humans, with society being only the means of assuring stability and maintaining separation among essentially identical beings? And is not traditional, realistic, and even psychological literature an accomplice to the repression called identity?

Doce y una, trece, a short play staged in 1964, attacks these questions directly.¹² An anti-Actors Studio play, it says that on stage anything can happen: characters can interchange identities, time is not chronological—in effect, exterior reality has little to do with literary logic or the lack of it. Realism, thus, is a farce and should be treated as such. However, amid the farcical debunking of reality, the protagonist, significantly an artist and the only one who notices the difference between reality and what is happening in the play, is told that he has failed as a painter because he distorts reality instead of faithfully representing truth. The truth referred to here is synonymous with the model herself, the woman loved by both men involved in this dialogue. Despite the obvious mutability of the model and surrounding

reality, the basic tenet of realism is pronounced as an absolute. This, of course, turns that tenet and the literature based on it into a joke. Yet the protagonist is judged to be a criminal and insane for seeking alternatives. Society may be a farce, but at this point it still is strong enough to impose itself on the work. The play's humor and its refusal to treat any subject seriously does not allow it to develop fully; it remains a truncated work, victim of its negativity, a gloss of the themes the author would explore in depth elsewhere, especially those of multiple identities and art as an alternative space of reality. In *Doce y una, trece* are the seeds of *Catálogo razonado*, a fully developed anti-realist, anti-drama play. Those seeds are the a priori rejection of, 1) drama as a code to be respected; 2) realism as anything but a severely limited and limiting version of life; 3) personal identity as a fixed, reliable basis for either literature or life itself, but rather yet another limited and limiting fiction. Finally, it states the conflict of art's and the artist's relationship to life.

In 1968, with *La presencia lejana*, García Ponce marks a break with his literature in which society had managed to suppress eros. His protagonist, again a painter, rejects social roles, preferring an asocial existence. He shuns any social artifice for affirming identity, including machismo and economic rewards. He also rejects as impossible any nostalgic return to childhood, discovering instead the recuperation of the childlike, impersonal state of being in the world as an object, without the alienation of the adult consciousness—and his means, as well as his goal, is eroticism. At the same time, the text itself moves towards poetry in language and content. It gives way to a capturing of images, that though by necessity remain fixed in language, are continually permutating into others. This is baroque writing, with an undermining of all static codes. There is, inside and outside the work, the intention of transforming the model—a woman who never holds still for long—into the text itself by an obsessive repetition of her image in the world and of the world as if centered around her.

Susbequent books further the process. Personality is taken towards the impersonality of objects, or variable identities, or the repetition of the same identity in different people.¹³ The frustrated woman of those first plays is liberated to seek and find fulfillment in a variety of roles, and the writer becomes the impersonal voyeur whose repetition of her image allows her to transcend herself. Even when García Ponce returns to old themes and settings, as in "La gaviota," permutations clearly switch the emphasis from negative social norms to the positive alternative of erotic experience.¹⁴ No longer will the characters accept society as their stage of action; although all of them have social lives and work, their emotional-spiritual center is asocial. There they remain suspended over the abyss of personality-destruction inherent in authentic erotic experience. And literature's role is not simply mimesis, but the taking of life, the model, to its multiple possibilities within the totally free space of the text.

After the novel *El gato* (1974), García Ponce begins work on *Crónica de la intervención* (1982). In this two-volume, monumental novel, two women are identical in every way, in spite of their different identities. The novel maniacally multiplies the women's images, centering experience around them. Identities crumble, though somehow they are realized in the act. All of

García Ponce's obsessions are once again treated, taken here to even wider circles, as the desire and the lack of particularity in the desired object undermine many more characters than ever before. The discourse itself, usually intensely concentrated in one voice, now multiplies into several, though all coincide in the realm of desire. It was when the author was finishing this novel that he accepted the commission for his new play.

Catálogo razonado is a commentary on the summa of García Ponce's work, a catalogue of scenes, aesthetic principles, and his philosophy, all *reasoned*, in the sense of explained, justified, and verified (*darle la razón*). As such, within the intratext it is an expanded parody of *Doce y una, trece*. Once again an artist, here the author, is accused of distorting reality, this time by the model herself. Yet now the author is in firm command of his faculties; society can no longer impose its will. As the earlier play's set imitated a Matisse painting to stress drama's separate reality, here sets integrate works by such painters as Arnaldo Coen, Joy Laville, Roger Von Gunten, Pierre Klossowski, and Balthus. The play's continual discussion between the author and the director seems a permutation of the dialogue about art and the model's reality between the two men in *Doce y una, trece*. In the opening scene, the author's voice states explicitly that here he again takes up the question of the model's truth. "¿Quieres volver a ser tú misma? ¿Puedes mostrarme que tú misma eres algo más que el retrato para el que serviste de modelo? ¿Esa demostración es el argumento de esta obra?" (p. 2). The very question of reality and art is the essential theme of both plays.

The first thing seen on stage is a woman lying on a bed located within a cube—one of Arnaldo Coen's cubes that graphically create the illusion of an interior space separated from reality, but with an imposing density that seems to invade the viewers' space.¹⁵ Once again García Ponce utilizes an image as metaphor for his play—like Coen's cubes, literature is a real presence in the world, but with its own space within which it creates its own logic. The author can take life to that space in order to hold it fixed and experience it once and again from many perspectives and so the model can be the many women she is.¹⁶ Yet when the model moves, it is to break out of the cube, a graphic denial of her role as model and the visual equivalent of the question already stated by the author above. And since the model is the origin of life and literature, her movement puts into action the author and his work—the play begins to probe the critical question of art versus reality and the personal and equally critical question of if the model and the author are to separate or continue together.

In each of three acts (the author notes where breaks can be taken if the director wishes), there is a pattern of two major, reflecting scenes. The first in each case comes from a narrative—*La cabaña*, *Unión*, and "El gato." To each the model objects that her reality has been altered. The author responds with a second scene, in Acts 1 and 3 drawn from *real life*; in 2, from an unpublished novel in which the model writes her memories. We also see paintings juxtaposed to the author's parodies of them from his fiction. And interspersed with these elements is a dialogue about models and art. Thus on different levels, the play becomes an intratextual, metaliterary reflection on García Ponce's thematics and aesthetics, as well as metadrama commenting on the genre itself.

Objections against distortions of reality—the same objection raised in *Doce y una, trece*—force the author to explain his purpose and methods. Essentially, he seeks expanded experience.¹⁷ He makes the model act as she would have liked to in the past, liberating her from repression. He, in turn, can enjoy what she lived with others by writing himself into her lovers. Intertextuality—with literature and paintings—he explains thus: “Muchas veces voy de un retrato a ti como modelo para convertirme en algo si no idéntico por lo menos muy parecido a ese retrato original y tenerte a ti como su nuevo modelo.”¹⁸ Model and author live in art and art lives in them. When the director accuses him of using the play to expose her image once again, the author pleads guilty. His purpose, then, is closer to poetry and painting than to narrative or dramatic plot: he seeks the contemplation of an image. Thus, his personal obsessions free him, his characters and their models, and art as well, from the restricted identities he himself once tried to respect.

The play runs through the fictional and *real-life* scenes, revealing each as a variation on the same one in which the model is viewed simultaneously from multiple perspectives and/or in ways that intensify vision beyond the usual, we might even say beyond the human. This is achieved through the use of the camera, the drawing pencil, and the presence of a cat. Each element doubles the model's image, allowing her to expand her possibilities. At the same time, those elements heighten the viewer's awareness of infinite possibilities of, not only the model's existence, but of his or her own. This, of course, is a metaphor of, as well as a justification of, writing. At the same time, it should be remembered, the model and the author are watching these scenes being enacted. Thus the scenes themselves are being submitted to a more intense scrutiny. And since the audience is watching the couple watch a representation of themselves, the focal points and images are multiplied and re-multiplied.

Each scene leads to a disrobing of the model, a revealing of her image as beauty itself to the spectators and to the model herself. Each is a slightly different possibility of experiencing the original encounter between the lovers. What normally can only happen once in diachronic time is relived over and over; yet endless identical repetition would mean static experience, death in essence, so the image changes, evolves, multiplies just as life does. This movement is summed up in one of the author's favorite motif phrases: always the same and every time different.

When the model writes her own scene (Act 2), she discovers the pleasure of writing, a pleasure as intense as the original act, yet different. Writing, the author is explaining, is not simply a means to an end, but an end in itself, a way of life, an alternative to the apparently irreversible flow of time. Yet it is not an act that can ever be achieved, in the sense of ended, but one that must continually repeat itself. Hence, the obsessiveness of García Ponce's writing.

The model is not fully convinced, however, and insists that she will no longer serve the author as his model. This situation reflects García Ponce's concept of life. In spite of his invented voice's desire to retain the model in the play, García Ponce has often stated that life can never remain static. So the model's rebellion is a manifestation of life's movement. At the same time, however, what the model demands is a static identity of which she can be sure

as her own, singular and well defined. In this sense she also manifests life's other force, thanatos. When the author's voice tries to lead her away from her insistence on her identity, he is correcting her error, her giving in to the temptation of death. Simultaneously, he is recycling his own writing, giving those fixed images yet another impulse of eros. But the play as presentation cannot go on forever, so the model's refusal to accept her role precipitates the denouement.

Faced with the director's observation that the author's comparisons with real life, though justifying his position, have not and will not convince the model to change her mind, the author stages one last scene. This last attempt to resolve the conflict is a new scene in the sense that it does not have a published source in García Ponce's fiction, nor is it a real-life event. The play projects beyond its own pattern, just as the author's career has always broken with its patterns to resolve questions raised by its own dynamics.

The final scene takes place at an exhibit of drawings by Pierre Klossowski. The action of this last scene, just as that of his first plays, is set in a social space. The difference is that now the activity within that space is determined not by social norms but by art. From the static world of an interior patio we have arrived at the ever-changing openness of an art gallery. The model enters dressed like Klossowski's protagonist Roberte. Although she once again rejects the author's project, in spite of admitting its truth, when confronted by the director—who is also dressed like a Klossowski character—she reverts to her erotic game of resistance and submission. Just as in the beginning she had emerged from a painting to start the action, she now moves towards the paintings on the walls and assumes the identical position of the Klossowski piece titled *La recuperación de la plusvalía*. The title itself echoes the author's attempt to regain whatever might be lost with the model's revolt. At the same time, this movement is yet another variation of the original scene and the application of the theories discussed in the play. The author ends with an expression of faith and one more homage to his model.

The play has returned to the space of art. The last scene freezes into a still image of the author watching the representation of an image that itself is a representation of another image—and again, we watch it all. Yet through the mediation of the play, the model's image has evolved. The first, dreamy, solitary, isolated, ambiguously innocent woman from the first scene has become this last, fully conscious woman in the middle of an ambiguous sexual encounter taking place in an open public space—still innocent, but with that perverse innocence of erotic being. Just as García Ponce's fiction sought to liberate both the woman and man restrictions he himself imposed in his early works, this play expands the model's range of movement.

As the play closes on this last scene, the author's voice states that perhaps in the future he will continue to use the same model, despite her refusal or any distance she may create between them. He cannot control the model, but he can be faithful to his project and her image. The play is the best affirmation of that fidelity. In the last analysis, it is a catalogue of the multi-faceted image of love.

García Ponce's unexpected return to drama has once again served as a commentary on his opus in general. *Catálogo razonado* explains the thematics,

techniques, and purpose of *Crónica de la intervención*, his last novel, as well as the dynamics—both personal and artistic—of *La errancia sin fin: Musil, Borges, Klossowski*, his latest book of essays. In all three, identity and art are in question. In the end—or in the process, for all three works deny endings as they draw to a close—identities multiply in infinite plays of associations that reach out and embrace the author himself; social and literary conventions collapse; truth and reality are relativized. The play itself is novel, essay, and drama, simultaneously—poetry as well. García Ponce has seduced the genres to lie down with personal obsessions—a literary/life *menage a trois* to the *n*th power.

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Notes

1. A list of García Ponce's books includes: *El canto de los grillos*, 1958; *Imagen primera*, 1963; *La noche*, 1963; *Figura de paja*, 1964; *Cruce de caminos*, 1965; *Nueva visión de Klee*, 1966; *La casa en la playa*, 1966; *Juan García Ponce*, 1966; *Desconsideraciones*, 1968; *Entrada en materia*, 1968; *La aparición de lo invisible*, 1968; *Nueve pintores mexicanos*, 1968; *La presencia lejana*, 1968; *El reino milenarío*, 1969; *Cinco ensayos*, 1969; *La cabaña*, 1969; *El libro*, 1970; *El nombre olvidado*, 1970; *La vida perdurable*, 1970; *Vicente Rojo*, 1971; *Thomas Mann vivo*, 1972; *Encuentros*, 1972; *La invitación*, 1972; *Unión*, 1974; *El gato*, 1974; *Trazos*, 1974; *Teología y pornografía. Pierre Klossowski y su obra: una descripción*, 1975; *Cuentos, antología personal*, 1980; *La errancia sin fin: Musil, Borges, Klossowski*, 1981; *Crónica de la intervención*, 1982.

2. *Juan García Ponce*, (México, Empresas Editoriales, 1966), p. 49.

3. Under President López-Portillo, I.N.B.A. had an intense program of artistic patronage in all media and genres.

4. *Catálogo razonado* will soon be published by Editorial Premiá, but the citations in this article are to a typescript provided me by the author.

5. *El canto de los grillos*, (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1958).

6. *La feria distante, Cuadernos del Viento*, Nos. 53-54 (mayo-junio, 1965), p. 842.

7. *Sombras, Revista Mexicana de Literatura*, No. 2 (abril-junio, 1959), pp. 136-149.

8. "Después de la cita" and "El café" in *Imagen Primera* (Xalapa, Veracruz; Universidad Veracruzana, 1963).

9. *La casa en la playa* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1966).

10. "La feria al anochecer," *Imagen primera, op. cit.*

11. "Imagen primera," *Imagen primera, op. cit.*

12. *Doce y una, trece, Revista de la Universidad de México*, 17, No. 1 (Sept. 1962), pp. 9-17.

13. Bruce-Novoa, "The Encounters of Juan García Ponce," *Latin American Literary Review*, 3, No. 6 (Spring-Summer, 1975) pp. 49-52.

14. "La gaviota," *Encuentros* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972).

15. Bruce-Novoa, "Life in a Cube, the Paintings of Arnaldo Coen," *Américas*, 34, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb., 1982), pp. 31-37.

16. The author's character explains directly to the audience the following: "Casi estoy seguro de que yo la hice aparecer a ella muchas veces en esa novela (*Unión*) tal como quería verse y tal como me atrevo a asegurar que en verdad era, antes de que todos nos convirtamos en los seres extraños, muñecos de sí mismos que aparecen en ese cuadro. (Vuelve la cabeza hacia el cuadro de Balthus) . . . en los relatos que ella me hacía de su juventud, existía por lo menos la posibilidad de esas escenas." *Catálogo razonado*, p. 28.

17. The following exchange explains the author's expansion of experience. "Modelo: ¿Pero por qué es necesario? (The creation of a fiction about her life.) Actor en el que encarna la voz primera (the author's character): Te contemplo como no te conocí; vivo contigo lo que no me tocó vivir. Podría decirte que yo soy el modelo de José, pero tampoco sería verdad. Me he elaborado para que José se porte como quizás yo me hubiera portado en el momento en el que tú eras Nicole." *Catálogo razonado*, p. 30.

18. *Catálogo razonado*, p. 30.