

## “A New Experience”: The Art and Power of *La familia de Pascual Duarte*

Most novels, with the passage of time, lose their potency and cease to touch the reader's sensibility. At best, they find their way into the histories of literature and are read and studied by scholars and their students. Another—much rarer—kind of novel creates a resounding initial impression and continues to speak to successive generations of readers. Into this category can be fitted *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (*The Family of Pascual Duarte*). It occupies a central and indisputable place in the history of the post-Civil War novel. But, above all, it has “stayed news.” And, more than forty years after its first appearance, it continues to find readers—in the Hispanic world, in the far-flung academic community and, by way of translation, among a variety of foreign readers. How this diverse public responds to the text is of course impossible to determine. However, judging by one's own experience of hearing the book praised and acclaimed, attacked and even dismissed, *La familia de Pascual Duarte* is a powerful, perplexing and, for some, a subversive novel.<sup>1</sup>

Among other things I want to touch on some of the aspects and effects of the work that contribute to its quality as a disturbing experience. Let me start by quoting an adverse judgement of the novel. In *La familia de Pascual Duarte*—writes Enrique Anderson Imbert—“Cela contaba por el puro gusto de contar; y contaba violencias por el puro gusto de la violencia. Es decir que no había allí ninguna intención moral. . . . Cela choca, asusta, disgusta con escenas crudas y cruentas. Esas escenas denuncian una malhumorada actitud ante la vida, pero es un humor frío, sin compasión.”<sup>2</sup> (Cela was recounting a story for the sheer pleasure of it; and he was recounting violence for the sheer pleasure of indulging in violence. In other words there is no moral intention in the storytelling. . . . Cela shocks, frightens, upsets with his crude and gory scenes. These scenes reveal an ill-humoured attitude to life, but the humour is cold, lacking in

compassion.) The general tenor of this passage does not accord with my reading of the text, but it neatly encapsulates some of the points that concern me here: the violent and sordid aspects and their effects on the reader, the question of moral engagement and compassion as realised in the work and the matter of the presentation, tone and telling of the story.

Perhaps we should first remind ourselves of the extent of the violence and sordidness in the book. The protagonist shoots his dog, knifes a drinking companion in a quarrel, stabs his horse to death, murders his wife's lover and, in a savage encounter, kills his mother. His upbringing and home life are disablingly grim: his parents show themselves to be brutal, selfish, mean-minded and given to heavy drinking and vicious squabbling, his sister becomes a prostitute in early adolescence and his brother is a mental defective whose short life is filled with unrelieved suffering. In all, some ten deaths are mentioned. Given that the novel is rather short (some 150 pages), this list of human misery might suggest that the author were pathologically obsessed with the seamy underside of life, intent on recounting violence for the sake of it, as Anderson Imbert claims. Without wishing to underestimate the shock effect of certain scenes, I would argue to the contrary that the author, through the workings of insight, moral awareness and verbal creativity, fashions the material of violence into a kind of aesthetic counter-order, which in stressing the absence of human values in the degraded world of the novel points to their importance in the real world.

At the beginning of the work, in the transcriber's note, in Duarte's letter to a person in Mérida that accompanies his memoirs, in the clause of this person's will relating to these writings and in Duarte's dedication of his text to a man he has murdered, questions are already being raised about the protagonist, his situation and his attitudes. The tongue-in-cheek tone implicit in the manner and ordering of these documents, the playful approach to literary tradition, writerly artifice and scholarly procedures serve to cast out a net of irony. The attentive reader is intrigued by these initial suggestions, alerted to possible complexities of presentment, structure and character study and disposed to adopt a quizzical standpoint in relation to the protagonist.

The central drama, seldom directly mentioned but always present,

is set in a prison cell in Extremadura, where a condemned murderer, Pascual Duarte, is reviewing his life and writing down his version of it in the form of a confession. The point of view is exclusively his, apart from the details supplied by the editor-transcriber. Pascual's first words take us directly into the realm of conscience and self-justification: "Yo señor, no soy malo, aunque no me faltarían motivos para serlo."<sup>3</sup> (I, sir, am not evil, though I'd certainly have plenty of reasons for being so.) The voice of revelation soon begins to impose its authority on the reader. As we listen to a person confiding to us aspects of his life and find ourselves being won over by the earnestness of the tone so that we accept the version as true (though, on reflection, we would have to suppose that it were partial), so—as we read—we accept Pascual's words as convincing and succumb to the spell woven by the story-teller. When he talks of his village in a detailed concrete and evocative way, we momentarily forget that Pascual is a murderer. Suddenly, the recollection of the church bell is so vivid that it makes him imagine he is hearing it in his prison cell. Pascual, we see, is engrossed in the task of telling and reliving his tale. He goes on to speak of his home, supplying graphic details, evaluating and making social distinctions. He next turns to his favourite pastime, hunting, and starts to talk affectionately of his dog, "la Chispa," reminiscing of the times they had together. Then, still in the same paragraph, the tense switches from the imperfect to the preterite and the focus is placed on the final moments the dog and his master spend together, the final moments in which master kills dog. Because this act comes so unexpectedly and because its motivation is only vaguely presented (the dog has "la mirada de los confesores, escrutadora y fría" / the look of the confessor, scrutinising and cold),<sup>4</sup> the reader is left stunned. Moreover, the description of the act is neutral, connoting no emotion on the part of the killer: "Cogí la escopeta y disparé; volví a disparar. La perra tenía una sangre oscura y pegajosa que se extendía poco a poco por la tierra."<sup>5</sup> (I took up the shot-gun and fired; and then fired again. The dog was covered in dark and sticky blood that spread little by little over the earth.) This whole scene is one of the most disturbing in the book, suggesting all sorts of deep frustrations in Pascual. Other scenes are more violent, more rivetting,—for example, when Pascual and Lola brutally make love in the cemetery after Mario's burial or, at the end,

when Pascual murders his mother. These events have a Goyesque intensity and leave a deep impression on the reader, but because they are—looking in particular now at the act of matricide—culminations of a demonstrated process of feeling, a process that is motivated and even—for the protagonist—justified, they do not have the same lingering power to disquiet the reader. In this way, Pascual's violence against people comes to be more readily accepted, the reader being shown how a multiple murderer, who might be branded a "hyena" according to conventional standards of judgement, can still have redeeming qualities.

The subject matter of the confessions is violence, corruption, the disintegration of the natural order, in which man vents his anger on animals, husband brutalises wife, mother persecutes witless son, and son murders mother. And the recreator of this disordered world presents himself as a victim as well as a perpetrator of violence. He wishes to show that he is not intrinsically evil but that he has been led into committing socially repugnant acts. Writing of his parents and family background, he feels that heredity and his upbringing in a climate of incessant domestic strife have played a part in disposing him to evil-doing. He also, at various points, sees himself as the victim of destiny, fate and the devil's doings. Thus, nagging questions about shaping influences, personal responsibility, determinism and free will are posed for the reader.

Pascual declares his main concern to be the setting down of essential facts about his life as faithfully as his memory will allow in order to get closer to the lived reality than the recipient of the confessions would, through merely imagining what happened. In other words, Pascual wants to prevent his name from remaining a prejudice, to paraphrase Nietzsche. Before long he shows himself to be self-conscious about the lack of order in his memoirs, but explains that the only way he can relate his story is by letting it emerge "como me sale y a las mientes me viene, sin pararme a construirlo como una novela."<sup>6</sup> He defends his spontaneous approach to literary creation and proceeds to write with sensitivity and compassion of his brother, maltreated by his mother and putative father. By chapter 6, Pascual is again commenting on authorial problems:

Ahora, después de releer este fajo, todavía no muy grande, de cuartillas, se mezclan en mi cabeza las ideas más diferentes con tal precipitación y tal

mareo que, por más que pienso, no consigo acertar a qué carta quedarme. Mucha desgracia, como usted habrá podido ver, es la que llevo contada, y pienso que las fuerzas han de decaerme cuando me enfrente con lo que aún me queda, que más desgraciado es todavía; me espanta pensar con qué puntualidad me es fiel la memoria, en estos momentos en que todos los hechos de mi vida—sobre los que no hay maldita la forma de volverme atrás—van quedando escritos en estos papeles con la misma claridad que en un encerado . . .<sup>7</sup>

Now after re-reading this still not very bulky sheaf of notes, the most disparate of ideas get all mixed up in my head so precipately and dizzily that, however much I think, I can't manage to decide what to make of it. As you must have seen, I have already recounted much misfortune, and I think that my strength will surely fail me when I confront what still remains, which is even more of a misfortune; it horrifies me to think of how faithful and precise my memory is, at those moments, in which all the facts of my life—over which there is no damned way of turning back—are being written on these sheets as clearly as if on a blackboard.

Here the reader shares in Pascual's growing awareness of life-writing as an existential act, a form of moral probing and self-query, in which he is conscious—acutely conscious—of time, the horror of his misspent life and the loss of personal freedom. His sense of self is expanding, his moral sense is sharpened and his sensitivity heightened. In chapter 7 he brings out the candour and ingenuousness he showed in the episode with Lola, revealing that her pregnancy took him completely by surprise. Whilst in the act of composing and writing he manifests a gain in awareness, he ironically discloses his earlier lack of awareness: his lack of self-control when he gets caught up in a knife-fight and his lack of prudence when he allows his wife to go unescorted on a horse that has, not many days before, been involved in an accident.

Pascual places much emphasis on the accident, particularly its adverse effects on his frame of mind and on his relations with his womenfolk. After describing the death of his infant son, he is led to wonder if he has been predetermined to a life of misfortune. That is to say, his past experiences strongly colour his attitudes as he writes; his past is catching up with him and influencing his consciousness. His narrative becomes more direct, as he reproduces the recriminations his hysterically antagonistic wife hurls at him. This is a crucial period when murderous thoughts obsess him. He explains

how one comes to kill: "Se mata sin pensar, bien probado lo tengo; a veces sin querer. Se odia, se odia intensamente, ferozmente, y se abre la navaja, y con ella bien abierta se llega, descalzo, hasta la cama donde duerme el enemigo."<sup>8</sup> (You kill without thinking. I'm the living proof of it; sometimes without wanting to. You feel hate, intense, ferocious hate, and you open the knife, and with the blade fully exposed, you come barefoot to the bed in which your enemy is sleeping.)

After these gloomy comments, Pascual dwells on his present condition. He reveals that he has spent a whole month without writing; and, by giving rein to his imagination, he has been able to enjoy himself. He has achieved peace of mind after going through various states of emotion. However, on the day previously he had taken confession with the prison chaplain and this had unnerved him, causing him to harbour "pensamientos siniestros"<sup>9</sup> (sinister thoughts). The experience of institutionalised confession has driven him back to the urgent business of getting his confessions down on paper. But writing has now become a more problematical enterprise. It has become a physical and aesthetic necessity for Pascual to write slowly, deliberately and with all his senses alert, for, as he says, "Estas cosas en las que tanta parte tiene la memoria hay que cuidarlas con el mayor cariño porque de trastocar los acontecimientos no otro arreglo tendría el asunto sino romper los papeles para reanudar la escritura."<sup>10</sup> (These things in which memory plays such a big part have to be looked after with the utmost care because if the events are switched around, the matter could only be put right by ripping up the papers and starting to re-write.) Furthermore, he has discovered that things are never quite what they seem; on examination, they disclose unexpected aspects. In trying to set the record straight about himself, Pascual has become intellectually attuned to the complexity of life. But not only intellectually, also morally: he wonders, for example, about the possible ill effects of recounting "barbaridades"<sup>11</sup> (awful things). Writing is an activity that brings him sadness, moments of joy and moments of regret at what has happened and cannot be undone. It is an activity which agitates him, yet makes him feel more alive.

He proceeds to tell of his flight and two-year absence from home, his return to find his wife pregnant by the hated ex-lover of his sister,

his killing of this man, his term in prison, his release, his second wife and finally his murder of his mother. At decisive moments he interjects explanations for his misfortunes. For instance, regarding his early release from prison, he reflects: "Da pena pensar que las pocas veces que en esta vida se me ocurrió no portarme demasiado mal, esa fatalidad, esa mala estrella que, como ya más atrás dije, parece como complacerse en acompañarme, torció y dispuso las cosas de forma tal que la bondad no acabó para servir a mi alma para maldita cosa."<sup>12</sup> (It pains me to think that the few times in my life I took it into my head to behave not too badly, fate, ill-starred as it is, which, as I said earlier, seems to take pleasure in dogging my steps, left me in the lurch and arranged things in such a way that being good in the end did damn all for my soul.) This kind of comment is recurrent in the final chapter, where Pascual records how he killed his mother. In taut graphic prose he describes the physical build-up of his matricidal impulses: "Los pensamientos que nos enloquecen con la peor de las locuras, la de la tristeza, siempre llegan poco a poco y como sin sentir, como incansable, pero lenta, despaciosa, regular como el pulso."<sup>13</sup> (The thoughts that drive us to the worst form of madness, that is sadness, always come gradually and unawares, just as fog invades the fields and tuberculosis the chest. It advances fatally, untiringly, but slowly, deliberately, as regular as a pulse beat.) Immediately before recounting the murder episode, he refers to the matter of his conscience, using the conditional tense: "La conciencia no me mordería; no habría motivo. La conciencia sólo remuerde de las injusticias cometidas. . . . Pero de aquellos actos a los que nos conduce el odio . . . no tenemos que arrepentirnos jamás, jamás nos muerde la conciencia."<sup>14</sup> (My conscience would not gnaw me; there would be no reason for it to do so. Conscience only gnaws you for injustices you have committed. . . . But for those acts motivated by hatred . . . we never have to repent, our conscience never gnaws us.) The obsessive act described, Pascual can bring his confessions to a close with words that describe how this event affected him physically: "Podía respirar . . ."<sup>15</sup> (I could breathe). A fine irony, since, as the transcriber speculates, Pascual may have been garrotted not long after writing these words.

Pascual could feel the weight of hatred lifted from his shoulders on the 10th of February 1922, but fifteen years later, as a condemned

murderer, he feels the weight of guilt and the need to unburden his conscience and to present his life story as a deterrent to others. In writing down his confession, in grappling with his bloody past, he can find himself, can articulate and enlarge his humanness, so that he is no longer merely that hyena, that madman, that multiple murderer bearing the name Pascual Duarte. As he writes about the past, he becomes engaged in a process of self-enquiry, a literary as well as moral process, that is sometimes painful, sometimes joyous. In confinement he has the time and comes to feel the compulsion to examine, relive and recreate the chaos of his earlier life. Huge gaps of silence—the last fifteen years of his experience, especially—remain and many ends are left untied. Yet Pascual's scribbled pages affirm and justify his "triste vivir"<sup>16</sup> and reveal a kind of rough-hewn wisdom.

The life and situation of Pascual Duarte throws out a challenge to the reader to define his own sense of what is criminality and what is normality and to reflect on such questions as: In what ways are all human beings involved in evildoing? To what extent does society itself help to shape the capacity for evil shown by its members? Is it possible for violence to be an authentic form of action? More impressively than the case histories produced by many a criminologist, the novel offers a moving, concrete and complex instance of the human side of a man who has taken human life. Cela himself has alluded to Pascual in terms of his "recóndita honradez" (recondite honesty) and talked of the book as being about the relations of normality and abnormality.<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt that the moral power of the work resides at this level. But not solely, for *La familia de Pascual Duarte* poses all sorts of questions about the process of memory and imagination, about truth-telling and self-delusion and about the art of narrative. The complex narrative presentation, involving framing devices, editorial concerns and the deployment of the autobiographical mode, works to multiply the ironies and the questions concerning the text and its protagonist. The novel leaves gaps, fissures and loose ends at the level of content and structure; it is porous and open-ended, but in a more tacit way than the Cortazarian novel. It is a work that embodies some of the contingency, contradictions and incongruousness of human life. Out of these elements Cela has made a verbal structure that produces "a new experience,"



one not easily pigeonholed, as D. H. Lawrence put it,<sup>18</sup> an experience that over the years seems to lose none of its newness and none of its power to move, suggest and disturb.

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#### NOTES

- 1 All quotations are taken from Camilo José Cela, *La familia de Pascual Duarte*, 13a. edición, *Obra completa de C. J. C. Tomo 1. Las tres primeras novelas (1942-43-44)* (Barcelona: Destino, 1962).
- 2 Enrique Anderson Imbert, *El cuento español*, 3a. ed. (Buenos Aires: Columba, 1974, 41-42).
- 3 Cela 57.
- 4 Cela 64.
- 5 Cela 65.
- 6 Cela 82.
- 7 Cela 96.
- 8 Cela 140.
- 9 Cela 144.
- 10 Cela 145.
- 11 Cela 146.
- 12 Cela 169.
- 13 Cela 187-88.
- 14 Cela 190.
- 15 Cela 194.
- 16 Cela 146.
- 17 See Camilo José Cela, "Palabras ocasionales," *La familia de Pascual Duarte*, ed. Harold L. Boudreau and John W. Kronik (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1961), ix.
- 18 "The world doesn't fear a new idea. It can pigeonhole any idea. But it can't pigeonhole a new experience." Quoted by Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967) 15.