

Experimenting with the Experimental Novel:
José Donoso and Naturalism in Chile

Salvador I. Ayala Camarillo
California State University, Stanislaus

At the end of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (*The Obscene Bird of Night*) (1970), the narrator of José Donoso's surreal novel is consumed by flames, and his essence disperses into the night. Prior to this, the narrator, named Humberto Peñaloza but sometimes referred to as El Mudito, had been wrapped up in rags by old women living in a decrepit asylum until he was dramatically reduced in size. This reduction occurred after his vital organs were stolen from him, which happened during his time as a warden to a failed utopia of deformed individuals. Compared to Donoso's previous works, *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* drastically departs from the realm of what is possible and pushes into the outer reaches of textual experimentation. Despite the feverish unreality of *El obsceno pájaro*, one can spot the distinct traces of literary naturalism's influence in the events of the novel, mainly naturalism's concerns with sexual difference and heredity. This presence, though, is complicated both by the fact that the novel does not at all abide by the narrative arc of the typical naturalist text and by the fact that much of Donoso's literary output attempted to escape the stylistic confines of criollismo and costumbrismo, both of which drew heavily upon realism and naturalism. In essence, José Donoso's novel includes a sustained engagement with the core of literary naturalism in a place few would think to look for it: a novel published sometime around the zenith of the Latin American Boom, a time when Latin American authors prioritized innovation and breaking with the past.

That Donoso includes naturalism's hallmarks in what is his most well-known work—a novel that launched hundreds of dissertations in the States, as Esther Edwards quips in her biography of Donoso (279)—should not come as a complete surprise. His previous novel, *El lugar sin límites* (*Hell Has no Limits*) (1966), engages with naturalism in a much more recognizable way. The novel deals with La Manuela, a transwoman running the local brothel, and the threat of Pancho, a ruffian who threatens Manuela and her daughter. The text reflects naturalism's fixation on determinism and sexual difference and follows its plot structure. By the end, Manuela is likely dead, viciously beaten by Pancho and his brother-in-law in a moment of transphobic violence. Thus, *El lugar* goes through the usual naturalistic tale of decline in which a pitiful figure is destroyed by the social forces around her because she transgressed the status quo. In *El lugar*, one sees social critique that still manages to play by the literary mode's rules, which will evolve into a much more complicated reworking of naturalism's structures and concerns in *El obsceno pájaro*. Given that *El lugar* was published in the middle of Donoso's

struggle to finish *El obsceno pájaro* and as a way to repay a debt to the Chilean publishing house Zigzag,¹ it is not hard to imagine naturalism making its way from one novel to the next. Though, as with so much else in *El obsceno pájaro*, the naturalism takes on a different form.

What is gained from understanding how naturalism's features live on in Donoso's fiction, even if transformed into an oddly shaped, imbunche-like version of their former selves much in the same way that *El Mudito* is transformed? Beyond its presence in Donoso's work, the persistence of naturalism in Latin America helps to illustrate its function as an index of anxieties about social change. In considering the "long tail" of naturalism in Latin American film, J.P. Spicer-Escalante notes that naturalism acts as a counternarrative that challenges "preconceived notions of social, economic, and cultural progress in the Hispanic world," which is relevant now more than ever in the face of globalization and neoliberalism (17). Sabine Schlickers, in *El lado oscuro de la modernización*, concludes that naturalist texts reflect fears that emerge in any era in which great transformation is happening and are skeptical of or even disillusioned with social progress (383). American literary critic Donald Pizer makes a similar point, when he notes that "the naturalistic ethos, which views man as circumscribed by conditions of life over which he has no control, appears to be confirmed during periods of social malaise and individual hardship," flaring up "like a dermatological condition" during times of income inequality and social unease (154-55). Taking a different approach, Claire Solomon explains how naturalism addresses discourses on prostitution by "proposing in literature scientific answers to the law's ambiguities" (16), and she observes how in Argentina, the philosophy underpinning naturalist literature "remained intertwined with criminological thought and popular in police writing" in the 1930s and beyond, long after literary naturalism had become "passé in literature" (110). In short, naturalism reacts to social upheaval and attempts to counter narratives that might frame momentous changes as a sign of positive social progress; it is invested in trying to explain through fictional narratives why various social ills persist even in the face of modernization. Given that Donoso is writing at a time when the Americas were experiencing revolutions, regime changes, and shifting economies, it is not surprising that naturalism and the questions it raises should resurface to try to provide answers to these developments, even if Donoso and others might not be interested in those answers. I am suggesting through this overview that naturalism plays a critical role in Latin American culture past its alleged expiration date, and Donoso's engagement with its core concepts showcases its lasting relevance.

¹ Donoso recounts this debt in *Historia personal del "boom"* (*The Boom in Spanish American Literature: A Personal History*), which was a thousand dollars in the currency of the time, an exorbitant amount for Donoso, who felt that producing another novel was the only way to pay off the debt (107).

If a connection between Donoso's works and naturalism remains underexamined, it is because of an insistence both on his part and on that of the criticism that figures Boom literature as a clean, triumphant break from past forms. Donoso himself propagates this view of rupture. In *Historia personal del Boom*, he proclaims that publishing the classic novels like *Doña Barbara* or *La vorágine* were safe bets for publishers given the use of these texts in school, but he nonetheless feels that reverence for classic works resulted in "una generación de padres debilitados por el mismamiento en su corta tradición, y nos quedamos sin padres con quienes nos complaciera identificarnos" (22) 'a generation of fathers weakened by their absorption into this brief tradition, and we were left without fathers with whom we would care to identify.' Donoso insists that the previous generation is one that he and his contemporaries cast aside, choosing instead to create something different. His iconoclasm is echoed by other critics who concur that Boom authors rejected realism, naturalism, and its offshoots (Friedman 482, Pollard 40). Neil Larsen, for example, sums up the "aestheticist account" of the Boom "as simply the discovery of a new literary language in which to express Latin American reality with, for the first time, complete authenticity" (775). A notable outlier in the criticism is Doris Sommer, who examines the U.S. critical machinery's acceptance of the Boom's self-mythologization: "Content, perhaps with this vindication of our scant information about Latin America, an English-language public hardly suspected the Boom's substantial pre-texts: a whole canon of great novels that elicited disingenuous dismissal by writers who anxiously claimed to be literary orphans at home, free to apprentice themselves abroad" (1). Similarly, Mónica Barrientos puts the work of Donoso in dialogue with nineteenth-century foundational Chilean writers like Alberto Blest Gana, Marta Brunet, and others, ultimately showing how, across *Coronación*, *El lugar sin límites*, and *El obscuro pájaro de la noche*, Donoso moves from absorbing to subverting and finally to exceeding costumbrismo, realism, and naturalism (24-25). Barrientos notes that it is in this third novel "donde se observa una explosión del realismo, donde sus restos no cambian de orden, sino que se difuminan" (32) 'where one observes an explosion of realism, where its remnants don't change in their order, but rather become a blur.' Thus, with some exceptions, criticism of Donoso's body of work, especially during the Boom years, largely frames his relationship to past traditions as adversarial or reiterates his sentiment that he saw little of value in those older forms.

To expand upon this discussion of Donoso's relationship to naturalism, I want to turn to one of his predecessors that he all too eagerly writes off as representative of the kind of stifling fiction that he sought to escape: Augusto D'Halmar.² In *Historia personal*, Donoso explains that the important names of

² Oddly enough, Donoso is less dismissive of a different practitioner of naturalism in Chile, Joaquín Edwards Bello, who publishes naturalist novels like *El inútil* (1910) or *El roto* (1920). Donoso

Chilean literature, which he views as powerless statues and which include Augusto D'Halmar (pen name for Augusto Goémme Thomson), hold none of the appeal of modernist writers like Faulkner or Joyce (23-24). However, striking parallels between D'Halmar's oeuvre and *El obsceno pájaro* reveal that Donoso's fiction does not break with Chile's literary history as neatly as he would have readers believe. Except to point out that both are queer Chilean writers, criticism does not often mention Donoso in conjunction with D'Halmar, except for Rodrigo Cánovas, who comments on how the feverish urban space of d'Halmar's *Juana Lucero* (1902) works as "antecedente del ruinoso y esquizofrénico espacio donosiano" (30) 'a precursor for the ruinous and schizophrenic Donosian spaces.' It is surprising that Donoso dismisses D'Halmar, a writer whom critics have recognized, especially in recent years, as doing innovative work in terms of form and style. Even D'Halmar's most conventional novel, *Juana Lucero*, which hews closest to Zola's naturalism than any of his other works, still introduces a fascinating irrationality to the genre in the form of the protagonist's spiritualist practices. In addition to her mother's ghost, identity is blurred in the novel, with Juana taking on the name and identity of Zola's *Nana* not only as a form of dissociation that acts as a survival mechanism (77), but also as a moment of intertextuality that still undermines Zola's determinism because Juana and her literary predecessor do not meet the same end for the same reasons (Solomon 20). The inclusion of supernatural elements and the almost metempsychosis between Juana and Nana serves as a reaction against positivism (Loebell 54). As such, instead of reading Juana's flight into madness as a fitting end for any naturalist protagonist, her disrupted psychology suggests "una ruptura que guía la exploración hacia otras cartografías, agitando el cuerpo social, para dar paso a la implosión de aquel paradigma normativo sociocultural" (Novoa Romero & Ramírez Peña, 167) 'a rupture that guides the exploration towards other cartographies, stirring the social body, to give way to the implosion of that normative sociocultural paradigm.' D'Halmar's first novel, the one that would be most closely bound to the tradition that Donoso claims to reject, already does the work of rethinking the assumptions behind naturalism and tweaking its formula to expand the possibilities of the genre, and this is even before considering D'Halmar's later works, like the stories of *Los alucinados* ('The Hallucinating Ones') or his travel narratives like *La sombra del humo en el espejo* ('The Shadow of Smoke in the Mirror'), both of which traffic in transference of identities. In short, José Donoso, who similarly reworked naturalism while playing within its generic confines, only to take his experiments with form and content in increasingly strange directions, has far more in common with D'Halmar than either his own or others' accounts of Chilean literary history admit.

declares that few writers can write about the city of Santiago quite like Edwards Bello, and Donoso states that he aims to be a writer of the city as well (Ferrada Aguilar 59).

Donoso's Boom contemporaries might have abandoned traditional literature as advertised, but at least for Donoso and his relationship to Chilean writers, the form and content of naturalism provide a jumping-off point for moments of innovation in *El obsceno pájaro*. In considering Donoso in relation to D'Halmar, I want to demonstrate that from its earliest moments, naturalism in Chile had already shown a willingness to experiment with the traditional formula, sometimes in an effort to add the unusual or folkloric to a narrative pattern that was supposed to reject the metaphysical. This is evident in both D'Halmar's introduction of a ghostly mother figure in *Juana Lucero* and in the monstrous inhabitants of Donoso's novel. From the start, Chilean naturalism engaged in critiquing the wealthy and powerful just as much as diagnosing the lower classes that were most vulnerable to determinism; Donoso and D'Halmar, in their respective works, challenge not only the hegemony of the landed elite but the masculinity that upholds it. Donoso participates in the naturalist tradition, despite his objections to the contrary, and even contributes to its evolution in Chile. Donoso's work, then, is not a rejection of naturalism but rather a dramatic intensification of its project of critique and the more fanciful, experimental approach to Zola's experimental novel initiated by D'Halmar and others. In fact, Donoso does not so much kill his genre fathers and grandfathers as he resurrects their concerns and stylistic interventions in different narrative forms.

The most obvious direct engagement with naturalism comes through *El obsceno pájaro*'s portrayal and criticism of heredity and determinism. These two concepts permeate naturalism in Latin America, where upbringing and genetics have political stakes. As Gabriella Nouzeilles explains in *Ficciones somáticas* ('Somatic Fictions'), naturalist fiction presents sterility, disease, and monstrosity as appropriate outcomes, or even poetic justice, for an unfit coupling—such as between an individual from the desired race or class and a dangerous racial Other that might be an immigrant (20). Nouzeilles shows how naturalism in Argentina and elsewhere provides cautionary tales in the hopes of preserving the purity of a national identity and avoiding catastrophe (20). In Chilean culture, as Carl Fischer notes, national and economic progress are also linked to appropriate breeding and “can be read as intrinsically linked to masculine, heterosexual practice and reproduction” (254). These pressing concerns regarding racial and class hegemony inform Donoso's reaction to heredity and determinism because of both his positioning in the higher strata of Chilean society and his sexuality. Since a narrative of national progress “is so often gendered and sexed to exclude queer, nonreproductive bodies from political and economic visibility,” both during naturalism's heyday and in the period of economic reform in which Donoso was writing, Donoso's text destabilizes those masculinist, reproductive standards and the way that social mores and practices reinforce them (256).

Donoso includes discussions about nature, nurture, and patriarchal continuity in his fiction mainly to challenge them. From early in the novel, the wealthy Jerónimo Azcoitia and his family are shown to be obsessed with passing down the family name, retaining their wealth, and making or breaking reputations. Following Chile's independence, the family line has produced only female heirs, and the Azcoitías fear losing their position in the upper echelons of society. The family's naked ambition reveals the preoccupation with good breeding for what it really is: less an interest in fostering characteristics for the betterment of society and more an attempt to retain power in the face of change. Losing the ability to pass down the family name means relinquishing all the privileges and glories that come with it: "El apellido corría peligro de extinguirse, y con él prebendas, derechos, posesiones, poder, sinecuras, honores, que al repartirse entre primos de otros apellidos disolverían la fuerza de ese único Azcoitia necesario en cada generación" (53) 'The family name ran the risk of going extinct, and with it the perks, rights, possessions, power, sinecures, honors, that, if spread out across cousins of different last names, would dilute the force of that single necessary Azcoitia in each generation.' As the repetition of various synonyms for power or wealth in the text show, maintaining status under a single banner is what matters most. Of further note is the fact that it is not enough for Jerónimo that his family be adjacent to power or even share power with other family branches. Rather, he sees it as an immutable and uncontested law of nature that they deserve to and should control it all.

In contrast, Humberto Peñaloza, who will become Jerónimo's personal assistant and Boy's warden, exemplifies Hernán Vidal's observation about the upper classes' decadence and their ability to bring down the lower classes along with them (31). Humberto and his father are similarly fixated on what posterity will say about them. Humberto recalls how his father bemoans his lack of status as a teacher and can only trace his history back to his own father, a train conductor. Just as Jerónimo creates an elaborate plan to mold Boy in a particular image, so too does Humberto's father create a program for Humberto, which he describes: "mi padre trazaba planes para mí, para que de alguna manera llegara a pertenecer a algo distinto a ese vacío de nuestra triste familia sin historia ni tradiciones ni rituales ni recuerdos" (93) 'my father drafted plans for me, so that one way or another I could belong to something apart from this emptiness that was our sad little family without history or traditions or rituals or memories.' While this list of what is important (history, traditions, etc.) to the Peñalozas is more concrete and commendable than the abstract synonyms for power that matter to the Azcoitías, Donoso still uses it to demonstrate the noxious effect of obsession with status. Humberto's father feels that his last name does not stand out against the nameless masses, which shows how the discourse of lineage and heredity have trickled down from the elite and convinced those below them that their histories do not matter. In a dark reflection

of naturalism's concern with upbringing, Humberto's father's worship of the upper classes and their lifestyle "tenía para él proporciones mágicas y resonancias fabulosas" (95) 'had for him magical properties and fabulous resonances,' which leads Humberto down a path of destruction. Taught to regard power religiously and superstitiously, Humberto will be exploited by Jerónimo on multiple occasions and later come to resent him. In a traditional naturalist novel, Humberto's father's exhortations to do something with his life would be admirable, but Donoso demonstrates that the class into which Humberto seeks entry is not one that is worth joining.

The novel, thus, explores how the upper classes wield notions of heredity and good upbringing as weapons to keep those below them in awe, but the text calls out the weakness of these concepts on two fronts. First, elites like Azcoitia ignore their own failings, and secondly, the text subversively comments on how their obsession with "patrilineal succession" and biological purity is not only "premodern and semifeudal" or even "monstrous" (Fischer 268), but also easily undermined. The first criticism is not unique to Donoso, and while one might think that the second one could be, in fact both of these challenges to the upper classes' behavior and genetic obsessions share connections with the D'Halmar's work. In *El obsceno pájaro*, for example, Azcoitia carries himself as the paragon of Chilean power, but his confidence is built upon an illusion. During a scuffle against protestors during which Humberto is injured, Azcoitia claims to be the wounded one in order to steal his servant's valor; in other instances, he makes Humberto watch him have sex, which not only evokes salacious voyeurism but also opens the way to a queering of the act when Humberto gains the ability to possess Azcoitia (Fischer 269). Azcoitia is so wrapped up in his self-mythologization that he is unable or unwilling to perceive his own transgressions and lies; he sees himself beyond reproach by nature of his status. His class and blood shield him from critique. Donoso's denouncement of the upper classes resembles similar caustic criticisms in *Juana Lucero* aimed at the upper classes' debauchery and at the notion of heredity as a means to dehumanize the lower classes. About halfway into that novel, the young protagonist is turned over by her aunt to be a servant for the Caracuel family, where she is raped first by the head of the household, Absalón Caracuel, and later by his son. She is eventually turned away, with the family and her aunt self-righteously justifying their actions through correspondence: "*Yo me lo esperaba...Eso es hereditario...Tiene mala sangre en las venas...En cuanto a ustedes, mis queridos amigos, estoy desolada por la turbación que esto ha introducido en esa casa ejemplar*" (140) 'I expected it...That kind of thing is hereditary...She has bad blood in her veins...As for you, my dear friends, I'm devastated by the trouble this has introduced in such an exemplary house.' Here, rather than place blame on the men of the house, who rape their servants with impunity, Juana's aunt invokes the language of determinism. It is Juana's tainted

blood, passed down from her mother, who herself was taken advantage of by an important man, that deserves the scorn of that great house. Neither Donoso nor D'Halmar are the first or last authors in Chile to excoriate the upper classes, but they both do so while invoking the language of determinism and lineage that permeates literary naturalism; in this conventional way, D'Halmar's text is a precursor for the critique that Donoso will make decades later.

In a far less conventional way, D'Halmar and Donoso share more than their rebuke of Chile's powerful men. Indeed, both authors turn the idea of patriarchal lineage on its head by showing how it can be subverted by both the lower classes and non-reproductive sexuality. In Donoso's novel, Humberto joins with another one of Jerónimo's servants, Peta Ponce, a witch, to help conceive a son by proxy, with Humberto standing in for his employer and Peta substituting his wife, Inés. Out of this comingling of bodies, of Humberto inhabiting his superior's body or "entering" him, comes Boy, who will become the last Azcoitía. This sexual substitution speaks to the novel's themes about the wealthy's anxieties, with the servant classes representing not only the fear of the anarchic that can overthrow the masters but also the darkness and magic of Chile's past and folklore, both of which must be silenced and hidden (Ugarte Undurraga 154). The fear of the servant class sexually subverting its superiors and the fascination with the transmigration of spiritual or erotic essence are taken up by D'Halmar. In one of his short stories, "En provincia" (1914), for example, Borja Guzmán is a musically talented servant who impregnates Clara, the wife of his wealthy employer, because his master wants a male heir but cannot conceive one. The child's parents cruelly refuse to let Guzmán have contact with the boy and eventually move away, likely worried about the influence he may have over the child. Borja, meanwhile, openly resents the man he sexually supplanted: "estuve sometido a la horrible expiación de que aquel hombre llamase *su* hijo al mío, a *mi* hijo. ¡Imbecil! Tentado estuve mil veces de gritarle la verdad, de hacerle reconocer mi superioridad sobre él, tan orgulloso y confiado, pero ¿y las consecuencias, sobre todo para el inocente?" (107) 'I was subjected to the horrible atonement of having that man call my son *his* son, *my* son. Imbecile! A thousand times I was tempted to yell out the truth to him, to let him know my superiority over him, so proud and self-assured, but what about the consequences, above all, for the innocent?' Here, the threat of Borja is twofold. He is a living reminder for his master that his class depends on the sexual potency of others to further its patriarchal ends. But Borja's knowledge also represents the threat of bringing it all crashing down. Borja is tempted to announce out loud the sexual failure of his master, to shatter the myth of the upper classes' "strong seed," but he stops himself for fear of harming his son. This sexual substitution is not infused with magic as it is in *El obsceno pájaro*, but it does show how both writers participate in a long-running commentary on the instability of the supposed genetic superiority of the powerful. It isn't until three years later, in *Los alucinados*, that

d'Halmar approaches this topic of erotic transference from a more otherworldly and queer angle that would not feel out of place in one of Donoso's works. In the "Ole Dol" section, a man encounters a younger man that he treats as a reincarnation of a lost love, with the speaker of the story noting that his past and current love share the same "sonrisa ambigua, casi del mismo porte, la piel trigueña y los cabellos dorados, hasta con sus silencios y su voz" (103) 'ambiguous smile, almost of the same shape, the tan skin and the hair, even the silences and his voice.' This transmigration of soul and erotic attraction figures in other D'Halmar works, most notably in *La sombra del humo en el espejo*, in which D'Halmar ends up "donning" the skin and culture of his lover, Zahir. This new identity assimilated into his own "functions as the essential self he never had. Ironically, he achieves it not merely through a process of identification but by usurping the self of the other" (Ellis 80). Given how much Donoso and D'Halmar write on body doubling, identity crises, queerness, and the magical or even feverish forces that make these transferences possible, it is a wonder that Donoso rejects a writer whose approach mirrors his own. Both begin their careers with relatively straightforward engagements with naturalism's possibilities, only to take its concerns about genetics and sexuality in new, surprising directions.

One such direction is in the use of space. Few spaces embody Donoso's ability to reshape naturalism's themes for his purposes quite like La Rinconada, Azcoitia's attempt to contain his son. Much has been written about the function of this monstrous utopia in the novel. It has been discussed, usually in tandem with La Casa de Ejercicios Espirituales, as a space in which those on the margins of society attempt to reconstruct their version of Western culture (García-Moreno 35), where the lines between the conscious and unconscious blur and reflect the author's own feverish composition process (Nawrocka 88), and where transgressive games that link mythic and historic time are played (Marlés Valencia 412). Each of these readings is compelling in its own right and informs my understanding of "el espacio Donosiano" in the novel. But it is the analysis of Mónica Barrientos and Miguel Ángel Náter that best helps make sense of what La Rinconada represents in relation to naturalism and the experimental novel in particular.³ For Náter, the "poética de la destrucción cósmica no pretende una modulación nihilista, sino la visión primitiva y mítica de la destrucción del mundo (artístico) del cual surge otro mundo nuevo" (27) 'poetics of cosmic destruction do not aspire to a nihilistic modulation, but rather the primitive and mythic vision of the destruction of the (artistic) world out of which a new world springs forth.' For Barrientos, La Rinconada and other

³ Writing over twenty years before Barrientos and Náter, Philip Swanson makes a similar point about La Rinconada's failure and the subsequent chapters in the novel: "This symbolic metamorphosis marks the transition from an ordered vision of the universe to an awareness of its truly chaotic and therefore terrifying nature (though at the same time, of course, La Rinconada is equally a construct or haven for Boy and the freaks who inhabit it)"(69).

Donosian spaces perform the Derridean task of solicitation, acting as locales where “las fisuras internas de la tradición se acentúan resequebrajándola lentamente hasta poner de manifiesto la carencia misma de esas estructuras” (36) ‘the internal fissures in tradition are highlighted, slowly fracturing it until they reveal the very lack of those structures.’ Barrientos notes that *La Rinconada* pulls or tests the contradictions of tradition to their limits, not in a sudden apocalyptic negation but in allowing them to play out for the reader. One such fissure is the positivism inherent in the naturalistic project. The chaotic results of Don Jerónimo’s project to shape his son’s upbringing—that is, to create order in the world—resemble one of naturalism’s foundational texts, Émile Zola’s *Le Roman expérimental* (*The Experimental Novel*). However, Donoso’s novel does not parody or explode this concept needlessly, instead treating Zola’s model of narration as the fuel that feeds a different, more expansive creative project. In order to arrive at the creative pandemonium that occurs in the later stages of *El obsceno pájaro*, the experiment that embodies the appeal of positivism must be pushed to its absolute limits so that its collapse can signal a different way forward for art.

To understand what worldview Donoso’s novel attempts to reconceptualize, I turn briefly to Émile Zola’s vision of naturalism, which was received differently (or sometimes not at all) across the Americas.⁴ In 1880, Zola publishes a foundational document of the genre, “Le Roman expérimental,” in which he sets out the tenets for a mode of writing that aims to create a hypothesis through fiction about the way society works, then sets out to prove or disprove said hypothesis through the experiment of seeing the variables, characters, and plots of the novel through to the end. Zola borrows extensively from physiologist Claude Bernard’s theories on the effects that heredity and the environment have on a person’s development. As Zola sees it, the experimental novelist must create a character, assign the character inherent and inherited characteristics, design the environment that fosters these traits, and then turn characters loose in the controlled experiment of the plot and, consequently, the novelist takes an observational approach “in order to continue the solution of the problem, and to solve scientifically the question of how men behave when they are in society” (Zola, Sherman 20-21). Zola’s experimental novelist has lofty aims; his textual laboratory is meant to diagnose the nature of behavior much in the same way that a physician looks at the empirical evidence of an illness to suggest treatment. For Zola, the experimental novelist abandons metaphysical explanations for mankind’s behavior to test out hypotheses and provide data “so that, in their turn, the legislators can one day dominate and control these phenomena” (31). The shift away from romanticized explanations of human actions and towards an empiricist mode of fiction was meant to produce

⁴ J.P. Spicer-Escalante notes that Latin American authors take inspiration from Zola’s method “in spirit, but not always in practice” and that approaches to his work “have traditionally been syncretic in the Hispanic world and absolute mimesis was never a reality” (18).

works that traced as faithfully as possible the concrete phenomena (poverty, alcoholism, etc.) that determine a subject's actions, eventually leading authorities to take appropriate actions.

Donoso's novel demonstrates what might happen were one to take this faith in the predictability of human behavior to a logical conclusion. Don Jerónimo de Azcoitia engages in his own aesthetic experiment and tries to dictate the terms of his son's life by running his own kind of world-building. La Rinconada's dark reflection of the *roman expérimental* is a critical stage in the process of tweaking naturalism, initiated by Augusto D'Halmar in *Juana Lucero*, where he introduces spiritualism as a challenge to the clear-cut rationality of naturalism. Donoso's witchcraft, imbunches, and monsters are an intensification of this experimentation with naturalism. Furthermore, the novel reveals the futility of something like Zola's experimental novel through Jerónimo's own efforts to create a paradise for his son. In order for his child to develop well, Jerónimo creates a hermetic environment populated only by abnormal people and meant to encompass the whole world. In essence, Jerónimo creates an experiment where he controls all the variables—or thinks he does—but loses control of the project as chaos and human nature ensue. The novel reconsiders naturalism and produces an entirely different kind of experimental novel.

Had Jerónimo set up his experiment in a rational, comprehensible world, La Rinconada might have had a more predictable outcome; however, the world of the novel is one designed not to lead the reader down a narrow corridor towards an inevitable conclusion. As Enrique Luengo observes, Donoso tasks the reader with navigating a complicated labyrinth that requires effort in order to sort meaning out of a multiplicity of perspectives, challenging the notion that a work of fiction can offer a singular understanding of the plot (53). The point is indeterminacy and the refusal of closure. Thus, it makes sense that Jerónimo's project, as steeped in logic as he thinks it is, should collapse into uncertainty and irrationality. Upon the birth of Boy, the child must be hidden away because his presence would force everyone to reckon with the irrational possibilities of the world. In the same way that D'Halmar destabilizes the rationality of the naturalist project by introducing table-rapping as communication with spirits or an apparition of Juana's aging mother in a mirror, comforting and then abandoning her daughter, Donoso introduces the mystical and the monstrous to the scientific pretensions of La Rinconada. Like the imbunche-like creature that Humberto will later become, Boy's mere existence as a product of two fathers undermines the legitimacy of the social order. Due to being a product of a confusion of master and servant, as Carmen Martín points out, Boy already embodies the tenuous nature of each category and the possibility of their inversion (60). Furthermore, since he has "lived his life sheltered from the hierarchies of the outside world," he does not respect the social schema of his father and ends up as a ruler of his own dominion, like a distorted version of a Chilean

cacique (Fischer 270-71). Additionally, the monster, as exemplified by Humberto, who accumulates multiple names and identities throughout the novel (including an imbunche), represents a multiplicity and instability that can only be accessed “a través de la exaltación de la imaginación y los deseos” (Barrientos 9) ‘through the exaltation of the imagination and desires.’ The monster and the indeterminacy it represents are the products of feeling, dreams, and the irrational, which are volatile and unfixed, thereby challenging any sense of stable identities or knowledge. In this way, Boy resembles the threatening Other in naturalism, and he must be written off by the plot or safely contained for the health of the body politic.

In Jerónimo’s eyes, isolating Boy from the rest of the world is an act of benevolence. He structures life in La Rinconada to be a scaled replica of society. To accommodate Boy’s own looks, Jerónimo banishes from this place anything that is not (to his eyes) monstrous-looking and even installs a statue of the goddess Diana with acromegaly and an asymmetrical Apollo (202-03) so that Boy recognizes his own shape as the standard of beauty. To approximate the social hierarchy of the outside world, Jerónimo and Humberto interview various “monsters” whom they will place into a ruling class or a class of “submonstruos” in charge of menial labor (205). Like a Zolaesque reformer, Jerónimo couches his project in the language of science:

Jerónimo tuvo que desarrollar el fino trabajo de convencerlos de que el ser anómalo, el fenómeno, no es un estadio inferior del género humano frente al que los hombres tienen derecho al desprecio y la compasión: éstas, explicó don Jerónimo, son reacciones primarias que ocultan la ambigüedad de sentimientos inéditos muy semejantes a la envidia, o erotismo inconfesable producido por seres tan extraordinarios como ellos, los monstruos. (205)

Jerónimo had to develop the careful task of convincing them that being anomalous, a phenomenon, is not an inferior state in humankind against which men have the right to rejection and compassion: these, explained don Jerónimo, are primitive reactions that hide the ambiguity of unexpressed feelings very similar to envy, or unconfessed eroticism produced by such extraordinary beings as themselves, the monsters.

Somewhere in the core of Jerónimo’s scheme is a noble idea: Boy should not be taught to despise himself for how he looks. His philosophical aspirations for La Rinconada employ quasi-scientific language of gradations, primal reactions, hidden feelings, and so on. He fetishizes his assembled “monsters” by concluding that they exist beyond the category of the beautiful or the ugly but instead “la monstruosidad es la culminación de ambas cualidades sintetizadas y exacerbadas

hasta lo sublime” (205) ‘monstrosity is the culmination of both qualities synthesized and exacerbated to the point of reaching the sublime.’ Donoso demonstrates how misguided pseudoscience and idiosyncratic understandings of humanity and the path of its evolution result in a grotesque vision of the world. Jerónimo’s miniaturized world is not the inverse of the real world he thinks it is, and the “monsters” that populate it are not motivated by his grandiose vision of a sublime social order composed of semi-divine beings but rather by the money he is willing to offer them to live with Boy. He claims to understand how the world works, but unlike Zola’s experimental novelist, fails to modify his experiment in light of human behavior and motives. Jerónimo is convinced that his project is airtight and that its variables will act as predicted, but he fails to account for how people will behave as opposed to how he believes they should behave.

After a few years of Jerónimo’s experiment, Humberto is ousted by Emperatriz, a relative of Jerónimo and the top of the monstrous chain of command, and Dr. Azuela, who is in charge of Boy’s physical well-being. Under their tenure, la Rinconada grows decadent, Boy becomes a sexual menace, and he escapes the confines of his miniaturized world multiple times. The text’s experiment goes off the rails because Jerónimo assumes that his limitless wealth and the good will he believes to have imparted onto his underlings, as well as the carefully planned living conditions of La Rinconada, will lead towards his desired result. He stacks all the variables of his experiment in his favor and still fails to mold Boy into the virtuous, transcendent “monster” he thought he could create. Jerónimo never counted on Emperatriz and Dr. Azuela being greedy and treacherous, nor did he factor in Boy’s self-awareness and his schemes to ensure that Jerónimo can never shut down their haven and send them out into an uncaring world. Jerónimo is then undone by the rules of his own game when he decides to reunite with his son. Everyone at La Rinconada regards him as monstrous in his average features, which culminates in a naked Jerónimo being humiliated during one of Emperatriz’s many costume parties. Jerónimo reflects in a panic: “me engañaron, tengo que huir antes de que las marquesas y los cardenales y los príncipes y los alabarderos se rían de mí, me van a dar una paliza porque vine disfrazado de monstruo y ellos no...si pudiera sacármela...estirar el brazo para arrancarme la máscara del terror” (437) ‘they tricked me, I must flee before the marchionesses and the cardinals and the princes and the halberdiers laugh at me, they will beat me because I showed up dressed as a monster and they did not...if I could only take it off...stretch my arm out to rip off the mask of terror.’ Jerónimo’s sense of social order breaks down at the same time as his syntax. He is ironically pursued by representations of power and authority (cardinals, princes, etc.). His panicked, staccato realizations reveal the irrationality of his situation overtaking him, and the man who is respected for his status becomes an aberration to Boy and his comrades. This profound sense of disorientation and inversion sends him into a tailspin in which he is convinced of

his own monstrousness, and he dies at the feet of the distorted statue of the goddess Diana. The failure at La Rinconada, similar to Humberto's failure to complete his own literary work, as Sharon Magnarelli notes, "may well signal a commentary on the artistic project itself and its attempts to impose structures that may not preexist in the literary/artistic gesture—a project Donoso has struggled to overcome in this text" (96). La Rinconada becomes its own place that does not play by the rules of the experimental novel or even by the rules of the outside world; instead, its workings are created not by the experimenter but by the experimental subjects, who define the space for themselves. To make the experiment of Boy and his fellow "monsters" true to their lives, they introduce their own variables and an irrationality that Jerónimo, beholden to his version of rationality, could never have imagined.

Donoso's abandonment of the positivism that informs naturalism, however, does not come purely from resenting the genre and its offshoots, which he saw as suffocating his creativity and that of his Chilean contemporaries. Where naturalism sees the failure of rationality as a social ill, Donoso presents it as a springboard for possibilities. The Rinconada experiment fails in the sense that Jerónimo's machinations collapse and his subjects turn on him, and this is an endpoint in the traditional naturalistic sense, an ill omen of society's impending chaos. In the hands of Donoso, however, this is a happy failure and a chance for a new beginning. The novel does not discard determinism, the experimental mode, or other aspects of naturalism. Instead, it absorbs and distorts them. However, he is not the first Chilean writer to do so, as shown in the fiction of Augusto D'Halmar, who cut his teeth on Zola's naturalism, even as he played with questions of mutable identities and mysticism. Naturalism in Chile has been experimental (not in the sense Zola might have meant) from the start; it might even be said that naturalism has been queer since two of the authors who work to reshape its form in dazzlingly creative ways write against the heteropatriarchal tradition. This is ironic in the case of Donoso. For one, he would balk at being thought of as a writer with a social message (as the naturalists would see themselves).⁵ Yet *El obsceno pájaro* nonetheless engages in the language of heredity and stages a version of the experimental novel to critique Chilean society's uncritical faith in both lineage and rationality. Additionally, Donoso would have hesitated to include himself in the canon of queer Chilean writers.⁶ Yet his novel is shot through, as Carl Fischer

⁵ In *Donoso sin límites* ('Donoso without limits'), Carlos Cerda explains how Donoso reacted to Pablo Neruda's praise and being seen as the Chilean Balzac, instead preferring to see the role of "social chronicler" as something alien to his aesthetic project (21). Likewise, Kirsten F. Nigro cites one of Donoso's many objections to being called "a writer with a message": "No tengo vision social. Es un ejercicio interior. No hay ninguna actitud o propósito mío respecto a la sociedad" (218) 'I don't have a social vision. It's merely an exercise in interiority. There is no attitude or purpose from me with respect to society.'

⁶ In *Correr el tupido velo* ('Leaving it in the past'), Pilar Donoso's biography of her adopted father written after a journalist posthumously outed him, she recalls an incident from her childhood in

points out, with different ways “in which heterosexual, masculine characters and the (masculinist) literature of the Boom are complicated, if not subverted, by an economic modernity identified repeatedly with queerness, monstrosity, and nonreproduction” (271-72). Counter perhaps to his expressed wishes, Donoso’s fiction places him in a Chilean tradition of writers invested in reworking and ultimately transforming—or even queering—naturalism and its principles. D’Halmar’s attempts to complicate naturalism’s aims and style are magnified in Donoso’s most studied novel, which ultimately treats naturalism as yet another combustible element in his creative experimentation. Rather than discard tradition, as Donoso so enthusiastically claims, his fiction takes past forms like naturalism seriously enough to test their premises and abandons them only once their approach proves insufficient for the dream-like world he aimed to craft. In this way, he echoes and builds off Augusto D’Halmar’s efforts decades before in a kind of literary metempsychosis that D’Halmar might have found amusing. For both writers, an initial foray into naturalism gives way to more feverish, wildly imaginative works. Naturalism, which might seem like a brief moment in Chile’s literary history, joins these two major figures whose work was experimental in more ways than one.

Works Cited

- Barrientos, Mónica. “El discurso confesional en *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* de José Donoso.” *Narrativas*, no. 7, 2007, pp. 3-10,
<https://www.revistanarrativas.com/sumario07.htm>.
- . “El realismo subvertido en la narrativa de José Donoso.” *Crítica Hispánica*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2013, pp. 23-44.
- Cánovas, Rodrigo. “A cien años de *Juana Lucero*, de Augusto D’Halmar: Guacha más que nunca.” *Anales de literatura Chilena*, no. 3, 2002, pp. 29-41,
www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl/coleccion/BND/00/RC/RC0093130.pdf
- Cerda, Carlos. *Donoso sin límites*. LOM Ediciones, 1997.

which José slapped her for calling a playmate a homophobic slur and learns from her mother of Donoso’s sexuality (190). Berta López Morales, in discussing the relationship between Donoso’s *El lugar sin límites* and the fiction of Pedro Lemebel, makes reference to Donoso being petrified at having his novel catalogued as gay literature and encountering three doctoral theses at Princeton following that line of analysis (83).

- Cortínez, Verónica. "La parroquia y el universo: Historia personal del 'Boom' de José Donoso." *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, no. 48, Apr. 1996, pp. 13-22. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40356832>.
- D'Halmar, Augusto. "En provincia." *El cuento Chileno: 1864-1920*. Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1964, pp. 100-09.
- . *Juana Lucero*. Editorial Nascimento, 1952.
- . "Ole Dol." *Los alucinados*. Ediciones Ercilla, 1935, pp. 60-119.
- Donoso, José. *Historia personal del "boom."* Alfaguara, 1998.
- . *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*. Alfaguara, 2021.
- Donoso, Pilar. *Correr el tupido velo*. Alfaguara, 2009.
- Edwards, Esther. *José Donoso: voces de la memoria*. Editorial Sudamericana Chilena, 1997.
- Ellis, Robert Richmond. "A Passage to the Self: Homoerotic Orientalism and Hispanic Life-Writing." *Revista Canadiense de estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2005, pp. 75-87. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27764037>.
- Ferrada Aguilar, Andrés. "La construcción marginal de Santiago en las crónicas de José Donoso." *Anales de literatura Chilena*, vol. 17, no. 25, Jun. 2016, pp. 55-79, <https://doi.org/10.7764/ANALESLITCHI.25.03>.
- Fischer, Carl. "José Donoso and the Monstrous Masculinities of Chile's Agrarian Reform." *Hispanic Review*, vol. 83, no. 3, Summer 2015, pp. 253-73. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/24809401>.
- Friedman, Mary Lusk. "Permutations of Selfhood in the Works of José Donoso." *A History of Chilean Literature*. Edited by Ignacio López-Calvo, Cambridge UP, 2021, pp. 482-99.
- Larsen, Neil. "The 'Boom' Novel and the Cold War in Latin America." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3, Fall 1992, pp. 771-84. Project Muse, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.0275>.
- Loebell, Ricardo. "Desplazamiento imaginario de Oriente: Augusto d'Halmar y la transmigración literaria del sujeto." *Iberoromania*, no. 87, 2018, pp. 50-67, <https://doi.org/10.1515/iber-2018-0005>.
- López Morales, Berta. "La construcción de 'la loca' en dos novelas chilenas: *El lugar sin límites* de José Donoso y *Tengo miedo torero* de Pedro Lemebel." *Acta literaria*, no. 42, 2011, pp. 79-102.
- Luengo, Enrique. *José Donoso: Desde el texto al metatexto*. Editora Aníbal Pinto, 1991.
- Magnarelli, Sharon. *Understanding José Donoso*. U of South Carolina P, 1993.
- Marlés Valencia, Liliana Patricia. "Juego de viejas." *Caracol*, no. 18, 2019, pp. 397-412.
- Martin, Carmen. "Monstruos y poder en *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* de José Donoso." *Catedral Tomada: Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013, pp. 54-66, <https://doi.org/10.5195/CT/2013.35>.

- Náter, Miguel Ángel. "La casa, el cuerpo y el discurso novelístico en la modulación apocalíptica de *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*." *Pórtico*, vol. 2, 2007, pp. 27-42.
- Nawrocka, Ewa. "El imaginario de la casa en *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* de José Donoso." *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2010, pp. 83-93.
- Nigro, Kirsten. "From *Criollismo* to the Grotesque: Approaches to José Donoso." *Tradition and Renewal: Essays on Twentieth-Century Latin American Literature and Culture*, edited by Merlin H. Forster, U of Illinois P, 1975, pp. 208-32.
- Nouzeilles, Gabriela. *Ficciones somáticas: Naturalismo, nacionalismo y políticas médicas del cuerpo (Argentina 1880-1910)*. 1. ed., B. Viterbo Editora, 2000.
- Novoa Romero, Alexandra and Mariela Andrea Ramírez Peña. "Devenir mujer, devenir loca, devenir imperceptible: Muerte y resistencia en *Juana Lucero* (1902) de Augusto D'Halmar." *A contracorriente*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2025, pp. 162-79.
<https://acontracorriente.chass.ncsu.edu/index.php/acontracorriente/article/view/2465/3850>.
- Pizer, Donald. "American Naturalism in Its 'Perfected' State: *The Age of Innocence* and *An American Tragedy*." *Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism: Selected Essay and Reviews*, Southern Illinois UP, 1993, pp. 153-66.
- Pollard, Scott. "Artists, Aesthetics, and Family Politics in Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* and James's *The Golden Bowl*." *The Comparatist*, vol. 23, 1999, pp. 40-62. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44367017>.
- Schlickers, Sabine. *El lado oscuro de la modernización: Estudios sobre la novela naturalista hispanoamericana*. Iberoamericana, 2003.
- Solomon, Claire Thora. *Fictions of the Bad Life: The Naturalist Prostitute and Her Avatars in Latin American Literature, 1880-2010*. Ohio State UP, 2014.
- Sommer, Doris. *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. U of California P, 1993.
- Spicer-Escalante, J.P. "The 'Long Tail' Hypothesis: The Diachronic Counter-Metanarrative of Hispanic Naturalism." *Au Naturel: (Re)Reading Hispanic Naturalism*. Edited by Lara Anderson & J.P. Spicer-Escalante, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 11-36.
- Sternbach, Nancy Saporta. "Augusto D'Halmar's *Juana Lucero*: Woman in a Trance." *Women and Violence in Literature: An Essay Collection*, edited by Katherine Anne Aickley, Garland Publishing, 1990, pp. 51-86.

- Swanson, Philip. *José Donoso: The "Boom" and Beyond*. Francis Cairns Ltd., 1988.
- Ugarte Undurraga, María Francisca. "Poderosos y malignos: El mundo del servicio En *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*." *Revista Chilena de literatura*, no. 81, 2012, pp. 145-59. *JSTOR*.
- Vidal, Hernan. *José Donoso: Surrealismo y rebelión de los instintos*. Ediciones Aubi, 1972.
- Zola, Émile. *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*. Translated by Belle M. Sherman. Haskell House, 1964.