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The Trauma of Nature: Antonio Di Benedetto's *Zama* as Ecological Noir

David Conlon

National University of Ireland, Maynooth, IE
davidbconlon@gmail.com

This paper suggests a reading of *Zama* (1956), the acclaimed debut novel of Argentine writer Antonio Di Benedetto, from an eco-critical perspective. In light of a remark by Sergio Chejfec, it will look at how the novel's eponymous protagonist, a colonial-era bureaucrat based in Asunción, encounters the natural environment as traumatic, engendering cognitive upheaval. On this basis, it will go on to consider how the work conforms to a variant of *Bildungsroman*, or, in this case, novel of ecological apprenticeship, insofar as the protagonist undergoes a process of cognitive re-orientation as his experience of the environment comes into conflict with Old World epistemologies. It will be argued that the temporal setting is, for this reason, significant, as it sets the action against the backdrop of then-emergent geological and proto-Darwinian discourses. In the final sections, the paper aims to contextualise the novel's publication in 1956 in terms of its affiliations with *film noir*, and to assess the grounds for considering noir as a paradigm for understanding latter-day iterations of the *Bildungsroman*, as well as an exemplary modality for the working-through of post-World War II epistemological trauma. Finally, and within the same broadly eco-critical framework, some reasons will be suggested for the renewed interest in Di Benedetto's novel in recent years.

1. Introduction: Placing *Zama*

Antonio Di Benedetto's debut novel *Zama* (1956) occupies a curious place in Argentina's literary history, as does the *mendocino* author himself.¹ Although largely ignored for decades by Argentina's cultural tastemakers (Saer 11) as well as by the wider reading public (Spiller 156), the novel has, over time, garnered effusive if sporadic praise from the upper echelons of the region's literary cognoscenti. Roberto Bolaño, who paid implicit homage to *Zama* in his short story 'Sensini', hailed the work as one of the great Argentine novels (Quintáns 39–40);

¹ Antonio Di Benedetto was born in Mendoza in 1922. From an early age, he worked as a journalist, initially with *La Libertad* and, from 1945, *Los Andes* (both based in Mendoza). On 24 March 1976, he was 'disappeared' by government agents, operating under the authoritarian regime of Jorge Rafael Videla. He was released in September of the following year, largely thanks to the interventions of other writers. He subsequently went into exile in Europe, returning to Argentina in 1984 following the country's return to democracy. He is the author of the short-story collections *Mundo animal* (1953), *El pentágono* (1955), *Grot* (1957), *El cariño de los tontos* (1961), *Absurdos* (1978) and *Cuentos del exilio* (1983), and of the novels *Zama* (1956), *Declinación y Ángel* (1958), *El silenciero* (1964), *Los suicidas* (1969) and *Sombras, nada más* (1985). He died in Buenos Aires in 1986 (Varela 280).

Juan José Saer went a step further, elevating *Zama* to the status of modern world classic, and additionally described Di Benedetto as the most original practitioner of prose narrative in twentieth-century Argentina (10–11). Similarly laudatory tributes from Julio Cortázar, Ricardo Piglia and Sergio Chejfec have further contributed to the idea of *Zama* as a peerless, if somewhat underground, classic in the Latin American literary canon (Guillén). Since the author's death in 1986, and partly as a consequence of plaudits such as these, Di Benedetto's reputation has grown in stature in Argentina; *Zama*, meanwhile, considered by Di Benedetto himself to have been his most important work (Duchi 9), has quietly accrued the status of a modern classic.

The story is set in 1790s Asunción, then an administrative outpost in the short-lived River Plate viceroyalty, and relates in first-person narrative the misadventures of Don Diego de Zama, a creole of Spanish descent and member of the colonial bureaucracy. Zama has been posted to Asunción as an adviser to the governor, a role for which he has had to move a vast distance from his wife and children, who are based in Mendoza. The first and longest of the novel's three parts, which together comprise a total of fifty numbered sections, is set in 1790 when, following a chance encounter with a group of female bathers in the woodland outskirts of Asunción, the hitherto prudish Zama begins the reckless pursuit of sexual adventure, most notably with Luciana Pinares, the wife of a local aristocrat, but also to a lesser extent with Rita, the daughter of Zama's landlord. The novel subsequently jumps forward to 1794, by which time the protagonist's recklessness (combined with the seemingly endless deferral of colonial wage payments) has culminated in his borderline destitution. He now has a mistress, Emilia, with whom he has an infant son, and though he makes an ostentatious show of being the family patriarch, in fact it is Emilia that provides for Zama by covertly paying for his upkeep through an intermediary. In the final part, set in 1799, Zama recounts events surrounding his return to the military for the duration of a strange expedition, which takes the narrative out of the city and into the jungle, away from the relative safety of the colony and towards a series of encounters with remote indigenous tribes, an increasingly disorienting natural environment and, finally, horrific corporeal violence. Zama's own narrative trajectory can hence be described as a series of binary reversals, from the rational to the instinctual, from culture to nature, and from civilisation to barbarism.

These interrelated binary structures have long been paradigmatic in Latin American narrative; the civilisation/barbarism dichotomy, in particular, and as exemplified by texts such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (1845) and José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* (1924), provided an ideological framework for the liberal nation-building and modernising projects that proliferated across the continent throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Conversely, the narrative trajectory of the 'return' to nature has supplied one of the recurring tropes deployed by Boom-era authors, as exemplified by texts such as Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), Jorge Luis Borges's 'El sur' (1953) and Mario Vargas Llosa's *El hablador* (1987). These latter texts can be considered varieties of recuperative *Bildungsroman*, where what is at stake is the protagonist's attempted recovery of a harmony with the natural world, perceived as coterminous with the indigenous, and as having been lost in the detached busyness of modernity. *Zama* could be loosely affiliated with this tradition, though the sense of sheer desolation and abandonment that Di Benedetto's novel fosters has also invited explicit comparison to another, loosely contemporaneous variety of *Bildungsroman*, namely the apprenticeship-to-the-void existentialist narratives epitomised by Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938) and Albert Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942), with both of which it also bears undoubted similarities (Menton 930).

Rather than seeking to explicitly ratify or refute the respective claims for the novel's inscription within either of these two traditions, some of the most fruitful critical approaches

to *Zama* have tended to capitalise on the idea that it effectively conjoins them, highlighting, for instance, how the work examines New World identity crises through the philosophical framework of existentialism (Vázquez 2006). Similarly, with this paper I will seek to insist upon *Zama's* rootedness within a particular Latin American colonial milieu while simultaneously emphasising the ways in which Di Benedetto's work can potentially operate as a cipher text for a broader, Western cultural complex. Taking as my cue the repeated suggestion that *Zama* is a fundamentally 'anachronistic' text (Foster 259), and that Zama himself figures as an early arrival at the scene of history (Claesson 67), it is my intention to show how the novel stages an exposure of the cognitive dissonance that stalks modern ecological subjectivity, and of the ways in which Darwinism, in particular, operates as the site of far-reaching cultural trauma. What I propose to show is that what has been called the novel's 'existentialism' comes about as a function of a specific cognitive movement in the life of its eponymous anti-hero, and that this movement can be fruitfully read against the coordinates of the proto-Darwinian discourse which was gradually rising to the Western intellectual mainstream during the particular decade when the novel is set. Drawing on a comment by Sergio Chejfec, I claim that the gradual narrative unfolding of the implications of this fundamentally altered human-environment relationship signals a cognitive upheaval for the protagonist, who can therefore be read as the site of a traumatic decentring.

In the light of my reading of the novel as staging the drawn-out encounter of the protagonist with the natural world, and drawing on recent theoretical eco-criticism by Timothy Morton, in the final section, I suggest designating *Zama* as a work of 'ecological noir'. In spite of the overuse of noir to the point of theoretical obsolescence, I deploy the term on the basis of how it designates an historically situated, narrative *Bildung* of self-recognition that situates the social anxieties and societal upheaval of the post-World War II period against the backdrop of the epistemological traumas mapped out by Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx and Freud throughout the preceding century. As I argue to be true in the case of *Zama*, it is only against the backdrop of this historic sequence of blows to human identity that the dislocation and disintegration of the noir protagonist is rendered legible. Finally, while some critical studies to date have (justifiably) interpreted Di Benedetto's obsessive tarrying with animality and ecology as indexing a world view in which nature figures as primarily indifferent and even evil (Varela 281), I am concerned with exploring how *Zama* can ultimately be taken to operate as a harbinger for the kind of ecological ethics elaborated by Morton, and hence as a potentially canonical text for the study of literature, ethics and environment.

2. The Trauma of Darwinism

In the novel's opening paragraphs, Zama makes his habitual descent towards the mail ship docked at Asunción harbour in the hope of a long-awaited letter from his wife. He will be disappointed once again (the novel is dedicated to 'víctimas de la espera' [those condemned to wait]), but, en route, he passes the corpse of a monkey afloat in the water, trapped between the pillars of a wharf. Like a classic crime fiction, the novel opens with a dead body, although overt recognition of this generic pivot is crucially absent. In fact, this sinister figure obliquely references two of the crime genre's foundational moments. Firstly, it suggests a reversal or displacement of the roles operative in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), in which the culprit is revealed by Dupin to be an orangutan; more importantly, the barely noticed presence of a dead primate in this pre-Darwinian era, I would suggest, opens up the potential for a rehearsal of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, wherein some indeterminate sin comes bound up with misconstrued kinship. It is my claim that this fatal image, or rather fatal lack of recognition, along with the upending of roles it implies, serves as both anchor and point of departure for the novel's fundamental concern with the severance of humankind's connection

to the natural world; the protagonist's overtly expressed displacement from homeland and family is redoubled in his covert, though equally profound ecological anomie. Wrapped up in the discursive frameworks and formal protocols of the Old World, Zama is alienated from the materiality of life in the New. I want to argue that it is the gradual dawning of this, and its reversal, that undergirds and propels its most fundamental narrative movement.

In a brief online note recently published on *Zama*, Sergio Chejfec draws attention to what for European settlers was a historically traumatic encounter with nature in South America.² Chejfec remarks on the novel's colonial setting, unusual even in Argentina's rich tradition of historical fiction, which tends not to look to the pre-Independence period for inspiration (Foster 259), and bids the reader's attention to the role played by the natural environment in the 'irresolute colonial past' of South America, 'where nature turned into trauma', and to how this traumatic nature registers in Di Benedetto's novel as 'mute, cruel, and desolate'. In the opening paragraphs, Zama describes the nature of the region as 'mansa' [benign] (9), but the novel subsequently cultivates a mood of ever-increasing ambient discomfort for a protagonist seemingly misplaced in, and misaligned with, an environment whose character is conveyed through harrowing descriptions of venomous plants (92), emaciated hens that would pluck out small children's eyes (161) and various potentially fatal encounters with dangerous predators, all of which serve to debunk the alluring notion that immersion into a pristine natural environment should offer respite from the alien trappings of a fallen world. This latter fallacy constituted a veritable discursive perversion in the colonial Americas, whereby indigenous nature and culture were viewed as forming a seamless and harmonious prelapsarian contiguity. The Edenic paradigm provided the conceptual apparatus for, at best, a stance of curatorial paternalism towards the indigenous population (Slater 4). Conversely, the mythos surrounding the initial 'discovery' of the River Plate supplies this troubling paradigm with its most brutal obverse. The first Europeans to arrive at the mouth of the river, which was to have been the gateway to El Dorado, were alleged to have been the victims of cannibalism (Verdesio 16–19); throughout *Zama*, allusions to the repeated colonial failures and depravities in the region surface in references to 'acto[s] sanguinario[s]' [barbaric acts] (48) and 'sacrificados' [sacrificial slaughters] (257) of times past, as well as in the overall mood of desolation inherited from the hapless *aventureros* who eventually found nothing but worthless minerals and ever more inhospitable terrain.

The version of nature presented by Di Benedetto is, Chejfec adds, stripped of 'prefabricated models'. What Chejfec designates the 'trauma' of nature would then presumably emerge out of a friction or dissonance between such prefabricated models and the collapse of these in the face of a natural environment that is amorphous, mysterious or otherwise recalcitrant to Old World conceptualisations. According to the by now well-rehearsed formulations devised by Cathy Caruth, who draws on Freud, Lacan and Kant, trauma has the structure of an unclaimed experience, an event that resists initial cognition. For Caruth, the traumatised subject becomes 'the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess' (5). In broader societal terms, a structural dehiscence between knowledge and experience can be likewise observed at those points of fracture in the broader cultural imaginary where epistemological ruptures or paradigm shifts (such as Kuhnian scientific revolutions) fail to cohere with tradition and intuition or where, in Jeffrey C. Alexander's explanation, 'the patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged' (92). Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection (based in part upon observations gleaned during his voyage aboard the HMS *Beagle*, which sailed around the South American coastline in the 1830s) precisely constitutes such a traumatic 'event' in

² The piece, entitled 'Sergio Chejfec on *Zama* by Antonio Di Benedetto', was published on the *Quarterly Conversation* website in December 2009; all subsequent quotes from Chejfec are taken from this source.

modernity, producing a cognitive block that Darwin himself foreshadows when he wrote in his *Beagle* diary in 1832 that, 'giving to a blind man eyes, he is overwhelmed by what he sees and cannot justly comprehend it' (23). Overwhelmingly new data requires ratification within as yet unelaborated, *a posteriori* epistemological constructs, necessarily engendering new language and new philosophical postures. In the Argentine context, the traumatic structure that pertains to evolution is succinctly captured in a well-worn joke which plays on the hubris of the nation's proudly European, civilised genealogy: 'el hombre descende del mono; los argentinos, de los barcos' [Man is descended from apes, but Argentines descended from ships].

The belief that animals are intrinsically different in kind from humans was established by Aristotle's zoological writings (Steiner 53), and was rarely challenged before the late eighteenth century, at least in the intellectual mainstream. But Gillian Beer notes that behind the theoretical culmination of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) lay 'a long history of *glimpsed* half-formulated or locally pursued evolutionary perceptions' [emphasis in the original] (11). Some of the anxieties fomented by evolutionary theory are foreshadowed at least as early as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and in particular Gulliver's 'Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms', over the course of which the fears of human-animal role reversal are played out in grotesquely satirical detail. Just a decade later, the first edition of Carl Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* (1735) founded modern taxonomy, and though Linnaeus did not question the fixity of species, he provoked controversy with the classification of humans alongside and within the same order as monkeys and apes. Thereafter, though, many of the earliest stirrings of evolutionary theory per se have their origins in precisely the decade-long period encompassed by Di Benedetto's novel. In his *Philosophy of Natural History* published in 1790, the Scottish naturalist William Smellie forwarded the hypothesis that humans were linked both in the anatomy and cognitive capacity to the orangutan, a notion that gained increasing traction in the years that followed. Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles, would, in the same decade, publish his *Zoonomia, or, The Laws of Organic Life* (1794–96), in which he forwarded the proposition that all mammals could claim descent from 'one living filament' and that they shared 'the power of acquiring new parts attended with new propensities' that could be imparted to succeeding generations (397). As the century drew to a close, investigative scrutiny honed in on the continuities, both physiological and psychological, between human and animal (Heymans 1). Throughout the same decade, the tectonic shift from Enlightenment to Romanticism entailed a calling into question of the relationship between culture and nature. Broadly speaking, as Kate Soper explains, whereas the Enlightenment had figured culture as a corrective of nature, the subsequent Romantic period envisioned nature as resistant to and in excess of culture (28–31). The interrogation of the accepted norms concerning the ethics of animal welfare would become a thematic mainstay of Romantic poetry in particular (Heymans 2).

These upheavals in the nomenclature of the biological were mirrored by crises of taxonomic fixity in the social and the political, most prominently with the advent of revolution in North America and France, but also in the pamphlet wars through which Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, among others, staked claims for conflicting ideas concerning political legitimacy and constitutional rights. The overall scheme of this crisis is mirrored throughout Di Benedetto's novel, wherein (his own objective of upward mobility notwithstanding) Zama exhibits an obsession with the conservation of social hierarchies in general and racial distinctions in particular. In this case, though, it becomes clear that the former are underwritten by the latter, as pseudo-biological hierarchies are invested by Zama with the power to authorise privilege. As is evidenced by a train of thought that sees Zama link together 'un ejército indígena, una jauría de cimarrones famélicos, una manada de animales salvajes' [an indigenous army, a pack of starving runaway slaves, a horde of savage animals]

(248), the indigenous is situated along a continuum that connects the barely human to the definitively animal. One of his indigenous acquaintances, Tora, shows him a deep, aged scar on her upper arm (177). This, she reveals, was one of many she acquired in utero, while her heavily pregnant mother suffered a beating with a chain by an angry creole. The schematic inference is that racial designation is artificially imprinted prepartum, through the violence of the colonially mandated sign, and prefigures destiny thereafter. The indigenous *guaycurúes* are dismissed wholesale by Zama as 'salvajes' [savages] (92), and he reinforces these negative essentialisms throughout the novel, carefully vetting new acquaintances for racial heritage and *limpieza de sangre*. But Zama is also intermittently subject to a curious haunting that precisely mirrors his own taxonomic fixations: the repeated appearance of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy, reckoned by the protagonist to be approximately twelve years old. One of few instances of potentially outright phantasmagoria in the novel, the *niño rubio* is twice glimpsed briefly early on, and is believed by Zama to be implicated in a theft. He shows up at Zama's door four years later (198), and again in the jungle five years after that, as the novel reaches its conclusion (262). Nine years have passed in total, though Zama remarks that the boy has apparently not aged. In the late eighteenth century, the term 'evolution' still referred to ontogenesis, or the capacity of the individual to change over a single lifetime, and not to phylogenesis, the Darwinian notion of descent with modification. Relaying the implications for the former paradigm onto its Darwinian analogue, the *niño rubio* as metaphor supplies a sublimated figure for Zama's own nostalgia for a redundant biological imaginary. And tellingly, Zama is at one point warned of the perils of falling captive to fascination with that which '*ya no es*' [no longer is; emphasis in the original], or fetishising and succumbing to 'una fantasía peligrosa' [a dangerous fantasy] (203). Evolution's polar opposite, or the persistence of pure, clearly demarcated biological forms through time, mediated through the arrested ontogenesis of the boy, is the novel's rueful motif, emblematic of its irrecoverably lost or receding fantasy-object.

Race, and specifically race in South America, played an important and not altogether savoury role in the elucidation of Darwin's ideas. With the 1871 publication of *The Descent of Man*, Darwin rendered explicit the hypothesis that could already be inferred from 1859's *On the Origin of Species*: Homo sapiens were 'the co-descendent with other mammals of some unknown and lower form' (152). Virginia Richter shows how Victorian assumptions about race supplied the basis of Darwin's thesis. For Darwin, the natives or 'lower races' on board the HMS *Beagle* (who had spent some years in England), precisely because of their ability to speak some English and adopt the thought processes of the civilised, embodied a 'living link' and hence evidence of 'the continuity of the evolutionary ladder' (Richter 38). The unavoidable subtext is that the indigenous is thereby construed as an intermediary between human and animal. For Zama, the indigenous retains the prohibitive force of a taboo, and he vehemently opposes intermarriage between races; he fantasises about women in Europe, free from perspiration (or so he imagines) and, when properly kept, safely guarded against the degradation of commerce with the earth (44–5). In one of the novel's key early episodes, occurring shortly after the appearance of the dead monkey, Zama happens upon a group of naked female bathers in the woods (12). What is scandalous about this encounter, and ultimately ruinous about Zama's muddled response, is precisely the absence of racial clarity, and his failure to correctly identify the women by caste. The fear of gazing sexually at a *mulata*, and henceforth incorporating her into his erotic imaginary, is founded upon a fear of courting 'derrota' [ruin]. Nevertheless, this episode awakens Zama's dormant sexual appetites, which in turn lead him inexorably towards the indigenous underclass, disadvantaged as the latter inevitably are in the economy of colonial desire. But far from mapping with fealty onto the existing hierarchies that channel its expression, desire operates as a rogue,

democratising element. Mid-negotiation with a mulatto woman, Zama discerns a disturbing flattening of established societal hierarchies, noting that '[e]stábamos en un mismo plano; en ese momento ella lo sentía así y yo también [...] estaba humillado' [we were on the same level and, at that moment, she knew it and so did I [...] I was humiliated] (77).

Zama's humiliation has in fact begun prior to the time encompassed by the novel. In a former role as *corregidor*, he had been feted for his administrative achievements in the repression of indigenous rebellions (20). With the abandonment of the *corregimiento* system in favour of the centralisation of royal authority, he is displaced into a lesser role of *asesor letrado*. This outward, social humiliation serves as frontispiece that indexes, foreshadows and is ultimately subordinated to a more substantive psychic humiliation. The latter term originates in *humus*, the organic component of soil, and so connotes a downward trajectory towards or into the earth; in Zama's case, this entails a devalorisation of reflection, rationality and circumspection in favour of the more instinctual mandates of loins, stomach and amygdala, leaving him confounded by his newfound attunement to 'las exigencias de mi estómago' [the exigencies of my stomach] (181), 'el ruido de las tripas' [the grumbling of guts] (159) and, more figuratively, the 'horrores, en mis adentros' [horrors in my innards] (195). *Zama* is poised on a precipice at the beginning of the age of humiliations imposed on humankind by Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and, later, Freud, the modern fulfilment of a process of 'decentring' the human that had been obliquely prophesied by the Copernican realignment of the cosmos some centuries previously. Darwin's contribution to this process entails the scandalous discovery that *Homo sapiens* are not at the apex of a teleologically ordained biological hierarchy. Set a few years before Darwin's birth, the distinction between human and animal is destabilised in *Zama*, frequently through metaphor. In the opening section, Zama is figured as 'gallo de riña' [a fighting cockerel] (10); as he succumbs to despair, he finds himself 'un animal enfurecido [...] de cuatro patas' [an enraged animal down on all fours] (82); a sickly guest is 'un gusano que se retorció' [a writhing worm] (53). Shortly after the appearance of the dead monkey, the novel's lugubrious opening passages relate a further image that even more explicitly portends a hitherto disavowed aspect of human entwinement with an objectified natural world. As Zama returns empty-handed to the colonial offices, he is immediately summoned to process the sinister case of a soldier who, having awoken to the illusory sensation that he had sprouted a bat's wing, lashed out with his rapier in terror, killing his mistress.

The subsequent nightmare account of the body transformed into a human–animal hybrid supplies an ominous figuration of an exterior 'nature' that encroaches upon human biological integrity. Monstrous episodes such as these, Stephen Mulhall suggests, function in part as *memento mori* that index human carnality and hence finitude; in Freudian terms, they represent 'the return of the repressed human body, of our ineluctable participation in the realm of nature' (20). Richard Kearney extrapolates from this idea the existence of latent fears that the human body is itself alien, insofar as it is the site of a repressed and sublimated materialism which, on return, threatens to destabilise identity (50). The awakening to find oneself become alien, like the experience of encountering Darwin for the first time, constitutes an *anagnorisis*, and is really just an awakening to what was always already there.³ In philosopher Dylan Trigg's reappraisals of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the coinages 'alien flesh' and 'traumatic embodiment' are designations for symptoms of 'the tension between corporeal and cognitive experience' (232), the missing contacts between irreconcilable or misaligned spheres of knowledge thereby opening up sites of trauma.

³ Virginia Richter likewise discusses the 'gaze of the ape' in the context of the Aristotelian notion of *anagnorisis* (62–5).

The return to the repressed materiality of the body and hence to the body's own participation in the material world constitutes, in a nutshell, the story of Diego de Zama's phenomenological apprenticeship to his own biological selfhood, as the armoured *metaphors* of animality are gradually displaced by an all-encompassing *metonymy*; Zama figured analogically as a fighting cockerel is displaced by the idea of Zama feeling as though he is literally coated in 'pelusa de murciélagos' [bat fur] (201). A similar transition can be observed in how Di Benedetto deploys equine imagery. When initial sex object Luciana is scrutinised more closely by Zama, she appears as exhibiting the facial characteristics of a horse (57). Not long after this, and in a heightened state of repressed sexual agitation, Zama describes himself as a horse waiting to bolt (71), the initial simile now displaced by metaphor. At the conclusion of the same section, he carefully avoids his own gaze when standing in front of a mirror (78). The trope finally passes from the figurative to the literal plane in the final section, wherein the cacique Nalepelegrá is perceived to turn into a horse in front of Zama, who observes that: '[en] un instante se convirtió en un caballo. Piafaba' [in an instant he changed into a horse. He stamped the ground] (233).

This process of gradual implication in nature is echoed throughout the novel in the figure of Zama himself, who in various contexts begins as observer only to find himself become unwilling participant. Following the initial appearance of the monkey, he professes to maintain a safe distance from the natural world, for fear that he might recognise himself therein (10). By the close of part one, on the other hand, he intuits that he has entered into the middle of some indefinable structure to which he had previously been exterior: 'advertí que era como si hubiese andado largo tiempo hacia un previsto esquema y estuviera ya dentro de él' [I realised that it was as if I had walked for an extended period towards an observable schema, and now I was inside of it] (130). Structures of entanglement such as this recur elsewhere; the act of looking is often either an implicit assertion of sovereignty or overtly predatory, but carries the risk of becoming the strung-up object of the gaze of the other. This is precisely what occurs when Zama accidentally spies the bathers in the woods; having been seen, caught in the act of looking, he soon finds himself covertly pursued. Much later, Zama realises he is the object of the gaze of a mysterious woman (179) who appears sporadically in a neighbouring window which, when observed during daylight hours, is revealed to look in on a room without a roof and filled with vegetation. The intuitively straight-line geometry by which Zama attempts to locate the room in relation to the rest of the house, fails; his logical perception of the interior space of the ruined house collapses into a distorted confusion of non-Euclidian, organic forms, and shadows 'como telarañas impregnadas de hollín' [like soot-coated cobwebs] (180). He soon arrives at an uneasy rapprochement with the deepening but insoluble mystery of this episode, observing the window every time he passes it, sometimes noticing the reappearance of the woman: '[s]e instalaba en la habitación vacía y me dirigía sus miradas' [she would set herself up in the empty room and fix her gaze directly at me] (181).

The same sequence recurs during the expedition undertaken in the novel's final section, when Zama and the rest of the troops venture deep into a forest that gradually becomes less like a collection of trees and more like a tangled organic web.⁴ Zama at different junctures offers us two discrete perspectives of the woods: the view from outside and the view from within, the experience of being 'apart' from nature and the experience of being immersed

⁴ As Darwin's successors show, and as this passage seems to anticipate, the tree of life is now an obsolete metaphor. Species identity is in fact even less stable than previously thought. Microbiology proves the existence of lateral gene transfer; life adheres not to the structure of a tree, but of a web, allowing for conjugation, transformation and transduction. In principle, genetic information can come from anywhere in the biosphere, with approximately half of the human genome, for instance, consisting in material originated in transfers from viruses (Dupré 155).

'in' nature. As the soldiers skirt around the edges, the forest appears to offer respite: 'pero quedaba allí, al costado, al margen de nosotros o nosotros al margen de él' [but it was over there, to one side of us, and we were to one side of it] (216). It is not until later on in the expedition that the troop ventures deep into the *y-cipó*, where Zama notes that many of the plants appear to have no roots in the ground, but are instead spread laterally across the forest in suspension, feeding parasitically off one another, and with no easily discernible boundaries between different species. He describes perceiving the situation as 'como la de quien quisiera penetrar en el dibujo de un bosque sobre el cual se ha hecho el dibujo de otro bosque, y a mayor altura, pero ligado al primero, el dibujo de un tercer bosque confundido con un cuarto bosque' [like that of someone trying to enter into a drawing of a forest, on top of which someone has drawn another forest, and on top of that, but connected to the first one, a third forest confused with a fourth] (240). The recourse to the metaphor of artworks within or transposed on top of other artworks alerts us to multiple visual fields and points of perspective, and the realisation that, as Zama has discovered earlier, positioning oneself as observer provides no safeguard against being observed.

These narrative involutions precisely echo the move enacted by Darwin's project which, culminating with *The Descent of Man*, walks the unwitting Homo sapiens observer right into the field of observation, suturing the gap between civilised subject and barbaric object. Zama's attempts to attain the master perspective by avoiding detection or ascending to higher land that overlooks the city are likewise doomed to failure (160). As a former magistrate, he also seeks refuge from change in the reassuring certainties of legal texts, and hence in the discursive regime proper to colonialism and which, as Roberto González Echevarría has shown, derived from the founding rhetorical gesture of Spanish authority in the New World. But as he peruses a once familiar book of laws, Zama confesses that he can no longer understand the text (179). The once reassuringly 'pure' legislative genre is countermanded, and disarmed, by the novel's linguistic operations more generally, whereby, as Alejandro Del Vecchio shows, asynchronous Hispanic forms and words originating in the native *tupí-guaraní* linguistic sub-family are frequently inserted. Like the shared genetic heritage that links Zama to *indios*, *mestizos* and *mulatos*, but also to apes, spiders and snakes, language itself is desecrated with otherness. The evolution of how language is deployed throughout the novel also reiterates its underlying narrative movement; what one critic has identified as the profusion of Golden Age *barroquismos* of earlier, more episodic sections (San José Vazquez 232), later give way to what another likens to the austere, questing poeticism of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (Prieto 345). The work's initial, parodic inscription within the Spanish picaresque tradition hence evolves towards affiliation with the twentieth-century New World noir, in a stylistic trajectory which, as I will later suggest, iterates elements of the novel's own thematic depth and temporal reach.

3. Time, Origins and Endings

The subsumption of human artifice into the organic is a recurring spectre that accompanies Zama's pursuit of sex, but also courts death and forewarns extinction, conveyed, as above, through the figure of the overgrown ruin. This sequential demise is rhetorically staged once again when Zama finds himself pursued by a pack of wild hounds while attempting to negotiate the terms of a sexual encounter in the midst of the ruins of a Jesuit hospital. The figure of the ruin is in fact deployed from the very outset of the text, where Zama's walk to the harbour in anticipation of the mail ship, sees him pass by an abandoned stone settlement, overgrown with moss and ivy. The image of the abandoned construction here (as elsewhere) registers the contingency of the civilising project, and awakens anxieties about the capacity of the natural to engulf and subsume human artifice. The region that was soon

to become Paraguay was, in 1790, already an archive of colonial and missionary folly, where the many former Jesuit settlements had succumbed to the encroaching forest, returned to *terra incognita*. This bracketing of human settlement within the time span of other, more durable ecologies suggests a blueprint for extinction, and a possible forecast of collapse for the hierarchical structure that places humanity at its pinnacle. *Zama's* period of narrative action is contemporaneous with the birth pangs of geological or 'deep' time, hinted at by the work of James Hutton – who in *The Theory of the Earth* (1795) could identify 'no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end' (qtd. in Oppen 138) – and more definitively by Charles Lyell in the decades that followed. New and dizzyingly open-ended temporalities were beginning to outflank older Judaeo-Christian timelines. As though deployed as a cultural barometer in respect of these changes, the figure of Zama increasingly scrambles for meaning in his own past. The protagonist operates as a site for the incursion of a kind of temporal sublime, whereby the subject trembles in awe before a past that seems to reach into a bottomless abyss; he describes the past as 'un cuadernillo de notas que se me extravió' [a notebook that went missing on me] (159), deploying a metaphor common to biological and geological conceptualisations of natural history as a vast archive that is radically incomplete, and accessible only in truncated, fragmentary form, but which also auto-reflexively reprises, *en abyme*, the intensely elliptical state of the novel itself.

Overtly, and from the outset, *Zama* is a novel about indefinite exile, but the sheer scale and depth of its displacement is disclosed only gradually. Zama professes a yearning to return to 'mi pasado: el hogar. Ese hogar que me dolía porque yo lo había formado y obedecía a una estructura más remota aún, heredada de mis padres y mis abuelos, ese hogar que me pesaba más porque no lo tenía' [my past, which is to say my home. The home that tormented me because I myself had forged it, though it conformed to an even older structure, bequeathed by my parents and grandparents, the home that mattered more than any other because I didn't possess it] (144). By way of a covert but implicit assonance, the name Zama itself iterates the longing for *mama*, the return to the womb or primordial shelter. Similarly, it is suggestive of a covert connection to the eponymous monkey in Leopoldo Lugones's classic tale 'Yzur', ironically described by Lugones's narrator as 'nombre cuyo origen nunca pude descubrir' [a name whose origin I was never able to find out] (71). The trajectory from Z to A indicates a quest for a recovery of origins, but also promises the existence of a definitive alpha and omega that would underwrite such a quest. Pre-modern conceptions of biology and geology could be accommodated within such a schema.⁵ In his heightened state of agitated desperation, Zama begins to consider his own pathway as akin to a journey across a plain without limits: 'tenía miedo del final, porque, presumiblemente, no había final' [I was fearful of how things would end, presumably because there was no ending] (82). His proclivity for discerning the darkness that lurks in the past of the other is, he is warned, nothing less than a disavowal of 'el temor de vuestro propio pasado' [the fear of your own past] (204).

For a book that purported to be about the origin of the species, Darwin's work is notoriously evasive of the question of origins, and even destabilises the idea that there is such a thing as a definable species (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 62). Evolutionary theory, explains Gillian Beer, 'implied a new myth of the past: instead of the garden at the beginning, there was the sea and the swamp' (119). In place of the taxonomically stable categories represented

⁵ Stephen Jay Gould (in *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time*) draws particular attention to the frontispiece of Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, from the late seventeenth century, which delineates, through a series of images, the creation of the Earth, along with its teleological progress towards End Times. The image is enveloped in a banner reading 'I am alpha and omega', a line drawn from the Book of Revelations that circumscribes natural history in its entirety within a Judaeo-Christian narrative (21–2).

by Adam, Eve and the snake, the emergent mythos proposed a genealogical admixture of species in a Precambrian slime, or, as Darwin famously speculated in an 1871 letter, 'a warm little pond' of chemicals; this hypothesis, long part of the biological imaginary, was given clinical credence by Stanley Miller's 'organic soup' experiments, carried out just three years before *Zama* was published (Brownson and Follmann 1265). As early as the 1830s, groundbreaking work by the embryologist Karl Ernst von Baer had suggested that the appearance of gill slits in human embryos could provide clues to a hidden, watery genealogy (Prothero 28). Darwin himself, noting the persistence of various forms of periodicity in humans, infers our descent from 'ancient progenitors' that had lived in and at the edge of the sea and had depended on the rhythm of the tides for sustenance (*The Descent of Man* 212). These obscure origins are reprised (or foreshadowed) in the novel's opening complex of imagery, when Zama is transfixed by the to-ing and fro-ing of the dead monkey, when he intuits that he is being implicitly compared with a maladapted species of fish by Ventura Prieto, and when this species is in turn explicitly compared to the monkey (10). They inch closer when Zama later has recourse to observation of the lunar phase for guidance (242), and penetrate the surface of the body itself when, deep in the jungle, the daughter of a local cacique undergoes a period of enforced mourning by having fish spikes inserted into her flesh (233). Earlier in the novel, Zama considers his own past as 'algo visceral, informe' [something visceral, indeterminate] and as 'pringoso, desagradable y difícil de capturar como los intestinos de un animal recién abierto' [slimy, unpleasant and difficult to get a hold of, like the innards of a recently cut-open animal] (21). In this instance, ironically, Zama is attempting to articulate the idea that his own social identity is potentially malleable, and hence that upward mobility is still obtainable. In attempting to reconfigure his past and hence refashion his own social and political trajectory, he inadvertently stumbles upon the terminology that identifies his own biological species-past and that circumscribes his impending fate. The true 'Zama venidero' [Zama-to-come], as we will later learn, is the site of an encounter with this materially inchoate species-past of which he is unaware, and yet which he implicitly telegraphs to himself in advance with troublingly and, in the context, perplexingly visceral imagery.

For Europeans, represented in the novel by the figure of Zama himself, the Enlightenment period marks the apotheosis of an idea of nature figured as hospitable to human settlement and malleable to the caprice of human design. Di Benedetto's protagonist enacts the breakdown of this milieu, overcome by inner desires 'despojándome de la realidad de esa oficina de todos los días' [divesting myself of the reality and routine of my position] (195), and a narrative debouchment that leads from the office of legal scholar, the rationalist subject position par excellence, and down into a raw and experiential encounter with nature's muddy ambiguities. 'Año 1799', the final and shortest of the novel's three parts, functions as a synthesis and further development of key themes, and a completion of the ecological 'formation' of the protagonist. In his latest attempt to win the King's favour and perhaps be rewarded with a transfer to Buenos Aires or, better yet, Spain, Zama enlists in a military campaign which has the aim of capturing Vicuña Porto, a Kurtz-like ex-soldier gone rogue, who has gained notoriety for terrorising colonial settlements in the region. Zama's narration supplies imagery that link Vicuña's depredations with natural turbulence, such as rainstorms and rivers that have burst their banks, and that define Vicuña himself in oppositional terms to the city: 'la ciudad le temía [...] La ciudad se decidió y quiso cazar a Vicuña' [the city feared him; the city decreed that Vicuña had to be hunted down] (213). The rhetoric bears the unmistakable conceptual blueprint of the civilisation versus barbarism dualisms that would suffuse almost every aspect of sociocultural and political debate in Argentina in the century that followed Independence. Both of the positions in this polemic, neatly synthesised in Sarmiento's *Facundo*, partook of the same meta-language where nature was concerned; where the gaucho

warlord Facundo Quiroga took pride in his subjugation of nature as a series of obstacles to be overcome, the rhetoric of his biographer and arch-nemesis, Domingo Sarmiento, drew on nineteenth-century discursive strategies that approached nature as a pure object of scientific knowledge. The hunt for Vicuña Porto, who is figured as surrogate for nature's own inherent barbarism, channels elements of both prongs into an ideological pincer movement aimed at subjugating the wilderness in the name of European Man and Empire.

Zama claims that he is regarded as the most valuable member of the expedition, not only on account of his prior successes in 'pacifying' the natives (214) but also because he has previously served with Vicuña Porto, and so it is presumed he will be able to recognise the hunted man. The heavy emphasis on sight as tool for recognition provides a platform to stage the denouement of the novel's interrogation of the visual, or more precisely of the latter's privileged Enlightenment status as knowledge-gleaning faculty par excellence. Throughout 'Año 1799', sight repeatedly both fails and is superseded by alternative modes of perception, most strikingly when the soldiers encounter an Indian tribe, every member of which has been blinded following a violent attack by a rival group (though a younger generation born since then now functions as the tribe's seeing prosthetic). One night when Zama is alone at the edge of the camp, Vicuña Porto appears behind him, revealing that he has been hiding in plain sight as a member of the search team. The implication of the troubling proximity of the pursued object is one that resurfaces again and again throughout *Zama*; the traumatic encounter with otherness, mediated through the proto-Darwinist lens, is traumatic precisely insofar as it enforces recognition of the disavowed or repressed elements inherent in the self. The invisibility of Vicuña Porto within the group, allied with his status as avatar of a murderous propensity that has detached from the polis, feeding instead off the elemental economies that power storms, floods and plagues, hints at the scale of this repression, and at the magnitude of its eventual unveiling.

The novel ends with what seems like the final descent from civilisation to barbarity as Zama, confronted with two distinct charges of treachery by his fellow soldiers, is condemned to 'una muerte doble' [death twice over] (261) by first having his fingers amputated and subsequently being left to slowly bleed to death. Like the motif of the Aryan child, what follows occupies an uncertain interstice in respect of the novel's waking 'reality' vis-à-vis its transposed fantasy structure. Nested within the horrible 'realism' of the scene is the image of an even more profound bodily transformation; pondering the survivability of his sentence, Zama presents the reader with an image of himself after undergoing dismemberment and blinding, still alive and extracting roots from the ground with his teeth for sustenance. This 'first death' of Zama, in both its realist and its imaginary versions, is so violently and even exaggeratedly represented not only because it is physically traumatic, but because of precisely what it represents: the end of a deep-seated illusion. The figuration completes a slow, winding descent to the earth that has been prefigured at countless junctures, such as when Zama compares himself to a four-legged, rabid beast (82), can barely lift his legs to avoid dragging the earth beneath his feet (199) and when his son by Emilia is first encountered as appearing to have become one with the earth (147). At the outset of the jungle expedition, he had pointedly described how biological hierarchies are enforced by access to drinking water: '[p]rimero los hombres, después los caballos, más luego las vacas, en orden de importancia impuesta por los primeros' [first went the men, then the horses, followed by the cows, in order of importance as decreed by the former] (216). But in this final part Zama repeatedly, and symbolically, falls down off his horse (San José Vazquez 233). The descent of the observer's vantage point into the mire of that which had been the object of observation recapitulates the gradual displacement of Homo sapiens from the pinnacle of the Chain of Being after the emergence of evolutionary discourse. The final bodily metamorphosis signals the completion of his traumatic fall

to earth and 'into' nature. For Zama this transmutation can hardly be a desirable endpoint, though in the work's larger thematic map it entails neither physical nor ethical (nor even aesthetic) degradation, but rather the realisation of a hitherto deferred encounter with some version of biological selfhood. In this regard, the scene reclaims the gaping missed experience at the heart of human self-discovery, and deliverance from 'la íntegra angustia del no encuentro' [sheer anxiety of the non-encounter] (202) that has stalked Zama throughout the preceding decade.

4. 1956 and Today: Zama as Ecological Noir

By the time *Zama* was published in 1956, Darwinism had long penetrated into the intellectual mainstream in Argentina, as it had elsewhere. As Roberto González Echevarría affirms, the scientists that travelled Latin America throughout the nineteenth century provided 'a new masterstory' (94) that 'embodied truth and exuded authority through its own performance' (102). Out of all of them, Darwin's influence and authority was pre-eminent (French 93). This is not to say that the reception, interpretation and application of Darwinian thought in Argentina was not the subject of continual controversy and debate throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth; as is shown by Levine and Novoa (2010), Darwinism's entry into public discourse was quickly conditioned by its appropriation in the articulation of national identity, and subsequently freighted by its ideological associations (which often contorted the original theory into various forms of pseudo-Darwinism). The basic idea underlying Darwin's theory had, however, attained sufficient traction by the time of Sarmiento's tenure as President of the Republic (1868–74) that he would support the teaching of evolutionary thought in schools, and would even claim Darwin as 'uno de nuestros propios sabios' [one of our own sages] in a speech at a memorial service held shortly after the latter's death in 1882 (French 94).

On the other hand, *Zama's* disturbing piquancy both in 1956 and today can at least partly be attributed to the inconclusive and still-traumatic epistemology associated with the ascendancy of these ideas. Contemporary writers such as scientist Daniel Dennett, philosopher Thomas Ligotti and literary theorists Timothy Morton and Cannon Schmitt have attempted to excavate and restore the pervasive shock value to what Dennett calls the 'dangerous idea' at the core of Darwinism. In Ligotti's pessimistic schema, recently popularised by the musings of outsider Rust Cohle in the pilot series of the HBO television series *True Detective*, human evolution produced a rogue phenomenon (advanced consciousness), which is constitutively traumatic insofar as it is objectively capable of understanding the evolutionary process, yet simultaneously ill-prepared to deal with the subjective, existential implications (23). To varying degrees, these authors all argue that our common primordial past as unveiled by Darwin not only was horrific to Darwin himself, but also retains a sense of deferred or belated horror even up to the present; our evolutionary descent remains an unassimilated fact of human genealogy. *Zama* can be approached as a novel that walks the reader through a belated cognitive process of thinking through some of the biological, ethical and philosophical implications of Darwinism, and it is in this sense easy to see how the novel is in key regards analogous to the experiential working-through of philosophical propositions in, for instance, *La Nausée* or *L'Étranger*.

Over the intervening period and up to the present day, *Zama* has also perhaps acquired new meanings. The decade that began in 1790, for instance, has become freighted with new environmental resonances, marking as it does the beginning of what some geologists now term the Anthropocene, or the era defined by the insertion of human time into geological time. Carbon deposits in the Arctic produced by human industrial activity can be dated to precisely this period (Glaser et al. 6), and Zama's figurative transformation into earthworm seems to

register a correlative entry of Homo sapiens into the longue durée of geological time. For Darwin, lifelong earthworm enthusiast, these creatures were deserving of special admiration on account of their transformational labours, which literally alter the Earth's material make-up. But if 1790 marks the synching up of the human with the geological in this sense, in another it marks the evacuation of the human out of the material world, as has been recently argued by philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, who grounds his influential critique in the stubborn persistence of a quintessentially Enlightenment disposition towards nature, articulated by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Kant's theory of the sublime posits a tripartite structure, which convenes a sequential encounter with, and sublimation of, nature-as-trauma. Initial psychic equilibrium is followed by a violent and destabilising confrontation with a traumatic otherness, followed by a final phase in which the ego transcends the material world. Kant claims that this structure 'reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of it and a superiority over nature on which is grounded a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us' (145). As Peter Heymans elaborates, Kant's aesthetic thus 'dramatises nature's unrepresentability and the ensuing breakdown of subjectivity, but mainly in order to cast the subsequent domestication of nature and recovery of subjectivity as even greater achievements' (25).

Zama's protracted encounter with nature is not followed by any transcendental evacuation from the rather icky materiality of his life on earth, though he does on one occasion quite overtly attempt to plot a Kant-esque escape when, midway through the novel, he reveals his attempts to develop a working eschatology that might serve as a spiritual and epistemological mooring, and hence a source of placement, belonging, and meaning. His idealised notion of God, entirely divested of the earth, is a Being both unmoved and unmoving, whose sole purpose is to act as originator and guarantor of physical law: 'un espíritu que no hacía pie en nada, capaz de establecer las leyes del equilibrio, la gravedad, y el movimiento' [a spirit that touches nothing, capable of establishing the laws of equilibrium, gravity and motion] (133). However, Zama cannot help but imagine God as materially embroiled in terrestrial affairs. The divine subject position of the God's-eye-view fails to deliver a functional concept of transcendence; there is no 'outside' of nature and, from that point in the novel onwards, Zama becomes embedded ever deeper. In response to the Kantian sublime, Mary Midgeley's *Beast and Man* (1979) proposed an 'ecological sublime' which, Peter Heymans explains:

dramatised that moment when the animal appeared too inhumanly different to be conceptualised. This cognitive failure to transcend our natural surroundings, she believes, makes us instantly aware of our rootedness in biological reality and of our vulnerability as physical beings. This awareness does not throw us into a state of permanent alienation as we might expect from such a traumatic experience, but inspires a deeply moral recognition of biological interdependence. (23)

Midgeley's ideas share some common points with the more recent works of Timothy Morton, concerned as the latter are with the question of human-ecological entanglement. Morton argues that: '[p]utting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration' (*Ecology Without Nature* (hereafter, *EWN*) 4–5). This is the version of nature as encountered early in Di Benedetto's text, when the protagonist hallucinates the image of a puma that is perceived not only as static and inoffensive to the point of decorative abstraction, but as docilely predisposed to receive human affection (12). (Immediately after this, and further collapsing admiration/sadism into a single category, the episode where Zama gazes upon the naked bathers concludes with his administering a beating to

one of them). Morton's proposed corrective of 'dark ecology' is on the face of it markedly less appealing than Midgeley's, though perhaps closer to the spirit of what is later encountered in *Zama*. This approach would amount to attunement to the melancholic (*EWN* 187), the claustrophobic and the aesthetically off-putting facets of ecological co-existence (*The Ecological Thought* (hereafter, *TET*) 44). Dark ecology, argues Morton, stages a moment of boundary breakdown at the human-other interface, and a jolting encounter with the self as uncannily other, irredeemably intertwined with animals, bacteria and fragments of non-human genetic code, with corporeality itself refigured as a 'palimpsest of symbiotic organisms' (*EWN* 108). Dark ecological space as an ethical category becomes uncomfortably, if necessarily, crowded and inter-subjective. While the advent of this space provokes a sense of profound loss, it also generates the implicature of a new ethical imperative, and Morton suggests this coupling as a platform for an agenda of 'coexistentialism' (*TET* 47). Instructively, a significant aspect of Morton's process of eco-cognitive mapping, and one of the sources of his rhetorical focus on 'darkness', is precisely noir film which, for Morton, is '[t]he form of dark ecology [...] The noir narrator begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that she or he is implicated in it' (*ibid.* 16–17).

Morton's engagement of existentialist motifs in the pursuit of a new environmental ethics is timely. Elsewhere, evolutionary biologist David P. Barash has argued for attention to the missed links between existentialist philosophy and the sociobiological implications of evolutionary theory. The Sartrean axiom that 'existence precedes essence' could, Barash suggests, just as easily refer to the taxonomic breakdown that is the logical conclusion of Darwinian thought (1012). But Morton's recourse to noir is of perhaps even greater immediate interest for the purpose of understanding how the cognitive structure of experience of a putative dark ecology might warrant the adoption of specific narrative forms; his insight might prove doubly valuable when it comes to locating *Zama's* ecological encounter, not solely in terms of the novel's 'pure' thematic affiliations, but in terms of its concrete historicity as a text published in 1956. The date of publication falls within the period most often cited as the peak years of film noir (1941–58), and it is perhaps not coincidental that Di Benedetto, an avowed cinephile who on occasion sat on jury panels at major international film festivals, not only intermittently wrote screenplays himself but also wrote extensively as film critic for regional newspapers from the time he was sixteen years old.

Noir itself remains a contested term, whose blanket utilisation in the designation of what is often little more than a pervasive mood of dislocation or 'a shared set of concerns and motifs' (Naremore 3) tends to yield diminishing critical returns. Some of the more incisive studies of noir's mechanisms have, however, helped to recover the term's appellative rigour by attending to ways in which noir filmic and literary texts entail particular narrative movements, engendering what Woolfolk calls the 'drama' of noir (108). Morton hints at the trajectory, recurrent throughout classics of the genre, of the investigator that becomes merged with the (criminal or proscribed) object of investigation (*Fallen Angel*, 1945; *Out of the Past*, 1947; *The Big Heat*, 1955; *Touch of Evil*, 1958), while the correlative uncovering of tragic self-knowledge recurs with equal prevalence (*Detour*, 1945; *Sunset Boulevard*, 1949; *The Asphalt Jungle*, 1950; *The Killing*, 1956). The keynote appropriation might, however, be located even more squarely in the centre of Diego de Zama's erotic imaginary, with its relentless projection of various reiterations of the femme fatale trope, which, Mary Ann Doane affirms, 'is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma', insofar as she appears to be and represents 'a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable' (1). Zama's early pursuit of Luciana, as well as being marked by his own descent towards the earth, 'rodilla en tierra' [bended-knee on soil] (67), is also registered by Luciana's projection of 'una hermosa y temible fatalidad' [a beautiful and fearful sense of doom] (67). Viewed through this prism,

it becomes clear that much of Zama's tortured involutions are forms of sexual strategising based on what are largely misreadings of what he imagines to be the strategies of Luciana, an expert, Zama concludes, in 'la advertencia, la comunicación y el arte de apuntalar esperanzas' [warnings, communication and the art of building up expectations] (70). Much later, Zama's conflation of the appearance of the moon with the image of a large, naked woman (200) serves to up the cosmological stakes of this ongoing sexual psycho-drama. As Doane suggests in respect of femmes fatales more generally, sexuality then becomes imbricated with the hermeneutic structure of the noir text itself, 'the site of questions about what can and cannot be known' (1). If, as in *Zama*, Darwinism operates as the site of a traumatic misalignment, then narrative attentiveness to the psychological and signifying mechanisms of sexual selection, beyond simply a medium for relaying the contrast between knowledge and ignorance, must be itself foregrounded as attesting to the presence of an obscure and (as yet) indecipherable language of hermeneutic desire.

The misconceived and misunderstood desires that circulate around the figure of the femme fatale serve as synecdoche for the broader complex of longing, fantasy and loss that propels noir narrative. In noting the 'fetishistic attitude to the poles of knowledge and desire' of the earliest *Série Noire* novels, Rolls and Walker also observe how the female characters operate as fetishised versions of the femme fatale in that they focus the protagonist's gaze on an illusion, blurring the black and white of truth and lie, present and past, myth and reality' (15). Both Naremore, writing in the context of American film noir, and later Rolls and Walker, who are largely concerned with noir's origins in French fiction, alight on a concept of nostalgia that is freighted with enthrallment to past elements that are or have become illusory. For Naremore, noir can refer to 'a nostalgia for something that never quite existed' (39); for Rolls and Walker, noir entails acting 'in the present with no idea of what is to come and in full (if suppressed) knowledge that our memories of the past are longings and no more than that' (7). Thematically resonant with the visual motifs of chiaroscuro contrasts that prevail in the visual iterations of noir, the genre hence dwells at the twilight interstice that occurs along the narrative trajectory leading from blindness to insight.

Virtually all of these critical approaches foreground the importance of historicising noir, given that the genre's fundamental narrative configuration is a self-reflexively circular repetition, *en abyme*, of the historical processes that engendered the cultural moment of which it is itself a representation. This embedded pre-history of noir is often interpreted as coterminous with the trauma of wartime experience, but also of the post-war period itself as it was experienced by returning soldiers; the exigencies of the American war effort and the mandates of the subsequent GI Bill allowed women and African American men to engage in a hitherto unheard-of level of participation in public life, thereby doubly displacing the primacy of the white patriarch (Oliver and Trigo xiii). But the prevalence of Marx and especially Nietzsche (as well as, in more implicit ways, Darwin and Freud) within noir discourse suggests that the post-war condition it speaks to has as much to do with an anterior crisis of position in respect of the decentred locus of Western subjectivity. Noir, it can then be suggested, stages the confluence of intellectual disenchantment with its belated manifestation in, firstly, the European theatres of war and, latterly, the American public arena. The wartime and post-war experiences, as traumatically repeated by noir, and figured by Rolls and Walker as 'scars on the flesh of its narrative' (9), are in this sense legible only as palimpsests written over the scar tissue of pre-existing epistemological fault lines.

Identification of noir's belated historical quality allows us to situate it relative to the Bildungsroman in terms of two loosely analogous structures whose principal points of contrast concern subjective agency, temporality and the wider social body. Bakhtin supplies

an effective summary of the archetypal Bildungsroman protagonist who 'emerges *along with the world* and [...] reflects the historical emergence of the world itself' [emphasis in the original] (23). By virtue of this concordance between subjective and collective identity, the forging of the individual operates as synecdochically tied to the historical emergence of the modern nation-state which, at the time when the genre was first named (by Karl Morgenstern in 1819), remained a projected ideal (Boes 29). In some ways, the archetypal noir text mirrors the thematic map that orients the Bildungsroman, given that it narrates what Jean Pons suggests is an expansion 'beyond the sphere of the individual' to encompass 'those accidents of history, inside the socially determined framework, that prove crucial and which are the modern equivalent of destiny' (trans. and qtd. in Rolls and Walker 8). In other words, if the Bildungsroman in its classical iterations followed a positivist ascent whereby the protagonist secures meaningful agency within the nascent liberal nation-state, the noir narrative heralds its negative mirror image; where the former negotiates a teleological movement towards and entry into mature 'participation' (in a community, society, or body politic), the latter tends towards recognition of an already present 'implication' in a crime that is constitutive of the (political, social, or ecological) field. And indeed, as Rolls and Walker show, some of the earliest Série Noire novels that gave noir its name took as their theme the collusion, and hence 'implication', of French citizenry in the Nazi occupation (9). It can be added that the final, hallucinatory piece of dialogue that takes place in *Zama* levels the charge at the protagonist that he has not 'grown' (262); in fact, throughout the text he becomes 'menguado' [diminished] (20). Personal growth in noir paradoxically equates with a kind of shrinking of subjectivity, in successive moments of recognition of the self as being fatalistically caught up in the structures unveiled by the hermeneutics of disenchantment.

The tension between optimism and pessimism, or rather between the elaboration of a platform for ethically responsible action versus the contrary move of establishment of rational grounds for a philosophical posture of the absurd, is evidently at the core of what is at stake in the genre-labelling game that one encounters at the confluence of terms such as 'existentialism', 'nihilism' 'Bildungsroman' and 'noir'. But whereas noir's courting of the void can be viewed as 'pointedly anti-social' (ibid. 9), insofar as it serves to destabilise rather than strengthen the constitutive narratives of the self and the polity, this act of sabotage is itself clearly not without long-term ethical, *Bildung* potential. Morton conceives of noir as prefiguring a protracted cognitive event which, in itself, insists only upon recognition of the epistemological violence wrought on an intrinsically problematic conception of 'nature', but which if successful would generate a prescriptive dimension in the form of a new, Levinasian ethical demand.

With the introduction of the ethical demand, we are by now perhaps too far advanced beyond the remit of what literary fiction can or even should be expected to achieve in itself. On the other hand, it can hardly be overstated that this fundamental concern with how the natural world has historically been encountered, framed and constructed is of no small consequence in contemporary discourse, given that it is these latter constructs that underwrite virtually every point of human interaction (affective, curatorial, exploitative, economic) with the environment. Literature is clearly implicated in this discourse as are all modes of expression, and it is perhaps not coincidental that we currently look set to be entering a watershed period for *Zama*'s reappraisal internationally, following the release of Esther Allen's English translation in 2016 and acclaimed director Lucrecia Martel's big budget film adaptation due for release in 2017. For as word of Di Benedetto's compelling work continues to spread, *Zama* merits renewed consideration, not only in its exploration of Darwinism's gathering impact on human subjectivity over the course of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment history, but

also in respect of the new and often disturbing contexts about which it sometimes seems to have been uncannily and prematurely aware.

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How to cite this article: Conlon, D 2017 The Trauma of Nature: Antonio Di Benedetto's *Zama* as Ecological Noir. *Modern Languages Open*, 2017(3): 4, pp. 1–20, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.42>

Published: 28 June 2017

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