

**TWO CONFESSIONAL NOVELS: A COMPARISON OF SÃO BERNARDO
WITH LA FAMILIA DE PASCUAL DUARTE**

M. W. Stannard¹

Abstract: This paper analyzes and compares a Brazilian neo-naturalist novel with one written in Spain. Despite the geographic and cultural distance between the authors, Graciliano Ramos and Camilo José Cela, and the striking differences in their backgrounds, there are remarkable similarities in their novels that reflect the aftermath of civil war and dislocation of society that both authors suffered. The narrative structure and literary antecedents of both novels are explored. Graciliano's interpretation of the genre includes regionalism and romanticism, while Cela's is colored by tremendismo. In both there are significant departures from the Naturalism of Zola.

Keywords: Neo-naturalism, Confessional novel, Brazil, Spain.

1. Graciliano's background

Graciliano Ramos, was born in 1892 in the state of Alagoas and moved to Viçosa, then to Palmeira dos Índios where he spent twenty years, after a failed attempt at journalism in Rio de Janeiro (Oliveira, 1988, p. 3). After well-received reports on local government, however, he was encouraged to publish his first novel, *Caetés* in 1933. A year later *São Bernardo* appeared, followed by *Angústia*, *Vidas Secas*, *Infância* and *Insônia*. More novels, including *Memórias do Cárcere*, were published posthumously.

Graciliano's writing, which emphasized the *sertão*, was recognized late in his life. In contrast with his Modernist contemporaries, he favored neo-naturalism based on European models (Mazzara, 1974, p. 7), which Flora Sussekind (1974, p.46) describes as a “persisting, recurring feature of Brazilian letters.” Determinism permeates his novels (Mazzara, 1974, p. 27), which are written from a psychological and subjective perspective (Sovereign, 1953, p. 57), in which misanthropy, perversion, hypocrisy, adultery and cruelty recur. Starved of affection as a child, the emotion Graciliano recalled most from his early years was fear. Autobiographical elements recur in his novels as his characters experience frustration and meaninglessness in life, part of the writer's genius being his ability to share and reveal their existential torment. Graciliano's first years were spent under the Old Republic when the economy thrived following the introduction of coffee cultivation. On the collapse of commodity

¹ Doctoral student, Spanish Literature, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 55455, U.S.A. E-mail: stann005@umn.edu

prices in the Great Depression, however, political instability exacerbated rural poverty and worsened social injustice inspiring his left-wing leanings.

2. São Bernardo

The novel starts as Paulo Honório, the *fazendeiro* of São Bernardo, plans to write an account of his life. A reference to the *revolução de Outubro* (SB, p.5) tells us that we are probably in 1931 and that we are going to learn about events that preceded the revolution. We find Honório feeling inadequate for the task because of his age and limited education reflecting, “é tarde para mudar de profissão” (SB, p.10). He describes his early years as an orphan, a blind man who used to twist his ears, and Mother Margarida, his only source of affection. As a young adult, he did hard laboring work and saved enough money to buy the *fazenda* of São Bernardo, becoming wealthy through the influence of friends in nearby Viçosa, and by brutal exploitation of his laborers. He recruits Padilha, the previous owner of São Bernardo, to teach in a school built to impress the state governor, and the decrepit Ribeira as book-keeper. A neighbor, Mendonça, who encroaches on São Bernardo land, is murdered at his behest.

Honório decides that he needs an heir, and marries Madalena, a beautiful, educated school teacher. The marriage is a disaster, however, and Madalena incurs expenses for the school and farm workers that enrage her avaricious husband. The birth of a son fails to reduce tensions between them, and Madalena’s friendship with Padilha reduces Honório to jealous fury, as a result of which she poisons herself in despair. At the outbreak of the October Revolution, many farm workers leave to join the conflict, commodity prices fall, and São Bernardo falls into decay. With only his son, a maid and his henchman for company, Honório also despairs and begins a painful self-examination that he hopes will make sense of his life. While he makes plans for his son, the memory of Madalena obsesses him and his future appears bleak.

3 Analysis of São Bernardo

The novel is narrated in the first person, with Honório a semi-reliable narrator, as he is capable of withholding some of the more criminal details of his life. His bitterness reflects the author’s and Pereira da Silva (1954, p.76) has observed that Graciliano’s novels are more autobiographical than fictional. Honório’s lack of education parallels that of the author who “must be considered largely a self-educated man” (Mazzara, 1974, p. 23). The novel is realist in its

detailed description of physical surroundings and the external features of its characters, and is regionalist by virtue of the idiosyncrasies of the setting and characters that are very much of the *sertão*. Graciliano based his style more on French nineteenth-century novelists and on the Portuguese, Eça de Queiroz, than on contemporary Brazilian modernists, which led William Martins to call him a “classic outsider.” *São Bernardo* is a Naturalist novel by virtue of its inclusion of ugly aspects of life, such as Honório’s violence, jealousy, adultery and cruelty. There is a leveling inherent in the narrative as a result of a mechanistic view of human behavior (Furst and Skrine, 1971, p. 51), a typical Naturalist *pinpointing* of the novel in place and time (Macdonald, 1959, p.62) with emphasis on the family background of the characters (p. 51) and on contemporary historical events. Also characteristic of Naturalism, *São Bernardo* is set *in medias res* (p. 84) since Honório writes his biography after the main events of the novel and looks forward to an uncertain future at its end. Distinguishing physical characteristics are emphasized (p. 77), such as Honório’s big nose, ears, and huge hands, combined with his imagined “coração miúdo, lacunas no cérebro” (SB, p.190). While Honório knows how to farm, he is out of touch with his feelings for Madalena while she is alive, recalling characters in Zola’s Naturalist novels who are often out of touch with aspects of reality (Macdonald, 1959, p.77). Until the end of the novel, his personal relationships are relatively casual (p. 84) and love, for Honório, is physiological and instinctual rather than romantic (p. 83).

Just as new elements of humor and editorial comment, untypical of Zola’s Naturalism, were introduced by Galdós in his writing (Pattison, 1965, p.130), Eça de Queiroz added his own elements of aestheticism and romanticism to his interpretation of the genre. Removed from the European originals, Graciliano also wrote in his own manner substituting an intensely subjective first-person narration for the objectivity of Zola’s novels, “Num nítido antinaturalismo, a técnica é determinada pela redução de tudo, seres e coisas, ao protagonista” (Candido, 1999, p. 77). Increasingly romantic descriptions of the landscape around the *fazenda* reflect Honório’s changing perception (Mazzara, 1974, p. 35). In contrast with other characters, there is a stubborn idealism in Madalena’s determination to write, in her efforts to help the farm workers’ families, and in her readiness to reprove Honório for his brutality. Key features of Zola’s Naturalism listed by Pattison (1965, p.127) are: crude language, minute description of places and people, and determinism, and of these it is the latter which predominates in *São Bernardo*. Padilha is a hereditarily weak wastrel unable to manage the property he inherited, inflexibility prevents Ribeira from capitalizing on his position in village society in the face of changing times, while Marciano, Caetano and their families are too

feeble in character to escape their wretchedness. The clearest example of determinism is that of Honório who berates himself “Se fosse possível recomençarmos, aconteceria exatamente o que aconteceu. Não consigo modificarme, é o que mais me aflige...Foi este modo de vida que me inutilizou. Sou um aleijado” (SB, p.188).

The interweaving of personal and national histories in Naturalism, with private lives symbolizing national events has been described in the novels of Galdós as “a double stream of narrative” (Macdonald, 1959, p. 70). As a symbolic device linking *São Bernardo* and Brazilian history, Honório represents the harshness of the colonial past, while Father Silvestre, stands for an entrenched Brazilian church, which does little for the rural poor. Madalena, by contrast, can be seen as representative of the new, educated liberalism which flourished in the urban middle class not found in the landed estates; her death symbolizes the failure of liberal ideals. The mutual incomprehension that dooms the marriage of Madalena and Honório parallels the rigid oppositions in Brazilian politics, in which conflicts result in complete power for the victor, and annihilation for the vanquished. Ribeira can be seen as representing the rural past, in the final years of the Empire, when he exercised benign despotism in a community supposedly free of racial prejudice where, “os pretos não sabiam que eram pretos, e os brancos não sabiam que eram brancos” (SB p. 35), and where his authority was enough to quell disturbance. With the community’s expansion, Ribeira’s status and family vanish, and though he finds employment with Honório, his mind is elsewhere, “se voltava para o lugarejo que se transformou em cidade, há meio século” (SB, p. 96), underlining the pain of transformation from rural to urban society. Even Honório imagines that he might have been content in the kind of static *sertão* community whose passing Ribeira mourns. A symbolic role is played by the owls of the church tower, harbingers of ill-omen which warn of tragedy (Cirurgião, 1976, p. 43). They leave the church when Madalena dies, and return when memories of Madalena remind Honório of his loss. The recurring rustle of dead leaves in the wind serves a similarly fateful purpose. Just as *São Bernardo* is an extension of Honório’s personality “o prolongamento dele próprio” (Candido, 1999, p. 30), so the deterioration of buildings and crops symbolizes his emotional destruction.

Intertextual references abound in *São Bernardo*. The struggles of Honório’s early life when he sells, cheats and uses violence in order to survive suggest a debt to the picaresque tradition. Three passages in the novel refer to his youthful occupation as guide to a blind man who twists his ears, reminiscent of *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Also from *Lazarillo* is the artifice of the confessional narrative, while the metafictional struggle to come to terms with a text has

overtones of the *Quijote*. Honório’s insane jealousy and suspicion of Madalena’s infidelity suggests roots in Calderonean drama and, even more, in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, with its parallel story of an unsophisticated, jealous hero misled by a letter into murdering his wife, an extinguished candle symbolic of life lost.

4. Camilo José Cela

Cela was born in Iria Flavia, Galicia in 1916. At 21, he joined the Francoist rebellion at Logroño, and after the Civil War returned to Madrid to study law. He wrote *La familia de Pascual Duarte*, published in 1942, and achieved notoriety for its shocking episodes, which earned the label of *tremendismo*. He later published poetry, travel narratives, and the novel of grim, post-Civil War Madrid, *La colmena* (1951), which is considered his masterpiece. He received a Nobel Prize for literature in 1989, and helped draft Spain’s 1978 constitution. He died in 2002.

Cela wrote *La familia de Pascual Duarte* during the *años de hambre*, which followed the Civil War of 1936-39, having been exposed to a rich variety of literary influences before the war. His devotion to surrealism “illustrates enduring aspects of Cela’s character as well as Vanguard mockery of rational behavior and delight in paradox, the rejection of customary norms in favor of artistic anarchy, and subversion of control by instinctive behavior” (Pérez, 2000, p. 27). Features found in *La familia de Pascual Duarte* reveal “elements of realism and naturalism...(with) continual experimentation and clear expressionist and surrealist affiliations” (p. 15).

4. *La familia de Pascual Duarte*

The novel opens with an authorial “transcriber” describing a letter from a convicted murderer, Pascual Duarte, to Joaquín Barrera López, lawyer and friend of Duarte’s last victim, don Jesús González de la Riva, Conde de Torremejía. The letter is accompanied by a manuscript, written by Duarte in 1937 just before his execution, describing his life in the 1920s and 1930s: his brutal childhood, the death of his father from rabies, a sister Rosario who worked in brothels, and a retarded half-brother, Mario, who died of neglect. Duarte marries a village girl, Lola, but the relationship does not survive the miscarriage of their first child and the death of a second. The hostility of his mother and Lola cause Duarte to flee with the intention of traveling to the

Americas but, finding himself unable to afford the voyage, he returns to find Lola pregnant by a local *señorito*, El Estirao, who he kills. Lola also dies, and when Duarte is released from prison years later, he comes home to find that Rosario has returned to the brothel, and that she is being kept by another *señorito*. Duarte is again consumed with hatred for his mother and murders her. The narrative ends here, and the transcriber records his failure to find any manuscript which might complete the story. He receives conflicting accounts of Duarte's execution for murdering the Conde de Torremejía.

5. Analysis of La familia de Pascual Duarte

The novel is narrated in the first person, as a novel within a novel, and can be classified as a third-degree narrative (Rimmon-Kenan) being embedded firstly in the will of the lawyer, Barrera López, and secondarily in the narrative of the “transcriber,” the finder of the manuscript. The narrative is autodiegetic as the third-degree narrator is also the principal character in the story (Eagleton, 1983, p. 106). The story starts *in medias res*, and ends after his execution with the eye-witness accounts of a prison chaplain and a Civil Guard. Duarte's third-order narrative, written as a flashback, is unlikely to represent the views of Cela the author, and he must therefore be considered an unreliable narrator. The squalid, violence-ridden background of Pascual Duarte has nothing in common with Cela's upbringing in Galicia. Elements in Cela's life which can be related to the novel, however, include his posting as a Falangist soldier to the Leonese village , of La Vecilla (Gibson, 2003, p. 78), where the retired Civil Guard of the novel finds himself “más tieso que un palo en este clima que no es ni para desearle al más grande criminal” (FPD, p.163), and his being stationed in the Extremaduran village of Terremejía (Gibson, 2003, p. 86) which must have given him the idea for Duarte's home. The pessimism of the novel may be related to that of Cela in those years, which he later described as “los más amargos de mi vida” (p. 89).

The detailed realism of *La familia de Pascual Duarte*, exemplified by the decoration of the Duarte kitchen, “lozas de adorno, con jarras con recuerdos, pintados en azul, con platos ocn dibujos azules o naranja” (FPD, p. 24), is part of a long tradition in Spanish literature. In addition, however, there are repellent Naturalist details such as “el mismo olor a bestia muerta” (p. 25) which Duarte misses when away from home, the “alfileritos de pus” about his mother's mouth (p. 31), and the family meal of eels from an open sewer, “las anguilas estaban rollizas por que comían los mismo que don Jesús, sólo que un día más tarde” (p. 26). More nightmarish still, however, are the episodes of *tremendismo* such

as when Duarte shoots his faithful dog whose gaze “me calentaba la sangre de las venas...y mis ojos se entornaban dominados por el mirar” (p. 28), the ghoulish drowning of his retarded brother, Mario, in a *tinaja* of olive oil “con la nariz apoyada sobre el barro del fondo” (p. 52), and his lethal struggle with his mother when, “con la boca me cazó un pezón...y me lo arrancó de cuajo. Fue el momento mismo en que pude clavarle la hoja en la garganta” (p. 156).

The text is intensely subjective without the “scientific” style that Zola favored. Though distinguishing physical characteristics of Duarte’s parents are given, we do not know what he looked like, and though he is in touch with external reality he has little insight into his internal motivation and his compulsion to kill. His relationships are not casual or biological, as in Naturalist narrative, since he has genuine affection for his sister Rosario and for his first wife, Lola. More Naturalistic, however, is the *pinpointing* which identifies time and space in the narrative. Hereditary determinism, a hallmark of Naturalism, is expressed when Duarte laments “es demasiado lo malo que la vida me enseñó y mucha la flaqueza para resistir al instinto” (FPD, p. 17) (my italics), indicating an ingrained difficulty in controlling impulses. He repeats this confession in relation to his violent parents observing, “defectos todos ellos que para mi desgracia *hube de heredar*---y esto hacía que se cuidaran bien poco de pensar los principios y de *refrenar los instintos*” (p. 31) (my italics). As he murders his mother, Pascual feels compulsion and inevitability “era algo fatal que habría de venir y que venía, que yo había de causar y que no podía evitar” (p. 152), feeling no remorse, “la conciencia no me remordería; no habrá motivo” (p. 153), in what Pérez (2000, p.10) calls a “neo-naturalistic” confession.” Ortega (1965, pp. 26-27) identifies four roots of the *tremendismo* in *La familia de Pascual Duarte*: a Spanish literary tradition of unreality, the author’s disgust with an ethically repulsive society that led him to caricature, an acceptance by post-war society of the tragic and the brutal, and an innate pessimism. The impulsive and remorseless violence of the novel with its “fatalism of the absurd” (McPheeters, 1969, p. 42) has invited comparison with Camus’ existentialist novel *L’Etranger*, published in the same year (Ferrer, 1958, p. 298), and much admired by Cela. The hallmarks of existentialist literature according to Cruikshank (1959, pp. 6-7), however, are blurred distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, an emphasis on concrete situations rather than abstract attitudes, and the absence of metaphysical aids, with an insistence upon human responsibility. In contrast with the hero of *L’Etranger*’s passive indifference to his mother’s death, and the murder of the Arab, however, Duarte oscillates between episodes of love, depression, despair and fury, and Cela’s novel has an orderly pattern not typical of absurdist work (McPheeters, 1969, p. 50). It cannot, therefore, be considered primarily as an existentialist novel.

Pérez (2000, p. 39) sees a symbolic significance in Pascual's name, linking it with the Paschal Lamb or Easter sacrifice, with the hero a scapegoat for the ills of a brutal society, for it was Cela's opinion that society had to accept partial responsibility for crimes committed as a result of its injustices. McPheeters (1969, p. 40) sees Pascual as symbolic of the “traditional, very Spanish tendency to take justice into one's own hands, to do just what one feels like doing.” The extinguished candle after Duarte's murder of his mother (FPD p. 157) symbolizes life destroyed. The calls of the owl, “en el ciprés una luchuga, un pájaro de mal agüero, dejaba oír su silbo misterioso” (p. 81) presage Lola's miscarriage after being thrown by a mare.

Cela is indebted to the literary tradition of the *pícaro*, the opportunistic rogue epitomized by *Lazarillo de Tormes*. The ironic description of the hero's humble origins is typical of the picaresque, autobiographical narrative (McPheeters, 1969, p. 36), as is the pseudo-innocence with which he describes his crimes (Pérez, 2000, p. 40). While graphic descriptions of violence are not typical of the picaresque novel, the admonition that the novel should be taken as a warning to readers goes back to *El libro de buen amor* (Gibson, 2003, p. 111). The literary devices of the transcriber, and the fortuitously encountered manuscript, and documents confirming its authenticity are derived from the *Quijote's* fragmented manuscript of Cide Hamete Benengeli. Equally Cervantine are the differing viewpoints of the witnesses of Pascual's execution (McPheeters, 1969, p. 36). Parallels have been drawn with Pérez Galdós's Realist observation of Spanish life (p. 32), while Rodríguez (1966, pp. 269-273) has even traced a narrative tradition of a child being gnawed by a hog, as happens to Duarte's brother Mario, in the novels of Pérez Galdós, Lorca, Valle-Inclán, Azorín and Ayala.

6. Comparison of the two novels

The similarities between the two novels are remarkable in view of their authors being such apparently different men. Ramos, the “classical outsider” who grew up in poverty and rural isolation, and Cela, who was privileged and who met many of the leading literary figures of his day. *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942) instantly attracted attention, and *La colmena* (1951) earned him fame which culminated in a Nobel Prize, contrasting with Graciliano for whom public recognition came late. Closer inspection, however, reveals that they had much in common. Both were independent in outlook, adapted the neo-naturalist genre in their own ways, and expressed pessimistic outlooks in the aftermath of civil wars. The heroes of both novels reflect that they would have committed the

same mistakes had they lived their lives again, Honório reflecting, “Se fosse possível recomeçarmos, aconteceria exactamente o que aconteci. Não consigo modificar-me, é o mais me aflige” (SB, p. 188). He confesses no sympathy for his farm workers “...esses infelizes não me inspiram simpatia” (p. 190) suggesting that part of his humanity is irrecoverable, “endureci, caleja, e não é um arranhão que penetra esta casca espessa e vem ferir cá dentro a sensibilidade embotada” (p. 184). Though laced with Christian eschatology, Duarte’s reflections are scarcely less tragic, “Pesaroso estoy ahora de haber equivocado mi camino, pero ya ni pido perdón en esta vida. ¿Para qué? Tal vez, sea mejor que hagan conmigo lo que está dispuesto, porque es más que probable que si no lo hicieran volviera a las andadas. No quiero pedir el indulto, porque es demasiado lo malo que la vida me enseñó y mucha mi flaqueza para resistir al instinto” (FPD, p. 17). Though Duarte confesses to a weakness that Honório never would, there is the same deterministic sense of being irremediably brutalized in them both. For all his apparent contrition, Duarte is never haunted by his victims as Honório is by Madalena, and he suffers no remorse for their deaths; such an absence of conscience is found in the psychopath.

Both characters fantasize about how their lives might have been. Honório reflecting that, without his ambition, “Se houvesse continuado a arear o tacho de cobre da velha Margarida, eu e ela teríamos uma existência quieta,” or “Se não tivesse ferido o João Fagundes, se tivesse casado com a Germana....Não me atormentariam preocupações excessivas, não ofenderia ninguém” (SB, p.187). Duarte similarly imagines how life would have been had he served the full 28-year sentence for the murder of Estirao, and not been released early for good behaviour, “Si me hubiera portado mal hubiera estado en Chinchilla los veintiocho años que me salieron...y (yo) hubiera salido manso como una oveja, suave como una manta, y alejado probablemente del peligro de una nueva caída” (FPD, pp.132-3). Both narratives are autodiegetic and start *in medias res* with flashbacks. Both characters struggle with their writing, Honório complaining “Não pretendo bancar escritor. É tarde para mudar de profissão” (SB, p.10) and “suspendo às vezes o trabalho moroso...digo a mim mesmo que esta pena é um objeto pesado. Não estou acostumado a pensar...Então para que escreve?--Sei lá” (SB, pp. 8,11), “se possuísse metade da instrução de Madalena, encoivarava isto brincando” (SB, p. 9). Duarte confesses a similar lack of skill, “Confío en que usted sabrá entender lo que mejor no le digo, porque mejor no sabría” (FPD, p. 17) and laments its laboriousness “ya estoy aburrido de todos los cientos de hojas que llené con mi palabrería” (p.16). Both feel impelled to write, however, in order to understand their lives.

Despite the similarities, I believe that there is a significant difference in the conscience of the two characters. While Honório acquires a profound insight into his interior self and has the honesty to confront the most unpleasant features of his personality, Duarte sees only his exterior, a victim of evil influences which he was unable to resist. We do not look into Duarte’s soul because, it is elusive and apt to vary according to circumstances, whether listening to the homilies of the prison governor (FPD, p.136), confessing to a prison chaplain “...que rociera sus últimas palabras de arrepentimiento con el mismo gozo con que recogiera la más dorada mies el labrado..” (p.161), dying on the scaffold “escupiendo y pataleando sin cuidado ninguno de los circunstancias y de la manera más ruin y más baja que un hombre puede terminar” (p.165), or murdering his mother with the utmost resolve, “No había más solución que golpear sin piedad, rápidamente, para acabar lo más pronto que posible” (p. 155). In contrast with the solidity of Honório’s character, there is a protean quality about Duarte’s unstable personality that can conceive itself only in terms of external influences, not pathology within. With his ability to be different things to different people, he is an unreliable narrator and his talk of religion is opportunistic. He assumes a picaresque air of innocence, blaming the world for treating him so badly “porque es demasiado lo malo que la vida me enseñó” (FPD, p.17). Since he kills without conscience I cannot agree with McPheeters (1969, p. 38) that Pascual is not a psychopathic killer. I believe that such a glib, multiple-murderer without remorse for harm done to others has much of the psychopath about him.

7. Conclusions

São Bernardo and *La familia de Pascuala Duarte* are neo-naturalist, autodiegetic novels, narrated as flashbacks, which feature poverty and brutality. The former is colored by elements of regionalism and romanticism, while the latter is characterized by nightmarish episodes of *tremendismo*. Honório is a semi-reliable narrator, while Duarte’s volatility and psychopathic personality make him unreliable. Both novels reflect the disintegration of societies dislocated by civil war.

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