

## **Historia no natural: Human Subjectivity and “Nature” in Alfredo Veiravé’s *Historia Natural***

***HISTORIA NO NATURAL: LA SUBJETIVIDAD HUMANA Y LA “NATURALEZA” EN  
HISTORIA NATURAL POR ALFREDO VEIRAVÉ***

***HISTÓRIA NO NATURAL: SUBJETIVIDADE HUMANA E “NATUREZA” NA HISTÓRIA  
NATURAL DE ALFREDO VEIRAVÉ***

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### **Abstract**

*The poetic sensibilities of the infrequently-studied Argentine poet and academic Alfredo Veiravé (1928-1991) evolved throughout his career from neoromanticism to his own mode of antipoesía. Constant in the development of his poetic voice, however, is how the natural and artificial worlds—and how the sciences and the humanities view these worlds—inspired and confounded him. He came to see the interconnections amongst all things, and his poetry reflects this point of view. Specifically, his 1980 book of poetry, *Historia Natural*, demonstrates the irony of how the sciences and humanities view the natural world. Through a parodic structure, his speaker catalogs a disparate variety of subjects and objects and layers what he refers to as “asociaciones interminables” with them in a sort of enmeshed palimpsest. With his poetry, Veiravé posits that an overarching authoritative discourse representing the natural world, as it is, does not exist. In this way, *Historia natural* provides a pivotal example of the post-environmental turn in Latin American ecological thought. It acknowledges and problematizes the role of human subjectivity in the fate of environments, landscapes, and territories.*

**Keywords:** *natural history, ecopoetry, argentine literature, the two cultures*

### **Resumen**

La sensibilidad poética del poeta y académico argentino poco estudiado Alfredo Veiravé (1928-1991) evolucionó a lo largo de su carrera desde el neoromanticismo hasta su propio modo de antipoesía. Sin embargo, un constante en el desarrollo de su voz poética es cómo el mundo natural y el mundo artificial—y cómo las ciencias y las humanidades ven estos mundos—le inspiraron y frustraron. Llegó a ver las interconexiones entre todas las cosas y su poesía refleja este punto de vista. Específicamente, su libro de poesía de 1980, *Historia natural*, demuestra la ironía

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de cómo las ciencias y las humanidades ven el mundo natural. A través de una estructura paródica, su hablante cataloga una variedad dispar de sujetos y objetos, haciendo lo que él llama "asociaciones interminables" con ellos en una especie de palimpsesto entrelazado. Con su poesía, Veiravé postula que no existe un discurso autoritario general que represente el mundo natural, tal como es. De esta manera, *Historia natural* proporciona un ejemplo fundamental del giro posambiental en el pensamiento ecológico latinoamericano. Reconoce y problematiza el papel de la subjetividad humana en el destino de los entornos, paisajes y territorios.

**Palabras clave:** historia natural, ecopoesía, literatura argentina, las dos culturas

### Resumo

*A sensibilidade poética do pouco estudado poeta e acadêmico argentino Alfredo Veiravé (1928-1991) evoluiu ao longo de sua carreira do neo-romantismo ao seu próprio modo de antipoesia. No entanto, uma constante no desenvolvimento de sua voz poética é como o mundo natural e o mundo artificial—e como as ciências e as humanidades veem esses mundos—o inspiraram e frustraram. Ele passou a ver as interconexões entre todas as coisas e sua poesia reflete esse ponto de vista. Especificamente, seu livro de poesia de 1980, *História natural*, demonstra a ironia de como as ciências e as humanidades veem o mundo natural. Por meio de uma estrutura paródica, seu falante cataloga uma variedade díspar de assuntos e objetos, fazendo o que ele chama de "associações infinitas" com eles em uma espécie de palimpsesto entrelaçado. Com sua poesia, Veiravé postula que não existe um discurso autoritário geral que represente o mundo natural como ele é. Desta forma, *Historia natural* fornece um exemplo fundamental da virada pós-ambiental no pensamento ecológico latino-americano. Reconhece e problematiza o papel da subjetividade humana no destino dos ambientes, paisagens e territórios.*

**Palavras-chave:** história natural, ecopoesia, literatura argentina, as duas culturas

*That the poetry of this most scientific of centuries should be, on the whole, less concerned with science than was the poetry of times of which science was relatively unimportant is a paradox that requires to be elucidated and explained.*

*Science has become an affair of specialists. Incapable any longer of understanding what it is all about, the man of letters, we are told, has no choice but to ignore contemporary science altogether.*

Aldous Huxley, *Literature and Science* (1963, p. 61, p. 62)

*nosotros como los físicos, los psicólogos, los químicos,  
científicos o inventores*

*a partir de la Revolución Industrial pertenecemos  
a la historia de la ciencia, somos  
también especialistas,  
los legisladores que el mundo no reconoce.*

Alfredo Veiravé, "Físicos y químicos" (1980, p. 55)

Upon returning home after the first of two extended stays in hospitals for treatment of Pott's disease, a dangerous and possibly deforming illness, the Argentine literary scholar and poet Alfredo Veiravé (1928-1991) ripped his unpublished poetry to shreds (1975/2002, p. 11). Though he had already recently published a volume of poetry, *El alba, el río y tu presencia* (1951), that had received welcoming acceptance from established and professional writers and poets from Argentina, his "apartamento de todo el mundo", as he calls his time in treatment and recovery, caused him to put life above art: "Durante los años de enfermedad había rehuido el poema porque sabía que si me entregaba a la fiebre de la poesía, no iba a vivir. Yo quería vivir" (p. 14). Moreover, in "La poesía, crítica y biografía", an autobiographical essay, Veiravé describes his first bout with Pott's disease as a critical turning point in his life and career. After destroying his unpublished work once he got home, he began to write again when fellow poet Alfredo Martínez Howard showed him how ripping up his work was a positive sign of his promise as a poet. As Martínez Howard (Veiravé, 1975/2002) explained it, that Veiravé could tear up all of his previous poems only proved that he had more poetry to write and did not need to attach himself to his old words (p. 12). Notably, Veiravé's second book of poetry, *Después del alba, el ángel* (1955), reflects a new outlook on poetry and the capacity of his poetic style and sensitivity to evolve. It demonstrates his separation from the "impregnación emocional" of *neoromanticismo* that defined the *generación del 40* in Argentine poetry (Prieto, 1968, p. 129). Veiravé agrees with several fellow literary scholars that this shift in his early poetry represents an "equilibrio" in his poetic style, which he attributes to his first experience with his

own mortality and separation from the world on account of Pott’s disease (p. 13-14).

After living in Buenos Aires for a few years following his first hospitalization, Veiravé experienced another significant change in his life that would also come to affect his art. Having published *Después del alba, el ángel*, the poet, already a resident of the capital city, began to feel a different sort of separation from the world than that which he had had as an in-house patient. He felt a particular disconnection from himself while living in the metropolis and he longed for the countryside of the small town of Gualeguay, Entre Ríos, his birth city. Though his friends advised him that, in terms of becoming a successful and published poet, leaving Buenos Aires was like going into exile (Veiravé, 1975/2002, p. 16), he was put off by the idea of continuing to live amongst the chaos of the big city: “Jamás pude sentirme sino un simple provinciano de paso, y ya me veía criando a mis hijos en los balcones de un departamento, corriendo los domingos para lograr un poco de verde y río [...]” (p. 15). For Veiravé, Buenos Aires denied him the kind of intimate relationships with people and the natural world that he had known and enjoyed while in Gualeguay, far from the mad rush of the modern megacity. He was so determined to leave the big city for the country that he left without having any occupational prospects waiting for him. Soon, he and his family decided to move to Resistencia, the capital city of Chaco, Veiravé’s wife’s native province. Soon after his arrival, he found work as a professor in the Universidad Nacional del Nordeste. Leaving a Buenos Aires that prevented him from relating to the world as he would like, Veiravé (1975/2002) realized that the city did not need him, nor vice versa (p. 16). As it did after his first bout with Pott’s disease, his poetry changed when he distanced himself from mainstream life. Though his retreat to the interior did not prevent him from travelling the world, and even briefly living abroad in Iowa during the 1960s and 1970s, he realized that, like his mentor, fellow Argentine poet Juan L. Ortiz, he did not want to write from the center of society (p. 25, p. 33). In fact, Veiravé did not necessarily place importance on subscribing to a literary, cultural, or even speciesist center from which to build his worldview. Indeed, his poems can be read as coming from within a system of connections wherein humans exist together with other entities as participants. While scholars such as Elise Calabrese (2002) and Mariela Blanco (2011) have extensively analyzed Veiravé’s interest in making connections amongst all things in his work, few— with the exception of Claudia Rosa (2018)— have read this perspective as necessarily relating to ecological thinking. The current study proposes that his poetry, especially his later work, reflects an ecopoetic sensibility in the way it conceptualizes interrelationships and interconnections among humans, nonhumans, objects, and ideas as dynamically reciprocal.

One of the ways that Veiravé seeks to reveal this interconnectedness is by questioning our humanity along with our spatial and ontological understanding of the world. This questioning emphasizes particular ironies in the human way of seeing the natural world through the epistemic subjectivity of the sciences, the arts, and everything in-between. Although few scholars outside of Argentina have studied Veiravé’s work, his penchant for revealing ironies in how humans view the natural world puts him in league with more widely-known Spanish American poets, such as José Emilio Pacheco, from Mexico, and Nicanor Parra from Chile.

Ecocritics such as Niall Binns (2004) and Mauricio Ostria González (2016) who have studied the ecological poetry of both Pacheco and Parra point out both poets' *antipoética* take on how humans and nonhumans interact and interrelate. Similarly, Veiravé questions human subjectivity by uniting disparate and diverse themes and things in and of the world, which, in turn, lessens and muddles falsely predetermined differences between any set of concrete and/or abstract subjects, whether they be human or nonhuman. Even more specifically, he reveals the irony of all perceived accurate representations of nonhuman reality on the part of humanity by writing “versos contruidos sobre frases de informaciones extraídas de documentos o textos o tesis”, which he calls “transparencias” (Veiravé, 1975/2002, p. 27). In other words, he puts these palimpsestic “transparencias” into conversation with one another—allusions and intertexts selected from representative discourses, be they scientific, artistic, religious, political, or mass media in a poetic discourse. His most overt and sustained “transparencia” comes in the form of his book *Historia natural* (1980), in which he structures his poetics by parodying the format and function of the pre-enlightenment and enlightenment scientific classificatory discourse displayed in certain natural histories.<sup>2</sup> More explicitly, Veiravé parodies the Spanish Jesuit José Jolís' eighteenth-century natural history of the Chaco region, *Ensayo sobre la historia natural del Gran Chaco*. The format of *Historia natural*, however, mostly reflects one of the original natural histories: the encyclopedic work by the Roman Pliny the Elder from the first century AD. By parodying early “scientific” analyses of the natural world, Veiravé sets up his poems as objective sketches that treat aspects of life worthy of study. Therefore, Pliny's work, together with that of Jolís', will provide key contextual reference points for our reading of Veiravé's ironic perspective on “official” epistemologies in *Historia natural* because they provide examples of “scientific” works that make rather subjective attempts at objectivity.

One of two of Veiravé's books published during Argentina's last military dictatorship (1976-1983),<sup>3</sup> *Historia natural* can also be read to reflect an ironic critique of accepted concepts of knowledge and power. Coincidentally, this same period marks the latter part of the global environmental turn, which may explain Veiravé's use of terms and concepts like “reserva ecológica” as he does in his poem by the same name. By 1980, environmental themes and ideas were already cultural currency for intellectuals like Veiravé, thanks in part to the paradigm shift from nature writing to environmental writing represented by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 (Clark, 2011 p. 84). The naturalist-turned-environmentalist writers' focus on human interference in, and responsibility to, the natural world largely defines this shift, which centers on struggles for political and social authority when it comes to how to use and/or preserve the nonhuman world. While Veiravé's ecopoetry diverges in several key ways from contemporary environmental writing, it similarly questions the validity of human authority over the natural world. And *Historia natural's* concept of treating both the arts and the sciences as potentially

<sup>2</sup> The definition of “natural history” as a term and subject has been, and continues to be, debated by those who see it as form of scientific investigation and those that see it as amateur science (Secord, 1996, pp. 448-450). In any case in the present work, I use the term to indicate those studies of nature that come through an objective perspective.

<sup>3</sup> The other book is *La máquina del mundo* published in 1976.

epistemologically repressive systems, especially as they relate to nonhuman entities, in the midst of a repressive political climate, made and continues to make a particularly powerful and timely statement.

To more fully understand the context and the importance of irony in Veiravé's *Historia natural*, one must consider philosophical and political questions regarding the idea of "Nature" as such. Indeed, to doubt or question the idea of "Nature" and what it does or does not encompass, has been a central task of humanistic and scientific studies alike. Timothy Morton's 2007 work, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, and Bruno Latour's 2004 book, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, both examine how the humanities and the sciences, respectively, have manipulated and manufactured the idea of "Nature". We can see that the concepts of "Nature" and human subjectivity that *Historia natural* parodies parallel similar arguments made by Morton and Latour, particularly when it comes to pointing out the problem with certain sectors of ecocritical and eco-poetical movements in their attempts to make ontological or epistemological changes in how we approach the interrelationships among humans and nonhumans.

According to Morton (2007), conventional ecocriticism, so-called environmental art, and other "ecological" representations need to rid themselves of "Nature" in order to be completely ecological or express "a proper relationship with the earth and its lifeforms" (p. 2). That is, ecocritics' understanding of "Nature" paradoxically acts as an obstacle in their attempt to analyze art and literature's ecological thought, especially when it comes to relationships among humans and nonhumans (p. 1, p. 7). The idea of "Nature" that Morton wants to remove from ecocritical analysis, and from the idea of environmental art, relates to the concept of the transcendental masked in the material (p. 14). This "Nature" somehow stands for both the will behind what happens in the natural world and the natural world itself. In other words, "Nature" is the abstract concept of a nonhuman world that exists beyond the so-called human world yet attempts to dialogue with humanity on certain occasions such as extreme weather events or camping trips. In his book, Morton traces many philosophical theories and aesthetic positions regarding this human/nonhuman dualism fallacy and often argues that one cannot view the natural world from the outside because everything interconnects; everything is already everywhere. There is no natural world, there is only the world, as such: "To write about ecology is to write about society" (p. 17). Therefore, "Nature" becomes a slippery, fantastic, and ironic term for artistic representations of what it supposedly connotes, and for analyses of it as a concept.

In some ways, this question of how humans can be exceptional while also joining nonhumans as part of "Nature", is one of the fundamental questions that had great thinkers like Descartes and Kant struggling during the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. This struggle to see humans as both inside and outside the natural world was a struggle for "the conciliation of causality, needed for science, with free will, needed for ethics" (Eichner, 1982, p. 13). Descartes and Kant's inability to satisfactorily explain and justify human free will while simultaneously emphasizing mechanical materiality eventually led to the birth of Romanticism (p. 14). Human free will and subjectivity are closely linked, and

Veiravé shows the inherent irony in human subjectivity and its representation of “Nature” in his way of playing with the often-ambiguous distinction between the human and the nonhuman. As noted above, *Historia natural* blurs these differences in part through a parody of scientific discourse. Primarily, Veiravé formulates his book of poetry within the guise of a natural history—a document supposedly dedicated to an objective observation of the natural world. He uses his palimpsestic “transparencias” to evoke various facts of history, art, science, daily life, and current events alongside and connected to the speaker’s observation of nonhumans, thereby actively confusing the parameters of what constitutes “Nature”. In this way he also signals, through a certain level of meta-representation, the impossibility of perfect human objectivity regarding nonhumans.

The opening lines of “El Zamuu,” from *Historia natural*, demonstrate Veiravé’s layered poetics:

La forma del Zamuu es tan ridícula como su nombre  
dice Dobrizhoffer del palo borracho, o palo ebrio según los  
españoles de la Real Academia [...] (p. 47)

The speaker’s tone comes across as observational, academic, and, at the same time, ironic. He appeals to a natural historian, Martin Dobrizhoffer, but not for the scholar’s objective assessment; rather the speaker cites the scholar’s value judgement of both the tree and the indigenous name for it. He then references the well-known and authoritative Real Academia at the same time that he points out the irony of the Spanish name for the tree. Both of these references to allegedly objective authority are underlying texts in the poem’s layers. Further along in the poem the underlying texts switch from scientific references to allusions to an Italian *vedette*, Indigenous culture, and ancient Roman poetry, to name a few of his sources of inspiration. Eventually the speaker utilizes his own discourse about the tree as an underlying text over which he writes to his lover, comparing her unfavorably to it (p. 48). Veiravé organizes this and other poems in *Historia natural* as objective encyclopedic entries in a natural history, but through his “transparencias” he reveals how human subjectivity problematizes our relationships with the nonhuman world.

Bruno Latour (2004) refers to the impossibility of attaining a perfectly objective perspective when he compares the platonic myth of the cave with the politicization of the relationship between science and humanity—a process that turns “the sciences” into “Science”. That is, the sciences are pathways for earnest and curious engagement with the natural world whereas Science is “the politicization of the sciences through epistemology in order to render ordinary political life impotent through the threat of an incontestable nature” (p. 10). The Scientists are those who say that they can leave the cave and objectively observe what is real and true about life, outside of the influence of culture or society. Thus, the statements of Science are supposed to be apolitical, even if the statements have political implications. The “slaves”, who are not Scientists, are tied to a continual debate regarding the subjective truth of their shadows forever unless they accept the ultimate truth from the mouth and hands of the Scientists (Latour, 2004, p. 10-14). Latour does not broadly discount the sciences nor the possibility of an absolute truth; rather, he sees the supposed distinction between humans and

nonhumans as fundamentally untenable. There is no distinct binary tension between the two but rather a dynamic "collective": "We are not dealing with a society 'threatened' by recourse to an objective nature, but with a collective *in the process of expanding*: the properties of human beings and nonhumans with which it has to come to terms are in no way assured" (p. 38). To diversify meanings of truth, Latour asks that humans come together with the nonhumans in a "collective" (p. 29, p. 37). *Historia natural* reaffirms this collective character of human-nonhuman interrelationships by denying the singular and personalized "Nature" for the plural and heterogeneous "natures". Scientists do not have a monopoly on objective privilege because there is no platonic "cave," and there are no clear candidates for non-Scientist "slaves" who create reality from their own shadow theories. Basically, as Latour explains, in order to avoid scientific exceptionalism as such and, in turn, the continual but artificial separation of humankind from the natural world, our questioning of human subjectivity must necessarily continue.

According to Latour, Science's aspiration to "pure objectivity" in its understanding of "Nature" must be replaced by a multivocal dialogue regarding a multiplicity of "natures". To pursue this collaboration could change separate and distinct perspectives on natures into "associations" of mind and matter (p. 37, p. 71-73). Veiravé's poetry similarly acknowledges what he calls "asociaciones interminables" among many and apparently disparate concrete and abstract things. Veiravé's organization of *Historia natural*, as we will see, gives his speaker the perspective of a natural historian, and in doing so he formulates the question of human subjectivity's authority over nonhumans as a study in both imagination and observation. And it is through observation that the speaker reveals Veiravé's eco-poetic "asociaciones".

Arguably, changing how one views one's place in the natural world could be a consequence of what a contemporary natural history writer does. She places herself in a natural environment, without completely losing her subjectivity, and she uses her creativity to record her observations with regard to the various actors of the corresponding space and thus interacts with the multifarious environment. In this way, naturalist discourse does not claim to be completely objective nor purely scientific. The natural historian takes detailed observations, makes objective calculations and explanatory conjectures regarding what she is observing.<sup>4</sup> This model is patterned after the environmentally embedded naturalist methodology established by such figures as Alexander von Humboldt and Charles Darwin.<sup>5</sup> Such a basic model for a modern natural history does not, however, serve as the parodied discourse upon which Veiravé overlays his "transparencias", though *Historia natural* alludes to some of the tenets of the modern natural history monograph. For instance, the poem "Consideraciones sobre las oscuras golondrinas", more closely parodies a combination of those classic and early modern natural histories that came to form the underlying base of modern natural histories (Principe, 2011, p. 108). Mariela Blanco's (2011) critique of *Historia*

<sup>4</sup> Some examples of contemporary naturalists are Annie Dillard (1974) with her famous *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and Aldo Leopold (1949) with *A Sand County Almanac*.

<sup>5</sup> Several good examples of this are the relatively dated *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) by Darwin or the more contemporary *Journey to the Ants* (1994) by Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson.



*natural* refers to the relationship that Veiravé posits between poetry and science as a way of demonstrating “la confluencia de elementos naturales en contextos ajenos”. She qualifies the *poemario*, however, as possibly in line with magical realism because of their mutual roots in surrealism (p. 187). Her observations of the parallels between the everyday magic in mixing the real and surreal and the “asociaciones” that Veiravé makes evolve into an analysis of how science gives the poet a “punto de partida” for his poetry, inspiring him to see the world with new eyes (Blanco, 2011, p. 195). Precisely, the natural histories that Veiravé parodies represent the origins and the “modern” revolutions in how we observe and represent the nonhuman world. In this way Veiravé reminds his readers of the discursive similarities and dissimilarities between human subjectivities as far as “Nature” is concerned that have guided us to the current ecological debates.

From the very beginning of *Historia natural*, there is a clear connection between Veiravé’s book and an earlier natural history, Spanish Jesuit José Jolís’ *Ensayo sobre la historia natural del Gran Chaco* (1789). As a sort of epigraph for the entire book, and even before the title page, Veiravé alludes directly to Jolís’ work: “Historia natural y moral del Gran Chaco y de otros reynos / que trata de las cosas del cielo y de la tierra / animales / plantas / móviles / costumbres / museos / máquinas / y otros *objetos imaginarios*” (the forward slashes are in the original, the italics are mine).<sup>6</sup> The epigraph clearly parrots the title of one of the first and most recognized natural histories to come out of the New World: José de Acosta’s 1590 publication, *Historia natural y moral de las indias* (1590/2008).<sup>7</sup> By substituting “indias” with “Gran Chaco”, however, Veiravé indicates that his book of poetry is to be read as a natural history connected directly with Jolís’. With this pseudo epigraph, Veiravé makes it apparent from the beginning of *Historia natural* that this “natural history” is more than slightly ironic by including everything from “animales” to “máquinas” and “objetos imaginarios”. Progressing increasingly along a gradient from the natural to the imaginary, this brief introductory phrase sets the iconoclastic tone of the tome: a natural history, for the author of *Historia natural* includes all that is natural and artificial or “imaginario”. This epigraph is not the only intertextual link, however, between Veiravé’s book and that of Jolís’. At the beginning of the second section of *Historia natural*, “Libro II”, Veiravé includes a direct quote from Jolís’ work, and in several of the poems, the poet refers directly or indirectly to the latter’s study of the region and to the scholar himself. Veiravé’s interest in linking his poetry with this eighteenth-century manuscript can be read as a sign that the poet understands the geo-biographic importance of a natural history as well as the episteme that Jolís’ work reflects as a product of human subjectivity in the years of the Enlightenment after the Scientific Revolution—a time in which “Science” had already begun to come out of Latour’s platonic cave (Cohen, 1994, p. 22-23).

Though Argentina was still a few decades away from independence when Jolís originally wrote and published his study in 1789, it took more than two

<sup>6</sup> For reasons unknown to the author of this article, the inclusion of this epigraph is left out of the version of *Historia natural* in Veiravé’s *Obra poética* (2002).

<sup>7</sup> The full title of Acosta’s work also suggests that Veiravé used it to form his own: *Historia natural y moral de las indias: En que se tratan de las cosas notables del cielo / elementos / metales / plantas y animales dellas / y los ritos / y ceremonias / leyes y gobierno*.

hundred years for his work to be translated from Italian into Spanish in 1972—something that might have contributed to its absence in many canons related to Latin American natural histories (Maeder, 1972). Fortuitously, at the time of the Spanish translation’s publication, Veiravé worked for Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, which financed and published the book (Maeder, 1972, p. 27). Veiravé published *Historia natural* shortly thereafter in 1980 and so his allusions to an old work, as is Jolís’ study, are also allusions to a rather new work because of the contemporary translation date. Even though Jolís’ *Ensayo sobre la historia natural del Gran Chaco* most likely continues to be an obscure work for the reader of Veiravé’s poetry, one can still analyze its role in relation to *Historia natural* as a text that paradoxically links the poet to a specific region while it also distances him from that same place. That is, the Jesuit’s text vindicates the native peoples’ culture and history, in addition to promoting the utility and beauty of the region’s landscapes and climates, but it also represents a colonial or even neocolonial, and therefore non-native, voice and knowledge (Maeder, 1972, p. 20-23). In effect, Veiravé’s *Historia natural* is a reading of scientific and humanistic discourse as well as a reading of the colonial perspective of Spanish American nature.

To complicate a reading of Jolís’ text even further, his voice and perspective are not only non-native, but they also come out of a period in which the Enlightenment was already well developed and the Scientific Revolution was beginning to affect the worldview of those seeking empirical knowledge and truth. The text is contemporary with those written in the time between the publishing of seminal works by important figures such as Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin.<sup>8</sup> By his own account, Jolís (1789/1972) sees fit to demonstrate that he did not intend to write a natural history from the stance of a “trained” naturalist. He writes, rather, as an astute observer and readily admits his lack of qualifications for the task (p. 90). In place of professional qualifications, Jolís emphasizes his dedication to detail in his observation of the natural world. Indeed, Veiravé quotes this confession of ignorance as the epigraph of “Libro II” in *Historia natural* (p. 33). Because of his lack of education and time, Jolís (1789/1972) believes that he cannot publish “una Historia Natural exacta y curiosa con términos técnicos y frases grecolatinas al gusto de los modernos Naturalistas” (p. 90). His confession is understandable when we consider the context within which he was working. In contrast to the seventeenth-century studies that based themselves on “affective interpretation of metaphysical experience”, Jolís’s study was to be compared to fellow Jesuit studies of his time that “were based on a new-found faith in scientific facts and objectivity” (Huffine, 2005, p. 282). Notably, the idea that one can write an “exact” natural history most likely comes from the influence of figures from the Scientific Revolution such as Carl Linnaeus—as Jolís (1789/1972) himself points out (p. 90)—and from the Enlightenment, such as Francis Bacon. Bacon encouraged experimental investigation through the newly formed scientific method and promoted ideas that submit the natural world to human domination as

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<sup>8</sup> If one considers Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* published in 1687 and Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life* published in 1859 as their most important works, Jolís’ natural history published in 1789 falls nearly equidistantly between them.

a means to understanding it (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002, p. 2). The baconian ideal of putting the human mind over all other matter only isolates humans from nonhumans, paradoxically impeding human desire to understand the nonhuman.

Though Jolís cannot provide an “exact” natural history, he finds it necessary to write in dialogue and dispute with other natural histories that cover the same territory, including the aforementioned Acosta natural history, in order to confirm or correct the “truth” of their accounts (Maeder, 1972, p. 21-23). His study works as a clarification of the human perspective of nature, in a determined geographic location, and so his most convincing claim to scholarly authority relies on the fact of his physical presence in the environment he is studying. Being physically present, something that was not absolutely necessary for someone to write a natural history of a place during his time—Georges Louis LeClerc Comte de Buffon provides one of the best examples of a practitioner of this sort of distance study—allows him to be an eyewitness to Argentine nature’s beauty and utility (Gerbi, 1973, p. 218-219). In other words, he makes a claim about the value of environmentally embedded knowledge. On the other hand, he recognizes the limitations of his knowledge and appeals to second-hand sources to fill in the gaps that his empirical knowledge cannot cover. According to Ernesto Maeder (1972), author of the introduction to the 1972 edition of Jolís’ study, his references to historians are the weakest parts of his work because they reveal his mistakes and the limits to his knowledge (p. 23-24). While his scholarship proves instantly verifiable for anyone who has access to the same sources, his naturalist work carries more validity because its *ethos* is based on environmentally embedded, and therefore empirical, knowledge, which remains unverifiable to the average reader. This privileged perspective notwithstanding, he was still a European voice writing for a European readership.

Combining local, physical knowledge with global, more abstract knowledge in a unified argument communicates a way for humans to connect with nonhumans without losing their humanness. Jolís’ refutation of faulty and “absent” scholarship and confirmation of more mindful scholarship regarding New World natural history suggests a human quality of making abstract meaning out experiencing the material world: in other words, *poiesis*. Veiravé addresses this paradox of an environmentally embedded yet abstract perspective in *Historia natural*, in part through his “asociaciones interminables.” There are poems, for example, that are dedicated to plants and animals native to the Chaco region, like the previously discussed “El Zamuu”, and that refer to Chinese legends, like “El sapo”, to Greek epics, like “Ybirapitá”, and French symbolist poets, like “Mallarmé”. Indeed, Claudia Rosa (2018) distinguishes *Historia natural* as a pivotal point in Veiravé’s *oeuvre* where two poetics emerged to forever converge: the “totalizante” and the celebratory of “lo pequeño, lo casual, lo anecdótico”. These poetics “buscan precisar o definir la imagen del yo en el cosmos, la relación entre lo cotidiano, los sucesos y eventos inmediatos, y aquellos de tiempo largo, históricos” (p. 406). The poem “Hieronimus Bosch”, for example, displays Veiravé’s ability to juxtapose such things as the frequent floods of his resident city of Resistencia, Argentina, and a copy of the well-known painting *Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronimus Bosch in his home. The speaker of the poem recognizes the incommensurability between a

European sensibility and the American reality:

Cómo no se va a asustar aquí un pintor flamenco de estos  
cambios de la realidad si su fantasía sólo sabe engendrar  
maquinarias de monstruos devoradores europeos, un bestiario  
de símbolos carnales en la aldea de Heterogenbosch! (p. 51)

Intentionally anachronistic, Veiravé’s poetic voice compares Bosch’s fantasy and his transitioning worldview—from Medieval to Renaissance—to the reality of the New World nature of the twentieth century. There is a hard line between abstract and concrete knowledge that even the vibrant imagination of Bosch or any other absent European cannot cross. *Historia natural*’s close connection with Jolís’ text supports this concept because of the Jesuit’s insistence on his environmentally embedded knowledge.

Notwithstanding Jolís’ empirical *ethos* and recognition of autochthonous and therefore environmentally embedded knowledge’s importance by using it throughout his work as a way to certify his own observations, he retains his non-native perspective regarding the Chaco environment. In essence, he appeals to the Enlightenment canon of texts so as to authorize his own claims. The fact that he combines contemporary academic texts together with more ancient texts considered academic in their time makes sense when one considers that Jolís was writing during a transitional moment in the history of natural histories. Tellingly, one of the ancient texts to which Jolís (1789/1972) repeatedly refers is one of the oldest natural histories—Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia* from first-century Rome—to confirm his conjectures based on his observations (p. 121, p. 212, p. 225). Nevertheless, as he does with more contemporary texts, Jolís tempers his references to Pliny’s work with clarifications and refutations of the Roman’s obsolete observations. In other words, though *Naturalis Historia* is a product of the ancient world, the Spanish Jesuit, a son of the Enlightenment, feels obligated to measure himself and his work against that of Pliny. Ironically, Veiravé makes a similar move by including Pliny’s text as one more discursive layer in his “transparencias.” *Historia natural* alludes to *Naturalis Historia* in direct references, in how Veiravé structures the poems as encyclopedic entries, and in its diversity of what Pliny deems as “natural” topics.

Veiravé’s *Historia natural*, Jolís’ *Ensayo sobre la historia natural del Gran Chaco* and Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* are each divided up into encyclopedic “Books” that cover either a single subject or multiple topics related to what is “natural”. In the case of Veiravé and Pliny, the “natural” includes not only plants, nonhuman animals, and humans but also art. As if to confirm a mutual agreement regarding this expanding sense of what is “natural”, Veiravé includes Pliny’s own words, translated into Spanish, in an epigraph of “Libro IV” in *Historia natural*:

En efecto, ellos [los libros de la obra] no son dignos de tu genio (que en mí es en extremo insignificante) y no contienen ni digresiones, ni discursos o diálogos, ni sucesos maravillosos o aventuras variadas, todas cosas agradables de escribir, atrayentes para los lectores, ya que el asunto que yo trato es árido: se trata de la naturaleza de las cosas, es decir, la *vida*. (p. 65, emphasis mine)

In her reading of this and similar statements from *Naturalis Historia*, Sorcha Carey (2006) points out that according to Pliny, “Natural history” includes all points and aspects of *life*, and so it includes all that exists in the world (p. 17-18). But, of course, Pliny’s world was systematically anthropocentric, placing humankind (more specifically: mankind) at the center of the world and the world at the center of the cosmos that rotates around it. “Nature” according to Pliny, however, exists as the “other”, though it is an “other” that has made humans and nonhumans alike (Carey, 2006, p. 133-135). Thus, paradoxically, “Nature” is both the creator and the created; all that is “Nature” is life.

To a contemporary reader, *Naturalis Historia* does not qualify as a strictly scientific text by any stretch of the imagination. Though built on the careful observations of its author, it bases much of its conclusions on the texts of others, similarly to how Jolís’ study operates. Both Pliny and Jolís refer to nameless Greek and Roman authors to establish their own *logos* and to demonstrate the superiority of their own texts via their bibliography, as it were (Carey, 2006, p. 23-24). Though one cannot qualify Pliny’s work as scientific by today’s standards, it does “converge with its twentieth-century descendants [...] in its concern with totality” (Carey, 2006, p. 17). It handles such totality by way of categorizing it, much like the way that biological sciences categorize the study of life into specializations such as entomology, mammalogy, botany, and ecology. As we have already observed, *Historia natural* also follows this pattern of organization by categorization. The poems do not explicitly indicate any one theme necessarily, but they do suggest a theme to the degree that they indicate to what “Libro” in the book of poems they belong. That is, the “Libros” are divided thematically into “animals”, “plants”, “art/culture”, and poetry successively, as their poems indicate. In this way, the structure of *Historia natural* functions even more as a parody of natural history’s categorization of the natural and artificial world. As Rosa puts it: “*Historia natural* contiene un museo de ciencias naturales imposible [...]. Es una recolección absurda” (p. 408-409). Titles of certain poems appear to be titles of an entry from a natural history but their contents betray this expectation. “Filodendros” is a poem as much about its ornamental plant namesake as *Don Quijote* is about the madness of creating everyday casual encounters with a love interest. This relationship between title and poem parallels the relationship between the book’s title and its poems. Blanco finds that the poems in *Historia natural* begin with scientific discourse that comes up short and must appeal to humanistic discourse “para llenar este vacío”, which then creates a “mirada alternativa al ámbito de la ciencia” (p. 189). Within this parodic structure Veiravé (1975/2002) links his poems and his “asociaciones interminables” in a “sistema”, as he likes to refer to the structure of his books of poetry. He reinforces and emphasizes the irony that he reveals through his poetry (p. 9).

Veiravé’s “asociaciones interminables” include humans and nonhumans, though the Argentine goes further, as we have discussed, including not only “natural” things but “artificial” things, those made by human hands and ingenuity, in this system. Works of art and household appliances, musical compositions, an overcoat or a photograph can all be connected in this system. Nevertheless, the “asociaciones” that Veiravé makes do not come in random fashion in his poetry; rather he offers them as ways to unite diverse perspectives by way of an idea or a

subject. The poems in *Historia natural* that present irony and diverse perspectives most effectively are those that maintain the book's irony by juxtaposing representations of "Nature" from artistic and scientific points of view. With these juxtapositions the poems reconceptualize the homogenous "Nature" as the heterogeneous, and politically messy "natures" that we discussed earlier in our reading of Latour (p. 29). For example, the poem "Consideraciones sobre las oscuras golondrinas" takes the discourse of the naturalist, Len Howard, regarding the migrations of swallows and weaves it together ironically with the classic Spanish poet, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's famous poem, "Rima LIII"—the same nostalgic poem to which Veiravé (2002) alludes in "Poema con color local" (p. 83). Both Howard's work and Bécquer's poem have the bird in common and so the connections that the speaker makes come across as one unit. Veiravé makes these associations somewhat seamlessly, though the discourses are separated into the two stanzas of the poem:

Miss Len Howard ha descubierto que las golondrinas emigran  
 de un almendro del valle de Sussex a un campanario  
 de un pueblito de Corrientes,  
 del estado de Minnesota a la casa del Greco  
 en Toledo,  
 que avanzan por un deseo de orientación inexplicable  
 y en cada una de las estaciones desovan, nos envían  
 postales desde Brujas, evocan  
 distintos lugares y después  
 naturalmente  
 se transforman en recuerdos o fantasías eróticas.

Inexplicablemente algunos enamorados se apoyan en el balcón  
 y se preguntan siempre de la misma manera:  
 volverán las oscuras golondrinas? (p. 23)

The connection between what Howard has "descubierto" and Bécquer's elocutions over a lamented love trace a gradual path through the poem but, in the reader's hindsight, the speaker gives clues to this connection along the way. And looking at the entire poem at once, we see that in the beginning of the poem the "golondrinas" are literal, but by the end of the poem they are figurative. The crucial turn in this change in discourse occurs in line eight, the first line in the second half of the poem where the speaker personifies the swallows, having them send postcards. Including himself and an interlocutor as connected to the swallows, his tone becomes subjective, but only for a moment. This purposefully brief inclusion of himself in the poem serves as a pivot point for the gradual change of discourse. Ironically, with the exception of this subjective pivot point, though the discourse changes from scientific to artistic, the objective tone of the poetic voice does not change. Making such a gradual transition the poem makes a strong connection between the literal and the figurative because it effaces the supposed hard line between the two. To make this transition, the speaker combines his reading of two texts and, in this way the poem forms a metatext. The speaker "reads" the natural world via others' readings of the same and the poem, then, depends on the reader's reading of the speaker's "reading". Again, the texts or discourses at the extreme

ends of the poem are two supposedly opposite perspectives on truth. The first verse points directly to scientific discourse by mentioning Howard and by highlighting the idea of discovery. To point to Bécquer, and therefore artistic or humanistic discourse, in the last verse, however, the speaker directly alludes to the Spaniard's famous first verse from "Rima LIII" (1868/1977).

That Veiravé has singled out Howard is significant when we consider her famously eccentric methods of observation. She considered each bird as an individual, and she carried out this sort of offer of subjectivity whilst living with the birds in her "Bird Cottage," as her home became known (Crist, 2006, p. 181). Her method of understanding "Nature" as "natures" was to try to erase any artificial border between humans and nonhumans. In the poem, the speaker's reference to Howard is also a reference to her attempt to become like a bird or vice-versa. Her desire to erase the line between human and nonhuman creates birds that, by the end of the first stanza, lose their individuality and become abstract as memories or erotic fantasies. It is as if by treating the birds as equals, Howard has driven them off, instead of bringing them closer.

In place of the birds as the focus of human subjectivity, as is the case with Howard, Bécquer's focus comes from humanity itself. Although the swallows symbolize lost love or regret, and in this way, they do not seem to get beyond the metaphor, Veiravé's speaker bases Bécquer's speaker's preoccupation with the swallows' return on the same natural mystery that Howard also determines to clarify: a swallow's migration pattern. Within the lines of the poem, the words that point us to this mystery are "inexplicable" (line 6) and, nearly the same, "Inexplicablemente" (line 12). The former pertains to the birds, the latter to the lovers contemplating the birds. Here the irony is clear: the naturalist and the poet are both unable to represent a human-nonhuman mystery. In the case of Howard, the birds are treated like humans in order to bring them closer to us, and therefore understand them, and in the other case they are used to help understand the passage of time and the corresponding loss of human love.

In "Hormigas", another poem from "Libro II" in *Historia natural*, we can see another demonstration of the human comprehension of the nonhuman irony between scientific and poetic representations of "Nature" (p. 27). Its title gives it a simple, encyclopedic air and shows how this poem functions under the natural history parody paradigm of categorization. Basically, the poem presents itself as part of an unnatural history of ants in which the speaker tries to explain why the ants do not suffer from loneliness:

Delicadamente transportan grandes piedras para  
las pirámides de los faraones  
apenas se tocan desde lejos  
con las antenas versátiles  
tristemente ignoran el sentimiento de los  
amantes separados en los aeropuertos  
y tampoco nada sintieron dentro del hormiguero  
cuando la noticia de la muerte de Chaplin  
recorrió el mundo en su silla de ruedas.

Según los especialistas de ciencias naturales  
 toda esa soledad de las hormigas no se siente  
 simplemente  
 porque no se acoplan porque sus huevos  
 son fórmulas del anonimato,  
 y porque de la lluvia sólo sienten sustancias líquidas  
 no sus nostalgias y eso  
 les impide silbar un viejo bolero de Armando Manzanero.

Divided into two long sentences separated into two stanzas, “Hormigas” offers a study in contrasts. We can interpret the “asociaciones” game from the first stanza as an ambiguous way to initiate a juxtaposition of the differences and similarities between the speaker’s subjectivity and what he perceives as a scientist’s objectivity. The speaker interprets his “investigation” of ants from the same motivational standpoint as an “objective” scientist. They both want to know why the ants are not like humans and why humans are not like ants.

The way to express this curiosity is through the “asociaciones interminables” that come in commingled metaphors. In this way, images of pyramids, airports, and Charlie Chaplin come together with “antenas versátiles” and an ant hill to draw a representation that puts the actual focus of the poem under doubt. Is “Hormigas” about ants or about humans? Effectively, it is either an exercise in exaggerated anthropomorphism or a drawn-out way of indicating a group of people who seem like ants—or neither of the two. This ambiguity prepares the irony of the second stanza and the clear reference to the limits of scientific knowledge when it comes to the “why” regarding the loneliness of ants. Even if the explanations for why the ants lack emotions seem logical, the conclusion mocks the possibility of making such a conjecture based on scientific observations, seeing as how emotion is too abstract to quantify. Thus, the word “simplemente” augments this mockery and ironizes a scientist’s work. Indeed, all of the poem’s irony and power rest upon the banal and common-sounding phrase that comes at the beginning of the second half of the poem: “Según los especialistas de ciencias naturales”. Without mentioning the supposed source of authority over the natural world, the poem would maintain its humor, but would simply be a long list of metaphors that describe the communitarian life of ants.

Veiravé does not try to offer a “correct” perspective regarding the natural world in either “Hormigas” or “Consideraciones sobre las oscuras golondrinas”. Put another way, if we consider ecocritic Jonathan Bate’s (2000) words, these poems are not ecopolitical but eco-poetic (p. 42). They are not normative nor didactic. If they affect our perspective, their influence is more akin to what Octavio Paz (1990) suggests in *La otra voz: Poesía y fin de siglo*: “Ante la cuestión de la supervivencia del género humano en una tierra envenenada y asolada, la respuesta no puede ser distinta. Su influencia sería indirecta: sugerir, inspirar e insinuar. No demostrar sino mostrar” (p. 137). One could claim that *Historia natural*, in its totality as part of a “sistema,” works in the same way. Its structure—beginning with its title, its epigraph, and its literary and cultural allusions—invites the reader to contemplate his or her own natural worldview with irony and circumspection. By way of the “asociaciones interminables” that he makes, Veiravé links both concrete and



abstract things of the world—including all of humanity—in order to blur the traditional divisions that have existed between them. This blurring is why the description of a whale’s skeleton can be put in the position of supporting a lover’s blue-jeaned legs in “Apología de la ballena”, and a quote from a “novela de la tierra”, *La vorágine* (Rivera, 1924/1985), mingles with biology, the “agrimensores kafkianos,” ants, linguistics, and metapoetry in “Naturaleza y tratado de la antropofagia”. *Historia natural*, though, does not represent Veiravé’s only foray into making interconnections that reveal the ironies and tragedies inherent in modern and postmodern views of the natural world. Therefore, more studies of Veiravé’s poetry can further solidify his place in a group of poets that includes such names as José Emilio Pacheco, Nicanor Parra, Pablo Neruda, Antonio Cisneros, and Ernesto Cardenal, whose work has already provided ecocritics with a distinctive Spanish American and contemporary view of human-nonhuman relationships. Together with these poets, Veiravé would likely agree that nature is not “Nature” because, as Latour indicates, it is a multitude of “natures” that are each linked intimately, whether it be emotionally, physically and culturally. Ultimately, however, as humans we cannot abstain from human subjectivity when we are poetizing the interrelationships among ourselves and nonhumans.

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