



Hipertexto 8
Verano 2008
pp. 99-104

**Blasco Ibáñez and Animal Portrayals:
An Attempt at Societal Reformation**

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Hipertexto

The primary critical analysis of Vicente Blasco Ibáñez revolves around a turn-of-the-century collection of novels commonly referred to as the Valencian cycle, six different novels written between 1894 and 1902, which has as a central theme Valencia, Spain. Vicente Blasco Ibáñez is considered Valencia's favorite son and enjoys great popularity there to this day in spite of the fact that his treatment of the area reveals its ignorance, vices and brutalities. The seeming emphasis placed upon these different elements has been one of the causes for the critical world's association of Naturalism to these novels.

Naturalism, a late nineteenth-century literary movement, evolved out of the earlier literary movement of Realism as a result of the studies by Darwin, the philosophy of Comte, and the sociological impacts of the Industrial Revolution. These novelists' works purportedly "objectively" examined life without the interference of authorial directives guiding the plot to its ultimate denouement in a literary experiment influenced by the scientific method; in reality, however, most of these writers—and particularly, Blasco Ibáñez—ultimately produced literature of social protest employing an animalization of the characters in an attempt to reform societal customs and mores. In fact, many of this Spaniard's novels and short stories most frequently cited as prime examples of Naturalism are also occasionally hailed as exemplary novels of social protest.

In this essay, I will examine one of the author's short stories, "Las plumas del caburé" ("The Feathers of the Pgy-my-Owl") from the collection *El préstamo de la difunta y otros cuentos* (1921, *The Loan of the Dead One and Other Stories*), in an analysis of the manner in which Blasco Ibáñez attempts to affect societal change by using mythological and contemporary views of animals to variously vilify or glorify

humans associated with those animals. Although this short story focuses on the supposed powers of rendering invincible the person who bears feathers from the *caburé*, references to other talismans and animals do occur in the narrative. That is, my thesis is that Blasco Ibáñez uses stories about animals and their characteristics to personify and attempt to change the society of his day, and, consequently, they contain more art and artifice than have been recognized heretofore.

In order to better understand my argument, a review of the basic plot summary of the story—thereby providing the necessary context for an analysis of the narrative—in is order. Two friends, Jaramillo and Morales, flee to Paraguay after having killed members of the ruling Argentine political party. Jaramillo discovers that a German scientist has captured a *caburé* for research purposes, and he manages to pluck three of its feathers. The powers of invincibility arising from this acquisition, which seem to empower Jaramillo, lead him to become so arrogant that one day he leaves the talisman on the river shore, goes for another of his frequent swims in the crocodile-infested waters, and is promptly eaten by the feared 400-year-old caiman. Morales, witnessing this, picks up the talisman and hangs it around his neck. He, too, becomes overconfident with his new-found powers: Political winds change; he goes back to Argentina a hero, obtains a position as a policeman, and soon becomes the talk of the nation because of his law-enforcement abilities. One day a long-lost *gringo* acquaintance shows up in town; he and Morales remember their separation years before on bad terms, and angry sparks start to fly. Morales brags about his exploits, hands the *gringo* his own pistol, and orders the *gringo* to shoot him, insisting that the talisman renders him invincible. Morales finally angers the *gringo* to action:

“¡Ya que lo quieres!...”

Y el *gringo* apretó los dos gatillos al mismo tiempo.

Una nube blanca se extendió ante sus ojos.

Al disolverse el humo y extinguirse el doble trueno, vio a Morales tendido a sus pies.

Tenía los brazos abiertos, el pecho destrozado y una sonrisa helada, de soberbia confianza, de fe inmovible, que iba a ser el último de sus gestos. (1562)

This brief review of the plot makes apparent, even on a superficial level, the high level of social criticism which the author is undertaking: The main characters, Jaramillo and Morales, both suffer from the fatal flaw of pride and live in accordance with unscientific-based superstitions, both are from the impoverished stratum of society, and both perish in a sudden and violent death.

Along with this marked emphasis on the description of life, and death, of the lower classes of society, is the common Naturalist technique of dehumanization, and in particular, portrayal of humans via animal imagery. Jerry Nash notes that, in general, “man is capable of participating in both the spiritual and the material orders of existence, with the possibility of greater participation in either. When man yields to his animal nature, he will degenerate to bestiality” (79). Paralleling this comment, and in specific reference to Blasco Ibáñez, Vernon Chamberlin notes in a very detailed analysis of animal imagery of Blasco Ibáñez’s *La barraca* that animal portrayals help to “ilustrar, poner en relieve y reforzar el tema y la tesis de la novela” (24). And Jeremy

Medina explains that the animalization (dehumanization) in Blasco Ibáñez's works has as a common purpose "to emphasize man's similarity to the brute force and primitive irrationality of animals, to demonstrate that the pressures of environment and heredity have reduced man to a sub-human level" (204). In a similar fashion, animals do play an important role in "Las plumas del caburé," and the association of animal characteristics/attributes to humans has as a major function that of social commentary, and hoped-for social reformation.

The most important animal in "Las plumas del caburé" is the title character, the *caburé*. This bird drives fear in the heart of all others, both man and beast: "Todas las bestias, las que vuelan, las que corren y las que se arrastran, se echaban a temblar cuando oían este alarido [del caburé]" (1553). The physical aspect of the bird is described in the following manner:

Tenía por armas su pico, un terrible pico fuerte como el acero mejor templado, y una infernal mala intención. Allí donde clavaba su arma abría orificio, y el golpe iba dirigido siempre a la cabeza del adversario, devorando inmediatamente su cerebro al descubierto. No había cráneo que pudiera resistir a sus perseverantes picotazos, iguales a golpes de barreno. Atacaba al toro, al tigre, al caimán blindado de planchas duras como un navío de guerra. Este volátil pequeño y de malicia diabólica era el caburé. (1553)

Later in the story the bird is called "una especie de mochuelo diminuto, de pico breve y encorvado. [...] Los ojos redondos del animal, unos ojos de oro con una cuenta negra en el centro, contemplaron al hombre ferozmente" (1556). "Mochuelo," or "little owl" also carries a stronger connotation in Spanish; in fact, the word is quite commonly used as a synonym for an "asunto difícil o enojoso" (*Sopena*), while another notes that "Cargar con el mochuelo" or "tocar el mochuelo" is equivalent to the English "to get the worst of a deal" (*Amsco*), certainly what happens to its victim. Roger Moore, as well, notes that another Spanish Naturalist author, Concha Espina, uses a related bird, the *nétiagua*, as "a bird of ill omen that foretells both death and misfortune. It is symbolic of witches and of witchcraft, and the actions of many of the evil characters can be associated with the bird's folkloric malevolence" (28).

Federico Achaval, a zoology instructor at the Universidad de la República, Montevideo, Uruguay, tells us on his "Aves del Uruguay" website that the *caburé* is, in fact the *Glacidium brasilianum brasilianum*, commonly known as the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl ("The Owl Pages"). Interestingly, the owl, in traditional western mythology has been associated with Athena, and wisdom, and it is the brain of its victim that the bird attacks, at least in this story. Additionally, it should be remembered that "In the Egyptian system of hieroglyphs, the owl symbolizes death, night, cold and passivity. It also pertains to the realm of the dead sun, that is, of the sun which has set below the horizon and which is crossing the lake or sea of darkness" (Cirlot 247). Through this one animal, then, Blasco Ibáñez is able to combine various mythological traditions while implying that the powers deriving from possession of the bird's feathers may, in fact, only "be in one's head."

At the same time, these talisman powers owe much to the ideas and superstitions rampant in the head of the narrative's characters. That is, superstitions

do play a major role in “Las plumas del caburé”; and the social commentary which the author is attacking most does seem to be superstitions. Much attention is paid to *curanderos* and their magical powers:

“Yo le [Jaramillo’s father] vi,” decía Morales con respeto, “curar a los enfermos en menos que se reza un credo. Les chupaba la parte enferma o ponía la boca en su boca, aspirando su aliento. Luego escupía un gusano, una piedra, una culebra pequeña o una araña. Era la enfermedad que acababa de sacarles del cuerpo... Algunos se morían; pero era porque les faltaba paciencia para esperar la curación y llamaban al médico.” (1555)

Jaramillo is “hijo de un brujo y había heredado muchos de los secretos paternos” (1553), but even that does not thwart his succumbing to very human foibles; i.e., becoming arrogant and domineering.

Even before Jaramillo’s plucking feathers from the *caburé*, the reader sees the two friends as having a strong belief in superstitious powers: In the failed coup, “‘No gastes tus cartuchos, hermano,’ continuó Jaramillo, con una expresión fatalista. ‘Ese hombre posee un talismán, un *payé* que le hace invulnerable como el diablo...’” (1552). When Morales is arrested for killing his opponent in a duel, “encontraron que debajo de sus ropas llevaba el cuerpo cubierto de plumas de avestruz. Jaramillo hacía lo mismo. Era un secreto de su padre el brujo; el mejor medio para vencer en agilidad a los enemigos” (1554). And, “Únicamente se puede revelar el secreto [to healing snake bites] el día de Viernes Santo. Si lo cuento otro día, perderé mi poder curativo hasta el Viernes Santo del año siguiente” (1555).

Further justifying the previous argument that the correspondence between superstitions and animal imagery—and the resultant negative portrayal of both—relates to a strong indictment of the social mores on the part of Blasco Ibáñez are the additional negative social commentaries which the author makes. These are wide ranging in nature, but because such is not the focus of the present essay, I will only make brief reference to four of the more overt statements and leave this point for further analysis in future studies.

On a more global level, the author attacks the institution of the *siesta*, dueling, hatred of foreigners, and the stereotypical ethos of the indigenous natives. Jaramillo, after an unsuccessful military coup at night, comments: “¿A quién se le ocurre hacer revoluciones a medianoche?... Es la peor de las horas, cuando todo el mundo vive y está despierto. Eso podrá ser en los países donde hace frío y la gente se acuesta temprano, pero aquí... Aquí, la mejor hora para la revolución es la una de la tarde” (1553). And he continues, “Desembarcando a la hora de la siesta habrían entrado por las calles sin que nadie los viese, lo mismo que a través de una ciudad muerta; habrían sorprendido el cuartel, matando a la guardia, que seguramente estaría tendida a la sombra y roncando” (1553). The negative social commentary concerning the *siesta* continues when Jaramillo and Morales go to steal the *caburé* feathers. They carry out their robbery during the *siesta*, and even the screaming of the captured *caburé* fails to arouse the bird’s owner from his slumber.

Blasco Ibáñez's opposition to duels (even though he was forced to participate in several) is well known. In fact, Alós Ferrando quotes him as saying "creo que es ridículo y denigrante para un demócrata, a fines del siglo XIX, tomar parte en esas farsas llamadas lances de honor, impropias de hombres serios y valerosos" (48). And the author reiterates that belief in "Las plumas del caburé": It is because of having killed a man in one of those "querellas de amor y de bebida [...], tizona en mano, a espaldas de la taberna" (1554) that Jaramillo is forced to flee the country. This anger of others shows itself, as well, in the foreigners: "El desprecio era porque ignoraba el guaraní y hablaba mal el español, signos de inferioridad mental. Además, como todos los *gringos*, tenía los pies enormes y calzaba zapatos que parecían navíos, lo que denuncia un origen ordinario en un país donde los hombres ostentan el pie pequeño y alto de empeine, lo mismo que una dama" (1559). Only the indigenous element, then, is held in esteem by the story's two main characters—both of whom, it should be remembered, die because of hubris and lack of self-discipline brought about by beliefs in superstitions.

That is, the ethos of all parts of society is ultimately suspect at best. The author describes the main characters as "dos mestizos guaraníes, pequeños, ágiles, débiles de miembros aparentemente, y con una resistencia asombrosa para la fatiga y las privaciones" (1554). Furthermore, "Trabajaban con verdadero furor, como si peleasen a muerte con un enemigo. [...] Pero al cobrar el jornal de la semana desaparecían, y sus protectores y admiradores los esperaban en vano todo el lunes siguiente. Sólo cuando quedaba consumido el último centavo en las tabernas donde hay acordeón y baile pensaban en reanudar el maldecido trabajo" (1554). In Blasco Ibáñez's view, then, Latin American is clearly deficient and in need of much societal reformation to save it from the superstitions and animalistic behaviors/attitudes so prevalent throughout the continent.

Juan Alborg comments that "'Las plumas del caburé' es otro de los mejores relatos de Blasco, quizá el mejor" (893). Although I do not wish to make a judgment as to which of Blasco Ibáñez's narratives is the best in and of itself, I would agree that this short story is one of the best in regards to demonstrating the author's social commentary while using animal imagery to convey that message. Here, the two *mestizo*'s superstitions—shall we also say mythos in general?—are proven to be suspect; in fact, a light attempt at mockery is even detected. This can only be fully explained, however, via an analysis of the animal imagery within the story. The *caburé* attacks the brain literally, but the psychological powers it seemingly bestows through superstitions belie an even greater destructive hubris which does have a very real impact. Certainly, then, an examination of the animals and their characteristics in this short story show that Blasco Ibáñez's narratives contain more art, artifice, and social commentary than have been recognized heretofore.

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