

ANIMAL IMAGERY AND THE PROTAGONIST IN GALDÓS'S *NAZARÍN* AND *MISERICORDIA*

Although animal imagery is a constant in Galdós's creative art, major novels in each general period show an evolving relationship between this imagery and the protagonist. In *Doña Perfecta* (1876), the most popular of the *Novelas de la primera época*, the characters opposed to Galdós's liberal protagonist—characters who personify reactionary forces Galdós disliked—become animal-like at the climax of the novel and murder the protagonist.¹ Galdós's novels of the 1880s, however, show a reversal with a complete change of emphasis: the protagonists themselves often become animalized. In the most naturalistic of these novels, *La desheredada* (1881) and *Lo prohibido* (1885), adverse heredity and negative environment combine to effect degeneration and dehumanization. Galdós uses human-animal comparisons throughout to illustrate the trajectory of the protagonist's descent and emphatic animal imagery at the end to confirm the protagonist's defeat.² In *Miau* (1888) animal imagery becomes an important means of illustrating Social Darwinism, Herbert Spenser's notion that only the fittest rightly survive in modern society. Already animalized before the opening events of the novel, the protagonist of *Miau* is trapped in a jungle of vicious social fauna; because the protagonist is the only one of all these feral characters to be handicapped, he must (in accord with Social Darwinism) fight a losing battle and perish.³ /c

The relationship between animal imagery and the protagonist during Galdós's *naturalismo espiritual* period, however, has never been explored, even though the abundance of human-animal comparisons during this period has been delineated.⁴ In the two major novels of this period, *Nazarín* (1895) and *Misericordia* (1897), a much stronger protagonist now emerges—one who can rise above the animal-like characters who abound in these novels. Although at the time of *Nazarín* and *Misericordia* Galdós had clearly moved away from the tenets of naturalism and was writing in accord with an entirely new aesthetic, a seamy, sordid, naturalistic background is still present,⁵ and it still contains many animal-like characters.

In *Nazarín*, for example, the opening chapters introduce the dehumanizing environment of the south Madrid slums. Father Nazarín's land-

lady is repeatedly labeled a "fiera" and is described as being "[con] el cuello ancho, carnosos y con un morrillo como el de un toro".⁶ The street women in this neighborhood are quick to react "como leonas o panteras" (1684), and one of them, Andara, describes herself as "muy loba, tan loba como la primera" (1693). In a fight with another street character, appropriately called *la Tiñosa*, Andara then comports herself "como una leona," stabbing her rival with a knife (1693). Subsequently, Andara hides in Father Nazarín's room,⁷ but another character (*la Camella*) tries to sniff out her whereabouts like a dog. Andara says, "La otra noche vino a esta ventana, y pegaba las narices al quicio, como los perros ratoneros cuando rastrean el ratón. *Golía, golía* y sus resoplidos se oían desde el portal" (1699).⁸ Such is the environment in which the narrator and his friend, the reporter, find Father Nazarín early on in the novel.

Subsequently, the priest leaves Madrid (II, iv) and spends the rest of the novel in the countryside and small towns west of the capital, before being brought back to Madrid as a prisoner. In his second environment, Nazarín must also interact with animal-like characters. The first important such instance occurs when he decides to call on "esa fiera," Don Pedro Belmonte (1720).⁹ As he approaches the latter's country estate, he is set upon by two fierce dogs, which seemingly function as a metaphor for Belmonte. The narrator says, "Dos perrazos como leones, ladrando desafortadamente y antes que pudieran huir los embistieron furiosos. ¡Qué bocas, qué feroces dientes! A Nazarín le mordieron una pierna; a Beatriz, una mano y la otra le hicieron trizas la falda" (1721). In spite of this attack, Nazarín persists in his determination to visit Belmonte, "a ver si el dragón se ablanda" (1721). The following day he gains admission to the house and admonishes Belmonte to change his way of life and to treat his servants as "personas, no animales" (1723). Then he speaks directly to Belmonte's own base nature, saying, "Heme puesto delante del dragón. Abra sus fauces, alargue sus uñas, devóreme si gusta; pero, expirando, le diré que se enmiende, que Cristo me manda aquí para llamarle a la verdad y anunciarle su condenación si no acude pronto al llamamiento." The narrator continues, "Grande fue la sorpresa de Nazarín al ver que el señor de la Coreja no sólo no se enfurecía oyéndole, sino que le oía con atención y hasta respeto" (1724). Nazarín's spirituality overcomes Belmonte's animality.¹⁰ Don Pedro even insists that Nazarín share a meal with him, gives him provisions for the road, and allows him to leave without any interference from the dogs.¹¹

After this adventure, all of Nazarín's encounters with the animalistic side of human nature are of muted significance. That feral nature is neutralized as part of the background of ordinary life until he and his companions are arrested. Now Andara reacts to indignities they are forced to suffer "como un tigre" (1747), "como una leona" (1761); she spews out her

anger at one of the guards, shouting, "Quisiera ser culebra, una culebrona muy grande y con mucho veneno, para enroscarse en a ti y ahogarte y mandarte a los infiernos" (1763).

Nazarín, however, does not share Andara's anger, nor does he imitate her behavior.¹² His first challenge occurs when he is mistreated with "bestiales irreverenicás" (1756) by other prisoners. After being knocked down by one of them (el *Parricida*), he starts to get up, but then assumes the posture of a "gato que acecha" (1757).¹³ After a long moment of hesitation, Nazarín regains his control. He rejects an animal response in favor of one which Galdós labels "entre divina y humana." He pardons his malefactors. Nevertheless, his forbearance only infuriates his tormentors further and they give him a terrible beating. In order to control his animal response, Galdós' protagonist must now struggle "en su interior con más bravura que la primera vez" (1757). Clearly recognizing his own potential for giving way to the animal side of human nature, Nazarín chooses a spiritual response—but explains it in animalistic terms. Using the symbol so often applied to Christ, he says climactically, "Ser león no es cosa fácil; pero es más difícil ser cordero, y yo lo soy. Sabed que os perdono de todo corazón, porque así se me lo manda Nuestro Padre que está en los Cielos" (1757-58).

Misericordia is even richer in its animal imagery. Once again Galdós establishes early on a dehumanizing social environment by means of the *costumbrista* street characters with whom his protagonist (Benina) will interact. Because the conditions in which *Misericordia's* beggars exist are so horrible and degrading, the use of animal imagery in their characterization is once again quite appropriate: la Diega is an "animalejo vivaracho", la *Burlada* has "ojuelos . . . gatuños [que] irradiaban la desconfianza y la malicia", and la Casiana has a "cara caballuna".¹⁴ These people are often "ladrando de hambre" (1908), and the police frequently mistreat them, "cual si fueran perros, para llevarlos al depósito donde como a perros los tratan" (1987). In such an environment even Benina herself has learned to survive through animalistic habits: "Había llegado a ser [en ella] el sisar y el reunir como cosa instintiva y los actos de este linaje se diferenciaban poco de las rapiñas y escodrijos de la urraca" (1895). This description, however, is the only instance in the novel of a pejorative animal comparison concerning Benina (and the narrator has already pointed out that her hands have not become claws—her fingers do not end in "uñas de cernícalo"—as one would expect from such a street beggar [1882]).¹⁵

From the just-mentioned potential toward animalization, Galdós progressively develops Benina in the opposite direction—until she reaches a degree of spiritual altruism that allows her to perform Christ-like miracles at the novel's conclusion. Because Benina is such a strong character, the animal-like *comendicantes* (and other similar characters) are never any threat to her. Consequently, it is quite appropriate for the narrator to present the

animal-like characters in a comic manner, utilizing them as part of the ever-present, rich vein of humor which extends throughout the novel.¹⁶ The comic tone regarding animality is established early in the novel when the narrator presents the mendicants la *Burlada* and Casiana: "Para conocer a la *Burlada* podríamos imaginarla como un gato que hubiera perdido el pelo en una riña, seguida de un chapuzón, [y] digamos que era la Casiana como un caballo viejo, y perfecta su semejanza con los de la plaza de toros, cuando se tapaba con venda oblicua uno de los ojos, quedándose con el otro libre" (1881).

Animality is especially pronounced in and around the cheap hotels of the south Madrid slums, where prostitutes are soliciting in the doorways and "cada noche dormía menos gente y los *micos* menudeaban" (1931).¹⁷ When Benina comes into these *barrios bajos* to borrow money to help others, she stops first at a *tugurio*, managed by "un par de *congrios*" (1931)¹⁸ and owned by Bernarda, "esa lagartona" (1925). Then she goes on to another place run by "el *Comadreja*." The latter's mistress is equally animalistic, for her name is Teresa Conejo; when she comes out of a small door to talk with Benina, the narrator says, "Como grieta que da paso al escondrijo de una anguila, así era la puerta, y la mujer [era] el ejemplar más flaco, desmedrado y escurridizo que pudiera encontrarse en la *fauna* a que tales hembras pertenecen" (Italics added, 1932). In this animalistic environment Benina finds Frasquito Ponte in the filthy kitchen storeroom of the *Comadreja-Conejo* hotel-tavern. The animalistic level into which Ponte has fallen is further emphasized when his illness is diagnosed and treated by "el *Comadreja*"—"[quien] había estudiado un año de Veterinaria" (1933).

"El *Comadreja*" is a most appropriate name for one who can successfully manage this kind of business. Undoubtedly he needs animal cunning (and weasel-like qualities) to survive in such a dangerous environment, and seemingly as proof, we are told that he still has an "herida [que] se le abre cuando menos lo piensa" (1932). Notwithstanding his animal-like qualities, *Comadreja* is most affable and helpful to both Benina and Frasquito Ponte and gives solicitous first aid to the latter. The fact that a character known only as "el *Comadreja*" has been to veterinary school and can now administer to humans is effectively humorous and becomes even more so when the narrator tells us that this tavern keeper "*desanimó*" Ponte and found him suffering from "un *sincopiés*" (1933).

Benina also gets along successfully with *Comadreja's* mistress, Teresa Conejo, borrowing from her a considerable sum to care for Ponte (even as she continues to help those she is already sustaining). After Benina leaves the *barrios bajos*, the narrator again uses the name of Teresa Conejo to humorous advantage. Benina brings Frasquito Ponte into Doña Paca's house, and, because Benina has been so busy "[arrancando] al cuitado viejo de las uñas de la muerte" (1935), she has not had time to think through a

proper cover story. Thus Paca catches Benina off guard as she expresses the opinion that the money for Ponte's care is surely coming from Don Romualdo. Without thinking, Benina inadvertently corrects her:

—[No]. Ella..., Teresa Conejo.

—¿Que dices, mujer?

—Digo que . . . Pero ¿usted no se entera de lo que hablo?

—Has dicho que . . . ¿Por ventura es cazador don Romualdo?

—¿Cazador?

—Como has dicho no sé qué de un conejo.

—El no caza; pero le regalan..., qué sé yo..., tantas cosas..., la perdiz, el conejo de campo... Pues esta tarde...

—Ya; te dijo: "*Benina*, a ver cómo me pone mañana este conejo que me han traído..."

—Sobre sí había de ser en salmorejo o con arroz, estuvieron disputando; y como yo nada decía y se me saltaban las lágrimas, "*Benina*, ¿qué tienes? *Benina*, ¿qué te pasa?...". En fin, que del conejo tomé pie para contarle el apuro en que me veía... (1935-36).

Because repetition can be such an effective aspect of humor, the confusion about a possible rabbit for Don Romualdo occurs three more times, all having their origin in Benina's contact with a character named Teresa Conejo (1937, 1967, 1969).¹⁹

When Don Romualdo calls on Doña Paca a second time regarding her inheritance, he brings along a parrot-faced notary. To appreciate the full humor of this briefly appearing character, we must first consider Galdós's characterization of Don Romualdo. The latter's surname is Cedrón and Galdós emphasizes

la perfecta concordancia entre la persona del sacerdote y su apellido Cedrón, pues por la estatura, la robustez y hasta por el color podía ser comparado a un corpulento cedro: que entre árboles y hombres, mirando los caracteres de unos y otros, también hay concomitancias y parentescos. Tallado es el cedro y además bello, noble, de madera un tanto quebradiza, pero grata y olorosa. Pues del mismo modo era D. Romualdo: grandón, fornido, atezado (1966).

When the priest and notary are standing side by side, the latter, "chiquitín y con perfil de cotorra, parecía un perico que se dispone a encaramarse por el tronco de un árbol" (1969).

Subsequently, as Frasquito Ponte is celebrating the news of his inheritance by treating himself to a meal in a restaurant, he observes (and latter talks with) a man who has a pronounced "rostro gimioso." This man is

eating "pausada y metódicamente una ración de caracoles". The narrator explains, "Era verdaderamente el tal una máquina para comerlos porque para cada pieza empleaba de un modo invariable los mismos movimientos de la boca, de las manos y hasta los ojos . . . siempre a compás, con igualdad de gestos y mohines . . . como figurilla mecánica de caja de música" (1972).

Thus, as Galdós approaches the climax of the novel, his use of dehumanizing imagery increases and intensifies: machine and animal comparisons in the same sentence for the same character ("el de los caracoles"), preceded by the tree and the parrot-like man standing side by side (Don Romualdo and the notary).²⁰ This emphasis soon blends in with a new role for Juliana, who now comes to the fore with a penchant—derived directly from "la Naturaleza" (1990)—for dominating and controlling the lives of others. Physically, Juliana has the "lozana robustez" of a mule and not only thinks of herself in animalistic terms (1990), but also sees Doña Paca's house as a "bosque . . . con fieras" and Ponte Delgado as "ese orangután mal *pintao*" (1977). Juliana herself has "garras" (1977); whenever she sees her husband "cerdear un poco" (1978), she screams and instills in him "más miedo que a una leona con hambre" (1973).

Benina, however, maintains her independence of Juliana and thus escapes the animal-like degradation which Juliana usually produces in others, especially Doña Paca. Benina watches the latter on moving day: "Detrás iba Juliana *arreándolos* a todos y mandándolos que fueran de prisa por el camino que les marcaba. No le faltaba más que el palo para parecerse a los que en vísperas de Navidad conducen por las calles las manadas de pavos. ¡Cómo se clareaba el despotismo en sus menores movimientos! Doña Paca era la res humilde que va a donde la llevan, aunque sea al matadero. . . Benina dió algunos pasos para ver el triste ganado y cuando lo perdió de vista se limpió las lágrimas que inundaban su rostro" (1987-88). Benina realizes that unfortunately there will always be "ingritud, egoísmo y unos que manden a los otros y le cojan la voluntad." Nevertheless, she rejects and rises above such things, finding consolation near the end of the novel in doing "lo que nos manda la conciencia y dejar que se peleen aquéllos por un hueso como los perros, . . . y tomar [al contrario] lo que Dios nos ponga por delante como los pájaros" (1988).

In marked contrast to Juliana and Doña Paca, Benina continues to rise ever higher into spirituality, closing the novel by working Christ-like miracles, even as she speaks the words of Christ himself. Like Nazarín, Benina clearly reaches a state of exalted purity—and the mass of animal imagery developed in the novel is one of the ways the narrator communicates Benina's elevation to the reader. It is significant that the last important use of animal imagery regarding the protagonist in both *Nazarín*

and *Misericordia* comes not from the realm of the observing naturalist, but—in these *naturalismo espiritual* novels—from the Bible itself.²¹

Clearly then, much of the animal imagery in both *Nazarín* and *Misericordia* is more than descriptive. Instead, it is programmatic and dynamic. Serving not only to vivify the characters and produce humor, this imagery also enhances our understanding of the protagonists' progress in an animalized environment and their final spiritual achievement at the end of the novels.

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¹ Vernon A. Chamberlin, "Doña Perfecta: Light and Darkness, Good and Evil." *Galdós: Papers Read at the Modern Foreign Language Symposium . . . Mary Washington College of the University of Virginia*. (Fredricksburg: Department of Modern Foreign Languages, 1967), 62-64.

² Chamberlin, "'Vamos a ver las fieras': Animal Imagery and the Protagonist in *La desheredada* and *Lo prohibido*," to appear in *Anales Galdosianos*.

³ Chamberlin, "Social Darwinism: An Unnoticed Aspect of Galdós's Animal Imagery in *Miau*," to appear in *Romance Quarterly*.

⁴ Jennifer Lowe, "Animal Imagery in *Misericordia*," *Anales Galdosianos*, 17 (1982), 85-89.

⁵ When *Nazarín* gets away from Madrid and into the countryside, however, nature is depicted as beneficent. (See especially Kronik, "Estructuras dinámicas" en *Nazarín*, *Anales Galdosianos*, 9 [1974] 81-98).

⁶ Benito Pérez Galdós, "Nazarín," *Obras completas*, 4th. ed. 6 vols. (Madrid: Aguilar, 1965) 5: 1679, 1681, and 1683. All subsequent references are to this edition. For an explanation of how animal traits combine with other elements to produce a sensation of the grotesque, see Kronik, "Galdós and the Grotesque," *Anales Galdosianos*, Anejo (1970), 45-45.

⁷ She enters "con rápido salto de gata cazadora" (1692).

⁸ *Nazarín*'s landlady had earlier referred to Andara as "la mala rata que esconde usted en su madriguera" (1699). Andara's only company, when *Nazarín* is out of the room, is "algún ratón . . . que andaba por debajo de la cama" (1696).

¹⁰ This accomplishment is reconfirmed late in the novel when the *alcalde* says to *Nazarín* (regarding Belmonte), "Oí que usted amansó al león de los leones" (1749). *Nazarín* is, of course, helped by the fact that Belmonte mistakenly thinks the protagonist is an Armenian bishop in beggar's garb.

¹¹ At one point in the interview with Belmonte, *Nazarín* had found his host's ideas so bizarre that he thought, ". . . la cabeza de este hombre es como una gran jaula llena de jilgueros, mirlos, calandrias, cotorras y papagayos, cantando todos a la vez" (1728).

12 Rather he is seen by the narrator as an "ave mística" and his two disciples as "polluelos" (1743). Earlier in the ruins of the old, very high, castle, all felt like "águilas" (1737). For the function of these two images in the spiritual dynamics of the novel, see Kronik, "Estructuras dinámicas," 87-88.

13 El *Parricida* is characterized insultingly by another of his group as "animal, que no naciste de hombre y mujer" (1758). Later, when el *Parricida* has a chance to escape from jail, the narrator says, "Con prontitud gatuna, trocándose fácilmente . . . en animal ligero, hubo de saltar de un brinco al boquete abierto en el tejado, y desapareció" (1765).

14 Pérez Galdós, "Misericordia," *Obras completas*, 4th. ed. 6 vols. (Madrid: Aguilar: 1965) 5: 1911, 1880, 1885. All subsequent references are to this edition. Marian Smolen finds la *Burlada* and Casiana also a part of Galdós's multifaceted caricaturing in *Misericordia* and says, ". . . de esta manera pone de relieve a la protagonista y Almudena." See "Las dos caras de San Sebastián: Hacia un análisis de la técnica caricaturesca en *Misericordia*," *Romance Notes*, 21 (1980), 63-67.

15 In his edition of *Misericordia* (Madrid: Catedra, 1982), Luciano García Lorenzo comments: "uñas de cernículo. Metonimia con la que Galdós caracteriza la rapacidad y la suciedad de las manos de los mendigos y también la astucia para localizar y sorprender a las presas cerniéndose sobre ellas" (77). Benina's hands are in marked contrast with those of *La burlada*, who has "diez uñas lagartijeras . . . en sus dedos negros y raptantes" (1882).

16 Some of this comedy occurs in *Nazarín*, but it is not as sustained or effectively programmatic.

17 *mico*: "hombre lascivo" (*Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, II, 906); García Lorenzo, however, glosses: "micos" «ladronzuelos» (189).

18 *Congrios*: spiny eels; García Lorenzo: "«inútiles», en lenguaje de germanía" (189).

19 Galdós had previously employed some of this comic repetition in *Nazarín*. Regarding the street character la *Camella*, Andara says, "Le viene este nombre de que antes, cuando pintaba algo, le decían la *dama de las Camelias*" (1695). *Nazarín* tries to correct Andara, but she soon humorously repeats the linguistic error with a new twist (1697).

20 In addition to these naturalistic elements, Obdulia now introduces an overabundance of plants into Doña Paca's house, "[una] irrupción del reino vegetal . . . , el campo [traído] a casa" (1976), "tanta *vegetación*" (1977).

21 (*Nazarín*), the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world: John 1:29; (*Misericordia*), the birds that God feeds: Matthew 6:26. Subsequently, in *Nazarín*'s feverish vision (while still in a state of complete spirituality), he says that he is unworthy of crucifixion: "Que me arrojen a un muladar y me dejen morir, o me maten sin bullicio, y me entierren como a una pobre bestia" (1767).