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The Contagious Effects of Rural Violence: Social Pathologies and Injured Bodies in Blasco Ibáñez's *La barraca (The Cabin)*

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The political drive of Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's journalism and novels of social protest has often been categorised as distinct from the predominantly aesthetic renderings of environment in his Valencian fiction (Medina, 1984; Cameron, 2018). This article seeks to reframe the ideological impetus of one of his best-known works, *La barraca* [*The Cabin*] (1898), through a focus on vivid imagery of the pathological body as it interacts with the Valencian landscape. By applying late 19th-century theories of crowd psychology and emotional contagion to the portrait of the pathologised nature of rural violence in *La barraca*, this article analyses the novel's thematic focus on social inequality in the context of literary Naturalism. It contends that the trope of stagnant water, channelled through the fertile Valencian plain as a conduit of contamination, echoes the moral sickness of rural society that results from a powerful combination of environmental determinism and imitative behaviour. Scholars have widely concurred that in his social protest novels, Blasco Ibáñez critiques the capitalist exploitation of the proletariat. Extending earlier studies of the author's naturalist fiction, this article proposes that the representation of contagious violence perpetrated by the landless rural labourers in *La barraca* draws implicitly on bourgeois discourses. It thereby aims to problematise the ideological foundation for the novel's exposition of social injustice in late 19th-century Spain.



Seeking to reinvigorate the dominant critical emphasis on the naturalist foundation of Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's Valencian novels, this article contends that the exposition of socio-economic injustice in *La barraca* [*The Cabin*] (1898) draws compellingly on vivid representations of sickness, injury and emotional contagion. Inspired by the prolonged Valencian drought of the 1870s, and its profound social consequences, Blasco Ibáñez's *La barraca* evokes the struggles of the local peasantry for financial and physical survival. When the rural labourers prevent a plot of land from being cultivated as an act of popular resistance against the landowning class, the arrival of Batiste Borrull provokes a campaign of marginalisation and aggression. The local thug Pimentó and his allies lead a vendetta against Batiste's family, whom they perceive as intruders, through violence enacted by men, women and children alike. This culminates in the death of Batiste's youngest son, Pascualet, following an illness contracted when other boys push him into a ditch of stagnant water on the way home from school. The novel's exposition of social inequalities thereby draws on the symbolism of the pathological body, a trope that gains momentum with the fatal injuries sustained by a five-year-old child, resulting from the ill-conceived violence of local families.

The theme of the pathological body extends, furthermore, to its symbiotic relationship with the environment, especially in the depiction of the irrigation channels that cross the Valencian *huerta* [fertile, cultivated district]. The fetid water constitutes a precious resource but is also a conduit for infection, echoing the physical injuries and moral corruption that are transmitted among the local population. Indeed, the depiction of wounded bodies finds symbolic connection with sources of water that are configured as a circulatory system in the landscape; this topic offers a new pathway of analysis for Blasco Ibáñez's Valencian novels (1894–1902), including *La barraca*.¹ The argument will focus on three key sections of analysis, that respond to the representation of pathology and moral contagion, through the following lenses: violence and the unequal social structure; imitative behaviour in the context of collective psychology; and, the trope of water and liquid ingestion as conduits of social sickness.

La barraca's ideological exposition of social inequalities in rural Spain is drawn out through the striking physiological themes and imagery that are characteristic of Blasco Ibáñez's naturalist fiction. As I will argue, the violent impulses of the Valencian peasantry stem primarily from socio-economic and environmental pressures, which are exacerbated by the drive of collective psychology and contagious emotion, rather than

¹ The Valencian novels comprise: *Arroz y tartana* [*Rice and a Carriage*] (1894), *Flor de mayo* [*The Mayflower*] (1895), *La barraca* [*The Cabin*] (1898), *Entre naranjos* [*Among the Orange Trees*] (1900) and *Cañas y barro* [*Reeds and Mud*] (1902). Due to thematic differences with Blasco Ibáñez's other novels of the period, *Sónnica la cortesana* [*Sónnica the Courtesan*] (1901) is not usually considered part of this group.

hereditary inevitability. Blasco Ibáñez's political identity and staunch Republicanism are well-documented (for example, by León Roca, 1967). Following the Valencian cycle, his novels of social protest include *La bodega* [*The Wine Cellar*] (1905) and *La horda* [*The Horde*] (1905), both of which, likewise, employ pathological themes to describe social inequalities in rural and urban environments. Set in Jerez de la Frontera, Andalucía, *La bodega* focuses on the degenerate qualities of bourgeois wine merchants, while *La horda* sets out the diseased conditions of poverty in working-class districts of Madrid, with an ideological aim to expose injustice. In a recent article on Blasco Ibáñez's Republican journalism, Cameron (2018) reclaims the overtly political agenda of his Valencian novels, in which the exploitation of the proletariat is one of the author's prime targets in Restoration Spain (1874–1931).² Building on Cameron's renewed critical emphasis on the political impetus of the author's early fiction, this article scrutinises Blasco Ibáñez's exposition of contagious violence and injured bodies in *La barraca*, in order to explore the ways in which the novel's representations of pathology (social, moral and physical) inform both its ideological perspective and its visual evocations of landscape. The article thereby seeks to extend and nuance existing critical analysis of the author's adherence to naturalist paradigms.

Theories of degeneration, which peaked in the 1890s in Spain as in other European countries, put forward the view that European nations were facing progressive decline due to a range of hereditary and environmental factors. It is widely acknowledged that bourgeois discourses of degeneration presented poverty as a disease that could be remedied through policies of social hygiene and sanitation (see, for example, Fuentes Peris, 2003: 2–6). However, as Campos Marín, Martínez Pérez and Huertas García-Alejo (2000: 218–19) explain, in late 19th-century Spain (as elsewhere in Europe) socialist and anarchist discourses countered these arguments by presenting the capitalist political system as corrupt and degenerate. Poverty itself was recast as the cause of degeneration and a social illness in the lower classes, created by the pathological workings of society (Girón Sierra, 2005: 299). The socialist press in Spain likewise appropriated the language of hygienic medicine in the late 19th-century by mobilising it against the bourgeoisie and thereby inverting the rhetoric that had been used to identify the vices of the working classes as the source of degeneration. Bourgeois leisure pursuits, including the consumption of alcohol, were characterised according to this view as traits of degeneration. Socialist discourse thereby construed these behaviours not simply as a social disease but rather a hereditary source of transmission of corrupt blood through the generations (Campos Marín, Martínez Pérez and Huertas García-Alejo, 2000: 229).

² The restoration of the monarchy under Alfonso XII, following the end of the First Republic in 1874. Blasco Ibáñez's Restoration-era targets included the Bourbon monarchy, the Catholic Church, and social injustice.

Fuentes Peris argues that in *La bodega*, Blasco Ibáñez denounces the idle and degenerate bourgeoisie, echoing an anarchist and socialist position that held the wealthy classes responsible for the exploitation of the working classes. According to this argument, the novel thereby contests bourgeois discourses that associated the working classes with ‘social illnesses or pathologies’ (Fuentes Peris, 2009: 489).³ By targeting the immorality of Luis Dupont, nephew of the wine magnate Pablo Dupont, the novel critiques both the exploitation and abuse of the lower classes, and a degenerate rural bourgeoisie (Fuentes Peris, 2009: 486). Anticipating these themes, in *La barraca* the absentee landowners who enjoy wealth and privilege in the distanced environs of the city are rendered both avaricious and idle. Don Salvador pushes tío Barret [old Barret] to the limits of endurance by demanding rent increases. Pimentó resents the privileged idleness of his absent landlady, ‘that fat, showy woman from Valencia’ and her overindulged daughters.⁴ Whilst avarice and idleness were markers of degenerative pathologies of the upper classes within anarchist discourse, *La barraca* explores the degenerationist notion of primitive aggression among the rural labourers while simultaneously presenting them as victims of capitalist exploitation. Though from the outset the novel emphasises the role of the bourgeois oppressors in the violence committed by the rural community, the pathological paradigm is expressed most directly in its portrayal of the peasant classes. This article argues that the violence of *La barraca* may be read both as a critique of social inequalities, which produce conditions that foster injury and sickness, and a marker of moral contagion among the proletariat.

Social Inequalities and the Pathological Nature of Violence in *La barraca*

The evocation of rural Spain in this novel exemplifies one of Blasco Ibáñez’s most enduring depictions of socio-economic injustice through its emphasis on the poverty of the peasant classes who toil the lands and inhabit the gloomy penury of the *barracas* [rudimentary farmhouses in typical Valencian style]. The local thug Pimentó is defined by laziness, whilst his downtrodden wife Pepeta rises before dawn to sell milk in Valencia. Described in sickly terms, she suffers from anaemia caused by a gynaecological ailment that frustrates motherhood. Her malady resonates with prevalent degenerationist theories of hereditary weakness and the failure to produce healthy offspring: ‘a spirited creature with pale, saggy skin, wasted away by anaemia whilst still in the midst of youth, ... she was nonetheless the most hard-

³ ‘... las enfermedades o patologías sociales.’

⁴ ‘... aquella señorona gorda de Valencia’ (Blasco Ibáñez, 2004: 170). All subsequent quotations from *La barraca* refer to this edition; all the translations from Spanish are my own. The full novel is available in English translation by Snow and Mekota (*The Cabin*, 1919).

working woman in the entire *huerta*'.⁵ According to this description, Pepeta embodies pathological debility. Yet, as a member of the rural proletariat she struggles for survival in an environment of poverty through determination and hard work. Arriving home, she witnesses the arrival of the new family, an event that disturbs the hard-fought status quo. Occupying the fields formerly cultivated by tío Barret, the incomer Batiste Borrull disrupts the collective rebellion of the local labourers against the power of the landowners. Due to the vigilante protection by Pimentó and other members of the rural proletariat, this plot of land has lain empty since Barret attacked the miserly landowner Don Salvador with a sickle, severing his neck in an uncharacteristic act of brutality. This first instance of physical violence in *La barraca*, a response to the unjust treatment of a hard-working rural labourer, is described in brief but necessarily graphic terms that convey bodily injury:

Don Salvador fell into the irrigation ditch; his legs remained on the bank, jolting with the final kicks of slaughtered cattle. And meanwhile his head, sunken in the mud, spilled all of his blood through the deep gash and the waters became tinged with red, following their gentle course with a peaceful murmur that cheered the solemn silence of the evening.⁶

The passage draws on liquid and water imagery to interconnect violence with the theme of pathology. Characterised by avarice, Don Salvador is the over-privileged instigator of the downfall of an honest labourer. Barret attempts to avenge social injustice through instinctive physical violence in response to the acts of moral and economic aggression by Don Salvador, who exploits the oppressive conditions of the peasant classes in rural Valencia. Don Salvador thereby serves as an example of corrupt bourgeois behaviour. The wretched outcome for the family, however, endures and, following the killing, his family are ruined and destitute: Barret is incarcerated and later dies in Ceuta; his wife dies of ill health; their daughter Rosario finds work in the city but, following the lead of her sisters and worn down by poverty, resorts to prostitution.

In the opening episodes of the novel, Blasco Ibáñez implies that an unequal social structure is responsible for the squalid conditions in which the rural labourers are trapped. However, as the novel progresses, degenerate characteristics, including alcoholism, immorality and violence are shown to be endemic among the peasantry, suggesting

⁵ '... una animosa criatura de carne blanquiza y flácida en plena juventud, minada por la anemia, ... era sin embargo la hembra más trabajadora de toda la huerta' (9).

⁶ 'Cayó don Salvador en la acequia; sus piernas quedaron en el ribazo, agitadas por un pataleo fúnebre de res degollada. Y mientras tanto, la cabeza, hundida en el barro, soltaba toda su sangre por la profunda brecha y las aguas se teñían de rojo, siguiendo su manso curso con un murmullo plácido que alegraba el solemne silencio de la tarde' (39).

that the pathological symbolism of *La barraca* reflects a more complex ideological stance.⁷ Focusing on the entrenched problem of socio-economic inequalities, Blasco Ibáñez employs bodily imagery in *La barraca* to describe a cycle of violence to which even the most honest, hard-working labourers (Barret and subsequently Batiste) are eventually drawn. The novel therefore oscillates between two competing perspectives. At times, the pathological condition of the working classes is demonstrably social in origin, a consequence of the brutalisation of the masses who endure the struggle for survival against nature and economic inequality. However, the novel also emphasises the pervasive violence that gains momentum as an imitative expression of resentment for the conditions of poverty in which the rural labourers are confined. In *La barraca*, moreover, the consumption of alcohol by the proletariat uncovers a latent brutality that becomes contagious among the local men who frequent the tavern.

These observations about rural social structures are drawn out through the intermittent and distinctly unscientific motif of the lineage of the peasantry, ‘country people who carry Moorish blood in their veins’.⁸ However, this portrait of rural Valencia does not convincingly evidence a hereditary paradigm; instead, it expounds a powerful environmental determinism that propels violence as a type of behavioural infection among the local populace. This trope is echoed by the representation of a discoloured body of water that crosses the Valencian plains, a symbolic conduit of corrupting behaviour among the local residents who must follow the distribution of irrigation rights directed by the Water Tribunal [Tribunal de las Aguas]. In the novel, Pimentó unfairly manipulates the system to remove temporarily Batiste’s access to water his crops at a critical time. This legislative structure still governs the use of irrigation waters in the region. In 2009, UNESCO named the court Intangible Cultural Heritage, a status that invites further analysis of the contemporary resonance of Blasco Ibáñez’s exposition of the water trope for ecological ethics.⁹ The close ties between fictional characters and environmental bodies of water in both *La barraca* and Blasco Ibáñez’s later novel *Cañas y barro* [*Reeds and Mud*] (1902) would benefit from further analysis, I suggest, as examples of the subject’s dynamic embodiment in the Valencian landscape. In *Cañas y barro*, the Albufera (a large freshwater lake to the south of the city) provides the setting in which Tonet drowns his newborn son in an act of desperation, provoked by the terms of a will that dictates his lover’s financial future, leading to his own suicide.

⁷ In an article on Blasco Ibáñez’s *Sangre y arena* (*Blood and Sand*, 1908), David George makes a similar point about the threatening representation of the crowd that attends the bullfight. He argues that the silent film version of 1916 plays on his potential film audience’s bourgeois ‘fears of the masses’ (George, 2008: 105).

⁸ ‘... gente campesina que lleva en sus venas sangre moruna’ (9).

⁹ On theoretical models, see Neimanis’ recent phenomenological study, *Bodies of Water* (2017).

In each text, bodies of water provide a vital source of life, but are also the setting of fatal injury.

Returning to *La barraca*, for 10 years the empty lands once toiled by Barret had been designated a symbol of collective resistance against the landowning classes. When Batiste revives the plot, however, the land is described as a living body through which the muddy water flows:

That was good land: always green, with tireless energy, generating one harvest after another; the red water circulating at all hours like revitalising blood through the countless irrigation ditches and channels that ploughed its surface like a complicated network of veins and arteries.¹⁰

The landscape is evoked through the physiological and pathological terms of literary Naturalism, emphasising that survival in this environment is a battle to harness the life force of the *huerta* and thereby avoid self-destruction. Here we find echoes of the struggle of the individual against nature in the French naturalist Émile Zola's *La Terre* [*The Earth*] (1887) (Cardwell, 1973: 50). More specifically in the context of the Valencian plains, water is a vital source of life but also of disease; the fetid water symbolically echoes the endemic pollution of the local character by a latent brutality that defines the inhabitants' struggle for survival.

La barraca was initially serialised in November 1898 in 10 episodes in the *folletín* section of the author's Republican newspaper *El Pueblo*, and then published as a novel in Valencia by Francisco Sempere. As Cardwell explains, Blasco Ibáñez encouraged the view that *La barraca* became a literary sensation both in France and Spain following Georges Hérelle's French translation that appeared in *La Revue de Paris* in 1901. In fact, critical acclaim had already led to subsequent serialisation by *El Liberal* in 1899 and a second edition of the novel was published in Madrid (Cardwell, 1973: 18–19). Inspired by his Francophilia and admiration for French Naturalism, Blasco Ibáñez acquired the epithet 'el Zola español' ['the Spanish Zola'] in early reviews of his novels (González Blanco, 1909: 582; Reding, 1923). Many critical studies have, however, refuted the label on the grounds of inaccuracy, emphasising that Blasco Ibáñez's works do not fully adhere to the conventions of literary Naturalism. Cardwell rightly points to the lack of scientific objectivity and the deviation from documentary realism in Blasco Ibáñez's writing. He thereby questions the author's adherence to naturalist tenets, arguing

¹⁰ 'Aquello eran tierras: siempre verdes, con las entrañas incansables, engendrando una cosecha tras otra; circulando el agua roja a todas horas como vivificante sangre por las innumerables acequias y regadoras que surcaban su superficie como complicada red de venas y arterias' (47).

that Zola, too, nuanced the questions of verisimilitude and social testimony (2000: 359). In fact, the parallels with Zola's Naturalism continue to provoke critical debate. Caudet (2000) underscores Blasco Ibáñez's opposition to the political establishment and his admiration for Zola (686–89), as well as his adherence to Naturalism and positivism (680). Focusing on Blasco Ibáñez's exposition of social injustice together with his support for Zola following the political scandal of the Dreyfus Affair, Cameron (2018: 621) likewise considers Blasco's ideological sympathies for the French author. Oleza (2002) reframes the naturalist associations of Blasco Ibáñez's Valencian novels alongside the modernist evolution of his literary contemporaries in Spain. In an earlier study, by contrast, Oxford (1997) interprets the painterly qualities and colour symbolism of Blasco Ibáñez's works as evidence of their divergence from the assumed objectivity of Naturalism.

Whilst a detailed comparison with the works of Zola and his prominent association with the development of French Naturalism is beyond the scope of this article, recent scholarship in French Studies focuses on areas of analysis that are relevant to renewed scrutiny of the parallels between the two authors. The brief observations below do not seek to re-examine evidence of Blasco Ibáñez's inconsistent adherence to a monolithic understanding of naturalist doctrine. Indeed, the aims and techniques of naturalist fiction as a unifying category resist straightforward definition (Baguley, 1990). Instead, Blasco Ibáñez's vivid pictorialism, pathological tropes and powerful evocation of the environment find potential echoes with the mythopoeic and symbolic qualities of Zola's writing that intersect with the well-known naturalist elements and hereditary theories of his fiction.¹¹ Susan Harrow has analysed the representation of physical materiality in Zola's writing, as conveyed by metaphor and metonymy. Her article on *La Débâcle* [*The Debacle*] (1892) explores the material traces of mud and blood in the battlefield environment, emphasising the analogies between individual corporeal experience and the body politic, 'emblematised by repeated references to the enfeebled Emperor' [Napoleon III] (2006: 52). Elsewhere, Harrow has commented on the abstractionist quality of Zola's writing and contends that his characters' bodies in the landscapes of *La Terre* seem to resist the tenets of Naturalism (2011). In other words, resonant parallels between the works of Blasco Ibáñez and Zola may be reframed by focusing on their shared literary expressions of pathological themes that interconnect the body's circulatory system to its environment through the imagery of infection.

Turning again to *La barraca*, Barret has toiled the land through back-breaking efforts to cultivate the 'vital essence' ['jugo vital'] (22) of the land, to maintain his family and

¹¹ With thanks to Dr Kit Yee Wong for drawing my attention to these connections with Zola scholarship.

avoid destitution. The idle Pimentó is characterised starkly as an ‘enemy of work’.¹² By contrast, Batiste Borrull exudes a virile energy, as the embodiment of strength and willpower. Trapped in a cycle of poverty as a millhand, a carter and latterly as a farmer in Sagunto, ‘bad luck pursued him’.¹³ Yet, as an outsider, Batiste also represents an alternative model of peaceful masculinity that for much of the novel is uninfected by the endemic brutality of the peasantry in the region. Undaunted by the labour involved in restoring the overgrown and neglected fields, he is defined by physical energy:

To work! The fields were in a state; there was much to put right; but when one is willing! ... And rousing himself, that big, strong, muscular fellow, with the shoulders of a giant, round cropped head and kindly countenance held up by the thick neck of a monk, stretched out his powerful arms.¹⁴

Spurred on by the collective will to keep the plot of land from being cultivated as an act of resistance, Pimentó harnesses the hostilities of the local people. Nonetheless, as a ringleader, he is also motivated by certain resentment about Batiste’s energetic renovation of the land and the *barraca*.

When Pimentó deceives Batiste over the irrigation rights of his land, leading to a crippling fine by the Tribunal, and as the local people look on with malicious intent and insolent laughter, the enactment of the corrupt morality of the *huerta* begins to gain momentum. The narrative emphasises the seemingly primitive emotions and shared force of the illiterate and insolent crowd through the representation of social and moral vices in the rural inhabitants, thereby foregrounding the pathologised character of the rural peasantry. The collective resentment against Batiste’s family is driven forward by a steady escalation of aggression, led by Pimentó, that extends to other members of the community, including men, women and children.

Social Pathologies: Imitative and Contagious Violence

The collective hostilities against Batiste’s family highlight a process of behavioural imitation and emotional contagion, as the individual succumbs to the force of the mob. In this context, Blasco Ibáñez engages with contemporaneous theories of crowd psychology that were expressed powerfully in late 19th-century France. The sociologist

¹² ‘... enemigo del trabajo’ (20).

¹³ ‘La mala suerte le perseguía’ (46).

¹⁴ ‘¡A trabajar! Los campos estaban perdidos; había allí mucho que rascar; pero ¡cuando se tiene buena voluntad!... Y desperezándose, aquel hombretón recio, musculoso, de espaldas de gigante, redonda cabeza trasquilada y rostro bondadoso sostenido por grueso cuello de fraile, extendía sus poderosos brazos’ (47–48).

Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904) and psychologist Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) described the crowd as a social organism that was vulnerable to behavioural imitation and concurred that the mass can forcefully harness a destructive collective will (Nye, 1975: 69). Hippolyte Taine (1828–93), the critic and historian who exercised a major influence on French Naturalism, likewise observed the characteristics of the horde. In her analysis of French crowd theory, Barrows explains that the crowd was thought primarily to be proletarian, comprised of peasants, labourers and urban workers. Furthermore, Taine, Tarde and Le Bon all equated the crowd with alcoholics and women, portraying them as ‘irrational, impulsive, uncivilized’ and ‘dangerous’ (Barrows, 1981: 44–46). Indeed, the concept of imitation blurs theories of collective psychology with mental contagion as a pathological category, underscoring the idea that ‘morbid or dangerous characteristics are more “contagious” than others’ (Nye, 1975: 68–69). *La barraca* thereby echoes theories of behavioural imitation, I contend, through its focus on the infectious nature of violence at the expense of any peaceful resolution to conflict, demonstrating the resonance of (and interactions between) these discourses across national borders.

The gendered associations of collective psychology expressed by the French theorists above have particular significance in *La barraca*. Attempting to escape the combined hostility of the other girls who work at the factory, ‘that band of harpies’, Roseta walks home through the fields in the dark, in fear of an alternative form of violence that could be perpetrated by some of the men who gather at the local bar, Taberna de Copa.¹⁵ Male inebriation is foregrounded as a source of peasant vice in the population, leading to rumours that local girls have been physically assaulted by Pimentó and other bullies. The threat of violence becomes an obvious symptom of latent pathological traits in parts of the community. As Roseta gathers the courage every evening to make her way past, the tavern is described metonymically as a locale that combines the effects of alcohol and aggressive desire. The bar is rendered the ‘cave of the wild animal ... the red gullet that emitted an uproar of drunkenness and brutality’.¹⁶ The drunkards merge here to form a menacing group, destroying individual responsibility and leading instead to unpredictable and volatile actions by working-class men.¹⁷ Collective behaviour regresses to animal instinct and atavistic responses, via the literary representation of a dubious morality that infects those who frequent the bar.

Rural violence in *La barraca* gains an inevitable momentum, beginning with hostility and illicit action against Batiste’s family and leading, finally, to the death of the youngest child, Pascualet, through the actions of local boys. In other words, the

¹⁵ ‘... aquellas arpías en cuadrilla’ (84).

¹⁶ ‘... la cueva de la fiera ..., la rojiza garganta que despedía el estrépito de la borrachera y la brutalidad’ (81).

¹⁷ For studies of alcoholism in Spain during this period, see Campos Marín, 1997; Campos Marín and Huertas, 1991.

enactment of hostility against the family becomes a symptom of an inverted morality that stems, in turn, from poverty and the struggle for survival. The pervasive modelling of violent behaviour powerfully corrupts the youngest members of rural society, though the authorial voice refrains from direct moral judgement. Throughout the early sections of the novel, there is an emphasis on the relentless work required to make ends meet in an environment of poverty. The rural population is subject to the whims of wealthy landowners, the distribution of water (decreed by the patriarchal justice of the Tribunal) and the unpredictable effects of the weather on their precious crops. The novel avoids overtly condemning the actions of the local people, who are caught in an impossible cycle of hardship and dubious morality. Nonetheless, and despite the novel's lengthy exposition of socio-economic injustices, the gendered and class-based associations of group aggression potentially betray a bourgeois ideological perspective through their narrative echoes of degenerationism and crowd psychology.

Bullied at the silk factory where she works, Batiste's eldest daughter Roseta is subject to a daily onslaught of micro-aggressions: she finds rotten goods in the basket in which she carries her lunch, the dish that contains her food is regularly broken, and she endures pushing and name-calling. When she goes to fetch water from the local fountain, known as the 'fuente de la Reina' [fountain of the Queen], Roseta encounters around 30 young women who have gathered, amidst an uproar of noise and chatter. The behaviour of the girls is defined here not by social decorum or the meek demeanour they display at church on Sundays; they are described as an unruly rabble that ostracises Roseta and then physically attacks her:

It was like a flock of squabbling sparrows. All the young women were speaking at once; some insulted each other, some tore to shreds those people who were absent, betraying all the scandals of the *huerta*.¹⁸

In the absence of paternal authority, these 'angelic brunettes' ['ángeles morenos'] (94) gain the courage to speak crudely and freely and are associated through animal imagery with an underlying primitivism that is otherwise restrained by the institutions of family and Church. Pimentó's niece is singled out as especially malicious: described as the sharp-tongued 'little viper' ['la viborilla'] (96), she proceeds to provoke Roseta with false rumours about her family.

When Roseta fights back, the group of young women collectively attacks her, suggesting a shared impulse that is reminiscent of feminine violence in theories of the

¹⁸ 'Era una reunión de gorriones revoltosos. Todas hablaban a un tiempo; se insultaban unas, despellejaban otras a los ausentes delatando todos los escándalos de la huerta' (94).

crowd outlined above. This assault exemplifies the distorted version of popular justice enacted by the working-class society through an emphasis on spontaneous group aggression that becomes an expression of moral pathology:

Roseta disappeared beneath the furious arms. Her face became covered with scratches: overwhelmed by so many blows, she could not even fall down, for the very crowding of her enemies round her prevented it; but shoved from one side to another, she ended up rolling head-first down the slippery steps, striking her forehead against an edge of the stone.¹⁹

The injured Roseta makes her way home covered in blood and dirt. It is significant, of course, that the collective attack on Batiste's daughter takes place at the water fountain, accentuating the marginalisation of the family when accessing this precious supply. As a pure source of water that is vastly superior to the local wells and muddy liquid of the irrigation ditches, the fountain becomes the focal point for the young women's brawl, thereby underscoring the wider trope of water as the channel for violence.

The novel's exposition of pathology culminates in the illness of the youngest child of the family, five-year-old Pascualet, who dies after being pushed by a group of hostile boys into a ditch of stagnant water from which he contracts a fatal infection. This episode draws attention to the (at times) deadly interaction between the irrigation channels and the labouring community of rural Valencia, emphasising the shared maladies of primitivism and violence that corrupt even the youngest members of society and lead in this case to the death of a young boy. Ranging from five to 10 years old, the local children who attend the rudimentary school run by Don Joaquín are described in atavistic terms as 'little savages' ['pequeños salvajes'] (100), 'beasts' ['unas bestias'] (103), and 'that bunch of filthy scamps' ['aquella pillería roñosa'] (104). When not at school, the boys occupy themselves by throwing stones at birds, stealing fruit and chasing dogs through the *huerta*. Describing his school as a temple whose role is to tame the endemic savagery of the area, Don Joaquín ineffectually attempts to control the youngest members of this society. The growing misfortunes of Batiste's family gain momentum when local children assault his sons with stones as they make their way home from school each day.

Pascualet's sick body becomes the physical embodiment of the family's suffering and misfortune at the hands of the violent rural collective: a pathological symbol of the

¹⁹ 'Desapareció Roseta bajo los iracundos brazos. Su cara cubrióse de arañazos: agobiada por tantos golpes, ni caer pudo, pues las mismas apreturas de sus enemigas lo impedían; pero empujada a un lado y a otro, acabó rodando de cabeza por los resbaladizos escalones, chocando su frente contra una arista de la piedra' (97).

effects of vigilante justice. This brutal version of morality is enacted by Pimentó, and imitated by the sons and nephews of his unsavoury companions at the tavern, producing the collective hatred of the *huerta* that results in the fatal illness of Pascualet, referred to here by his family nickname:

The poor Bishop barely moved. Only his chest stirred with laboured and rasping breaths; his lips took on a violet hue; his half-closed eyes revealed a glimpse of the dim and motionless orb; they were eyes that no longer saw, and his little brown face seemed to be darkened by a mysterious gloom, as if the wings of death cast their shadow over it.²⁰

The child's death comes to symbolise a wider source of pathology: that of a brutal society that responds to injustice with further aggression, creating a cycle of primitive violence stemmed only temporarily by collective recognition of the family's disproportionate loss. Rural violence in the novel gains momentum through a type of behavioural contagion, or ripple effect (to underscore the water symbolism), that drives collective action and constitutes a source of social and moral sickness among the lower classes.

With the family plunged into mourning, the narrative focuses on the emotional response of Batiste, the honest man who goes out to defend his family with a rifle but finds he is powerless to restrain his grief. As he sets out to find the author of his misfortune, Batiste's character is transformed by the desire for brutal revenge:

In his bloodshot eyes shone a murderous fever; his entire body shook with anger, that terrible anger of the peaceful man who passes the limits of gentleness and becomes ferocious.²¹

His pacific nature is corrupted finally by the hostility of the local population. The voice of tragedy, tío Tomba [old Tomba] reiterates his presage of misfortune: 'It was inevitable: those lands were cursed by the poor and could only bear ill-fated fruit'.²² Blasco Ibáñez's account of the family's downfall draws heavily here on the language of Romantic tragedy through its underscoring of an inescapable and fatalistic outcome,

²⁰ 'El pobre Obispo apenas si se movía: únicamente su pecho agitábase con penoso estertor; sus labios tomaban un tinte violado; los ojos casi cerrados dejaban entrever el globo empañado e inmóvil, unos ojos que ya no miraban, y su morena carita parecía ennegrecida por misteriosa lobreguez, como si sobre ella proyectasen su sombra las alas de la muerte' (129).

²¹ 'En sus ojos inyectados de sangre brillaba la fiebre del asesinato; todo su cuerpo estremecíase de cólera, con esa terrible cólera del pacífico que cuando rebasa el límite de la mansedumbre es para caer en la ferocidad' (131).

²² 'Era inevitable: aquellas tierras estaban maldecidas por los pobres y no podían dar más que frutos de maldición' (134).

rather than any consistent adherence to the aims of scientific neutrality in line with naturalist determinism. The schoolteacher Don Joaquín identifies the coarseness and lack of education of the local people, who would benefit from instruction rather than alcohol:

Believe me, for I know them well: essentially they are good people. Very ignorant, of course, capable of the most barbaric acts, but with hearts that are moved by misfortune and make them conceal their claws ... Poor people! How can they be to blame if they were born as brutes and no one frees them from their circumstance?²³

This perspective echoes Zola's own attempts to establish a scientific approach to literature and especially his concept of the social milieu as an active force, a formulation strongly influenced by Taine's often-cited 'race, milieu and moment'. In *La barraca*, Don Joaquín diagnoses the endemic pathologies of an unequal society, in which capitalist exploitation of the rural underclasses results in their condition of barbarity, alcoholism and poverty. Dependent on the erratic payments by local parents for their children's education to ameliorate his own poverty, he is the spokesman for a socialist perspective on the region, identifying the source of moral vice and the flawed behaviour of the local residents as the brutalising consequences of social deprivation.

Classified here as a consequence of social injustice, collective pathology is nonetheless fuelled, according to my reading of the novel, by imitative behaviour. As Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson explain, emotions may be considered 'contagious' due to the human tendency to imitate the emotional experience of others (1993: 10–11). Emotional imitation therefore holds the potential for the pathological spread of 'moral contagion' as a type of social malady that is equally as threatening as physical contagion (Mitchell, 2012: 58). This imitative form of sickness may be demonstrated by the dissemination of emotional extremes among crowds of people. Proposing a model of emotional circulation, Sara Ahmed has theorised emotions not as interior 'psychological states, but as social and cultural practices' that result from interactions between the self and the external world (2004: 9). She thereby counters models of emotional contagion that imply a falsely homogenous experience. In *La barraca*, however, the public display of emotion appears to drive its contagious properties, leading to imitative expressions of violence by an underclass who use it (whether consciously or unconsciously) to respond to injustice through revenge against perceived outsiders. Indeed, there is little

²³ 'Créame a mí, que los conozco bien: en el fondo son buena gente. Muy brutos, eso sí, capaces de las mayores barbaridades, pero con un corazón que se conmueve ante el infortunio y les hace ocultar las garras... ¡Pobre gente! ¿Qué culpa tienen si nacieron para bestias y nadie les saca de su condición?' (146).

evidence of non-conformity or individuation in the narration of group violence against Roseta or Pascualet outlined above. In Batiste's case, his attempts to raise his family out of poverty through hard work provoke envy and resentment among his fellow labourers, who regard his actions as breaking class solidarity and therefore rejecting a moral code that only perpetuates obstacles to social mobility. In fact, in response to bourgeois oppression, this class unity appears to resonate with them more powerfully than the arduous effort modelled by Batiste to escape poverty.

Water and Alcohol: the Conduits of Pathology in *La barraca*

The culmination of the novel's thematic focus on rural violence brings together the trope of water with a toxic form of liquid ingestion: alcohol. The penultimate chapter of the novel sets an idyllic scene of plenty during the harvests of San Juan [festival of Saint John] in midsummer, reflecting Batiste's false sense of tranquillity before local hostilities resume. The awkward truce with the neighbouring households is ruptured by the consequences of a drinking competition between Pimentó and two opponents, but more specifically by the combined effects of alcoholism and the bully's violent nature. Here, once again, Blasco Ibáñez employs pathological imagery to diagnose the character of the rural masses as the victims of social oppression and their own distorted morality. Indeed, the episode exposes the symptoms of an excessively brutal masculinity, demonstrated by Pimentó's thinly disguised resentment of the Borrull family's hard work and growing prosperity. Although his motivation is defensive, the contagious effects of violence finally infect even the hard-working and peaceable Batiste, who defends himself by hitting Pimentó with a barstool in order to protect the survival and livelihood of his own family. The damaging influence of alcohol is evident in both the participants and observers of the drinking competition, as I will explore below. Furthermore, the episode echoes the concept of collective psychology or behavioural contagion: the crowd that has gathered to witness the two-day drinking binge replicates violent action through a mass fight that breaks out in the square outside.

The local tavern run by Copa serves to exaggerate a performative (or publicly displayed) version of masculinity that depends on aggressive bravado and becomes endemic in this rural society. The brutal bet between Pimentó and his two opponents centres on their attempt to continue to play cards at the tavern, whilst they drink nothing but *aguardiente* [distilled liquor] for two or three days to discover the most macho competitor. Even Batiste's habitual sobriety does not prevent his participation as an observer; he starts to drink a little, enticed by the illusory comfort provided by alcohol and the false anonymity of the crowd. Indeed, Batiste enters the bar for the

first time due to the tempting draw of the collective from which he continues to be marginalised, knowing, however, that he really should not be there: ‘his envious gaze followed all those who were walking towards the tavern. Why should he not go where the others were going?’.²⁴ Yet Batiste’s presence at the tavern, during the scene of collective binge drinking, will lead indirectly to physical injury and his own economic collapse, as Oxford expounds in his study of alcohol as the catalyst of destruction in *La barraca* (1999: 171).

Belying the pastoral scenes that adorn the walls, Copa’s tavern is a threatening setting for inebriation and violent action. The cellar of the bar contains vast quantities of alcohol, a marker of excess that infiltrates and corrupts the morality of the men who consume it, bringing out the homicidal potential of Pimentó:

That damp, dark room exhaled a reek of alcohol, a scent of grape juice, which intoxicated one’s sense of smell and disturbed one’s vision, giving the impression that the air and the land were going to be saturated with wine.²⁵

This description suggests that even the land itself will be subject to the pernicious effects of alcohol. Indeed, earlier in the novel, Barret murders Salvador only after waking from his hungover stupor, when he sees the landowner and ‘sensed that all his blood was rising suddenly to his head, that his drunkenness was reappearing’.²⁶ The effects of alcohol directly ignite his homicidal instincts, transforming his peaceable nature to murderous intent (Oxford, 1999: 165).

Providing alcohol to the rural labourers, a faithful clientele, the landlord of the tavern facilitates the worship of inebriation in his role as ‘the high priest of that temple of alcohol’.²⁷ This phrase covertly points to an exploitation of the moral weakness of the working class through the manipulation of their desire for alcohol, which is a dangerous form of worship because it facilitates class solidarity. An example of the petit bourgeois social climbers of Blasco Ibáñez’s Valencian novels, Copa is a coarse but shrewd businessman, who is motivated by profits from his sale of alcohol to the proletariat whom he then expels at the first sign of violent brawling. As one scholar observes, both anarchists and socialists in Spain considered alcohol to be an instrument of capitalist exploitation of the workers by the bourgeoisie (Fuentes Peris, 2009: 496). Indeed,

²⁴ ‘... seguía con mirada de envidia a todos los que marchaban hacia la taberna. ¿Por qué no había de ir él donde iban los otros?’ (159).

²⁵ ‘Aquella habitación oscura y húmeda exhalaba un vaho de alcohol, un perfume de mosto, que embriagaba el olfato y turbaba la vista, haciendo pensar que la atmósfera y la tierra iban a cubrirse de vino’ (160).

²⁶ ‘... sintió que toda su sangre le subía de golpe a la cabeza, que reaparecía la borrachera’ (37).

²⁷ ‘... el sumo sacerdote de aquel templo del alcohol’ (161).

temperance and sobriety were encouraged by workers' representatives as a 'route to self-improvement and self-respect' (Fuentes Peris, 2003; 100); these moral values were not derived alone from the discourses of bourgeois public health. Furthermore, the anti-alcoholism movement focused particularly on women as vehicles for the dissemination of principles of social hygiene (Fuentes Peris, 2003: 100). Nonetheless, the passage draws on a widely held view in crowd theory that associates alcoholism with the working classes; it also underscores their unpredictable and potentially threatening behaviour from a bourgeois perspective. In other words, in *La barraca* the regressive characteristics of the rural proletariat are foregrounded in much more detail than the pathological traits of the bourgeoisie. The exploitative landowners of Valencia embody the vices of avarice and laziness, but these are referenced only schematically. By contrast, much greater attention is devoted to the physical squalor and brutal actions perpetrated by those who work the fields. In correlation to this, Blasco Ibáñez emphasises the powerful influence of environmental determinism through a network of physiological and corrupting metaphors of the land, a living body invigorated by arteries of bloodied water.

In this dangerous environment of masculine bravado and unlimited alcohol consumption, Pimentó begins to show the physical symptoms of excess:

... his eyes had reddened; in his pupils shone a bluish, flickering spark, similar to the flame of alcohol, and his face was rapidly acquiring a dull pallor ... It was a real flood of *aguardiente* that, overflowing beyond the tavern, went down like a wave of fire into all of their stomachs.²⁸

The corrupting influence of toxic liquid that infiltrates the bodies of the local men gains momentum in this passage. However, the immediate provocation of hostility is made by a spectator, who jokes that Pimentó cannot afford to lose the bet now that he is paying rent once again, an incident that is described through a medical metaphor: 'it led to a painful silence, as in the bedroom of a sick person when the wounded part is revealed'.²⁹

In metonymic terms, Pimentó's open wound ('the wounded part') represents a combination of poverty and aggressive resentment of the landowning classes, a potent form of physiological corrosion that is exposed by the ill-judged remark. The thug's astute success in previous years in avoiding payment to his landowner has now been

²⁸ '... tenía los ojos enrojecidos, brillaba en sus pupilas una chispa azulada e indecisa, semejante a la llama del alcohol, y su cara adquiriría por momentos una palidez mate. ... Era aquello una verdadera inundación de aguardiente que, desbordándose fuera de la taberna, bajaba como oleada de fuego a todos los estómagos' (165).

²⁹ '... se hizo un silencio doloroso, como en la alcoba de un enfermo cuando se pone al descubierto la parte dañada' (167).

threatened by Batiste's presence, because he perceives that it weakens the collective resistance of the local labourers against the power of the landowners. However, alcohol is the immediate catalyst that provokes latent intent in Pimentó:

... many noticed that he was looking out of the corner of his eye, a murderous glance they knew of old in the tavern, as a sure sign of immediate aggression. His voice became distorted, as if all the alcohol that was swelling his stomach had risen to his throat like a burning wave.³⁰

For Pimentó, the only response to perceived threat is violence, thereby perpetuating the cycle of brutality suffered by the local collective – one that carries implications of primitivism here, through the surge of primal instinct. The alternative model of masculinity embodied by the honest, hard-working Batiste provokes only envy and resentment in Pimentó and fails to be accepted as a positive example by the local community. Infected by alcohol and anger, and inspired by Pimentó's brutal leadership, the collective hatred of the rural population re-emerges in the courtyard outside the tavern. They encircle Batiste, as though hypnotised by the power of the local thug:

The eyes staring at him shone with the flame of hatred; their heads, perturbed by alcohol, seemed to feel a horrible longing for murder; instinctively they all moved towards Batiste, who started to feel himself pushed from all sides as if the circle were narrowing to devour him.³¹

Blasco Ibáñez's representation of the atavistic force of the collective once again draws on contemporaneous theories of crowd psychology, in which the masses function as a single social organism that is susceptible to emotional infection and contagion.

In *La barraca*, the leader-hypnotist takes the form of the lazy drunkard Pimentó, who aggressively targets the intrusion of the peaceable, hard-working outsider. Trapped by the communal hostility of the crowd, the muscular Batiste defends himself by brandishing a barstool with which he cracks Pimentó's head open, resulting in profuse bleeding. Finally, the relentless cycle of hostility against Batiste triggers his own participation in violence. Fuelled by alcohol and an inflamed sense of injustice, and

³⁰ '... muchos advirtieron en él la mirada de través, aquella mirada de homicida que conocían de antiguo en la taberna, como signo indudable de inmediata agresión. Su voz tornóse fosca, como si todo el alcohol que hinchaba su estómago hubiese subido cual oleada ardiente a su garganta' (170–71).

³¹ 'Brillaban los ojos fijos en él con el fuego del odio; las cabezas turbadas por el alcohol parecían sentir el escarabajeo horrible del homicidio; instintivamente iban todos hacia Batiste, que comenzó a sentirse empujado por todos lados como si el círculo se estrechara para devorarlo' (172).

under the dominant influence of their ringleader, meaningless brutality has infected the male community that gathers at Copa's tavern as fighting breaks out among the spectators. In this scene, the proximity of aggression seems to activate a shared primal instinct that influences other members of the group.

La barraca thereby engages with contemporaneous discourses of collective psychology that were influential in *fin-de-siècle* France, and transposes them to a Valencian context. The novel foregrounds the recourse to both instinctive and imitative behaviour of the local people as a response to their entrapment in poverty. The water trope that contributes so vividly to the symbolism of corruption associated with the Valencian *huerta* informs the novel's *dénouement*. When Batiste goes shooting birds in the fields, demonstrating a bravado that attempts to repel the resurgent threat against him, he reaches a ravine of stagnant water and muddy banks. The rank water is described as a toxic liquid that threatens those who venture there: 'from the pools rose a foul-smelling vapour, the poisonous breath of marsh fever'.³² The pathological body of the land mirrors the deadly violence of local society that has resurfaced following the dangerous drinking competition between Pimentó and two adversaries. Beyond the obviously socio-economic dimension of the novel, the rural inhabitants are equally shaped by their relationship with the physical materiality of the landscape.

La barraca brings together images of fetid water and intoxication by alcohol, in a complex network of allusions to the injured body and liquid ingestion. Indeed, the pathologised characteristics of the environment and human body are closely connected through the trope of water. Pursued by the shadowy figure of Pimentó, Batiste shoots twice and injures his adversary, who drags himself out of a channel steeped in sludge, leaving a trail of dark blood. When he returns home after falling likewise into an irrigation ditch during the fight, almost drowning in the mud, Batiste discovers that he has been shot in the shoulder. As he surmises from the neighbours' visits to Pimentó's home, his adversary has died, finally succumbing to the consequences of his own aggression that functions as a type of moral illness. That night Batiste endures a feverish dream of Pimentó, the spectre of whom continues to inflict visions of physical injury: 'That is what the ghost desired, to hurt him. ... and afterwards he sank his cruel fingernails into the tear in his flesh and pulled apart the sides, making him roar in pain'.³³ The trope of the pathological body continues in the dream through violent visualisations of bodily injury, symptoms of the collective brutality and emotional contagion of rural

³² '... de las charcas salía un hálito hediondo, la respiración venenosa de la fiebre palúdica' (180).

³³ 'Eso es lo que deseaba el fantasma, hacerle daño. ... y después hundió sus uñas crueles en el desgarrón de la carne y tiró de los bordes, haciéndole rugir de dolor' (193).

society. These qualities, epitomised by Pimentó, are driven by an unequal class struggle for survival in the natural world and by extension the capitalist system.

The novel ends cyclically: the fate of Batiste's family echoes that of his predecessor, Barret, who narrowly abandons the idea to torch the roof of his own farmhouse towards the beginning of the novel in desperate protest against Don Salvador's cruel exploitation. Instead, Barret burns the crops outside his home, in a blaze that lasts for several hours. Mirroring this earlier event, as Batiste dreams about an inferno in the novel's concluding pages, his nightmare blends into reality when he becomes aware that the neighbours have set fire to his *barraca* whilst the family are sleeping. The elder son's calls for help are ignored; the family will flee in poverty, leaving the dead body of Pascualet to rot in the earth. The novel's cyclical ending emphasises the fatalistic nature of the tragedy, in which the Borrulls' illusions of peace and hard work are destroyed as the fire is evoked, literally as spilt blood, through one more image of bodily injury: 'the burning embers... tinged their bewildered faces with the reflection of blood'.³⁴ The contagious effects of violent action, conveyed by the author's striking evocations of physical and emotional wounding, accumulate and intensify over the course of the novel. Above all, the cycle of vengeance plays out in the description of Rosario's beating, the events leading to Pascualet's death, the fight at the tavern, and the gun-battle between Pimentó and Batiste. These episodes culminate, finally, in the house being set alight and the burning animals running from the barn at the novel's end, resulting in the flight of the family of outsiders from the land.

Conclusion

Blasco Ibáñez's sympathy for the struggling peasant classes inspires the vivid pictorialism of *Labarraca*. Notwithstanding the author's ideological critique of injustice, the narrative revels in pathological representations of the sick collective body of the rural proletariat and its corrupting expressions of imitative violence. This sickness is transported both by the stagnant waters that irrigate the land, leading to the untimely death of the child Pascualet, and the toxic effects of alcohol. An outsider, Batiste represents strength and honest labour, which are qualities that elevate him above the regressive brutality that underpins the local working-class character – until he too resorts to violence. No convincing hereditary paradigm is proposed; instead, the people of the *huerta* have been brutalised by poverty and hardship, and they are vulnerable therefore to the influence of behavioural contagion. By the end of the novel, Batiste's efforts to provide for his family through hard work have been rendered futile against

³⁴ '... el brasero ... teñía sus rostros atontados con reflejos de sangre' (197).

the forces of environmental determinism and the natural world (as elements of literary Naturalism), but also through the inevitable progress of Romantic tragedy. Whilst a full comparison is beyond the scope of the current article, contemporary scholarship on Zola raises significant areas for further consideration with regard to the ways in which each author's ideological stance informs their pictorial representations of the pathological body.

One of the most striking sets of visual imagery in *La barraca* is the irrigation system that conveys physical and moral sickness among the local populace, a theme echoed by alcohol consumption and its incitement of violence. The many resonances with the Albufera in *Cañas y barro*, in which the lake provides vital sustenance but also witnesses the destruction of the Paloma family, also invite further scholarly exploration. The pathological trope in *La barraca* underpins social critique that implicates both bourgeois oppression in the brutalising conditions endured by the working classes, and exposes the moral vices that corrupt the rural proletariat. Often described as Blasco Ibáñez's early masterpiece, *La barraca* depicts collective violence and behavioural imitation through vivid representations of the pathological body and its symbiotic relationship to the Valencian landscape.

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