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Helene C. Weldt-Basson  
*Michigan State University*

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## The Significance of Birds in the Works of Augusto Roa Bastos

### Abstract

Birds have occupied a central role in the works of the Paraguayan writer, Augusto Roa Bastos (1917-2005), from the beginning of his literary career. In texts ranging from his early poetry to his complete short stories, compiled in 2003, the bird motif repeatedly resurfaces, raising the question of the relevance of birds in Roa Bastos's *oeuvre*. This article argues that birds are used symbolically throughout Roa Bastos's poetry and prose works, by drawing upon their significance within Guaraní myths and literature. The article focuses on several symbolic associations for birds in Guaraní culture, including their relationship to oral language, their prophetic value, their association with thunderstorms, and their view of the owl as an ambiguous creature that signifies both death and rebirth. This article studies Roa Bastos's poetry, the short stories "El pájaro-mosca" 'The Hummingbird,' "Cuando un pájaro entierra sus plumas" 'When a Bird Buries its Feathers,' "El país donde los niños no querían nacer" 'The Country Where Children Didn't Want to be Born,' and the novels *Yo el Supremo* 'I The Supreme,' *Vigilia del almirante* 'The Admiral's Vigil,' and *Madama Sui* 'Madame Sui.'

### Keywords

birds, Augusto Roa Bastos, Paraguayan literature, Paraguay, poetry, short stories, symbolism, Guaraní myths, Guaraní literature, El pájaro-mosca, cuando un pájaro entierra, sus plumas, el país donde los niños no querían nacer, Yo el Supremo, Vigilia del almirante, Madama Sui

## The Significance of Birds in the Works of Augusto Roa Bastos

Helene C. Weldt-Basson  
*Michigan State University*

The late Paraguayan writer, Augusto Roa Bastos (1917-2005), wrote a large corpus of works spanning seven decades. His first piece, a book of poetry titled *El ruiseñor de la aurora* 'The Nightingale of Dawn' was published in 1942, while his last work, *Cuentos completos* 'Complete Short Stories' appeared in 2003.<sup>1</sup> Although he is primarily known for his short stories and novels, Roa Bastos's *oeuvre* also includes poetry, theater, essays, and childrens' books. An interesting commonality between works from these varied genres is the prominent presence of birds. The author symbolically employs a variety of different birds (especially owls, hummingbirds, roosters, swallows, and crows) to develop many of the principal themes of his poetry and fiction.

The focus on birds implies an obvious question: why do birds occupy such an outstanding role in the Paraguayan author's works? I believe that Roa Bastos's bird symbolism arises from the significance of birds within Guarani myths and literature. In this essay, I will analyze Roa Bastos's works within the context of two collections of Guarani writings and anthropological studies: the *Pequeño Decameron Nivacle* 'Small Decameron Nivacle' compiled by Miguel Chase-Sardi, and *Las culturas condenadas* 'The Condemned Cultures' compiled by Roa Bastos himself. These texts shed light on much of the bird symbolism developed by the author to express and enhance important poetical and fictional themes.

Perhaps the most frequently mentioned bird in both Guarani myth and Roa Bastos's fiction is the hummingbird, known in Spanish as *colibrí*, *pájaro-mosca*, or *picaflor*. The hummingbird plays a

major role in two of Roa Bastos's short stories: "El pájaro-mosca" 'The Hummingbird' from the collection *El baldío* 'The Vacant Lot' (1966), and "Cuando un pájaro entierra sus plumas" 'When a Bird Buries its Feathers' published in *Cuentos completos* (2003). It also appears briefly in the poem "Destino" 'Destiny' (*Poesía*, 1999) and the novel *Yo el Supremo* 'I The Supreme' (1974).

In Guarani myth, the hummingbird has at least three major meanings. First, the hummingbird is associated with the creation of language. In the Guarani poem "Fundamento del lenguaje humano" 'Foundation of Human Language,' we are told that the creator, Father Namandui, is sustained in his labor with food and drink offered by the hummingbird, who witnesses and participates in the creation of language: "Habiendo creado el fundamento del lenguaje humano / habiendo creado una pequeña porción de amor, / ... el Colibrí le refrescaba la boca; el que sustentaba a Namandui / con productos del paraíso fue el Colibrí" (*Las culturas condenadas* 260) 'Having created the foundation of human language / having created a small portion of love, / ... the Hummingbird refreshed his mouth; he who sustained Namandui with products from Paradise was the Hummingbird.' Thus, the hummingbird is intimately associated with human language. This becomes an important connection for Roa Bastos in his fiction, since one of his principal themes is the loss of authenticity of language, the alienation between language and the objects or concepts it names. There is a direct connection between the Guarani poem and *Yo el Supremo*, since the novel specifically cites the poem in a passage that reflects upon the disintegration of linguistic meaning. When the main character, *El Supremo* (based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century dictator, José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, called Dr. Francia), imagines a return to a mythical era in which word and object were unified, prior to the invention of human language, he cites "Fundamento del lenguaje humano" and its version of creation *verbatim* (*Yo el Supremo* 483). He follows this quotation with the commentary:

¡El famoso lenguaje humano! Entonces también nosotros hablamos. Millones de años después los bribones de la filosofía y los escobones del púlpito dirán que no sacamos el lenguaje de una simple granadilla sino de una "ayuda extraordinaria." Ahora esa

*ayuda extraordinaria* ya no me sirve. Te oigo y te comprendo por memoria. Lo demás, todo perdido. El inmenso caballo negro entre los dos (483-84).

There you are! The celebrated phenomenon of human language! After that we too speak. Millions of years after, the fat scholastics idling on their asses and broom-skinny preachers straddling their pulpits were [going] to say that we did not get language from a mere passionfruit but from an “extraordinary aid.” And now this *extraordinary aid* is of no help to me whatsoever. I hear you and understand you in memory. The rest, all lost. The huge black horse between the two. (324)<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere, I have reflected upon the possible symbolism of the “black horse,” which is alternately referred to as the “moro,” or white and black horse, suggesting a connection to writing (white paper, black ink).<sup>3</sup> Throughout *Yo el Supremo*, the character Dr. Francia constantly criticizes writing as an inauthentic form of expression, while he praises spoken words as a more genuine way of communicating. Hence, the hummingbird evokes the value of a pristine, original, untainted language, which contrasts with the connotation-laden, misinterpreted writings of the contemporary world.

Roa Bastos employs the parrot in *Yo el Supremo* in a similar manner. The parrot is credited with speaking “una lengua viva que la lengua muerta de los escritores encerrados en las jaulas-ataúdes de sus libros no puede imitar” (168) ‘it preached a living language that the dead language of writers imprisoned in the coffin-cages of their books is incapable of imitating’ (65). Hence, the language of birds has greater communicative power, as it is associated with a mythical moment of linguistic creation, in which object and word were still unified.

The poem “Margen” ‘Margin’ similarly suggests that humans should attempt to imitate the authentic language of birds through their writing: “en el borde interior de la página ... / alguien espera en cuclillas con Mirada de sordo ... / a que la palabra diga algo ... / como el canto natural de los pájaros” ‘on the inner margin of the page ... / someone is waiting crouched with the Look of a deaf man ... / for the word to say something ... / like the natural song of the

birds' (110).

This preoccupation with the authenticity of language linked to birds clearly precedes *Yo el Supremo* in the story "El pájaro-mosca." In one of the few articles published on this story, Debra Castillo deftly analyzes the literary feud between the protagonists, Funes and Ozuna. Funes, accused of plagiarism years ago by Ozuna, is slowly buying off the impoverished Ozuna's classic library. Ozuna, for political reasons, lost his professorship and was incarcerated. This led to his subsequent poverty and need to sell his famous book collection. According to Castillo, both men have buried themselves in ossified books, isolated from society and reality:

Ozuna y Funes se asemejan en su adherencia inflexible e intransigente a la cultura de la frase gastada que representan. Los dos hombres se han vertido completamente hacia el interior y reflejan perpetuamente auto-percepciones trilladas y derivativas. Sin embargo, el cuento se revela esta excentricidad o apoteosis de lo mediocre como la más peligrosa locura, como los dos egoístas esfuerzan la clausura no sólo en sí mismos sino también en sus hijas inocentes ... Delmira y Alba heredan, en una forma intensificada, la locura implícita en las ilusiones de sus padres, una locura ya sin pretensiones literarias cuando el "pájaro-mosca" de sus espíritus vivos se agita para escapar del arte malo y objetos podridos de museo que definen sus vidas.

Ozuna and Funes are similar in their inflexible and intransigent adherence to the culture of the spent phrase which they represent. The two men have completely turned themselves inward and perpetually reflect cliché and derivative self-perceptions. However, the story reveals this eccentricity or apoteosis of the mediocre as the most dangerous form of insanity, since the two selfish men force confinement not only on themselves, but also on their innocent daughters ... Delmira and Alba inherit, in an intensified form, the insanity implicit in the illusions of their fathers, an insanity no longer with literary pretensions when the "humming-bird" of their lively spirits agitates to escape from bad art and the rotten museum objects that define their lives. (193)

The interesting question here is what does the *pájaro-mosca*, or hummingbird, symbolize? Throughout the story we are told that Alba, Ozuna's daughter, "se le escapa en busca de su famoso pájaro-mosca" 'escapes in search of her famous hummingbird,' (300) while the story ends with the image of Funes's daughter, Delmira, trying to catch her own imaginary bird (311). Castillo implies that the hummingbird represents the "lively spirit" of the girls (*sans* literary pretensions) counterpoised to the bad art of their fathers. However, I would argue that the hummingbird is not divorced from the literary and represents something even more specific than the notion of the girls' spirit. Since the hummingbird is associated with authentic, original human language in Guarani cosmography, perhaps the search for the *pájaro-mosca* symbolizes the desire for an authentic language beyond the fathers' ossified written culture. The daughters are not simply looking for an outlet for their "lively spirits," a form of sanity or peace, but a specific type of sanity or peace, embodied in the equation of the hummingbird with genuine language. This interpretation makes sense within the context of the story, which focuses on books as objects without meaning. The search for the hummingbird thus becomes a search for a meaningful, untainted language, beyond the useless words of the old books.

Second, Guarani myth also associates the hummingbird with the human soul. León Cadogan asserts that the hummingbird from Guarani myth is the same as the one discussed by Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss speaks of the hummingbird who arrives at "La morada de las almas; y la misma alma humana que en las creencias de los lejanos aztecas 'pasaba años en el paraíso, dorado dominio del sol ...' después su cuerpo tomaba la apariencia de un picaflor" "The dwelling place of the souls; and the same human soul who in the beliefs of the faraway Aztecs 'spent years in Paradise, golden dominion of the sun ...' after its body took on the appearance of the hummingbird' (Cadogan 34). In Roa Bastos's poem, "Destino" 'Destiny' we are told that "cada uno lleva pegado / a la sed inmemorial de los labios / el trémulo colibrí / de la materia alma / su río de rocío inagotable" 'each one carries stuck / to the immemorial thirst of his lips / the tremulous hummingbird / of the material soul / its river of inexhaustible dew' (112). Thus, Roa Bastos relies directly on the Guarani association of the hummingbird with the soul, to construct

the man/hummingbird metaphor in his poem. Furthermore, the vision of the hummingbird satiating man's thirst with its dew evokes the hummingbird of the Guarani poem who "refreshed the mouth" of the Guarani creator, Namandui. Roa Bastos frequently fuses the human soul with the hummingbird and other birds throughout his texts.

Third, there is an association between the hummingbird and prophetic ability in Guarani myth. This connotation forms the nucleus of the story "Cuando un pájaro entierra sus plumas." Branislava Susnik states with regard to the supernatural in Guarani culture:

El pájaro por sí mismo simboliza para los indígenas el don de "visión de la tierra:" este símbolo es el origen del que surgen los conceptos de "aves premonitoras," aves de augurio, etc. Pero además las almas de los chamanes post-mortem y las almas externalizadas de los chamanes vivientes—sueños, visiones—pueden tomar "asiento" en los pájaros ...

The bird in itself symbolizes for the indigenous people the gift of "vision of the land:" this symbol is the origin from which the concept of "premonitory birds," birds of augury, etc. arises. But moreover the souls of the dead witchdoctors and the externalized souls of the living witchdoctors—dreams, visions—can seat themselves within birds ... (149)

Cadogan concurs that the hummingbird is the messenger of the prophets (33). A textual example from Guarani literature is the Mak'a poem "Qué dicen los pájaros?" Here, the hummingbird, referred to as "el pájaro de mal agüero" 'the bird of bad omen' (*Las culturas condenadas* 345), foresees the arrival of the white men who are looking for the Indians in order to destroy them. Roa Bastos's story builds on these connotations by underscoring the prophetic talents of the hummingbird. In "Cuando un pájaro entierra sus plumas," the protagonist's godmother tells him to hunt a hummingbird so that she can make him a protective relic. The boy asks: "—Es cierto que eso ataja los golpes de garrote y las balas? —El colibrí es sagrado, mi hijo. La frutita del sol. Ya los indios sabían que el colibrí nos señala en el vientre de nuestra madre para futuros dirigentes de

los hombres” ‘Is it true that that wards off blows of the cudgel and bullets?—The hummingbird is sacred, my boy. The fruit of the sun. The Indians already know that the hummingbird designates those among us who will be the future leaders of men within the womb of our mothers’ (424). The boy, instead of hunting the hummingbird with palm leaves, uses his slingshot and appears to kill the bird. However, the godmother manages to revive the hummingbird, who then escapes. The protagonist subsequently transforms himself into a bird, flying through the air propelled by a sheet attached to two long sticks. At the end of the story, the wind blows the boy into a pit, presumably causing his death. As he falls, he calls for help: “aferándome al amuleto que no tenía, al corazón del colibrí que se había volado esa mañana” ‘holding on to the amulet that I didn’t have, to the heart of the hummingbird that had flown away that morning’ (427). The wounded hummingbird thus becomes a bad omen or predictive sign of the future death of the boy and carries the same prophetic value attributed to it within Guarani myth.

The prophetic value of birds is not surprisingly a major element in Roa Bastos’s third novel, *Vigilia del almirante* (1992) ‘The Admiral’s Vigil,’ based on the historical figure Christopher Columbus. The sighting of birds during Columbus’s first voyage historically presaged the discovery of land and the New World. However, Roa Bastos’s use of birds transcends historical veracity and functions symbolically within the novel. When the birds are first mentioned at the beginning of the text, the narrator states: “Toda la tarde se oyeron pasar pájaros ... A veces el arco se descompone en dos rayas oscuras formando el número siete como un rasgón en el astroso trasero del cielo” ‘All afternoon one heard the birds pass by ... At times the arc [of birds] decomposed into two dark lines that formed the number seven like a tear in the starry behind of the sky’ (15). Traditionally, the number seven is associated with the end of one cycle and the beginning of another.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the fusion of birds with the number seven presages the end of an era (Spain’s decadence, Old World) and the beginning of a new one (Spain’s golden age, the New World). Birds go beyond announcing the discovery of land, and are developed into a symbol pointing to the future conquest.

The same can be said of a section titled “The Sacred Bird” that appears much later in the novel. According to the narrator (Colum-

bus), one of the *taíno* kings sent the unknown Pilot (who supposedly voyaged to America before Columbus and gave him information relevant to the discovery) a sacred bird. The king's emissary cut open the bird's head to reveal that instead of a brain it had "un pequeño espejo ovalado. Vio en el las estrellas de la noche. ... Cuando las estrellas desaparecieron, el Piloto vio reflejada en una turbia lejanía la turbamulta de muchos hombres vestidos de hierro que parecían bajar del cielo pero que en realidad desembarcaban de grandes galeones. El ave expiró en un posterior aleteo" 'a small oval mirror. He saw in it the Stars of the sky. ... When the stars disappeared, the Pilot saw reflected in a cloudy distance the crowd of many men dressed in iron who seemed to come down from the sky but who in reality disembarked from great ships. The bird died in a subsequent fluttering of wings' (241). In other words, Spain's conquest of Latin America is revealed in the form of a prophetic bird, whose brain mirrors the future. The character Columbus himself confirms the importance of birds in the discovery of America when, on his deathbed, he states "ni en mi cabeza vuelan más los pájaros del Mar Tenebroso, a los que debí el Descubrimiento" 'nor do the birds of the Tenebrous Sea, to whom I owe the conquest, fly any more in my head' (368) *Vigilia del almirante*, just as "Cuando un pájaro entierra sus plumas," employs birds in the prophetic manner suggested by the Guarani.

Another Guarani mythological association that appears in Roa Bastos's fiction is the connection between birds and the elements of thunder and fire. According to Cadogan, "los *Choroti*, *Lengua* y *Ashlushlay* consideran que el trueno es producido por aves míticas. A lo cual agrega [Lowie] que en el folklore de los *Ashlushlay* 'el fuego pertenecía originariamente a los Pájaros del Trueno, los que habían sido empollados de huevos de colibrí'" 'the *Choroti*, *Lengua* and *Ashlushlay* consider that thunder is produced by mythic birds. To which he [Lowie] adds that in the folklore of the *Ashlushlay* "fire belongs originally to the Birds of Thunder, who had been hatched from hummingbird eggs"' (35). The connection between birds and fire brings to mind Roa Bastos's children's story, *El pollito de fuego* 'The Little Chick of Fire.' This tale traces the adventures of a tiny chick, Pipiolín, who does not lead a normal life because he is made of fire. He accidentally sets things aflame, and lacks friends because

he is different from everyone else. At the end of the story, there is a dangerous snake terrorizing the town. Pipiolín decides to attack him. While he is fighting with the snake: “el pollito de fuego fue creciendo, creciendo, hasta convertirse en un hermoso gallo azul que brillaba con los colores del arco iris. El pico y las púas de Pipiolín acabaron destrozando a la víbora” ‘the little chick of fire was growing, growing, until he became a beautiful blue cock that shone with the colors of the rainbow. Pipiolín’s beak and spines ended up destroying the snake’ (*El pollito de fuego*, n.pag.). This tale fuses various mythological associations. In addition to the allusion to the Guarani myth of the thunder birds that cause fire, Pipiolín’s story bears a resemblance to the myth of the phoenix. The phoenix, associated with the color red (Pipiolín’s color), is a symbol of eternal life, as it dies and resurrects within fire. Similarly, Pipiolín’s heroic attack on the snake and transformation into the rooster reenacts traditional associations between the cock and courageous behavior.<sup>5</sup> According to Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, “the cock counteracts the evil influences of darkness” (209). Pipiolín’s battle against the snake can thus be seen as symbolizing the eternal struggle between good and evil.

The cock as symbol of courage and as triumphant over evil is also employed in *Yo el Supremo*. *El Supremo* cites the relationship between the cock and the lion from François Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (*Yo el Supremo* 140), where the lion fears the white cock who represents the sun. Roa Bastos amplifies the text to allegorize the Paraguayan triumph over Brazilian imperialism (Weldt-Basson 206-07), since the citation appears within the context of the Brazilian emissary, Correa da Cámara’s visit to Paraguay: “El león anda de noche en busca de sus presas y depredaciones, bandeirante de gran melena y hambre grande. El gallo despierta con la luz y se mete al león en el buche. Correa tragó fuerte y revoleó los ojos ...” (140) ‘The lion prowls by night in search of prey and spoils, a *bandeirante* with a great mane and a terrible hunger. The cock awakens with the light and stuffs the lion down his gullet. Correa swallowed hard and rolled his eyes ...’ (43).

The connection between birds and thunderstorms also characterizes the novel *Yo el Supremo*. In the Nivaclé myth “Ajoclohái, Los hombres-pájaros” ‘Ajoclohái, the men-birds’ the wives of the men

become angry with them because they will not end their game, and thus refuse to bring them water. The men enter a great fire shouting the names of different birds and, in a manner once again similar to the myth of the phoenix, are then actually transformed into these birds and fly away to a river where they satiate their thirst. According to this myth, “estos ajoclohai se encuentran hoy arriba, sobre el cielo. Hasta ahora creen en ellos. Se dice que son ellos los que envían las tormentas y los truenos. Los que mandan las lluvias” “These *Ajoclohai* are found above today, above the sky. They believe in them even now. It is said that they are the ones who send the storms and the thunder. Those who send the rain” (*Pequeño Decameron Nivacle* 74). This myth appears to motivate the episode in which a group of blind swallows fall at El Supremo’s feet during a storm:

A la tarde siguiente ... por el catalejo encañonado hacia el Chaco, vi avanzar una nube de extraña forma. ¡Otra tormenta! Repicó la imaginación en los huesos ... De nuevo todo el país en pie de guerra. ... Cuando me di cuenta estaba cayendo una manga de golondrinas que volaban a la deriva, enloquecidamente. Ciegas las aves. Los balazos del agua de la tormenta les habían reventado los ojos. ... Aguanté los tiros de plomo derretido y helado, las golondrinas, no. Se traían su verano desde el norte. ... Deduje que la tormenta se había extendido muy lejos. Toda esa volatería llegaba desde los confines del país a morir a mis pies (561-62).

The following afternoon, ... through the spyglass aimed toward the Chaco, I saw a strange-shaped cloud approaching. Another storm! Imagination tolled in my bones ... The whole country on a war footing once again ... By the time I realized what it was, a skirl of madly drifting swallows was falling. Blind birds. The bullets of rain from the cloudburst had put their eyes out. ... I was able to withstand the hail of freezing melted lead; but not the swallows. They were bringing their summer from the north. ... I deduced that the storm had extended over a vast area. That whole great flock had come from the farthest corners of the country to die at my feet (394-95).

The raindrops, described as bullets, prefigure The Paraguayan Cha-

co War (1931-1935) [note that the spyglass is facing the Chaco and the birds are coming from the North], fought against Bolivia over the rights to the Northern Chaco region. Although Paraguay won the war, the country lost thirty-six thousand men and was brought to the brink of financial collapse. Another result of the Chaco conflict was that it led to mass emigration from Paraguay (Weldt-Basson 104). The mythical connotation of the birds is here combined with a historical one: According to Teresa Méndez-Faith, the Paraguayans who emigrated to Argentina in order to find work harvesting cotton were also known as swallows, or *peones-golondrinas* (29-30). Thus, birds are used in this segment to symbolize a Paraguayan historical reality, but are simultaneously intertwined with traditional mythic associations.

The owl is yet another bird whose significance in Roa Bastos's texts relates to Guarani myth. Cadogan informs us that the owl has a bifold symbolic value among the Guarani. On the one hand, he cites Ismael Moya's article, "Aves mágicas," in which Moya states that "la lechuza es pájaro de mal agüero" 'the owl is a bird of bad omen' (*Las culturas condenadas* 35). This coincides with traditional symbolic associations for the owl, such as Cirlof's, who indicates that the owl represents death (247). On the other hand, Cadogan states that this negative meaning is not always the case among the Guarani, who often associate the owl with the Creator, since the Creator assumes the form of the owl to engender the father of the Guarani race (*Las culturas condenadas* 36). Thus, the owl is simultaneously associated with death and creation or rebirth.

This Guarani mythic association explains how the owl is symbolically employed in Roa Bastos's last novel, *Madama Sui* (1995). We are told that the name "Sui" is derived from the owl known as the *suindá* in Guarani. Moreover, the *suindá* becomes an important artifact for the protagonist:

Alguien, nunca se supo quién, había cazado una lechuza suindá. La momificó en aguardiente y salitre y la puso bajo el pupitre de Sui. Llena de espanto, la maestra mandó poner el pájaro embalsamado sobre la mesa de los mapas y los dibujos. ...  
Durante una hora los alumnos contemplaron el prodigio alucinante del ave nocturna ...

En un descuido de la maestra, Sui recuperó al vuelo la momia del suindá. Escapó corriendo, llevándola bajo el brazo.

Someone, it was never known who, had hunted the *suindá* owl. He mummified it in whisky and saltpeter and put it under Sui's desk. Full of fear, the teacher ordered the embalmed bird placed on the table with the maps and drawings. ...

For an hour the students contemplated the dazzling prodigy of the nocturnal bird ...

Because of carelessness on the part of the teacher, Sui quickly retrieved the mummy of the *suindá*. She escaped, running, carrying it under her arm. (55)

Sui's identification with the owl is important within the novel's development. The owl, who, as we just saw, symbolizes both death and creation, and hence implies rebirth and immortality, prefigures and represents the novel's ending, in which Sui and her love, the protagonist of Roa Bastos's previous novel, *Contravida*, burn up in the *tarumá* tree. Again reminiscent of the tale of the phoenix, the ending suggests that the two characters, who occupy archetypal roles within their respective novels, will be reborn and continue their archetypal nature in some other form. Sui's lifelong love is an archetype of the Paraguayan revolutionary who is reincarnated in various forms throughout Roa Bastos's novels, while Sui herself is an archetype of the prostituted Paraguayan woman.<sup>6</sup> The death and rebirth of these two figures throughout Paraguayan history is symbolized through the Guarani mythological symbol of the owl.

Cadogan also states that in Apapoluva myth, the owl is "guardián de la morada de las almas" 'guardian of the dwelling place of the souls' (35). Roa Bastos uses this association in his poem "Nocturno paraguayo," in which he speaks of the urutaú, which is a type of owl: "Canta el urutaú / ... Pero desde el nocturno campanario del monte, / no dobla por los muertos / sino por los ausentes en lejanos países" "The urutaú sings / ... But from the nocturnal bell tower of the mountain / it does not toll for the dead / but for those who are absent in foreign countries' (64). The poem negates the traditional association of the owl with death. Instead, the owl is singing for the exiled, those who must dwell in foreign countries due to Paraguayan

civil war. In this sense, the owl becomes the guardian of the “dwelling place of the souls,” but in this case, the souls are living in exile far from their homeland. Another possible interpretation is that exile implies a different kind of death, consisting of nostalgia for the homeland, the death of the ability to live in one’s own country.

The general connection between birds and men’s souls perhaps explains the strong identification between humankind and birds that permeates Roa Bastos’s fiction. As we have already seen, in Guarani myth, men-birds actually appear, further confirming this association. In many of Roa Bastos’s poems, men, women, or their souls are described metaphorically in terms of birds. For example, in “Madrigal,” the woman’s voice is compared to that of a bird: “Como el canto suave del trovador alado, la armonía de su voz vibró sólo un momento” ‘Like the soft song of the winged troubadour, the harmony of your voice vibrated only for a moment’ (17). The two voices give rise to the title, “Madrigal,” which is a musical composition for various voices. In “La jaula de oro” ‘The Golden Cage,’ man’s soul is identified with a nightingale: “Es una jaula de doradas rajadas / como ésas que aprisionan la sonora / inquietud del ruiseñor cuando a la aurora / repite el canto de sus dulces quejas. / Cuántas veces también con ala herida, / en vano intentó de fugarse, mi alma” ‘It is a cage of golden slits / like those that imprison the sonorous / inquietude of the nightingale when at dawn / it repeats the song of its sweet complaints. / How many times did my soul also try / in vain to escape with a wounded wing?’ (18). In the poem “El primer hombre” ‘The First Man,’ the first man created, Nanderu Mbaë Kuaa, is compared to a heron: “La primera mañana / como una garza hiriendo con sus alas el cielo / amaneció volando sobre el mundo / desde la noche antigua hasta los hombros del gran Padre. Nanderuvusu pasó la mano / sobre el plumaje blanco de la claridad / y encontró a su lado a Nanderu Mbaë Kuaa, / el primer hombre ...” ‘The first morning / like a heron wounding the sky with its wings / dawned flying over the world / from the ancient night to the shoulders of the great Father. Nanderuvusu passed his hands / over the radiant white plumage / and found at his side Nanderu Mbaë Kuaa, / the first man’ (95). Finally, in “Conversación con el hijo” ‘Conversation with his Son’ the bird symbolizes human life and mortality: “la realidad en una de tus manos / y la fábula en la otra; / tu infancia hará con ellas /

sus castillos de luz, / y el tiempo entre tus manos / latirá hasta morir / como un pájaro borrándose en un sueño” ‘reality in one of your hands / and fable in the other / your infancy will make with them / castles of light, / and time in your hands / will beat until death / like a bird erasing itself in a dream’ (104).

In a similar vein, birds are associated with human error and sin in the story “El país donde los niños no querían nacer” ‘The Country Where Children Didn’t Want to be Born.’ This story deals with a young prince who seeks revenge on the cruel emperor who killed his father. The emperor has the young prince killed, and as a result, all the children of the country refuse to be born. The country is deserted and its population has died off, when one day a young boy, referred to as Nada (which means “nothing” in Spanish), wanders into the country and hears the tale of the country’s history from an old woman. The old woman sends him off to a garden, where he meets “Ave” (which means “bird” in Spanish). There Nada kills a serpent while Ave eats an apple from the tree. Nada is Adán, or Adam, spelled backwards, while Ave is Eva, or Eve, also spelled backwards. Thus, these two characters reenact the myth of Adam and Eve, and the creation of the world. They briefly signify an opportunity for the world to reinvent itself; however, when they repeat the actions of Adam and Eve, the sun disappears and darkness envelops them, presaging once again man’s original sin.

Although Ave is largely used by Roa Bastos because it is Eva spelled backward, the name Ave (in a manner similar to the biblical Eve) also acquires an identification with womankind and with human nature in the story. This association is reinforced by the symbolic appearance of birds throughout the story. For example, when the young prince is killed by the emperor, his body is devoured by a large quantity of crows, which are traditionally associated with death. The presence of symbolic birds suggests to the reader a possible emblematic connection between Ave (bird) and Eve (womankind).

In *Metaforismos* ‘Metaphorisms,’ Roa Bastos extracts key lines from his novels that encapsulate a form of axiomatic wisdom. The final “metaphorism” of the collection, taken from Roa Bastos’s last novel, *Madama Sui*, states: “Una obra bien hecha es aquella cuyo final recuerda siempre el comienzo cerrando el círculo del relato”

'A well-done literary work is one whose ending always recalls the beginning, closing the circle of the tale' (*Metaforismos* 151). To a certain degree, this saying, which indeed characterizes many of Roa Bastos's individual works, also aptly describes the manner in which the corpus of his writings has been constructed. Roa Bastos, in a writing career that spanned seven decades, peppered all his works with certain key themes and leitmotifs. From his early poetry to his final novel and short stories, birds prove to be key symbolic figures that illustrate the cyclic nature of the trajectory of his works and their profound interrelationship with Guarani culture.

### Notes

1 *Cuentos completos* is largely a compilation of Roa Bastos's previous short stories, with a few additional new pieces.

2 This quotation and all translations from *Yo el Supremo* are taken from the translation by Helen Lane. All other translations are my own.

3 See Weldt-Basson 1993, 92-99, where I extensively develop the novel's symbolism with regard to the white and black horse and its relationship to writing.

4 Several dictionaries of symbols associate the number seven with cycles. See Cirlot, 330 and Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 860.

5 Such associations are especially true for Far Eastern culture, where the cock is linked to the quality of courage, primarily due to a homophony between the Chinese ideogram for cock and that which means "of good omen." See Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 209.

6 The character, Madama Sui, is a "reincarnation" of Miguel Vera's childhood friend turned prostitute, Lágrima González, from Roa Bastos's first novel, *Hijo de hombre* 'Son of Man.' She is also identified with Madame Lynch and Eva Perón, both of whom were primarily known as mistresses of famous men (Francisco Solano López, Paraguayan president, and Juan Perón, Argentine president). Through these associations, as well as certain textual commentaries that establish Sui as an emblem of the exploited woman (see *Madama Sui* 11), Roa Bastos develops his character into an archetypal figure. Similarly, the protagonist of *Contravida*, who is also Sui's lifelong love in *Madama Sui*, is shown to be a repetition of other revolutionary figures in Roa Bastos's fiction, such as Cristóbal Jara in *Hijo de hombre*, and Félix Moral in *El fiscal*. See Weldt-Basson 2007, where I develop this archetypal interpretation.

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