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WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

The Argentine Way of Fiction

When I accompanied ***Borges*** across the street one day near the National Library in Buenos Aires where he worked, he knew within seconds of my introducing myself that my native language was English--though I had prided myself on my unaccented Spanish. With equal alacrity he guessed that I was from New York, and then, with the confident divination of his blindness, that I was Jewish, a tribalism whose bloodline, he assured me, he shared by a demonstrable quarter.

That was ***Borges***, the most cosmopolitan and gentlemanly of writers. He processed everything into his private vision of the world, even me, an 18-year-old, thrilled to be strolling with the old master. He asked why I had come to South America. "To know it," I said. "To learn." Barges scrolled his eyes, in appreciation, I thought, of my folly.

I might have added, without lying, that his fiction was one of the treasures that had lured me to the South, but I rejected the impression such an apparently sycophantic response might have conveyed. The fact was, I didn't know why I was there. I wasn't a scholar--I belonged to no institution.

I had saved money working the graveyard shift at the General Post Office in Manhattan, dollars that could buy real blocks of time in that poorer part of the world. I was also armed with a few barely articulate notions: that we of the North and the South were inextricably entwined, the extension and flip side of each other, the Alpha and Omega of the New World.

Yet for all my eagerness, somewhere inside me was a sense of the peril that this trip might entail. When it came time to leave, I found myself begging my high school girlfriend to join me, almost dragging her along. Her interest in "seeing the world" was not nearly as intense as mine. But I wouldn't have gone without her: I was afraid of taking my trip alone.

It was the early '70s. A giddy sense of promise--and chaos--seemed to pervade the continent. Salvador Allende was president of Chile, the first freely elected Socialist in the Americas. In Argentina, militant workers and a group of left-wing urban guerrillas were on the brink of forcing the military to cede pow er to an aged, exiled, populist named Peron.

But more than politics or youth or experiential hunger, what propelled me to South America were

the writers--not only Barges, but Asturias, Vallejo, Neruda, and Garcia Marquez. Their work represented an explosion of literary expression that seemed to dwarf what I, at least, perceived to be the contracting imagination back home.

It did not occur to me yet that the amplification of my self that I wished to extract from these writers might be a delusion. In New York I had convinced myself of their connection to the North --Neruda to Whitman and Hart Crane, Barges to Hawthorne and Poe, Garcia Marquez to Faulkner. By extension, they were connected to me, I told myself, their work belonged to all of us, a kind of literary Pan American highway that stretched to the far, astral reaches of the New World. But how could I expect the world I had constructed from reading them, siphoned through the dreamscape of my own desire, to be accurate or even remotely real?

Borges once said that while Spanish American writers of the 19th century had influenced only themselves and Spain, North American writers of the same period belonged to the literature of the world. Behind his words was the heady awareness that he was among a handful of artists who would change this.

What I did not grasp was how singular, even miraculous, this accomplishment truly was. Or the crucible in which it had been forged.

It was no accident that my girlfriend and I eventually settled in Buenos Aires. In the tropics and in the altiplano we were obvious outsiders, ersatz anthropologists at worst, at best voyeurs. In Buenos Aires, however, life seemed vaguely, disturbingly familiar: its legions of European immigrants might have left for America from the same port as my grandparents. It was with a certain naive wonder that I realized we had rented an apartment in Barrio Once, the old Jewish quarter of the city. Around the comer was a pastrami shop run by a husband and wife who bickered in Yiddish behind the counter. But the clarity of this apparent mirror of New York was deceptive: in a lusterless suburb, a few train stops away, Eichmann's eldest son did a booming business with an auto body shop that catered to Nazis who had bought their citizenships from Peron in the '40s at a cool million a head.

My girlfriend studied the milonga, the rich guitar music of the country, while I found work as a stringer for a few publications back home. Argentina was in the news. Peron, the Great Caudillo, had returned, a perplexing, wily demagogue who was a combination of Mussolini and Garcia Marquez's autumnal patriarch.

During Peron's tumultuous exile a group of young guerrilleros cleverly laid claim to his movements name. They quickly hoped to win over, and then radicalize, the Caudillo's supporters among the working class. The plan seemed to work. The left grew rich from kidnappings and dizzy with the sense that the Peronist hordes were behind them. But it was a bloody and perilous game.

In ***Borges***'s story "The Dead Man," the protagonist realizes that the group of contrabandistas he has tried to take over "have betrayed him from the start. . . . They have allowed him to make love, to command, to triumph, because they had already given him up for dead, because in [the chieftain's eyes] he was already dead."

The same may be said of Peron's young guerrilleros: the Caudillo let them have their day because he had already condemned them to die, striking a secret deal with the military who had deposed him 18 years before. Peron recaptured power and the country erupted in celebration. Argentina was saved. He branded the leftists as "infiltrators; and banished them from the movement. Tramped by their leader, the left scurried back underground. But they would not capitulate. They wanted the power they believed they'd earned, the power they'd been promised, and a vicious fight

broke out, the prize being the soul of a party that did not have one.

The military stood on the sidelines and waited. The Caudillo was old, his health was bad, he died shortly after assuming power. But he died with honor, a national hero, his stripped military rank and his presidency restored.

His corpse lay in state and millions of Argentines filed past it, weeping. In broken-down buses came the despised cabecitas negras, or "little blackheads," as the European portenos called the dark, Indian blooded folk from the provinces. Downtown Buenos Aires was flooded with the nation's poor. They slept in piles in front of the elegant stores on Calle Florida, beating drums, chanting Peronist slogans and songs. The radio continuously played the most solemn music--requiems by Beethoven, Mozart, Verdi, and Brahms. Many believed the music had been composed especially for the occasion: to mourn the loss of hope, the death of another savior.

After a decorous interval, the Dirty War against the guerrillas began, though few people knew yet what was going on. Not that there weren't signs. One evening my girlfriend visited a friend who was convalescing from a minor illness in the hospital. More than the usual number of gunshots and explosions took over the city that night, and when she did not return, I went out on the streets to find her.

As it turned out, she did not come home: leaving the hospital, she had stumbled upon a surprise demonstration in the Congressional Plaza. Running from the tear gas, she was apprehended.

There are many details of her captivity: the bedless, common cell, naked to the cold drizzle on the patio, in which she was confined; the blanket I was permitted to bring her; our three-minute visit under guard of six pointing machine guns, during which she responded to my concerned questions with delayed, numb nods. But most of all, the young man in a room directly above her whose unmuffled torture she listened to for three nights without end. On the fourth night be died.

Disquieted by the connections of his well-to-do father, his torturers decided to cover up their murder. They carried the dead man down the stairs at dawn, threw him onto the cold patio stone, and opened fire. Dozens of bullets sprayed through the bars of my companions celt, missing her only because a fellow prisoner had pushed her to the ground.

A few hours later, the press was invited in. "Confiscated arms" were displayed, published on the front pages of the morning papers. My girlfriend and her fellow prisoners were implicated in "the prison revolt." There she was in one of the tabloids, "an unnamed conspirator," being loaded into the van that would take her to "a location undisclosed."

For days I tramped the streets in search of that location. Finally I found her, huddled in a tiny cell somewhere on the outskirts of the city. She looked at me almost without recognition, unable to speak. At last I was able to get her case processed through the courts. She was charged with disorderly conduct and sentenced to a few days in the Women's House of Detention, a palace after her ordeal in the precincts of bell. Had her arrest occurred a few months later, she might never have been released or found: the judicial system would soon be dissolved.

Julio Cortazar told the story of a"fantasy-filled" writer he knew who some time ago imagined a talc. In this tale a group of citizens decides to erect a city on a plain, not realizing that the land they have chosen was once a cemetery that has left no visible trace.

"One by one," says Cortazar, "the buildings and streets emerged. Life was organized and it prospered. Very soon the city grew to considerable heights and proportions, and its lights seen from afar became the proud symbol of those who built the metropolis."

After a while, the symptoms of a rare uneasiness begin to creep into the inhabitants' lives. They realize that they "were living on top of a layer of death, and that the dead had a way of coming back and of entering their homes, their dreams, and their very happiness: Euphoria gives way to the worst of nightmares. Slowly, the people awaken to "the cold and slimy presence of invisible condemnations, of a curse not expressed with words but which stained with its unspeakable horror everything that had been built on top of the necropolis."

At this point in his project, the writer--who is clearly Cotazar himself--realizes that were he to write this tale "he would be committing an act of plagiarism because it had already been written in history books and that his imaginary city already had a name--the 'Argentine Model.'"

The "Argentine Model" is the term that the world's fund managers and finance ministers have given the relative prosperity that was built on the corpses of the dasparecidos of the Dirty War. The model is not new, nor does it stand alone. The proud and tormented settlements of death are everywhere in Latin America. With grotesque, chimeric optimism they seem to renew themselves in every generation. There is the Brazilian Miracle, the Chilean Example, the Mexican Partnership. . . . "Underdeveloped Countries" are now "Emerging Markerst," and almost all of them have emerged from the concealed bodies that Cortazar was loath--or unable--to agitate in his fiction.

"To write realistically about this society has peculiar difficulties," concluded V.S. Naipaul when he visited Buenos Aires in the '70s. "To render it accurately in fiction might be impossible: I wouldn't be surprised if Naipaul had tried. As a novelist he was stuck in a fallow period at the time; having exhausted the material given him by his upbringing in Trinidad, he was still in the throes of transforming himself into a writer who could claim as his subject the postcolonial graveyards of the world, He would soon abandon America and turn his eye to Africa. But wherever he went, his insight into post-colonial life was the same: pathetic, atavistic lands of hollow "mimic men" who from their cultural and political purgatory ape the "authentic" accomplishments of a Europe that they will not--cannot--earn or understand. Inevitably, Naipaul suggests, the mimicry descends to the very barbarism it had tried to transcend. His insight is not untrue so much as incomplete. The Europe that hovers over his writing is a ghostly, idealized place, vindicated by its glorious cultural tradition. But cultural tradition, we know, does not cancel barbarism and might even enhance it.

The particular barbarism of Latin America--ubiquitous, horrific, disturbingly attractive--presents its own implacable set of rules. It defies imitation, but is so complex that the challenge of expressing it on its own terms seems insurmountable. Surely Naipaul would understand Cortazar's predicament: mired in a country where the cycles of upheaval and oppression seem to deny the writer any practical or artistic future, Cortazar flees to a European capital, Paris, where he produces an oeuvre of postmodern fiction--removed, brilliant, filled with masterful, and daring, narrative experiments. But all the while Cortazar's eye remains fixed on the land he escaped, as if aware he may be missing some vital aspect of his subject, and that the real juice is in the raw and barbaric precincts back home.

Barbarism-- is it a concept, a condition?--haunts the artists of Spanish America like a monster, an urge that must be confronted and fled at the same time. In an introduction to a collection of his essays Ernesto Sabato writes: "my turbulent life coupled with my quasi-barbaric status lends these notes a certain value." In a way he's right. The barbarism that haunts the writer may also fuel him.

No one did it furl more than ***Borges***. He seemed to own the world, though, almost alone among Spanish American artists, he rarely left the South, lived with his mother, and did not marry till after she died when he himself was in the twilight of his life. His whole demeanor was radical,

precisely because it was free of the corrosive sense of the marginalized that had stifled the continent's literary and social potential for years. It was the perennial bugaboo of the South, this inferiority complex that either scoffed at or sentimentalized anything authentically American. In his memoir A Fish in the Water, Mario Vargas Llosa recalled the awe of his young years in Paris; to him, Europe was El Dorado in reverse. And even Garcia Marquez, young and still unknown, lit out for Spain as soon as he found the means. I was living on the continent that most writers fled. But ***Borges***'s example seemed to suggest that as an American I was on the right track, even if in coming to Argentina I might have strayed too innocently and too far. ***Borges*** turned the tables. He saw no need to run after Europe like a rejected suitor: implicitly he said it had always belonged to him.

To the writers of Latin America this was a revolutionary bequeathal, though in his lifetime most of his countrymen failed--or refused--to grasp it. With justifiable exasperation Sabato once remarked: "If ***Borges*** were French or Czech we would all be reading him enthusiastically in bad translations." Writers of the younger generation often approached him with confused and fascinated aversion. In a conversation with Vargas Llosa, Garcia Marquez said he found ***Borges***'s work to be terminally"evasive," and then, in a coup de grace that amounted to the most damning insult he could muster, dubbed him "un--Latin American."

Borges was not "un-Latin American" nor was he "evasive," and Garcia Marquez knew this better than anyone. (Later he would pay him homage.) Nothing proves this more than the almost ecstatic presence of the barbaric in his work. In one of his essays ***Borges*** observes that in the entire Koran the word camel is not mentioned once, irs presence being so integral and obvious to Arab life as to be unremarkable. ***Borges*** treats the violence of the South in a similar manner. He remarks on it, of course, but in a stark, natural way that comes from so deep beneath the surface of that violence that it requires little exposition. In his story "Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz," he introduces his gaucho protagonist with the words: "He did, true enough, live in a world of monotonous barbarity,." The matter-of-fact tone is deadly accurate: to note that "monotonous barbarity" is to describe the lonely, blood-rich vastness at the pampa: it is a given, like the grasses.

Borges rooted his work in a tradition, even if he had to embellish it, a tradition at least partly substantiated by Jose Hernandez's epic gaucho poem, Martin Fierro, from whose hypnotic, colloquial strophes he extracted his Huckleberry Finn and Paradise Lost in one. The pampa was where the juice was: the wealth, the violence, and the national, romantic failure. Without it, the incandescent, almost weightless nature of his perception would have floated away, and his stories would have been no more than a collection of metaphysical musings.

It is essential that Dahlmann, the bookish convalescent in his great story "The South," be "profoundly Argentinean." Like his creator, Dahlmann is a solitary, municipal librarian who nurses a secret, soldierly nostalgia for his violent Argentinean past. This "voluntary, but never ostentatious nationalism" is symbolized by the decaying ranch of his grandfather, a romantic hero of the pampa wars "who had died on the frontier. . . run through with a lance by Indians from Catriel?'

Having come through an almost fatal illness, Dahlmann decides to visit this ranch that, held on to "at the cost of numerous small privations," he has not seen in years.

Dahlmann boards a train in Buenos Aires and fides out into the pampa. He dozes and looks out the window. The light changes--the world is trans figured. The country. is limitless, vast, "but at the same time intimate and, in some measure, secret." The solitude is "perfect, perhaps hostile, and it might have occurred to Dahlmann that he was traveling into the past and not merely south."

It is almost dark when he deboards and walks alone onto "the vivid and silent plain." He walks

slowly, "breathing in the odor of dover with sumptuous joy." He enters a general store where some peones, to whom at first Dahlmann does not pay any attention, are eating and drinking at one of the tables. In another part of the store squats"an old man, immobile as an object? His years have "reduced and polished him as water does a stone or the generations of men do a sentence." He is "dark, dried up, diminutive," and seems "outside time, situated in eternity." Dahlmann notes with satisfaction "the kerchief, the thick poncho, the long chiripa, and the colt boots," and tells himself that gauchos like this no longer exist "outside the South."

Dahlmann sits down. Darkness overcomes the plain, "but the odor and the sound of the earth" penetrate the iron bars of the window. The shop owner brings him sardines, followed by some roast meat. He eats with relish, until one of the customers in the shop, "a tough" with "Chinese blood," throws "a spit ball of breadcrumb" that strikes Dahlmann lightly against his face.

The peones laugh. Dahlmann ignores them. Then "the tough with the Chinese look" staggers heavily to his feet, shouting insults at Dahlmann, and exaggerating his drunkenness with an "extravagance" that constitutes "a ferocious mockery." The tough takes out a knife. Dahlmann is unarmed. "At this point something unforeseeable" occurs.

From a corner of the room, the old ecstatic gaucho -- in whom Dahlmann saw a summary and cipher of the South (his South) -- threw him a naked dagger, which landed at his feet. It was as if the South had resolved that Dahlmann should accept the duel. Dahlmann bent over to pick up the dagger, and felt two things. The first, that this almost instinctive act bound him to fight. The second, that the weapon, in his torpid hand, was no defense at all, but would merely serve to justify his murder.

As the armed men step out into the night, a resigned ecstacy overcomes the librarian. He feels that "if he had been able to choose, or to dream his death, this would have been the death he would have chosen or dreamt."

At last my girlfriend was released from jail. I met her at the wall of the Women's House of Detention on the edge of Buenos Aires. Several other prisoners were released with her, and together we walked down the concrete ramp. That evening, we took the steamship across the River Plate to Montevideo. We traveled through the Uruguayan countryside almost without words, at times clutching each other with impersonal ardor as we stared out at the plains. During this trip our son was conceived. We were 20 years old, our future as a couple was fragile, but we made love without caution, with a kind of silent, lust-less gratitude as if to reclaim the life that was very nearly denied us, to assert our-salves against death and the random terror of the world.

At night I read the books that impelled me South, but they meant something different now. Neruda, whose American expansiveness now took on an altered tone:

Scarcely with my reason, with my fingers, with slow waters slow inundated, I fall into the realm of the forget-me-nots, into a tenacious atmosphere of mourning, into a forgotten, decayed room, into a cluster of bitter clover.

Suddenly I understood the bitterness of his death, just a year before, on Isla Negra days after the coup in Chile came down. Neruda had been ill it was true, but there was no question that Pinochet's atrocity had hastened his demise. Sucede que me canso de set hombre, said a Chilean friend of mine when we heard that the military had ransacked the poet's home in those dark days. "I happen to be tired of being a man." Several of his friends were being executed in the National Stadium in Santiago; the rest had fled, like him, into penniless, impotent exile (though even in Buenos Aires, Chilean agents stalked him). His lament was the first line of Neruda's poem "Walking Around"--words that had been written 40 years before, in the shadow of the Spanish

Civil War.

Foolishly, my girlfriend and I returned to Buenos Aires. We had built lives there, friendships that we were reluctant to abandon. We convinced ourselves that her arrest was an aberration, an unlucky night to be on the streets, it wouldn't happen again.

But the campaign of terror mounted. People were leaving the country without warning. A silence descended. Unmarked Ford Falcons ripped through the streets. Acquaintances "disappeared." One afternoon a convoy of Falcons screeched up to our building. The car doors opened and slammed as one. Our hearts stopped: we did not need to look out the window to know what was going on.

When I did look out, a phalanx of weapons was trained on me. "Put your head back inside or I'll blow it off," said one of the gunmen. In a comer of our apartment sat a stack of outlawed publications. Some had accumulated from before they were banned, others had been acquired since then--supplemental information in a country where most news was not allowed. If the police (but they weren't "police"--who were they?) stormed our apartment we faced certain torture, probable death.

From our side of the door we could hear them move through the halls, smashing anyone they met with the butts of their guns. My companion, six months pregnant now, shivered on the bed. I cursed my stupid in caution. We were in the hands of the fascists. Too numb to weep, we prepared to say goodbye.

The Death Squads had come for someone else, our neighbor. Paralyzed, we heard her being pulled from her apartment, screaming and gripping the banister as they dragged her away. The Falcons departed. No one in our building spoke of the incident. She was never heard from

Two days later we flew back to New York. Three years had passed since we had quit the U.S., and in that time the "limitless" future of South America had dramatically changed. So had our own future. In the months following our return, with my baby son at my feet--my son who was conceived in a Uruguayan inn not far from Funes's town of Fray Bentos--I worked on a novel. It was about a fictitious country, something like Argentina and something like the U.S., told in the witnessing voice of an aide to presidents and dictators over a span of 150 years. The book presented innumerable problems, and after several hundred pages I put it aside. Naipaul's observation that "to write realistically about this society might be impossible" came back to me with renewed force. I had yet to sort our what was mine from what was theirs.

Like ***Borges***'s Dahlmann, I would have to dream my own death. The place where it occurred would be the place that I could write about. And the barbarism it revealed would be the barbarism that was mine. The incurable passions of the South belonged to others, even if their expression belonged to the world.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Peron let the young leftists have their day because he had already condemned them to death.

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By MICHAEL GREENBERG

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