

Labyrinths

**Selected Stories & Other
Writings**

by
Jorge Luis Borges

Story of the Warrior and the Captive

On page 278 of his book *La poesia* (Bari, 1942), Croce, abbreviating a Latin text of the historian Peter the Deacon, narrates the destiny and cites the epitaph of

Droctulft; both these moved me singularly; later I understood why. Droctulft was a Lombard warrior who, during the siege of Ravenna, left his companions and died defending the city he had previously attacked. The Ravennese gave him burial in a temple and composed an epitaph in which they manifested their gratitude (*contempsit caros, dum nos amat ille, parentes*) and observed the peculiar contrast evident between the barbarian's fierce countenance and his simplicity and goodness:

*Terribilis visu facies, sed mente benignus,
Longaque robusto pectore barba fuit!**

* Also Gibbon (*Decline and Fall*, XLV) transcribes these verses.

Such is the story of the destiny of Droctulft, a barbarian who died defending Rome, or such is the fragment of his story Peter the Deacon was able to salvage. I do not even know in what period it took place: whether toward the middle of the sixth century, when the Longobardi desolated the plains of Italy, or in the eighth, before the surrender of Ravenna. Let us imagine (this is not a historical work) the former.

Let us imagine Droctulft *sub specie aeternitatis*, not the individual Droctulft, who no doubt was unique and unfathomable (all individuals are), but the generic type formed from him and many others by tradition, which is the effect of oblivion and of memory. Through an obscure geography of forests and marshes, the wars brought him to Italy from the banks of the Danube and the Elbe, and perhaps he did not know he was going south and perhaps he did not know he was fighting against the name of Rome. Perhaps he professed the Arrianist faith, which holds that the Son's glory is a

reflection of the Holy Father's, but it is more congruous to imagine him a worshiper of the Earth, of Hertha, whose covered idol went from hut to hut in a cow-drawn cart, or of the gods of war and thunder, which were crude wooden figures wrapped in homespun clothing and hung with coins and bracelets. He came from the inextricable forests of the boar and the bison; he was light-skinned, spirited, innocent, cruel, loyal to his captain and his tribe, but not to the universe. The wars bring him to Ravenna and there he sees something he has never seen before, or has not seen fully. He sees the day and the cypresses and the marble. He sees a whole whose multiplicity is not that of disorder; he sees a city, an organism composed of statues, temples, gardens, rooms, amphitheaters, vases, columns, regular and open spaces. None of these fabrications (I know) impresses him as beautiful; he is touched by them as we now would be by a complex mechanism whose purpose we could not fathom but in whose design an immortal intelligence might be divined. Perhaps it is enough for him to see a single arch, with an incomprehensible inscription in eternal Roman letters. Suddenly he is blinded and renewed by this revelation, the City. He knows that in it he will be a dog, or a child, and that he will not even begin to understand it, but he also knows that it is worth more than his gods and his sworn faith and all the marshes of Germany. Droctulft abandons his own and fights for Ravenna. He dies and on his grave they inscribe these words which he would not have understood:

*Contempsit caros, dum nos amat ille, parentes,
Hanc patriam reputans esse, Ravenna, suam.*

He was not a traitor (traitors seldom inspire pious

epitaphs); he was a man enlightened, a convert. Within a few generations, the Longobardi who had condemned this turncoat proceeded just as he had; they became Italians, Lombards, and perhaps one of their blood -- Aldiger -- could have engendered those who engendered the Alighieri. . . Many conjectures may be applied to Droctulft's act; mine is the most economical; if it is not true as fact it will be so as symbol.

When I read the story of this warrior in Croce's book, it moved me in an unusual way and I had the impression of having recovered, in a different form, something that had been my own. Fleetinglly I thought of the Mongolian horsemen who tried to make of China an infinite pasture ground and then grew old in the cities they had longed to destroy; this was not the memory I sought. At last I found it: it was a tale I had once heard from my English grandmother, who is now dead.

In 1872, my grandfather Borges was commander of the northern and western frontiers of Buenos Aires and the southern frontier of Santa Fe. His headquarters was in Junín; beyond that, four or five leagues distant from each other, the chain of outposts; beyond that, what was then termed the *pampa* and also the "hinterland." Once -- half out of wonder, half out of sarcasm -- my grandmother commented upon her fate as a lone Englishwoman exiled to that far corner of the earth; people told her that she was not the only one there and, months later, pointed out to her an Indian girl who was slowly crossing the plaza. She wore two brightly colored blankets and went barefoot; her hair was blond. A soldier told her another Englishwoman wanted to speak to her. The girl agreed; she entered the headquarters without fear but not without suspicion. In her copper-colored face, which was daubed in ferocious colors, her eyes were of that reluctant blue

the English call gray. Her body was lithe, like a deer's; her hands, strong and bony. She came from the desert, from the hinterland, and everything seemed too small for her: doors, walls, furniture.

Perhaps the two women felt for an instant as sisters; they were far from their beloved island and in an incredible country. My grandmother uttered some kind of question; the other woman replied with difficulty, searching for words and repeating them, as if astonished by their ancient flavor. For some fifteen years she had not spoken her native language and it was not easy for her to recover it. She said that she was from Yorkshire, that her parents had emigrated to Buenos Aires, that she had lost them in an Indian raid, that she had been carried off by the Indians and was now the wife of a chieftain, to whom she had already given two sons, and that he was very brave. All this she said in a rustic English, interwoven with Araucanian or Pampan, and behind her story one could glimpse a savage life: the horsehide shelters, the fires made of dry manure, the feasts of scorched meat or raw entrails, the stealthy departures at dawn, the attacks on corrals, the yelling and the pillaging, the wars, the sweeping charges on the haciendas by naked horsemen, the polygamy, the stench and the superstition. An Englishwoman had lowered herself to this barbarism. Moved by pity and shock, my grandmother urged her not to return. She swore to protect her, to retrieve her children. The woman answered that she was happy and returned that night to the desert. Francisco Borges was to die a short time later, in the revolution of seventy-four; perhaps then my grandmother was able to perceive in this other woman, also held captive and transformed by the implacable continent, a monstrous mirror of her own destiny. . .

Every year, the blond Indian woman used to come to the country stores at Junín or at Fort Laval to obtain trinkets or makings for maté; she did not appear after the conversation with my grandmother. However, they saw each other once again. My grandmother had gone hunting one day; on a ranch, near the sheep dip, a man was slaughtering one of the animals. As if in a dream, the Indian woman passed by on horseback. She threw herself to the ground and drank the warm blood. I do not know whether she did it because she could no longer act any other way, or as a challenge and a sign.

A thousand three hundred years and the ocean lie between the destiny of the captive and the destiny of Droctulft. Both these, now, are equally irrecoverable. The figure of the barbarian who embraced the cause of Ravenna, the figure of the European woman who chose the wasteland, may seem antagonistic. And yet, both were swept away by a secret impulse, an impulse more profound than reason, and both heeded this impulse, which they would not have known how to justify. Perhaps the stories I have related are one single story. The obverse and the reverse of this coin are, for God, the same.

*For Ulrike von Kühlmann
Translated by J. E. I.*