

The Case of Eduardo Barrios: A Literary Paradox

JOHN WALKER, *Queen's University*

Eduardo Barrios, the Chilean novelist, it has been generally admitted, has not received just recognition in literary circles.¹ In spite of having written exceptional *individual* novels like *El niño que enloqueció de amor*, *El hermano asno* and *Gran señor y rajadiablos*, which were all well received, Barrios has never achieved the fame of lesser contemporaries.

Apart from my own contributions, the only two full-length studies in recent times have both been produced in North America—the solid “psychological” studies of Ned J. Davison² and Vázquez-Bigi, already mentioned. Other critics, who have devoted their time and energy to his work, have written either superficial biographical studies, reiterating the oft quoted platitudes on Eduardo Barrios as a psychological writer, autobiographical elements in the works of Eduardo Barrios,³ or studies of doubtful quality and faulty interpretation. Even Chilean scholars like Torres-Río seco, Silva Castro, Milton Rossel have never done Barrios complete justice, failing to grasp the universal qualities in his work.⁴ In spite of a powerful early trilogy like *El niño que enloqueció de amor*, *Un perdido*, and *El hermano asno*, Barrios is perhaps the most neglected of the so-called “traditional” novelists i.e. pre-1939, a convenient dividing date between the traditional and contemporary novel.⁵ Apart from the reasons offered by Vázquez-Bigi (see note 1) for the poor reception of Barrios, a few others spring to mind.

The history of the novel in twentieth century Latin America can, simplistically, be divided into various types or genres, with corresponding decades.⁶ The two important events that helped to shape the development of Latin American fiction are the Mexican Revolution and the 1914-18 War. As a result of the geographical and spiritual isolation of the war, Latin Americans were forced to turn inwards and look for themes and inspiration in their own continent. The Mexican Revolution, a genuinely national and agrarian movement, predating the Russian Revolution, had underlined the growing awareness of themes and things American. The historical novel of the second decade of the century is principally *la novela de la Revolución Mexicana*. The novelists of the twenties found their backgrounds neither in Europe nor in the exotic lands of the East but in their own continent. This gave rise to *la novela de la tierra* and the growing importance of the *pampa*, *llano*, and *selva* not only as background for the action but as active forces in the formation and destruction of Latin American man, the *gaucho*, *llanero*, *cauchero* etc. If the novel of the land is the phenomenon of the twenties, then the *indigenista* novel, written to highlight the exploitation and abuse of the Indian by the combined forces of military, clergy, and gringo, was the genre of the thirties. These novels and their writers were easily identified. Azuela's *Los de abajo* (1915) was *the* novel of the Mexican Revolution. Rivera, Güiraldes, and Gallegos gained fame as the authors of the great novels of the land, *La voragine* (1924), *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926), and *Dona Bárbara* (1929) respectively. *Huasipungo* (1934) elevated Icaza to the militant ranks of those writers in the thirties who used the novel as a weapon to fight a reactionary society on behalf of the downtrodden Indians.

Barrios, who had already written three major novels, short novels, short stories, and drama by the mid-1920s, did not achieve the popularity of his contemporaries. One of the reasons is that Barrios, who is so difficult to label or pigeonhole, can hardly be identified with any of the three types of novels listed above, nor does he appear to fit any of the conventional patterns. This accounts partly for the difficulty in assessing his worth, his value as a writer in comparative terms.⁷ By a slick piece of deductive work on the part of some critics, if Barrios cannot be slotted into *la novela de la tierra*, then by reverse logic his fiction must belong to the other main category, *la novela de la ciudad*, simply by default. On the strength of the diaphanous *El niño que enloqueció de amor* (1915) and *El hermano asno* (1922) Barrios could hardly be classified as a novelist of the city. *Un perdido* (1918), however, by analogy with Manuel Gálvez's *El mal metafísico* (1916), another analytical novel, dealing with the metaphysical problems of an unhappy protagonist living amongst a bohemian group in Buenos Aires, might well deserve the label. The question that has now to be posed is: which city? Barrios's novels, in spite of the efforts of critics to fit them into the *criollo* stream, tend to be more universal than American, or even Chilean. Notwithstanding the claims of Torres-Rioseco, an influential critic, *El niño que enloqueció de amor* and *El hermano asno* have little that is typically Chilean or Latin American about them. This perhaps accounts for their lack of total acceptance at a time when *americanismo* was such an important criterion for success.

Barrios does not have the same popularist appeal as his fellow-Chilean, Manuel Rojas who, although moving out of *criollismo* towards cosmopolitanism in his fiction, never leaves his proletarian background too far behind in his characterization and portrayal of atmosphere. Nor does Barrios try to appeal to the masses nor portend to the man in the street by vitiating the language to obtain effects of local color. Compared to the bad grammar and coarse language of Icaza in Ecuador, for example, Eduardo Barrios maintains a pure, *castizo* attitude to prose that is almost Castilian in its essence. Praising the "castizas sonoridades y clásica limpieza"⁸ of the Peninsular writers, he lamented the depths to which Chilean prose had fallen: "Suele faltar en nuestras prosas esa nobleza lingüística."⁹ Barrios was opposed to all abuses of language whether it be in "las adaptaciones francesas" or "el pauperismo indiano." He had little patience with young writers ("estrafalarios") because of their disregard for the Spanish dictionary and grammar. In general, Barrios was not prepared to court cheap popularity by distorting the language, nor did he jump on the *criollista* bandwagon. In fact, he almost seemed to be going against the current by following the European type of novel when all around were abandoning it. This attitude probably did not endear him to the Latin American reading public nor to the critics who seemed to be unaware that they had a rarity in their presence—a Latin American writer who treated lasting, universal themes, who dealt with problems that beset man, not just Latin American man.

The great tragedy, and one of the reasons for his lack of popularity, is that Eduardo Barrios was not fully understood in his time because he did not fit into the mold of those around him. As Vázquez-Bigi in particular has pointed out, Barrios was formulating *intuitively* as early as 1907 in his short novel *Tirana Ley* (from *Del natural*), but especially in the first trilogy 1915-22, ideas that were to be the stuff of later novels based on Freudian analysis—at a time when Freud's theories were not generally widespread, and certainly not in Latin America. In this sense Barrios was ahead of his time and not appreciated by the public in general nor by the critics who still

viewed literature in terms of traditional criteria. This helps to account for the misunderstanding of *El hermano asno* and the furore it caused when published in 1922. Most people saw it simply as an attack on conventional religion, orthodox Catholicism, and the Franciscan order.

Paradoxically, Barrios, who seemed ahead of his time with the first great trilogy, did not hesitate to go against the stream and write occasionally what appeared to be anachronisms. In 1944 he published *Tamarugal*, ostensibly a *novela minera*, and in 1948 *Gran señor y rajadiablos*, at first glance a *novela de la tierra*. On its superficial level *Gran señor y rajadiablos* would have been a resounding success if it had appeared in the 1920s contemporaneous with *Don Segundo Sombra*, *La voragine*, and *Dona Barbara*, and Barrios would have been accepted as yet another novelist of the land. Ironically, it was a huge popular success (as a *novela criolla* written out of its time!), which highlights the very point that Barrios was not understood. Though American, it was much more, as I have demonstrated elsewhere.¹⁰ So too with *Tamarugal*, which looks so much like the Zolaesque *novela minera* of the first decade of the century, superficially similar to the *cuentos* of Baldomero Lillo's *Sub Terra*, which portrayed the miserable life of the exploited, abused Chilean miners. *Tamarugal* did not achieve the same success partly because it was poorly written and also because there is nothing romantic or escapist about underground slavery. *Tamarugal*, however, is important for other reasons."¹¹

Another reason for the lack of appreciation of the novels of Eduardo Barrios is that Latin Americans have so often sought in their novels documents, social protest, and denunciation of abuses that they have neglected the philosophical content and ignored the aesthetic level of their novels. José Antonio Portuondo has expressed it thus: "El carácter dominante en la tradición novelística hispanoamericana [es] la preocupación social, la actitud criticista que manifiestan las obras, su función instrumental en el proceso histórico de las naciones respectivas . . . Grave consecuencia del sentido instrumental, pragmático, dominante . . . en la mayor parte de las novelas hispanoamericanas, es que la crítica se ha acostumbrado a tratarlas como documentos y no como obras de arte, desdeñando lo estético para destacar sólo lo sociológico en ellas."¹²

Apart from Barrios, who is so obviously out of character for the 1920s, other novelists of the land like Rivera and Güiraldes have had their work viewed simply as sociological documents or *artículos de costumbres*. Critics have generally failed to see in *La voragine*, for example, beneath the surface of the sociological (exploitation of rubber workers) and psychological (study of the deranged mind of the protagonist, Arturo Cova) the metaphysical problems that Rivera treats—the search for values, *perfectabilidad*, the odyssey theme (the stuff of the modern novel), all clothed in a beautifully symbolic, poetic language. In *Don Segundo Sombra* the universal themes of man's struggle with nature, destiny, the birth-life-death cycle have all taken second place to the level of folkloric customs, dances, cock-fights, horse-breaking. That Güiraldes rendered both levels in beautifully Modernist prose is indicative of his aesthetic preoccupations.

One wonders, then, with Barrios, as to what place there is for him in the 20s and 30s given that epoch's concern for the land and indigenous problems. The prevailing outlook could be significant in helping to explain his twenty year silence during these very decades. Critics have sought to see in his quiet period many reasons for his nonproduction—lack of inspiration,

the completion of his literary mission, the need to gather more material, to gain more experience, to philosophize more about life. One critic would apply to Barrios the words of the protagonist of his last novel, *Los hombres del hombre* (1950) to explain his silence: "Ha de haber por la tierra no pocos escritores como yo, que por muchos años no escriben y, de buenas a primeras, lo necesitan y lo hacen."¹³

No one has suggested literary or political disillusionment, with its concomitant disengagement. One must point out, however, that although Barrios wrote *Tamarugal* about the life of the nitrate miners, he in no way intended it to be *la literatura comprometida*. Barrios had little sympathy with the plight of the workers and no intent to write a work of social protest. A noted conservative, even reactionary, Barrios was openly anticommunist, anti-Russian and pro-U.S.A. He had scant respect for Chilean communist writers who, he felt, were using communism for their own ends.¹⁴ When he did break the silence it was to write a *novela minera* in reverse, using old material, though he was not interested in the class struggle, like Lillo, for example. Whatever the reason for his silence, he chose to rewrite in the 40s when the atmosphere was more propitious, when the mood was more conducive to his kind of writing, with the passing of the novel of the land and the *indigenista* novel. Paradoxically, in the rarefied atmosphere of the first days of the new novel, he leapfrogged all the way back to the turn of the century, using an old format, an old genre, and old material. As always, the novel was accepted at its face value and not fully understood. However, this *novela minera* plane constitutes only one level of the work.¹⁵ Choosing material, background and an era that he knew well, he was able to make a philosophical comment about life that was not immediately obvious to the reading public. Also, since it was anachronistic, there was no political backlash or involvement. Unfortunately, being poorly written, the novel had little impact either on the public or the critics. Once again, as in the 20s, Barrios, apparently out of step, was misunderstood.

Though *Gran señor y rajadiablos*, written four years later (1948) was a best seller, it too was not fully appreciated, being written in a *passé* genre of two decades before. The appearance of *Los hombres del hombre* two years later (1950) did little to increase his popularity, since it was a difficult novel, containing something of the analytical qualities of the early trilogy, and yet not quite in the mainstream of the new novels of the late 40s and early 50s. However, Barrios was, in this last novel, in advance of his era, using techniques and ideas that prefigured the *nuevos novelistas* of the next two decades.¹⁶

Apart from his anomalous position in *time* as a writer in Latin America, i.e. sometimes anachronistic, sometimes advanced, Barrios also stands out as a rarity because of the *kind* of writer he was. Latin America has always been short of philosophical writers,¹⁷ and therein lies one of the tragedies not only for the continent but also for philosophical writers like Barrios who, apart from Mallea, stood almost alone, *Pensadores* they have had, but this breed of journalist-cum-essayist has been more concerned with Latin America and its future than with metaphysical problems. Rodó, Vasconcelos, Reyes, Martínez Estrada suffered more from a continental or national identity crisis than from metaphysical *angustia*. Even Mallea is different from Barrios in that he shows a preoccupation with *argentinidad* that starts with *Historia de una pasión argentina* (1935) and is developed through *La bahía de silencio* (1940). Running parallel with his "universal" novels of metaphysical concern (from *Cuentos para una inglesa desesperada* (1926) through *Todo verdor perecerá* (1941), the national concern is manifest. These two strands do not exist in Barrios's work. Though the setting of several of his novels is obviously Chile there is no great revelation

of, nor concern with, *chilenidad*. His only real *Chilean* novel of the land was *Gran señor y rajadiablos*, which from the popular point of view was a great commercial success on account of the *costumbrista* element and the evocation of the values of a past epoch, the nineteenth century. The real point of the novel, however, is that Barrios merely used the American scene and the Chilean format to work out a more general view of the world and a philosophy of life. The tragedy for Barrios, then, is that often his work has been lauded for the wrong reasons, whilst his unique position as a Latin American novelist with a metaphysical view of life has gone unnoticed.

Herein lies another paradox in the life of this unusual man. In spite of his wide tastes in literature and philosophy—nineteenth-century French Romanticism, Spanish mysticism, Generation of '98, the atheistic philosophers of nineteenth-century Germany—and his European, especially Germanic background, this cosmopolitan thinker never traveled outside of Latin America, and never beyond Chile, after his youthful trips to neighboring countries. Yet, despite the lack of personal contact, he was able to treat in profound fashion the universal problems of man's place in the world, how he evolves, matures, and changes.

It is doubly tragic that Barrios has been so little appreciated in his own land, as befalls all prophets. Fortunately, popular success is not the primary criterion of those writers who have something to say about life. Eduardo Barrios has occasionally been duly praised by several scholars for the psychological (Davison, Vazquez-Bigi), social and costumbrist (Torres-Rioseco, Jefferson Rea Spell) values of his writing. Despite the many critical works on his fiction, and notwithstanding my own contributions on his metaphysical vision of life that stems from the philosophical commentary and the aesthetic pre-occupations, all of which together make up the artist, Eduardo Barrios remains a gravely misunderstood and undeservedly neglected writer.

NOTES

¹Angel Manuel Vázquez-Bigi, in his unpubl. doctoral thesis "La verdad psicológica en Eduardo Barrios" (Minnesota, 1962), postulates various theories for the neglect of Barrios. The general ignorance (in other continents) about things Latin American militates against Barrios. A non-Latin American, looking for refined, psychological literature, does not expect to find it in the barbaric continent of the South. On the other hand, those in search of the exotic and the erotic will find little to their taste in Barrios's works. Also, there is the general feeling that *great* literature (of universal application) cannot come from small countries like Chile—in spite of the example of Pablo Neruda, and even more striking from the point of view of size, Ruben Darío from Nicaragua and Miguel Ángel Asturias from Guatemala.

²"Psychological Values in the Works of Eduardo Barrios," unpubl. doctoral diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 1957, the basis of his *Eduardo Barrios* (New York: Twayne, 1970). My "Art and Metaphysics in the Work of Eduardo Barrios," unpubl. doctoral diss., University of London, 1975, is an attempt to redress the balance, by correcting the undue emphasis on the psychological, autobiographical and social elements in Barrios' fiction.

³e.g. José Antonio Galaos, "Eduardo Barrios. Novelista autobiográfico," *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, LVI, No. 166 (1963), 160-174.

⁴Torres-Rioseco, although he did a great deal of pioneer critical work not only on Barrios but on Latin American literature in general (for which we are indebted to him), often fails to grasp the significance of Barrios's novels e.g. *Un perdido* (whose American qualities he stresses) and *Gran señor y rajadiablos* (see my treatment in "Gran señor y rajadiablos: A Shift in Sensibility," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, XLIX, No. 3 (July 1972), 278-88). Without belittling the efforts of the older school of critics, one should be aware that Torres-Rioseco, Spell and the like, who made valuable contributions to the field of narrative, plot and characterisation, often failed to see the deeper meaning and the hidden implications below the surface of the novel. Torres-Rioseco is further handicapped by his tendency to see *lo americano* in everything Barrios does. See his *Grandes novelistas de la América Hispana* Vol. II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), p. 57.

⁵1939 marks the publication of Juan Carlos Onetti's *El pozo*, perhaps a valid point of departure. It is rather interesting that Ciro Alegría did not publish his prize-winning *indigenista* novel *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* till 1941—an obvious anachronism, but justified by the prevailing conditions in Peru and the social and political motives which prompted the writing of the novel.

⁶This division, which is purely arbitrary, is one of convenience and is not meant to be totally binding. There are obvious exceptions that transcend the boundaries of time and genre.

⁷See John Wain's interesting and amusing similar experience in "A Literary Chapter" of his autobiography, *Sprightly Running* (London: Macmillan, 1962), on how the critics squeezed him into the ranks of the "Angry Young Men" of the 50s (much against his will), on the strength of one novel, *Hurry on Down* (pp. 162-210).

⁸Review "Balmaceda: político romántico por Luis Enrique Delano," *Las Últimas Noticias*, 25 (7 de julio, 1937), 5.

⁹Review "El hombre en la montaña por Edgardo Garrido Merino," *Las Últimas Noticias*, 32 (23 de mayo, 1934), 12.

¹⁰See my BHS article referred to in Note 4.

¹¹See my article "Tamarugal: Barrios' Neglected Link Novel," *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, 8, No. 3 (1974), 345-55.

¹²"El rasgo predominante en la novela hispanoamericana," *La novel iberoamericana* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1952), pp. 84-85.

¹³Donald Fogelquist, "Eduardo Barrios, en su etapa actual," *Revista Iberoamericana*, XVIII, No. 35 (1953), 13-26. See OC II, 990.

¹⁴Bernard Dulsey, "A Visit with Eduardo Barrios," *Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 43 (1959), 349.

¹⁵See my article "Tamarugal . . ."

¹⁶See my article 'Anacronismo y novedad en la obra de Eduardo Barrios,' *Atenea* (to appear).

¹⁷The same criticism can be made of Spain. Apart from Unamuno, the '98 Generation writers were more thinkers preoccupied with the *particular* problems of Spain at the turn of the century than with the human condition. Unamuno, however, shows the same kind of double concern (national and universal) that we find in Mallea—hence *En torno al casticismo and Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*.