

Doña Bárbara: The Human Dimension

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In an interview with Frances Dunham, Gallegos confesses that reality always serves him as a trampoline.¹ The object of this brief study is to show how Gallegos, in his most famous novel *Doña Bárbara* (1929), captures the living reality which surrounds him and how he presents the psychological and sentimental aspect of his human mosaic. As well as the multidimensional characters who people the living world of Gallegos's novel there are also unidimensional characters with intense life and historic reality² but who lack psychological development. Within this category one can point to Lorenzo, the first victim of the insatiable doña Bárbara, an "ex-man" who is swallowed up by the swamp; to Mr. Danger, that brutal grown-up child who frolics with the tiger cat and who, with equal pleasure, romps with Lorenzo, Marisela, Balbino Paiba and even with Santos. Mr. Danger frolics, but he does not kill (and this is a basic difference between him and doña Bárbara) nor is he convinced by events which are not "en el programa."³ One can also point to Melquíades, the "sorcerer," that disturbing travel companion whose voice "parecía adherirse al sentido, blanda y pegajosa como el lodo de los tremedales de la llanura" (*DB*, p. 11); to his rival, Balbino Paiba, one of Bárbara's succession of lovers; to Carmelito López, "el encuevado," whose concepts of *machismo* differ so radically from the outward appearance of Santos ("con este patiquincito presumido como que no se va a ninguna parte," *DB*, p. 41). One may mention Pajarote who completely "se volvia movimientos," and who utilizes the legend of the familiar spirit as a good omen for Altamira (*DB*, first part, chap. 7), and Juan Primito, the ingenuous fabricator of the *rebullones* ("bad luck birds," *DB*, second part, chap. 3). One should not forget the Sandovalos, those devoted followers of Luzardo, nor the three Mondragones, those inveterate barbarians. Finally, let us point to the picturesque representatives of justice: to no Pernaletes (who well knows how to dot his "h's") and to the unforgettable Mujiquita who helps him achieve his orthographic feats—because the text states, "no existirían no Pernaletes, si no existieran Mujiquitas" (*DB*, p. 236). All display a vibrant reality within the context of "inmensidad, bravura y melancolía" which forges "hombres recios" in accordance with the label of the author himself.⁴

Nevertheless there are three characters who contribute a greater measure of penetration and maturity to the psychological substance of this novel's fascinating human dimension. I refer to the protagonist, Bárbara, and also to the two characters "de pura invención de novelista" (according to the novelist)⁵ that

*Translated from the Spanish by Roger Moore

¹"I always use reality as a springboard." Quoted by Lowell Dunham, *Rómulo Gallegos. An Oklahoma Encounter and the Writing of the Last Novel*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974). P. 79.

²For a discussion of the novel's historical 'reality,' see the excellent pioneering article of John Englekirk: "Doña Bárbara, Legend of the Llano," *Hispania*, 31, 3 (1948), 259-70.

³Rómulo Gallegos, *Doña Bárbara*. (Buenos Aires, Mexico: Espasa Calpe Argentina, S.A.) 15th. Edition. 1952. P. 107. All references are to this edition and will be contained in the text after the initials *DB*.

⁴Rómulo Gallegos in "A manera de prólogo," *Doña Bárbara*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1954). P. 8.

⁵"A manera de prólogo," p. 12.

is, to Santos and Marisela. These are the characters whose interaction produces the changes which dictate the story's multiple facets. The subtle nuances of the gradual metamorphosis which are shown through them point to the accuracy of the author's psychological focus. The words "No matarás. Ya tú no eres la misma" (*DB*, p. 164), by means of which doña Bárbara recognizes the unusual phenomenon of her inability to act in accordance with her instincts, proclaim a kind of leitmotif for the three protagonists who, at various stages of the story, experience unaccustomed or unlooked for feelings. Someone or something holds them back or forces their hand: in any case, they are no longer themselves.

In the first part of the novel, which corresponds to the first thirteen chapters, violence and arbitrariness reign. Doña Bárbara, Mr. Danger, the group from "El Miedo," and the traditional law of the plains that might is right, all prevail. Doña Bárbara, not unlike don Pedro Páramo, makes her own laws and seizes lands to which she is not entitled. Don Pedro marries Dolores out of greed; doña Bárbara does not marry but she nurtures her greed by means of a succession of lovers, individuals who tend to turn into "ex-men." Santos Luzardo, a plainsman beneath his city man's guise, tries to bring about reforms by legal means and immediately suffers setbacks: on the legal level he receives a humiliating lesson for not having fully researched the issue before challenging Mr. Danger. On the sentimental level, of course, Santos is more successful, "Las manos le lavaron el rostro y las palabras le despertaron el alma dormida" (*DB*, p. 97). Marisela's metamorphosis and regeneration begin when she meets Santos: "Ya no es la misma." But as for doña Bárbara, she has already claimed her prize: "Ese hombre me pertenece" (*DB*, p. 82).

If the thirteen chapters which make up the first part trace violence's triumph, the next thirteen chapters, which structurally form the second part, announce the incipient decline of traditional and primitive forces. The first encounter between Santos and Bárbara, which does not come about until the initial chapter of the second part, produces an unusual occurrence, for it awakens Bárbara's "sleeping soul." In actual fact the whole of the novel's second part is constructed around unusual events. This is another leitmotif. Santos begins by making doña Bárbara respect him in spite of herself—an unaccustomed event; her own daughter ends up by calling her a witch—an almost unbelievable thing that nobody had dared to do previously. There can be no doubt that Bárbara is no longer herself. She respects a man; she is incapable of pulling the trigger after Santos's provocative visit (*DB*, p. 164), and at the end of the second part her dialogue with her "Partner" is frustrated (*DB*, p. 214). The validity of her absolute supremacy has been questioned, and this signifies that doña Bárbara's powers are in decline. Meanwhile, the prairie's wild, primitive beauty imposes itself on Santos awakening bit by bit his latent plainsman's instincts. Antonio's diagnosis is accurate: "Llanero es llanero hasta la quinta generación" and the visionary reformer (from the chapter entitled "Algún día sera verdad"; *DB*, pp. 99ff.) gradually yields to the magic enchantment of his own roots and to their powerful ally, Marisela.

As the novel's last part progresses, so the cruel despot (Bárbara) becomes increasingly disorientated: the grasslands' sphinx has turned into a sphinx unto herself. She longs to make herself worthy of Santos's love by beginning a new life. Nevertheless, she intuits that by handing over everything she must, of necessity, lose Santos according to the dictates of her destiny. She is on the point of capitulating definitively when Juan Primito brings her the news of Marisela's imminent marriage. The effect which his words produce brings to mind Bárbara's very feminine reaction to the same messenger when, earlier in the novel, he dared rather ingenuously to praise Marisela's beauty and hence awoke

doña Bárbara's rivalry and impetuous jealousy (and the corresponding thirst of the *rebullones*). "Bueno. Eso no me interesa . . . Puedes retirarte" (*DB*, p. 145). Of course, this new piece of information is much more explosive: doña Bárbara overthrown by her own daughter? Never, "Primero muerta que derrotada" (*DB*, p. 295). Confronted by her daughter's triumph and her own failure, the woman's ferocity is awakened for the last time; when, in one of the novel's most romantic episodes, she aims her pistol at her daughter's breast, she no longer has the strength to fire. Somebody (or something) restrains her hand, inferring echo-like the earlier judgement: "No mataras. Ya tú no eres la misma" (*DB*, p. 164).

Santos, after repeated indications of latent violent tendencies, ends up by openly embracing violence and by conquering barbarity by barbarous means. At the same time he recognizes the melancholy truth that "la barbarie no perdona a quien intenta dominarla adaptandose a sus procedimientos" (*DB*, p. 266).

Clearly the traditional description of Santos and Bárbara as symbols of civilization and barbarity is an excessive simplification. According to Lowell Dunham, the pioneer of Gallegos studies, the author himself was not fond of "estos doctorcitos que andan buscando símbolos en mi obra."⁶ Although it is true that Santos is formed both intellectually and spiritually within the Venezuelan capital, it is also true that the origins of Bárbara and Santos have clearly marked points of contact: both are engendered by violence, although different social circumstances lend them slightly differing façades. As the novel unfolds, the plainsman's natural instincts gradually take control of the impulsive youth in a convincing demonstration that "llanero es llanero hasta la quinta generación" (*DB*, p. 156). Santos embraces "benevolent dictatorship" in order to "preparar la futura obra civilizadora" (*DB*, p. 249).

Of course, "benevolent dictatorship," even when embraced with apparently healthy motives, carries its hazards, and one wonders whether reservations which are laid aside at one moment can easily be taken up at another. If this enthralling novel had a sequel, what type of individual would be our "symbol of civilization?" Well, since sequels are "assumed to be inferior" (rightly or wrongly) and since Gallegos preferred not to write one, it is better not to speculate. For me, the novel's human truths rest solidly on the dynamism and multidimensionalism of its three main characters, and above all on those two who are pure "invención novelística."

Marisela is enchantingly successful; I consider her to be the novel's most interesting human creation. She begins as a wild child of nature, "aquella masa de greñas y harapos" (*DB*, p. 94) who might well have sung—in chap. 11 of the first part—"Wouldn't it be lovely?" Marisela Dolittle,⁷ with echoes of a Calderonian Segismundo, is tutored by Professor Santos Higgins who not only explains to her the meaning of the term "cerciorarse" (*DB*, 94), but also initiates the process of her regeneration, Marisela, the humiliating plaything of don Guillermo, is rescued by Santos. Unfortunately, once installed in his house, she soon becomes a rather awkward problem for the very sensible and logical professor who supposes that the difficulty will soon be resolved with the establishment of the "Colegio de señoritas—el mejor de la república" (*DB*, p. 198). The cure, however, turns out to be ephemeral and a more radical solution must be imposed. Marisela and Lorenzo return to the place they came from.

⁶Dunham, p. 79.

⁷See the stimulating article of J. A. Molinaro, "Doña Bárbara y Pigmalión," *Quaderni Iberoamericani*, 19-20 (December, 1956), 212-15.

Once back in the palm grove, Marisela experiences her second metamorphosis as the innermost corners of her soul are illuminated. Filial love—the touching light in the cave—causes her to turn down Antonio's invitation to return to Altamira to play "el papel de la tonada" to the alarming changes in Santos's conduct (*DB*, p. 257). Antonio insists on Marisela's undertaking the "breaking in" of Santos, and this corresponds to a radical change in their roles and to yet another echo of Shaw's play. Marisela has to decline for she has just experienced, for the very first time, a feeling hitherto unknown to her, that of authentic filial obligation.

This is the culminating point of an evolution which begins in the eleventh chapter of the first part and which lends some of the most successful touches to the novel's human dimension. The "discovery" of Marisela and her rescue (in the last chapter of the first part) immediately produce fascinating psychological phenomena as well as the odd problem in the second part of the novel—which belongs structurally to the Barbara-Santos-Marisela triangle). Marisela tames, and is tamed (*DB*, chap. 2 of the second part), and Barbara's violent fits of jealousy, provoked by Juan Primito's revelation which is as enthusiastic as it is ingenuous and imprudent (*DB*, p. 145), foretell the fight to the death between mother and daughter who are rivals for Santos's soul. "Miel de aricas" is a key chapter which reveals the emotional inventory of Marisela who shares Genoveva's painful conclusion, with its analogous application to the world of nature and the sentiments, that the "miel de las aricas es muy dulce pero abrasa como un fuego" (*DB*, p. 171). It is not surprising that, during the cowhands' evening dance, Marisela longs for Santos's arrival, as her mother had done a few days before. When Santos pays her no attention, an angry Marisela invites Pajarote to dance, hoping to make Santos jealous. Muerto, ¿quieres misa? underlines the peon's reaction to this un hoped for privilege. Two masterful chapters follow, in which two souls scrutinize their own sentiments by means of "soluciones imaginarias." Marisela achieves this by resorting to the enchanting dialogue which culminates in the rhetorical question "Me quieres, Marisela?" with its unenigmatic reply "Te idolatro, antipático" (*DB*, p. 193). Santos, on the other hand, has recourse to an analysis of his own sentiments as he searches for a rational solution to his dilemma. Surprisingly—and this is another of the author-psychologist's masterly touches—it is Marisela's voice interrupting this rational analysis, which, even if it does not make the problem disappear, at least diminishes "la necesidad apremiante de resolverlo en seguida" (*DB*, p. 196). These chapters, "Pasión sin nombre" and "Soluciones imaginarias," in which two souls, one very simple and the other most complicated, try to resolve their sentimental dilemmas by differing means, also merit a special mention for the subtlety and accuracy of their psychology.⁸ The second part of the novel culminates in a physical clash between mother and daughter which is interrupted by Santos's opportune arrival. The last part brings about the second metamorphosis of Marisela who, finding herself through filial love (*DB*, p. 256), discovers her own plenitude—a favorite concept of the author.⁹

The transcendental importance of the figure of Marisela to the human dimensions of the novel has not been adequately explored by critics; it is time to rescue her from unwarranted neglect. The subtleties of her human contribution not only constitute a vital ingredient of Gallegos's art, but they also enrich the aesthetic value of the novel. There can be no doubt that, at that stage in his development, the author was extremely interested in the phenomenon of love

⁸Consult Ulrich Leo, *Rómulo Gallegos—Estudio sobre el arte de novelar*. (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1954). Pp. 53 ff.

⁹This theme is also elaborated in Gallegos's other novels, for example *Cantaclaro* and *Canaima*.

and that he portrayed it with understanding and sensitivity; this in turn broadened the human range of the whole work, intensifying and varying its message.

This does not imply a lessening of the dynamic role of the South American scenery, nor of the intimate relationship between countryside and character. Not by any means! I maintain, nevertheless, that if the topographical and geographical realities which serve the author as a trampoline are authentic and convincing, no less so are the human and psychological realities which endure in the reader's memory. As a result, man is not crushed by geography but shares with it in a totality which is both artistic and human.