

# Reading a Chilean Classic: Eduardo Barrios's *Gran señor y rajadiablos*

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The text of *Gran señor y rajadiablos*, published in 1948, is divided into an introduction, set apart by italics, and five sections called "evocations," an unusual designation that alludes to the central importance of memory and voice for the teller of the tale, the narrator. After the title and before the introduction lies an odd epigraph for a novel that follows as an epigone the tradition of the novel of the land, such as *La vorágine* (1924), *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926), and *Doña Bárbara* (1929). Barrios, without identifying the source for his quote, writes "Tolle, lege . . ." the well-known words recorded by Saint Augustine in *Confessions*, viii, 12: "Tolle lege, tolle lege."

In their original context, the words quoted in the epigraph retain the shadow of a moment of magical density: Augustine has been undergoing a long personality crisis; in despair, he retires to a garden to mourn and pray. The voice of a boy or a girl is heard coming from the other side of a wall and urging: "Lift it up and read, lift it up and read!" The speaker is rendered invisible, undetermined, by the wall, as time removes and makes absent the writer from the book, but the memory and incitation of those words remain. Augustine considers that this scene has been planned by Providence, so we read that he returns to the book that he was reading at the time. He opens it randomly and happens upon a passage by Saint Paul (*Romans*, xiii, 13), where he admonishes his correspondents to behave decently, "as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy." The overhead work led to reading, and reading to Augustine's conversion that opens the road to a bishopric, sainthood, further writing, and finally to the *Confessions*. At the same time, the scene is patterned as a Christian version of the *sortes* that used to be practiced with the writings of Vergil. How easy the articulation of the writing of language and the writing of life, between the monumental persistence of the work of art and its capacity for performative function! Any writer of social novels would find in Augustine's Latin garden the no longer utopic space of the ambition that gives rise to his writing. But Barrios was much more concerned with writing than with politics or social reform. How then does this epigraph relate to the feudal landowner José Pedro Valverde, whose adventures are remembered in this book?

From an anecdotal point of view, we know that José Pedro studied Latin at school. The narrator refers back to the epigraph when he recollects that his grandfather José Pedro showed a marked preference for one of those Latin writers: "De las remotas clases conservó, eso sí, una vieja simpatía por San Agustín."<sup>1</sup> This liking reflects the similar strong passions that rage in Augustine and José Pedro, and their shared belief in the superiority of intuition and feeling over reason and logic.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, intention will be valued over results and

<sup>1</sup>*Gran señor y rajadiablos* (Santiago: Nascimento, 1948), p. 164. In contrast "ni ése ni otro año escolar alguno pesaran . . . sobre la vida del estudiante" (p. 51). Further quotations with the page number in parentheses refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>The preference for Saint Augustine can be added to the convincing evidence put forth by John Walker in "Echoes of Pascal in the Works of Eduardo Barrios," *RR*, 61 (1970), 256-65, in order to obtain further understanding of the antecedents of the defense of the values of the heart that José Pedro launches against a journalist in *Gran señor y rajadiablos*, pp. 399-404.

the base for Barrios's affirmation that all feudal landowners of the nineteenth century were always good at heart (cf. p. 69) becomes undebatable, even if assailable. Barrios's blindness to the suffering of the peasants is related to his belief in an inner realm, a region of intuition where good dwells and from whence all worthwhile projects are articulated. Nature left to itself will not progress. An imagination grounded in humanistic passions will be able to project an otherness that can lead to progress, but the strength necessary to translate into action the images of the mind can only be found in a few men who, because of their exceptional nature, will be in greater danger of not always conforming to the rule and behaving decently. These men are defined as "los hombres fuertes, laboriosos y honrados que se habían impuesto la ilusión de crear la agricultura" (p. 68). In Spanish an illusion is not always a deceptive image, but it may be, since this creation has to deal, among other obstacles, with the original indifference of nature: "Sólo belleza ofrecía el mundo de Dios. De contemplarlo y comprenderlo, José Pedro asombrábase a menudo. ¡Tanta paz! ¡Tan absoluta indiferencia! Su dolor, el dolor de su tío, el fracaso de su padre, ¿no valían para la naturaleza? Así era la naturaleza. Para una dicha como para un horror, tenía la misma dulzura en los celajes, la misma placidez en la campiña, la misma inalterable armonía de las cosas. La gran conforme. Había que dejarse inspirar por ella y dar al corazón el mismo ritmo de grandeza inocente. La suprema sabiduría, ¿era un candor?" (p. 69).

Man introduces writing, difference, into the indifference of nature, a different state of affairs that he dreams up in his imagination flared by passion.<sup>3</sup> Candor, on the contrary, is the whiteness where all colors are already present, the openness where all is revealed. In order to transform, man must discard and replace, add and lose; for a conversion a new version must take the place of the old one. The alteration brought about by the creator will introduce absence and dissonance. The illusion of writing in the book of nature will stir the nostalgic memory of a bygone era of struggles and spur the writing of a novel about a Chile that is no more and perhaps never was.

*Gran señor y rajadiablos* contains insistent references to yet another book, the only one that José Pedro reads, an heirloom handed down to him by his uncle, a warrior-priest who conveniently became mystical as death drew near. This book is a Latin Parnassus, a bilingual edition, that shows on its front cover an illustration of Pegasus. When the child José Pedro saw it for the first time, he exclaimed: ¡Caballo Pájaro!, Bird-Horse! This cry becomes his nickname and "el grito que siempre, en todo el curso de su vida, tradujo la clave recóndita de su carácter" (p. 13). John Walker has indicated that this expression symbolizes José Pedro's desire, and capacity, to escape from barbarism into the civilized world of Classic art and poetry.<sup>4</sup> But one can add that Barrios does not only see the contrast as external, between the muscle applied by the mind to break new lands for cultivation and the resistance of Nature, between the courage of the honest landowners and the treachery and cowardice of almost everyone else, but also as internal, as forces incessantly pitched against each other in José Pedro's soul, the horse of his passions and the bird of his soaring creative spirit, his down-to-earth outlook on life and his gestures of generosity, friendship, love, and transcendence. The mythological Pegasus is a wishful fiction of unity and

<sup>3</sup>For a brilliant analysis of Rousseau's ideas about language, where he also places passion at the origin of speech, and for a careful delimitation of the concept of writing and difference, see Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967), especially pp. 203-445.

<sup>4</sup>John Walker, "Gran señor y rajadiablos: A Shift in Sensibility," *BHS*, 49 (1972), 287. The internal conflict is well seen by Walker in "The Theme of 'Civilización y Barbarie' in 'Gran señor y rajadiablos,'" *Hispano*, 42 (1971), 62.

harmony, broken apart into the unresolved duality of Caballo-Pájaro. In the gap between them, the dash obliterates the conciliation that could again bring Pegasus into being. The re-membling in which the narrator is engaged rests on the disquieting dismemberment that all men suffer in their contaminated praxis, in a sense of loss that is tearing asunder the fabric of society. Even as the narrator insists on telling one linear story, evidence mounts as to the existence of distorting forces that do untold damage to the continuity of a tradition. José Pedro is the incarnation of a historical dialectic, a monstrous creature made up of the two elements in which Sarmiento's writing divided Latin America's experience of history: civilization and barbarism. But just as Sarmiento, as he wrote, grew in his admiration for, and understanding of, Facundo Quiroga, so he also understood that there was barbarism too in the city of Córdoba. In the same way Barrios creates a disquieting zone that undercuts the superficial value structure of the narration.

In the introduction, the narrator declares that the values of the horse and those of the bird did not contradict each other: "Nada encontré jamás absurdo, ni siquiera contradictorio, en el gran viejo" (p. 9), and says further that for him his grandfather was "un conjunto de valores complementarios." But there is no synthesis, and Pegasus remains dismembered into horse and bird. When José Pedro makes his first long trip and leaves behind the farm where he spent his early childhood, he observes a detail that identifies him with a bird: "En aquel ramaje renegrido, negro también, se destacaba un nido sobre el cielo recién lavado" (p. 19). Just before a crucial encounter with death, he observes an eagle educating an eaglet on how to fly independently (p. 58). José Pedro believes that his wings have a greater breadth than the nest, *Majores pennas nido* (p. 163). Nevertheless, the first part of his life is dominated by his track record as "potrito de campo" (p. 116). In the last evocation, called "Águila vieja," he is downcast because of his physical and political weakness, and the spiritual side of his spirit takes the upper hand. There is a change by degrees, a slow transformation, an almost imperceptible dash from Caballo-Pájaro to Pájaro-Caballo.

We can return now to *Tolle, lege*. These words precipitate the conversion that serves as the pivotal element in the structure of the *Confessions*. A jump into an unprecedented stage occurs, and after it Augustine emerges no longer a sinner but a convert on the way to salvation. It is the instant, total recasting of the project of life.

*Gran señor y rajadiablos* lacks such an internal catastrophe, but a double set of clues that have not been considered up to now by the critics, the epigraph and the references to Saint Augustine, Pegasus and the allusion to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, points towards a reading of *Gran señor y rajadiablos* as a novel that tells about the passing from one state to another, not merely from one situation to another, as every narration must do. There is a radical shift that leaves nothing untouched. The fact that the novel encompasses in its scrutiny the whole life of a man and almost eighty years of Chile's history should not be forgotten. Barrios is concerned in other of his works with the difficulty involved in describing adequately the spiritual and social processes that occasion radical transformations in individuals, as in *El niño que enloqueció de amor* (from childhood's serenity to the madness of love), *Un perdido* (from a promising youth to moral and physical decline), *El hermano asno* (an inexplicable—from the outside—action of a reputed saint who tries to rape a woman). The possibility of sudden collapse continues as a backdrop to the action of *Tamarugal* and *Los hombres del hombre*. In all of these novels, passion is the primal force that roams the mind's paradise.

Barrios as a writer was worried about the abyss of transformation and dismemberment that lies under the surface of any structure, even if apparently stable. He wrote about why authors lose inexplicably the following of their public.<sup>5</sup> The cause, he argues, is that they write too much, they become too well-known, they do not surprise any longer, and they saturate their readers. His paradoxical conclusion is that in order to survive as a writer who has written important works, the writer must still his pen and fall silent.

Total transformation is feared as annihilation, yet if progress is to continue, the only possibility is to dash between extremes that are never totally obliterated. Except that *Gran señor y rajadiablos* proves, against itself, that this can never be the case. Values that at the beginning were clearly positive, as they shift the terrain in which they must perform, lose their effectiveness and become defects. Only nature and things have that "misma inalterable armonía" (p. 69). As Gabriela Mistral wrote to Barrios when she heard that he had taken up the life of a gentleman farmer, "sólo la tierra verde da alguna dicha estable."<sup>6</sup> But in order to attain joy one must risk exiling oneself from the indifference of nature.

José Pedro will assert defiantly the continuity of his identity: "Recuerda que cierta vez oyó por ahí que alguien decía 'Mucho ha cambiado este caballero.' Falso: él continua el mismo" (p. 323). Even if his conviction were true, the world around him has changed and meaning has revealed itself as not being individually anchored in a fixed and immutable presence, but as being historically and socially determined by a play of differences. José Pedro has received this knowledge from his uncle, and he resists it because it rubs him against the grain: "resulta la verdad algo relativo, condicionado a lo que crean. No es nada en sí" (p. 161). Thus, for example, the copy of the Parnassus remains the same, but its concrete manifestation in history is viewed differently in the references to it along the narrative. At the beginning, it is only "un raro libro" (p. 46), then "aquel viejo volumen" (p. 163), and finally "el viejo volumen del Pegaso en la portada" (p. 393). The transmutation of mystery into distance (*raro-aquel*), of distance into intimacy (*aquel-el*), is a trace left by value-modifying time. The process of modification will give birth to melancholy, when values are still cherished even though they are recognized as obsolete. They were not demolished with one blow, one could not rush to their defense: they were imperceptibly sidetracked. In the opinion of José Pedro, "los famosos tiempos modernos, ellos tienen dentro la locura" (p. 467). As he speaks and objectifies the present he expresses his alienation in relation to the present century: "No podía soportar el nuevo siglo" (p. 568). The hero has not been defeated by jungle, open plains, or *pampa*, but by a submerged category perceptible only to the mind and its capacity to remember and compare. Against time and the metamorphosis chronically induced by history, Valverde's creative powers come to naught.

José Pedro's son Antuco could be interpreted to be Valverde's continuity in time, but he is only a copy of his father, and therefore not a true development of tradition. He is there to show that an identical repetition of the past is not enough to avoid falling into time's rift. An evocation, on the other hand, may write something new at the same time that it remembers the old. The struggle of agriculture and its illusions can be translated into the language of culture.

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<sup>5</sup>Eduardo Barrios, "La saturación literaria," *Atenea*, 154 (1964), 69-74, reproduced from the first number of *Atenea* in 1925, when Barrios was the organizer and director, a position he occupied until 1929.

<sup>6</sup>José Anadón, "Epistolario entre Gabriela Mistral y Eduardo Barrios," *CA*, 211 (1977), 234.

The duality of creators is signaled from the first paragraph of the introduction: "Bajo la encina centenaria, desdibujado dentro de la húmeda sombra, inmóvil como zorro al acecho, está el patron." The protagonist is power, *patron*, landowner, but frozen, *inmovilizado*, caught at a moment in which he is about to leap into writing, but while still he is erased, *desdibujado*, by the century-old tree of time. The narrator will scare away the darkness that surrounds him with the power of speech: there will be light.

The narrator never defines himself directly, he has no name, but he calls Valverde "tata" (grandfather) twice in the introduction and still another time in the first evocation. Almost at the end of the novel, the reader finds out that José Pedro had in Europe "nietos, chicos que desde allá solían garrapatear cartitas al 'querido tata'" (p. 434). The narrator presents himself as the grandson of the hero, perhaps with a European education, as the true continuer of the creative tradition of the Valverde family. There may be here an attempt by Barrios, himself a man of the middle-class but with aristocratic leanings, to graft himself through writing into the agrarian Chilean *fronda aristocrática*. But he is also showing his deep understanding of the complexity of the creative process. The narrator is the origin of a text that brings him into existence as a grandson-writer, with his grandfather as the main character and hero. (Is there any novel that is not about the past?) This creator wishes to underline that he descends from the figure he is creating, that he makes himself in the making. A constellation thereby is soberly defined: Eduardo Barrios becomes a writer as he writes the text, and the text comes into existence because Barrios writes it (taking into account the complicity and resistance of language); the narrator originates the text as he tells the tale, but he exists only as a text, created in the medium of language.

Valverde is introduced by the narrator as "patrón," which means "owner" or "boss," but also "model," a pattern to apply or to follow. He may be seen as a quintessential type of certain protagonists of Chilean history, and Barrios claims that José Pedro is the result of combining traits of many landowners that he actually knew.<sup>7</sup> But as a human model he is to be avoided, as the example of his son Antuco clearly shows. It is not exact to say that Barrios defends the feudal landowners of the twentieth century, placing Valverde as a model to shame absentee landowners who evade their apostolic duty of civilizing the peasants, as Peralta writes, or that he brings Valverde forward as an example to the rebellious masses, as Santiván fears.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, as we have shown, Barrios describes the passing of the hero, and his main concern is for time and writing.

As the ideas were articulated into practice, and difference brought into an indifferent but benevolent nature, now practice is translated again into words. The reflecting mirror of the evocation establishes a new identity: "Porque toda, entera, como si fuese la mía, puedo evocar la vida de aquel

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<sup>7</sup>For Barrios's biography and the autobiographical aspect of his novels the most interesting articles are: Fernando Santiván, "Eduardo Barrios y su tiempo," *Atenea*, 154 (1964), 75-99, and Raúl Silva Castro, "Eduardo Barrios (1884-1963)," *RI*, 30 (1964), 239-60. Neo J. Davidson's book *Eduardo Barrios* (New York: Twayne, 1970), is useful. Less original are Julio Orlandi and Alejandro Ramirez in *Eduardo Barrios* (Santiago: Editorial del Pacífico, 1960), and José Antonio Galaos, "Eduardo Barrios, novelista autobiográfico," *CW*, 56 (1963), 160-74. In an interview with Donald F. Fogelquist, "Una visita a Eduardo Barrios," *CA*, 20, No. 116 (1961), 234-39, he tells Fogelquist that "Valverde es una especie de síntesis literaria de varias personas que él había conocido en el campo, todos, a su modo, representantes de un tipo de aristocracia rural y feudal. Ellos eran el vínculo humano que tenía Barrios con una época, ya pasada, de su país," p. 237.

<sup>8</sup>Jaime Peralta, "La novelística de Eduardo Barrios," *CHA*, No. 173 (1964), 357-67, and Fernando Santiván in p. 96 of the article mentioned in the previous note.

hombre . . . Tanto anduvieron mis pasos sobre sus pasos, que hoy, ocultándome, silenciándome yo, desapareciendo de todo escenario, fácil me resulta sentirme su mero espejo” (p. 8).

Only in the evocation the wholeness of life becomes possible, “entera,” only when absence is scratched into words, and for the writer, as for José Pedro’s uncle when he contemplates Caballo Pájaro’s empty room, “se le materializó la ausencia” (p. 128). Writing emerges as the reading in memory of the imprint left by the man of action, his own writing in nature. In order to make this analogy more pointed, the novel, as we have seen, underscores the fact that José Pedro did do some reading that influenced him, and his grandson adds: “Sin advertirlo, tata José Pedro era, pues, un artista” (p. 18). Nature too is read as if it were an artist: winter seems like a farm laborer who came down from heaven, and even like an artist who brought aesthetic delight into those rustic souls that have not enjoyed it (cf. p. 250), and the drizzle draws with India ink on the naked branches. When the Chile that he has helped to build turns away from him, José Pedro meditates as a writer would, confronted by a mutiny of his characters: “fatalmente todo creador ha de acabar en esclavo de sus criaturas” (p. 323). Some of the words in the text are echoes of those pronounced by Valverde himself when he spun his adventures for the benefit of his grandchildren, when visions of the past “acudían, unas tras otras, y él las traducía en palabras” (p. 18).

The word, the idea and image of what a true farm should look like, became writing in nature through the efforts of José Pedro: “La Huerta no pasa de ser un campo agreste, salvaje. Es preciso transformarlo en fundo, en fundo verdadero” (p. 89). But under the orchard, *Huerta*, lurks the original name of the farm with its atavistic call: *Vuelta*, return. What permanence can man aspire to with the writing in nature, that so easily returns to its origins, covered by snow, undone by unruly growth, washed away by a flood, retraced by a different hand?

Pegasus, stamping the earth with his hoof, released Hippocrene, the stream that allowed the Muses to transform into an orchard the previously parched land of the Helicon, according to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, v. 256-68. Here again the underlying correspondence is outlined between Pegasus, José Pedro, the farmer who channels rivers and gives form to an estate, and the narrator (and even more in hiding, the author), who infuses new existence by commanding the flow of memory and language. Flesh becomes words; the country manners and the rural experience that Barrios describes—horse—, is metamorphosed into refined prose—bird—; chronological time becomes verbal tense, and in doing so it takes wing to the region of representation, never undone while never truly present.

Pegasus, writes Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, iv, 786, is born from the blood of the Medusa, begotten by Poseidon, who is son of Cronos—time—and Rea—change—the two forces that Barrios feared most. Pegasus’s mother immobilizes with her gaze, as she petrifies her victims and subtracts from them their historicity. The writer too is a builder of monuments, rescuing and defending from dispersion and dismemberment, but he does so at the price of removing historical action to a different space where tense translates time. Historical time, as keenly perceived by Barrios, inexorably continues its run, and all labor, be it that of the farmer or the artist, rushes too into that stream, where it will be read in different ways or simply forgotten. The Medusa, she who grants a statuesque form of permanence, is herself the only one among the Gorgons who is mortal, and she dies at the hands of Perseus who reflects her own gaze with his shield.

Once José Pedro has completed his work, once he has emptied his ideas into nature, there is no place left for him. As he sees his work finished, and his reflections and memories caught in the shield of Perseus, as represented by the book, Barrios is no longer an author. He becomes a reader, a spectator who watches Pegasus or Horse-Bird's flight. José Pedro becomes an exile from his past, just as the writer is left behind, at the other side of the wall of time. Passion and imagination became action, action begot words, and words constitute a monument from whence new passions, images, and ideas may arise: *Tolle, lege.*