

The story of the warrior and the captive

On some page of his *La Poesia* Croce recounts the fate of Droctulft the barbarian, abridging the account in Latin of Paul the Deacon, and quotes his epitaph — which Gibbon transcribes too, I think — all of which affected me strangely, I recall, though only afterwards did I understand why. This Droctulft was a Lombard warrior who during the siege of Ravenna abandoned his fellows and died defending the city he had attacked. The men of Ravenna buried him in a church and composed for the sepulchre an epitaph which declares their gratitude — *contempsit caros dum nos amat ille, parentes* — and records the singular contrast between the fearsome aspect of the man and his simplicity and goodness:

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

Such is the history and destiny of Droctulft, the barbarian who died a champion of Rome; or such the fragment of his story that Paul the Deacon could recover. I do not know the date, even, of those happenings: whether they cut in two the 6th century — when the dreaded Longbeards, the *Longobardos*, desolated the plains of Italy — or if they divide the 8th century, rather, before the surrender of Ravenna to the Franks. Let us take it for the earlier: I am not a historian.

Consider Droctulft *sub specie aeternitatis* then — not the particular Longobard named so, who was unique and unfathomable surely, as all individuals are — but the generic Type made out of him, and out of many like him, by the work of memory and oblivion that we receive as Tradition. Across leagues of forest and swamp obscure to the geographers, from the banks of the Danube and the Elbe, war brought the barbarians to Italy. Perhaps they did not know that they were going south, even, nor that the men they fought called themselves Romans. Perhaps they were rude disciples of Arius — who had maintained that the glory of the Son reflects, only, the glory of the Father — but it is more proper to suppose them devoted to the Earth, to Hertha, whose veiled idol went from camp to camp in a cart pulled by oxen, or to their gods of War and Thunder, which were heavy figures of wood draped in cloth and loaded with coins and bracelets. They came from the mazing forests of the wild boar

and the ure-ox, they were white, spirited, innocent, cruel, loyal to their captains and to their tribes, not to the universe.

War brings Droctulft to Ravenna: and he sees a thing he has never seen. A day of cypress and marble, a conjoining multiple but without disorder, a city, an organism composed of statues and temples, mansions and gardens, terraces, urns, cornices and pediments, plazas, planes and solids regular and open. The monstrosity did not seem beautiful to him, this much we know, and it must have struck the barbarian just as we are struck by some complicated piece of machinery: of whose purpose we are ignorant but in whose devising we divine an immortal intelligence. Perhaps a single arch sufficed, with its inscription of triumph incomprehensible in its eternal Roman letters. The brusque revelation blinds and restores: the City claims him. He knows that within the walls some dog goes barking, or a child is wailing, he knows that he could not even begin to comprehend it, but he knows as well that this is to be honoured more than his gods and his sworn faith, is worth more than his swamps and forests — is more valuable than Germania all, whose fierce men and brave wives Tacitus had commended.

Droctulft forsakes his own and contends for Ravenna: dies: and on his sepulchre are graven words he would have understood as little, then, as now we pronounce them truly:—

Contempsit caros, dum nos amat ille, parentes,

Hanc patriam reputans esse, Ravenna, suam.

He was not a traitor: traitors do not inspire reverent epitaphs. He was a man illumined, a converted soul. In the end, some few generations after, the Longobards who vituperated the deserter did as he had done: they became Italians, Lombards ... and perhaps someone of their blood, an Aldiger say, sired the man or the woman whose issue would one day engender Alighieri. Many conjectures are entitled to enlist to their aid the signal act of Droctulft. But mine is the most economical: if only as cypher or symbol, say, were the facts of the matter otherwise.

Reading in Croce's book the story of the warrior I was moved in an unwonted way, and I felt that I was recovering, under some different shape, something that had been mine once. Passingly I thought on those Mongol horsemen who had wanted to make of China an endless pasture, and grew old at last in the cities they had longed to destroy: but that was not the memory I sought. I found it at last: it

was a story I had once heard from my English grandmother, who is dead now.

In 1872 my grandfather Borges commanded on the frontier to the north and west of Buenos Aires and south of Santa Fe. He was quartered in Junin. Further on were the forts, standing four or five leagues apart from each other, and after them came what was called the Pampa then, simply, or the Interior. One day my grandmother, between astonishment and jest, wondered at the destiny of an Englishwoman banished to that end of the earth. She was not the only one a companion said: and some months after pointed out to her an Indian girl who was walking slowly across the plaza. She wore a red blanket and went barefoot. Her braided hair was blonde at its roots. A soldier was sent to say that the other Englishwoman wished to speak with her. The woman agreed, and entered the house without fear but not without misgiving. Against the flaring reds daubed on the coppery face her eyes were that reserved blue the English call grey. The long body was light, like a doe's, but the arms were strong and raw-boned. She came from the desert, from the Interior, and everything seemed to become small around her: the door, the walls, the chairs of the parlour.

The two women felt themselves sisters for a moment perhaps: they were far from their beloved island and in a savage land. My grandmother spelt out her questions. The other answered with difficulty, searching for words and saying them over — amazed at their taste, at a savour ancient and alien as if. It would have been fifteen years since she had spoken the language she was born to: to recover which was not easy. She said that she was from Yorkshire, that her parents had come out to Buenos Aires, that they had been killed in a raid, that she had been carried away by the Indians: and that she was the woman of a young chief now, who was very brave, and to whom she had borne two sons. All this was said in a rustic English mixed through with Araucanian, maybe, or the many tongues of the Pampa ... and under her telling glimmered a life still feral — the feasts of scorched flesh and raw innards, the bonfires of dung, the stench, the rawhide tents, the furtive marches at dawn, the assaults on the ranches, the yelling, the mares whipped baying from the corrals, the stripped homesteads, their rude finery heaping the naked riders, the rampant matings after, the spilling entrails before, their magic splay ... To such barbarism had an Englishwoman been reduced: and moved by pity, and by the scandal of it, my grand-

mother exhorted the squaw to not return, to remain with her. She would protect her, she swore it, she would ransom her sons. The other replied that she was happy: and that very night went back to the desert. Francisco Borges died a little after, in the revolution of 1874 ... and maybe my grandmother saw then, in the other woman snatched away too and transformed by this implacable continent, a monstrous mirroring of her destiny.

All those years the blonde Indian had been coming to the markets of Junin, or to Fuerte Lavalle, to procure trinkets and drink; after speaking with my grandmother she came no more. She was seen again once however. My grandmother had gone on a hunt. On some ranch, beside its washing-troughs, a man was slaughtering a sheep. In a dream as if the Indian passed on a horse, swung herself down, drank the hot blood. I do not know if she did so because she could not do otherwise, by then, or in defiance, and for a sign.

One thousand three hundred years and an ocean subsist between the destinies of the captive and the warrior; and both are equally irrecoverable now. The barbarian who embraces the cause of Rome and the Englishwoman who decides for the Pampa might seem opposed as types; but both were ravished by a secret impulse, deeper than reason, and both honoured an impulse they could nowise have justified ... and the stories I have related are one history perhaps, equal, the obverse and reverse of one coin, tossed by God.