

A GENEROUS INNOCENCE: Art and Social Justice

As the 1960s came to a close, Jorge Luis Borges published a short story, “Doctor Brodie’s Report,” in which the narrator – a Scottish missionary – explains the customs of a primitive tribe, named the Yahoos in homage to *Gulliver’s Travels*. His report highlights that “one of the tribe’s customs is the discovery of poets. Six or seven words, generally enigmatic, may come to a man’s mind. He cannot contain himself and shouts them out, standing in the centre of a circle formed by the witch doctors and the common people, who are stretched out on the ground. If the poem does not stir them, nothing comes to pass, but if the poet’s words strike them they all draw away from him, without a sound, under the command of a holy dread. Feeling then that the spirit has touched him, nobody will either speak to him or cast a glance at him, not even his own mother. Now he is no longer a man but a god, and anyone has licence to kill him.”

Like our most distant ancestors, who sat around fires in caves, we have always felt the urge to put together “six or seven words” to communicate the almost ineffable things we feel, think, imagine, and create. And just like for the Yahoo poets, most often “nothing comes to pass.” The words we utter do not excite, do not impassion and, in societies that began writing five thousand years ago, they are relegated to libraries where they await in quiet hope for the coming of new readers. Literature – art — is infinitely patient.

However, in rare cases where words (or works of art, musical compositions, dance patterns) succeed in moving their audience, several things could occur.

First consequence: Through the reaction of the audience, the artist transforms into a prestigious being, endowed with divine qualities and absolved from the obligations ordinarily imposed on his or her fellow citizens. The artist is consecrated through literary awards, lists of bestsellers, official ceremonies. But the artist can also become a sacrificial lamb of sorts. Sartre defined the genius as the one whom God's finger crushes against the wall.

Second consequence: The creation, acknowledged as a work of art, enters into a sort of imaginary museum (to apply Malraux's concept in my own way). Here, in this warehouse of universal art – continuously expurgated and revisited –, are found the likes of Margaret Atwood and the Mona Lisa, Bach and Banksy, Nietzsche and Shakira. Every society adds and removes canonical works of art, and from this hodgepodge flow the vocabularies with which societies define and redefine themselves. Our mother tongues are moulded in this numinous space, affecting both those who acknowledge it and those who are unaware of its existence. We are all citizens of Athens, Jerusalem, Bagdad, and Beijing.

There are examples in literature. No Italian is insensitive to Dante's voyage, even having never read the *Commedia*. No Argentinian is oblivious to the questionable morals in *Martín Fierro*, even having never recited verses by José Hernández. No German is impervious to the linguistic paradoxes of *Faust*, even having never seen Goethe's work or opened the book. We come into the world and are welcomed into the collective imagination of our tribe, which – perhaps now more than ever and despite a few bewildering walls –, has undefined boundaries. From this shared *imaginaire* emerges our vision of the world and of ourselves:

our projects of coexistence and our prejudices, our ambitions, empathy and wildest dreams, as well as our double identity as observers and observed. The great Quebec poet Saint-Denys Garneau described the visionary being that lives inside of us:

For always standing within us
 A man not to be beaten down
 Erect within us, turning his back
 To where our looks are turned
 Erect in his bones, eyes fixed on the void
 In a fearful dogged confrontation
 That is also an act of defiance.

Third consequence: At times, and perhaps more often than we realize, artistic creations can directly influence the course of history. For instance, certain works of art provoke social change: we know that Dickens's *Oliver Twist* contributed to changing child labour laws in England, and that Emile Zola's *Germinal* helped improve somewhat the situation of French miners. Other examples can be found in the Americas. In 1862, when Abraham Lincoln met with the famous author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lincoln is reputed to have said: "So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this Great War!" In the 20th century, *Hausipungo* by Jorge Icaza, *Broad and Alien Is the World* by Ciro Alegría, and *Masters of the Dew* by Jacques Roumain, among others, helped document, if not change, the situation of those who were being exploited.

It was the brilliant Aby Warburg who introduced the concept of *Nachleben* or the survival of images, the continuity and metamorphosis of

images over time in very diverse cultural contexts. One may extend the application of this Warburgian concept to all works of art – not only to images, but to words, sounds and movements as well. It would then become possible to observe how the words used by the Yahoo poets – in cases where they struck their audience – are translated from generation to generation, take on various meanings and are used to very different ends. For Shakespeare's contemporaries, *Hamlet* was a precursor to the crime-fiction genre, as well as a social commentary of the mechanisms behind the monarchy. For readers in the 19th century, the play illustrated the tension between *logos* and *praxis*, between action and reflection. During the period of the Third Reich, it sketched the portrait of a new kind of Aryan hero, and for Freud's successors, it presented a classic psychological conflict. Such metamorphoses are slow, gradual, and sometimes barely perceptible, but they are ever-present as underground cultural movements in all societies, worldwide.

These movements, which corrode, crumble and modify the vocabularies of a society, also alter its visible identity. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the men and women in the Americas understood this well, and felt the need to distance themselves from European governments. In Canada – the only country in the Americas born not from a revolution, but from a counter-revolution – national identity was not established in opposition to another identity (English or French, Spanish or Portuguese). Instead, it is rooted in openness to all, including those yet to come. For instance, a group of Sikh immigrants arrived in Canada during the 1980s, and many among them became Canadian citizens. Rather than force them to conform to an official image, Canada changed the symbols of its image to include them. Thus, when a member of the Sikh community wished to join the Mounted Police, but for religious reasons could not remove his

turban to wear the emblematic wide-brimmed hat with the red uniform and black boots, Canada changed its rules. Today, Canada is proud to have members of the Mounted Police who wear turbans instead of hats. The *Nachleben* of images can be symbolically inclusive.

In the years that followed Columbus's journeys, the literate and illiterate soldiers who emigrated to the New World brought along not only European mythology – from giants and amazons to the god that suffered on the cross –but also the books that immortalized this mythology. It is moving to read the chronicles of Columbus's first journey, in which the influences of Pliny are apparent: spotting some manatees near the mouth of the Orinoco River, Columbus thought he had seen “three mermaids jump high out of the water, but (as the Admiral so faithfully added) they were not as beautiful as they are described.”

Columbus's descendants acted under the influence of the collective imagination, inherited from Europe, and believed in the intellectual (and talismanic) power of books. Cornell University has the copy of Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, the one Lafayette brought to America from his library in France, emulating his hero, Alexander the Great, who always had with him, during his travels, one of Homer's books. General San Martín carried in his saddlebags, during his military campaigns, the works of Diderot, the copies of which can be found today at the National Library of Argentina. Our Library was named after its founder, Mariano Moreno, who was one of the secretaries of the first revolutionary assembly (Primera Junta Revolucionaria) of 1810, and who translated Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Justifying the need to create a national library as the emblematic core of a country longing to become independent, Moreno wrote the following lines before he died at the age

of 33: “If the people do not seek education, if they do not popularize their rights, if every man does not know what he is worth, what he is capable of and what is owed to him, new illusions will succeed old ones, and after hesitating for some time between thousands of uncertainties, our fate may be to change tyrants without destroying tyranny.” Such fundamental words are the *Nachleben* of those written by Diderot half a century earlier and which Moreno had undoubtedly read [translation]: “Educating a people is civilizing them. Extinguishing education is bringing the people back to their primitive condition as barbarians”.

These concepts, in multiple regional variations, have moved men and women in the Americas and inspired them to establish the nation states in which we live today. This is something we can see for ourselves, living under one geographical label in communities recognized as independent ones. Unfortunately, we cannot see the *Nachleben* of these concepts in today’s societies, its active persistence and its creative validity. Allow me to elaborate.

Fourth consequence: I talked about three consequences of the poetic act. There is one more consequence, which is the most remote, the most important, the most desirable, and the one that seldom occurs. It is the transformation, through the work of art, of the affected individual into an ethical and empathetic citizen who can repeal his selfish and petty tendencies, for he is eager to convert his society into a place that is sufficiently fair and adequately happy.

Our governments only pay lip service to education and culture and allocate them the lowest budgets among state entities, thus displaying the low importance granted to what Moreno called the “enlightenment.” In

2018, in Mexico for instance, only 12,8% was granted jointly to Education and Culture; in Argentina, 5.6% was granted to Education (to which must be added the budget allotted to Education by each individual provincial government) and only 0.15% to Culture. In Italy, the government allotted 1.4% of its budget to Culture and 4% to Education. In Canada, the cultural budget allotted to the Canada Council for the Arts, the Library and Archives of Canada, the National Gallery of Canada and the Department of Canadian Heritage, jointly, is a miserly 0.75% of the total federal budget.

The cultural programs set up by our governments are said to foster culture, but it means no more than almsgiving, relegating culture within the collective imagination to the category of a superfluous, decorative activity; nothing but mere entertainment. Our educational programs ignore or pretend to ignore that schools need to be a space where imagination enjoys absolute freedom, without a defined purpose, encouraged by the creative pedagogical intelligence of enthusiastic teachers. Instead, throughout the world, we have transformed schools into a training facility for offices and factories. In all our societies today, intellectual activity has lost much of its prestige, and the word itself no longer has a transformative force and a thaumaturgic power. This has often led to the replacement of rational and argumentative discourse with sectarian slogans and temper tantrums expressed in tweets.

Either individually or collectively, we no longer trust our relationship to works of art. We accept commercial discourse that only seeks consumers and wants to convince us that we are not sufficiently intelligent for the so-called “high culture.” We are told that it is too

complex, slow and difficult for us. And the industry knows it cannot sell a product that is “complex, slow and difficult.”

Thus, we do not accept the open work, the non-dogmatic text. We are trained to indulge ourselves with conclusive answers. We reject a book that interrogates us, a work of art that does not provide us with conclusions. We have known for centuries that empathy and knowledge of others are learned more deeply and with greater ease through psychology or anthropology, and yet we mistrust those imaginary friendships that are offered to us since the *Epic of Gilgamesh* onwards. We wonder what a work of art is for, instead of contenting ourselves with, and being thankful for, its mere existence, and the effect it produces in us. “*Art happens*,” Whistler wisely observed. It happens, and nothing more.

Art and literature can offer us exemplary fables and questions, each one more expansive and insightful than the last. Yet no art or literature, not even the best ones or the most thorough ones, can save us from our own madness. Paintings, sculptures, installations, videos, music and theatre performances, novels, poems, film scripts (to give in to the easy temptation of labelling) cannot protect us from suffering or from deliberate error, from natural or artificial catastrophes caused by our own suicidal greed. The only thing that art can do is, sometimes, miraculously, tell us something about that folly and greed, and remind us that we must remain cautious about commercial technologies, which are more and more absolutist and self-sufficient. A work of art that moves us carries within it, for us, several transformative possibilities. A work of art may offer us comfort in our suffering and words to describe our experiences. It can tell us who we are and teach us to imagine a future in which, without

hoping for a conventional happy ending, we can stay alive, together—but in a balanced way—on this ill-treated planet.

It seems that all threats issued against artists and writers from the kings' thrones, from the inquisitors' pulpits, from the presidents' chairs, from the offices of the big bosses in big companies, have only served to reinforce our conviction that art is an essential activity for human beings. When in Plato's *Republic*, the aggressive philosopher Thrasymachus declares that justice is nothing but "a generous innocence" and injustice a matter of "discretion," we know he isn't right, but Socrates's interrogation will not lead to proof, in a precise and unquestionable way, that his definitions are erroneous; it will lead to Socrates declaring that justice must be included in the class of things [translation] "that, if one wishes to be happy, one must love as much for their own sake as for what may result." But how is that happiness to be defined? What does it mean to love something for its own sake? The work of art (and even fiction writing, which Socrates condemns in another passage) may help us answer those questions, or formulate them in a clearer way, fighting the obstinate duel declared by Saint-Denys Garneau. If few people are interested in the arts and literature; if many read poorly; if artists and poets can, according to the Yahoos' verdict, be annihilated by anyone; if most people mistake propaganda with artistic creation — none of this matters so much as that the arts live on and that books endure, in the hope that they will help us become a little happier and a little less foolish.

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