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THE EVOCATIVE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH*

By Edgard Telles Ribeiro

Fifty two years ago, in March 1964, a military *coup* deposed João Goulart, the democratically elected President of Brazil. Two years later, in 1966, the democratically elected President of Argentina was also forced to step down by a military *coup*. A few years later, Uruguay's President was the victim of the same scenario. And finally, on 9/11, 1973, Salvador Allende, the democratically elected President of Chile, was deposed by a military *coup* led by General Augusto Pinochet. President Allende shot himself at the Palace of La Moneda, which had been bombarded by air and attacked by tanks.

Four *coups* in a row... All in the same region. *Could it have been a simple coincidence?*

These four nations had all enjoyed free elections, an independent press and judiciary system, as well as all the prerogatives of thriving democracies. And all of a sudden they found themselves plunged into the middle ages, the liberties of their citizens curtailed, their dissidents subjected to torture or worse. Over the years, forty to fifty thousand people would be killed or "disappeared" in the region. Just as importantly: many thousands more died as a result of misguided economic policies put in place by the military, as well as low health priorities and lack of social agendas addressed to the poor.

Since then many years have passed. Long enough for political analysts to denounce the role the CIA played in these *coups*, and for scholars to examine the many declassified documents made available by the US Government. The US involvement in these coups has been fairly well established in Chile, and to a greater or smaller extent in the other three countries, Brazil included. Without firing a single shot or losing a single man in the so called field of battle, the US had helped to make sure that these four countries kept a safe distance from Fidel Castro's communist revolution in Cuba. Back in the sixties, as we all remember, Cuba had become a so-called Soviet "satellite". Fidel Castro's "red threat" was taken seriously by Latin America's conservative elite, and obviously by the US.

Today, seen in retrospect, Washington's involvement in these *coups* in South America makes sense from a strictly geopolitical standpoint. With its growing involvement in the Vietnam War, which had started in 1962 under Kennedy, and worsened under Lyndon Johnson, the last thing the US needed was another guerrilla war right in their backyard. The Pentagon could face *one* guerrilla war in the Far East (with disastrous results as it turned out), but never *two*, especially if the second was so close to home.

Beyond that, and this is equally relevant, important economic US interests were at stake as well, as many of these South American countries were nationalizing their energy resources, from oil to mining, as well as imposing limitations on the repatriation of foreign funds.

So there is little doubt that the CIA and the Pentagon did contact and influence the military in South America, as well as the local ruling classes. More than a simple political interaction, they provided the funds that eventually helped to bring down the above-mentioned democracies, through massive anti-communist campaigns in the media. These were the years of the Cold War, after all. And South America had been caught in one of the fronts of that war.

So when the four *coups* took place in quick succession, no one thought of them as a simple coincidence... A military *coup* is not a virus, which travels from country to country thanks to prevailing winds, or sick individuals. *Coups* are plotted, and very carefully. They feed on the fear and anxieties of certain segments of a given society – when that society feels confronted by threats. Threats which, in reality, merely reflected a rather modest pressure for change.

Political changes, based on better representation for the lower classes; *social changes*, based on reforms focused on education, health issues, and a fair land distribution; *cultural changes*, based on the necessity to deal with the ethnic diversity of these countries' populations. Nothing that would, today, shock anyone dealing with government policies in the Western world. Nothing that isn't currently part of the mainstream platforms of any decent political party. But these were the sixties...

In Brazil, the military dictatorship lasted 21 years. When it ended, in 1985, we moved on. We moved on, but we didn't forget. Many books were written documenting the dead, the tortured, the "disappeared". But these were factual books, based on interviews with survivors or their relatives, with historians, with journalists. Some films were also produced, addressing the repression and violence we had gone through.

In the field of literature, however, with some exceptions, few novels addressed the dictatorship and its consequences.

In those days (the mid-eighties), I had not yet started my writing career. I had been a journalist, writing for a number of Rio de Janeiro papers, a film professor at the University of Brasilia, and a diplomat. In 1991, however, I wrote my first novel, a book that was later published in this country by Saint Martin's Press. It was called "O criado-mudo", which means "Nightstand". (In the US my subtitle title was changed to "I would have loved him if I had not killed him" ...)

After this first novel came out, I took to writing and ended up publishing, over the next twenty years, another eight works of fiction, including novels and short story collections.

These books always told a tale, springing straight from my imagination, but very seldom reflected any sort of objective reality. They all shared a "once upon a time" flavor. Fiction for fiction's sake, no strings attached of any sort...

Until one day, in 2008, my younger daughter asked me: "Dad, how come you never write about the dictatorship?"

She was right, and I was stunned by her question. I realized that, like most witnesses (or victims) of dictatorships, the writers of my generation, myself included, seemed reluctant to deal with these painful and complex themes. How does one address a dictatorship, *when one writes fiction?*

The subject appeared to be far too big, and almost abstract in nature. It evoked painful memories, of oppression, censorship, injustices of all kinds. But the challenge resided both in the *scale* of things – and its *vagueness*. It seemed impossible to take this shapeless monster by the hand, look the reader in the eye, and write: *“Once upon a time, military tanks rolled in our main streets...And as a result, many people got killed.”*

However, I never quite stopped thinking about my daughter’s question. Until, one day, I remembered an episode involving a Brazilian film-maker, Alberto Cavalcanti, who had made many films, including documentaries, in England during World War II. He had once been asked to shoot a film about the British Post Office. Faced with a rather boring subject, he decided... *to film a letter!*

And film a letter he did... *He simply followed it with his camera.* From the moment it was written, placed in an envelope, stamped, thrown inside a mailbox, retrieved by a post office truck, sorted out by machines, dropped in a postman’s bag – until it was finally delivered to the right address. Not a single word of explanation was uttered in the film’s soundtrack; no information was provided to the audience, other than what could be seen on the screen. One just saw the letter moving around, surrounded by the everyday noises resulting from its progression towards a final destination.

As I remembered Cavalcanti’s film, I realized I could use this idea to deal with the military dictatorship in Brazil: *focus on a specific topic and never waiver.* I needed to find *my letter.* In other words: I needed a strong character to bring my tale to life. And this character, who slowly emerged from the depth of my memories, took the shape of an informer. *An informer working for the military, but operating in the Brazilian Foreign Ministry.*

Once I had my main character, I provided him with a younger colleague, who at first admires and even worships him, but little by little begins to suspect him, until, in due time, he uncovers the fellow as the fascist he really was. The younger man became my narrator. And with that I was set to go.

Five hundred pages and two years later, my novel came out and helped shed some light on the twenty years of repression that had gone by among us, while also denouncing what had happened in the region. Because this informer of mine ended up crossing our borders to interact with carefully chosen partners in Buenos Aires, Montevideo and Santiago. How did this start?

At first, while still in Brazil, he began to report on colleagues whom he suspected of being leftists. His information was passed on by his superiors to the military, with whom our man then began to socialize. They, in turn, went a step further and began to share wider plans with him. They instructed him to infiltrate the Ministry on their behalf, but to do it more systematically, *“so as to keep an eye on people who might deserve to be watched”.*

Soon, however, far more important missions were entrusted to him, and our man began making contacts through our embassies with like-minded individuals in Argentina, Uruguay and Chile. The CIA acted as a facilitator of sorts, providing names, addresses and people interested in financing undercover operations. It wasn't hard to find parties that shared the same concerns regarding the threat of socialist ideas in the region. And the rest is History.

The "domino theory" so often quoted in Southeast Asia ("*If Vietnam falls, Thailand will fall, and then Malaysia and Singapore, and then who knows, maybe Japan...*") ended up taking place in our region, *but in reverse*, as it empowered the extreme right: Brazil fell in 1964, as I mentioned, soon followed by Argentina, Uruguay and Chile.

As a young diplomat, I had guessed what was going on around us in the Brazilian Foreign Ministry. Forty years later, as a writer, my challenge would be to transform my vague recollections of those days into a realistic scenario for my novel. How could I make this transition?

I could not, as an author, rely on facts, because most of these were hidden – as the evidence had been destroyed. So there was very little I could work with to make my case. But I had heard many rumors. The atmosphere around us was so charged with somber hints that you could almost touch it with your bare hands. You didn't see or witness much, but *you sensed something was wrong*.

Foreign Affairs are traditionally conducted in secrecy in times of peace or war. The minimum one expects in diplomatic circles is some degree of confidentiality. As a result, my informer and his fellow conspirators were able to act with total impunity. But they couldn't avoid raising suspicions.

To write my novel, I gathered whatever information was available from the press, films and books about what had actually happened in Brazil in those days. But regarding *the more private and secretive atmosphere of the Foreign Ministry*, I realized that I would have to reinvent scenarios – *reinvent a reality that had existed, but had remained invisible to the naked eye*.

For that, as I mentioned, I had to fall back on my intuitions from the past – and rely on perceptions more guessed than documented. As my writing began to take shape, I slowly transformed these perceptions into the *real memories* of my narrator as he tracked down his colleague.

Once I reinvented a reality, and injected life to it, I knew I stood a chance to reach my readers. Why? Because my version of the repression blended with the knowledge they had acquired from other sources. Blended, in other words, with the suspicions that they had held all along.

I reached them, not rationally, not with facts or statistics, *but emotionally*. By providing them with a context for what had happened: a story they could relate to, a story akin to a dream. Or, as was the case, a nightmare.

And they could relate to my story *because people had died*, as had been widely documented by scholars and other sources, like the Amnesty International, for instance, and even the United Nations' Human Rights Commission.

So once an author *knows* that these crimes actually took place, what difference does it make whether some of the decisions leading, say, to the creation of death squads, were taken during a secret meeting, a military parade – or even during a cocktail party or a gala dinner? *Let the author decide where they took place!* And let him make this information work for the story...

The main point, if I may insist, is that the deaths and the torture sessions were not a product of our imagination: *They had existed, and they had been documented.* As an author, I simply tried to fill in the gaps. And I did so by retrieving in my imagination the memories of our dead. They were the ones who kept me going. It was their story I was telling, their landscape I was revisiting.

Of course, working along those lines I had not exactly invented (or reinvented) the wheel. Many writers before me had done precisely that throughout History. Just think of the Holocaust. *“How does one write about the Holocaust?”* had always been a question haunting those who tried. How could one, *through a work of fiction*, describe what had happened in the concentration camps and in the ghettos during World War II?

And yet the literature about the Holocaust continues to be written, as the first generation of authors gave way to a second, and then a third.

Interestingly enough, each of these succeeding generations of writers began to distance themselves from the necessity of *documenting realities*, which had been a priority for the first Holocaust authors, and opted instead to *recreate scenarios and plots*. By so doing, they brought an added poignancy to the horrors they described in their fiction. They were no longer limited by the facts, so to speak, but inspired by them. As a consequence, they could give free reign to their imagination. Reviewers and critics called what they did *“imaginative retellings”* or *“alternate histories”*. Not *“stories”*, mind you: *Alternate Histories*.

Later, after finishing my novel, I realized that my own experience had reflected a similar pattern. My challenge was of a smaller scale, naturally, considering the tragedy that had overcome Europe, where millions had died. But the way to handle it had been very similar: out of frustration, out of the impossibility of dealing with themes of such magnitude (and, in my case, so scarcely documented), I came to root my facts in perceptions, and also ended up putting my imagination to work.

After I found *“my letter”*, I felt safe. My informer never ceased to grow as a character, and to dominate the narrative. I named him Max. And I shaped him, like a sculptor would. I made a collage, relying on some of the suspects around us – and thus ended up with a *“composite-character”*. Max was clever, sophisticated, ambitious, elegant, cynic, cold and efficient. He was almost too good (or too bad) to be true... I also gave him a wife, equally sophisticated, beautiful, elegant and rich, who loved him at first, but betrayed and left her husband once she realized the sort of person he really was. Sadly, she ended up becoming one of his victims.

Betrayals call for betrayals, double lives call for double lives. Max and his companions were victims of their own contradictions. And yet, they managed to survive. And in some cases even to thrive.

It is indeed sad to conclude on such a pathetic note, but our man was essentially a survivor. And survive he did: When, many years later, democracy was finally restored in Brazil, *he went on being successful*; he continued to get his promotions and his good posts. Most of his friends and colleagues operating with him in the shadows are still doing just fine.

Unfortunately, such was often the case in the region after democracy was restored. Most of these criminal figures still managed to outperform those who were chasing them, as they had left no visible tracks behind, nothing tangible that could serve as proof of the sordid role they had played.

Impunity was the name of the game here. Impunity, so eloquently denounced by those who studied the aftermath of the Nazi and Fascist horrors in Europe. I mentioned the Holocaust: How many of the perpetrators of these crimes were actually brought to justice and punished? In comparison to the few who were judged and hanged or shot?

In this regard, my novel has no happy end. Other than the fact that it was actually written, bringing to light what until then had remained in the shadows. And for this I have my daughter to thank.

Thank you.

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