STORY OF THE WARRIOR AND THE CAPTIVE

To Ulrike von Kühlmann.

On page 278 of his *La Poesia* (Bari, 1942), Croce, summarizing a Latin text of the historian Paul the Deacon, recounts the fortunes and quotes the epitaph of Droctulft; I was extraordinarily moved, and later I understood why. Droctulft was a Lombard warrior who deserted to the enemy during the siege of Ravenna, and died defending the city he had previously attacked. The Ravennese buried him in a temple and composed an epitaph in which they expressed both their gratitude (*"contempsit caros, dum nos amat ille, parentes"*) and the striking contrast to be found between that barbarian's terrible face and his simplicity and goodness:

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

Such is the story of Droctulft, a barbarian who died defending Rome, or such, at any rate, is the fragment of his story that Paul the Deacon was able to recover. I do not even know when this took place: whether about the middle of the sixth century, when the Longobardi laid waste the plains of Italy; whether in the eighth century, before the surrender of Ravenna. Let us imagine (since this is not a historical work) the first to be the case.

Let us imagine Droctulft *sub specie aeternitatis,* not the individual Droctulft who was, doubtlessly, like all individuals, unique and unfathomable, but the generic type that tradition (which is a product of oblivion and memory) has made of him and of many others like him. The wars brought him from the banks of the Danube and the Elbe across a dim geography of forests and marshes to Italy, and he perhaps did not know that he was journeying south and that he was warring against the name of Rome. Perhaps he professed Arianism, which holds that the glory of the Son is a reflection of the Father's glory, but it is more suitable to imagine him a worshiper of Earth, of Hertha, whose veiled image went from hut to hut in a cart drawn by cows, or of the gods of war and thunder, rude wooden figures wrapped in homespun clothes and heaped with coins and bangles. He came from the dense forests of the wild boar and the aurochs; he was white, brave, innocent, cruel, loyal to his captain and his tribe but not to the universe. The wars bring him to Ravenna and there he sees something he has never seen, or has not seen . . . in such plenitude. He sees the day and cypresses and marble. He sees a whole that is complex and yet without disorder; he sees a city, an organism composed of statues, temples, gardens, dwellings, stairways, urns, capitals, of regular and open spaces. None of these artifacts (I know) impresses him as beautiful; they move him as we might be moved today by a complex machine of whose purpose we are ignorant but in whose design we can intuit an immortal intelligence. Perhaps it is enough for him to see a single arch, with an incomprehensible inscription in eternal Roman letters. Abruptly, that revelation, the City, blinds him and renews him. He knows that in that city he will be a dog, or a child, and that he will not even begin to understand it, but that it is worth more than his gods and his sworn faith and the German marshes. Droctulft deserts, and goes to fight for Ravenna. He dies, and words he would not have understood are carved on his tomb:

* Gibbon (*Decline and Fall,* XLV) also transcribes these verses.

Contempsit caros, dum nos amat ille, parentes,
Hanc patriam reputans esse, Ravenna, suam.

He was not a traitor (traitors do not inspire pious epitaphs), he was a visionary, a convert. After several generations, the Longobardi who condemned the deserter, did as he had done: they became Italians, Lombards, and perhaps someone of that race—Aldiger—may have engendered those who engendered Alighieri. . . . Many conjectures may be made to explain Droctulft's act; mine is the most economical; if it is not literally true, it is symbolically so.

When I read this story of the warrior in Croce's book, I was moved in an unusual way and had the impression I was recovering, in a different form, something that had been mine. I thought fleetingly of the Mongol horsemen who wanted to turn China into an infinite pasture and then grew old in the cities they had longed to destroy. That was not the memory I sought. I found it at last: it was a tale I had sometimes heard from my English grandmother, who is now dead.

In 1872, my grandfather Borges was commander of the northern and western frontiers of Buenos Aires Province and of the southern frontier of Santa Fe Province. His headquarters were in Junín; beyond that, four or five leagues from one another, the chain of outposts; beyond that, what was then called the pampas and also Tierra Adentro. Now and then, half-astonished, half-mocking, my grandmother spoke of her destiny as an Englishwoman exiled to that end of the earth. She was told she was not the only one, and, months later, an Indian girl who was slowly crossing the plaza was pointed out to her. She was wearing two red blankets and went barefoot; her hair was blond. A soldier told her that another Englishwoman wanted to speak to her. The woman consented, and entered the headquarters fearlessly, though with misgivings. In her

coppery face, which was streaked with fierce colors, her eyes were of that wan blue the English call gray. Her body was light, like a deer's; her hands, strong and bony. Coming from the wilderness, the pampas, she seemed to find everything too small for her: the doors, the walls, the furniture.

Perhaps the two women felt for an instant as if they were sisters, here in this incredible land far from their own beloved island. My grandmother said something; the other answered with difficulty, searching for the words and repeating them as if astonished by an ancient savor. She had not spoken her native tongue for fifteen years and it was not easy to take it up again. She said that she was from Yorkshire, that her parents had emigrated to Buenos Aires, that she had lost them in an Indian raid, that the Indians had carried her off, and that now she was the wife of a chieftain to whom she had already given two sons and who was very brave. She said all this in a rustic English interspersed with Auracan and the pampas' dialect. A savage life could be glimpsed behind her tale: the horsehide Indian huts, the fires made of manure, the feasts of scorched meat or of raw entrails, the silent dawn marches; the attacks on the corrals, the yelling and plundering, the naked horsemen charging the haciendas; war, polygamy, stenches, magic. An Englishwoman had lowered herself to this barbarism. Shocked and pitiful, my grandmother urged her not to return, and promised to protect her and to rescue her children. The woman answered that she was happy, and, that night, returned to the wilderness. Francisco Borges died shortly afterward, in the revolution of '74. Perhaps my grandmother was then able to see in that other woman, swept away and transformed by this implacable continent, a monstrous mirror of her own destiny. . . .

The blond Indian woman used to go every year to buy trinkets in the general stores in Junín or Fuerte Lavalle; she did not turn up again after her conversation with my

grandmother. Nevertheless, they saw each other once more. My grandmother had gone out hunting; on a ranch, near the sheep-dip, a man was cutting the throat of a sheep. As if in a dream, the Indian woman came by on a horse. She threw herself to the ground and drank the warm blood. I don't know whether she did this because she could no longer act differently or as a challenge and a sign.

Thirteen hundred years and an ocean stretch between the destiny of the captive and the destiny of Droctulft. Today, the two are equally irretrievable. The figure of the barbarian who embraces the cause of Ravenna and the figure of the European woman who chooses the wilderness may seem antithetical. Nevertheless, both were carried away by a secret impulse, an impulse deeper than reason, and both obeyed this impulse they could not have justified. Perhaps the stories I have recounted are a single story. To God, the obverse and reverse of this coin are the same.

—*Translated by* Irving Feldman

THE CAPTIVE

They tell this story in Junín or in Tapalqué. A boy disappeared after an Indian raid; he was said to have been carried off by the Indians. His parents pressed a futile search for him. After long years a soldier who came from the interior told them of an Indian with sky-blue eyes, who might very well be their son. At last they found this man (the chronicle loses track of the exact circumstances and I don't want to invent what I don't know) and thought they recognized him. The man, formed by the lonely life of the wilds, no longer understood the words of his native language, but let himself be led, indifferent and docile, up to their house. There he stopped, perhaps because the others stopped. He looked at the door, but without understanding. Suddenly, he lowered his head, let out a shout, went down the entrance hall and the two long patios at a run, and burst into the kitchen. Without hesitation he plunged his arm up the blackened fireplace chimney and pulled out a little horn-handle knife he had hidden there as a boy. His eyes shone with joy and his parents wept because they had found their son.

Perhaps other recollections followed this one, but the Indian was not able to live within walls, and one day he went off to look for his wilderness. I wonder what he felt in that vertiginous moment when the past and the present were confused; I would like to know if the lost son was reborn and died in that moment of rapture, or if he managed to recognize, like an infant or a dog at least, his parents and his home.

—*Translated by* Elaine Kerrigan