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“Life and Letters”

(Beneath the Bathtub, the Ocean)

When we first meet the General, he is in the bath. But this is not so much a place for cleansing refreshment and revitalization: it is more of a watery grave. As the General’s loyal aide and manservant, José Palacios, catches sight of his master floating naked with his eyes open in the bath’s purgative waters, he believes that the great man has drowned. Not, however, that the General’s demise is marked by tragedy. On the contrary: Palacios reads on the semi-submerged body before him the signs of an “ecstasy” that is reserved only for those who are no longer of this world. The General is known for his habit of bathtime meditation; he has now simply gone a step further, and entered a state of blessedness that is no longer mortal, no longer human. No wonder Palacios approaches with trepidation, fearful of coming too close. The General is his master, but the master’s death promises not liberation but rather a new form of enchantment. Palacios softly calls to the inert form in the tub, fulfilling his orders to wake the General up even if he senses that the great man is now beyond the call of a human voice. Palacios’s is a *voz sorda*: a lowered or whispered voice, but also literally a *deaf* voice, an unhearing sound that calls out without the expectation of response from an unhearing ear.

In fact, however, the supposed corpse in the bath does respond. The General Simón Bolívar (for it is he) emerges from his stupor, his state of enchantment, and with unexpected force and grace he rises from the waters. Yet even this sudden rush of

energy is compared to the “spirit of a dolphin”: an animal that leaps above the waves only to fall back down almost as soon as it has appeared. The General Bolívar, asleep or awake, is in his labyrinth. And in the book that this incident introduces, Gabriel García Márquez’s *El general en su laberinto*, the great Latin American Liberator will remain always on the verge, hovering somewhere between life and death, reason and ecstasy, the dazzling surface and the deadening deep. And so also, perhaps more importantly, the General as García Márquez depicts him is also endlessly hovering between his mortal body and his impulse to mastery, between the material deprivations of his encroaching illnesses and his continued ambition to construct and consolidate a united Latin American republic. Throughout what will follow, an account of his watery passage down the Magdalena river from upland Bogotá to the Caribbean sea, the General is, in other words, rather precariously suspended between biology and politics, the two poles, as Roberto Esposito observes, of what we have come to call biopolitics. Simón Bolívar, the body in the bathtub, is the biopolitical subject *par excellence*.

For Antonio Negri, biopolitics is the province of what he terms the multitude: that insurgent subject of constituent power that refuses all pacts, betrays all contracts, yet promises to take us through and beyond what he and Michael Hardt label “Empire.” And Empire, on the other hand, mobilizes various forms of biopower to obstruct and control the multitude’s self-expression. As we enter the age of the real subsumption of society by capital, Negri suggests, and after a historical series of insurgencies and subsequent class recompositions in which the terrain of political struggle becomes ever more expansive, the final and most decisive and dreadful conflict pits biopower against biopolitics. Previously, politics revolved around the working week, a living wage, or social welfare. Now, what is at stake is life itself. And so

biopolitics has become the horizon of all politics: both a position on the field of combat, and also the substance of that field itself.

But Simón Bolívar hardly fits within Negri's scheme. He is the agent of neither biopolitics nor biopower. If anything, he is closer to what Giorgio Agamben terms bare life: a semi-spectral presence, spectral because so fully material, so fully identified with his own prematurely aged and suffering body. But it might be better to view him as at the crossroads of both biopolitics and biopower. He is both the radical insurgent who threw off the first great global Empire and also the would-be sovereign of a nascent modern order of nation states and Enlightenment reason. He is the insurgent who lingers uncomfortably on well after the insurgency is over; he is the sovereign without sovereignty, making plans (as the Beatles once said) for nobody. Bolívar is the biopolitical subject not so much because he demonstrates that biopolitics is the quasi-natural substrate to all politics and indeed all life (as though the biopolitical offered some kind of unified theory of the social whole); he poses the question of biopolitics in particularly acute form, rather, because his tragedy is that of the extreme difficulty of making bios and politics cohabit within the same frame. In Bolívar, life and politics are at odds: each threatens to cancel the other out, without either ever achieving fully the upper hand. For the triumph of the biological, the death that lies at the end of what everyone knows is the General's final voyage of no return, is equally the triumph of Bolívar as political figure, as a guiding myth that will be reinvoked and reincarnated by successive political movements throughout the region, most recently of course in Hugo Chávez's (now) Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Excursus One: Bolívar is, first, the man in the bathtub. The bath is perhaps the most fitting scene of everyday bare life. To bathe is to immerse oneself in something like an amniotic fluid, to be in a state of

semi-suspense, to rest but not to sleep, to cleanse but also to soak in your own dirt. Of course, the bath (and the bathroom) is also a culturally differentiated space: Americans for instance don't bathe, they shower; they choose efficiency over contemplation, activity over the liminal experience of a death before death, a *petit mort* that involves nakedness but not sexuality. Bathing is the closest that we will regularly come to lying in our own coffin. The bathtub is the setting for a series of rituals in which we play dead, perhaps even lighting candles as though in both remembrance and forgetting of ourselves. Much more so than the bed, the bath is a place for contemplation but also for letting thought escape, slip away. The bath is both private and public: it's the site of intimacy, the most intimate room in the house; but it is also regularly staged as public, as a site for both science (Archimedes) and politics. After all, one of the most famous of political paintings is David's portrait of Marat, dead, in his bath: the bathroom as site of political assassination, the place in which the revolutionary impulse is curbed as well, perhaps, as fermented. Charlotte Corday hoped to strike at the heart of Jacobinism by aiming at Marat while he bathed.

The General sustains himself with the myth of his own immunity. As all around him watch his inevitable decline, and are caught up in it themselves, in the frustration and boredom of waiting, in the failure to act, in the suspense of non-decision, Bolívar himself refuses for the most part to accept the reality of decay. He puts himself heart and soul into the taxing task of incarnating the myth that is also his project of a transcendent state that could unite the warring factions of Spanish America. And his *modus operandi* is the typical technological prosthesis of any dictator, indeed the *techne* that defines him as dictator: the written word. Bolívar has sent, we are told, some ten thousand letters over the course of his many campaigns. And he continues dictating up until the very last, wearing out squadrons of scribes who attend him with pen in hand. The letter can of course be the means of sedition. Marat, too, was writing in his bath, and is pictured dead with his correspondence still before him. Marat's activities as campaigning journalist were an attempt to stir up and spread contagion. But the letter

is also the agent of immunity: it is the unhearing voice that unites the territory by conveying the word of command. The Argentine Domingo Sarmiento had stressed the importance of a functioning postal system to develop national (un)consciousness and prevent the nascent nation's fragmentation and fall back into barbarism. A postal service anchors and precedes the newspaper circulation and the propagation of the novel that for Benedict Anderson give shape to a national habitus. And Bolívar continues writing, even after he is far too sick to read what he has written by means of his willing amanuensis. But what has changed, what is the decisive break in *The General in His Labyrinth*, is that we are all too aware that the General is only going through the motions. It is the fact that his letters will have no readers that destine Bolívar to his non-sovereign sovereignty. In García Márquez, for the first time, with his endlessly reiterated obsession with letters that do not arrive or books that remain impenetrably mute (*El coronel no tiene quien le escriba; Cien años de soledad*), the link between writing and power that otherwise sustains Latin American reflection upon politics is now decisively broken. Sarmiento's civilizing Leviathan would have laid down the infrastructure. Miguel Ángel Asturias's eponymous Señor Presidente turns the mail into an instrument of surveillance and torture, showing how soon civilization became barbarism. And Augusto Roa Bastos's Supreme is haunted by the power of writing to subvert the voice, enabling the scribe to turn the tables on dictator. But in García Márquez, mail routes mark out merely yet another labyrinth.

At the intersection of bios and politics, articulation is just a dream, a kind of futuristic nostalgia woven around the notion of what might have been. The General is the ultimate dictator, and so *The General in His Labyrinth* is the ultimate dictator novel, because it stands squarely at the end of the tradition that associates articulation (and so hegemony) with power. And yet ironically it projects that terminus right back to the

origin of post-independence Latin America, so forestalling both the nostalgia and the mythmaking that would pretend that hegemony was ever at issue. It is because bios undoes politics at the heart of biopolitics, because the articulation of life to politics is forever unstable, elusive, and indeed impossible, that biopolitics undermines any notion of politics as hegemony, politics as consensus, persuasion, or even duplicity. Bolívar may believe that he is immune, but the only person that he is deluding now is himself--and even then only fitfully. The General finds himself distanced from his own political project; he is aware that as he becomes mythic he loses even his own sense of self. Or rather, he becomes caricature. And likewise, subsequent dictator novels are little more than exercises in genre, however compelling they are on those terms: Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*, for instance, is simply a high-brow literary thriller. With the end of the dictator novel, with the end of the dream to unite life and politics through the hegemonic word, so naturally enough the days of the total novel are at an end.

Excursus Two: Second, Bolívar is the man on the river. River communication and postal communication go hand in hand for Sarmiento, of course: Argentina's republican backwardness results equally from its failure to develop fluvial interprovincial transport. The river is an artery in the figurative body that is the national territory: it carries the lifeblood that pumps merchandise, innovation, and modernity through the socius. But the river can also be supranational. While most colonial outposts are port cities (Buenos Aires, Sydney, Hong Kong, New York, Jakarta, Cairo, Calcutta), most colonial centers are situated on rivers: London, Paris, Seville, even Washington DC. Joseph Conrad famously leaves it ambiguous as to whether the heart of imperial darkness is up the Congo or up the Thames, but either way it is up a river. And the various twentieth-century adaptations of Conrad's colonial parable likewise take the river as their setting: *Apocalypse Now* takes us up the Mekong to investigate US machinations in Indochina; and *Aguirre, Wrath of God* speeds us down the Amazon on a series of rickety rafts. The river belongs to the

colonizers; the riverbanks are the site of unknown subaltern threats. But in *Aguirre* we also see the river as a vehicle of escape or, perhaps better, Exodus. What starts as another raiding party, another search for El Dorado, turns into a line of flight as Aguirre’s betrayal leads the ever-dwindling party through a strange zone of indiscernability and madness, in which their senses start to play tricks on them, boats appear high up in the jungle canopy and, finally, the monkeys take over the asylum. Bolívar’s river is likewise a route of escape. Away from Bogotá, away from the site of central authority, it gathers him up in a Heraclitan flux in which nothing is quite as it once was. On the river, the nation opens up to the Empire, and the Empire opens up to the sea.

For Esposito, immunity is the unreciprocated gift, and so perhaps the unanswered letter. This *immunitas* secures *communitas*. But it is also surely a threat: it suggests the indifference of the silent majorities, their immunity to power. Ironically perhaps, the dictator novel is always about the insecurity of power, the limits to its own propagation; it is about the failure to make biology political, the failure to induce consensus, the inevitable failure of any hegemonic project. More specifically, dictator novels are about the failure of republicanism. For dictatorship is a Republican disease, as is clear in *The General in His Labyrinth*, but above all perhaps in *I, the Supreme*. Dr Francia, Paraguay’s supreme leader, spends much of his time reflecting upon the establishment of the republic, the foundation of the post-independence state and the numerous negotiations and shenanigans required to prevent the land-locked nation from being overwhelmed and over-run by the Brazilians and the Argentines. He ruminates on Rousseau and the Social Contract. But he is vituperative about the failure of that contract: that is, as he sees it, the failure of reciprocity on the part of the Paraguayan people who have never fully constituted themselves, who refuse (through indifference, not through protest) to recognize his own role as Liberator and Republican hero.

The dictator's paranoia comes from the fact that his anxiety is always to secure his borders, to secure an inside rather than to expand beyond territorial limits. Dictators are not generally Emperors: they look outside, but in fear and in defence. The dictator feels hemmed in even as it is he who is anxiously patrolling his own borders, even as he it is who is his own most effective border guard. A dictatorship is always under pressure, and the dictator keeps it under pressure by trying to maintain the territorial status quo. Perhaps that is why the few times that a dictatorship does overspill its boundaries, it does so with such terrible ferocity: Hitler, for instance. But even Hitler's was not really an imperial project. And the great European empires were not built by dictatorships, but by monarchies or even by democracies. An Empire has to learn to let go a little in order to take hold: it has to be prepared to reach beyond itself, and so to delegate its power, to allow its own control to fray at the margins. The cutting edge of Empire always comprises privateers, non-state agents, mercenaries, free market capital. A dictatorship would never allow such rivals to its own power to spring up. A dictatorship is necessarily centripetal, rather than centrifugal.

But Bolívar's tragedy is that of the unviability of republican dictatorship. Gran Colombia is already splitting up, already disintegrating into its constituent parts even as it is still being established. The General's disappointment is that of the degradation of the Republican constitution even at the moment of its birth. To serve the Revolution is to plough the sea, as he famously says. The attempt to give political form to life, to build upon biopolitics, is dead in the metaphorical water. The dictator is sick. On the river he crosses the path of Santander, who is headed towards the city while the General himself floats on towards the sea. But the two never meet. The hinge between Empire and Republic never quite closes. The people are missing, but so is the founder himself, slowly wasting away as the Caribbean and final dissolution beckon. The

impossibility of Republicanism is encoded within its non-foundation. And the contemporary, post-Republican move to biopolitics, to the so-called era of biopolitics, is simply the overt admission that biopolitics was doomed from the start. You can have bios, or you can have politics; you can't have the two together. Caught in the inevitable tension between the one and the other is a sickly and paranoid dictator, as displaced founder, a would-be unifier who is simply headed towards a watery grave. Negri (in particular) seems to believe that there is some novelty to the biopolitical. What's novel is in fact that the biopolitical machine has now definitively broken down, given up, admitted that the only thing it can produce with any reliability is disillusion and disappointment, a vague sense of uncertainty and so precarious insecurity.

Excursus Three: Finally, Bolívar is (almost) a man at sea. The sea is the most famous, familiar, and over-theorized of political spaces. It is the smooth space of both imperial expansion and piratical escape, but it is also the striated space of abstract coordination, the grid of longitude and latitude, the fleet at being. The sea is sublime in its immensity and so gives rise to thoughts of transcendence; but we are equally liable to get lost pinned to its endless superficial expanse or dissolved in its profundity. The Caribbean Sea has its vectors of both Revolution and counter-revolution, that lead us to either Los Cayuelos or the Bay of Pigs. Bolívar makes a brief excursus by boat, running up the Colombian coastline before putting back in to port, too unwell to continue further (though it is the boat itself that is blamed). The sea is the destiny that the General somehow just about averts: the line from bathtub to river to ocean is caught short at the Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino, just outside and inland from the coastal city of Santa Marta, at which the General finally breathes his last. And it is at that Quinta that subsequent patriots have built the massive, neoclassical building that is the Simón Bolívar Memorial Monument. It is here (as well, yes, as in every city and street and square that bears the General's name) that the sickly body of the biopolitical subject becomes mythified as agent of Liberation. It is rather harder to build monuments at sea. At sea, the body sinks, falls back beneath the waves, to be eaten by the fish, who in turn are eaten by other fish.