

Big Sharks and Little Fishes

Once again, the great Don Durito de la Lacandona helps Marcos prepare a presentation. This time it is on “Culture and Media in the Transition to Democracy” for the First Intercontinental Encounter that was hosted in five different Zapatista communities at the end of July 1996. Durito recounts a story he claims to have dictated to Bertolt Brecht back in the 1940s about what would happen if “sharks were people.” He then goes on to elaborate that story on his little microcomputer, adding revolt to a parable of divided communities. This elaboration was written during a period in which state funding and the provision of arms and training was expanding the presence of paramilitary forces such as Los Chinchulines and Paz y Justicia as part of a counterinsurgency strategy aimed at splitting local communities and terrorizing Zapatista supporters.

July 1996

July reaps the humid legacy of the June night and, nonetheless, allows a bit of sun to slip into the gray day. The moon offers, as consolation for its absence, the nostalgia of ceiba trees and jungle mud. A failed military intelligence satellite grows bored and yawns ostentatiously. Down below, it makes out men and women talking and listening, walking, tripping and walking once more, seeking. They are seeking many things, for example, they are seeking to find what they are seeking. They seem happy in this search. Nothing special is seen in them, they seem to be ordinary men and women. Well, it seems that one of them is particularly large of nose, but, aside from those details, everything seems normal. Yes, we could say that Power can rest easy. No important danger is detected; there are no weapons, or anything like that, only words. Good, I believe today will be a normal day, a day and a night with men and women talking.

Just a minute! What is that sneaking through the crack of the door of the one who is called El Sup? Is it a cockroach? No. The satellite’s powerful electronic machinery begins to analyze all the data: size, specific weight, texture, form, velocity, rhythm and all the etceteras which this complicated software has incorporated in order to justify its elevated price. In a matter of seconds, the space computer finishes confirming the data, and it begins its correlation with the gigantic file that contains all the data of all the proven probable enemies of Power and of their daily habits. Suddenly the alarms sound, and the colored bulbs light up. One would think it was a Christmas tree, if it were not for the fact that one can read, clearly, on the screen: “Supreme danger!” The comput-

First published in *La Jornada*, July 5, 1996. Originally translated by irlandesa.

er seems to be cybernetically terrified. In the great capitols, the arrogant activate their super-defense plans. The financial centers register the worst catastrophe in their histories. Heavily armed military units take up nervous positions at all the borders. What is happening? The answer appears on all the screens.

“Supreme danger! Durito. Supreme danger! Durito.”

Read “D” for “Don and for Durito, Righter of wrongs,” “E” for “Exceptional Beetle” and for “Emergency.” “A” for “Active Knight-errantry” and for . . . “Alert, maximum alert!”

“That satellite is an imbecile,” Durito tells me, taking off his raincoat and leaving a tiny puddle of water on the floor. “Look at them, confusing me with a cockroach . . .”

“What are you reading?” Durito asks, sitting now upon one of my shoulders and lighting his tiny pipe. I do not respond, showing him the title page of the book, which reads:

“Bertolt Brecht. *Tales from the Calendar*. 19/5. 19. Wednesday.”¹

“Ah! My colleague, Bertolt . . .” Durito sighs, while he starts going through my pack.

“And might I know what you’re looking for?” I ask, closing the book.

“Tobacco,” Durito responds laconically.

“I don’t have any,” I lie, but it’s useless now. Durito found a black tobacco pouch and prepares to fill his knapsacks.

“And might I know how you came to be here?” Durito begins to transform himself as his lecture progresses.

“I am the great Don Durito de la Lacandona. *El Mío Cid* reborn, he who took up the sword at just the right moment. I am the lord and gentleman of the unutterable and passionate dreams of women of all ages. He for whom, when he passes by, men take off their hats and recognize their own imperfections. The hero who renders all superficial neoliberals inconsequential in children’s imaginations. I am the fortunate one, he whose sword exceeds the exploits of Don Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, of Minaya, of Martín Antolínez, of Pedro Bermúdez and Muñoz Gustioc.² I am he whom the villain in Ireland fears, the nightmare of the thief hiding in Manhattan.³ I am the one who was born at just the right moment. I am the last and first hope of all the poor wretches and large-nosed swordsmen who wander about without destiny or reason. I am . . .”

1 Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht, the German Marxist poet and dramatist, fled Nazi Germany in 1933, arriving in the US in 1941 only to become a target of McCarthyism. In 1949 he returned to Berlin and founded his own theatre company. *Tales from the Calendar* (*Kalendergeschichten*), a collection of stories and poems written during his exile, evokes the tradition of popular almanacs. *Tales from the Calendar*, English translation by Yvonne Kapp and Michael Hamburger (London: Methuen, 1961).

2 Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, a great medieval folk hero of Spain, was born near Burgos about 1040 and died in 1099. Known by the honorific title *El Cid*, his exploits are recounted in the epic *The Song of El Cid* (*El Cantar de Mío Cid*) (1150). Minaya Alvar Fanez, Martín Antolínez of Burgos, Pedro Bermúdez and Muñoz Gustioc were knights who followed El Cid to battle.

“A beetle who can be confused with a cockroach,” I say, resentfully. Durito stops his speech and turns around to look at me, taken aback.

“What’s going on with you?” he asks, after a puff. I feel ashamed and tell him:

“It’s that I have to give a presentation at the Table on Culture and Media in the Transition to Democracy, and I don’t have anything ready.”⁴

“Ah! I knew it! You find yourself in a serious predicament, and your anachronistic pride prevents you from turning to the best and supreme paradigm of the sublime art of knight-errantry. And tell me, my elephantine squire, why do you allow anguish to weigh you down? Are you not aware, perhaps, that it is precisely to come to the aid of the helpless, that wise destiny has chosen well among human beings: those who combine ingenuity, valor, a gallant presence, goodness of heart, intelligence, boldness and . . .”

“A hard shell?” I interrupt, because I well know that Durito can spend entire hours talking about the virtues that knight-errantry requires and demands, but everyone knows that the time period for appearing at the tables is limited to a few minutes. Durito stops and falls into my trap.

“Well, a hard and shining armor is needed by every knight-errant. Everyone knows that, and I do not see why nature in her wisdom did not take that into account. But, where was I?”

“You, Sir, were going to help me with the presentation for the Table on Culture and Mass Media,” I hurry him.

“Yes?” Durito hesitates. “Alright, so it shall be. I do not believe that an ignorant squire would dare deceive his master.”

“Never, my lord,” I say, with deep reverence.

“Good, let me consult and see what I can find to help you with such a ridiculous theme.” Durito gets down from my shoulder and onto the table. Durito takes a teeny-tiny, mini-microcomputer out of his knapsack. I cannot help but be surprised and say:

“Don’t tell me you have a computer?”

“Of course, you rogue! We knights-errant must always be modernizing ourselves in order to better carry out our work. But do not interrupt me . . .” Durito begins typing and typing. Someone later wrote that the moon was full that night. A bit later I woke up from a nightmare I was having. In it, Zedillo was re-elected by a wide margin in the year 2000, after an intelligent election campaign focused on the well-being of the family, social peace and fighting corruption. Startled, I looked all around me. Durito was still typing at the small table. Between yawns, I asked him,

3 The “villain in Ireland” is undoubtedly Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who fled Mexico amidst public outrage. The “thief in Manhattan” is likely his brother Raúl Salinas de Gortari, who was charged with involvement in the narcotics industry and with shipping millions of dollars of pay-off money to Switzerland. Seized by US officials and extradited to Mexico in 1999, he was found guilty and sentenced to 50 years in prison.

4 The first Intercontinental Encounter was organized around a series of *mesas* or “tables” that functioned as workshops.

“Did you find something for the presentation yet?”

“Presentation? What presentation?” Durito asks, without taking his eyes off the mini-microcomputer screen. Desperately I tell him,

“What do you mean, what presentation? The one on Culture and Media! What, you weren’t looking for it in your computer?”

“Looking in the computer?” Durito says, not asks, mimicking Olivio. He continues, without turning around to look at me, and says,

“Of course not! What I’m doing on the computer is playing. They just gave me a program where the beetles defeat the boots . . .”

I begin to whine:

“But, Durito, if you don’t get me a presentation for this table, they are going to tear me to bits at the coordinators’ meeting. They already have it in for me . . . sniff . . . sniff . . . sniff.”

“Now, now,” Durito consoles me, putting his little palms on my shoulder. “Don’t worry. I will know how to rescue you from such a grave predicament . . .”

“You’ll make me a written presentation?” I ask him, hopefully.

“No, no way! I will give you a written excuse so that the coordinators will not hit you so hard. Especially since all of us are into strengthening the path of peace . . .” I sigh in resignation. Durito looks at me for a bit, and then says,

“Alright, don’t be like that. Here is the presentation.” Durito picks up some written pages and shows them to me. With ill-disguised anxiety, I take them, and, babbling, try to express my gratitude:

“Thank you, Durito! You don’t know how much . . . just a minute! What’s this about the presentation being signed by Don Durito de la Lacandona and Bertolt Brecht?”

“What’s so odd about that?” Durito says, lighting his pipe again. “You’ve never heard of joint presentations? Well, this is one of them . . .”

“But, Durito, Bertolt Brecht died many years ago . . .” I reproach him.

“Forty, to be exact. I know, we had begun the presentation at the end of World War II, and then we couldn’t finish it. But I should warn you that Brecht only transcribed what I was dictating to him. Something very similar to what you are doing right now. But do not make that detail public. It would not be fair, during the homage to the 98th anniversary of his birth, for it to be known that some of Bertolt’s texts are, in fact, mine.”

“Durito . . .” I say to him, with incredulity and reprobation. He doesn’t take the hint.

“No, say nothing. Do not insist on making public the debt that universal culture owes me. We knights-errant must be modest, so do not let it be known that the presentation is mine alone. I wrote here that it is from both. In addition, in order to lend credibility to the collective work, I will separate the text that was published in 1949 and, in another part, what I added these last few hours. And now, if you will pardon me, I must retire because during these cold and helpless nights, I must see if some damsel requires the aid of my strong arm.”

Durito would not listen to my protestations. He scurries underneath the door and once more sets World Powers trembling. I anxiously review the presentation. The title is convincing:

Joint presentation by Bertolt and Durito, in which it is explained why wisdom consists not in knowing the world, but in intuiting the paths which must be followed in order to be better.

Dedicated to the children, Dalia and Martina,
of Tlaxcala and to the prisoners accused of being Zapatistas.

Part I

Where Bertolt responds to the question: What would happen if sharks were people?⁵

"If sharks were people," the landlady's little daughter asked Mr. K, "would they be nicer to the little fishes?"

"Certainly," he said. "If sharks were people, they would build enormous boxes built in the sea for the little fishes, with all sorts of things to eat in them, plants as well as animal matter. They would see to it that the boxes always had fresh water and, in general, would take hygienic measures of all kinds. For instance, if a little fish injured one of its fins, it would be bandaged at once, so that the sharks should not be deprived of it by an untimely death. To prevent the little fishes from growing depressed there would be big water festivals from time to time, for happy little fishes taste better than miserable ones. Of course, there would also be schools in the big boxes. In these schools, the little fishes would learn how to swim into the sharks' jaws. They would need geography, for example, so that when the big sharks were lazing about somewhere they could find them. The main thing, of course, would be the moral education of the little fishes. They would be taught that the greatest and finest thing is for a little fish to sacrifice its life gladly, and that they must all believe in the sharks, particularly when they promise a splendid future. They would impress upon the little fishes that this future could only be assured if they learned obedience. The little fishes would have to guard against all base, materialistic, egotistical and Marxist tendencies, reporting at once to the sharks if any of their number manifested such tendencies. If sharks were people they would also, naturally, wage war among themselves, to conquer foreign fish boxes and little foreign fishes.

5 The following passage reproduces "If Sharks Were People," one of the "Anecdotes of Mr. Keuner" that make up the last story in *Tales from the Calendar*. In Marcos' communiqué, the Spanish translation of the German word *Menschen* is given as *hombres*, usually translated into English as *men*. Yvonne Kapp's translation of *Menschen* as "people" is more accurate and we have used her translation of the Brecht text. The original can be found in Bertolt Brecht, *Werke: Vol. 18, Prosa 3* (Ertste Auflage: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), 446-448.

They would let their own little fishes fight these wars. They would teach the little fishes that there was a vast difference between themselves and the little fishes of other sharks. Little fishes, they would proclaim, are well known to be dumb, but they are silent in quite different languages and therefore cannot possibly understand each other. Each little fish that killed a few other little fishes in war—little enemy fishes, dumb in a different language—would have a little seaweed medal pinned on it and be awarded the title of Hero. If sharks were people, they would also have art, naturally. There would be lovely pictures representing sharks' teeth in glorious colors, their jaws as positive pleasure grounds in which it would be a joy to gambol. The sea-bed theaters would show heroic little fishes swimming rapturously into sharks' jaws, and the music would be so beautiful that to its strains the little fishes, headed by the band, would pour dreamily into the sharks' jaws. There would also be a religion, if sharks were people. It would teach that little fishes only really start to live inside the bellies of sharks. Moreover, if sharks were people, not all little fishes would be equal any more than they are now. Some of them would be given positions and be set over the others. The slightly bigger ones would even be allowed to gobble up the smaller ones. That would give nothing but pleasure to the sharks, since they would more often get larger morsels for themselves. And the bigger little fishes, those holding positions, would be responsible for keeping order among the little fishes, become teachers, officers, box-building, engineers and so on. In short, the sea would only start being civilized if sharks were people."

Here the text published in 1949 ends, which the history of literature attributes to Bertolt Brecht. Durito added the following in 1996:

Part II

Wherein Durito tries to demonstrate that flags can offer refuge and a new world to a bay horse, and tells of other marvels that the wheat would understand.

But there would be, most certainly, among all the little fishes, some who would leave behind the meager "I" that the sharks had taught them, and who would raise, quite high, the flag of "we" that would grant the yearning for freedom and for being better beings. And the mere fact of raising that flag in such a watery medium would itself be something that would make them better. And so great was their joy that they would discover themselves made even better, and they would try to talk and the first word they would speak would be "liberty." And they would use the flagstaff, but not to lead a rebellion that would destroy the sharks and supplant their power with that of the little fishes. No, they would use the flagstaff as a battering ram, and they would break apart all the boxes of the sea, and everything in the sea would be emptied and there would be neither sharks nor little fishes, rather crabs and sailors and relatives of beetles, and those who know that the best way to advance is to go backwards. In a word, there would finally be a struggle in the sea

for a new culture, a culture that would do without sharks and little fishes and would remake everything anew, without fisheries or jails. A culture that would not always have to imagine people in a condition other than human in order to suppose them good and better, always. A culture which has room for the lost bay horse who rides, still, seeking a story where he can be horse and bay without anyone demanding that he stop being so or that he change his color.

End of the Joint Proposal which Bertolt Brecht and Don Durito de la Lacandona made for the Table on Culture and Media in the Transition to Democracy. Berlin-San Cristóbal, 1949-1996.

I am getting nervous. I don't know which is worse: not submitting any presentation at all, or submitting the presentation by the Bertolt-Durito duo. Then I decide to resolve the dilemma through a scientific method that my brother taught me. I take a coin out of my wallet and flip it up in the air. How did it fall? I paid no attention. When I came back to this table, the money had not yet fallen. On the other hand, I also believe Durito's presentation in this forum will have unexpected repercussions. Tomorrow the newspapers will carry the news of a profound financial crisis, and of the obvious nervousness in all the armies of the world. No one will be able to know that the cause was a smoking and talkative beetle, knight-errant and astute critic of neoliberalism, who, righting wrongs, aiding damsels in distress and winning the loves of moons, wanders through the mountains of the Mexican southeast, still believing that there is no better enterprise than fighting injustice, nor any prize greater than the feminine smile which this hopeful bridge has tried to evoke.

Vale. Salud, and may the sea that is multiplied in the mountains have moon and skin.

From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos