

Afterword

In “The Translator’s Introductory Remarks,” the fictitious translator, Tomás García Guerrero, assures the reader that he will write an Afterword to explain “how Zabala’s masterpiece actually ended up in [his] hands and [share the story of] the challenges [he] faced during the four years” he spent translating Zabala’s novel. I am both the fictitious translator, Tomás García Guerrero, and the fictitious author, Javier Pedro Zabala, so allow me to share with you some of what I experienced while writing *The Mad Patagonian*.

In 2010, my first novel, *The Conjure Man*, was published and I went on a book tour for the summer. From April 2011 thru April 2012, I wrote a novel titled *Gods Among Gazelles*. My dad died in January 2013; a few months later I started writing *The Mad Patagonian*.

To say that the book just came pouring out is an understatement. Then again, the words always come pouring out when I am writing. That has been my experience. And to explain this, my writing process, I have developed a pretty weird theory of writing and where stories come from. I believe that all of the great books already exist and when it is time for such a book to be born, it seeks out a writer who has the patience and talent to listen and bring that book into the world. My talent is that I listen to every nuance of the unfolding story, so in my mind, I am not the author; I am the medium. I just sort of plug in, if you will, and the story does the rest.

With *The Mad Patagonian*, I realized from the beginning that I was writing a very big book. I also realized by 2014 that I was writing a very Spanish book. The story was taking me from Florida (where I had lived for a number of years) to Cuba and then Spain and then Argentina. (I was in the middle of Book Five at this point.) But even as I was writing the book, I could hear American-born naysayers shouting at me: “what right did I have to write a book about Spanish-speaking people when I was clearly not Spanish.” I was pretty sure that many would-be critics in the American publishing industry would not accept that I had written *The Mad Patagonian*; or at least many would consider it inauthentic.

What a shame! American publishing as whole would have you believe that biography and geography are the hallmarks of that legitimacy which confer to a work the status of being acceptable, and therefore publishable. Taken to its logical absurd extreme, there will come a day when “acceptable” writers will only be permitted to write stories about their own lives, what they actually saw and did. Perhaps this has already happened; writers writing a memoir as their first book has become something of the norm.

I have a different view of what is important in fiction. I believe the imagination is what confers the greatest legitimacy of a book; imagination is what makes a great book a great work of art. So I invented both Javier Pedro Zabala (his name is sort of twisted mirror image of my own, but nobody seems to see this) and the translator, Tomas Garcia Guerrero. Both Zabala and Guerrero sit at the intersection of reality and fiction, between the real world and the world of the imagination, between what is real and what is illusion. This fact also means that *The Mad Patagonian* is in part a metafictional experiment that attempts to draw the narrative out into the real world so that readers can participate in a metafiction, some perhaps without quite realizing they are contributing. (I was successful in this metafictional endeavor to some degree; from 2018 thru the end of 2019, well over a dozen Internet bulletin boards contained the posts of readers discussing whether or not Zabala was real. The conclusion reached by the

majority of these discussions was that it didn't really matter, as the book was a great book no matter who wrote it.)

So I was pondering the ethnic roots of *The Mad Patagonian* in 2014. I was also reading the books of Roberto Bolaño at that point. I connected the two and wrote "The Translator's Introductory Remarks" in a week. I also remember reading something Bolaño once said to the effect that many writers could build small houses, but that you had to be very good to build a skyscraper and that he was interested in building skyscrapers. When I read that I wanted to build a bigger skyscraper than Bolaño. In many respects, *The Mad Patagonian* is me having a conversation with Bolaño. It is also me having a conversation with many writers and philosopher; it is also a paean to the Latin-American writers and poets I love.

At that point I just wrote the book. I began in April 2013, three months after my dad died, and finished on September 28, 2015. But I was still not entirely at ease with the decision to write under a pseudonym. Yes, the Translator's intro was pretty good, and I convinced myself that Bolaño would have approved of what I was attempting, but the voices of those American naysayers and would-be critics were just as loud in 2015 as they had been a year earlier. My solution? After I finished, I sent the book to Pablo Medina at Emerson. Pablo is one of our country's most anthologized Cuban writers. He of all the writers I know would be able to let me know what I had achieved (or not achieved) in *The Mad Patagonian*.

Pablo wrote almost immediately that he was hooked, and so at that point I decided to have a frank discussion with him about the subterfuge. Here is the first letter he wrote me (he was two-thirds of the way through at this point:

Dear Peter,

Yes, I figured as much early on, and I appreciate your honesty. I would hate, however, to see the meta-fictional aspects of the book done away with simply because of extra-literary concerns. The fact is that this is an old technique, used even before Cervantes but mastered by him in *Don Quixote*. What first drew me into the story (or stories) of the Mad Pat was indeed the mystery surrounding the authorship and translation of the novel. That twin device is very much in operation in DQ, what with the narrator discovering a manuscript in Arabic by a certain Arab author Cide Hamete Benengeli, which he then has translated into Spanish, thereby revealing the story of DQ. There are two issues here: whether you want the fiction to spill out of the frame of the narrative to the translator and the author on the one hand, and your desire to act "in good faith" on the other. I don't think they are in conflict. What the so-called subterfuge brings up—where does reality end and fiction begin?—is precisely one of the drives that leads the reader (at least this reader) into the book, into its complexity and variously fascinating and conflicted characters. All the authors you label below as having been influences work in this fashion, and whether they acted in "good faith" or not is a question that will never fully be answered. Javier Zabala is both author and character of this tale. The introduction places him at that juncture. Behind the characters, the author, and the translator, is yet another hand, unknown yet all-powerful, an Ur-author if you will, who manipulates everything. This play is essential to the intelligence of the work (and it is a very intelligent text,

enviously so) and I'd hate for it to be diminished out of some sense that you are doing something unethical for which at some point you will be called to task. Hell, this is too good a book not to take the risk that some may see it as an author disguising himself as someone else simply to get the novel published. Every intelligent piece of fiction performs the legerdemain of having the author be not so much invisible as in disguise. Just some thoughts. I will keep reading. I'm hooked.

You were right about Carlos de Rokha. He was the son of Pablo de Rokha, whom I was urged to read early on by Nicanor Parra. Both father and son, interestingly, committed suicide.

Yours, Pablo

PS. That's interesting about doing the poetry of the fictitious poets.

PSS. I can only imagine what this book has cost you. Every long piece of fiction I've written has left me devastated, though I've never written anything nearly as long as Mad Pat. I am in the midst of work on a very difficult and thorny novel.

After Pablo finished the book, he said it was a crazy brilliant, profound book and wrote a great blurb for the cover. He has become one of the book's biggest fans. I should also point out that it was Pablo who suggested that even though I was writing in disguise, I needed to put myself in the book somewhere so that readers could find me (this was also a way to have recourse to any suggestion that I was misappropriating someone else's culture, a criticism that is silly at best if you believe as I do that the most important trait that defines the authenticity of a novel is the writer's imagination and not his or her ethnic roots).

So based on Pablo's advice, I created a note from me as the Publisher/Editor to the reader and placed this note at the very beginning of the book, before even the translator's introduction. In this note I stress three things: 1) after retiring, the translator moved from Mexico to Toledo, Ohio, where he translated Mad Pat from Spanish to English; 2) while the translator may feel about the book as a father to a child, I feel about the book as a stepfather to a stepchild; and 3) I still claim all flaws in the book.

I am here doing exactly what Cervantes did when he presented *Don Quixote* to the world. Cervantes presented himself as editor. He said he found the book in Toledo and had it translated from Arabic to Spanish. He said he was not the father to this child he was the stepfather. And he still claimed all the flaws. I actually used the exact language and phrasing Cervantes used in my note, so there would be no mistake for anyone who might look. (So far, every reader has missed the significance of this note upon first reading; it is only when I point it out that they say "ah, yes, of course." The frame of a book, a translation of an unknown Spanish masterpiece, is far more powerful than I initially realized.)

The Mad Patagonian—A Book of Destiny or Simply Two Bizarre Coincidences?

So now for two bizarre coincidences. I finished writing the book on a Sunday morning (Sept 28, 2015). Then I read in the newspaper that there was to be a blood red moon Sunday evening. (I watched it for half an hour). The last time such a moon occurred was in 1982. Now the first coincidence is this: since

the book was (is) very Spanish, I drew from the symbolism of many Spanish and Latin-American authors, Borges being among them. I really liked one image in particular from Spanish poetry that Borges used in a poem of his. In this poem, Borges commented on Quevedo's blood moon. I used this image or referred to it on numerous occasions throughout *The Mad Patagonian*. So to have actually finished writing the book on the day a blood red moon appears I find remarkable (yes one can say I had heard that the blood red moon was coming so my subconscious shaped my creative pace; but I hadn't watched television or read the newspaper in weeks; I was writing).

The second coincidence is more startling to me. The day after the blood red moon, I woke up wondering if was I the right person to have written this book; I am not Spanish, I do not speak Spanish, what was I thinking. So a voice in my head said 'go over the Spanish phrases that had become a part of the book,' so I did. On page 430 (second edition), I came across the very first problematic phrase, a two-word phrase "otra muerte." I had Nicario say that "otra muerte" was the second death, but the phrase means other death. I corrected the mistake, but I also asked myself why I had done this (change the meaning of the phrase). The voice in my head said google it: so I did a google search for "Other Death" and among the list, at the very top in fact, was a short story titled "The Other Death" by Borges. Naturally I could not help but read this story, thinking to see what connection I could make between it and my book, since Borges is such a large part of my book. (Keep in mind here that my name is Peter Damian.) Imagine my surprise to learn that the name of the main character in Borges obscure story is Peter Damian. Borges is a character in my book and I am a character in one of his stories. That was the answer to my question: I was the right person to write *The Mad Patagonian*.

The Lost Poets of World War One

I started working on *The Lost Poets of World War One* in the summer of 2014. I envisioned it as a companion piece to *The Mad Patagonian* because *The Lost Poets* would provide the biographies and the poetry of the fictitious poets (Sageuo Ruedas, Eduardo Montoyo, and Raúl Francisco Manrique) I had put into the pages of *The Mad Patagonian*. In part I was (and am) paying homage to Bolaño's book *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, a book containing the biographies of dozens of fictitious right-wing writers and poets. But as far as I was concerned, Bolaño had not gone far enough. Now if Bolaño had included samples of the writings of these writers, samples of their poetry, along with the biographies, then that would really be something. So that's what I set out to do with *The Lost Poets*. I also used lines from their poetry in the text of *The Mad Patagonian*. At times while writing *Mad Pat*, I would think of a line of poetry from Borges or Westphalen or Pimental or Octavia Paz or Bolaño himself and then work that line into the text of the novel. But on other occasions, I remember thinking that I needed a line of poetry to slip into the text, but I could think of no poet writing the line I felt was needed. That's how I created the three fictitious poets that exist in *Mad Pat*. I created their biographies, then I created their poetry, and then I inserted a line from their poetry into the text of the novel. In my initial conception, I was going to have 10 poets from Latin America to Europe to Japan, all with some connection to World War One, all of them now lost. I didn't get beyond three. I may still finish that book and add seven more poets to the mix, but in case I don't get around to it, I leave you with some sixty pages that feature the biographies of three poets along with samples of their work.