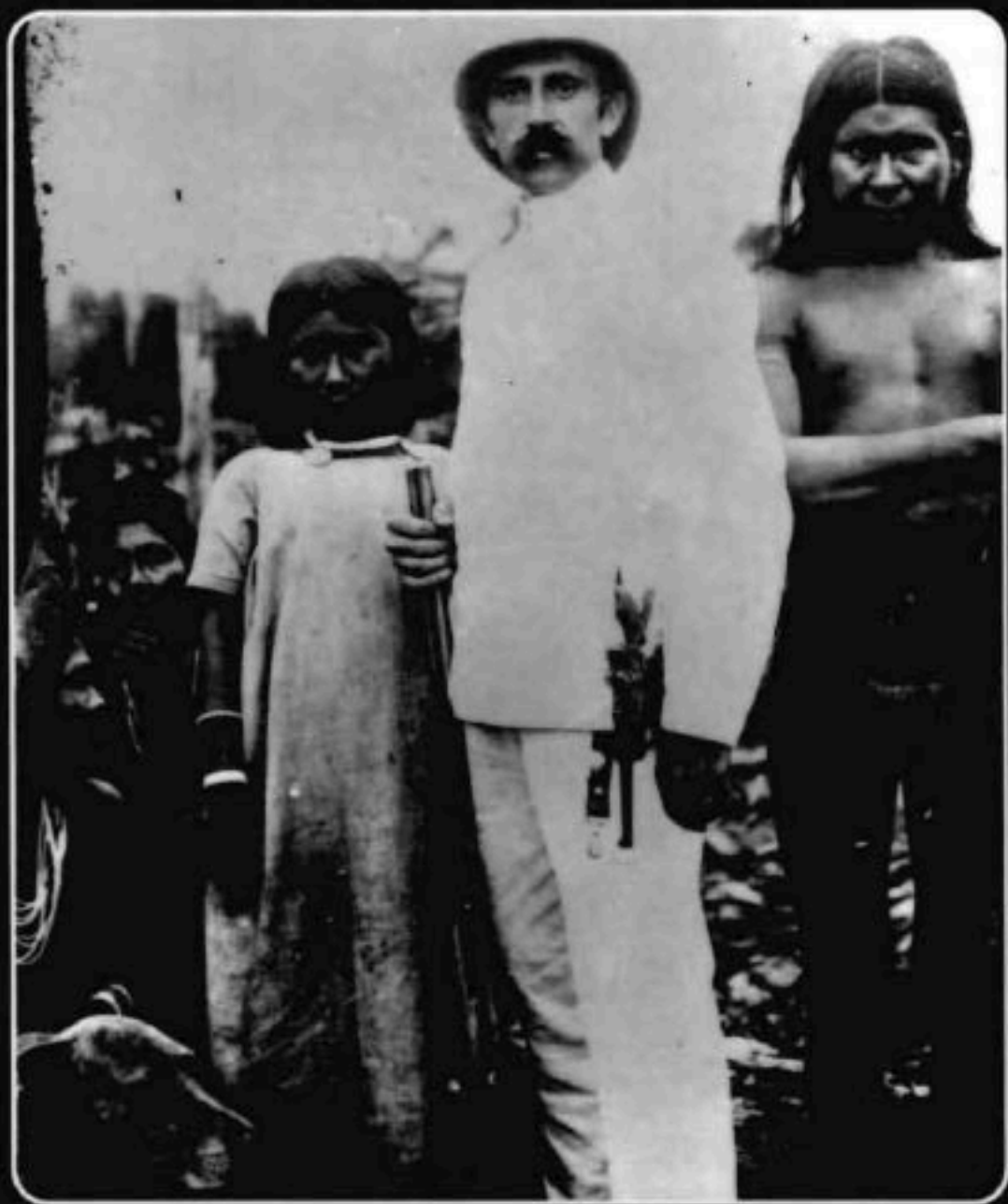


Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man

A STUDY IN TERROR AND HEALING



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ONE

Culture of Terror, Space of Death

Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture

Most of us know and fear torture and the culture of terror only through the words of others. Hence my concern is with the mediation of terror through narration, and with the problem of writing effectively against terror.

Jacobo Timerman ends his recent book, *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*, with the imprint of the gaze of hope in the space of death.

Have any of you looked into the eyes of another person, on the floor of a cell, who knows that he's about to die though no one has told him so? He knows that he's about to die but clings to his biological desire to live, as a single hope, since no one has told him he's to be executed.

I have many such gazes imprinted upon me . . .

Those gazes which I encountered in the clandestine prisons of Argentina and which I've retained one by one, were the culminating point, the purest moment of my tragedy.

They are here with me today. And although I might wish to do so, I could not and would not know how to share them with you.¹

Ineffability is a striking feature of this death-space. In his not knowing how to share those gazes that pierce it, Timerman for an instant creates the illusion that we who follow him can be pierced by the emptiness of the hope that makes it real.

And how those gazes must have pierced the murk of death's coming! How they must have lit up its hollowness! For Timerman's burden was double. He was not just a victim: he was victim of what he had himself prescribed—military dictatorship as the solution to the disorder afflicting the nation.

And the result? A society shrouded in an order so orderly that its chaos was far more intense than anything that had preceded it—a death-space in the land of the living where torture's certain uncertainty fed the great machinery of the arbitrariness of power, power on the rampage—that great steaming morass of chaos that lies on the underside of order and without which order could not exist.

There is an old story in the Chilean countryside, Ariel Dorfman tells us, about what happens when a child is abducted by witches. In order to break the child's will, the witches break the child's bones and sew the body parts together in an abnormal way. The head is turned around so the child has to walk backwards, and the ears, eyes, and mouth are stitched up. This creature is called the *Imbunche*, and Dorfman feels that the military junta under Pinochet has done and continues to do everything in its power to make every Chilean and Chile itself into an *Imbunche*.

Writing in 1985, he insists that even if their bones are not actually broken or mouths sewn up, the Chileans are, "in a way, already like Imbunches. They are isolated from each other, their means of communicating suppressed, their connections cut off, their senses blocked by fear."

The control enforced by the dictatorship, he points out, "is as arbitrary as it tends to be at times absurd." A child's dictionary was removed from the newsstands because the censors did not agree with its definition of the word "soldier." Officialdom strives to create a magical reality. When 5,000 slum dwellers were rounded up and held in a stadium, a high official denied that the event had even happened. "What stadium? What slum-dwellers?"

What is endangered, concludes Dorfman, is the existence of the society's moral foundations. He has found many people, like the *Imbunche*, floating apart into fragments.²

The space of death is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness, nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes. We may think of the space of death as a threshold that allows for illumination as well as extinction. Sometimes a person goes through it and returns to us, to tell the tale, as did Timerman, who fell victim to the military force he at first supported and then criticized through his newspaper, *La Opinión*, fighting with words in and against the silence imposed by the arbiters of discourse who beat out a new reality in the cells where torturer and tortured came together. And on his return from

there, he found: "We victims and victimizers, we're part of the same humanity, colleagues in the same endeavor to prove the existence of ideologies, feelings, heroic deeds, religions, obsessions. And the rest of humanity, the great majority, what are they engaged in?"³

The creation of colonial reality that occurred in the New World will remain a subject of immense curiosity and study—the New World where the Indian and African *irracional*es became compliant to the reason of a small number of white Christians. Whatever the conclusions we draw about how that hegemony was so speedily effected, we would be unwise to overlook the role of terror. And by this I mean us to think-through-terror, which as well as being a physiological state is also a social one whose special features allow it to serve as the mediator *par excellence* of colonial hegemony: the space of death where the Indian, African, and white gave birth to a New World.

Did the grim reaper ever take in a harvest larger than that caused by the Spanish conquest of the New World? And then the enormity of death of African slaves during the middle passage and on the plantations.

This space of death has a long and rich culture. It is where the social imagination has populated its metamorphizing images of evil and the underworld: in the Western tradition Homer, Virgil, the Bible, Dante, Hieronymus Bosch, the Inquisition, Rimbaud, Conrad's heart of darkness; in northwest Amazonian tradition, zones of visions, communication between terrestrial and supernatural beings, putrefaction, death, rebirth, and genesis, perhaps in the rivers and land of maternal milk bathed eternally in the subtle green light of coca leaves.⁴ With European conquest and colonization, these spaces of death blend into a common pool of key signifiers binding the transforming culture of the conquerer with that of the conquered. But the signifiers are strategically out of joint with what they signify. "If confusion is the sign of the times," wrote Artaud, "I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation." He wonders if it is that cleavage which is responsible for the revenge of *things*; "the poetry which is no longer within us and which we no longer succeed in finding in things suddenly appears on their wrong side."⁵ Marx pointed to the same disarrangement and rearrangement between us and things in the fetishism of commodities, wherein poetry suddenly appeared on the wrong side of things now animated. In modern history the fetishism of commodities rejuvenates the mythic density of the space of death—with the death of the subject as much as with the new-found arbitrariness of the sign whereby a resurgent animism makes things human and humans things. It is in the terror of the space of death that we often find an elaborated exploration of what Artaud and Marx, in their different ways, see as the rupture and revenge of signification.

In Miguel Angel Asturias's depiction of the culture of terror of the Estrada Cabrera dictatorship in early twentieth-century Guatemala, it is unbearable

to read how, as people become like things, their dreaming power passes into things that become not only like people but their persecutors. Things become agents of terror, conspiring with the president's need to sense the innermost thoughts of his subjects, who, once sensed, become not just objects but disjointed parts of objects. It is in the dictator's sensing of people's inner worlds that terror makes nature its ally; hence the forest surrounding the president's palace,

a wood made up of trees with ears which responded to the slightest sound by whirling as if blown by a hurricane. Not the tiniest noise for miles around could avoid the avidity of those millions of membranes. The dogs went on barking. A network of invisible threads, more invisible than telegraph wires, connected every leaf with the President, enabling him to keep watch on the most secret thoughts of the townspeople.⁶

It is in the world of the beggars that the culture of terror finds perfection. They are misfits, cripples, blind, idiots, dwarves, twisted, and deformed. They can neither talk nor walk nor see straight, and they exist in two critically important zones: huddled on the steps of the cathedral in the main square opposite the presidential palace, or, like the idiot, splayed out on top of the city's garbage heap. Here indeed is the figure embodying the society as a whole: on account of his idiocy he has struck at a high-ranking army officer, and therefore at the president himself. Now the idiot is running away, half in a dream world like a man trying to escape from a prison of mist. He is exhausted, slobbering, panting and laughing. He is pursued by dogs and by fine spears of rain. Eventually he collapses—onto the garbage heap with its broken glass, sardine cans, brims of straw hats, bits of paper, leather, rags, broken china, pulped books, collars, eggshells, excrement, and nameless patches of darkness. The buzzards with their sharp beaks come closer and it is in the hop, hop, hopping of these ungainly birds of prey that feed upon offal that the dictator's *modus operandi* is expressed. They lunge for the soft flesh of the idiot's lips, here on the debris of the garbage heap where the city's strewn signs lay bare in their disjointedness the political function of their arbitrariness.

Above the dunghill was a spiders-web of dead trees, covered with turkey-buzzards; when they saw the Zany lying there motionless the black birds of prey fixed him with their bluish eyes and settled on the ground beside him, hopping all around him—a hop this way, a hop that way—in a macabre dance. Ceaselessly looking about them, making ready for flight at the slightest movement of a leaf or the wind in the rubbish—a hop this way, a hop that way—they closed in upon him in a circle until he was within reach of their beaks. A savage croaking gave the