

A Great Maximalist Novel

by Peter Damian Bellis

I started writing *The Mad Patagonian* in 2013; it just came pouring out. (This experience actually fits with my theory of writing and where stories come from. I believe that all of the great books already exist and when it is time for them to be born into this world, they seek out a writer who has the patience and talent to listen and bring them into the world. My talent is that I listen to every nuance of the unfolding story, but in my mind I am not the author; I am the medium.)

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.) I felt based on my earlier experiences, that America was not going to accept me as the author of this book. (As I see it, American publishing seems to elevate biography over the imagination, and *Mad Pat* is all imagination.) I was also pissed at publishing in general, and at this idiotic notion in American publishing that biography and geography are the hallmarks of legitimacy which confer to a work the status of acceptable, because the hallmark of legitimacy as far as I am concerned is the imagination (I even have an article titled “The Hyperreality of *The Mad Patagonian*: Towards a Postethnic Deconstructive Literature that Resists the Multi-Cultural Representativeness of Ethnic Literature” that embraces this view). 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; they are in fact characters, which means the novel is also a metafictional experiment that draws the narrative out into the real world.

I was also reading some Roberto Bolaño at that point. So I connected the two and wrote the Translators introduction. (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 some respect, *The Mad Patagonian* is me having a conversation with Bolaño. Of course it is also me having a conversation with many writers; it is also a paean to Latin-American writers and poets.

Of course I was not entirely at ease with the decision to write under a pseudonym, but the Translator’s intro was pretty good, and I convinced myself that Bolaño would have approved. At that point I just wrote the book. I began in January 2013, the month my dad died, and finished at the end of September 28, 2015. But after I finished, I sent the book to Pablo Medina at Emerson; Pablo is one of our country’s most anthologized Cuban writers.

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, enviably 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 somewhere put myself in the book so that readers could find me (this was 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.)

I officially released the book on June 26, 2018 and just this past month *Mad Pat* got a great review in *Rain Taxi Review of Books*.

Critical Response to *The Mad Patagonian*

Here are what a few critics said of *The Mad Patagonian*:

Javier Pedro Zabala’s *The Mad Patagonian* is a literary supernova. From absolute silence, both the author and his 1,200-page book appeared suddenly and completely. Fans of William T. Vollmann, Roberto Bolaño, Julio Cortázar, and Alain Robbe-Grillet will find it a novel take on recognizable topics and themes. The cumulative effect of this polyphonic novel is akin to a kaleidoscope, each fragmented and embedded narrative falling over each other in an ever-expanding and ever-evolving narrative.

– Jacob Singer, Book Review Editor, *Entropy*

The Mad Patagonian is borderless unlike Vargas Llosa’s masterpiece, *Conversations in the Cathedral*, which is self-contained; and at the same time it is more contained than Bolaño’s false epic, *2666*. In this respect it is similar to Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, and also Gabriel García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. One could also say that in his use of language, Zabala also seems a worthy heir to James Joyce, writing each passage according to the dictates of the content.

Of course one other Spanish language comparison is to Borges, for the book’s wealth of intricate, labyrinthine arcania—it is brimming with such...to the point that the reader no longer cares in the least what is true and what is not. We do know that there were Merovingian Kings, but was Diego Penalosa governor of Cuba in 1746? There are dozens of such details, all of which are available in the sweep of the language, none of which require a pause— though during my second read, which may not occur this year, I intend to do a great deal more digging, as the book is an extremely learned text that wears its genius lightly.

– Rick Harsch, author of *The Driftless Trilogy*

It's probably fair to say that Javier Pedro Zabala is the greatest Latin American writer you've never heard of, and his magnum opus *The Mad Patagonian* is the greatest novel in Spanish of the 21st century that you've never read. Zabala is acutely aware of the limitations of language, as aware as no other writer of his generation, except perhaps David Foster Wallace. He knows that language describes what is not as much as it describes what is: gun delineates a specific object as much as it rules out the possibility that the object is not something else, like nun or gum. Zabala knows that when a writer writes something as apparently innocuous as a description of the night, he is also drawing a line through other possibilities: *Outside the moon has set*. Can also just as well refuse to be: *Outside the moon is glowing in the night sky*. or even *Outside it is twilight and the birds have stopped calling to each other*. Zabala gives us all three descriptions, as if asking us to choose, or to understand them as a radically telescoped sequence, or to consider their possibilities as palimpsest.

At 1,200 plus pages, the book is a daunting read. However Zabala's imagination is a fount of fecundity; a multitudinous world envelopes the reader, crowded with vivid characters and events, a great deal of salt, genuine feeling, irony and humour, and a kind of unstoppable energy. Mahler said of the symphony that it should embrace the world, and the really great novels of the 20th/21st centuries: *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Infinite Jest*, *Underworld*, 2666, seem to have also embraced this view. Zabala's novel should rightfully take its place alongside them.

– Tom Murr, Book Critic, *The Lectern*

After reading Proust, Virginia Woolf questioned if anything remained to be written. Javier Pedro Zabala's encyclopedic, multi-generational page turner is a strong, if belated, answer. The book is vast and, like Borges's *Aleph*, appears to contain everything; its scope and vision recall Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Roberto Bolaño, and Sergio de la Pava. As the translator's sumptuous introduction indicates, Zabala secretly worked on the manuscript from 1983 to 2002, and the result is an expansive consciousness grappling with a variety of ideas: what constitutes reality; the problem of suffering; the ambiguity of identity; the elusiveness of love

. . . As the historical milieux change, the prose adapts to complement, à la *Cloud Atlas*. The progression of the narratives also mirrors the transition from youth to old age like the stories of Joyce's *Dubliners*, allowing Zabala to modulate from Rabelaisian

reverie (and humor to rival *A Naked Singularity*) to poetic sublimity and deft yarn-spinning. . . .

. . . Zabala is a raconteur above all, with endless narrative techniques at his disposal. The book is packed with enough stories to be considered Cuba's *Arabian Nights*. Whether in the form of a biblical pericope, seriocomic sketch, postcards, journal entries, or a detective's field notes, the rhizomatic layering of stories elevates *The Mad Patagonian* to mythological heights. . .

. . . Everyone in *The Mad Patagonian* is looking for paradise, only to find, as Proust did, "the true paradises are the paradises that we have lost." This new, highly accessible maximalist novel is the lost paradise of a mind on fire with poetry and a heart longing for home. Like Andres Escoraz's library, Zabala's epic is "the visible expression of his soul."

-Chris Via, *Rain Taxi Review of Books*, Print Edition Fall Issue 2018

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

So now for the 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 some Spanish and Latin-American authors; one of the major figures I chose was Borges. I really liked one image in particular from Spanish poetry that he 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 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. About 400 pages in 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, so I 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*.

Where To Now I Have No Idea

When I began my journey as a writer, I sort of felt like Kilby in my novel *The Conjure Man*. Now I feel like Thaddeus. Which is to say that I have come to a crossroads of sorts, which is why I need some advice from anyone who cares enough to offer. As a publisher I have decided to expand the books published thru River Boat Books, so on June 26 I released three other books: *Skulls of Istria* by Rick Harsch, an ex-pat American author living in Slovenia; and *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers*, both by Argentine writer Roberto Arlt (a writer who was a columnist in Buenos Aires in the 1930s and who is widely considered the godfather of Latin-American fiction). But I have yet to figure out how to make any money from publishing books.

As a writer, things are just as problematic. I am now 57 years old and I have a fairly decent track record as a writer, but I am truly invisible, under the radar. I cannot get a sustainable position to teach writing, which would allow me to finish all of the books that are floating around in my head, unless I secure an MFA. So I thought maybe I could enroll in an MFA program somewhere. Unfortunately, I am the epitome of the cliched image of the starving artist. I cannot pay for this program. Perhaps through some combination of grants, scholarships, and working as a graduate assistant I could manage. Of course all of this seems tragically ironic given the fact that many early reviewers/readers of *The Mad Patagonian* have said Zabala (they do not know it is me) has written one of the great literary masterpieces of the last one hundred years. People have always said great things about what I write; but that still hasn't provided me with any security; I seem to have lived my life as a writer in exile even here in the U.S. It is funny, but Andrei Codrescu said to me you have to live in exile if you hope to write great literature; and then you have to be okay with the fact that the world may never accept you back. So I am trying to get the world to accept me back, and I realize that the only way to do this is to focus on expanding the scope of River Boat Books. The books we publish, the more subversive writers I help bring to the attention of the world, the more likely all of us together can change the way books are published.