



BOOK REVIEW

Baler, Pablo:
***Circa*. Buenos Aires, Galerna, 1999,**
130 pp.

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Circa, an erotic, metaphysical thriller, captures the reader's attention with its engaging story line, and the energy with which the work is imbued. The story is a fast-paced murder mystery that gradually becomes a mystical and spiritual quest, although the ironic tone of the work clearly mocks any truly religious sentiment. The work begins as the fictitious Scottish poet, Harius Scotto, commissions the protagonist, Ciro Siquerzhoff, to steal a Rembrandt painting, thereby setting off a chain of events that intertwine the destinies of the two characters. This seems an act of fate, as Siquerzhoff has always felt a spiritual affinity with the poetry of his portly employer. However, in reality, Siquerzhoff is an unwitting dupe, carried along by a chain of events, bounding from various European cities to the far-off temples of Tibet, while endeavoring to evade the clutches of a tenacious Interpol detective. During this time, Siquerzhoff ostensibly probes the riddles of eastern mysticism, while searching for answers of a more earthly nature.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is the lively pace, which is riddled with twists and turns of plot that keeps the reader ever mindful of what will happen next. In this way, the work is similar to the popular thrillers of today. However, like many other Post-Boom Latin American texts, *Circa* contains metaphysical and spiritual elements, which might be rooted in the real maravilloso or the realismo mágico, although here too the author is

perhaps playing with those concepts, rather than attempting to perpetuate them.

Another strength of the novel is its depiction of the exotic atmosphere, especially of Tibet, which is particularly striking. Baler traveled through Northern China and into Tibet, as a member of a Scientific Expedition, where he served as an expedition historian. Thus, despite the fictional nature of the work and the poetic license exercised by the author, there is a great deal of detail, relating to the Tibetan landscape, religion, and language, of a factual nature, which is based on actual research. In particular, the visual imagery of the Tibetan Gods is quite evocative, and plays a central role in the construction of plot.

While not as complicated as the earlier works of Borges, one clearly sees echoes of the fellow Argentinean author in such elements as the use of extra-textual documents, and apocryphal and authentic intertextual references. Specifically, preceding the main body of the text, there is an actual quote by a Chinese philosopher, followed by a fictitious affidavit attesting to the protagonist's identity, and a playful caveat informing the reader that the story is real, but that the events have been changed to protect the dead. As with Borges, intertextuality plays an integral role in the work, where one repeatedly sees the poetry of the fictitious Harius Scotto, footnoted at the bottom of the page, in the typical Borges fashion. Mirroring the enigmatic Tibetan chanting, Scotto's poetry becomes an almost spiritual mantra of the protagonist, which serves to drive the entire plot. It is through this poetry that the protagonist finally comes to understand the mystery of what has transpired, and to reach a spiritual state of Nirvana. Although on a physical level reaching Nirvana actually occurs by the means of either a sexual release, or that of other bodily excretions. This brings to mind the truly erotic nature of the work, where the protagonist expresses his every reaction in terms of body functions, especially his state of sexual arousal, which serves as a leitmotiv for the work.

Also reminiscent of Borges, is the fact that it is the detective's identity, rather than the criminal's, which is in question. A further intriguing swerve from the traditional mystery genre is perspective of the work, which is from the criminal's point of view, rather than that of the detective.

Another curious element in the work is the constant reference to rare butterflies, one of which even incites an erotic response on the part of the

protagonist, due to the dead butterfly's position of surrender. When the protagonist journeys to Tibet, one of the monks assures him, that they have brought his butterfly collection. The inscrutable *Harius Scotto* also has a massive butterfly collection. The character's preoccupation with butterflies is, of course, reminiscent of the transformation that occurs at the literal and spiritual level, and of the theme of reincarnation and birth, which permeates the work. Nevertheless, one should be mindful that this sacred quest is not a deeply spiritual experience, but a trope used by the author as a springboard for the ironic tale, which in actuality has more to do with the mockery of gods playing god, than any deeply held religious beliefs.

Circa's author, the Argentinean Pablo Baler, has participated in a wide variety of artistic and literary endeavors, to include producing and directing a radio talk show and working as a correspondent for *Colors of Benetton* and as an art critic for *Clarín* and the *Buenos Aires Herald*. Baler has studied in Argentina, Israel, and the United States, where he received his Masters Degree from Stanford University in Spanish Literature and Literary Theory. He has also traveled extensively, including the 1994 expedition across Northern China and into Tibet, where he did much of the research for the novel. The author's second literary work to receive critical acclaim, *Circa* received a First Place Literary Award from the Argentinean Ministry of Culture and Education in 1999, and was awarded Second Place by the Argentinean National Endowment of the Arts in 1998.