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AT WORK

All Writers Have a Corpse in Their Closet: An Interview with Andrés Barba

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Andrés Barba. Photo © Andrés Barba

*Andrés Barba's [August, October](#), now translated from the Spanish by Lisa Dillman, should bring him the wide Anglophone readership he's long deserved. The novel follows the fourteen-year-old Tomás as he travels to the coast with his affluent family on their summer vacation. He's at a point in his life when everything feels distant and strange: friendships, sex, the alluringly lawless behavior of the lower-class kids he meets. Tomás ends up becoming complicit in the sexual assault of a local girl, the central event from which the narrative unspools, and back in Madrid, assailed by guilt, he tries to plot a path toward atonement—one that shines at times with an uneasy air of self-interest. The reader becomes trapped in a story of immaturity and transgression that leaves no room for the usual reassuring tropes of coming-of-age novels. The prose moves on constant commas, swaying between arousal and revulsion, and in its subject matter *August, October* brings to mind the early work that earned Ian McEwan the nickname "Ian Macabre": *First Love, Last Rites*; *The Cement Garden*.*

*Barba is the author of twelve books in Spanish. Besides literary fiction he has written essays, poems, books of photography, books for children, and translations of *De Quincey* and *Melville*. We discussed his obsession with aloneness, the difficulties of capturing *Moby-Dick* in Spanish, and why certain "pompous utterances" in literature are "only useful inasmuch as Justin Bieber can get them tattooed across his ass." Barba is fluent in English, but felt more natural discussing his craft in Spanish. Cecilia Ross kindly translated his answers.*

***August, October* isn't the first time you've used your fiction as a space to explore the transgressions of adolescence. What is it about a person's teenage years that keeps drawing your attention as a writer?**

More than adolescence itself, what I'm most interested in are transition periods, situations in which one set of circumstances has come to a close—a love affair, a life stage, a job, time spent living in a particular house—and the next has yet to begin. I think those are the moments when who we are as people, and the gap between that person and the person we would like to be, is most revealed—the moments when our

inner scaffolding is shakiest, and also the moments when the greatest changes take place. Adolescence interests me when seen in that light. In the case of *August, October*, the novel starts with a notion—the idea of relating the life of a person whose character was forever determined by the mere fact that another person forgave him. They forgave him for something he did in a crucial moment of his adolescence. The whole book was then born out of that idea.

There’s a line in one of Harold Brodkey’s books—“My protagonists are my mother’s voice and the mind I had when I was thirteen.” Who are your protagonists?

My protagonists are generally outside myself and have nothing to do with me. I’ve always approached my stories as being completely made-up things. They’re topics that interest me and have something to do with me, of course, but only tangentially. So they’re not related so much to my direct experience as they are, for example, to my *fears*.

I understand what Brodkey said. He’s an author for whom I feel equal parts great admiration and boredom, and because I’m so familiar with his work I know what he said is a lie—a false, literary statement. Brodkey was the type of author who couldn’t avoid saying something he knew was false, for the simple reason that what he’d written sounded nice. As I see it, literature goes beyond nice-sounding sentences and has more to do with the truth, with the possibility of saying something truthful about life. It’s an experience that’s always happened the same way every time in my life. Every time I’ve experienced an intense feeling of pleasure when reading a book, it was somehow related to the idea that what I was reading there was profoundly truthful.

You write extensively about sex, and I’m interested in what aspects of sex you were particularly interested in exploring in this novel. Tomás explores sex as a “senseless sensation,” and thinks at one point about how “the act of fucking or being fucked” can seem like part of a “perpetual fervor, but one that had no object, or whose object was met by virtue of the act itself, only to then start up once again, unrelenting ...” Does your writerly interest in sex come down to an interest in people’s animal appetites, and what they might try to layer over them?

No, I’m not interested in sex from an animal perspective, that’s not true ... It seems to me that all manifestations of sex are human and that, being human, they are understandable. They belong to us and they have a lot to tell us about who we really are, even those manifestations that seem most brutal to us. In the context of sex, as in so many other contexts, we aren’t always the people we’d like to be, and that’s what makes sex so prone to becoming a context for important “revelations” to take place. I’m not interested in the sex per se—I hate writers who use sex for shock value—so much as I am in what takes place *around* sex. The people we become, the gap that opens up between what we feel and what we wish we felt. Literature has very often employed sex as an exotic element, as a “perk,” but for me sex is a framework, an atmosphere.

There’s an honesty in your portrayal of Tomás’s sexual self and his sense of shame about it. He’s complicit in a terrible act. Were you interested in seeing how far you could stretch the reader’s sympathy or empathy? To raise an old question, to what extent do you think about, or even care about, how much a reader might like or care about one of your characters?

I think there are situations in life where we judge people in this ruthless and extremely frivolous way. We all make a snap, cut-and-dry judgment—the guilty over here and the innocent over there. Reality is never like that, it’s only like that in our conscience. It’s easier and more comfortable for us to divide the world into good guys and bad guys, into the virtuous and the unjust, because it’s a lot more comfortable to forgo the bother of having to think. To accept reality in all its complex ambiguity is much more difficult, and when a person truly understands things, it’s not so easy anymore to draw that line in the dirt and let the heads roll indiscriminately.

I’m not justifying rape—far from it—I’m simply saying that whenever someone pronounces a judgment without stopping to think long and hard about the surrounding circumstances, that person has in all likelihood put forth a mistaken and therefore false judgment. Additionally, it’s also a very common experience for a person who knows some situation or case thoroughly to become incapable of judging it in absolute, black-and-white terms. What constitutes a terrible act? It seems to me it’s not such an easy thing to define. Neither are the extent of our own involvement and responsibility. The words we use to judge things are always grand, incontrovertible, and we speak them too lightly. Literature, for me, is an appropriate place for us to go back over those judgments we think we’re so clear on.

I don’t measure these stories by the degree of possible affinity the reader may feel for the characters—although, naturally, I’m not wild about the presence of unpleasant characters. Instead, I try to create characters that come across as much as possible like real people. And if our feelings about real people are always complex and ambiguous, why shouldn’t the same be true in a novel?

Were there particular books that were influential for you during your youth, when you were Tomás’s age?

Not especially. I was very much a latecomer to reading. I hated reading as a kid, and I hated reading as a teenager. I began reading when I began to come up against things I was unable to resolve, as a young adult, around the age of nineteen, and that’s when I started reading

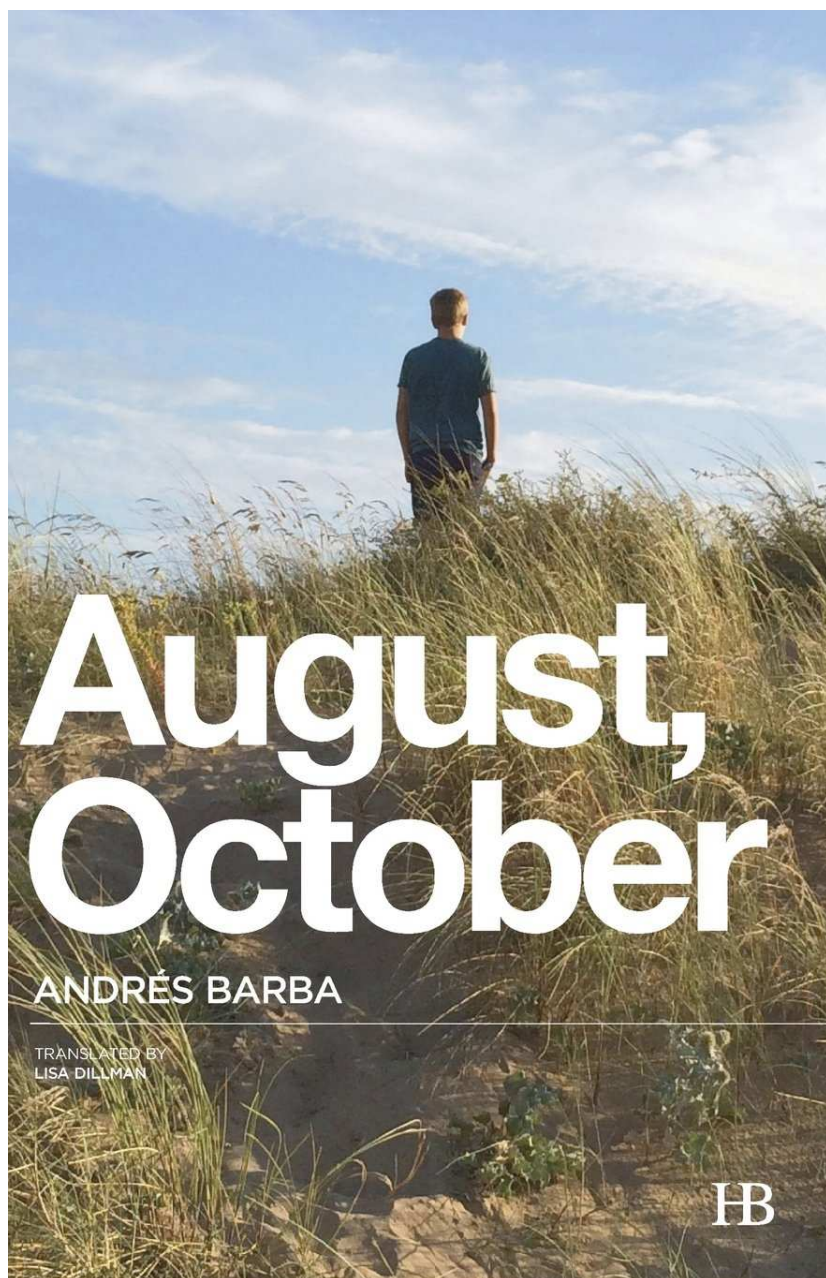
desperately, like a madman. I'm a late convert.

When I began to read, I also began to write. For me the two experiences and drives are intimately linked, but I think that happens to everyone. What I *am* against are those campaigns designed to promote reading in childhood, and the proselytizing of all these adults who don't read a thing but do expect their children to. For me, literature is a private religion and there is nothing more perverse—and counterproductive—than shoe-horning books down people's throats. Literature is something a person has to come to on their own.

That might link up with a clear interest in your work in privacy, and the many ways in which human beings invade one another's privacy, forcing themselves or their ideas upon others.

To my mind, the quintessential territory of literature is the private realm, the intimate world, the “incommunicable,” and the way those internal structures come through in the small gestures and actions of our everyday, outward lives. I consider myself a child of Henry James in that sense. Our intimate worlds make up everything that has anything to do with us, in the end, because everything is naturally concentrated in them. We're aware of the problems that are going to accompany us throughout our lives, and yet for some mysterious reason, we never get used to those questions. It's as if each man and each woman has to go through that learning process in private, on their own, again and again, without the help of culture or literature or the testimony of the hundreds of millions of people that came before them.

What interests me is that aloneness is so inseparable from life learning, and the way that beginning to love another person as they deserve to be loved involves coming to understand or experience the other person's aloneness in the same way as they themselves feel it.



You also work as a translator of English texts into Spanish, including classics by Melville and Conrad. In that sense you're always in

conversation with other writers. How has your work as a translator influenced your own writing?

It's true that different prosodies are sometimes quite *catching*. One very catchy author is De Quincey. When you're translating him, these long, intricate sentences start to just flow right out of you. Translating is a very beneficial process for a writer, but it's also very difficult—and, in Spain, particularly badly paid. Often you don't even realize you're learning anything until you sit down to write something of your own.

What is the book you've translated that has been hardest to do justice to, or to capture the spirit of, in Spanish?

Moby-Dick. A nightmare. It was difficult for me to deal with the anachronistic, deliberately arcane tone of the book in English—it didn't have a rigid enough air in Spanish.

There are a lot of good Spanish authors out there who haven't yet been translated into English. Which books should American publishers be acquiring and bringing to English-speaking audiences?

Four fantastic authors. Sergio del Molino, *La hora violeta*. Carlos Pardo, *El viaje a pie de Johann Sebastian*. Mercedes Cebrián, *La nueva taxidermia*. And Alberto Olmos, *Alabanza*.

What kinds of things are you looking to strengthen or eradicate as you revise your sentences during successive drafts of a novel?

Far and away, the most important thing for me is to not say anything that I know for sure is a lie. When I go back over a book, the first thing I look for are precisely those places where, for the sake of a pretty phrase, I've said something that's false, or simply stupid. Great sentences almost always sound like utter idiocy when spoken on their own out of context. Flaubert poked a lot of fun at that, and rightly. Everybody ends up lapsing in one way or another into cliché, or into corniness.

I'm a sworn enemy of pompous sentences. To my mind, the greatness of great sentences lies in their ability to make any distracted reader run their eyes over them without realizing it. In contrast to more grandiose, pompous utterances—which are only useful inasmuch as Justin Bieber can get them tattooed across his ass—I think truly great sentences constitute a recognition, an idea, some part of a still larger remark, and as such their meaning dies when you separate them from the body that's produced them.

You've said before that writing is your way of "thinking in the world."

I'd say that my way of thinking, my way of *experiencing* my passage through life—or the most important way, in any case—is through literature. Sartre put it particularly aptly in *The Family Idiot*. "Thoughts are made in the mouth." Meaning—among other things—that a person only truly understands that which he is able to articulate, for one, and for another that thinking is "saying." In that sense, I could never be anything other than a writer, though I like all occupations having to do with material, with manipulating and transforming different materials, from cooking to gardening, from making alcohol—I brew my own beer and distilled liquors—to drinking it.

I understand you write poetry, too. How does that process compare to the writing of your novels?

I've only written one book of poetry, *Crónica natural*, and that was very recently. It's a book about my father, who passed away a year and a half ago. I wanted to write a book about him, and it seemed to me that the only way to avoid as much as possible any of the acquired, "professional" habits of novel-writing would be to learn a new language to speak about him. It was the first time in my life I used autobiographical information in a literary text, and it was quite an experience—one I'm not sure I'll be repeating. Very educational, but also quite exhausting.

You've spoken before about books you've written but never published—abandoned novels. Is it ever possible, as a writer, to learn from one's mistakes?

All writers have a corpse or two in their closets. That's completely normal. You're lucky if you get one novel for every five tries, but regardless, I don't think you learn anything from making mistakes. By which I mean that you don't learn anything by spending months writing something you then toss into the trash can.

What you do learn is to not be overly trusting of your most immediate perceptions—thinking that something is great today and then complete garbage the next day—and that is very important, yes. In writing as well as in life. It's just as difficult to judge a novel properly as it is to judge an important decision you've just made.

Jonathan Lee is a British writer. His new novel, High Dive, will be published in the U.S. in March.

TAGS adolescence, Andrés Barba, August October, death, fiction, Harold Brodkey, Ian McEwan, interviews, Justin Bieber, Moby Dick, novels, privacy, prose, sentences, sex, Spain, Spanish literature, translation