

# ARGENTINA'S UNMASTERED PAST

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As the recent decade of violence and tyranny slowly recedes into the past, few signs have yet emerged that Argentines are making headway in coming to terms with this troubled heritage. Although the memory of these years is less omnipresent, it still evokes a repulsion as intense—and as fascinated—as when these matters were first allowed to come out into the open. Some reasons for the exceptional depth and scope of the Argentine crisis have become clearer in retrospect, but this clarity does not make the remembering any less painful. The extreme savagery of the country's turn toward violence makes even the most insightful historical exploration of its causes pale in comparison with the memory of having experienced the consequences.

This common experience can be summed up in the word *terror*. It would be certainly wrong to suggest that between 1973 and 1980, the millions who inhabit the large cities of Argentina were equally haunted by terror. Responses to the violence unleashed first by the left, then by the right, and finally monopolized by the military ranged from dull underlying worry to obsessive fear. But the repressors' view of the crisis that they were facing persuaded them of the need to concentrate on vast sectors of the intellectual and professional classes (and even other sectors of the urban upper-middle class, whose children had gathered in disproportionate numbers behind the banners of the left-wing underground) and to purify them by heroic means of the subversive virus that had infected others (most of the working class and its unions) more mildly. Thus the terror affected with exceptional intensity precisely those Argentines who would not be satisfied until they had made sense of it.

The sudden emergence of terror revealed to these Argentines the presence of a sinister and previously unsuspected dimension in the Argentine collective experience. Some were tempted to conclude that such a dimension, although mercifully hidden from even the most pessimistic observers, had been central to that experience since its inception. It is difficult to agree with Andrew Graham-Yooll's avowal, in introducing his tales of life under fear, that he was "beginning to believe" that the years of terror "might have been any five years in the last four

centuries" (Graham-Yooll 1981, 13) or to accept the notion that the nightmarish Argentina of the seventies was somehow more "true" than the country whose inhabitants had managed for centuries to lead reasonably normal lives. Yet one cannot deny that to incorporate the recent episode of terror into the body of Argentine history requires modifying some of the basic assumptions on which the historical image of the country has been built as well as modifying the image relied on instinctively by Argentines in negotiating their daily lives.

It is too early for Argentine historians, in circumstances unfavorable to the quick completion of ambitious projects, to develop a view of the national past informed by these new insights. This undertaking has been attempted instead by two British scholars. John Lynch's admirable political biography of Juan Manuel de Rosas (Lynch 1981) and David Rock's provocative recent history of Argentina (Rock 1985) operate under the implicit assumption that what the recent horrors brought to light had always been very much there. Yet both authors were able to put this basic insight to excellent historiographic use because they employed it only sparingly. Refusing to reduce the recent descent into hell to a meaningless aberration, they recognized that it lent new urgency to the need to explore a brutal underside of Argentine history that previous historians had preferred to ignore, but both declined to view it as the *clavis universalis* to four centuries of Argentine history.

In Argentina, meanwhile, creators of drama, film, and narrative fiction did not await the historians' reassessment to start exploring the past for images and symbols that would allow them to render the searing recent experiences more bearable to themselves and their public. The most obvious metaphor offered by the past was the period of terror under Juan Manuel de Rosas in the 1840s. In 1982 Argentina's leading experimental dramatist, Griselda Gámbaro, staged in Buenos Aires her successful play *La mala sangre*, which revived the voices of Rosista terror squads sarcastically offering the decapitated heads of their victims for sale as ripe melons. María Luisa Bemberg's film *Camila*, which achieved an even wilder success in 1984, showed these same gangs in all their horror, roaming the streets of the same city where Bemberg's public had only recently lived under the terror of less picturesque, but even more deadly, squads.

But the resurrection of the half-forgotten anti-Rosista legend apparently resulted from the workings of subconscious memory rather than from conscious choice. Neither Gámbaro nor Bemberg was ready to identify with the view of the Rosas period to which they had lent new dramatic life. Gámbaro stubbornly denied any connection between Rosas and the unnamed tyrant of her piece, and Bemberg went out of her way to refashion the pathetic story of Camila O'Gorman into an illustration of the evils of patriarchy rather than those of political terror.

It is easy to understand such reactions. The collective memory of the Rosas terror had been erased not merely by the passing of time but by erosion of the ideological consensus inherited from the long period of impressive socioeconomic advances that ended for Argentina in the world crisis of 1929. This consensus had viewed the country through the eyes of the highly ideological intellectuals and statesmen (Sarmiento, Mitre, and Alberdi) whose ideas had guided it toward unparalleled prosperity, leaders who were recognized as the true founding fathers of modern Argentina. But the consensus could not survive reluctant acceptance of the sad fact that the events of 1929 were no temporary accident but the end of the world order that had made such success possible. Yet it took more than four decades, culminating in the blindly hopeful mood created by the triumphant return of Peronism in 1973, for an alternative view of the Argentine past to predominate in the allegiance of Argentines. This alternate view recognized that the demonic role had not been played by Rosas but by the founding fathers so deeply revered until recently. The sudden resurrection of Rosas's terror in collective memory threatened to abort the results of that painful reappraisal of Argentina's historical experience and resurrect a view of its past (and implicitly of its present and future) that even those who had used the Rosas terror as a paradigm for the current terrors could not accept.

This ambivalence endowed the novels that explored the link between past and present with a rich complexity and a baffling ambiguity, qualities absent from the powerful, but comparatively simple (and even simple-minded), constructs of Gámbaro and Bemberg. The novelist found in the era of civil war and tyranny the symbols and possible models for the literary transformation of recent Argentine experience. The works that first came to mind were *Facundo* and *Martín Fierro*, but less for their political-ideological message than for their evocation of the horror and despair that Sarmiento and Hernández had sometimes experienced when looking at their country. That desperate mood (which both left aside in their proposals for melioristic reforms) completely permeated another even more relevant exploration of the horror that was Argentina. Esteban Echeverría's *El matadero*, written in the 1830s in Rosista Buenos Aires, narrated the death of a young man of social and intellectual distinction, assassinated by fanatic Rosista workers in the Buenos Aires stockyards. This story initiated the dubious insight that the gory rituals of stock-raising and slaughtering could serve as a paradigm for Argentine political savagery. The sustained popularity of this view is revealed in literary works from Sarmiento to Martínez Estrada and in films from *La hora de los hornos* to *Camila*, but its popularity owes less to intrinsic perceptiveness than to its ability to convey such a mood to successive generations of Argentines.

The somber world of *El matadero* is revived in Carlos Dámaso Martínez's *Hay cenizas en el viento* (1981), a powerful depiction of contemporary life in Córdoba under the grip of terror (notwithstanding the title's source in Borges's *Poema conjetural* and the opening quote from *Facundo*). This worldview can also be recognized in the more complex construct of Roberto Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980), a novel that became an instant secret classic. In connecting past and present, Piglia was less interested in terror as a collective social experience than in its impact on the lives of two emblematic members of the Argentine intelligentsia who are ambiguous victims of terrorist regimes. Piglia does not consider the anti-Rosista generation of 1837 (in whose ranks Echeverría, Sarmiento, and his hero from the past entered public life) to be a valid model for his own generation. His deep affective identification with these intellectual forefathers does not preclude his unhesitating rejection of their ideological inspiration. Both attitudes are less contradictory than they seem at first glance, however, because it is the mistakes of the generation of 1837 (so nobly inspired and so dearly atoned for) that make it comparable to the one that rode the wave of ideological radicalization in the early 1970s. This later generation was now paying a high price for choices that it could no longer support but was not yet ready to repudiate.

Such affective identification was possible only with those members of the generation of 1837 who had also paid a high price for their mistakes, not with those who capitalized on them to launch dazzlingly successful public careers after the fall of Rosas. Thus the parallel that Piglia draws between past and present links a shadowy (and wholly imaginary) follower of Echeverría, who commits suicide when the long-awaited fall of the tyrant is in sight, with an equally shadowy failed intellectual who is fascinated by the suicide's mysterious decision and (it is hinted) is himself fated to become a *desaparecido*. But another figure in the novel easily overshadows its two ambiguous heroes—the grandson of the anti-Rosista suicide and the father-in-law of the future *desaparecido*. After almost a half-century of physical disability and political marginality, he evinces admiration rather than compassion, thanks to a pitiless knowledge of himself and the world that is part of the heritage of the founding fathers of liberal Argentina, with whom he passionately identifies. Through this character's role, the founding fathers are restored to the center of the national experience and recognized as even more awesome figures than in the liberal *légende dorée*. These monumental paradigms of Machiavellian *virtú*, whom legend had reduced to insipidly correct practitioners of republican virtue, obviously have nothing in common with the current tyrants, who offer instead appallingly convincing illustrations of Hannah Arendt's insights on the banality of evil.

A similar perspective can be found in *Cuerpo a cuerpo* (1979), published in exile by David Viñas. His earlier works since *Cayó sobre su rostro* (1955) had found a common theme in the ruthless conquest of the land and its people by social groups that had identified with the rising Argentine state. In *Cuerpo a cuerpo*, this process should have reached its logical outcome in the post-1976 military despotism, but Viñas was apparently not ready to face such an outcome. Viñas's central character, Lieutenant General Alejandro Mendiburu, is presented more ambivalently than Piglia's hero in a wheelchair. While Viñas dwells more insistently on the sinister aspects of his protagonist's career, he also endows his paradigmatic general with the most versatile talents and accomplishments. This unexpected connoisseur of Claudelian Alexandrines is shown to full advantage chatting with General de Gaulle in impeccable French on subjects as diverse as Pascal, Malraux, the modest merits of Argentine imitation champagne, and the vicissitudes in Brigitte Bardot's courageous battle against aging, as well as privately enjoying Marx's prose, with his heavily annotated copy of the original German version of the *Grundrisse* at his bedside. Yet this flawed, but worthy, heir of General Julio Roca and General Lucio Mansilla (the greatest soldier-politician and the most representative intellectual of the generation of 1880) is already a defeated man when the terrorist state takes over, and he is fated to become a victim of the incomparably lesser, but more deadly, men now in power.

In the works of Viñas and Piglia, although the search for historical precedent and context was cut short at the threshold of the episode of terror that it was intended to clarify, the repressed memory of that episode was nevertheless beginning to modify views of the Argentine past by inspiring a new sense of respect for the founders of modern Argentina. But this beginning was a reluctant and hesitant one; thus neither novelist felt the need to tone down his contemptuous reaction to the intellectual figures from the recent past whom both perceive (sometimes wrongly) as ideological heirs of the founding fathers. The second part of *Respiración artificial* offers a poorly informed, yet unhesitatingly negative, view of the intellectual leaders of the thirties and forties; and in *Cuerpo a cuerpo*, the high-society lady resembles Victoria Ocampo, the Madame de Staël of Argentine letters during the interwar years. Even in these works, however, the hesitations suggested that more was to come. In *Respiración artificial*, Piglia tried more strenuously than successfully to hide from his readers his idolatry of Borges. In the issue of Sartre's *Temps Modernes* dedicated to Argentina prepared by Viñas and César Fernández Moreno (Fernández Moreno and Viñas 1981), Noé Jitrik was to proclaim the same idolatry with unbridled enthusiasm.

The enormity of what had to be comprehended was thus defeat-

ing attempts to come to terms with it by exploring historical parallels and only fostered dissolution of the views of the past summoned for that purpose. A more promising approach was perhaps to transpose the recent horrors into a simplified fantasy-world. What was attempted in this direction possessed only superficial analogies with Latin American "magic realism." Even *Cola de la gartija* (1984), Luisa Valenzuela's magic-realist yarn inspired by the career of José López Rega (the Peróns' Minister of Social Welfare, factotum, court astrologer, and magician), takes as its backdrop a monotonously horrid physical and human landscape that has none of the baroque exuberance of the magic worlds depicted by García Márquez.

That same background is even more convincingly brought to life in Juan Carlos Martini's *La vida entera* (1981), which transposes the *tragedia grotesca* of the 1973 Peronist restoration to the lowlife of a provincial city in the littoral of Argentina. What makes the novel so admirable is that instead of offering a precise counterpoint to those events (as Jorge Asís did for the killing of Aramburu in *La calle de los caballos muertos* in 1982), Martini builds a world endowed with a more substantive reality than decaying Peronism through a parallel evocation of the protracted agony of a plebeian cult leader in a shantytown and the sordid conflicts among pimps over control of their women. The radical hopelessness of Martini's world is admirably conveyed by the desolate fluvial landscape, never completely reclaimed from its primeval barbarism, in which the action of the novel is set.

While Martini's evocation of the early stages of terror, still under the aegis of the moribund Peronist restoration, is the poetic resurrection of a collective mood, Daniel Moyano's *El vuelo del tigre* (1981) uses the techniques of fantastic literature to explore the internal logic of the military regime's attempt to win the "hearts and minds" of its subjects by using terror as a pedagogic tool. The book's coherence is that of a *roman philosophique* or a novel of retrospective anticipation, which builds a simplified imaginary world around the basic features of the real world in order to decipher the secret laws of a present as mysterious and threatening as any future.

The recourse of transposing reality historically or fantastically was inspired by the need to establish some distance from it, perhaps even more than by the hope of finding indirect clues that could help explain the Argentine crisis. The difficulty of the former goal can be appreciated by reading those establishment writers who were as ready as the military rulers to proclaim that nothing was seriously wrong with post-1976 Argentina. One finds in their writings the traces of the stark realities of state terror infiltrating even their sheltered fantasy world. For example, Silvina Bullrich, who continued to produce her annual yarns of adultery among the upper classes, closed her *Reunión de direc-*



torio (1977) by having her central feminine character leave the country. Although this *dénouement* was not new to her fiction, it was motivated this time by the heroine's conviction that she would be killed by orders from her father (the military dictator) or perhaps her husband (the financial wizard of the regime), both of whom had gangs of thugs available for the task.

But if the enormity of what had to be dealt with made its direct representation almost unthinkable and its transposition into historical or fantastic metaphor extremely problematic, this obstacle could be sidestepped by organizing a narrative that would not attempt to transcend the overwhelming incomprehension evinced by such horrors. For example, Manuel Puig's *Pubis angelical* (1979), which was published in Spain during his semi-exile, takes as its central character a languidly passive beauty buffeted by the storm, a situation that again embodies the fantasy of radical powerlessness always present in his narrative. Also, Jorge Asís's best-selling novel *Flores robadas en los jardines de Quilmes* (1980) views the country's descent into hell through the uncomprehending eyes of his lumpen hero. But while Puig achieved this effect on the strength of a refined, excessively self-conscious sense of rhythm and style, Asís's less-successful later novels confirmed what some of the readers of *Flores robadas* had suspected: that the relentless triviality in his rendering of the Argentine tragedy was not consummate art but an accurate reflection of his own limited view, much like the limitations of his scarcely admirable hero.

Asís's literary success and his achieving it under the military government caused some of his colleagues to suspect him of literary demagoguery and possibly even of cleverly serving the regime while appearing to defy its taboos. During the last stages of the military regime, two novels by Osvaldo Soriano (first published in exile) achieved an equally large success with less controversy. The novelistic cycle of Colonia Vela, a mythical town in the heart of the province of Buenos Aires, repeated Roberto Payró's attempt nearly a century earlier to reflect the Argentine political predicament in the simplifying mirror of another mythical provincial backwater, Pago Chico. *No habrá más penas ni olvido* (1980) depicts the murderous rivalries between the Peronist left and right as an exercise in pure madness: the right is literally power-mad; the left (to the extent that it is more than a convenient label for all who stand in the way of the right-wingers) is more innocent but so radically foolish that it is equally dangerous to innocent bystanders.

*No habrá más penas ni olvido* articulates the reactions of a witness who was one of few members of the progressive intelligentsia not to be swept by the left-Peronist wave of the early seventies. *Cuarteles de invierno* (1982), Soriano's second novel about Colonia Vela, starkly profiles a terrorized country, as imagined from exile. Forced to view the bloody

chaos at a distance, Soriano was able to construct from it a malevolent, yet coherent, cosmos. But was the physical distance of Soriano's exile the only reason for his perspective? Perhaps for all his aloofness from the recent left-Peronist wave, Soriano could not feel as estranged from it as from the later administrators of state terror, with whom he did not need to fear discovering any secret affinity. The exasperated and reluctant goodwill he maintained toward the absurd heroes of the Peronist left confirms that he could not help responding to their hopeful and impatient mood, which can be recognized in retrospect as a necessary antecedent to the calamity of 1976.

Not even the most direct fictionalization of that calamity can achieve the immediate impact of the testimonies from victims and witnesses. Jacobo Timerman's *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number* (1981) achieved the greatest reverberations: long excerpts were published in *The New Yorker*, and a film made for television attracted a distinguished cast, including Liv Ullmann to play Timerman's wife. More surprisingly, his story found a respectful audience among Argentine exiles, and for a time, only the defenders that the Argentine military government had found among American neoconservatives raised a discordant voice in this awed chorus. Only after Timerman took up residence in Israel and (in typical Argentine fashion) immediately started offering imperious advice on how the country should be run did his following begin to suffer defections. Timerman's later critics reacted most strongly to his opinions on the Lebanese adventure, which they viewed as proof enough that Timerman's martyrdom had been, if not a clever promotion gimmick for his book, at least a richly deserved punishment for his later heterodoxy in matters of Israeli foreign policy.

These defections were perhaps less surprising than the initial consensus acclaiming Timerman as one of the few exemplary witnesses among the countless martyrs of our awful century. In trying to understand how this reaction could occur, the end of Borges's story "Emma Zunz" comes to mind. Borges observes that Emma's version "era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta. . . . [V]erdadero . . . era el ultraje que había padecido; sólo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o dos nombres propios" [Emma's version was indeed incredible, but it convinced everyone because it was substantially true. . . . The outrage she had suffered was authentic; only the circumstances, the time and a couple of proper names were false.] (Borges 1982, 129, my translation).

In Timerman's account, the circumstances, times, and names relevant to his ordeal are not falsified, but this veracity makes his story no less incredible. What it suggests is that a young man raised according to the principles of revolution, socialism, and Zionism in a country that experimented with a succession of political solutions (all of them



including considerable doses of fascism) successfully rose from a tenement in Parque Patricios to that sanctum sanctorum of the Argentine establishment, the Grill Room at the Plaza, to become the owner and director of an influential daily newspaper while maintaining a ferocious loyalty to the ideals of his youth. This scenario was not the case. Timerman's career was boosted instead by his readiness to lend his formidable journalistic talents to dubious enterprises, such as overthrowing the civilian government in 1966. He candidly admitted to Alain Rouquié in a 1970 interview that he had been encouraged by Army officials to launch a magazine for that purpose (Rouquié 1982, 2:244).

Although Timerman's predicament was not caused by any ambition to become the nation's conscience, it resulted from more than failed speculation, contrary to the claims of some critics. What did Timerman in was probably a sense that after years of ably serving the political designs of those actors whom he expected to emerge victorious from the labyrinthine power struggles of the inter-Peronist years, he should play a more active and independent role. He claimed in his book that his captors planned to use his trial to compromise some of his military and political associates who still enjoyed marginal influence on the armed forces.

Following this atypical confidence, however, Timerman assumes his usual reticence, alluding in only the vaguest terms to his having cooperated with the attempts of a former president to gather political and journalistic support for a halt to the ongoing barbarities. Readers are not told that the former president is General Alejandro Lanusse, whose policies *La Opinión* had served faithfully, if not always openly, since Timerman launched it in 1971. Also, little is said about the fact that Edgardo Sajón, Press Secretary in the Lanusse administration, was captured with Timerman and counted afterwards as among the desaparecidos. The recent trials revealed that Sajón perished a few days after his capture, electrocuted on a wet pool table in the game room of an officer's club, converted for the occasion into an improvised torture chamber.

This attempt by the military hard-liners to revive the show trials perfected by Stalin in the 1930s and use them to destroy their rivals within the armed forces was soon abandoned, however. Timerman explains that the reason was their pathological anti-Semitism, which made them drop this promising approach to explore the protean threat of the Jewish world conspiracy. The captors tried at length to extract the secrets of this conspiracy from Timerman, thereby saving his life and sparing the other intended victims of this aborted Argentine replica of the Moscow trials.

Thus after some initial hesitation, Timerman's *Prisoner without a Name* resolutely places his experience in a Jewish context by claiming

that he was victimized as a Jew by racial fanatics eager to emulate the Holocaust. It was this aspect of his testimony that drew the most intense criticism, and indeed the comparison with the Holocaust cannot be sustained for long. While the authenticity of Timerman's feelings (which has been frequently and gratuitously denied by his critics) is beyond doubt, their intensity seems to preclude his achieving clear, or even coherent, insight into the reasons for his ordeal.

Timerman is right to stress the anti-Semitic component in the fantasy world inhabited by his captors, and also, in milder forms, in the slightly more rational views of the "moderates" in the military government. He might have made an even stronger case had he stressed to what extent the irrational turn taken by Argentine politics in the 1970s popularized conspiracy theories (among which the Jewish conspiracy remains the most popular) far beyond the circle of their permanent devotees. But he completely ignores the point that although anti-Semitism is now a permanent item in the ideological stock-in-trade of the Argentine right (and by no means limited to those with fascist or quasi-fascist inclinations), rarely can an important political decision be attributed exclusively (or even predominantly) to the influence of anti-Semitic views. Although no reason exists to doubt that Timerman was reviled as a Jew by captors who saw him as an incarnation of Semitic evil, one must keep in mind that this persecution could occur because other, more powerful figures who did not share these puerile views were perfectly ready to utilize them when convenient. This state of affairs thus expanded the influence of anti-Semitism much beyond the small circle of true believers who were really convinced that Israel had territorial ambitions in Patagonia and intended to fulfill them with the support of its traditional ally, the Soviet Union. While Argentine anti-Semitism is perhaps more pervasive than even Timerman allows and its manifestations can be as nasty as he reports, it never achieved the dominant position among the highly irrational *idées fixes* emerging during the Argentine nightmare years that was characteristic of Nazi Germany.

Timerman's impassioned denunciation of a very real anti-Semitism, of which he was an equally real victim, does not make him an impostor just because his experience did not leave him the patience required to analyze the complexities and ambiguities in the Argentine variant of this universal phenomenon. But it is possible to wonder whether, in offering a story endowed with metaphoric rather than literal truth, Timerman was guided only by an outrage too intense to allow him to pay proper attention to complexities and nuances, and whether the instincts of a master journalist were not also at work. Perhaps Timerman preferred to gloss over the specifically Argentine di-

mensions of his ordeal neither because he had too much to hide (as his enemies suggest) nor because his overwhelming anger and sorrow oversimplified a complex story but mostly because he sensed that if he wished to capture the foreign audience that he wanted to reach, he needed to translate the idiosyncratic ideological and political background of his ordeal into a less parochial language of ideas. Whatever the reason, while his testimony has been crucial in bringing the Argentine tragedy to the world's attention, what he had to say about it was at the same time deeply moving and slightly beside the point.

If Timerman was so ready to give rein to his journalistic instincts and thus ensure the widest possible impact for his tale of horrors, it was at least in part because although he declared sincerely at the start of his book that he had left Argentina forever, he could not reconcile himself to the thought that his harrowing experiences had ended his Argentine career in defeat. Publishing his book was a way of continuing the struggle against his cruel enemies, and both his passionate denunciations and his sudden reticences were intended to influence the future course of the country in which he had risen to fame and to which he maintained an allegiance reinforced by his enemies' decision to deprive him of his Argentine citizenship.

How decisive this circumstance was in inspiring Timerman's approach to his own and his country's predicament can be better determined by comparing his testimony with that of another journalist. Anglo-Argentine Andrew Graham-Yooll left the country fearing for his life, less because of his affiliation with the *Buenos Aires Herald* (the English-language daily that courageously provided information on the victims of state violence) than because of his links with the literary and artistic circles that had provided many devout camp followers and even some leaders of the leftist underground.

Perhaps because Graham-Yooll was a witness rather than a victim of the horrors he chronicled but also because his exile could not deprive him of any position in the Argentine power elite, he does not share Timerman's overpowering outrage at unforgivable wrongs. Graham-Yooll's testimony is permeated instead by a dull sorrow in which even self-pity expands into compassion for a doomed country. His more muted reaction results less from the overwhelming monotony of living with fear than from his constant awareness of the barbarous episode's deep national roots. This awareness allowed Graham-Yooll to recognize without bitterness that the killers were complex figures with complex motivations, some even quite attractive. This recognition came readily to him on remembering left-wing friends who became victims of the violence they had encouraged (such as poet Francisco Urondo or even Diego Muñoz Barreto, the millionaire in search of political adventure),

and it also extended, albeit more reluctantly, to his thinking about their right-wing rivals. Even the colorless mass killers who led the repression after 1976 are not cast as abstract incarnations of evil.

Graham-Yooll's nuanced awareness makes his portrait of a city in terror even more chilling. Readers are shown how violence insinuates itself as a new dimension in urban life, changing daily existence forever yet modifying little on the surface. In an exemplary story, a gang of right-wing activists kidnap and almost kill a photographer from the *Buenos Aires Herald* for the most frivolous reasons. A few months later, however, they invite their quasi-victim and his family to the opening of their new neighborhood restaurant. The invitation is gratefully accepted, and there is nothing false in the warmth of the reencounter. This feel for the ambiguities in the experience of terror, this refusal to simplify it into any stark contrast of innocence and guilt, inspires no wish to delve into it further for deeper explanations. The author's final reaction is instead a fascinated revulsion toward the whole episode, a feeling that makes the wish to erase it from collective memory even more understandable. But Graham-Yooll wrote to counteract his own impulse to forget because he felt that what happened had to be remembered, not as "an exercise in itself" but as "a way to prevent repetition of the suffering."

When Graham-Yooll wrote his reminiscences, he did not expect them to find a warm welcome in a country that was also desperately "trying to forget." Today Argentina has given up on that vain attempt. Too upset by the economic and military debacle that brought about the demise of the military regime, the nation decided in an unguarded moment to look back on the time of terrors. Once what had been so carefully hidden began to come to light, there was no stopping this exercise in revelation of what everyone knew until it ran its full course. *Nunca más*, the report of the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas appointed by President Raúl Alfonsín, made a decisive contribution (CONADEP 1984). It integrated into the national memory an episode whose perpetrators had wished to see stored in the darkest recesses of the Argentine national consciousness, as a cautionary tale too ghastly to be kept alive except by the very effort to consign it to oblivion.

This commission did an admirable job, and without much cooperation from the institutions partially responsible for the deeds it investigated. The information collected adds telling detail and fills in many serious gaps in the picture of a country terrorized by its own government, which had been sketched in 1980 by the courageous OAS commission that visited Argentina (OEA 1980). The detailed picture of a vast system of terror offered by the presidential commission and the analysis of its workings will no doubt be precious to future researchers.

The commission, well aware that its report would immediately face nit-picking criticism from still influential persons who disapproved of any exploration of past misdeeds, wisely decided to avoid unnecessary controversy by limiting its mission to carefully reconstructing the institutional aspects of the origin and workings of the terror machine.

The immediate significance of *Nunca más* for Argentina was that what had been a *mysterium tremendum* became the stuff of a best-seller. One hundred thousand copies of the report were sold in the early summer of 1984. The consequences were sometimes disconcerting: this overwhelmingly monotonous tale of systematic cruelty became the favorite reading of hordes of tourists who converged on Mar del Plata during that summer, making copies of the *Informe* as much a part of the beach scene as bottles of suntan lotion.

This trivialization of a horrible past was the most paradoxical consequence of the success of the *Informe* in exorcising the experience. Thanks to the report's impact and the ensuing trial of the commanders in chief, a new consensus emerged that recognized the savage repression begun in 1976 as an unforgivable crime. But precisely because it had been classified under so satisfying a label, many Argentines felt ready to lay the matter to rest and address more pressing concerns. While understandable, this reaction did not represent any genuine coming to terms with the complex developments that fostered military terror, except at the most superficial level. In this regard, the emerging consensus adopted the perspective of those caught in the middle in condemning the left, the right, and the terrorist state. Such condemnation was not necessarily unfair, but it tended to dismiss the deepest crisis in Argentine history as merely a succession of meaningless episodes in which the country had been victimized by rival gangs of kid-nappers and killers coming apparently out of nowhere.

This consensus was not unanimous, however. The most alarming exceptions were the military officers, who refused almost to a man to condemn even faintly the military's actions in what they alone now called a war. But their sullenly dissident view of the recent past was shared only by the most eccentric fringes of public opinion. Even former allies of the military government felt that the farthest they could now afford to go on its behalf was to plead extenuating circumstances. As for the surviving friends of the underground left, they also knew better than to try to identify with the movement's record, preferring to argue that the much-misunderstood guerrillas had erred with the best of intentions: they had indeed tried, by desperate (and admittedly ill-advised) means, to ensure for Argentina the institutionalized, pluralistic democracy that it had only fleetingly enjoyed in the past.

Some Argentines, however, rejected the aprioristic condemnation of the recent era of violence as an unqualified triumph of evil, a

conclusion that threatened to transform the dreaded exploration of its horrors into the most effective means of denying it any meaningful place in collective memory. This rejection came mostly from members of the intellectual, literary, and journalistic left, which had identified, if not always with the underground movements, with the rebellious political climate in which they arose, and this response was echoed among foreign scholars with similar ideological inclinations. But this repudiation of a consensus they consider stultifying is not a disguised attempt to vindicate the record of the left during the time of trouble. On the contrary, their intention is to examine the period critically in order to discover why what began as the most intense wave of hope to rouse Argentine society in recent decades came so quickly to such a pitiful end. Argentines of this persuasion know in advance that if they pursue this task seriously, they cannot spare the left from accepting an important share in the responsibility for the disastrous outcome.

The dissidence of a few perplexed survivors who finally felt ready to ruminate on the catastrophe has not significantly weakened the consensus challenged. But the success of some of the books inspired by this minority view suggests that even among the majority who prefer a horrified global rejection of the recent past, some curiosity lingers about critical explorations of this era.

The approach taken by these books, while critical in intention, is anything but detached. Inspired by their authors' need to pass judgment on a movement that all of them valued intensely, their former passionate identification gave way to a variety of more nuanced and sometimes contradictory (but no less intense) reactions. These responses ranged from a reluctant and partial distancing that tries to reclaim as much as possible of a seriously tarnished legacy to a condemnation as all-embracing as the identification it replaced.

Miguel Bonasso's *Recuerdo de la muerte* (1984) offers perhaps the least-critical revision of the *guerrillero* past of all the works that strive to reassess and not just vindicate it. Described by Bonasso as a *novela real* or *realidad novelada*, the book is an exercise in "new journalism" inspired by the immensely successful works of Rodolfo Walsh, the writer who first exploited the genre's political potential in Argentina before his death as a Montonero officer. The effectiveness of Walsh's writings came from his superb narrative talents and the strength of his political convictions, which infused enormous persuasiveness into the sometimes far-fetched political conclusions he proposed for his exemplary tales. Bonasso, a professional journalist who for a time directed *Noticias* (the unofficial organ of Montoneros in the Buenos Aires daily press), provides in his *Recuerdo* an eloquent reconstruction of the experiences of the victims of military repression, but he is not above falling into a serviceable journalistic mode when dealing with more mundane sub-



jects (as in his biographical chapter on the hero's career prior to his capture and the section on the Montonero exile in Mexico). Bonasso has few conclusions to offer his readers, and his disclaimer that his narrative "muestra, no demuestra" entitles readers to wonder whether this outcome is due to his admirable self-restraint or to his lack of clarity about what points he would have chosen to make had he decided to do more than just tell a story.

It is not that Bonasso lacks specific causes to plead. He does not hide his deep dislike for Mario Firmenich, the leader of the Montoneros, and his immediate associates. Bonasso clearly sympathizes with the dissident groups that emerged after defeat to challenge Firmenich's supremacy. But even the points that are well taken are peripheral to the subject covered in *Recuerdo de la muerte*. His story begins at the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada, the torture and extermination center that haunted Porteños during the years of terror. Protagonist Jaime Dri, a former left-Peronist legislator and Montonero officer, is brought to the Escuela after being captured in Uruguay. Following a harrowing period of systematic torture, he decides to pretend to join the collaborators recruited by the officers among the victims in order to escape. He is then borrowed by the Second Army Corps, led from Rosario by General Galtieri, and involved in a vast scheme to infiltrate the Montonero exiles and provoke the movement's surviving followers in Argentina. The plan is to resurrect clandestine Montonero publications, which are to be written by collaborating prisoners directed by their military captors. Once back in Buenos Aires, however, Dri discovers that these roles have been reversed in the domain of Admiral Emilio Massera: a think tank of Montonero prisoners are advising this polyfaceted public personality on his fancied second career as a social-democratic political leader. Dri succeeds in escaping to Paraguay, where he is finally smuggled to safer exile by Panamanian diplomats, only narrowly to escape being tried by his Montonero superiors, some of whom apparently would have preferred to see him remain a captive.

Bonasso attempts to draw conclusions for the future by using his story to develop a self-criticism of the Montonero movement, but it is a half-hearted attempt at best, and the self-criticism sometimes comes surprisingly close to self-flattery. For example, Bonasso's recognition that the Montoneros' "Cartesian spirit" is their most damaging shortcoming lends the rigorous coherence of rational thought to what less committed observers would describe as the fixity of an obsession. Bonasso's reluctance to offer any more substantive criticism reflects his unwillingness to abandon his allegiance to his Montonero past and renders his critical insights into the story more irrelevant. What makes the story compelling is less the real or fancied reasons for the failure of the Montoneros' political project than its depiction of a daily system of

terror that gradually loses its driving justifications and imprisons its perpetrators as completely as its victims. The final chapters show both groups, all passion spent but still prisoners of an inhuman world now as alien to those who devised it as to its intended captives, sharing the boredom of long empty hours in the same chambers where they first met through torture and rape, a scene even more desolate than those monotonous horrors.

Bonasso, however, would like to believe that his story offers more inspiration for the future than the numbing sorrow and pity it so powerfully evokes, that the defeat he chronicles is not definitive, that the Montonero project is still viable and relevant. These forlorn hopes are not shared by two authors more ready than Bonasso to seek the reasons for the Montoneros' failure in the shortcomings of the movement itself.

In *Soldiers of Perón: Argentina's Montoneros*, British social scientist Richard Gillespie is well aware that they were "political performers whose influence upon Argentine political life in general and [. . .] Peronism in particular has been substantial" (Gillespie 1982, v). But rather than exploring their achievements, as promised in the introduction, Gillespie uses the Montoneros as "an illustration of both the potential and the limitations of a strategy [that of the so-called armed struggle] which numerous left-wing and national liberation movements have experimented with in recent years."

Gillespie pursues the reasons for the failure of the Montoneros' attempt to take power through insurrectional violence. He searches for these reasons in the intricate history of a movement born in the ideological crucible of the 1960s and destroyed by the political storms it helped unleash in the 1970s. To this end, Gillespie gathered, with immense effort and not a little luck, an impressive array of well-sifted and sensibly critiqued factual information. This contribution of a vastly enriched and finally reliable Montonero dossier is significant indeed.

But as previously indicated, Gillespie also wants to make sense of the movement's failure. Although his robust common sense helps him sort out the explanations proposed by critics and self-critics of the Montonero experience, it does not distance him from the rigid ideological matrix shared by most of these critics. As a result, readers are asked to ponder how successful the Montoneros were in avoiding the pitfalls of adventurism, militarism, elitism, authoritarian centralism, and divorce from the masses in a ritualistic language that cannot do justice to the complexities brought to light by Gillespie's research. The conclusions he reaches (that those who came to the movement with a Guevarist background, which included a proper ideological formation, were less easily tempted by these dangerous heresies than its right-wing Catholic founders) are as unsurprising (given the author's ideological

inclinations) as they are difficult to justify from his results. For example, Dr. Roberto Quieto, the Montonero leader and former Communist whose bizarre behavior made his capture inevitable, had impeccable Marxist credentials; nor do facts confirm that poet Francisco Urondo, a former Guevarist who died a hero's death, ever acquired the sound ideological formation that Gillespie awards him. But instead of quibbling with Gillespie's conclusions on such points, this reader wishes that the author had not allowed himself to be distracted into discussions that miss the point he made so vigorously in his preface—namely, that the Montoneros' most interesting feature was their ability to breathe life into a mass movement that for the first time promised to naturalize a radical left-wing current in the unpromising soil of Argentine politics.

The same point is systematically ignored by Pablo Giussani in *Montoneros: la soberbia armada* (1984). A former staff journalist for the pro-Montonero daily directed by Bonasso, Giussani attempts to make sense of the movement's shortcomings by examining the fascist roots it shared with mainstream Peronism and by comparing it systematically with the Italian Red Brigades. Neither approach is really helpful, the first even less so because Giussani pays little attention to the manifold hybrid reformulations of fascism in Argentina. He concentrates instead on the original Italian version, apparently because he himself adopted it with fanatical conviction while growing up as a child of the Italo-Argentine establishment in Buenos Aires. This reason is not a very good one. If the influence of Mussolini's version of fascism on Perón was indeed significant, it became more marginal on mainstream Peronism, and all but negligible on a movement such as the Montoneros, which had moved from Catholic authoritarian integralism to a commitment to social revolution.

Giussani cannot find any more specific affinity between Italian fascists and Argentine Montoneros than the cult of death he discovers in both, a find that seems rather less than the master key to the two movements. It is far from clear that fascism's rhetoric of death (obviously inherited from the recent experience of World War I), which did not preclude a cautious, economical approach to killing as a political device, had much in common with the rhetoric that expressed the Montoneros' need to come to terms with a style of militancy centered on the experience of expecting and inflicting death.

The comparison with the Red Brigades appears even less relevant. Although the Brigades benefited for a time from the reluctance of the political left to join in the uncompromisingly hostile reaction that their deeds were starting to unleash, they were never able to attract the mass following that supported the Montoneros from 1972 to 1974. While the Italian Communist party probably deserves Giussani's high

praise for its common sense, the example of its actions in 1945, when pushing the resistance movement toward integration and final dilution in the new legality of Republican Italy, is more relevant to the dilemmas faced by the Montoneros in 1973 than the party's reaction to the threat from the insurrectional left in the 1970s.

Giussani's explanations are less than satisfactory, and if this talented journalist and shrewd observer of Argentine realities failed so conspicuously, his heart clearly was not in the task. His is a work of moral criticism rather than political analysis, a critique directed less at the Montoneros than at those vast sectors of Argentine society that placed wholly undeserved confidence in them for far too long. As such, Giussani's *Montoneros*—for all its inability to make sense of the Montoneros' rise and fall—has been validated by its enthusiastic reception among huge numbers who share his ambivalent feelings toward that movement. If nothing else, the book states authoritatively the retrospective view of those in the intelligentsia who remember with dismay their previous incarnation as ideological camp followers of the insurrectional left.

This ambiguous achievement makes Giussani's book the most successful of the works that strive to come to terms with the past by reassessing personal experiences from a moral perspective. Such works can contribute little to elucidating a national crisis in which the responsibility the left-leaning intelligentsia was much more limited than is assumed by these ruthless, but excessively self-centered, exercises in soul-searching. Even so, these attempts to reorder memories still too overwhelming to be explored with the detachment required to make sense of them constitute an important step in a healing process that will eventually allow examination of the years of terror from a viewpoint less dominated by sorrow and guilt.

While this process is far from complete, two works born after the fall of the military regime perhaps anticipate the new profile that the Argentine past and present may acquire once the era of terror is finally integrated. Juan Corradi's *The Fitful Republic* is the work of a professional sociologist, while Tomás Eloy Martínez's *La novela de Perón* was written by a skilled novelist and a brilliant journalist who gave up (sooner and more spontaneously than Timerman) on the power games created for talented journalists by the military bailiffs of Argentina's chronic political crisis.

Martínez's book is a *novela real* (or what the author describes as a novel in which everything is true) but otherwise has little in common with Bonasso's work. *La novela de Perón* (1985) is a complex literary artifact that shares an unmistakable *air de famille* with works inspired by magic realism but successfully integrates an even richer multiplicity of literary approaches than most of these works. All these approaches are

needed to weave three distinct narrative threads from very different contexts, all three converging into an impressionistic, but exhaustive, reconstruction of a key day in the history of Buenos Aires. On 20 June 1973 at the Ezeiza airport, where the largest multitude in Argentine history had gathered to greet Perón on his return from exile, all the contradictions in his political movement finally ignited in a murderous battle royal between its champions of the right and the left.

It would seem at first that the most significant shift in the novel displaces emphasis from the years of military terror to the preceding era dominated by the agony of Perón and "historic Peronism" (the movement he structured as a collective extension of his own personality) and by the murderous rivalries emerging among the impatient heirs. This interpretation is implicitly validated by the complex narrative structure that Martínez builds around the Ezeiza episode and by his making Perón, his Madrid entourage, and the left-Peronist insurrectionary wing the protagonists of three parallel actions that finally converge on that fateful day. But, as his readers slowly discover, the view implicit in the structure of the novel is not entirely consistent with the novelist's perspective.

This unresolved contradiction does not affect Martínez's rendering of the first context in a biography of Perón that selectively explores his early years in search of keys to the public personality that he went on to develop. Nor does it mar Martínez's brilliant description of his court in exile in Madrid (a virtuoso performance that compares favorably with the collective portrait of the court of Isabella II in Valle Inclán's *Ruedo ibérico*).

The divergence influences instead Martínez's presentation of his third context, a moving collective portrait of the Montoneros as doomed apprentices of revolution. This characterization is obviously based on the notion that their failure had nothing mysterious about it, that it was brought on by the same qualities that made them so engaging—their callow arrogance, their charming adolescent foolishness, which offered momentary relief from the relentlessly sordid intrigues spun around the dying Perón. The youthful guerrillas who fleetingly introduce into *La novela de Perón* the purer atmosphere of an idyll that was to end in tragedy cannot also provide one of the foci for Martínez's account of Argentina's journey toward catastrophe. The book's tripartite narrative structure hides a view of Argentina's catastrophic course that relies on two, not three, explanatory foci. One is provided by the pretenders around the dying Perón, all equally tainted by corruption and madness, the other by Perón himself.

This second focus emerges from Perón's past. For an alarming moment, Martínez appears to have taken psychoanalysis as his guide: he assures his readers that when a preadolescent Perón discovered his

mother in a telling embrace with a young day laborer on his father's farm, the personality of the future leader was born. According to this interpretation, the episode rendered Perón unable to experience any real feelings and hence exceedingly adept at mimicking all emotions.

But Martínez is not satisfied for long with this too-convenient master key and seeks better ones beyond Perón's idiosyncratic family circle. Ultimately, he finds them in an earlier era in the Argentine past, in which Perón reached adulthood and started a not particularly brilliant military career. For that purpose, Martínez projects Perón's early life against an admirably detailed map of the *terra incognita* that falls between the past covered by historians and the more recent era that can still be reached by memory. In Martínez's felicitous resurrection of the forgotten Argentina of the early twentieth century, every detail rings true, and Martínez's underlying intuition discovers in the course of Perón's life the signs of a continuity between past and present requiring careful exploration to elucidate the decisive clues of Argentina's precipitous journey toward catastrophe. Martínez's unearthing of these signs and clues is what makes *La novela de Perón* so relevant to the issues posed by the more recent past.

What Martínez's biography illuminates is that the Perón who presided over the destruction of the Argentina built by Mitre, Sarmiento, and Roca was more literally their heir than the fictive heroes of Piglia and Viñas. Indeed, in the Colegio Militar founded by Sarmiento and in the national army reformed by General Pablo Ricchieri with the inspired support of General-President Roca, Perón discovered his real family. These institutions provided the firm supporting structures that neither his mother nor his father (whose constant flight from the norms of a respectable family and an emerging society removed his wife and children to the most savage corner of Patagonia) had ever known how to provide.

By using Perón as the link between the Argentine past and present, *La novela de Perón* succeeds where many scholarly studies have failed. It draws a map of Argentine contemporary history in which Peronism has finally found its proper place—not as an aberration, not as a new beginning, but as yet another thread in the complex web of continuity and change in which even the recent catastrophe will finally find its place.

While Martínez reveals by indirection and allusion the continuing relevance of the brilliant era when modern Argentina was created, Corradi prefers to stress its unavoidable counterpart—the continuous effort to escape the grip of the perhaps overly rigid socioeconomic structure inherited from this past, an effort that only deepened the stalemated crisis in which Argentina lived for half a century. In Corradi's view, the country's descent into hell follows the same spiral route



traced by Dante in exploring the lower regions. This insight has been already exploited to brilliant effect by Guillermo O'Donnell in discussing the political system (O'Donnell 1977) and more routinely by several analysts of Argentine inflation. But *The Fitful Republic* (1985) goes beyond achieving a composite image of sectoral studies by offering a highly original description of experiencing all these processes as so many dimensions of a single background process against which every Argentine must negotiate his or her own life.

This remarkable achievement has been made possible by Corradi's placing himself both inside and outside the magic circle of the recent Argentine experience. He says, "Argentina, which has not been my home for many years, is no longer my country, by choice" (Corradi 1985, xiii). This circumstance protects him from succumbing to the temptations of self-pity and self-incrimination that many Argentines find hard to resist and also from sharing the popular notion that the recent course of Argentine history constitutes a cruel joke of fate on a country predestined by Providence for bigger and better things. Yet Corradi's relation to Argentina remains much deeper than even the most sympathetic "participant observer" could achieve. This combination of estrangement and intimacy allows him to create an exceptionally subtle and textured portrait of a country in crisis without ever losing sight of the link between that crisis and the national experience to which it provides a disappointing (and finally terrifying) anticlimax and a wholly logical continuation.

Martínez and Corradi may have provided a first glimpse of what Argentine history will look like when seen from the other side of the recent horrors. While it is clear that these horrors have changed the shape of that history forever, it is less clear whether the new Argentine history will have much to say about the horrors themselves. While these barbarities are an effective reminder of the cruel underside to Argentine history that sometimes surfaces with terrifying consequences, it is difficult to infer more precise insights from the sudden revelation of the potential for savagery that exists in Argentina (and almost everywhere else, as sad experience has proven). But this conclusion should be neither surprising nor disappointing. The notion that the illuminating potential of any historical episode is proportional to its terribleness assumes that history is structured like good melodrama, which does not seem to be the case.

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