

CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINE FICTION: Liberal (Pre-)Texts in a Reign of Terror

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- INTENSIÓN DE BUENOS AIRES.* By ABELARDO ARIAS. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1974. Pp. 243.)
- AQUÍ, FRONTERAS.* By ABELARDO ARIAS. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1976. Pp. 372.)
- EL GRAN COBARDE.* By ABELARDO ARIAS. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1975. Pp. 179.)
- EL LIBRO DE LOS CASOS.* By ANGEL BONOMINI. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1975. Pp. 107.)
- LOS CUARTOS OSCUROS.* By CARLOS GOROSTIZA. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1976. Pp. 260.)
- LLAMADO AL PUF.* By REINA ROFFÉ. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pleamar, 1972. Pp. 142.)

Argentine cultural expression in the 1970s has been altered time and again by the prerogatives of military rule. In a country where murder and abductions are commonplace, both censorship, as deletion of information, and torture, as its extraction and recreation, circumscribe all artistic production, conditioning the writer to encode his messages in the denser layers of the text. The more transparent books, those whose ideological fibers too sharply rebuke the Argentine "way of life," are swiftly withdrawn from circulation; their authors frequently detained or forced into exile. Prohibited texts include everything from pulp fiction and comic strips to literary journals such as *Crisis* and *Los Libros*. Seventy-three publications were sanctioned during the second half of 1978 and, in December of that year, even the prestigious Sociedad Argentina de Escritores denounced the secret decisions of government authorities who control Argentina's cultural future. *Clarín* reported in March 1979 that book sales dropped 50 percent during the last four years. While fifty-five million volumes were sold in Argentina in 1974, barely twenty-two million were printed in that country by 1977. This drastic decline in production and sales responds not only to government intervention, but also to the material realities of everyday life in Argentina, identifiable in the fall of real salaries and the soaring costs of pub-

lication. Indeed, at six to eight dollars per volume, the literary text has become a luxury item for a privileged minority.

Amidst this cultural debacle, those authors survive who successfully maneuver their texts into the neutral, safer harbors of the literary market. Some pretend to sever the networks between the book and its history, positioning discourse in a closed circuit of self-referential signs. This idealist, utopian vision makes the book a marginal plaything, devoid of social accountability; its limited status as a political voice ensures the virtual freedom of its author. Another text, commonly promoted in the supplements of the Buenos Aires dailies, sabotages history by punctuating seemingly neutral discourse with minor political infractions. Thus, profanities, sexual perversion, and games of cops and robbers dot the pages of this modern narrative, pretending to make a reckless incursion into the universe of official discourse. The novels of Sábato (*Abaddón, el exterminador*), Enrique Medina (*Las tumbas*), or Rubén Tizziani (*Los borrachos en el cementerio*) come to mind as examples of the "scandalous" books of this decade, designed to seduce reader attention with scenes of blood and violence or simply with a slender allusion to Che Guevara or clandestinity. This kind of writing survives because its feeble protests are topical, localized on the surface of discourse in a few disputatious images or phrases. It engrosses the general readership with a garish audacity that, in the final analysis, sharply belies the author's underlying ideological suppositions. Even popular genre classifications, promoted by reputable publishing firms and established literary critics, falsely condition the reader to expect denunciatory texts. As popular rubrics of the 1970s, the "feminist" novel, the detective story, or the neo-naturalist urban saga exploit reader anxiety with their seemingly dangerous propositions. In reality, these normative categories mystify trivial excursions and advance the liberal text as official evidence of freedom. Hence, feminist fiction, classless and univocal, pretends to denounce the ills of patriarchy; the detective novel pretends to trace the strategies of paramilitary hit squads; the neo-naturalist novel fakes a historical commentary as its gothic heroes stray from rational social order. These fictions and critical explorations dissimulate the broader problems of totalitarian rule; they institutionalize minor dissent and, ultimately, they endorse and conform to official ideology. At the same time, this system sanctifies the liberal writer and ensures his privileged domain, free from the authority of censors. This writer survives, in the long run, because he poses no threat; under a plurality of signifiers, he echoes the non-conflictive aspirations of a socially safe and homogeneous class.

The six books considered here for review form part of that "accepted" discourse that has passed the check-point of censors. Published between 1972 and 1976 (Lanusse to Videla), these volumes range from

officialist prescriptions for behavior (Abelardo Arias) to self-conscious jokes about the nature of writing (Angel Bonomini). What intrigues us in these fictions is their survival potential and the way in which these writers confront (or avoid) the problems of this age.

Abelardo Arias (1918) is a familiar name on the Argentine best-seller charts. Since his first novel appeared in 1942, Arias has produced a steady stream of travelogues, translations, and popular fictions. The three books reviewed here—*Intensión de Buenos Aires*, *Aquí, fronteras*, and *El gran cobarde*—provide an adequate sampling of the writer's literary canon and also serve as paradigms for the official Argentine text. Arias' narratives advance on a string of timeless clichés; the spiritual odyssey of the madman, the conquest of the frontier, or the splendors of the urban maze form the story stuff of these texts. Their structure tacitly endorses the present order; rebellion is limited to a gesture, protest is but a whisper. These books tell us that life in Argentina is contradiction-free; any aberrant behavior derives from individual madness. These books are interesting for what they omit and for the writer's grotesque distortion of contemporary Argentine life.

Intensión de Buenos Aires, as a travelogue, clearly positions the writer as an apologist for his class. Arias embarks on a whirlwind tour of the capital; through Rivadavia, Alvear, and Santa Fe Avenues, he sketches a cosmopolitan and glamorous city, marked by its theaters, clubs, and colonial monuments. The residents of the fashionable *barrio norte* glide on the surface of the text to demonstrate to the reader the joys of conspicuous consumption. The first line of the narrative establishes the romanticized perspective of the writer: "Para descubrir lo esencial de ciudades, de personas y cosas, es necesario perspectiva y nostalgia." Arias stabilizes through nostalgia the fantasy of what once was, situating the reader before a garden of earthly delights. What commands our greater interest are the omissions from this landscape. In this narrative, Arias manages to avoid the human factor completely: no one acts (save legendary figures), no one works, no one is unemployed. And in a country where the monthly inflation rate surpassed 12 per cent in 1978 and 1979, Arias dismisses economics to focus on unrelieved elegance. Names, numbers, and dates are invoked to reconstitute Argentine history in what resembles, at times, almanac form. He tells us, for example, that Rivadavia is the longest avenue in the world but somehow ignores the working class neighborhoods that surround it; he describes the architectonic harmony of the presidential palace but forgets the brutal practices of its inhabitants. Abelardo Arias reconstructs history through a graceful and romantic screen; *Intensión de Buenos Aires* is called a travelogue but could also be sold as fiction.

In *Aquí, fronteras*, Arias revives another nationalist cliché when he

describes the confrontation of civilization and barbarism. Situating the narrative in Misiones, the writer convokes the pioneering spirit of the modern colonizers of the interior. A cast of larger-than-life characters populates this formulaic fiction: the rural schoolteacher who brings truth and reason to the jungle; his receptive student, herald of the new age; the silent and faithful women, beholden to their men; the treasure hunters from the city, determined to conquer the wilderness. Arias leaves nothing to the imagination: these paradigmatic figures are designed as models for behavior; and, not coincidentally, they echo the moral prescriptions of the Videla regime. Parallel tales order the narrative structure: while the first part of the novel describes the valiant commitment of the teacher to his wards, the second section traces the final hours of the lone survivor of a plane crash, abandoned in the interior. Manichean forces govern these separate but converging Robinsonian adventures in which Arias advances the values of individual (male) courage and determination against a hostile world. Looming over these well-worn prescriptions for action, the banner of nationalism rises; Indians, immigrants, and *criollos* wander through this novel, periodically summoning the spirit of Sarmiento to proclaim their allegiance to Argentina. Arias' text is monovalent in its faithful reproduction of official discourse. Far from the so-called "open text," which invites reader participation, this novel leaves no unanswered questions. Arias positions his readers as passive spectators of heroism; we are only asked to assent to the ethical standards proposed.

In contrast to the valorous models that he deployed in *Aquí, fronteras*, Arias explores man's fall from grace and teaches by negative example in *El gran cobarde*. The writer traces the grotesque behavior of an alienated, duty-bound clerk driven mad by diabolical passion and obscure desire. Horacio, an attendant in a book depository, renounces human contact to trade in objects and texts. The volumes under his custody take on special significance as they mediate the protagonist and the hostile, outer world. Horacio defers to the authority of print culture in order to shape his life: book titles, bibliographies, or even police "wanted" posters guide the hero's fantasies although, in reality, they provide no clear course for any reasonable action. Arias connects this asocial behavior to Horacio's repressed sexual anxiety and to the hero's long-standing contempt for women. This facile psychologizing plus a series of unconnected calamities isolate the hero in a closed, solipsistic universe. Abundant episodes of crime and sexual perversion not only create a mass market appeal for Arias' text, but also lock the hero in a socially aberrant space. Horacio recalls Ernesto Sabato's darker heroes as he maps out a pyromaniacal fantasy in which he destroys all sources of information: "El pequeño y desconocido artesano de biblioteca, unido

a sus congéneres, podían hacer desaparecer libros y fichas y variar la forma de pensar de una generación, acaso del hombre" (p. 41). This mode of controlling knowledge obsesses Horacio throughout the narrative until, finally, he takes his life by setting fire to the library. Horacio's death ensures, in the end, a purification of society; by eliminating the madman, order is regained. This novel was originally published in 1956, in the aftermath of the first Peronist period. It is not, therefore, mere coincidence that Sudamericana should reissue it in February 1975, in the twilight hours of Isabel's government. Just as Horacio's marginalized existence is tied in a demonic and self-consuming knot, the text, too, suggests a univocal and closed solution. Horacio, as both victim and aggressor, works as a metaphoric displacement for the larger fears of Argentina, allowing us to believe that any irrational social behavior can be cured by simple excision. By focusing on individual insanity, *El gran cobarde* mystifies historical process, denying material realities and the force of collective action.

Arias proposes a monovalent discourse with singular prescriptions for behavior. By contrast, Carlos Gorostiza (1920), in *Los cuartos oscuros*, moves from his customary theatrical mode to a dialogic novel that leads us—and his protagonist—in circles around the central problematics of the day. The novel refers to the major political upheavals of the last twenty-five years of Argentine history, from Perón to Onganía. Gorostiza takes advantage of the frightful and dramatic violence that has characterized Argentine life, using it as a backdrop for the less intriguing adventures of an itinerant, free-lance photographer. Contrapuntal voices give the text its shape: a traditional omniscient narrator alternates with the hero's personal notebooks to form a composite reading. These double texts emphasize the contradictions of the hero who is caught between public turmoil and a comfortable, private life. *Los cuartos oscuros*, explained by the narrator as a metaphor for human memory, deals with the reordering of experience through print, speech, and art. The protagonist of this novel is carefully concerned with the inscription of observable reality in his notebooks and camera lens. Recalling to some degree the strategies of Cortázar's fiction, the novel conflates a series of impressions and corrections of experience while the hero debates the antinomies that separate reality and art.

The novel, told from the hero's position in the mid-1970s, begins with the abortive coup staged against Perón in June 1955. At that time, Valentín, a casual passerby in Buenos Aires, is arrested and detained along with militant activists. Although some political prisoners regard him with condescension, the hero is not uneasy in his Villa Devoto cell; in fact, prison permits a utopian space for friendships, reflection, and writing (a situation that inevitably recalls Manuel Puig's *El beso de la*

mujer araña). Valentín's release from jail, his romantic encounters with Ana and Lina, and the crisis within his family fill the subsequent narrative sequences of *Los cuartos oscuros*. Characters organize their lives around centers of familiar authority: just as the members of Cortázar's Club de la Serpiente or La Joda (in *Rayuela* or *Libro de Manuel*) conspire to make their "revolutions" through intellectual discussion and play, the protagonists of *Los cuartos oscuros*, relatives or chums of Valentín, take advantage of political events in order to promote their own domestic games. The group, then, insulates its members in a sacred zone which conveniently absorbs history to suit the discursive needs of characters. Police attacks, bombings, and Sherman tanks in the Plaza de Mayo serve as dramatic pretexts for liberal discussions about art and love. Liberty, for example, is positioned as a variable, semantic question when Valentín likens his monotonous job in a grain company to the long days of detention in Villa Devoto. Incongruous juxtapositions of this kind flirt with the horrors of everyday life while they exploit contemporary history in an unproductive way. Gorostiza glosses over the tragic events of his time, taking advantage of political drama to punctuate intellectual discussion.

In her first novel, *Llamado al Puf*, Reina Roffé (1951) withdraws her characters from history by isolating them in the safety of a private, illusory past. Obviating prescriptive discourse, Roffé turns to the comfort of nostalgia as a meager compensation for the present. She suggests this mode through Celia, the adolescent protagonist, who returns to the site of her childhood home and generates all narrative events through memory. Much like Alice when she falls through the rabbit hole, Celia enters Wonderland. Nostalgia transports the adolescent backward in time where she reconvenes the family as the dominant structure of her life. Celia's felicitous and slapstick household exists as if outside of history, enclosed in a web of dream stuff woven by the heroine. Roffé, a witty and graceful writer, shapes with outrageous humor the foibles of the middle class Argentines who live in Celia's home. These delightful inhabitants, who immediately remind us of Gudiño Kieffer's more successful figures, are identified by Roffé with epithets that freeze them in time: thus, "Doña No Pincha Ni Corta," who peevishly bewails all domestic calamities; "La Dueña del Piano," a clumsy spinster who runs a Music Conservatory in the family dining room; "La Viejita," who hysterically nurtures her incompetent, thirty-year-old offspring. Roffé uses these characters to constitute centers of authority in the novel; in their absurd behavior, they permit the heroine momentary solace from the more sobering realities of the present. But Roffé, hardly a naive idealist, quickly exposes the illusive structure of her dreamhouse: even the novel's title suggests that instability. Time forces the characters out of para-

dise, so that they tarnish from exposure to the nonfamilial world. "El Idolo," for example, is described as Celia's model; as a young intellectual, he speaks for the oppressed and traffics clandestine newspapers through the family abode. But an older "Idolo" leaves home and becomes a professional conformist, wryly stuffed by the narrator in an unglamorous business suit. By ironizing all idealism, Roffé denies any fruitful alternatives to nostalgia; her narrative turns to the past in order to deal with the present.

Angel Bonomini (1927) also withdraws from current events to parody the structures of rational discourse. In *El libro de los casos*, narrative is inscribed in a tautological circuit where mirrors, doubles, and self-referential jokes on writing break all ties to external reality. Dedicated to H. A. Murena, *El libro de los casos* consists of twenty-eight epigrammatic fictions and two additional "ceremonial cases." These stories illustrate Bonomini's skill as an excellent and careful writer, fully aware of the playful possibilities of language and fantasy. Perhaps because of his long experience as a poet (his first book dates from 1947), Bonomini sets up a series of lyrical emblems that defy logical translation to any recognizable code of experience. The labyrinths and corridors of this closed Borgesian-like sphere emphasize writing as an autonomous, self-generating process. Bonomini intentionally deflects a reading within history; he encourages us, instead, to look at an assortment of fantasized alternatives for epistemological questions. These stories center on ways of knowing and use paradox, farce, and the inversion of spatio-temporal sequence to sabotage philosophical order. Most of the narratives are character centered. Bonomini positions his protagonists before uncommonly absurd tasks and forces them to choose between a series of irrational or trivialized propositions. In that way, the writer pokes fun at the strategies of Western thought, pointing out the farce of all logocentric systems. Paradoxically, this fantasy mode thrives in totalitarian Argentine society, as if its nonreferential substance were devoid of social criticism.

Taken as a whole, these six texts provide valuable testimony about the liberal Argentine writer in this decade and point to possible literary freedoms within repressive military regimes. As surviving texts that enjoy a popular following, they invite us to reconsider those utopian alternatives that fiction can or cannot provide. Finally, they show us hierarchies of ideological encoding that insulate discourse from censure in order to continue the dialogue between writer and general reader.