guest column

Afterword: The Buenos Aires Affair

SYLVIA MOLLOY

WHEN I WROTE MY FIRST NOVEL, *EN BREVE CÁRCEL*, I WAS DETERMINED TO ERASE REFERENCES TO SPACE AND HAVE ALL ACTION (IF THAT is the apposite word) occur in a place devoid of particular markings, as close to abstraction as I could possibly make it. This rather pretentious gesture was destined to thwart any recognition by the reader, rendering the city—or, in this case, the cities—unrecognizable and therefore a little (but not excessively) uncanny. Then, toward the end of the novel, with an equally pretentious gesture, I identified those cities and arbitrarily revealed their names. One of those cities was Paris, where I had lived for many years, the second was Buffalo, where I had lived briefly, and the third city was Buenos Aires, where I was born and spent the first thirty-odd years of my life. Looking back, I think my desire to mask all three cities may have been less frivolous than it would appear. I suspect that I didn't want to identify Paris because it was too obvious as a place of exile, especially for a Latin American. Buffalo I preferred to avoid because, although I had spent some time there, it felt very much to me like Alfred Jarry's Poland—*c'est à dire nulle part*. Buenos Aires, I'm guessing now, was masked for reasons more complex: mainly, I think, because the city, which for a long time had been for me a more or less familiar and stationary construct, made out of manageable and no doubt embellished memories, was becoming more and more disquieting with every trip I took there. Political repression makes short shrift of auratic illusion. It is difficult to recognize a city, or what you remember of that city, when you see soldiers with machine guns on every corner.

En breve cárcel ends with the protagonist waiting in an airport, clutching a manuscript, about to take off for an unknown destination. My second novel, *El común olvido*, begins with the protagonist (not the same one) arriving in another airport, clutching a bag containing an urn with his mother's ashes, which, in accordance with her last wishes, he is bringing back to scatter in the Río de la Plata. The city, this time, is identified: it's Buenos Aires in the mid-1980s. It

SYLVIA MOLLOY, Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at New York University, is working on a book on homecoming narratives and writing another novel.

© 2007 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.1.352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was time to come home, for my character and for me, even if we both knew that you only call home that which you leave behind.

For many years, when teaching Latin American literature, I played with the idea of devising a course on Buenos Aires, a phantasmatic Buenos Aires made out of literary references and quotations. I would probably begin in mid–nineteenth century with Sarmiento, I told myself, Sarmiento who, in his remote province of San Juan, dreamed of Buenos Aires as the beacon of civilization that would save Argentina from unruly and untutored barbarism and yet had never set foot in the city. Indeed, the first time Sarmiento even laid eyes on Buenos Aires was from a distance, from a ship anchored briefly in the Río de la Plata on its way to Europe. This champion of Buenos Aires would get to know Rio de Janeiro, Paris, Madrid, and Rome years before he was to go to Buenos Aires and make the city his own. After Sarmiento, I would continue composing this imaginary Buenos Aires, built largely out of desire, by quoting Lucio Mansilla, who in the 1880s, on the eve of massive immigration and enormous urban renewal, wrote a moving memoir evoking a city on the brink of drastic change, a comfortable "big village" that still held to its colonial habits while turning into a cosmopolis. After Mansilla, I would go to Borges, whose initial literary gesture was the defiant re-creation of an uncanny, marginal Buenos Aires, then perhaps to Alfonsina Storni's memorable cityscapes, and on to Adolfo Bioy Casares's melancholy walks through the working-class barrios in *El sueño de los héroes*, to Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, caught between Paris and Buenos Aires, to Ricardo Piglia's ghostly *La ciudad ausente*, and perhaps to Manuel Puig, whose title I have borrowed for this piece. I never completed that project, but enough of these bits and pieces of texts have stuck in my mind so that when I think of the city I often imagine it as a topography of quotations. I have turned Buenos Aires into a reservoir of literary invention. In a sense, I could say of the city what Calvino says of Paris: "it is a giant reference work, a city which you can consult like an encyclopaedia" (171–72).

When I go back to Buenos Aires—and I do so every year, if I can—I try not to show that I don't live there. And yet, however hard I try, I am found out. I manifest surprise when I should appear blasé. I notice street performers at an intersection, some of them children, doing a balancing act while cars wait for the traffic light to change. I say the wrong thing. "What a dangerous performance," I remark, as they run up to cars asking for money. "They make a fortune, señora. Don't feel sorry for them," says my taxi driver unsympathetically. "And they're all Serbian, anyway," he adds enigmatically. "But then you're not from here, are you?" Voilà: I've been found out. Like the putative Serbians, I am the subject of his xenophobic scorn. *I don't understand what it's really all about anymore.*

It's not that I don't know how to get places or that I've forgotten the names of streets. They're indelibly engraved in my mind, although no longer as lived knowledge: they're now part of an archive, where I go when I need them. At a distance, I endow them with a kind of talismanic power. I take comfort in enumerating them for myself. And more than once, when having trouble falling asleep, I have found reciting Buenos Aires street names a good way to lull myself into forgetting whatever was keeping me awake: Charcas, Paraguay, Córdoba, Viamonte, Tucumán. What I have definitely lost, however, are my street smarts, and those, I fear, I will never quite regain. Despite my desire, I do not pass.

When Marcel Duchamp visited Buenos Aires in 1918, he was quick to declare that Buenos Aires "n'existe pas." Eleven years later, Le Corbusier arrived in Buenos Aires and, even before landing, drew up a series of proposals to transform the city. The plans included a major relocation of the business district to the southern edge, facing the Río

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.1.352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

guest column

de la Plata. Buenos Aires, he claimed (not without reason), made poor use of its river, even turned its back on it. Le Corbusier's ideas were never truly implemented, yet the bit about the river somehow stuck. The most ambitious new development of Buenos Aires in the 1990s, Puerto Madero, has been the rebuilding and gentrification of the decaying harbor area south of the old downtown, squarely on the river. Puerto Madero is not the "Cité d'Affaires" Le Corbusier envisioned, however, but, as one tourist guide puts it, a "modern hotspot." A developer's dream, nurtured by multinational financial interests, it is a district of luxury hotels, restaurants, and discos favored by tourists and business travelers and mostly unaffordable to locals. A notable feature of Puerto Madero is that its streets are all named after women: a well-meaning gesture, intended as a tribute to feminism, it seems oddly inapt. The women honored are mostly twentieth-century activists committed to education, social justice, political reform, and human rights: they seem strangely out of place in the consumer-oriented glitter of Puerto Madero, but then few of the habitués of this neighborhood, most of them foreign, even know who they are. In this simulacrum of a barrio, enhanced by such names as Pelli, Calatrava, and Starck, the attempt at urban commemoration goes largely unheeded or at best allows for an ironic frisson, as when you see the sign with the name of Alicia Moreau de Justo, one of the founders of the Centro Socialista Feminista in 1902, gracing the same street as the oxymoronic neons of the Pizza Banana restaurant, with their promise of exotic pseudo-Caribbean dining.

The Puerto Madero enclave backs onto the Río de la Plata, as I mentioned, and onto a large expanse of green somewhat grandiosely called the Reserva Ecológica (Ecological Preserve), destined to preserve plants and wildlife. Called a *parque natural*, it is anything but, and, as so often in Buenos Aires, it is the product of chance encounters and local canniness. Initially conceived as a landfill project (and a way of dealing with debris from surrounding demolition) in preparation for a huge sports complex and residential accommodations, it was abandoned before any ecologically sound decisions were made. Protruding into the river, the landfill soon started trapping silt, together with seeds, plants, and animal life brought down to the Río de la Plata by its two confluents, the Paraná and the Uruguay, from as far north as Misiones, on the frontier with Paraguay and Brazil. These bits and pieces of life thrived in their new surroundings, and the preserve became a repository for migrant forms of life, not unlike Buenos Aires itself. The acclimated guests, now claimed as natural to the area, were officially declared "protected species" with more fanfare than real effort, and only the eye of the specialist (or perhaps that of an attentive outsider) can distinguish a native bird, plant, or lizard from those that came from elsewhere. Puerto Madero may provide temporary respite for the transient, but the flotsam and jetsam that hit the Reserva are there to stay.

Buenos Aires was and continues to be a city of immigrants, much like New York City. But patterns of immigration have changed. The nineteenth century saw the arrival of immigrants from Europe. My grandparents arrived that way, my father's parents from Ireland, my mother's from France. Like most new arrivals, my father's family settled in the southern section of the city, in an immigrant, mainly Irish neighborhood that had once been genteel—not too far, in fact, from the now gentrified Puerto Madero. Once the fashionable side of the city, the Barrio Sur had gradually been abandoned by the well-to-do after the cholera and yellow fever epidemics of the 1870s made it clear that the area was insalubrious. The elites moved north, to higher ground, and the immigrants moved in. My father remembered the old couple who lived next to them, remembered how the man would come home late, in his cups, and knock on their

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.1.352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

door instead of his own, remembered how the man's wife would come out and, standing on the stoop, would threaten, "Dada, the sorjers are comin'!" whereupon the man would hotfoot it to his own house and run inside.

Again like New York, Buenos Aires today is made up of a more complex mix. There are few European immigrants—the movement goes in the opposite direction these days—and, as in many Latin American capitals, there are long lines before European consulates. These are the grandchildren of immigrants, seeking to reclaim the nationality of their forebears so they can try their luck in Europe. Besides, as popular wisdom has it, it's always good to have a second passport. For years, many of my friends waited impatiently for Poland to join the European Union so they could claim EU citizenship through grandparents or parents who had fled Poland because they were Jews. As soon as Poland became part of the union, my friends got their Polish passports. With typical *porteño* insight, they appreciated the irony of the situation, its subtle poetic justice.

If *porteños* have been leaving Buenos Aires since the 1970s, first for political reasons, then for economic ones, and sometimes for the two reasons combined, new arrivals have appeared on the scene. There has always been migration within the borders of Argentina. Poor indigenous workers from the provinces descended in droves to the big city beginning with Perón's first presidency, giving the lie once and for all to the myth that Argentina is a white European country and Buenos Aires a mainly European city. While this myth has not disappeared, it is now complicated by a new immigration, this time from neighboring countries. Buenos Aires has a sizable population of Bolivian and Paraguayan immigrants who, much like the European immigrants of the turn of the twentieth century, are unskilled, sometimes undocumented, do the most menial jobs, and are a general subject of scorn, as Adrián Caetano shows in his devastatingly lucid film *Bolivia*. When Argentina suffered its economic collapse at the end of 2001, city streets had more than their usual share of panhandlers. "They're all Bolivians" and "They're all Paraguayans" were phrases I heard often from shopkeepers, taxi drivers, and, yes, some members of my own family. When I protested, I was routinely met with the familiar comment "You don't live in this city"—a phrase that was routinely applied to whatever observation of mine went against the consensus.

This is a hard phrase to hear, one that forecloses discussion instead of encouraging it, leaving me with my "But even if I did live here . . ." stuck in my throat. Those are the truly uncanny moments, in which my alien status is made so clear to me that I am indeed convinced: I have lost my right of place. At the same time, that rootlessness allows me, I think, to see the city and to dwell on details that those who are of the city take for granted. This became apparent to me during the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s, when my trips to Buenos Aires were peppered with surprises at things people there had learned to accept or, for reasons of survival, to disregard. State terror had led to a naturalization of violence that shocked the alien that I was. One night I was stopped by armed policemen who asked me what I was doing, scolded me for being out so late, *una mujer sola*, and demanded to see my identity card. Thoughtlessly, I had left it behind in my mother's apartment. It took a while—a frighteningly long while—to straighten things out. When, still in shock, I told my friends about this the following day, they were barely sympathetic. "Who would think of leaving the house without an identity card?" was all I got back.

This incident happened nearly thirty years ago, yet it is still in my mind, is still happening again and again in my mind despite the fact that Buenos Aires is no longer captive to state terrorism and I am unlikely to be detained by the police. But perhaps the most

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.1.352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

guest column

salient recollections I have of Buenos Aires date from a few years later, just at the end of the dictatorship. Two things stand out in my memory marking that "new" Buenos Aires, the one to which I now return with increasing frequency. One was the absence of young soldiers with machine guns at the airport. The other—I remember this clearly, staring out the taxi window on my way in from the airport—was the walls of the city, literally papered with silhouettes. Every available surface, or so it seemed, was covered with black outlines of human forms on thick white paper, marked with persons' names and the dates of their disappearance. The visual impact of these paper ghosts was enormous—I couldn't stop talking about it, couldn't help looking at them up close, checking names and dates, afraid I might happen on a name I knew. People in Buenos Aires seemed less traumatized by this display than I was. For them it had been an everyday experience; for me it was a blatant reminder of what I had been spared.

Although I never taught the course on a phantasmatic Buenos Aires made up of literary allusion and borrowed quotations, the project continued to haunt me. When I started to write *El común olvido*, the idea visited me once again, and I allowed it to enter my fiction. I wanted to recover Buenos Aires through the words of others, to recycle fragments, bits of text others had written or had said, words not necessarily prestigious or even memorable but that for some reason had once caught my fancy. I wanted to recover stories and above all voices, things people had said and the tone they had used in the telling, the chatter of a city where I had been born and had lived at different periods of my life crowding my memory. This reconstruction—a kind of archaeology of twice-told tales—did not stem from nostalgia. I didn't feel that I was summoning a world forever lost; instead, I was having fun. It was pleasure to rewrite and retell stories that spoke of a city I loved, an homage of sorts.

When people ask if I would return to live in Buenos Aires, I always hesitate before answering, never answer quite the same, and sometimes do not answer at all. In the weeks following 9/11, I often thought of Buenos Aires, dreamed of the city night after night. These dreams (or memories—I can no longer tell which is which) were of a distant past, when I still had no inkling that I would not spend the rest of my life in Buenos Aires; dreams (or memories) of voices, old expressions, disconnected images, most of them happy, despite the constant noise of the helicopters circling New York, which also, inevitably, brought back other memories of Buenos Aires, less distant and not so reassuring. After 9/11 it was as if the weather stood still in New York, the city suspended in a mild, sunny, timeless fall. We never had a winter that year. I think this contributed greatly to my disorientation, for I started to feel that I was—physically was—in Buenos Aires. The weather felt like Buenos Aires: spring in September and October, and summer at the end of the year, bringing Christmas and the smell of freesias and gardenias. Even the dog barking in the building behind ours in Manhattan sounded like the dog that barked in the neighbor's garden, asking to be let in, when I was a child. Trauma makes you want to go home, to whatever home you fabricate for the occasion, and my fabrication then happened to be Buenos Aires, a Buenos Aires that won't leave me. It's a way of going back.

Work Cited

Calvino, Italo. *Hermit in Paris: Autobiographical Writings*. Trans. Martin McLaughlin. New York: Pantheon, 2003.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.1.352 Published online by Cambridge University Press