

ARGENTINE LETTERS: THE QUESTION OF SURVIVAL

- AUTOBIOGRAFÍA DE IRENE*. By SILVINA OCAMPO. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1975. Pp. 120)
- PUEBLOAMÉRICA*. By MARÍA ESTER DE MIGUEL. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pleamar, 1974. Pp. 199)
- SERÁ JUSTICIA*. By SILVINA BULLRICH. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1976. Pp. 159)
- LOS PASOS PREVIOS*. By FRANCISCO URONDO. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1974. Pp. 398).
- LOS DEDOS DE LA MANO*. By MARTA LYNCH. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1976. Pp. 235)

A study of contemporary Argentine writing must take into account contemporary Argentine life—and contemporary life in Argentina at best is uncertain, at worst is a chilling and macabre composition of kidnapping, torture, and assassination. Although it is sagely advised not to concentrate on social, historical, and economic factors when undertaking an analysis of literature, there is absolutely no way to ignore the dramatic political environment prevailing in Argentina today. Moreover, there is no possible way of ignoring the real and continuing issue of *peronismo* as a politically valid tenet of Argentine life. Peronismo goes far beyond a political interpretation or justification. Peronismo, rather than Perón, is the substance, the nucleus, and the confrontation with which Argentina faces limitless divisions, fragmentations, separations, and disintegrations. There is no single peronismo, there is no easily decipherable Peronist dogma—even Perón, in his return from exile in 1973, confronted interior conflicts and struggles that had absolutely no relationship to the more comprehensible world of economic protectionism, national bourgeoisie, and plausible labor reform laws developed from 1945 to 1955. In addition, the language of politics had changed. This new terminology, a dashing mixture of Third-World ideas, Trotskyism, Maoism, and political activism, had no resemblance at all to the more recognizable terminology contained in land and labor reform speeches voiced almost twenty years previously. Kidnapping and assassination had become political replacements for legislative reconstruction. Perón returned as an old man with old ideas and a vacant-eyed young wife; this was not the decisive Coronel Perón of the 1940s, nor could Isabel Perón even remotely approach the excitement and fervor of Evita. More important, Argentina had changed.

The politically astute and active young Argentine had become a militant, an urban guerrilla, and a rural guerrilla while Perón was in exile. Ché Guevara and Camilo Torres had emerged and died while Perón was in exile. Cuba and the Cuban Revolution had cut deeply into historical development while Perón was in Spain. And the Uturuncos and the Tacuara and the Montoneros and the

Front Against Imperialism and For Socialism (FAS) and the Army of National Liberation (ELN) and the Peronist Armed Forces (FAP) and the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) had organized and attacked and issued proclamations and ultimatums while Perón remained away. Distance and years comprise a significant barrier to understanding. The return of Perón to Argentina did not mean a return of the peronismo and Peronist vocabulary of the 1950s—nor did it signify the inception of political cohesiveness and stability. It's not that Perón's return was too late but, rather, that Perón was no longer the voice of unification for large segments of Argentina.¹ More specifically, Perón didn't even comprehend the language of politics that had developed during his absence. It was not the language of demagoguery common to the 1940s; it was a language of political ideologies and guerrilla movements and dispersed revolutionary organizations. Moreover, it was a language that resulted in piecemeal attacks on police and military and that brought devastating waves of repression from military and paramilitary units of the government. The language of terrorism, assassination, and destruction had become the new political tongue of Argentina; it had become the language of communication structured to permeate all sectors of life.²

In Argentina, as in other Latin American countries, the writer can seldom remain aloof from political occurrences. Involvement results in jail, exile, silence or death. Journalists are constantly imprisoned or mysteriously disappear. Writers, when fortunate, go into exile; when not fortunate, as in the case of Rodolfo Walsh, Antonio Di Benedetto, and Haroldo Conti, are arrested for "ideological reasons." Given the nature of the political chaos and the realization that the quality of life and the quality of language are absorbed and restructured by the artist, it is fundamental to see how the writer still alive and still living in Argentina purports to develop the narrative and convey the artistry of ideas.

These five novels offer a curious indication both of what is and what is not occurring in Argentine writing. First, to focus on the solid and safe: the works by Silvina Bullrich and Silvina Ocampo demonstrate that redundancy is a plausible literary device never easily discarded. *Será justicia* is a boorish love triangle-quadrangle story related in the form of a diary that stylistically and thematically belongs in a provincial tea salon of the 1940s. *Autobiografía de Irene* is a work of five short stories, all stressing a Borges-like concern for themes of repetition of time and self, where reality/irreality merge and glide painlessly and adroitly; philosophy becomes a labyrinthine subterfuge. So much for what is not happening in Argentine letters.

The other three books move, at times delicately, at times awkwardly, in vastly different directions. *Los dedos de la mano*, a collection of thirteen stories, runs the gamut of differing thematic situations—all with decisive overtones of failures in human relationships. A prevailing concern for sex and violence is apparent. Only one story, *Sentencia*, deals outrightly with the political quality of Argentina: torture, death, and vengeance. In *Los dedos de la mano*, as well as in her novels, Marta Lynch ostensibly attempts to create an uneasy amalgam of sex and politics. Generally, an almost hermaphroditic sexuality obfuscates the historic and political spectrum. An earlier novel, and possibly one of her more successful, *El cruce del río*, is much less cautious about the presentation of guerri-

lla militancy and subsequent military suppression.³ The politics of life and of not living represent a persistent if somewhat cosmetically handled concern in her writings.

María Ester de Miguel, a far less well-known author than Marta Lynch, creates an entire community to serve as a microcosm for Argentine society: a likeable group of guerrilla figures and the adjacent military repressors. All the lines and all the stances are conveniently drawn and disseminated before the novel begins. There are no questions, no changes—the clandestine organizer of guerrilla activities is short and Jewish (although quick to indicate that he is not a practicing Jew). The village priest and the local doctor become politicized and then, of course, killed in a confrontation with police, army, helicopters, and tanks. Unknowingly, *Puebloamérica* with all its imperfections, mirrors the stock characters functioning within the country. As in the Lynch work, there are no solutions, no way out, and everyone seems to be distributed his role as repressor or repressed with equanimity. The guerrillas are dedicated and doctrinaire and ultimately, without exception, are killed.

Most interesting of the novelists is Francisco Urondo. Born in 1930 and later the director of contemporary art in the Universidad del Litoral (1957) and director of culture in the province of Santa Fe (1959–60), Urondo entered journalism in the 1960s. Basically, he was a minor and conventional poet, with a muted and lackluster attempt at theater and short stories. Then, something happened and Urondo's language and style changed dramatically. His first major and decisive work was the interview and publication of the account by survivors of the Trelew massacre—the 1972 gunning down by the military of nineteen young guerrilla fighters while held in protective custody in a detention center. Three survived and Urondo recorded and presented a detailed description of the events leading to the massacre.⁴ Prior to this, the only indication of an emerging politicization in Urondo is visible in a small book of poems, *Adolecer*, where elements of future militancy became apparent:

El terreno que se gane a la libertad . . .
será un terreno anegado de sangre y virtud
de muchos prisioneros . . .⁵

Thus, from 1968, artistically, thematically, and politically, modifications are discernible in the country and in Urondo.

Los pasos previos, Urondo's only novel, was published in 1974. It is a strong and dramatic story of different members of revolutionary resistance movements. The nucleus of the story deals with the kidnapping and "disappearance" of a young labor leader, Felipe Vallese, in 1962. Any association with Vallese, any interest in the official policy of refusing to acknowledge police involvement results in abduction and often in death. The account turns into a revolutionary peregrination: Bolivia, Cuba, Paris, Algiers, back to Buenos Aires and the bombing of the Minimax supermarkets during Nelson Rockefeller's visit to Latin America in the late 1960s. The paramilitary details concerning the organizational endeavors of the guerrillas are as precise and realistic as the interview of the Trelew survivors. Despite a rather annoying recourse to literary

terminology that reappears in clumps throughout the documentary-style work, the ideological and political character of Argentina in the 60s and 70s is described and presented bluntly. Urondo uses speeches by the now exiled labor organizer, Raimundo Ongaro, as the focus of historical analysis. The political deceptions during the presidency of Juan Carlos Onganía are recorded and enumerated. The kaleidoscopic sensation of colored pieces of glass catching brittle edges of lives prevails; Vallese, Ongaro, Onganía, and Vandor all enter, rotate, and disappear. The impact of the story, rather than the style, remains. *Los pasos previos* was Francisco Urondo's last work. Urondo was in jail for "ideological motives" in 1972. In 1978, Urondo, a member of the Montoneros, was killed in a confrontation with police in Córdoba.

There are Argentine writers who remain alive and publishing and write about time and space and stylistics. The endless studies on structuralism and "the new novel" seem to have an almost parthenogenetic capacity to appear and reappear. Others, gingerly, and with a certain amount of chagrin, approach the issues of political reality/irreality in Argentina—they, too, remain alive.⁶ Some adroitly leave the country, not necessarily to continue a political or literary struggle while in exile. Some do not leave nor do they survive.

So, the ultimate question in regard to contemporary Argentine letters is not one of stylistics but, rather, of survival.

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NOTES

1. For a penetrating interpretation of recent developments in Argentina see Donald C. Hodges, *Argentina, 1943–1976* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976).
2. For further information concerning language usage in violent political atmospheres see Ariel Dorfman, *Imaginación y violencia* (Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1970), and the introduction to *Literatura y revolución* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1971) by Fernando Alegría.
3. Marta Lynch, *El cruce del río* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1972).
4. Francisco Urondo, *Patria fusilada* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Crisis, 1973).
5. Francisco Urondo, *Adolecer* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1968), p. 66.
6. *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* (New York: Avon, 1973), translated by Suzanne Jill Levine, is a 1968 novel by Manuel Puig that concentrates primarily on the dull and plodding conditions of provincial life—movies and tedium seem to balance each other perfectly and merge as a superimposed and contrived little world of realities and fantasies. A major and almost singular concern of Puig's in this work is with technical narrative problems. *Betrayed* is certainly not one of his most convincing novels, thematically or stylistically. A more recent work, *El beso de la mujer araña* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1977), also includes a cinematographic stylistic development as a background device, but this time there is a significant rupture with the theme of provincial life and aging starlets: *El beso* deals with the guerrilla movement in Buenos Aires and open homosexuality. The result is a provocative situation of clandestine and officially repressed activities—political and sexual—in Argentina. A rather poignant ineptness causes the death of the young homosexual involved quite by accident in guerrilla contacts. Like Marta Lynch, María Ester de Miguel, and Francisco Urondo, Manuel Puig demonstrates that all the lines and roles are handed out in advance; no one escapes.