

The Dirty Realism of Enrique Medina

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Since the publication in 1972 of *Las tumbas*, a novel dealing with the reformatory experiences of a child abandoned by a single mother who cannot care for him (Foster, "Rape and Social Formation"), Enrique Medina has established himself as the major voice in Argentine literature of the urban lumpen proletariat. The author of over twenty works of fiction (novels and short stories), chronicles, and a work of children's theater, Medina was, during the military dictatorship known as the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (1976-83), the author with the largest inventory of books banned by the censorship apparatus. *Las tumbas*, which has been one of the best selling novels of contemporary Argentine fiction, was unavailable until the end of the dictatorship, and it was once again a bestseller after it was reissued.¹

Las tumbas established the basic features of all of Medina's writing, and it is difficult to know which order of importance to assign to them: 1) a determined effort to engage in "dirty realism," understood as the commitment to describe the daily experiences of life with no attempt to euphemize them, either by turning away from certain aspects as somehow too gross to be related in literal terms or by supplementing them with a transcendent (social, political, religious) meaning that would detract from the imperative to examine the facts of life as unflinchingly as possible. Such a commitment is as much a defiance of the censorship imposed directly and indirectly on cultural production by tyrannical gov-

ernments as it is a repudiation of the norm of good taste that usually serves as a de facto censorship with an obligation, precisely, to augment the depiction of reality with transcendent meanings.

Dirty realism also means a strict regard not just for what gets expunged from the “artistic” contemplation of the social record. It basically refers to the choice of which segment of the social record one focuses on. While it may not always be subaltern groups and marginal individuals—certainly, there are plenty of dirty hidden stories to tell about the privileged sectors of society—and those on which a writer like Medina will choose to focus are those social entities that, because their reality cannot be euphemized and transcendentalized, simply do not get reported on. Argentina has a long tradition of proletarian (Portantiero) and social realist writing (Foster, *Social Realism in the Argentine Narrative*), and there are many antecedents to Medina that can be mentioned: Roberto Arlt, Elías Castelnuovo, Leonidas Barletta, Bernardo Verbitsky, Bernardo Kordon, José Rabinovich, Alvaro Yunque, Max Dickmann are a few of the names that come to mind, and various versions of a literature of commitment continue to produce other writers and artists, now enhanced by the strong presence of women’s voices, whose work bears degrees of resemblance to Medina’s project. However, most of these writers either wrote in a period in which to write about certain things and to utilize certain linguistic registers of expression would have either meant not to publish at all or to experience an unbearable degree of social opprobrium. Also, many writers of social commitment are, in fact, tied to a transcendent signifier (e.g., social revolution, the fulfillment of History, salvation through commitment itself) that imposes a supplementary level of their writing, as much as it may serve to distract them from executing a full account of the social record: the movement toward the transcendent signifier necessarily means leaving the concrete details of social life behind.

Medina has claimed that the discovery of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s books was a factor in his empowerment as a writer and showed him how one could write without yielding to a chimerical criterion of transcendence. Although Medina wrote with the goal of provoking the reigning principle of cultural decency in Argentina, such that works of his were banned, he was energetically condemned by sectors of the cultural press, and many bookstores refused to carry his titles (for example, the prestigious and ultraconservative Ateneo). The extreme circumstances of the dictatorships between 1966 and 1983 and the principle during the period of redemocratization of “Never Again” (*Nunca más* became the name of the best-selling report of the official commission on the disappeared),

which led to the attempt to confront head on the social and political facts of national life were, in addition to the changing appearance of those foreign cultural forces that, after the suspension of censorship, arrived in Argentina unmediated, important factors in providing some sort of final legitimacy to Medina's work. Currently, he does a weekly column for *Página 12*, the Buenos Aires newspaper that has published material of some of the country's most respected writers and intellectuals; commentary below of specific texts will be based on the published collections of his chronicles that have appeared since 1987.

2) Medina's attention has remained firmly anchored in the urban context, and he is probably the most important urban writer in Argentina at the present moment. Medina was for personal reasons obliged to remain in Argentina during the dictatorship, and he was throughout the period the recipient of many death threats. In the case of many writers who did leave Argentina, foreign residence often attenuated the precise outlines of their representation of Buenos Aires, and, as in the case of Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963), the city has more of an allegorical function *vis-à-vis* constants of Argentine social history than as a specific lived environment. By contrast, Medina wishes very much to provide a sharply focused representation of urban life, although his characters are not drawn exclusively from the Argentine lumpen proletariat. Indeed, many of his chronicles deal with foreign happenings, and he has a particular interest in significant U.S. events, in view of the enormous idealization and selling of American culture as part of a whole range of venues in Latin America. He also has an interest in other classes because of the need to examine the interrelationship of all social groups in order to understand a global power structure, such that it cannot be said that Medina is exclusively a writer of the lower classes

True, some of his memorable characters are from the working class or from a *petite bourgeoisie* that (often as a consequence of Peronismo) was working class in the last generation and in the present generation is just barely hanging on to its social gains. One of Medina's most memorable characters is Jose María Gatica, the prizefighter who enjoyed the support of the Peróns. *Gatica* (1991) tells the story of a marginal youth lost in the big city who makes it big, only to end up a broken wreck as the result of the pummeling taken in the ring: Gatica dies at the age of thirty-eight, when, drunk, he falls from the step of a moving bus he attempts to board and is run over, a symbol of a mortal cityscape (on Gatica's death, see Soriano; more on *Gatica* below). Gatica's is a true story, while the young female characters of *Buscando a Madonna* (1987) and *Con un trapo*

en la boca (1983) are fictional individuals on the cusp between the lower middle class and the abyss of complete social marginalization.

The character of *Buscando a Madonna* typifies the utterly aimless existence of a younger generation that has no viable space, at least in terms of any sense she might have of fulfillment, in the social structure, and less so as a woman (the one-woman stage version of this novel had an enormous success in 1993). Their parents had the military dictatorship and the larger issue of social revolution to fight against or, if directly committed, at least as something against which to define themselves. Thus, Madonna is both a positive and a negative symbol, since on the one hand she promises a female and feminist (and perhaps lesbian) social agency, while at the same time she is a skillful media creation of the American culture that is transforming the country as part of a neoliberalist venture of a commercial elite. The woman of *Con el trapo en la boca*, by contrast, has quite a bit more agency, and the novel is the story she tells to, apparently, a female lover about the violence she has suffered at the hands of a masculinist society, one for her particularly colored by military authoritarianism. The principal point of the story is how she counters the aggressions of a male lover by eventually castrating him as a rather definitive farewell gesture.

The sense of the city of Buenos Aires and of its social actors in Medina's novels is indeed intense, and he has very much of the sense of the relationship of the individual to society described by Greimas:

It is true that in examining the practice of subject-citizens, along with individual roles, we were able to identify social roles by which individuals participate in collective tasks. Consequently, we can say that these social roles are "lived" in one way or another and that these social activities are significant for the individual. But such an analysis cannot be pushed too far, if only because social activities are participatory, each role and each program being inscribed within the framework of collective practice that goes beyond them. (151)

The one movie that has been made of his fiction that is very well crafted, *Perros de la noche* (the novel is from 1977; the film, directed by Teo Kofman, is from 1986 [Foster, *Contemporary Argentine Cinema* 109-23]), deals with a brother and sister who, when the mother who has managed to hold the family together dies, lose even their shack in a slum settlement. In a sort of reversal of the paradigmatic trek into the big city from the outskirts and the provinces, the two

hit the road in the search for survival. The sister, who has been raped by her brother, who presents himself as her agent, tries to get work as a striptease dancer. One of Medina's early novels, and perhaps one of his very best on life in a dark and dank Buenos Aires created by the military, is called *Strip tease* (1976). After she has been forced to participate in what becomes virtually a snuff film (Medina plays on the allegations that the military sponsored the production of pornography, including snuff films, using women who had been kidnapped or detained), she finally rebels against her brother's exploitation when they return to Buenos Aires, where the slum seems almost like a mecca to her.² The movie is, of course, able visually to place the story of these urban heirs of Hansel and Gretel against the backdrop of the city in a way that the novel can only suggest. But without ever falling into local-color practices that would betray the presence of a transcendent signifier, Medina holds the materiality of Buenos Aires firmly in the foreground as the specific sociohistorical reality in which his characters are enmeshed. The forces, personal and impersonal, that move this reality are given metonymic expression in the details of the city they have created and in terms of which the daily lives of individuals, whose resources are limited almost to the vanishing point, play themselves out—most exemplarily under the sign of terrible violence that those structures impose.

3) Medina has, perhaps more than for anything else, been criticized for the registers of Spanish that he uses. His own prose as a narrator has striven to be a model of academic writing, and this is admirably demonstrated in the care that he takes with the composition of his texts, in both stylistic and discursive terms. However, the speech of his characters is another thing, and it is here where one most tangibly understands the meaning of dirty realism. Of course, dirty realism also characterizes the narrator's voice, simply in terms of the matters that are chosen to be described in the detached, almost clinical terms of mainline journalistic prose. But Medina's characters express themselves with what one can take as a painfully accurate sociolinguistic documentariness, and indeed, especially in the case of female characters, his writing is based on the attempt to provide an image of recorded speech such as one might obtain from linguistic fieldwork. Such speech is "dirty" because of the multiple ways it violates dominant linguistic taboos. But it is also dirty in the way in which the social world Medina evokes is dirty. Unable to comply with the model of social propriety endorsed by those who exercise symbolic power, either because that very exercise impedes the access to symbolic

power by vast sectors of the populace, or because the model espoused has little to do with the material conditions of life, Medina's characters are confined to spaces that are considered dirty, and they talk accordingly.

4) Violence is a slippery term, particularly when it is used to refer to something other than deliberate physical harm done to another person's body. It has become customary to speak of certain uses of language and discourse as constituting forms of social violence, especially where epithets on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference are involved, and it has been argued that verbal abuse is of a whole with physical assault. Concomitantly, the concept of structural violence has been proposed to explain how certain social structures are intrinsically violent toward those who are obliged to live them. Thus, slavery is violent in the ways in which torture is used as a means of control, but slavery is also violent because it is predicated on the denial of personal liberty, no matter how benevolent the treatment of the slave may be.

As many reviewers have felt it necessary to complain, Medina's books are filled with violence, no matter how such a concept is defined. There is violence in the sense of gross bodily harm, such as the castration of a man by a lover fed up with the sustained abuse she has received from him. There is certainly violence in the sense of language used as an instrument of assault, whether the object of such an assault is the reader (an individual of some degree of social standing, and therefore, complicitous with symbolic power, by virtue of being able to read literature) or another character, the language directed against whom the reader overhears; reviewers who have complained about the vulgarity of Medina's language are rarely interested in making such a distinction. And, finally, there is certainly structural violence, as Medina shows the physical suffering of individuals both as a consequence of specific circumstances such as military dictatorship and as the result of the oppression created by generalized social structures. Again, negative criticism has little use for an argument to the effect that one form of violence begets another, and that some dimension of legitimacy ought to be assigned the dirty language of dirty realism.

All of these aspects of Medina's work define a very specific interpretation of urban life both in terms of the particular spaces inhabited by the lumpen proletariat and, beyond those spaces, their interaction with other sectors of Argentine society. It is important to note that Medina has scant interest in focusing exclusively on the marginal *barrios* and *villas miserias* of the city as such. The nature of social life is such that the inhabitants of these sectors, in their struggle for survival, go out into the world and

interact with those who exercise symbolic power, either in a way that is tolerated (as docile labor) or in ways that provoke outrage (as criminals, activists, or lone individuals who engage in random and insulting acts of social resistance). Thus, Medina's characters come to range over the entire urban domain. By contrast, the higher the symbolic power of individuals, the more circumscribed their movement in the city tends to be. In this way, the extent of their interaction with the city as whole confirms Medina's interest in interrelating the violence by which the lumpen proletariat is victimized with the global social structures that produce, legitimate, duplicate, and overdetermine that violence.

Medina began writing chronicles essentially urban in scope after the return to constitutional democracy in 1985, and to date he has published a half-dozen collections of the columns he has been publishing in *Página 12* since the mid-1980s. These columns belong to a long tradition of journalistic micronarratives, and the chronicle is considered a literary genre in many Latin American societies. Practitioners like Mexico's Carlos Monsiváis and Brazil's Luiz Veríssimo are very popular authors, and each has staked out his own particular cultural space. Whereas Medina has focused on the dirty realism of the megalopolis, Veríssimo composes droll human comedy sketches that are underlain by a serious contemplation of the chaos and tribulations of urban life, the inherent ridiculous, surrealistic, grotesque texture of daily existence. Monsiváis is the more scholarly of the three, and he has used his columns both to analyze with considerable subtlety the dynamics of life in the largest city on the planet, with an emphasis on the elements of popular culture in terms of which that life is essentially conducted, and to provide an interpretation, one that is grounded in an understanding of historical and social forces, of Mexican cultural institutions. Monsiváis's texts are often not as narrative as Veríssimo's and Medina's, but together the three, writing from the perspective of the largest cities in Latin America, constitute a cultural phenomenon taken much more seriously in Latin America than in the United States.

One of Medina's obvious predecessors is Roberto Arlt (1900-42), whose *Aguafuertes* series—*Aguafuertes porteñas*, *Aguafuertes españolas*, *Aguafuertes uruguayas*—gave definite literary status to the chronicle. Like Medina, Arlt also practiced a form of dirty realism, although Arlt was more interested in the petite bourgeoisie than he was in the parents of Medina's lumpen proletariat. And too, Arlt was criticized for his use of language, but more for the *patois* of immigrants (*lunfardo* in the broad

sense and with specific reference to Italian immigrants) than for any vulgarity. Indeed, Arlt seems at times to be an armchair philologist, as he analyzes the semantic scope of words and phrases and charts their incorporation into Argentine metropolitan Spanish. Arlt was important for constructing a specific space for urban literature in Argentina, at a time when it was still believed that authentic national culture could not be found in the city, where immigrants were rapidly distorting and corrupting whatever was left of the Creole inheritance, but rather in the countryside, the repository of tradition, as in the case of Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926), one of the principal entries in a bibliography of rural mythification (ironically, Arlt worked at one time as Güiraldes's personal secretary).

Medina's first collection of essays cleverly marks with its title the transition from the period of military dictatorships to institutional democracy, under whose aegis Medina is not only able to reissue books that had been banned, but to practice the sort of critical commentary to which he has devoted himself for the past ten years. *Desde un mundo civilizado* (1987) refers to a traditional oligarchic trope, to the effect that surely we live in a civilized world (the one created by the oligarchy) and we should conduct ourselves as such (the rule of decency, decorum, acceptance of the status quo). In Medina's text, this trope, with the irony of the title, appearing as it does over a nineteenth-century cut depicting violent mayhem, is the first step in subversion and points in two directions. In the first place, it points to how, certainly, we do not live in a civilized world: if such a world did in fact exist, there would have been no military dictatorship in Argentina (for the oligarchy and their adherents, the military is a confraternity of gentlemen: dixit Jorge Luis Borges, at least with respect to Pinochet, although he later recanted this sort of effusion). Consequently, there would be no social marginalization in the country, no gross economic injustice: precisely the stuff of Medina's chronicles. Secondly, the title points to how Medina's texts, in their very existence as cultural production, break with the gentleman's academic agreement as to what constitutes decency in writing: a violent and uncivilized discourse to challenge a violent and uncivilized social experience. By echoing the civilized tenet that we inhabit a civilized world from which the manifestations of a dirty reality are regrettable deviations, Medina explores how they are, quite to the contrary, exemplary vignettes of a society in which the individual is constantly at the mercy of a dynamics of structural violence that masks itself with the illusion of civility and law and order.

In terms of the need in Argentina in the mid-1980s both to denounce a national structural violence that made military tyranny possible

and even welcome and to overcome the tendency for a country that had at that time emerged from a recent ignominious past to view itself as a pariah among self-reputedly civilized nations, *Desde un mundo civilizado* exemplifies the attempt, from the position of cultural production, to re-define a national consciousness on the basis of a broader analysis of sociocultural dynamic than the denunciatory testimonial. Since many of the texts deal directly or by implication with recent actual events that have appeared on the front pages of the newspaper, Medina is also demonstrating the ability of literary narrative to provide a more probing inquiry into the motivations and consequences to the individual of acts and events that journalism can profitably chronicle. Specifically, Medina frequently focuses on the interior processes of the so-called agents of violence in order to suggest their compulsions as well as to portray the psychological impact on them of their actions.³

Although neoliberalism has brought a renovation of equipment and the implementation of differential service, the *colectivo*, the most common form of surface transportation, remains ubiquitous in the streets of Buenos Aires. The Buenos Aires subway system, the first in Latin America, is efficient but limited, and suburban trains are, since privatization, on the way again to becoming a major form of transportation between the city and the suburbs. But within the city, where most people cannot afford the equally ubiquitous and superb taxi service, the vast network of busses is what basically moves workers, students, and shoppers. Few cities of Latin America have as rich a folklore surrounding the bus as does Buenos Aires, where brightly colored vehicles stand out against the generally drab background of the city, and where the driver's area is typically highly personalized with icons of cultural identities: a picture of Gardel, a pennant of the soccer club of preference, a holy card of the Virgin of Luján, patron saint of travelers, perhaps a picture of one's mother, not to mention stickers that announce with caustic and aggressive wit a particular view of society and mankind. Even Borges, not much of a fan of popular culture aside from the tango, wrote during his early vanguard local-color phase on the stickers, although with reference to an earlier exterior placement on vehicles ("Las inscripciones de los carros"; see also Norberto Folino's delightful book.)⁴

Medina, however, has no interest in the folklore of the *colectivo* nor in the sort of nostalgic registry provided by Folino. His text "El colectivo" is a nightmarish metaphor of the tumultuous nature of collective life.⁵ Indeed, the very word *colectivo* refers to the fact that it is a collective

mode of transportation: like an urban ship of fools, it brings together a social sampling of individuals from the city and places them in uncomfortable and therefore potentially violent contact with each other. The text is written in brief sentences, most of which are four or five words in length, and few are more than ten. The staccato beat of the text is clearly meant to capture the frenetic and jumpy pace of the bus, its abrupt starts and stops, and the harried circumstances in which everyone travels. Nerves can never be anything other than frayed, and the bus driver is in a constant state of apoplexy. Civility is impossible in such circumstances, and the individual, implacably subjected to the indignities of mass transit, can do nothing more than become also a conduit for indignities committed against the person of fellow travelers.

The brief text has a number of recurring motifs, one of which is a policeman whose hand rests on the butt of his holstered gun. This image is stated four times in seven pages, and one's conclusion is that it marks the ineffective authoritarianism of Argentine society: the symbols of police power are always present, but such power, whatever else it can do for/to the citizenry, cannot impose civility, and the policeman is no more safeguarded from indignities at the hands of the passengers than anyone else. "El colectivo" is a metaphor of Argentine society in the sense that it models the low level of human comfort that is imposed by an anonymous and ugly urban experience. Echoing the hoary commonplace of travel as a figure for the human transit of life, of life as a journey filled with trying experiences, Medina underscores how these passengers are condemned, like the Flying Dutchman, to travel eternally by horrendous modes of public transportation: "Para el colectivo. Por suerte llegamos a la estación dice una. Tomarán el tren y otro colectivo y otro colectivo y otro colectivo. Toda la vida" (134).

In order to reinforce the ship-of-fools image, the author, in addition to sketching in a sociologically representative inventory of urban personages, relies on metonymies of dirty realism to highlight the incivility that flourishes in this quintessentially urban nightmare: "El hombre le ha dado un golpe a la mujer. En el costado y con disimulo. Sus ojos giran huracanados. Ella intenta calmarlo. ¡No se puede bajar por adelante! Gritan. El colectivo no abre la puerta hasta que dicen que es la embarazada" (133). Or: "Y por si fuera poco alguien grita: ¡Abran la ventanilla por favor! Fue un pedo sordo y despiadado" (132). During the period of military dictatorship, one category of American movies that could be given without restrictions or censorship belong to the Hollywood genre of the horror movie, of the *Carrie* and *Friday the 13th* possession, stalker,

slasher variety. It is possible to argue that such horror fantasies, which have little if any correspondence to lived human experience and to actual social reality, serve by design or accident to distract the viewers from the verifiable horrors of daily life outside the theater. Latin American culture production has rarely attempted to vie with U.S. skills at producing science fiction, horror films, and action flicks, especially now that the majority of the inflated budgets goes to the sophisticated technology of special effects. By contrast, horror and related genres for Latin American cultural production have relied on accurate documentaries of sociohistoric interpretation. Such interpretations, of course, are not free of ideological circumscriptions. However, a contemplation of their interpretive project within the context of an adequate understanding of how ideology always drives interpretation, provides the occasion for a sustained public debate over the substance of daily life. From this point of view, Medina's chronicles paint much more of an authentic horror story than any Hollywood film ever could. Certainly, there are those who would insist that Hollywood's work can be read as rich and suggestive allegories of the terrors of existence that bourgeois normalcy and decency insists on glossing over. Yet Medina's point seems to be that, thanks to the effects of military tyranny and an abiding social authoritarianism, there is no glossed-over surface to allegorize.

Published five years after *Desde un mundo civilizado*, *Deuda de honor* continues to practice something like a narrative radar mission in which the author scrupulously seeks out metonymic incidents of contemporary Porteño life. True, many of Medina's texts continue to report on incidents from other parts of Latin America or from the United States, as though he were concerned to demonstrate that his lens of dirty realism is not confined exclusively to Argentina. Medina also continues his carefully measured utilization of a third-person, indirect free style. This modality often represents a special challenge to the foreign reader because of the cultural and linguistic information that it typically presupposes and which the brevity of the text makes elaboration impossible. What is especially effective about the indirect free style, however, is that it challenges the reader to accept the legitimacy of the spoken consciousness of individuals whom "decent" or "genteel" readers have difficult accepting as anyone whose view of the world on either microcosmic or macrocosmic terms they might be willing to accept. That is, Medina's indirect free style functions to create a measure of legitimation for the radical otherness of dirty realism for the literate reader. Since Medina's characters and

their consciousness are drawn from a wide array of social classes, from the miserable and the marginal to the powerful, it is not simply a question of entering and sharing the perspective of the forgotten members of society, but of scrutinizing the hidden dirty face of those who are among the most prominent and influential.

Medina's success as a writer has been based in large part in his ability to grasp with a firm hand the tenor of the moment. Thus, even as his texts represent a panoply of constants about Argentine social life as it is showcased in Buenos Aires, especially the self-satisfied and self-serving pretenses of a moral superiority that have justified that country's worst history of oppressive institutions, they are also artfully in tune with shifts in a first instance of social consciousness. This is what gives *Deuda de honor* a particular stamp of originality. Well into the current Carlos Menem administration and with all the unremittingly harsh realities associated with the recapitalization of the national economy, any gesture toward a resistant culture of localized strategy of human dignity has disappeared from these chronicles. In previous collections, although there have been texts that examine the bleakest aspects of the human social drama, there were also narratives that demonstrated something like successful efforts at resisting institutional humiliation and the constituent elements that make such a resistance possible. None of this is present in *Deuda*. Text after text slips into place in a mosaic of failure and despair on the one hand and cynical manipulation on the other as reflexes of the total disappearance of the optimism associated with the redemocratization of Argentine society in the 1980s.

Boedo is a legendary working class neighborhood on the south central side of Buenos Aires, famous for its proletarian cultural roots which, in a facile ideological binary, have customarily been juxtaposed to the north side of elite writers like Borges (Barletta). However, like Borges, Medina is particularly interested in issues relating to masculinity and the blindness it creates in the individual with regard to the violence of his conduct. In "El crimen del barrio Boedo," the reader follows the interior preverbal discourse of an individual jailed for killing the mother and sister of the woman he suspects of being unfaithful to him. Before or after killing Patri's sister—and he insists that it was not his intention to kill the two women, but only to insist energetically on their telling him where Patri is—he rapes her. When the prisoner is tossed a dead rat through the bars of his cell, with a message around its neck, "Las muertas que mataste, te saludan" (78), the prisoner hangs himself.

Medina need provide no judgment here, not against the codes of machismo, not against the justice and jail system, not against the journal-

ism whose impersonal account of the murder the prisoner reads as he picks his teeth with a fork after eating. But where there is a space of assessment opened up is in the juxtaposition between the assumptions of the newspaper report and the criminal's reaction to it. The latter, caught up in the reasoning process that involve his relationship with Patri, the reasons for his attempt to find her, the fatal altercation with her sister and mother and the taking out on them of his anger, and the alienation of his almost virtually disengagement with what he reader, finds little of himself in the newspaper report:

“Según el relato de los testigos, un hombre al que luego se identificó se apersonó en la agencia de acompañantes donde trabajaban junto a Patricia y le reclamó a ésta que volviera a unirse a él sentimentalmente. Ante la negativa de la joven...” ¿Qué saben los diarios? ¿Qué sabe la policía? ¿Qué saben los testigos, los análisis microscópicos y los jueces y...? Mira las fotos. Están al costado de la página. No las quería ver a pesar de que la policía ya se las había mostrado. Las mira detenidamente. (76)

As though the prisoner had little to do with what he reads about in the paper or as though what was being reported were not what really happened, the anomie of the prisoner is confirmed by the fact that, in reading the story, he is particularly interested in making sure his name is spelled correctly: “Con el tenedor busca su nombre. Sí, Está bien escrito” (78). This apparently insignificant detail, which from one point of view marks his psychotic disengagement from the crime, from another point of view has the value of humanizing him: among the millions of inhabitants of Buenos Aires, only a limited percentage have Hispanic names, and the need to confirm one's identity by making sure a name is spelled correctly is not an insignificant detail for a miserable urban outcast.

There is clearly no suggestion of cultural resistance in “El crimen del barrio Boedo.” Locked in the codes of masculinity and sealed in the anomie of the outcast condition provoked by the violence pursued in conformance with those codes, the prisoner appears to commit suicide. Suicide is certainly one form of cultural resistance, as Western culture has known at least since Cato's defense of it in Antiquity. However, Medina's text, as a chronicle, is too short to allow for the sort of psychological build-up to such a decision that would make it evident as a condition of despair leading to the considered decision to take one's life as a gesture of defiance and escape. One suspects here that suicide is meant to signify a degree of individual will, as a correlate of the prisoner's separation from

the image provided of him in the newspaper report and the importance for him to ascertain that his name is spelled correctly. At the same time, as an interpretation of the implacable violence of social life, of which the prisoner is less “victim” in any liberal sense but rather the transparent embodiment, Medina’s text demands a cruel investment on the part of the reader. As a reflex of urban life, the prisoner cannot be set aside for the reader via the process of “humanizing” him as a victim. Victimization disengages individuals and turns them into unique human cases whose tragedy we contemplate from a distance, relieved that we are not in their shoes. By contrast, the individual who is a reflex of an entire social dynamic, by virtue of not being individuated and therefore engaged from the multitude, becomes a synecdoche of that multitude, and his anonymous case—we never learn what his name is that he is concerned to see spelled correctly—can be the case of anyone. The illusion of the greater misfortune of the subaltern individuals is only an illusion: one does not embody social codes as an act of social agency. Social codes embody the individual, who has little choice in fulfilling their demand, and the consequences are repeatedly every bit as appalling as Medina’s chronicle demonstrates. In a certain sense, the individual exists only to carry out the social code, and any unique subjectivity the individual is alleged to possess is a recurring fallacy of our cultural ideologies. It is along these lines that Medina often chooses not to individuate his characters, or when they do have names, such as the lover Patri or her sister Miriam, they are of no particular importance, which in turn only underscores how they are undifferentiated ciphers of an unalleviatedly and mercilessly dirty urban landscape.

There may be no sense in which *autism* is used in less than strictly clinical terms, in a metaphorical fashion, to describe the sort of acute alienation of an individual who, without being socially marginal in the way in which uninstitutionalized psychotics who walk are, manifest alarming symptoms of being out of synch with society at large. Such malcoordination may, on the one hand, reveal something like an innocence deriving from the inability or the unwillingness to accept the unyielding cynicism of the world around them. On the other hand, it may manifest certain profound limitations in their ability to understand the demanding subtleties of being attentive to the needs, the world view, and, of course, the limitations of others.

José María Gatica (1926-63) was probably the most controversial figure in the history of the Argentine ring, fighting ninety-four matches, of which he won eighty-five, with only seven losses and two draws.⁶ Un-

fortunately, the fight of his life, against Ike Williams in New York, with the full backing of the Peronista propaganda machine, was the most spectacular of his losses, the downward turn in his career and his life at a time when, given the opportunities and the support available to him, he should have been a stunning triumph. Never able to shake the family and friends who sponged off him mercilessly, caught up in the high life of the post-war and Peronista boom years in Argentina, especially the cabaret scene in Buenos Aires, and never able to grasp the conditions of discipline that would have made him a truly great fighter, Gatica died at thirty-eight, a down-and-out drunk run over by a city bus.

Gatica is an important title to consider for the urban culture of Buenos Aires, something that is readily apparent in the 1993 film by Leonardo Favio, *Gatica, el mono* (for a review, see Beceyro). Favio's film has many things wrong with it; an almost sycophantic evocation of Gatica's relationship with the Peróns, a mawkish deathbed scene between Gatica and the dying Evita which is totally unhistoric, a clumsy attempt to impose an auteurist style on the filming, especially on the ones dealing with deadening pummeling of Gatica's later fights, and the lack of any sense of sociohistorical interpretation. Yet there is a careful attempt to evoke both the popular cultural identities of Gatica and the importance to his life of elements of the urban landscape. Gatica was a rough-and-tumble kid who lived the streets of Buenos Aires during the so-called *Década Infame*, the period of Argentina's first military dictatorship, which was driven by various elements of fascist inspiration. Gatica's rise corresponded to the rise of Peronismo, which overtly and energetically favored popular culture, especially forms that could be used as public display, thereby constituting extensions of a Peronista political rally. The enormous growth of the mass media during the prosperous 1940s and early 1950s meant greater forums than ever in radio, print journalism, and newsreels, and television was to come at the tail end of the Peronista period, although Gatica was pretty much washed up by then. In general, the growth of such forums has meant a significant increase in the public display of popular culture, and this was even more so in the case of populist Argentina (see Ciria; Geltman). Favio, who has been a long-time Peronista supporter, is reasonably interested in enhancing the sort of nostalgic look at the heyday of Peronismo a picture like *Gatica, el mono* permits.⁷ Indeed, the greatest value of Favio's picture, in which it is clear, and rather suspect, that he equates Gatica's decline with the decline of Peronismo, or makes an allegory of the other, is in the nostalgic evocation of the urban spaces, mostly marginal, even when they included posh cabarets, inhabited by Gatica during his short and brutal career.

By contrast, Medina's novel, called simply *Gatica* and published the same year as Favio's film, wastes no time in setting Gatica up also as an icon of, in a first instance, the freewheeling corruption of the Peronista years in Argentina and, more generally, of the enormous distance that exists between the cultural myths of Argentine society and the grinding inexorableness of the false promise: surely, on the basis of this novel, as allegorical as Favio's film, but in a more critically negative way, one cannot expect of Medina any desire to defend Peronista ideology or its hagiography.

Gatica, like Peronismo, truly believes that he is the best that ever was, while at the same time he senses he is being used, that he has no effective control over his body or the conduct of his life, that he is merely a cipher in a political machine with no substance in terms of human dignity. Thus, Gatica is made to serve Medina's overall interpretive project regarding the dirty realism of Argentina: despite all of the ways in which Gatica is made to believe that he is in control of his own life, that, with his talent and his ensuing fame, he has gained a measure of social agency, that he can, in fact, attain a position of social respectability that must naturally accompany his professional accomplishments, the novel is relentless in demonstrating that it is all smoke and mirrors, that Gatica has, and can never, rise above the slime of his originary social condition. It is to that slime that he will in the end return—or at least, to the Biblical dust in which he rolls after being run down by a bus. The scene in which Gatica is hit by the bus reminds us of the social symbolism that, in the essay commented on above, Medina had attached to the Buenos Aires *colectivo*, except in this case its client-victims are outside as well as inside:

Se levanta, va hasta el mostrador, paga todo, vuelve a decirle chau a los amigos y sale muy tambaleado. Busca un taxi. Hace señas y no le paran porque debido a la dificultad que le produce la pierna enferma y a su confusión mezcla de vino y grapa, camina como espantapájaros sacudido por la tormenta. Gatica los insulta. Ve un colectivo lleno que lo puede llevar y, esquivando autos que a su vez lo esquivan, corre a treparse. Se aferra de un pasamano; bien, a pesar de que la gente amontonada en el estribo es demasiada. Salvo el intento del dedo índice, con la otra mano no logra agarrarse debido a los dos muñequitos que se la ocupan. En un pequeñísimo lugar consigue poner un pie. El tipo que está colgado delante de él intenta subir un escalón, el colectivo en marcha inesperadamente adquiere velocidad y el tipo se echa algo para atrás haciéndole perder el equilibrio a Gatica que,

cayendo, porque una mano sola no lo puede sostener, ve al hombre subir por fin el escalón al mismo tiempo que la puerta se cierra de un latigazo. Cae, Gatica, sobre los adoquines; casi sin soltar los muñequitos. El colectivo hace el cuarto de giro para doblar la esquina y las ruedas traseras brincan sobre el cuerpo asombrado. (301-302)

The text is constructed around segments that move between a characterization of Gatica's preverbal speech (he probably articulates no more than a dozen or so utterances directly in the course of the novel) and a recitation, in the image of the hard-bitten yet occasionally sensationalist and sentimental sports-page prose of the period, of the circumstantial facts of Gatica's life and career. Gatica's life is unquestionably an allegory. But it is a terrible and thereby effective account of a capitalist society in which the destiny of the individual has hardly any consequence at all, and in this sense Gatica is put forth as a Argentine lumpen-proletariat everyman. Medina wrote his novel at a time when Argentina was beginning to move once again into the throes of institutional incoherence imposed by a neoliberalist economic adventurism and government by decree, with a president for whom the ethos of sports (with every trace of its disingenuousness covered over by an unrelentingly brutal, masculinist rhetoric) is the quintessence of the Argentine national character. In this regard, it is instructive to refer to the lamentable chronicle of the soccer superstar Diego Maradona. There can be little doubt that Medina intends *Gatica* to be read as an accurate barometer of the deep social deceptions spoken through the main character's often almost incoherent flow of consciousness.

But to return to the matter of the presence of the city of Buenos Aires, Gatica, by transcending the streets of the city, if only momentarily and falsely, confirms the importance of urban popular culture and its spaces for the construction of an itinerary of important facets of Argentine self-identity. Since Medina has no interest in romanticizing the Buenos Aires cityscape, he has no occasion to dwell on its importance in defining significant moments in Gatica's life. The city is simply there, and its spaces are where what Medina has to say about Gatica takes place, for no other reason than that there is nowhere else for it to take place. Gatica may have had some access to privileged spaces, as Evita certainly did. But for both of them, life was where people (or *the* people) were, and it was the spaces of the lumpen proletariat and their extensions—cafés, bars, cheap restaurants, sports rings, dance halls, dives, and the like—where Gatica was most at home.

Notes

¹There is a 1991 film loosely based on the novel, but it had no commercial success and received scant critical attention.

²At the end of the novel he dies, but in the movie she pummels him as a sign that she is no longer under his control.

³A particularly notable feature of Medina's collection is the decision to dedicate each one of the thirty-six texts to a group of individuals with whom he as a writer and as a citizen identifies. The result is the evocation of a broad network of men and women (and children) with a shared commitment to knowing how the world is, despite what the hegemonic discourse would maintain is hardly a civilized place, yet by extension to knowing how such knowledge can contribute to the forging of a decent society. (The hegemonic discourse, of course, is likely to find many uncivilized in the world, but only as a deviation from its privileged norms.)

⁴Unfortunately, I know of no Argentine film set on a *colectivo*, not at least of the importance of Luis Buñuel's 1951 *La ilusión viaja en tranvía*, made as part of his Mexican cycle and, like the 1950 classic *Los olvidados*, so eloquent in revealing Buñuel's fascination with the Mexican cityscape. Neville D'Almeida's *A dama do lotação* (1978) showcases Brazil's Sônia Braga (*lotação* is the Brazilian Portuguese word for *colectivo*). Santiago Carlos Oves's *El verso* (1995) concerns the sort of ambulant salesman who finds hawking cheap wares (pen knives, ballpoint pens, comic books, coloring books) on city busses, and several scenes take place on *colectivos*.

⁵It is interesting to compare a similar version of the bus with a Chilean writer of dirty realism, Pedro Lemebel. In his text "Coleópteros en el parabrisas," we read: "La micro es una lata de sopa que revuelve los intestinos. Un pastiche de eructos, flagos y peos que colorean el duro tránsito que se desbaranca a la periferia" (72).

⁶There is little information available about Gatica, despite his popular cultural importance. See information in Barrera on the history of boxing in Argentina; Montes provides an earlier (and trite) novelized account of Gatica; Ramírez includes a section on Gatica (41-43).

⁷Note that Favio underscores the nickname Mono (= monkey). Gatica himself would have preferred to be called Tigre (= tiger), and for this reason, Medina avoids using the former. It is worth noting that such nicknames, still widely used in Argentina, are synecdochal and metonymic in nature and that they can refer to features that may be as much viewed as affectionate as pejorative.

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