
Review

The space of disappearance: A narrative commons in the ruins of Argentine state terror

Karen Elizabeth Bishop

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In the *The Space of Disappearance. A Narrative Commons in the Ruins of Argentine State Terror*, Karen Elizabeth Bishop examines four novels by three contemporary Argentine writers: Rodolfo Walsh's *Variaciones en rojo* (*Variations in Red*), Julio Cortázar's *Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales* (*Fantomas against the Multinational Vampires*), and Tomás Eloy Martínez's *La novela de Perón* and *Santa Evita*. Her reading of novels written both before and after the last Argentine dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 leads her to posit what may be the core hypothesis of the book: disappearance, the privileged technique through which the Juntas' generals disappeared political opposition to the neoliberal model they were implementing, is also a literary device by which the authors studied proposed 'divided, refracted and embedded ontologies' (p. 11). Drawing on deconstructionist analysis of voids and absences as an 'active hermeneutic agent at work in literature' (p. 15), Bishop reads Walsh, Cortázar, and Martínez's works not only as denouncing neoliberalism and engaging in politics, nor as national dramas refracting the agitated recent Argentine history, but rather as 'anticipatory fictions' (p. 154) that foresee the dissimulations, doublings, displacements, and suspensions that were later implemented by the dictatorship.

This anticipatory potential is neither confined to Argentina nor to Walsh's invention of the non-fiction novel – an invention that is typically (mis)attributed to Truman Capote, especially in the 'Global North' (p. 42). Moreover, Bishop reads Walsh's denial 'to keep writing highly refined works only for the bourgeois intelligentsia' (p. 43) as an anticipation of Blanchot's 'disappearance of the book' (2003). Similarly, she reads Cortázar's 'continued ontological searches' (p. 78) as a reflection on Baudrillard's statement that 'pretending or dissimulating leaves the principle of reality intact' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 67). Baudrillard's claim would be why Cortázar stopped writing 'highly refined literature' such as *House Taken Over* (1946) and instead engaged in political projects like *Fantomas*, where reality is



problematized and the limits between book and life are blurred. Finally, Bishop finds in Martínez's works an anticipatory dialogue with Baudrillard's discussion of the double and the copy: 'No one would grant the last consent, the last devotion, to a real person. It is to his double, he being always already *dead*, to which allegiance is given' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 135). According to Bishop, this thought is applicable to Perón. In the events surrounding his return in 1973 after eighteen years of military proscription, Perón would have been already dead. So the consecutive confrontations between Peronism's left and right wings were on behalf of a double – this is Daniel Guebel's (2004) hypothesis in his novel *La vida por Perón*.

Bishop further identifies doubling, disappearance, and dissimulation in Martínez's *Santa Evita*. As 'one of the most visible female figures in Western history' (p. 160), the 1955 anti-Peronist dictatorship's response to Eva Perón's death on July 26, 1952 exhibited political devices that mimicked earlier techniques of literary representation: doubling (with a Galician embalmer obsessed with her figure), disappearance, dissimulation (three copies of her corpse were fabricated and sent to different places in the world to disorient her Peronist supporters), delocalization, and suspension (Evita is dead, but she lives in the memories of her followers, but no one knows her whereabouts).

Here, we can see a literary preview of what would become a common political practice during the last Argentine dictatorship: the creation of a new ontological condition in which someone is neither alive nor dead but disappeared. For Bishop, then, the creative techniques of literature are mimicked and doubled in reality, as Nestor Perlongher's famous poem suggests: 'In the necessity of this absence/In what underlines that word/In your divine presence/Comandante, in your mark/ There's corpses' (Perlongher, 1987).

Nevertheless, I would like to pose some questions about Bishop's thought-provoking observations. First, the authors under examination are separated both temporally and politically, such that their selection appears somewhat arbitrary. While this could be read as a deliberate distancing from the 'Borges factor' (Pauls, 2004) and his fetishization as *the* representative of Argentine literature, it remains unclear why these writers and oeuvres were chosen. The same question can be extended to Bishop's heterogeneous list of new writers engaging with recent Argentine history: Aira's *Los fantasmas* (1990), Osorio's *A veinte años*, Luz (1998), Chefjec's *Los planetas* (1999), Pauls' *El pasado* (2003), and *Historias* trilogy (2007–2013). Similar doubts, in turn, could be raised to the last list of Argentine writers enumerated by the author, namely, Neumann's *Una vez Argentina* (2003), Bruzzone's *Los topos* (2008) and *76* (2013), and Roble's *Pequeños combatientes* (2013). What do they have in common beyond being from Argentina and writing about the dictatorship such that they can be said to belong to the *same* tradition of Argentine literature?

Second, Bishop's characterization of Walsh, Cortázar, and Martínez as 'postmodern' is disputable. While we can certainly identify some literary devices



and aesthetic characteristics of postmodernism in their writings – the fragment, the impossibility to accomplish a totality, the interruption, and deferral of teleological time, of history, of politics – their characterization as postmodern only applies to the formal and storytelling dimension of their novels. Walsh and Cortázar endorsed, or at least sympathized with, revolutionary Peronism, and Martínez was a loyal Peronist follower. Thus, they were politically modern writers who, as Bishop argues, in some moments, felt the insufficiency of literature to fulfill their political desires. Even though their larger oeuvres allow us to find nuances – Walsh wrote his last text, ‘Carta de un escritor a la junta militar,’ in the first person singular; Cortázar criticized the lack of humor of revolutionaries; Martínez ultimately did not become an orthodox and uncritical Peronist – the analyzed works not only indicate postmodern narrators who foresaw the new ontology that the last dictatorship put in place but also Augustinian authors who struggled with the inefficiency of literature and politics against a neoliberal reality that rose on the horizon (Walsh) or was already part of life (Cortázar and Martínez). Because, as Mark Fisher (2009) notes, ‘it’s easier to imagine the end of the world’ than the end of neoliberalism, Walsh, Cortázar, and Martínez had to create new, refracted, and embedded ontologies in their works.

Finally, Bishop’s reliance on Blanchot, Baudrillard, and Derrida raises the question why we should turn to thinkers of the ‘Global North’ to analyze Argentine and, more generally, Latin-American literature. Would it perhaps be an interesting undertaking to ‘flip the turtle’ (Quilapayun, 1968) and analyze North-American, British, or French literature through the lens of Martínez Estrada, Josefina Ludmer, or Horacio González? (Why) do we need to cite Foucault, Debord, and Certeau to understand the small resistances against the last Argentine dictatorship depicted in its literature?

Bishop argues that ‘Argentina’s modes of disappearance are symptom and product of a larger disappearance of literature’ (p. 192). Where, in her approach, is there space for other historical, though perhaps not exclusively textual, phenomena that also constitute techniques of disappearance? These include the Spanish conquest of the Americas, exploitation, torture, and state-sponsored genocide of native peoples at the foundation of the Argentine nation-state, and, for instance, the invention of the electric prod by Polo Lugones, son of well-known Argentinean writer Leopoldo Lugones and father of Piri Lugones, a revolutionary militant tortured in the 1970s with the instrument invented by her father. I think that we, as western people – to the extent that we can be considered as such in Argentina – should always be held accountable for the disappearances made in our name.



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