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SANTA EVITA

Diary of a reader

Carlos Fuentes

In 1943, I lived with my family on the corner of Quintana and Callao in Buenos Aires. I had just turned fifteen, but was not going to school so as to avoid the fascist ideology fostered by the minister of education, Martínez Zuviría. I wanted to go back to Mexico, and Argentina was just an interlude. Rather than study, I read Borges, followed the tango orchestra of Anibal Troilo, went to the movies on Lavalle Street, and listened to the soaps on the radio.

The actress Eva Duarte starred in a radio series on famous women in history: Marie Antoinette, the empress Carlotta, Madame Du Barry . . . These programs were announced in the bible of Argentine radio, *Sintonía*. They were quite atrocious, and she was a terrible actress. Tomás Eloy Martínez transcribes her tirades to perfection in his splendid novel, *Santa Evita*: “Macksmilian is suffering, suffering, and I vill go mad!” Eva Duarte’s films were no better; I remember seeing an adaptation of Alarcón’s *La Pródiga* which, as Eloy Martínez notes,

looks like it was filmed before the invention of cinema. Eva Duarte would also make an occasional appearance on the cover of *Antena* magazine, in badly cut swimsuits or decked out as a sailor.

In the apartment building where we lived, everybody left in the morning at ten; the only people remaining were myself, reading Borges and listening to Eva, and a gorgeous European woman who lived alone on the floor above us. One morning I played dumb and went to knock at her door. She appeared, all platinum and with an artificial mole on her cheek. I had lost my copy of *Sintonía*, I apologized, and wanted to know if Eva Duarte would be playing Joan of Arc this morning.

— No, answered my neighbor. Today she is doing Du Barry. She is less saintly, but more amusing.

Thus it came about, indirectly, that I owe my sexual initiation to Eva Perón. I knew her, by voice, even before Colonel Juan Domingo Perón himself, who at the time was minister of labor in the

Discussed in this essay

Santa Evita,
Tomás Eloy Martínez,
New York: Knopf

Evita, 1944

UPI/Corbis-Bettman



military cabinet of General Edelmiro Farrell, and was already said to be the power behind the throne. My surprise knew no bounds when I learned a year later that Perón and Eva Duarte had met the year before and were now starring in their own radio soap opera, acting out before the crowds, without any need to pretend to be Caesar, or Cleopatra. I saw them together for the first time on a newsreel: they were on their balcony overlooking Plaza de Mayo, and I realized that from now on Eva Duarte and Juan Perón would be playing two characters, “Eva Duarte” and “Juan Perón.”

Eva Perón, Cinderella in power, exercised it like the stepmother in a fairy tale.

As Eloy Martínez notes, they ceased to distinguish between truth and fiction, and decided that reality would be whatever they pleased; they acted as novelists. “Doubt had vanished from their lives.”

• • •

To many, the Latin American novel has become synonymous with a kind of magic, a dizzying, fantastical reality which warps the boundaries of the everyday. First the novels of Carpentier, then those of García Márquez and Roa Bastos, gave a supreme and unsurpassable literary life to this hyperbolic truth. It was not—is not—possible to go further, in this regard, than *The Autumn of the Patriarch* and *I, the Supreme*. It remains true, however, that the novel can hardly compete with history in Latin America. García Márquez himself said to me, regarding the incredible recent events in Mexico: We should cast our books into the sea, for reality has surpassed them. Tomás

Eloy Martínez goes back to the source of this Latin American paradox to remind us, first of all, that in it lies the origin of the novel; then, to subject this paradox to the test of biography (the life and death of a historical figure, Eva Perón); and finally, to restore a documented and documentable history to its factual truth, which is fiction.

The only duty we have toward history is to rewrite it, says Oscar Wilde, quoted by Eloy Martínez. And the Argentine author continues, “Any account is, by definition, unfaithful. Reality . . . cannot be told or repeated. The only thing we can do with reality is to invent it anew.” And if history is one of the literary genres, “why deprive it of the imagination, absurdity, exaggeration, and defeat which are the raw materials of literature?”

Walter Benjamin wrote that when a historical figure has been redeemed, all of his past can be cited, apotheoses and secrets alike. Let us imagine for a moment the unredeemed life of Eva Duarte, born in the little village of Los Toldos on May 9, 1919—an illegitimate child, a virtually illiterate girl who never learned to spell, who would say, “I am going to the phygician” when she was going to the physician, forced to learn the basics of etiquette: an Eliza Doolittle from the heartland of Argentina, waiting only for a Professor Higgins to teach her to pronounce her aitches. Instead, she was taken to Buenos Aires at age fifteen by a conductor named Carriño, a comedian whose orchestra played tango, and who was wont to dress up as Charlie Chaplin.

When Eva Perón began her spectacular rise, the elites and the oligarchy of Argentina attacked her with ferocious



Eva and Juan Perón addressing the crowd from the balcony of the Casa Rosada, Buenos Aires, 1950.

AP/Wide World Photos

contempt: “That cheap hussy, that bastard bar floozy, that little shit.” In the eyes of her social enemies, Eva Duarte was “a base resurrection of barbarism,” in a country convinced that it was “so ethereal and spiritual it had nearly evaporated.” The defeat—mediate and immediate—of the Argentine oligarchy and its pretensions by the “cheap hussy” is one of the best stories of political vengeance in our century.

Evita wielded a single historical weapon in this vendetta: she did not forgive or pardon anyone who had humiliated her, insulted her, hurt her. But her mythical weapon was even more powerful: Eva Duarte believed in the miracles of the radio soaps. “She thought that, if there had been one Cinderella, there could well be two.” And she was right: this much she knew, and this her enemies did not know. Evita was Cinderella, armed and dangerous.

. . .

No matter how sordid the story of the origins and rise of Eva Duarte may appear, from the outset it is paralleled by another story which is historical, mythical, magical. The enemies of Evita saw only the naturalistic novel, à la Zola: Evita Nana. She sought to live the dramatic novel, à la Dumas: Cinderella Montecristo. But neither she nor her en-

emies saw beyond the cultivated, Parisian, Cartesian Argentina which the elite of Buenos Aires presented to the world, led by Victoria Ocampo and *Sur* magazine. After all, didn’t fiction vanquish history, imagination reality, in a country where the soldiers at a camp lost in Patagonia would tie six or seven dogs to a wall, organize a firing squad, and execute them in a frenzy of missed shots, blood, and howls? “Our only amusement here is executions,” Eloy Martínez recalls, and describes the penchant of the Argentine military for sects, cryptograms, and the occult sciences, which culminated in the reign of the “Sorcerer” López Rega, *éminence grise* of the subsequent Mrs. Perón, Isabelita. Only in a fable would we find the plan of an Argentine colonel to assassinate Perón by slicing off his tongue as he slept. And only in a fable would young Eva have already launched her “philanthropic” career by supporting a tribe of mute albinos who had escaped from an institution. (When Evita presented them to Perón, a group all naked and covered with shit, the horrified general sent them away, out into the country—where they escaped once more, disappearing into the cornfields.) Reality or fiction? The answer: reality is fiction.

Eloy Martínez admits it: the forces at play in his novel are dubious, but no

**Eva Perón
speaking at labor
meeting, Buenos
Aires, 1951.**

Corbis-Bettman



more than language itself. Lapses of memory filter tainted truths: "Perhaps none of what seemed to be happening was really happening. Perhaps history was made not of realities but of dreams. Men dreamed of events, and then writers invented the past. Life did not exist—only stories did."

Eva Perón, Cinderella in power, exercised it like the stepmother in a fairy tale. Like a Robin Hood in skirts, she gave everything away, attending to the long lines of people in need of furniture, a wedding gown, a hospital. Argentina became her own Island of Barataria; the only difference was that she herself was Don Quijote, and Sancho Panza, her down-to-earth, snub-nosed, working-class husband, devoid of charisma until she invented a myth for him, a myth he finally came to accept. Eva Perón could

be as hard as any general or politician, but this was secondary; now Cinderella did not have to do bad films or bad radio plays. Cinderella could act in history, and even see herself making history: Eloy Martínez recounts a marvelous scene in which Eva, from her theater seat, watches Eva onscreen paying a visit to Pope Pius XII. The frustrated actress repeats in a whisper the silent dialogue between First Lady and Holy Father. She no longer has to act in the disgraceful settings of Argentina Sono Film. Now her stage is nothing less than the Vatican, the World . . . and Heaven. Only God, after all, can write a perfect script. But to imitate God's imagination is to accede to his celestial kingdom while still on this earth. Santa Evita did so in her lifetime: in 1951 a sixteen-year-old girl, Evelina, wrote Evita two thousand letters, at a

rate of five or six a day. All contained the same text, as befits a prayer addressed to a saint. Evita was already in her lifetime the Virgin of Guadalupe, as Ricardo Garibay says of Mexico's patron saint.

How could such a body, such an image, possibly endure illness and death? "I would rather die of pain than sadness," says Eva Perón when her cancer becomes terminal. At thirty-three years of age, that powerful, beautiful, adored, capricious, and philanthropic woman, the wife of Perón but also mistress of the *descamisados*, Mother of the Greaseheads, sinks irrevocably into an unbearable early death, taken by the Fates. . . . And the legend surrounding her is enlarged by her agony. Her valet, Renzi, removes the mirrors from the bedroom of the dying woman, keeps the scale at an unchanging 46 kilos in perpetuity, tampers with the radios so she won't hear the lamentations of the crowd: Evita is dying. But it is in death that Eva Perón begins her real life. This is the essence of Tomás Eloy Martínez's hallucinatory novel.

. . .

Dr. Ara, a true *criollo* Frankenstein, is charged with giving immortal life to the embalmed corpse of Eva Perón. "Evita had become firm and young, like a twenty-year-old. . . . Her entire body radiated a soft fragrance of lavender and almonds . . . a beauty which made one forget all the other joys in the universe." Dr. Ara's final, theatrical touch is to suspend the dead woman in thin air, supported by invisible threads: "Visitors fell to their knees, and arose lightheaded."

When Perón falls in 1955, the new military rulers decide to make Evita's

corpse disappear. But they do not incinerate it, though it would have been easy, with all the wrappings soaked in chemicals: she would have ignited at the touch of a match. The president in office decrees, instead, that she be given a Christian burial. Her body is "bigger than the

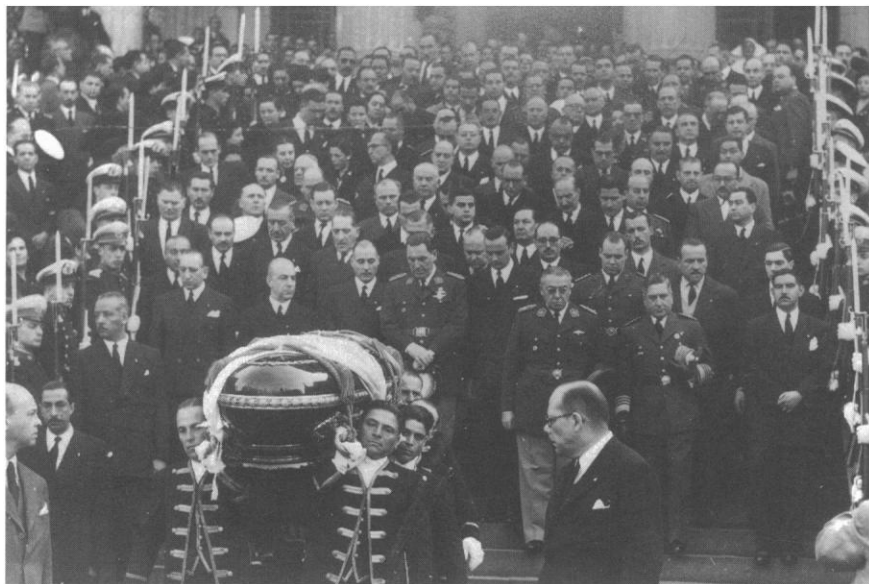
Eva Duarte, born in the little village of Los Toldos on May 9, 1919—an illegitimate child, a virtually illiterate girl who never learned to spell, an Eliza Doolittle from the heartland of Argentina, waiting only for a Professor Higgins to teach her to pronounce her aitches

country," and Argentines put into it "all their shit, their hatred, their craving to kill it again." And their grief. Perhaps, after a Christian burial, Evita will finally fall into oblivion.

But Eva Perón, mistress of her fate at last, refuses to disappear. Masterfully, Eloy Martínez reveals to us the ways in which she stays alive, ensuring her immortality, as her body becomes an object of pleasure even for those who hate her, even for her custodians. . . . Fetishism, as Freud observes, is a displacement of the sexual object. It provides a surrogate satisfaction—satisfaction, but also frustration. The guardians of Evita's corpse do not just replace an impossible sexual love with a National Goddess. They ensure the corpse's survival, assisted by Dr. Ara—who prays, of course, that his masterpiece will endure. The corpse is triplicated: the real one and two copies, the original identified by hidden marks on the genitals and the ear. The corpse—

**Eva Perón's
funeral, Buenos
Aires, 1952.**

UPI/Corbis-Bettman



corpses—are moved around to create confusion in a funereal odyssey from garret to projection room, from Patagonian jails to Army trucks and transatlantic ships. She is called The Deceased. TD. TW (That Woman). She is called “the Person.” The French *personne*, which means at once “somebody” and “nobody,” perfectly captures the ambiguity of this sobriquet. That Person who is Nobody is idolized by her successive jailers. Evita survives all calamities. Her death is both her fiction and her reality. Wherever it is taken, the corpse begins each day mysteriously surrounded by tapers and flowers. The task of the caretakers becomes impossible. They must combat a death whose life millions believe in. Her ghostly reappearances are many and identical: she says only that the future will be somber. As ever, Santa Evita is infallible.

The embalmer always knew it: “Dead, she can be infinite.” It is Dr. Ara who is entrusted, after Evita’s death, with answering the letters still sent by her faithful, asking for wedding gowns, furniture, jobs. “I send you a kiss from Heaven,” replies the dead woman. “I speak with God every day.” The jailers of the corpse are, themselves, prisoners of that ghost of Nobody, The Dead Woman, That Wo-

man. “She ceased to be what she said and did, to become what people say she said and people say she did.”

The art of the embalmer is akin to that of the biographer. It consists of freezing a life or a body, says Eloy Martínez, “in the pose in which eternity must remember them.” But Evita’s destiny is incomplete. Maddened by Eva, Colonel Moori Koenig, one of her corpse’s many guardians, believes he is witnessing the destiny of Nobody when he sees American astronauts land on the moon. When Armstrong begins digging to collect moon rocks, the colonel cries out, “She is being buried on the moon!” I myself prefer this other climax: the artillery captain Milton Galarza escorts the body of Nobody to Genoa on board the *Contessino Biancamano*. The embalmed corpse is knocked about in a huge casket filled with newspapers and bricks. Galarza’s only pastime during the crossing is to go down to the hold and talk every night with Nobody. Eva Perón, his corpse, “is a liquid sun.”

. . .

The Russian formalist Victor Schlovsky admired the daring of those writers capable of revealing the inner design of their novels, who made shameless display

of their methods. *Don Quijote* and *Tristram Shandy* are two famous examples; Cortázar's *Hopscotch* is a great contemporary example. Tomás Eloy Martínez's novel belongs to this club. *Santa Evita* is constructed somewhat like Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, with testimony from a varied cast of people who knew Evita and her corpse: the embalmer, her valet, her mother Juana Ibarguren, the projectionist from a cinema in which the coffin was hidden—like a second film—behind the screen. Evita's hairdresser, the soldier who took charge of her corpse.

All of them, however, are transcended by the author himself. Tomás Eloy Martínez is conscious of what he is doing. Myth and history part ways, and between the two lies the defiant reign of fiction. He wishes to elevate his heroine to fiction because he wants to save her, in a sense, from history: "if we could see ourselves within history," he writes, "we would be terrified. There would be no history, because nobody would want to move." To overcome that terror, the novelist offers us not life, but stories. The novelist knows that "reality does not come back to life; it is born in another guise, it is transformed, it reinvents itself in novels."

Abandoning this credo, however, the novelist is doomed to live with the phantom he has created, the dream invented by the past, the fiction halfway between myth and history. . . . "Thus do I advance, day by day, along the thin line between the mythical and the true, finding my way among the lights of what did not happen and the darks of what might have happened. I lose myself among the folds, and She always seeks me out. She

never ceases to exist, make me exist; she makes of her existence an exaggeration."

Tomás Eloy Martínez is the last custodian of The Deceased, the last lover of Nobody, the last historian of That Woman.

. . .

Santa Evita is the story of a Latin American country which deceived itself, which imagines itself to be European, rational, civilized, and awakens one day bereft of illusions, as Latin American as El Salvador or Venezuela—but still more insane, because it never imagined it was so vulnerable. It has been forced to recall that is also the country of Facunde, Rosas and Arlt—as brutally savage as its military, who are torturers, murders, destroyers of families, generations, and entire professions of Argentinians.

The art of the embalmer is akin to that of the biographer

Just as Latin America invades the Republic of Argentina, as the poverty-stricken mestizos surround the Parisian city on Río de la Plata, so did Eva Duarte invade the heart, the mind, the guts, the dreams and nightmares of Argentina. A hallucinatory gothic novel, a perverse love story, a shocking tale of horror—a hallucinatory, perverse, shocking national history in reverse, *Santa Evita* is all that and something more.