

BORGES AND BUENOS AIRES
THE BARRIO, MEMORY AND THE OTHER



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Sólo en un vasto, artístico y accesible parque, el pueblo será pueblo; sólo aquí no habrá extranjeros, ni nacionales ni plebeyos.

(Domingo F. Sarmiento)

The spaces in which we live close about us and disappear like the waters of the sea after a ship passes through. To look for the essence of life in space is like trying to look for the path of the ship in the water: it only exists as a memory of the flow of its uninterrupted movement in time. The places where we happen to be are ephemeral and fortuitous settings for our life in time, and to try to recapture them is impossible.

(Kern 50)

The excerpt from Sarmiento's speech, cited above, is telling of the nation-building project, which had dominated Argentina in the late nineteenth-century, and would continue to play a significant role in the formation of the Argentine metropolis through the first third of the twentieth century. This speech alludes to a public space within the borders of a newly demarcated Buenos Aires, in which the barbaric tradition of the past had been symbolically dis-

placed with the promise of a new and civilized center.¹ Thus, Palermo became in the nineteenth-century an imagined space versus an organic one, which would unify the city's inhabitants—foreigners, nationals, and commoners alike.

Construction of a space perceived initially as a collective idea (as seen with the Palermo Park project), is the notion that allowed Jorge Luis Borges to define Buenos Aires in mythical terms. However, in order to complete this project, Borges needed to incorporate a second component—time.

As Stephen Kern points out above, space and time are inextricable. In his book, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1930*, Kern pays particular attention to the concept of memory at the turn of the century. It is within this context that he examines the two inventions that were pivotal in the transformation from experience to personal and collective memory—the phonograph and the camera. Each of these tools provided direct access to the past through auditory and visual imagery. Consequently, construction of the past, present, and the future could be controlled. While the implications of such manipulation of time are far-reaching, there is one example that is particularly pertinent to the discussion of Borges and Buenos Aires. At the turn of the century, the European community demonstrated concern about the preservation and restoration of those architectural structures that were threatened by urban growth (Kern 38-39), an urban growth (in this case European) reminiscent of the changes Borges witnessed in Argentina.

Imagined space and indeterminate time are recurring themes in Borges' poetry as he attempts to (re)construct the city of his youth.² Nonetheless, in studying his work, one is confronted not with a reflection of the present, but an allusion to a remote past—a past that

¹ In 1887 the government granted land to the city of Buenos Aires in order to expand. The Palermo Park, commissioned by Sarmiento was built on the property of the former dictator, Rosas (Gorelik 57-58).

² Due to the extensive corpus of poetry available, I will concentrate primarily upon poems found in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929), *El Otro y el mismo* (1964), and *Elogio de la sombra* (1969). While these books were chosen to show contrast, it is important to note that Borges rewrote many of his earlier poems in the 1950's and 1960's. For more discussion of this see: Lafon 105-109.

Borges attempts to recuperate through the use of personal memory. In his later poetry, Borges recognizes the myth he has created as personal and individual. Not the collective imagined space he envisioned, Buenos Aires is finally captured in its entirety, both through the images chosen and those, by definition, excluded from his work. It is in this manner that the Other, decidedly absent in his poetry, is finally recognized as co-creator of Buenos Aires.

In his article "Buenos Aires, mito y obsesión," Horacio Salas proposes that Borges attempts to create a history for the city. Consequently, his work becomes simultaneously text, mythology, imagined history and metaphysics (389). This approach is immediately apparent in his first book of poems: *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923). In "Arrabal," Borges clearly identifies himself with the collective image of Buenos Aires, and rejects the referent of the city that accompanied him in the European years (1914-1921):

y sentí Buenos Aires.
 Esta ciudad que yo creí mi pasado
 es mi porvenir, mi presente;
 los años que he vivido en Europa son ilusorios,
 yo estaba siempre (y estaré) en Buenos Aires. (15-19)³

The moment, which accompanies the poet's awareness of the city, is one of displacement. The childhood experiences in Buenos Aires, taken to Europe, are now recuperated. At the same time, the more recent memories of Europe retreat to an illusory mental space. The relationship between Buenos Aires and Borges thus transforms from one of distant memory to one of origin, of home.

As mentioned earlier, in the attempt to recover the Buenos Aires of his youth, Borges uses visual references similar to photographic shots.⁴ While describing the outskirts of the city, the spaces por-

³ "and I felt Buenos Aires, / This city that I believed was my past / is my future, my present; / the years I have lived in Europe are illusory, / I was always (and will be) in Buenos Aires".

⁴ The connection between photography and recovery resounds in a remark that Salas makes in his article: "Borges teme que su ciudad, su Palermo, se pierda, desaparezca, y trata de fijar los restos de hábitos y personajes, postales del viejo Buenos Aires que imaginó en los años europeos" (395) (Borges fears his city, his Palermo, is being lost,

trayed are decidedly empty; the poet wanders the streets in solitude, as the other inhabitants are alluded to only by the image of houses:

y quedé entre las casas,
 cuadrículadas en manzanas
 diferentes e iguales
 como si fueran todas ellas
 monótonos recuerdos repetidos
 de una sola manzana (4-9)⁵.

This particular reflection of the *arrabal* is of interest as it places the city both within the realm of the real and the imagined; the blocks indicative of the planned city coexist with the notion of repeated memories.

In his poem, "Amanecer," Borges draws upon the ideas of Berkeley and Schopenhauer and declares that the world is a mental activity, a shared dream (11-14). As such, ideas should not be considered eternal, but immortal (16-18).⁶ The poet's conception of Buenos Aires is not universal, however, but limited to a few. As such, Buenos Aires' survival is threatened (38-41). Important for this analysis is his definition of the city as it clearly evokes a sense of Self and Other, and the role of this relationship in the city's potential destruction.

Si están ajenas de sustancia las cosas
 y si esta numerosa Buenos Aires

will disappear, and tries to fix the remains of the customs and people, postcards of the old Buenos Aires that he imagined in the European years).

⁵ "and I remained between the houses, / squared in blocks / different and the same / as if they all were / monotonous repeated memories / of only one block".

⁶ In this poem as in "Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires", Borges draws the comparison between the eternal (time) and water. Lelia Madrid attributes this connection to Borges' conception of history and memory—based on Heraclitus' teaching: One cannot visit the same river twice. She continues: "Memoria infinita donde lo que se recuerda el hecho no es nunca idéntico, principalmente porque en la memoria no hay comienzos ni fines verdaderos, ni tampoco segmentos absolutamente estables. Los únicos límites válidos de la memoria son los que los seres humanos inventan cada vez que se actualiza el recuerdo" (350) (Infinite memory in which what is remembered and the occurrence are never identical, principally because in memory there is no true beginning nor end, nor absolutely stable segments. The only valid limits of memory are those that human beings invent each time they have a memory).

no es más que un sueño
 que erigen en compartida magia las almas,
 hay un instante
 en que peligra desafortadamente su ser
 y es el instante estremecido del alba,
 cuando son pocos los que sueñan el mundo
 y sólo algunos trasnochadores conservan,
 cenicienta y apenas bosquejada,
 la imagen de las calles
 que definirán después con los otros (26-37)⁷.

There is a sense in this stanza that Buenos Aires' foundation is tenuous; it relies heavily on the shared and faded dream of a few, and is threatened by the constructions of others.⁸ Borges does not identify these others. They, like the inhabitants of the *arrabal*, remain anonymous and absent, mere reflections, rather than true inhabitants.

In the poems from *Cuaderno San Martín*, Borges begins to treat the city in terms of its barrios, each recognized by its distinct personality. Palermo, the barrio of Borges' youth, is identified as the origin of Buenos Aires. It is from this space, once on the outskirts of the city, that the poet interprets the city around him.⁹ While Sarmiento perceived Palermo as an entirely new space without history, Borges recuperates a distant past in his writings. In the first chapter of *Evaristo Carriego*, "Palermo, Buenos Aires," Borges retells Palermo's history. He identifies the founding figure as Domenico Palermo, a

⁷ "If things are free from substance / and if this numerous Buenos Aires / is no more than a dream / that souls erect in a shared magic / there is an instant / in which its being is threatened furiously / and it is the shaky instant of dawn, / when few are those who dream the world / and only some of those awake all night conserve, / ashen and barely outlined, / the image of the streets / that will be defined later with the others".

⁸ The city as idea is echoed in Borges later short story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," (*Ficciones*), which describes the formation of a country (and, subsequently a planet), conceived by a group of few. These "founders" were able to establish a reality based solely upon the literature that they created.

⁹ Palermo and its poet, Evaristo Carriego are the subject of several of Borges' essays in the twenties and early thirties. See for instance: "Carriego y el sentido del arrabal," in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1925) or the prologue to his book *Evaristo Carriego* (1930), "Palermo, Buenos Aires."

butcher in the seventeenth-century, and later places Palermo within its nineteenth-century context—as part of General Rosas property.

The book starts with the poem “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires.” This city exists outside of the confines of time, and as such can only take shape within textual space in poetic form (Robatto 47). Buenos Aires, constructed from the poet’s point of reference (Palermo), is appropriated by Borges. In this manner, he is able to manipulate the past and to create a history for the city according to his own visualizations. Once again, the foundation of the city falls within the context of mental rather than concrete space (Madrid 348).

In his analysis of the original “La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires,” James Holloway also notes this interrelation of myth and history. The first three stanzas of both versions recover symbols pertaining to the age of the explorers—“a world frequently bewitched and still fraught both with mystery and mythical creatures, yet for them undeniably real” (23). Although the fourth stanza differs considerably in the two versions, the first evoking images of the rival literary group Boedo, and the latter images of the barrio of La Boca (and its associations with the immigrant populations), both versions end with a clear definition of the poet’s own barrio as center, Palermo.

The stanzas that follow are dominated by nostalgic glimpses of the barrio revisited in the first three books of Borges poetry: the organ player, the cigarette store, the tango, etc. These photograph-like descriptions evoke an unrecoverable past, as the Palermo contemporary to Borges surroundings was dominated by manifestations of the modern metropolis. The contrast between the real and imaginary urban space is a common subject in Argentine writing at the turn of the century. In her essay, “Buenos Aires infundada,” Rosalba Campa notes that the café, the street, the patio, the barrio are recurring themes in the literature of Carriego, of Borges, and in tango lyrics. Most importantly, however, she proposes that these spaces are mentioned textually precisely because they no longer exist in reality. In her discussion of Borges’ Palermo she notes: “And in every corner of memory, Palermo, this Palermo in which, even though in the time of Rosas it was being transformed into a park, still oozes the

blood of the colonial slaughterhouses (...)” (109)¹⁰. Borges, thus, creates a Buenos Aires centered not only in a space originally constructed intellectually, but he also projects a distant and distinct time period onto the present.

The integral Buenos Aires created textually in this first poem, is dismantled in subsequent poems. In “Muertes de Buenos Aires,” Borges juxtaposes two distinct cemeteries—that of the West, La Chacarita, and that of the North, La Recoleta. Death, while universal to all human beings, is not experienced equally by Buenos Aires’ inhabitants. As Robatto points out, those who die in the West occupy an inferior position in relation to those of the North:

The contrast between these two places is evident; filth, poverty, a pile of bones, thick hard walls, social tragedy: this is *La Chacarita*. Distinction, ashes of those of lineage, military pomp, birds, flowers, rigid marble: are derivations of *La Recoleta*. (67)¹¹.

It is in this poem that we begin to find evidence of the Other. Borges’ mention of the slums, yellow fever, and the city outskirts suggests the poorer areas inhabited by the immigrants. He does not refer in the poem to the *compadrito*, the Argentine-born urban dweller, but instead prefers to speak of anonymous mass associated with pestilence—a common myth surrounding the immigrant populations at the time. This vision of the cemetery is reversed in the second poem, “La Recoleta,” in which Borges revisits the national heroes and founding fathers of the nation.¹² It is in La Recoleta that honor, tradition and memory persist.

The physical division of Buenos Aires as well as the preoccupation with memory and oblivion are echoed in “Barrio norte”. It is

¹⁰ “Y en cada rincón de la memoria, Palermo, ese Palermo en donde, a pesar de que ya en la época de Rosas fuera transformando en un parque, aún rezuma la sangre de los mataderos coloniales (...)”

¹¹ “Es evidente el contraste entre estos dos lugares; suciedad, podredumbre, montonera de huesos, duros paredones, tragedia social: esto es *La Chacarita*. Distinción, alcurniadas cenizas, pompa militar, pájaros, flores, mármoles yertos: son derivaciones de *La Recoleta*.”

¹² These heroes and founding fathers are recovered textually in Borges early poems as well. See, for instance, “Inscripción sepulcral” and “Isidoro Acevedo.”

within this poem that Borges allows us to glimpse the relationships that operate beyond the static snapshots of previous poems. Initially visual signifiers of the barrio —the *milonga*, the patio, the sign, the guitar are presented. In recovering these visual images, Borges rescues the barrio from oblivion: “el olvido, que es el modo más pobre del misterio” (6). He positions memory within the figure of the blind man; the one who no longer sees is the one who is able to preserve the barrio as it was—in memory.

In the second half of the poem, the poet moves from a superficial study of the barrio, to a focus on its invisible aspects:

Pero sin ruido y siempre,
 en cosas comunicadas, perdidas, como lo están siempre las cosas,
 en el gomero con su vetado cielo de sombra,
 en la bacía que recoge el primer sol y el último,
 perdura ese hecho servicial y amistoso,
 esa lealtad oscura que mi palabra está declarando:
 el barrio (23-29)¹³.

The barrio that is slipping away from the present reality, “Se nos aparta el barrio” (19), is recovered not in its concrete form, but in the interactions between its inhabitants. The difficulty, which Borges has in verbalizing these abstractions, is emphasized in the final phrase. Borges concentrates, not on the physical aspects, but virtues such as service, friendship and loyalty. He thus attempts to create a more complete referent for the city; one that is based not only on the visible, but also on the forces which exist between these objects, and that allow the barrio to endure.

In his later poetry, Borges revisits the myth that he built in his earlier works. The *compadrito* celebrated in earlier poems is placed clearly within the realm of the epic, the fable, and the legend. These figures, once central to Borges conception of the barrio, have been lost. This idea is explicit in his poem “Tango” from *El otro, el mismo* (1964):

¹³ “But without noise and always, / in the uncommunicated things, lost, like things always are, / in the rubber plantation worker with his grainy sky of shade, / in the washbasin that catches the first sun and the last, / endurance this helpful and friendly act, / this dark loyalty that my words are declaring: / the barrio”.

¿Dónde estarán? Pregunta la elegía
 De quienes ya no son, como si hubiera
 Una región en que el Ayer pudiera
 Ser el Hoy, el Aún y el Todavía (1-4)¹⁴.

Not only is the figure of the *compadrito* demystified in this poem, but also Borges manipulation of time. Lost as well is the space described as containing a mixture of past, present, and future. Borges goes on to describe the figures that lived by the “secta del cuchillo y del coraje” (8). He finds that these men are immortalized within the lyrics of the milonga. These songs, born in the outskirts of the city, and integral to the myth of Buenos Aires allow direct access to a time that is forgotten:

En un instante que hoy emerge aislado,
 Sin antes ni después, contra el olvido,
 Y que tiene el sabor de lo perdido,
 De lo perdido y lo recuperado (45-48)¹⁵.

Instead of the camera, Borges moves to the promise of the phonograph as his tool of recovery.¹⁶ Borges does not mention the Italian immigrant in this poem. He chooses instead to emphasize the Argentine-born figure. This effectively excludes the co-creator of a musical tradition considered exclusive to Argentina.

Borges relationship to Buenos Aires changes significantly in the two poems of the same title. The first, demonstrates a growing realization that the construction of the Argentine metropolis has been a personal endeavor. The final lines of the poem, clearly show the appropriation of the city personal and mental; once the poet dies, so will his Buenos Aires: “Ahora estás en mí. Eres mi vaga / Suerte,

¹⁴ “Where would they be? Asks the elegy / of those who are no longer, as if / a region that Yesterday could / Be the Today, the Still and the Yet to be”.

¹⁵ “In one instant that today emerges isolated, / without a before or an after, against oblivion, / and that has the flavor of the lost, / of the lost and the recuperated”.

¹⁶ In 1965, Borges continues to explore the milonga and recovery. His book of poems *Para las seis cuerdas* is composed of poems with the themes and form of the milonga, those songs composed before the influence of the immigrants was felt, and converted into the tango.

esas cosas que la muerte apaga" (13-14)¹⁷. This personal incorporation of Buenos Aires is closely tied to the experiences of the poet in the second "Buenos Aires" poem: "Y la ciudad, ahora, es como un plano / De mis humillaciones y fracasos" (1-2)¹⁸. As in the first, the poet concludes with images of shadows without substance. He finds that the union between the city's inhabitants of the city is not built from love (as it was in "Barrio norte"), but from fear.

The full realization of the city as memory, as personal, and as therefore incomplete does not occur in Borges' work until he writes the final "Buenos Aires" poem found in *Elogio de la sombra* (1969). In this poem, Borges revisits the visual images of the physical city, Argentine authors, as well as memories of his experiences: the Plaza de Mayo, the city lights, the wall around Recoleta, Elvira de Alvear, Lugones, his father's reflection in a mirror. Yet, it is the final two stanzas that are most telling of Borges' Buenos Aires:

No quiero proseguir; estas cosas son demasiado individuales, son demasiado lo que son, para ser también Buenos Aires.

Buenos Aires es la otra calle, la que no pisé nunca, es el centro secreto de las manzanas, los patios últimos, es lo que las fachadas ocultan, es mi enemigo, si lo tengo, es la persona a quien le desagradan mis versos (a mí me desagradan también), es la modesta librería en que acaso entramos y que hemos olvidado, es esa racha de milonga silbada que no reconocemos y que nos toca, es lo que se ha perdido y lo que será, el lo ulterior, lo ajeno, lo lateral, el barrio que no es tuyo ni mío, lo que ignoramos y queremos. (61-75)¹⁹

¹⁷ "Now you are in me. You are my ill-defined / Luck, those things that death extinguishes".

¹⁸ "And the city, now, is like a plane / of my humiliations and failures".

¹⁹ "I do not want to continue; these things are too individual, they are too much what they are, to also be Buenos Aires. / Buenos Aires is the other street, the one that I never stepped upon, it is the secret center of the blocks, the patios at the end, it is what the facades hide, it is my enemy, if I have one, it is the person to whom my verses are disagreeable (to me they are disagreeable as well), it is the modest bookstore in which we barely enter and that we have forgotten, it is this fragment from a whistled milonga that we do not recognize and that touches us, it is what has been lost and what will be, in the furthest place, the alien, the lateral, the barrio that is not yours nor mine, what we forget and love".

In this poem, Borges presents us with a negative-like image of Buenos Aires. The city becomes not what has been recovered and captured in the text, but that which has been left out: the experiences, the spaces, the music and images—forgotten, ignored or desired. Buenos Aires, in this sense becomes an integral whole. No longer the shared dream of a few, the city is converted into the space that captures the dreams of all—those recognized and those excluded—and is appropriated by no one. Each signifier brings with it its opposite, to build a Buenos Aires understood not for its images, but also its reflections, not for the concrete, but also the abstract, not only in the self, but also in the Other.

The Buenos Aires that Borges has chosen to construct in his early poetry is one in which the Other is excluded from the “shared” conception of the metropolis. Those who envisioned the city, and contributed to its ideal formation were figures of a distant and Argentine past. It is not until his later work that the previously anonymous inhabitants of the city emerge. While Borges does not mention the immigrant explicitly in his poetry, these figures are inferred from the visual and auditory images recovered and positioned textually.

The preservation, restoration, and projection of a remote time and place upon Buenos Aires are accomplished through the manipulation of time and space. Borges’ play on memory and oblivion are recurring themes in this work, as in his fiction. However, it is not until his later poems, that Borges recognizes the inherent flaw in his design. By creating a city based upon the ideas of one, Buenos Aires would cease to exist with the poet’s death. In order to create the eternal Buenos Aires he proposed in his early poetry, Borges was forced to recognize precisely those elements of the city that he had previously excluded. Only through the incorporation of all of the components of the city, could the project be realized. In this manner, Borges places Buenos Aires—with its foreigners, nationals, elites, and commoners—within the realm of the immortal.

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