

DISSIMULATIONS: NEGATION, THE PROPER NAME, AND THE CORPSE  
IN BORGES'S "EL SIMULACRO"

*Margaret Schwartz*

*"Los temas contemporáneos son peligrosos"*  
*Borges in Entredichos, Buenos Aires, August 1983*

**E**l simulacro" describes a scene in the Chaco, in July, 1952, during the period of national mourning for the first Lady of Argentina, Eva Perón. A charlatan, a mountebank sets up an obviously fake casket, adorns it with flowers and candles, and charges credulous country folk to pay their respects to a blonde doll he has used to represent the corpse. Yet the question of credulity Borges's narrator is addressed to the charlatan, not to the crowds, although he notes that many paid more than once to pay their respects to the fake widower. No, Borges's narrator wonders, did the charlatan believe himself to be the mourning widower Perón? Was he purely cynical, heartlessly opportunistic? He does not answer this question except to simply assert that the story is not only true, but only a local variation of a story taking place all over Argentina, in the provinces, while the people in the capital mourned. Here the essay turns to the models for this sham, Eva and Juan Perón, and muses that they themselves "were unknown or anonymous persons (whose secret name and true face we shall

never know) who acted out, for the credulous love of the working classes, a crass and ignoble mythology" (Hurley 301-02). In Spanish, the entire sentence reads:

El enlutado no era Perón, y la muñeca rubia no era la mujer Eva Duarte, pero tampoco Perón era Perón ni Eva era Eva sino desconocidos o anónimos (cuyo nombre secreto y cuyo rostro verdadero ignoramos) que figuraron, para el crédulo amor de los arrabales, una crasa mitología. (167)

My essay will focus on this last sentence of the piece –like so many of Borges's last lines, it feels like a metaphysical punchline. The theme of the simulacrum, like that of utopia or infinity, haunts critical writing about Borges. However, by confining my remarks to the sentence itself, I can cut down on the magnitude of the theme: *this* simulacrum, of this thing – the mourning, Perón, Eva's corpse – which is, of course, an event of no small import for Argentine history, cultural memory, and of course Borges himself. In the midst of an apparent flight into poetic language and metaphysical theme, he delivers his most deliberate salvo, calling Peronism a "crasa mitología." He names Perón in this sentence, and he names Evita, and here he makes a metaphor between the abstract concept implied by the metaphysical register, and the very specific, historical entities that were Perón and Eva, his wife.

My own work elsewhere focuses on the corpse of Evita, which I read across multiple communication media in contemporary Argentine history. It's an object, which makes it a little hard to "read" in itself, but the ways in which modes of communication break down over the corpse are rich in suggestions about the contours of the communication process itself – and not just cognitively, but metaphysically. This is no ordinary object, nor is it without its macabre suggestions for human imagination, obsession, fear and hatred.

So *how* is this object inserted, or rather how does it show itself, in the medium of Borges's text? First, the sentence is negatively constructed around the verb *to be*. Perón is *not* Perón, Eva is *not* Eva. This unique syntax makes Eva and Perón both the subjects and the objects of their own negation, meaning that each is simul-

taneously invoked and effaced. Second, Eva Perón is named, or rather misnamed, as Eva Duarte – an "illegitimate" name marking the historical woman's illegitimate claim to power. If I read this sentence dialectically, then, I have some Eva that is Eva, and is the woman Eva Duarte, and who is also not an unknown, and whose true face is not hidden from us, and whose very real mythology transformed a nation. Third, this particular combination of historical reference, negative construction and deliberate misrecognition results in what the narrator calls "la cifra de una época irreal," comparing the scene in the Chaco to the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*. Peronism itself was a sham: the scene in the Chaco is a sham of a sham. What I want to show is that the cost of this condemnation – the stylistic force needed to carry that much scorn – is a historical remnant, if you will, a referential trace, to the real corpse lying, at the time of the story, in state in Buenos Aires.

#### TREATMENTS OF THE SIMULACRUM IN BORGES

Jonathan Stuart Boulter explicitly examines Baudrillard's simulacrum in Borges's work. To briefly summarize Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum, there are four phases of the image (these phases are roughly but by no means exclusively considered historical insofar as they are successive):

1. it is the reflection of a basic reality
2. it masks and perverts a basic reality
3. it masks the *absence* of a basic reality
4. it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (11)

Baudrillard famously chides Borges for his failure to move beyond the second phase of the image, citing his "Del rigor en la ciencia" as proof. Boulter's project is to refute this position, proposing instead that "Borges' vision of the world is one that attempts dialectically (and perhaps aporetically) to create a textual bridge between the infinity of a totalizing linguistic structure of

the universe and its particular real-world expression" (358). Stephen E. Soud's "Borges the Golem-Maker" is less conciliatory between postmodern readings of Borges and those that cling a metaphysics of presence, claiming that an establishment of authorial presence in Borges's work "directly controverts a deconstructive reading" of "Las ruinas circulares" (743).

Other critics, while they do not explicitly take up the simulacrum, have of course dealt with the theme of mirrors, which is the simulacrum's closest kin. The examples are too numerous to cite in detail here, but a few stand out. Víctor Bravo calls the mirror "síntesis y umbral de todas las dualidades, la más inmediata concreción de la representación de la alteridad" (152), thus seemingly aligning himself with a metaphysical, or second-order simulacrum. His project, however, is to locate Borges within modernity. Thus he reads Borges against Nietzsche's "disenchantment of the world" as "el movimiento profundo de la conciencia moderna" within which "la obra de Borges parece reunir en sí los signos complejos de ese estremecimiento" (84). He considers one of the main characteristics of postmodernity "el lugar de lo 'original' como lugar vacío y el juego de copias (de reproducciones, de repeticiones, de sustitutos) como única realidad," and identifies Borges's fascination with "la imposición de la copia sobre el modelo" as a movement from modernity towards postmodernity (105). Sylvia Molloy identifies in Borges's "La postulación de la realidad" a similar fascination with the relationship of text to reality—rightly so (60). She opts neither for a complete imposition of the simulacrum on the model nor for an anchoring original, but instead traces the movement of what she calls a "differential supplement" (60) that makes it possible to distinguish between these two positions. The similarity of this movement to Derrida's *différance* is most likely what leads Boulter to classify her among the postmodernist readers of Borges.

My argument confines itself to this specific instance of the simulacrum, in a piece itself titled "El simulacro." Interestingly, not even Boulter mentions this piece in his article. I am not so much interested in reconciling "postmodern" readings with those that subscribe to the "metaphysics of presence." Rather, a care-

ful reading of "El simulacro" reveals a material, historical trace whose power in the text derives explicitly from its misrecognition and its position within a negative construction. There are a variety of candidates for the titular "simulacro," as described below. I argue that one of these candidates presents itself compellingly because it is *not* named, or misnamed. The blonde doll does not, as Borges writes, stand in for "la mujer Eva Duarte." It stands in for her corpse. This material object, itself a cipher for the problem of the simulacrum, is what haunts this text and mediates between a purely historical reading and a metaphysical reading, postmodern or otherwise.

#### EL SIMULACRO

To what or to whom do we refer when we talk about the titular simulacrum? There are a number of candidates. The entire situation is a simulacrum of the actual scene of mourning taking place in Buenos Aires. The blonde doll is a simulacrum for the embalmed corpse of Evita. The architect of the situation, the "enlutado," is also a simulacrum for the mourning Perón, as it is he who receives the peasants' consolations and who charges them admission.

Now, the word simulacrum, both in English and in Spanish, has a number of different meanings. The first and most common is an image that stands in for the "real" thing. Here the simulacrum carries the connotation of the idol, the icon, or the mask: it circulates in the realm of religious imagery and the problem of representation and what Kant called the noumenal and Lacan called the Real. Another primary meaning is that of a simulation: in English, military training scenarios such as flight simulators or, more generally, what are called "war games," may be called simulacra. Secondly, the word can mean a sham or a grift, connoting intentional, maleficent dissimulation.

Boyer translates "El simulacro" as "The Sham", Hurley as "The Mountebank"—a somewhat archaic word meaning a huckster or con man. Both translations seem to focus the reader on this last meaning, dissimulation or trickery, and thus on the role

of the “mountebank” posing as Perón exacting money from the “crédulo amor de los arrabales” with his “sham” funeral. There is no translation that uses the simple cognate, *simulacrum*. One reason for opting out of the obvious choice is biographical: Borges hated Perón, who removed him from his post as librarian and appointed him chicken inspector, instead (Borges immediately resigned). Borges’s mother, Leonor Acevedo, and his sister, Norah, were involved in a protest on September 8, 1948, in which they were arrested for singing the national anthem in protest on Florida Street (Monegal, Santí and Alonso 66; Balderston 91). Focusing on the negative connotations of “*simulacro*” is therefore not inappropriate, as the story does cast Peronism as the sham on a national scale.

In this context, the English translators’ choices point to a certain classification of “*El simulacro*” as biographical and historical, registering not literary or metaphysical themes but instead Borges’s own personal experience with the years of the Perón dictatorship.

These translations notably buck the trend in Borges scholarship to identify themes such as the *simulacrum* as metaphysical concerns staged in an aesthetic register. Along with the mirror, the parallel universe, and the double, the *simulacrum* is easily classified as one of Borges’s engagements with what Víctor Bravo terms the modern “crisis of representation” (83). By filing “*El simulacro*” under biography, therefore, the translations also seem to disqualify it from serious literary scholarship –and indeed, this essay has received very little attention in comparison to other pieces in *El hacedor* such as “*Borges y yo*,” “*El testigo*,” “*Una rosa amarilla*” and “*El otro tigre*.” *El hacedor* also contains two pieces directly concerning mirrors, “*Los espejos velados*” and the poem “*Los espejos*.” Moreover, many of the pieces just cited, particularly “*Borges y yo*” and “*El otro tigre*” explicitly engage questions of representation and perception, of faces and masks, avatars and dreams. In this context, a reading of “*El simulacro*” as a meditation on the copy’s usurpation of the original, on the emptiness behind the mask, would not be out of place.

This essay argues for a third position, reading in “*El simulacro*” a trace of the real—in both the historical and metaphysical sense—left by the final sentence’s use of the proper name within a negative construction. The third candidate for the title’s referent, the blonde doll, is registered neither in the English translations various parsings nor in the text’s explicit argument. The blonde doll seems buried in a series of negations: it was not Eva, but neither was Eva Eva. Yet the blonde doll is not a substitute for the woman: it is a substitute for her corpse, which in July of 1952 lay in state in Buenos Aires. Thus the doll stands in for, simulates the corpse; the corpse itself simulates a woman who was never self-identical, whose “*nombre secreto y cuyo rostro verdadero ignoramos*.” As I will show, it is precisely the way in which language inverts itself around this plastic noun that allows the text to register its reality. The uncanniness of the corpse, particularly that of the embalmed corpse, confronts and confounds language with its stubborn, unsettling materiality. Its persistence in this text allows us to refigure the ways that historical reference works in Borges, to unmask the reading of “*bad infinity*” this text invites. In this sense, the text itself dissimulates: it covers over its referent with negative construction and deliberate misrecognition of the proper name. It registers the corpse’s materiality in spite of itself.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ORIENTATION IN TIME AND SPACE

When “*El simulacro*” was written, in 1960, Peronism was still fresh in the Argentine cultural memory. Although Borges does not name the characters in the scene until this last sentence, the detail of the doll’s blonde hair and the date, even vaguely sketched (“*uno de los días de julio de 1952*”) would have been an immediate and clear signal to every Argentine reader. July 1952 was when the entire country was plunged into mourning, regardless of their political sympathies. The scale of the funeral and its markers in everyday life for a thirty-day period starting on July 26 made it impossible to ignore or forget. As a simple example, from 1952 to 1955, every night at the hour of her death, 8:25, the radio intoned: “*Son las veinte y veinticinco, hora en que Eva Perón pasó a la*

inmortalidad" (Navarro 339). Moreover, the scene of mourning, the casket and the general and the candles and the flowers: this scene, acted out on a grand scale in Buenos Aires, was instantly iconographic. Scenes of the line snaking on for miles as mourners waited in the rain to file past the coffin, piles of flowers at the gates of the Casa Rosada, grown men and women in tears having to be helped away from the casket—all were photographed and published not only throughout Argentina but worldwide (see for example *Life*, August 11, 1952).

Analyzing the function of dates and chronology in Borges, Elsa Repetto challenges Roger Caillois's assertion that time for Borges is fundamentally circular. "En realidad, fechas y lugares sirven para construir una especie de base, de suelo, de presunto realismo, que va a ser luego 'dislocado', cuestionado, por el desarrollo del relato y que va a permitir la introducción de lo fantástico, a través de lo cotidiano" (48). The fantastic is introduced via everyday life, rather than having a kind of independent orbit. This temporal grounding is the precise starting point of "El simulacro": it begins "En uno de los días de junio de 1952, el enlutado apareció en aquel pueblito del Chaco." In fact, we have a triangulation of sorts between the date, the location, and the apparition of the man in mourning. The Chaco province was named "Presidente Juan Perón" during the years 1950-1955, and so its mention here would also carry the suggestion of the dictator's name, at least to a contemporary Argentine audience. The conjunction of the place, date, and the simple description, "el enlutado" would immediately orient an Argentine reader in a particular historical and geographical space. It is only from this concrete context that the simulacrum detaches, resulting in the vertiginous repetitions and negations of the last sentence. Only one cipher remains that cannot be dislodged from its historical context: la muñeca rubia, a simulacrum for the corpse of Evita Perón.

TAMPOCO PERÓN ERA PERÓN NI EVA ERA EVA

Let us take another look at the last sentence of "El simulacro," which I have said reads like a metaphysical punchline:

El enlutado no era Perón, y la muñeca rubia no era la mujer Eva Duarte, pero tampoco Perón era Perón ni Eva era Eva sino desconocidos o anónimos (cuyo nombre secreto y cuyo rostro verdadero ignoramos) que figuraron, para el crédulo amor de los arrabales, una crasa mitología.

Parsing the sentence roughly, I get: identifying nominalized adjective (el enlutado) *was not* proper name (Perón); simulacrum/substitution (la muñeca rubia) *was not* identifying adjective (la mujer) proper name (Eva Perón), but *neither was* proper name (Perón) proper name (Perón) *nor was* proper name (Eva) proper name (Eva), rather unknowns, anonymous actors, or even archetypes in a "crasa mitología." Both translations I've worked with have rightly tried to preserve the spatial arrangement of the sentence, which visually registers the insistent repetition of the proper name and its adjectival representatives. Moreover, these elements repeat within a negative grammatical construction of the verb *to be*: *were not, neither was, nor was*. Borges, the poet, was not unaware of course that he had entered the cadence of a poetic register—one of the implicit justifications of my careful focus on the one sentence—and here he uses repetition to mirror his own theme of doubling, of masks concealing not a real face, but some kind of abyss. A parenthesis holds the metaphysical "truth" apart: what is certain is that we shall never know their true names or faces. Ana María Barrenechea writes that Borges uses parenthesis to destabilize narrative certainty, to present "una realidad de múltiple motivación simultánea" (197). While she allows for parenthesis as a kind of correction or sharpening of the prose, her main point is that Borges uses parentheses to express "la dificultad de interpretar una realidad que se escapa" (201). Here, however, the parenthetical phrase is itself the interpretation, for although it describes the "escape" of a certain "reality" (that of the true faces and names of Perón and Eva), it is absolutely certain of this interpretation. The parenthesis gives this certainty syntactic force: the unknown faces and true names appear only within the aporia of the parenthesis, without grammatical access to the rest of the sentence. The syntax underlines the sense: the truth behind the simulacrum is out of reach.

The use of the verb “to be” places us in the realm of the metaphysical, first philosophy, whose first inquiry, according to Aristotle, is material: why *is there* something instead of nothing (Mc Keon 283)? Here it is the “nothing” that is positively construed: they were not themselves, but they *were* anonymous persons, whose true identity is forever hidden. The sentence employs repetition, but couched in the negative construction, the doubling is like the famously “abominable” duplication of the mirror. What repeats are merely images thrown up by the ineffable faces confined in the parenthetical. One might imagine two mirrors facing one another — an image Borges himself evokes<sup>1</sup> — to understand how this sentence repeats only the reflection of an inaccessible reality. Thus, here it would be tempting to simply stop at a reading of one of Borges’s most common metaphysical experiments, the infinite regress, with endless substitution of masks for masks, names for names, faces for faces, each as unreal as the next with no “true” identity to ground them. However *la muñeca rubia* disrupts this reading: it is neither a repetition of a previous element, nor is it an adjective that modifies or stands in for one of the repeated elements. It stands on its own, and yet it is the *simulacrum* in question for something that is not named: the corpse of Eva Perón.

The negative construction itself, however, invites a closer reading. The ontological negation — that is, a negation using the verb *to be* — thwarts the tendency to read into this sentence only bad infinity or infinite regress. Negative theology denies the existence of God, circumscribing this ineffable being only by means of negative attributes. Yet just as negative theology believes in an ineffable God, negative construction is here dialectically determined by what it excludes. This determination is what Hegel called “the seriousness, the suffering, the patience and the labour of the negative” (10). Like Ireneo Funes, Hegel’s sense certainty cannot distinguish between the multiple instances of “Here” and “Now” that determine each act of perception.<sup>2</sup> Sense certainty can only

<sup>1</sup> See *Siete noches*, “La pesadilla”: “No son distintas [la pesadilla del espejo y la del laberinto] ya que bastan dos espejos opuestos para construir un laberinto” (226).

<sup>2</sup> Although Hegel’s next chapter is called “Perception,” what he terms “Sense Certainty” is closer to the commonplace meaning of the English word “percep-

make sense of the world by appealing to the abstraction of the category or the form: without this abstraction, it grasps at immediate truths and never reaches “pure being,” for that is “something to which negation and mediation are essential” (61). Abstraction itself negates, insofar as it effaces the detail that tormented Funes and that led Nietzsche to call us all liars by necessity (Kaufman 45). We simply cannot make sense of the world without forgetting something, or lying about something that sense certainty perceives. This necessary exclusion of detail is what Hegel calls the negative, and here it is what Borges’s syntax must necessarily imply without explicitly evoking.

How might we open up this empty space, or qualify the relationship of representation to referent when the latter appears as a mere placeholder in an infinite series? When Hegel says that “negation and mediation” are essential to truth, he means that any proposition must somehow encounter and assimilate what lies outside of it: what it does not or cannot name. For Hegel, this process of encounter and assimilation is the unfolding of Spirit as self-consciousness. Taking up the dialectic before its tautology, however, we might say that in naming Perón, Borges also negatively implies all that the proper name Perón excludes. Yet, as we have seen, Perón is named within a negative construction: “el enlutado no era Perón.” What precisely lies beyond this statement, therefore, is Perón himself, in all his historical, cultural, and biographical glory, Coronel Kolynos, as he was called for his dazzling smile (Page 4). Similarly, the negative clause “la muñeca rubia no era la mujer Eva Duarte” allows this woman to hover over the text — just as, one might imagine, the peons in the Chaco felt her presence in the sham funeral.

The second part of the sentence makes this point even more clearly, as Perón and Eva make appearances as both subjects and objects: “pero tampoco Perón era Perón ni Eva era Eva.” In this clause, Perón and Eva become subjects of the verb to be, paradoxically negating themselves. They appear and then flicker out, appear and flicker out. Elsa Repetto writes that “El relato borgeano

tion.” For Hegel, “perception” concerns the apprehension of universal categories, the intuition that the sense data point towards something other than themselves.

nombra para producir la evocación y anula enseguida lo que se acaba de evocar" (45). Certainly "El simulacro" is an example of precisely this sort of evocation, but I disagree that the proper name is just as quickly annulled or cancelled out. Rather, this oscillation is the trace of their presence in the text: though they may not be themselves, their names repeat not only as negations but also as subjects of those negations. Though the literal effect might be to neutralize, that is, to have each proper name cancel itself out, the syntax itself tells a different story. The sentence cannot cancel out these names without repeating them, even giving them the agency to negate themselves as subjects of the verb *to be*.

Thus the grammar of the sentence—its negative construction—actually maintains the relationship of the simulacrum to its original. The "real" Perón and the "real" Eva may only appear in the narrative as other than themselves, but the grammatical structures in which they appear assert their reality as the authors of their own disappearance and thus the implied referents of what they are not. What we have, then, is neither a postmodern chain of signifiers floating free of its referential anchor, nor a stable relationship of simulacrum to reality. Rather, Borges's text holds these two possibilities in tension on the aesthetic plane: here prosody, not philosophy, operates at the level of the signifier.

#### UNA ÉPOCA IRREAL

Why evoke Hegel here, and not one of Borges's philosophical touchstones, like Berkeley or Schopenhauer? Because what we are dealing with here is not idealism, but historical truth—more precisely, historical truth understood as the diverse intonations (to borrow an apt phrase)<sup>3</sup> of a particular kind of spirit. Buried in the seemingly detached musings of the narrating voice of "El simulacro" are the various stages of a national spirit trying to encounter itself in historical truth. Borges's narrator compares the scene in the Chaco to Hamlet's play-within-a-play (167). In order to be faithful, such a reflection would have to also include within it its

<sup>3</sup> *Otras inquisiciones*, "La esfera de Pascal": "Quizá la historia universal es la historia de la diversa entonación de algunas metáforas" (2: 16).

simulacrum, and so on into infinite regress. Yet the narrator also refers to the scene as "la cifra perfecta de una época irreal" (167). What happened during that "época irreal"? The phrase is almost an oxymoron: how can an historical epoch be "unreal"? It is this quality of seeming unreality, of irresolvable paradox that precisely characterizes the Peronist era, and that also seeps into its small-scale reenactment in the Chaco. "La historia es increíble pero ocurrió," Borges's narrator writes (167). So much hangs on the sparseness of the verb *ocurrió*: the narrator feels no need to justify this assertion. He does not claim to have seen it himself, nor does he make reference to other testimonies, written or oral, as happens in so many other Borges stories. No, this simply *happened*, and this fact is more incredible, perhaps, than any of the details.

Historical reference in Borges, as Balderston notes, is almost always oblique (9). In "El simulacro" we have a historically specific reference, but Borges still approaches it indirectly: he begins with the sham, with the simulacra. As Sylvia Molloy writes of *A Universal History of Infamy*, the characters function as points of divergence, rather than convergence, as figures who are and are not congruent to the roles they play (24). Thus, from the initial description of the scene in the Chaco, "El simulacro" proceeds negatively to the referents of the representation, evoking them only as the secret avatars of what, by the end of the essay, becomes a kind of blight on the countryside, erupting spontaneously with different actors in any number of different locales. Even the particular "enlutado" of this scene, one might imagine, would pack up his sham corpse and head to the next town and do it all over again. So, we not only have an infinite regress, but also a multiplication of such regressions, the abomination of duplication whose figure, for Borges, is always the mirror. Far from negation, it would appear that we have multiple affirmations, each horrifying, each a dissimulation, each itself a reflection of something already unreal.

The first point of divergence from the scene in the Chaco is therefore this shift in focus, from the particulars of the one occurrence to its recurrence and nauseating repetition on a national scale. The second point of divergence is to say that the avatars themselves were not who they claimed to be, to make their faces

and names unknowable. The names Perón and Eva Duarte seem to be emptied of their historical reference, but as we have seen, the negative construction of the sentence actually maintains this reference. Nevertheless, the reference is not explicit, but rather implied by the syntax. Thus the multiple instances of the scene in the Chaco in other places with other actors not only multiplies falsehoods: it is also a figure for Peronism as it spread over Argentina with its sacred texts, iconographies, and doxa. Peronism itself may have been a falsehood, but it happened. Notice that the narrator does not ask himself why the peons came more than once to view the blonde doll. He asks himself who this false Perón might be, wonders what cynicism or lunacy brought him to play this role. The townspeople — “los arrabales” — are shown performing a ritual that, one imagines, they might have performed in a church, lighting candles before a holy image. They are not deceived by the sham of the blonde doll; they are deceived by the false sainthood of the cult of Evita Perón.

#### LA MUJER EVA DUARTE

Michel Foucault famously quotes Borges in the introduction to his treatise on taxonomy, *The Order of Things*. “*Heterotopias* are disturbing,” he writes, referring later to “those to be found so often in Borges,” “probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’” (xviii). We have been looking precisely at syntax, and have seen how it is simultaneously undermined and exploited in “El simulacro.” Following Foucault’s lead, I turn now to the consideration of that “less apparent syntax” in “El simulacro” with regard to the function of the proper name, or rather, to its malfunction.

“La muñeca rubia no era la mujer Eva Duarte.” Who is Eva Duarte, and why doesn’t he call her Perón? In July of 1952 Argentina was not mourning “the woman Eva Duarte.” Eva Duarte was

the name of an actress who married Juan Perón. Evita Perón was legally given the title “jefa espiritual de la nación” (Navarro 331). Evita Perón was the woman for whom the nation mourned. The blonde doll is a simulacrum for the dead body of Evita Perón, not the actress Eva Duarte, who had been long effaced by her more infamous successor. Borges’s narrator deliberately misnames Evita, denying her the only “legitimate” name she had: Perón’s. Duarte was her father’s name, and because he never legally recognized her as his daughter, the name was not “properly” hers. Both Evita’s enemies and the Peróns themselves used her illegitimacy as part of Evita’s public persona. For those who opposed her, the illegitimacy was used as slander. For the Peronists, the illegitimacy was false, another piety of the oligarchy to be profaned, and, most importantly, as a symbol for her “rebirth” with her marriage to Perón. By marrying his mistress, Perón legitimized her as a public, if not political figure. In the Peronist mythology, this act of legitimization traveled through the body of Evita to the people themselves. In giving Evita his name, Perón also gave it to the people, transforming them into a public body with political agency (Navarro 144).

Thus the misrecognition of the body of Evita Perón as the body of “the woman Eva Duarte” strips away this mythology of transformation and empowerment. Moreover, the qualifying “la mujer Eva Duarte” signals her mortality in an epoch when children learned to recite “*Madrecita nuestra, que estás en los cielos*” in school and the Vatican was petitioned for beatification (Navarro 339). As described above, the sham of Peronism itself is an explicit theme in this story. Borges’s narrator signals his distaste for this “*crasa mitología*” by deliberately stripping Evita Perón of her martyrdom. Again, we have an unnamed but negatively implied presence haunting the text: “la muñeca rubia no era la mujer Eva Duarte” — but was she, then, “Santa Evita”? The deliberate misrecognition opens a space for this dubious deity to haunt the text.

#### LA MUÑECA RUBIA

I have suggested that negative construction, read dialectically, evokes presences in the narrative where there are ostensibly



only empty reflections. These evocations in turn imply an historical reference that implies the very real implications of an “unreal epoch.” I now turn to an element that the text neither names nor negates: the embalmed corpse of (the woman) Eva (Duarte) Perón. For the third time, let me cite the last sentence of “El simulacro” so that we may exhume this unshakeable, material reference:

El enlutado no era Perón, y la muñeca rubia no era la mujer Eva Duarte, pero tampoco Perón era Perón ni Eva era Eva sino desconocidos o anónimos (cuyo nombre secreto y cuyo rostro verdadero ignoramos) que figuraron, para el crédulo amor de los arrabales, una crasa mitología.

The following elements are negated: *Perón* and *la mujer Eva Duarte*. The following elements are “positive” in the sense that they do not function within a negative construction: *desconocidos*, *anónimos*. We have a parenthetical expression asserting the infability of the secret faces and true names of these unknowns or anonymous persons; this parenthetical further closes off access to these identities by separating them syntactically from the rest of the sentence. *Perón* and *Eva* are also double negatives: “tampoco Perón era Perón ni Eva era Eva,” which, as I have shown, has the function of underlining their actual, historical identities. The sentence has a parallel construction with two subjects: *el enlutado* and *la muñeca rubia*. These elements are again defined by what they are not—not Perón, and not the woman Eva Duarte. However, *el enlutado* has an antecedent in the story itself. His are the primary actions of the story (setting up the shrine, collecting money, playing the role of Perón) and he is the figure upon whom almost all of the descriptive language is lavished: “Era alto, flaco, aindiado, con una cara inexpresiva de opa o de máscara”... he receives the peons’ sympathies with “las manos cruzadas sobre el vientre, como mujer encinta” (167). This man is also the focus of the narrator’s musings, and thus the pretext for the final metaphysical arabesque: “¿Qué suerte de hombre (me pregunto) ideó y ejecutó esa fúnebre farsa? ¿Un fanático, un triste, un alucinado o un impostor y un cínico?” *El enlutado*, though he may not be Perón, is certainly a great many other things in this text.

*La muñeca rubia*, on the other hand, is mentioned only twice and does not receive more than the cursory description of her blonde hair. The first mention is at the beginning, as the man sets up his casket and places inside “una muñeca de pelo rubio,” and for the last time in the final sentence we have been analyzing. The doll appears as the second subject of the parallel construction, and thus as a “positive” element in the sense that its grammatical position as subject tends to bring it into existence without question. However, the doll is the subject of the negative construction already analyzed: “la muñeca rubia no era la mujer Eva Duarte.”

Of course the blonde doll was not the woman Eva Duarte—and not because she was the woman Eva Perón, or Santa Evita. The blonde doll does not stand in for any living woman, regardless of her name or her saintliness. The blonde doll stands in for—is a simulacrum of—the *corpse* of Eva Perón. And what is precisely unsettling about the corpse, any corpse, is that it *is and is not* the person who died. In fact, the corpse has something of the simulacrum about it already: it appears to be the person we knew in life, but we know this impression is false. Indeed, the litmus test for embalming is that the person should appear to be sleeping peacefully. This is a polite fiction, of course. But it helps us with the awfulness of the corpse, for what lies behind the mask is nothing less than nothingness, putrefaction, oblivion.

Suddenly the vertiginous mass of negations and repetitions, of secret avatars throwing up shadow after shadow in their flight reads less like a metaphysical game and more like the wall the Emperor Shih Huang Ti built to stave off death (2: 12). The only object not named in this vertiginous play of proper names, misnomers, and negations is also the only one powerful enough to stop infinity, to burst idealism, to confound language. What may be less clear is why the blonde doll stuck inside that construction opens up more than just an historical situation in Argentina. A corpse is neither a copy nor the “original” person whose body it once was. The blonde doll, and the embalmed corpse for which she does not substitute, but to which she refers, are more firmly anchored to the roots of metaphysics because they stage its most

crucial predicament. The blonde doll does refer to someone, and her face and her name are not secret. Yet that someone has already departed the secret name of that thing which she is now, is a space where signification breaks down, where only the negative registers its trace.

Margaret Schwartz  
University of Iowa

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