

MI BUENOS AIRES HERIDO:  
BORGES AND LANDSCAPES OF FEAR, 2008

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Look up in the sky, it's a bird. It's a plane. It's Super-Borges. There he is, billowing high above maps, atlases, spatial relations, everywhere and nowhere, disconnected, disembodied, unreal. An imaginary being, a superhero of the mind, with a cane instead of a cape, unseeing eyes instead of a huge "S," a denizen of the Library of Babel instead of Krypton come to save a free-floating literary space, or should I say, *espace littéraire*, instead of truth, justice, and the Argentine way.

It seems somewhat ironic that my very respected mentor, oh so many long years ago, was none other than Ana María Barrenechea, author of the classic, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Borges*, devoted to showing how Borges's central enterprise is to undermine our belief in concrete existence (16). I say somewhat ironic because as my own work evolved, I needed to complicate this almost canonic formulation, arguing that Borges's enterprise was not to banish our unremittingly concrete and frequently painful existence, but to find new ways to engage the embodied and real in what we call the unreal, or "fiction."

In the last decade, my interest in Borges's "concreteness," if I could term it that, has only grown under the impact of very real events, particularly the changing topography of Borges's home town, today a Buenos Aires resembling contemporary cities scarred by recent catastrophe, disappearance, and bombing, and marked by the arduous work of shaping the public space of memory. Buenos Aires has always prided itself on being the most "European" of Latin American cities, the Paris of the South. Perversely, now it is: walking in and around Buenos Aires in 2008

is akin to walking in Berlin, with its multiple memorial plaques, such as the one near the Wittenbergplatz metro station that I just visited recently, with its simple German inscription: "Places of terror we should never forget," and the names of the concentration camps; or going to Ground Zero in New York with its great ruin of hole and soon to be slurry wall memorial; or entering Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, where space speaks the Holocaust through the multifaceted work of architectural remembrance.

These "walks" of mine are less in the spirit of the *flâneur*, than of the mourner. On July 18, 1994, a powerful car bomb blew my friend Susy Kreiman to smithereens in downtown Buenos Aires, on Pasteur Street. Susy headed the Job Exchange at the Argentine Jewish Mutual Association, known as the AMIA, but her day was tragically cut short when a terrorist bomb destroyed the AMIA building, burying many of those inside and near it (see Aizenberg). With Susy's murder as a catalyst, I have been chronicling the polemics of contemporary memorial making in southern Latin America, particularly Argentina — a nation with a keen understanding of bodies, and bodies politic violently ripped apart. Two years before the AMIA blast another suicide van demolished the Israeli embassy on Buenos Aires's posh Arroyo Street. The tens of thousands of "disappeared" under dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s were an even "grander" precedent, when "enemies of the state" were "worked over" in the so-called Club Atlético, or El Olimpo torture sites, and most infamously, at the ESMA (Escuela Mecánica de la Armada), the stately façade of the naval Mechanics School surrounded by spacious grounds hiding the terrorized bodies in the basement and attic cells inside, often then dropped into the murky River Plate from low flying helicopters.

Each one of these horrors, and others, has triggered the creation of polemical, contemporary memorial spaces, for example, memorials to the AMIA and the embassy dead, a Memory Park near the River Plate where the murdered went to a watery grave, and an ESMA memory site and park, all little akin to what we associate with Latin America: traditionally the monumental constructions of pre-Columbian antiquity, sung to by Neruda and Paz; or the ornate Spanish colonial plazas and churches; or the triumphal equestrian

statues to founding fathers. The contemporary memorial spaces and the itineraries they trace are, *me atrevo a decir*, are in some manner “Borgesian” — anticipated by or echoing Borges. Another way of putting it, perhaps more accurately, is that I inevitably read the present-day topography of terror through Borges; the long-time storyteller of Buenos Aires has created his successors, or the reverse, the topography of terror has created Borges as its precursor.

So let me rub together my research on memorial making with my investigations of Borges. First, there is the issue of memory itself, what Richard Terdiman labeled the twentieth century’s, and we might add the twenty-first’s, memory crisis, and what Andreas Huyssen equally labeled an obsession with memory, or a nostalgia for ruins (see Terdiman and Huyssen). Recall (the appropriate word here) Borges’s superbly prescient “memory crisis” stories, “Funes el memorioso” (1944) and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940), written in the heat of World War II, a key era for my research, when truth and memory were already under murderous siege. In “Funes” the immobilized protagonist suffers from mnemonic overload and the inability to select and shape what he remembers, a basic aspect of memory-formation; in “Tlön,” the opposite occurs: a totalitarian world order abolishes history and a fictitious past supplants all other pasts, nothing is certain, even the falseness of the “new” past. Both cases — overload and obliteration — show the dangers threatening remembrance. At a time of atrocity and impunity, Borges understood or foresaw what would in fact become the dilemma of Argentine society in a later time.

The questions being asked as I write are: in the face of so many killed, so many culpable, what to remember or to forget? And who should decide — the state, the public, the families? What kind of memorials can best carry the burden of active memory? Where should they be, how should they be used? Borges’s memory stories are invoked as precursory texts in these very concrete disputes, as in Beatriz Sarlo’s essay on the topic, “Los olvidados,” included in the collection, *Instantáneas* (95-99).

But let’s now enter the manifestly topographical. During the Second World War and the Holocaust, Borges openly and justifiably worried about the real map of Argentina being taken over by

a totalitarian, Tlönitarian, world order, by the same forces actually reconfiguring the face of our measly *Orbis Tertius*. I quote from an essay as far as I know little mentioned in discussions of space in Borges, entitled "1941." It appeared in *Sur* in December of that same year immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as one of a dossier of articles on the subject. Borges writes there that the notion of an atrocious German plan to conquer the planet seems like the plot of a banal detective novel, or the equally banal ranting of the head of the Hitler Youth (note the juxtaposition).

Unfortunately, Borges goes on: "la realidad carece de escrupulos literarios." The directors of the Third Reich, who have already overrun the geography of Greece, Norway, the USSR, and Holland, and have now attacked American territory, indeed have their eye on the entire globe, when Argentina's coasts and cities will also be 'blessed' with the benefits of hell fire, torture, sodomy, rape, and mass executions, and the Argentine pampas will become part of the Nazis' colonial *Lebensraum*, the fascists' euphemistically-termed "living space" (*Borges en Sur* 31-32). Borges, who was fluent in German and uses the word *Lebensraum* in the original, evincing a clear understanding of its sinister implications, is the only author in this dossier to ponder the relationship between fact and fiction, real and literary space, global and Argentine space. *El infinito literario, en otras palabras, no quita lo local*, and Borges's imaginary worlds are extremely anchored in his here and now.

I'd like to argue, then, that the topography that Borges develops in his fictions in part as a response to this wreckful era is what humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan termed much later "landscapes of fear," or what I'd like to describe less elegantly as a *geo-aesthetics of ruination*. Borges's stories do not contain the then-fashionable fascist-style grand monuments of the thousand-year Reich, superimposed on Berlin or Nuremberg; think of Albert Speer's Germania behemoth or Leni Riefenstahl's grandiose representation of the Nazi Party's Nuremberg Rally Grounds in *The Triumph of the Will* (1934). Rather, Borges gives narrative substance to "architecture of oppression," a phrase I borrow from another much later study, Paul Jaskot's *The Architecture of Oppression: the SS, Forced Labor and the Nazi Monumental Building Economy* (2000).

That is the kind of architecture that now injures post-Proceso Buenos Aires. (The "Proceso de Reorganización Nacional" was the dictatorship's own euphemism à la Hitler, covering up the reality of state-sponsored terror.) Borges, as in so many cases, from his far-off *arrabal sudamericano* (another ruin?) presaged ruination as a mark of our days, paralleling the ruminations of his constantly cited Continental contemporary, Walter Benjamin.

In *his* book Jaskot chronicles in searing detail the ruination, enslavement, and death that *underlay* (the verb is purposeful) the Reich's monument-mania, as the homes of undesirables such as Jews were razed, concentration camp labor quarried gargantuan stones, and the SS modeled the lager watchtowers, considered important "monuments," after medieval Teutonic castle turrets (2). One wonders here about Borges's allusion to Tlön's "torres de sangre," in a story pullulating with references to anti-Semitism, Nazism, and let's not forget, cremation (OC 435). And one cannot help but relate these "torres de sangre" to the more contemporary and Argentine guard towers that greeted the miserable prisoners at the ESMA Naval Mechanics School, towers I walked by on an emotional special tour.

Borges's other fictions are likewise full of the architecture of oppression: the circular ruins of a destroyed civilization, the deadly corridors and staircases of the gruesome Library of Babel, the ensnarling and lethal garden of forking paths, the dungeon death trap of "The God's Script," the nefarious City of the Immortals, "with dead end corridors, high unattainable windows, portentous doors which led to a cell or pit" (*Labyrinths* 110-11). The City of the Immortals has often been compared to Piranesi's 18<sup>th</sup> century *Carceri d'invenzione*, and rightly so. But could there have also been a closer precedent for a story published in 1947, the concentration camps, about which Borges wrote directly a year earlier in "Deutsches Requiem"? Borges tellingly calls the lager there, "Tarnowitz," a name that rings with "Auschwitz," even more so since Tarnow (with an infamous Nazi-established ghetto) and Tarnowitz both exist in southern Poland, in the general area of the death camp. Or how about the story, "The Secret Miracle," set in a Nazi occupied Prague where a terrified Jaromir Hladík "died hundreds of deaths" "in courtyards whose forms and angles

strained geometrical probabilities" (*Labyrinths* 89). Why then only Piranesi, and not Auschwitz?

I'd like to cite a description by a survivor of the ESMA here, connecting chilling past to chilling closer past. She says:

El Sótano era el primer lugar al que eran llevados los secuestrados [...] y se los volvía bajar cada vez que iban a ser interrogados o torturados [...] había pocas paredes fijas y cada vez se cambiaba la disposición de los espacios. Las divisiones se hacían con materiales livianos, lo que permitía un fácil montaje y desmontaje [...] Todo olía a sangre y suciedad. No había luz natural [...] no había ninguna ventilación.

The quote appropriately comes from volume called, *Ese infierno*, an inferno imagined by Borges, and we don't always have to think Dante (22).

In this sense, the most specifically relevant Borges fictions for contemporary Buenos Aires's landscape of ruination are "El Aleph," published in *Sur* in September, 1945 and "La muerte y la brújula," also in *Sur* in May, 1942. Death and memory trigger the fiction of the Aleph—the death of a beloved, the desire to retain her memory amid the wreckage. The wreckage is none other than a marginal basement space, a dark place of hiding where the protagonist "Borges" fears he will be left to perish under the rubble of a house about to be demolished. (Demolished houses and dangerous basements seem to be a Buenos Aires specialty in the frightful era.) Julio Ortega appropriately calls this nightmare setting, "las ruinas de la ciudad habitable" (460). And the Aleph that may provide some visionary space of memory to fend off inevitable and menacing forgetfulness lies not in the false façades of falsely glorious monuments, but among the ruins.

In the story's provisional version we know that Borges envisioned a "mihrab," a Muslim holy space, yet it ultimately became a sacred Aleph lying in the rubble at the very moment when the people of the Aleph were being "rubbled." As "Borges" explains, the letter "Aleph," the first of the sacred Hebrew alphabet, applies to the disk of his tale, since it the Cabala's sign for the *En Soph*, the unlimited godhead, and for the connection between the upper and lower spheres—good and evil, if you will.

The cabballistic Aleph put (bravely, perhaps) on the cover of the first edition of Borges' story collection materialized, so to speak, after the AMIA bombing in the fragmented granite "A" from the exploded building's front, a remnant of the four (again cabballistic?) letters on its façade, AMIA. When the AMIA exploded, 300 truckloads of its rubble were haphazardly carted away without regard to their investigative and cultural value, and discarded like so much household garbage near the River Plate. But forgetfulness was not to have the last word, since the dump site was right near the place reserved for the new Memory Park. Photographer and human rights activist Marcelo Brodsky salvaged the stones of the AMIA, most significantly the fragment with the great A, made photographic collages out of them that were exhibited at various public sites in Buenos Aires, and proposed that the recovered A be part of the memorial to the AMIA dead also planned at the Memory Park. "I am totally secular," Brodsky told me, "but there is something cabballistic about this letter, like the mystical Hebrew Aleph." I wonder if he would have said that had there not been a Borges, or the story "The Aleph," or the Tetragrammaton, the four lettered name of God in "Death and the Compass." Brodsky added: "On the same site where we are working to remember the disappeared—the main focus of the Memory Park—we have to explain why so many forms of violence coexist in Argentina" (Personal communication).

Brodsky's poignant comments, so many forms of violence, so many sites, bring me directly to the idea of itineraries of terror. And here I will refer more fully to "La muerte y la brújula," a story which traces an itinerary of murder in a phantasmagoric Buenos Aires; entrapment, violence, liquidation lurk in every corner of the city, north, west, east, south. Borges himself described the fiction as "una suerte de pesadilla en que figuran elementos de Buenos Aires deformados por el horror de la pesadilla" (OC 270-71). *El horror de la pesadilla*: Buenos Aires in 1942, where the world war was echoing mightily, as under right-wing president Ramón Castillo the tide had turned in favor of the ultra-nationalists, who in street demonstrations vociferated against the Allies and the Jews, and in favor of Hitler. Buenos Aires in 1942, where anti-Jewish dia-

tribes filled pro-Nazi publications, *Cabildo*, *El Pampero*, and *Crisol*; the same *Crisol* which in the 1930s had berated Borges for his “maliciously hidden” Jewish ancestry, triggering his famous response, “Yo, judío.” Among the best known of these nationalist writers was Ernesto Palacio, like others strengthened by the militant Catholicism of the International Eucharistic Congress, held in Buenos Aires just a few years earlier, and graced by the presence of none other than the pro-German Cardinal Pacelli, later the still-controversial Pope Pius XII. Borges, open-mouthed with sarcastic horror at the spectacle of this gathering, mentions it in the essay “1941,” which I quoted earlier, as one of very real war related unrealities: “nuestros ojos atónitos has mirado el Congreso Eucarístico.”

All of this concrete history molds Borges’s story. In a fiction structured as an itinerary of death, particularly the of Jews (and Hebraists), in a fiction filled with references to pogroms and war, to the Christian Trinity confronting the Jewish Tetragrammaton, Borges alludes forcefully to what is going on in his native city:

Los diarios de la tarde no descuidaron estas desapariciones periódicas. *La Cruz de la Espada* las contrastó con la admirable disciplina y el orden del último Congreso Eremítico; Ernst Palast [notice the Germanizing of the name] en *El Mártir* reprobó “las demoras intolerables de un pogrom clandestino y frugal que ha necesitado tres meses para liquidar tres judíos”; la *Yidische Zaitung* [a newspaper published in Buenos Aires at the time whose atheist, myopic, and timid reporter looks an awful lot like Borges] rechazó la hipótesis horrorosa de un complot antisemita, “aunque muchos otros espíritus penetrantes no admiten otra solución del triple misterio.” (OC 503)

*El infinito literario, en otras palabras, no quita lo local.* It isn’t surprising, then, that when one of Borges’s successors, Tomás Eloy Martínez, wanted to represent today’s topography of terror in a Buenos Aires scarred by state terror and its neo-liberal aftermath, especially the economic-political crash of December 2001 (which I had the sad experience of witnessing), he turned to Borges’s geo-aesthetics of ruination; to the idea of the Aleph under debris, currently even more debased than the one Borges had imagined, and most of all he turned to “La muerte y la brújula.”



Like Erik Lönnrot, Bruno Cadogan, the protagonist of Martínez's novel *El cantor de tango* (2004), is in search of the hidden morphology of a ghastly and ghostly Buenos Aires. "Durante esos días enloquecidos," he says as he too experiences the December 2001 debacle with its violence, "compré algunos mapas de Buenos Aires y fui trazando los lugares donde Martel había cantado, con la esperanza de encontrar algún dibujo que descifrara sus intenciones, algo parecido al rombo con el que Borges resuelve el problema de 'La muerte y la brújula'" (207). The Martel he alludes to is the elusive and infirm cantor de tango, a broken body much like his country, but whose still enduring pure voice and strength of spirit bring to mind Kafka's Josephine, the mouse singer.

Martel sings the plaintive national song, the tango, in the strangest of places, eschewing the ritzy clubs frequented by tourists attracted to an exotic gig by the cheap peso, and instead embracing—as Cadogan finally figures out at the novel's end—"el itinerario de los crímenes impunes que se habían cometido en la ciudad de Buenos Aires" (248-49). A strange itinerary consciously constructed by Martel from the beastly plethora of horror sites, the Club Atlético, the AMIA, the demolished residences of the tortured and disappeared, deathly corners and plazas where innocents were shot, besieged houses of dissidents in Buenos Aires neighborhoods like the labyrinthine and Borgesian Parque Chas.

Martínez re-writes Borges for the new millennium, registering the fear landscapes of the present with the topography of terror his predecessor had developed. Borges anticipated on the page what later came to be on public space. Martínez picks up the ball, creating a memorial in pen and ink through his novel, refusing like those who fight to create contemporary memory sites to let the ugly past be converted into "una montaña de basura," as he aptly says it (234). That would be a victory for the adherents of the architecture of oppression.

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