

# ENCUENTROS



## *Myth, History and Fiction in Latin America*

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Lecture by

**Tomás Eloy Martínez**

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## MYTH, HISTORY AND FICTION IN LATIN AMERICA

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*Tomás Eloy Martínez*

Fiction and history are written in order to correct the future, to build up the riverbanks for the navigators to come, to situate the future in a wished-for place. Myths also reflect a community's secret desires to create symbols and metaphors by which it can transfigure its past into its future. Or said another way, myths enable communities to imagine their future.

But both history and fiction are constructed on the breath of the past, we rewrite a world we have already lost and, in those common wellsprings, in those mirrors where each reflects the other, there are scarcely boundaries anymore to separate them. The differences between fiction and history have become increasingly unclear. Histories like *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller* by Carlo Ginzburg, *The Great Cat Massacre* by Robert Darnton, *Citizens!* by Simon Schama, and—on the other side

of the divide—novels like *The White Hotel* by D.M. Thomas, or *Mason and Dixon* by Thomas Pynchon, cause us to wonder which is which. Fiction or history. Illusion envelops everything, and icy facts melt together under the narrative sun.

Which is which. In the lives of the saints, in the recordings of miracles, in the numerous chronicles and accounts of Indians, history was a host of fictions that didn't dare to speak their names. In the Middle Ages, as we know, there wasn't the slightest incongruity between composing a devotional poem and propagating religious fraud. For Gonzalo de Berceo, for example, these two activities were aspects of a single obligation. Toward 1245, he was involved in the falsification of the Vows of San Millán to make the villages of Castille, and a few in Navarre, pay an annual tribute to his monastery.

And then fiction, in order to gain re-

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spect and credibility, started presenting itself, in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, as history. I remember, to cite just one example, the hallucinatory Arthurian novel called *The History of the Noble Knights Oliveros de Castilla and Artús d'Algarbe*, where Oliveros decapitates his two children out of love so that, in the following chapter, he can compassionately restore their heads to their proper places.

Which is which. There is nothing like narrating a personal experience by crossing (positioning oneself at the crossroads) several genres in order to explore a theoretical problem which is also a problem connected with reading and which, at the same time, forms the center of literary debate in Latin America. Which is which.

We novelists don't know how to read or explain our own texts. Even though writing a novel is, like any other form of writing, an act of reason, certain signs and metaphors slip into the text, or fall within, pulled by weight that derives not from logic, but from need: the author feels or knows these elements need to be in the text, but can never decipher why something appears in a particular place, and not somewhere else, or nowhere. The author might think of justifications *a posteriori*, but rarely during the actual process of writing. If, with every line, the novelist stopped to wonder *why*, he'd be paralyzed. That's why, with the passage of time, a writer's own work can sometimes seem alien. With time, a work belongs less to the author and, increasingly, to those who read and discuss it. For an author, his own work is situated in the past. For the reader who examines it, the text is a continuous present, a code that can eventually be deciphered. Permit me to use personal experience in order to explain

the origin of these confusions, this problem of which is which.

The first country ever described to me, even before I had learned to read, was a series of pictures, full of rain and deserts. My first nation was a book with a tile and adobe town hall, a rainy morning in 1810. Around the hall you could see some low, arcaded buildings, women in petticoats, and about a hundred patriots insisting on the end of Spanish rule and on the Viceroy's expulsion. The patriots wore impeccable frock coats, carried parasols, and waved blue and white ribbons. The picture totally hid reality. One doesn't see that the square was in fact a quagmire, that the parasols (then costly and cumbersome) were unthinkable in the town at the end of the earth called Santísima Trinidad, and the port of Buenos Aires.

Other pictures I remember show an infinite plain—flat, smooth, without wind, ripples or bushes: the empty land of an empty country, interrupted only by herds of wild horses. It's as though I'm seeing these illustrations all over again—where solitude was only occasionally broken by Pampas Indians out on a rampage, or by hordes of barbarous gauchos who robbed each other of their few possessions. In the north of Argentina, where I was born and raised, the value attached to these few possessions comes down to us in a verse written at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

In Salta they robbed  
my horse and my woman  
Give back my steed  
For the woman I have no need.

In the first books that I could read, the Argentine past was like a gallery of sol-

emn, grandiose paintings one wasn't allowed to examine up close, and about which one wasn't allowed to ask too many questions. I was simply to learn what was said about them, end of story. Perhaps that is why I remember the images so much better than anything else. It's as though I am seeing all over again the room where the representatives of the United Provinces declared independence; the snowy peaks of the Andes where the Liberator José de San Martín marched to glory; the *caudillo* Juan Facundo Quiroga meeting his death at Barranca Yaco; the triumphal Desert March of General Julio Argentino Roca, annihilating the last bastions of Indians.

In this retelling of the past, there practically was no past; it was as though Argentina suddenly came into being one rainy day in May, 1810, and nothing before that had ever existed. No one mentioned the Colonial era, or the Discovery of America. It seemed that, in order to be born, the country had to omit, or censor, its origins.

In the founding images of which I speak, civilization and barbarity are interlaced, or alternately displace each other. The story of Argentina has always moved within the compass of this fatal pendulum, which left no space for a spectrum of grays. Civilization either occupies the whole horizon of the story, or else it cedes its place to barbarity. All of these images are immobile, sacramental: they are "living pictures," the euphemism used in my country to refer to dead pictures.

Yet and still, there are grays. They are hidden among the trellises of history, locked in the basement like family idiots, but now and again, we hear their cries. We see one of these grays, hear one of

those laments.

In Tucumán's central square, opposite the Casa de Gobierno, a monolith commemorates the martyrdom of Marco Manuel de Avellaneda, assassinated in 1841, on the order of Juan Manuel de Rosas. On the spot where the monolith is now, Avellaneda's head was mounted on a pike, and so displayed for fifteen days, until a patriotic lady seduced the commander of the base and, with his complicity, removed the head and hid it in her bedroom.

A detailed account of these events appears in Adolfo Saldías's history of the Argentine Confederation under Rosas,<sup>1</sup> and generations of teachers in Tucumán have taken this material and embellished it with their own legions of adjectives. The assassination was barbarous; the victim's rescue, therefore, had to be civilizing. To accentuate the effect, Saldías tells the story like a Greek tragedy:

Doña Fortunata García, the heroine, begged the commander to bring her the head, with the same passion as that of the weeping, defeated Andromache, made to separate from Peleus's son. That same night, the noble lady took the head and, after washing and perfuming it, placed it in a coffer. The following night, she gave it burial.

For many years, that living picture was embedded in my imagination until, in early 1989, I found in the colonial archives of the City of Seville, a letter from Visitación García, Fortunata's sister, which tells the true ending of this incredible story. The letter, written to another sister, Rita García, is dated May 1871, a

short time after the heroine's death. I'll quote from one of its two paragraphs:

My dear Rita, you must know that, during all those years, Fortunata never wanted to be separated from the remains of our country's hero. For a long time she kept the coffer with his remains in her room, which no one was permitted to enter. Later, when she was ill and disconsolate, she would bring the head into bed with her, and play with it as though it were a doll.<sup>2</sup>

This tale, a precursor to William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," in which, as you recall, a lady of noble lineage hides in her house the corpse of the fiancé who jilted her at the altar and who, it appears, she killed with arsenic—is not an uncommon story in the complex delta of Argentine history. It is hard to distinguish, in both Fortunata García and Faulkner's Miss Emily, where barbarity ends and civilization begins. And I can't now find an exact name for that shadowy epoch in which we Argentines were civilized, in fits of barbarity.

If I have focussed on images forged by history in the nineteenth century, it is because it is there, on the very field of history, that what we know today as the Argentine story was born. What we call Argentine literature (in the nineteenth century) is composed of memoirs, like those by General José María Paz; autobiographies, like those by Sarmiento; or diaries, like those of Luis V. Mansilla, to give only the major examples. Some of the best fictions of the last half-century, from Borges to Manuel Puig, can be read as a response to the silences and censur-

ing in historiography or, put another way, as a re-writing of history.

The revelation of the private (memoirs, autobiographies, diaries), is where literature finds its natural place in the nineteenth century, and it is the spring from which historians will drink at the beginning of the twentieth century. The private and the public flow, then, from the same river. The explorations of individual destinies in the great Argentine sagas of the nineteenth century (*Facundo*, *Martín Fierro*, *Amalia*, *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles*), are also read as social testimonies and political documents. Argentine literature is born, then, as a constant desire to pass from the private to the public.

Borges, in his famous lecture of 1951, *Tradition and the Argentine Writer*, believes he sees the opposite inclination. "Reserve, suspicion, and reticence," he writes, "are unequivocal traits in the Argentine character and, by extension, in the literature, which expresses this character." Perhaps Borges is only shrewdly attempting to apply to "the Argentine" in general, traits found in his own work and which, in a certain sense, repeat the silences, suspicion of reality, and censorship with which my old history books recounted the birth of the nation.

Some of the best Argentine writers have persisted in constructing "reserved and rational" fictions while, all around them, Argentine reality and the Argentine character go to great efforts to be strident and irrational. Without the national lack of reserve, without the tendency toward exhibitionism, rumor and gossip would be impossible—but these flow like an incessant consciousness of the historical.

Defending the virtues of allusion and evasion, as Borges did in this 1951 lecture, allowed Argentine literature, over the last four decades, to purify itself of the ravages wreaked by the *costumbrismo* evident elsewhere in Latin America. Inversely, the canonization of dryness, frugality, and useless reserve prevented certain excellent narrative ideas from taking off, and nourished a literature where the tug-of-war between *that which is* and *that which should be*, between that which wants to be written and that which critical consensus will accept as *literary*, has yet to be resolved.

So feelings were censored. But why this censorship of [our] origins? Why this insistence on evading, or even denying, our country's history prior to the Revolution of May 1810, as though Argentina was born *ex nihilo* from the emancipatory movement founded by the educated Creole minorities at the beginning of the nineteenth century?

In the books that first told the story of our nation for me (I'm thinking especially of the histories by Alfredo Bartolomé Grosso, Gustavo Gabriel Levene, Vicente Fidel López, and Bartolomé Mitre), this censoring of origins was deliberate and corresponded to a political project: that of converting Argentina into a country of European culture, inhabited by men of the white race. The arguments for this censorship appear for the first time in a collection of biographies, *Galería de celebridades argentinas* (*Gallery of Celebrated Argentines*), in which Bartolomé Mitre decided, circa 1857, who would be the founding icons and models for the country under construction. Mitre decided that there was no country "before the [Revolution of May 1810] made it exist

through an act of will," and established that the men of colonial Argentina "are not included among the sons of our land."<sup>3</sup>

At the time, Mitre was a passionate collector of documents. In fact, it was he who first brought serious research and documentation to Argentine historiography. It seems paradoxical that he should use these qualities in constructing a country where documents were subordinated to desires. It is no less paradoxical that, with his attitude, he helped install in the Argentine imagination a deep-rooted suspicion concerning the truth assured by documents.

Although documents rarely serve to establish a criterion for truth, they do provide a constant reference for the criteria of legitimacy. A notable example is found in the falsified documents that both Evita Duarte and Juan Perón presented to the Civil Registry in Junín, on the day they were married, October 22, 1945. According to his documents, Perón was a bachelor; in fact, he was a widow. Evita's papers listed a fallacious place and date of birth. But both needed, at this moment, to establish a more or less definitive public identity, and they believed they would be aided by these falsified papers. In fact, the only official biography of Perón, written during his first presidency, completely omitted the fact that Perón had married for the first time in January 1929, and that his wife had died in September 1938.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it's no coincidence that at the beginning of the 1940s, Borges was heightening the verisimilitude of his fictions with fake references. In "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," the bibliography consists of nineteen entries,

some of them abounding in dates and editorial elucidations, all invented, of course. The information in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” comes from a fictitious article from an encyclopedia that is also fictitious, a facsimile reproduction of a real encyclopedia, the *Britannica*. In Borges, as in much later Argentine historical fiction, invention is woven from real information and characters who really existed.

Perón and Borges shared the idea that documents could be manipulated in Argentina with a certain impunity. Perón had learned that power always enjoys impunity; for his part, Borges knew that any testimony about the past in Argentina is subjected to a systematic and inevitable process of destruction.

Documents are worthy of suspicion not only because historians and those with political power end up manipulating them *pro domo sua*. It is also because they disappear, become extinct, evanesce; they lose their probative value.

This doubly dubious value of documents leads us inexorably to the following questions: Have archives been constructed by educated minorities and powerful politicians to serve their own version of history, and is that history “a book of marvels,” which conceals, hides, and fictionalizes reality? Why should the novel, which is an undisguised fiction, be denied the right to propose its own version of historical truth? Why do we find it hard to believe that through fiction—the lie that dares to speak its name—history might be told in a way that is also authentic or, at least as authentic as that found in the documents?

This line of questioning might seem presumptuous in the United States, which takes extreme care in preserving its ar-

chives, and in comparing and contrasting different versions of the same event. But in Latin America, land of dictatorships, the novel has always seemed to me the surest literary method for approaching reality. First, because reality is, in essence, novelistic. And then, because the complexity of that novelistic reality demands that the nation be narrated with more flexible and, of course, complex instruments.

In Argentina, for example, there are many stories so incredible that they couldn't be recounted in a novel, because no one would believe them. Imagine for yourselves the difficulty of recounting how a country, after a succession of military coups and in the midst of chaos and violence, inaugurates as President a dim-witted woman dominated by a mad police officer with occult tendencies. Yet this is what happened in 1974 with Isabel Perón and José López Rega. How does one novelize a country in whose concentration camps victims were made to write propaganda speeches and articles for the press, as was revealed in 1985 during the trial of the ex-commanders of the military dictatorship; a country where a drunken general, Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri, planned a sea war against one of the greatest maritime powers in the world, and convinced the people that we were winning; a country where corpses are used as a political negotiating tool, or as electoral propaganda. And why not also mention Mexico during the last days of Salinas de Gortari, with those stories of fasts, and corpses exhumed by a clairvoyant. Or the Guatemala of Ríos Montt, who believed he was a messenger of God.

In countries where suspicion concerning the veracity of documents is in direct

relation to the suspicion aroused by political power, what counts is that which the community, through tacit, underground consensus, establishes as authentic—and this often runs counter to what is preached in the media or in official discourse. Documents are perceived as authentic or fake in accordance with the historical tradition embedded in the country's imagination. The truth is that which resembles what we believe is true. This is why the made-up encyclopedias and erudite, but false, notes in Borges's stories seem credible; it is not only because, in Borges, they are founded on real erudition, but also because they reinforce the Argentine's image of being part of an educated, humanistic, European country, different from barbarian Latin America.

What does it mean *now* to write a novel about history? How do fiction and history maintain a dialogue on the tricky terrain that is discourse? What is the meaning of *historical*? What is the meaning of *fictitious*? Permit me to cite an example from my novel *Santa Evita*. What I did here was to weave a plausible account, a fiction, on a canvas comprising real events and characters, some of whom are still alive. If the text gives the impression of being journalism, it is because I deliberately reversed the so-called "new journalism" strategy of the 1960s. Works like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Norman Mailer's *The Fight*, and Gabriel García Márquez's *Report of a Drowning*, all recount real events using novelistic techniques. In *Santa Evita*, the narrative process is exactly inverted; fictitious events are recounted as though they were real, using some techniques from journalism. Where the novel says, "I saw," "I was there," "I went through these index cards," these

phrases are to be understood in the same way we understand the first-person, the *I*, in the novels of Dickens, Proust, or Kafka: that *I* is the *I* of the imagination, and appears like a fictitious witness in order to lend credibility to happenings that are at times incredible. The text tries to establish with the reader a pact similar to the one forged by a movie: reality fades, disappears, and the viewer is immersed in another reality that disappears only when the film is over.

Let's examine this idea a little more closely. To write novels today on history is an operation that differs, in more than one way, from the narrative exercises of the sixties and seventies. In those decades of absolute certainties, of clear positions, of political questioning and subversion against power, as well as submission to power, the novel and history moved within a field of tensions in which truth and lies were still adversarial concepts, to put it in very simple terms. The novel, overwhelmed by an all-encompassing desire, endeavored to substitute its own fabled truths for the false ones elaborated by official history. Propelled by a passion for justice, the novel tried to signal that the truth was no longer the patrimony of [those with] power.

Certain fundamental Latin American texts written in that period, like *Yo el supremo*, by Augusto Roa Bastos and *Terra Nostra* by Carlos Fuentes, insisted on the official manipulation of history. There are no reliable archives, they emphasized. Institutions served their own interests by using their documents to construct an appropriate reality, as false as fables.

But *now*—and this is a *now* which could have begun twenty years ago—the denunciation of power and its calumnies is no

longer the overriding aim of fictions about history. Like water flowing under the bridge, we have seen the passing currents of philosophers: Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Hayden White's ideas on narrativity and representation, and even attacks by Roland Barthes against the supposed objectivity of traditional historical discourse. But above all, we have experienced (*directly experienced*) the fall of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union; as I speak, there are wars of religion and race in Kosovo and Albania, and countries not directly affected are intervening to bring about peace. We are experiencing waves of adolescent violence in Colorado, Georgia, Tucumán, and Medellín; and economic crises in certain countries are causing a devastating domino effect in distant nations. We feel unstable, buffeted by the *corsi e ricorsi* that the lawyer Carlos Vico talked about.

The neo-liberal end of history, a common prediction in 1988, has been challenged by the masses of poor people streaming down from the hills in Caracas in February 1989; by the uprising in Chiapas at the beginning of 1994, and by the interminable exodus of Kosovars and Albanians in 1999. The act of writing no longer means opposing the absolutes, because no absolutes are still standing. No one now believes that power is a homogeneous bastion; nor can anyone re-discover that power constructs its own truth, as Foucault observed, by using a network of production, discrimination, censorship, and prohibitions. What has survived is the void: a void that is beginning to be filled not by one version [of truth] replacing the official one, but rather by a ver-

sion of the story that changes color according to the viewer's optics. Polarities, ethnocentrism, margins, genres: the point of view shifts according to place. It is no longer possible to keep talking about battling political power, because power itself is on the move, passing from the hands of the army, the Church, and the traditional economic corporations, to the narco-traffickers, money launderers, arms dealers, and politicians who make fortunes at a dizzying speed, only to return to the army, the Church, etc., or to make fleeting alliances between one sector and another.

We can no longer discuss history in terms of truth; we must consider history as culture, as tradition. Historians today are performing the inverse operation: using literature to construct history. *La nouvelle histoire*, or intellectual history, has adopted the technical tools and traditions used in the study of literary narrative, in an effort to re-construct traditional history. In Robert Darnton, in Simon Schama, and in Claudio Magris's magisterial *Danube* (1989), *la nouvelle histoire* constructs characters by recovering them from among the leftovers of History, and emphasizes the details, habits, and manias that hadn't merited even a footnote in the great texts.

It no longer makes sense to wage a campaign of opposition, to engage in what I used to call "dueling narratives" (following an idea of Jean-Pierre Faye). That "dueling" spirit led to novels that opposed, that challenged authoritarian power: novels like *The Autumn of the Patriarch* by García Márquez; *Curfew* by José Donoso; or *Kiss of the Spider Woman* by Manuel Puig.

Perhaps what we should be offering

now is a reconstruction (though I use the word cautiously). By “reconstruct,” I mean recuperate the community’s imagination and cultural traditions, in order to give them a new kind of life. *La nouvelle histoire* works on that which has been discarded, on that which has been excluded or considered trivial, integrating this “detritus” into the great current of events, and by giving equal weight to this “minor material.” The new novel about history also recovers the marginal, the “leftovers,” but, at the same time, it recreates the icons of the past, departing from the traditions, myths, symbols, and desires that were already there. In the first case, there is a fertile accumulation of material; in the second, there is transfiguration. Needless to say, I’m not speaking here of what is traditionally known as the “historical novel,” whose objective was to achieve a photographic and servile imitation of the past (or what was believed to be the past): the novels of Manuel Gálvez and Hugo Wast in Argentina half a century ago, for example those of Francisco Herrera Luque in Venezuela twenty years ago. I’m referring here to those novels that give us new renderings of history, and manage to incorporate those renderings into the culture as indelible icons. An example is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The author is, by definition, a convention. The author is a partial, subjective, limited mediator, who is rarely able to transcend the frame of his own experience, or to rise above his personal deficiencies. He might convert these deficiencies into a kind of richness (as happened to Borges, whose world abounded with books yet lacked romance), but, inevitably, the fictions are shot through with what the author knows and has experi-

enced. It is when a writer most clearly sees the horizon of what he doesn’t know, that he can put the greatest intensity into what he does know.

But even within the narrowest horizon, the novelist of history is always forcing himself to recuperate, recreate, and represent the stories imagined and marinated by his own tradition. When he gets it right, his text bears the signs—civilized or no—of the epoch he is narrating: gossip, conspiracies, dialects, inflections, radio voices, advertising jingles, academic papers, posters, graffiti, and assorted background noise. In this sense, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a novel about history: the history of the city of Dublin, Ireland, on June 16, 1904. And, in another register, *Evita*, the opera by Tom Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber, is a novel of all the histories that viewers in North America foisted on Evita Perón ever since she appeared on the cover of *Time*, forty-seven years ago. It is no longer possible to think of Dublin in the summer of 1904 without simultaneously thinking of *Ulysses*; it is equally difficult to separate the real image of Evita Perón from that other Evita, crowned by a halo that reminds us of the Statue of Liberty. The fiction creates another reality and, at the same time, renews the myth.

We forge these images, the images are then modified by the passage of time and, finally, it doesn’t matter anymore if what we believe happened really did happen. Tradition doesn’t argue about whether or not a certain version is correct. Tradition accepts or it doesn’t accept. Evita Perón’s most famous, most quoted, statement is, “I will return, and I will be millions,” a phrase she never pronounced, as anyone who stops for only an instant

to take in the posthumous perfume that impregnates these words, “I will return and I will be millions,” immediately knows. And in spite of this falsehood—confirmed many times over—the statement keeps appearing beneath images of Evita that commemorate her birthday, and in the innumerable speeches of her followers. It is a clearly fallacious hyperbole, but for Argentines who venerate Evita, fewer promises hold more truth.

There is, of course, nothing new in recreating a myth from the culture’s history in an attempt to discover who we are, or what we harbor in ourselves of someone else. Historical figures enter and exit contemporary texts. In March 1993, the first third of the admirable correspondence between Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, the most seductive and complicated of Freud’s apostles, was published in English. Although these letters are all lucid, manic-depressive, and revealing, not one of them has, for me as a reader, the same accent of truth as the fake letter from Freud to Ferenczi which opens *The White Hotel*, the 1981 novel by D.M. Thomas. Language that hits the target, it enriches the myth, widens the horizons of what we call “the imaginary.”

Both operations—writing, and reflecting on what has been written—have always been shot through with extreme tension in Latin America, where history and politics were born as fiction. How can criticism orient itself in a cultural field where everything tends to be fiction, and where reality is represented as at once prophecy, past, incredible truth, myth, conspiracy, and magic invocation? In order to understand this magma, the critic examines each text as though it were a universe in which there are multiple

codes. In the cultural tradition of Latin America, nothing is what it seems. Nothing could ever be what it seems because reality is always shifting: values, discourse, celebrities, fortunes, and myths change at a vertiginous pace. What was here today is somewhere else tomorrow, or it is nowhere. Edgar Bayley—a minor Argentine poet—put it well: “You are where you are not. Your abandoned wealth is infinite.”

A single text merrily shifts from one genre to another, from year to year, from generation to generation. I don’t think this happens in other places. Even a work as difficult to define as Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, which falls mid-way between literary criticism, chronological inventory, parody, history and, of course, fiction, has been classified as a novel since its publication in 1984. For the English literary tradition, *Flaubert’s Parrot* was, and will always be, a novel.

In Latin America, however, this business of classifying a text is much more arduous. Look what happened with *Facundo*, which Domingo Sarmiento published in 1845 as a political pamphlet. In 1988, two hundred Argentine writers defined it as a novel, which isn’t too strange if one considers that, for Borges, the great patriotic poem, *Martín Fierro*, was in truth a novel.

The other element in historical fiction to which I would like to call attention is the advent of apocryphal erudition. When I speak of “historical fiction,” I am alluding to works that weave together something fictitious with information which simulates being historical, or which readers accept as being historical. I am thinking not only of *Facundo*, but also of the *Universal History of Infamy* by Borges,

and “Las imágenes posibles” (Possible Images) and “Juego de las decapitaciones,” (The Game of Decapitations) short stories by José Lezama Lima. In order to invent information, libraries, histories, and philosophical systems, it is necessary—Borges insinuated—to know everything. Anyone who invents without already knowing everything runs the risk of redundancy, of creating something that already exists. From this simple and smart intuition were born the lost volume of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, which talks about the ancient city of Uqbar, Pierre Menard’s books and monographs, Herbert Quain’s astonishing body of work and the nonexistent gentleman, Suárez Miranda. This intuition also gave rise to the apocryphal Chinese dynasties and apocryphal versions of Greek mythology in José Lezama Lima, to Morelli’s fake quotes in *Hopscotch*, to the *Diccionario del argentino exquisito*, in which Adolfo Bioy Casares creates a grammar and glossary on the basis of texts that don’t exist. This false erudition can also be read as Latin America’s declaration of intellectual independence. Both Alfonso Reyes and Carlos Fuentes have insisted that, since we lack our own tradition, all traditions belong to us; we should affiliate with and serve them all. Borges articulates this idea perfectly on the back cover of his *Obras completas*: “Fortunately, we are not indebted to a single tradition. We must aspire to them all.” With false quotations and apocryphal erudition, we not only widen the horizon of our village, but also, in a cyclical way, recover our remotest ancestors, the Asian or Viking origins of our prehistory. We are eclectic, and in this geographical vacillation, we will find our own geography; in this invented history,

we will find a good deal of our authentic history.

Many novels about history derive from these artificial or faked constructions found in the *Facundo*. The documents “compiled” or invoked by Roa Bastos in *I the Supreme* are often false or parodies, like the tabloid news that opens the book, *Noticias del imperio (News from the Empire)*, a novel by Fernando del Paso about Charlotte and Maximilian [Emperors of Mexico, until he was executed in 1867], which features an inventory of invented appointments and ceremonies. This game has gradually expanded toward other cultures, almost always as a tribute to Borges: it is present in *The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto Eco, in some of Italo Calvino’s posthumous tales, and in John Updike’s *Memories of the Ford Administration*.

Every novel and fictional tale is an act of provocation, because it tries to impose on the reader a representation of a reality that is alien to him. In this provocation, there is an *I* that exerts itself to be heard, an *I* that tries to endure by narrating itself to itself. Criticism is also and always a form of autobiography, a way of recounting one’s life through one’s readings, if not as a provocation, then in the form of inquiry. Both forms of writing are at once prophecies and interpretations of the past, reconstructions of the future made from the remains of the present. But how then do we define the discourse of history? Unlike fiction and criticism and, most of all, unlike philosophical thought, historical discourse is an affirmation. Where there is doubt, history lays down (or feigns to lay down) a truth; where there is conjecture, it accumulates data.

Fiction and history are also corrections

of the future, as I said at the beginning of this talk. Although the writing history as a novel, or the writing of novels with historical facts are not merely methods of correcting the official story, or of countering the discourse of power, they never stop being both of these things: fictions about history reconstruct stories, oppose power and, at the same time, point the way ahead.

What does it mean to point toward the future, to bet on the future? Needless to say, it does not signal an intention to create a new society through the transforming empire of the written word (this was preaching three decades ago). Whether they are strident or silent, novels don't move a single hair on the head of reality. But they are written to build up the riverbanks for the navigators to come, to situate the future in a wished-for place. How, though, does this happen?

One of the most original aspects of historical fiction is its attempt to recuperate a community's myths, without invalidating or idealizing them, but by acknowledging them as tradition, as a force that has left its sediments in the collective imagination. Every myth ultimately expresses communal desire. And nothing so clearly belongs to the future as desire.

As I come to the end of my reflections, let me warn you that I have shot arrows in too many directions. If I had to hold fast to only one idea, I would choose the one I just articulated: that fiction about history are writings about the future. Because recuperating a community's dreams and transfiguring them in fiction—that is to say, in true imagery—allows those dreams to return to reality, now transformed into another icon of the culture, another avatar of tradition. And

when this happens, we see that the icon is not yet completely constructed; we see that traditions are weavings, fabrics whose threads are incessantly changing the form and meaning of the motif so that it is ever more fragmentary, incomplete, and ephemeral. Today there are many hands at this weaving, and they come from infinitely distant shores: so many shores that it is difficult to find the center. These are the kinds of images with which the past rewrites in novels the history of the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Trigkasin". The letters are fluid and connected, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the word.

## NOTES

1. Adolfo Saldías, *Historia de la Confederación Argentina. Rosas y su época*, vol.2. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Juan Carlos Granda, 1967), pp. 318-319.
2. *Catálogo de los fondos americanos del Archivos de Protocolos de Sevilla*, vol. 3. (Madrid-Barcelona-Buenos Aires, 1931), no. 146, p. 124.
3. Bartolomé Mitre, et al, *Galería de celebridades argentinas: Biografías de los personajes más notables del Río de la Plata* (Buenos Aires, 1857), p. i.
4. Enrique Pavón Pereya, *Perón. Preparación de una vida para el mando* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Espino, 1952).

**Tomás Eloy Martínez** (b. Tucumán, Argentina, 1934) earned a Masters Degree in Literature from the University of Paris in 1970. He was named *Doctor honoris causa* by the John F. Kennedy University in Buenos Aires, and by the University of Tucumán. Since 1995, he has been Distinguished Professor at Rutgers University, in New Jersey, and the Director of its Latin American Studies Program. He is also a professor at the workshops organized by the Fundación para un Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano (Foundation for a New Ibero-American Journalism) in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. Between 1975 and 1983, he lived in exile in Caracas, Venezuela.

He has published *Estructuras del cine argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1961), *La pasión según Trelew* (Buenos Aires, 1974), *Los testigos de afuera* (Caracas, 1978) *Retrato del artista enmascarado* (Caracas, 1982), *Lugar común la muerte* (Caracas, 1979), *Las memorias del general* (Buenos Aires, 1996), *El sueño argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1999), and four novels: *Sagrado* (Buenos Aires, 1969), *La novela de Perón* (Madrid, 1989), available in English as *The Perón Novel* (New York: Random House/Pantheon, 1988, translated by Asa Zata), *La mano del amo* (Buenos Aires, 1991), and *Santa Evita* (Buenos Aires, 1995), the most widely translated novel in the history of Argentine culture, appearing in 37 languages, including English, where it was published under the original title by Random House in 1996, in Helen R. Lane's translation. *Santa Evita* was named one of the best Latin American novels of the decade by Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, and by *The New York Times Book Review*, *The London Review of Books*, and other publications.

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