

located in the Navy Mechanics School had mentioned a man they called Antejitos ("Little Eyeglasses"). A small, round, nearsighted man who taught school and loved books. He was always mentioned together with others, some of whom are still missing. I gathered no stories that were specifically about this man; rather, he floated on the edges of other narratives. All I had were his nickname and kindly image, and to these I grew terribly attached. Try as I might, I could learn nothing more about him. Until the evening I met Susana Barros and in walked her husband, whom I immediately knew as Antejitos. That he was alive seemed a miracle, and, in fact, it was.

Among my guides on this journey was Dr. Juan Carlos Adrover, a prominent lawyer who headed the Santa Fe branch of the CONADEP. One day he offered me this story within a story:

In 1984, we [the CONADEP] were taking testimony in San Rafaela, a small city nearby. The mayor kept saying, "Why have you come? We had no disappearances here."

"Then why have all these people formed a line?" And I went back to work. Toward the end of the day, I was approached by a middle-aged *campesino* who worked for a man who contracted a plot of land from the army. And he told me this: That during the dictatorship, he and his family were evacuated from this land six or seven times, and brought to stay for several days on the army base. When they returned, he noticed that the earth had been turned over. And once, he found a woman's sneaker and a gold chain, a choker. He buried these things and marked the tree, but said nothing to anyone. Until the CONADEP, until that very moment.

Later I went with a friend, a doctor, and we met this *campesino* who took us to "his" tree. Very gently we dug around, and found some little remains which I assumed were those of a dog. But I was wrong, it was a human finger with the fingernail still attached. By this time, the Punto Final had elapsed, and we couldn't investigate.

In his rational, lawyerly way, Adrover continued, "I put that little finger with its fingernail in a plastic bag and I keep that bag in my desk. Because to tell you the truth, I have the feeling that this whole country is a graveyard, and that we are all constantly walking on the bones."

1

A Lexicon of Terror

* really focus on the language used during The Process when reading this! *

The aim of the Process is the profound transformation of consciousness.

—General Jorge Rafael Videla, 1976¹

We know that in order to repair so much damage we must recover the meanings of many embezzled words. . . .

—Admiral Emilio Massera, 1976²

THE GRAND ORATOR OF THE PROCESS WAS ADMIRAL EMILIO MASSERA, master of the majestic rhythm, learned tone, and utterly confounding—but captivating—message. As a young man he had studied philology, and language would remain a lifelong obsession. Here is but one of his darkly shining verbal jewels: "Unfaithful to their meanings, words perturb our powers of reason." The quote is taken from "The Quiet and Subtle Cyclone," one of his most widely disseminated speeches. In his opening he makes clear that he speaks not only for himself, but on behalf of the entire navy, whose union with the army and air force is "brotherly" and "indestructible." (They were in fact bitter rivals.) Grandly solemn, he says that his themes derive from a "meditation" on "objective reality," which he italicizes in the published text. That reality is "a veritable world war whose battlefield is the human spirit," a war in which "even the Word of God is used by murderers to invent a theology that justifies violence." Here, as elsewhere, Massera is tormented by the state of the language, which he compares to "an abject Tower of Babel," and warns his audience to beware

of words. They are “unfaithful,” will betray the unsuspecting, destroy the innocent. “The only safe words are our words.” The warning is surreal, for it captures exactly what Massera himself is doing: spinning an intricate verbal web to ensnare his audience and “perturb [their] powers of reason.”

Brutal, sadistic, and rapacious, the whole regime was intensely verbal. From the moment of the coup, there was a constant torrent of speeches, proclamations, and interviews; even certain military memos were made public. Newspapers and magazines, radio and television all were flooded with messages from the junta. The barrage was constant and there was no escape: Argentinians lived in an echo chamber. With diabolical skill, the regime used language to: (1) shroud in mystery its true actions and intentions, (2) say the opposite of what it meant, (3) inspire trust, both at home and abroad, (4) instill guilt, especially in mothers, to seal their complicity, and (5) sow paralyzing terror and confusion. Official rhetoric displays all of the traits we associate with authoritarian discourse: obsession with the enemy, triumphal oratory, exaggerated abstraction, and messianic slogans, all based on “absolute truth” and “objective reality.”

The Dirty War, though unprecedented in its extent and cruelty, did not erupt from a vacuum. Rather, it drew on a reservoir of beliefs, phobias, obsessions, and rhetoric that have filtered down through a variety of ultra-conservative movements, tendencies, and regimes. Resonating through the speeches, articles, and proclamations are echoes ranging from the Inquisition to the Opus Dei, from the Praetorian Guard to the Nazis, from the *ancien régime* to the French war for Algeria. For all their shadings and variations, these elements had long coexisted in Argentine politics. In one guise or another, extreme archaic conservatives have always been a force—now in shadow, now casting the light. In the nineteenth century, the pioneering educator, writer, and eventual president Domingo Sarmiento called them “barbarians”; for the eminent contemporary historian Tulio Halperin Donghi, they constitute “the dark underside of Argentine politics.” Virtually every institution and political party has been colored by, or has negotiated with, these extremist factions. For Argentines, the discourse is so familiar that even if one doesn’t agree, the language—to some extent—gets internalized. The official rhetoric of the Dirty War drew much of its power from being at once “comprehensible,” incongruous, and disorienting. “It made you *psychotic*,” said Mother of the Plaza Renée Epelbaum. “We could barely ‘read,’ let alone ‘translate’ the world around us. And that was exactly what they wanted.”³

The terrorist state created two worlds—one public and one clandestine, each with its own encoded discourse. I will examine each, and eventually

draw a straight line from the public pronouncements to clandestine practice, where language became a form of torture. But before we enter the “night and fog” of Argentina, let us consider some of the texts and speeches that were delivered in the (so-called) light.

Once again we need to emphasize that the coup of March 24, 1976—coming after two and a half years of political chaos under Isabel Perón—was generally met with great relief. Both within and without the country, the takeover had long been expected. The junta’s first proclamation opens with an extended litany of the ills that have corroded the nation’s institutions.⁴ The sentences are extremely long, solemn, and dirge-like, full of adjectives like “exhausted,” “impossible,” and “defeated”; hinging on nouns like “dissolution,” “anarchy,” and “frustration”; “corruption,” “contradiction,” and “loss.” In the reader or listener, the preamble induces fatigue, discouragement, and a keen desire for a change of direction. Politics aside, on the level of rhetoric, the coup is a welcome resolution.

The takeover is described as the result of “serene meditation,” suggesting that the new leaders are clear both in mind and conscience. Further on, the junta pledges to “fully observe the ethical and moral principles of justice . . . [and to act in] respect of human rights and dignity.” The new government will be “devoted to the most sacred interests of the Nation and its inhabitants.”

The commanders have begun not by imposing themselves, but by apparently acceding to the needs (the “tacit and/or explicit request”) of the citizens for order and decency. Where earlier the tone was funereal, now it consoles, uplifts, offers a covenant. “Each citizen must join in the fight. The task is urgent and arduous. There will be sacrifices, the strict exercise of authority in order to definitively eradicate the vices that afflict the country.” But only those who are “corrupt” or “subversive” need to worry. Only those who have committed “abuses of power.” The country was now embarked, “with the help of God,” on “a quest for the common good, for the full recovery of *el ser nacional*.” This expression recurs in these initial documents and was throughout the regime a dominant note. *El ser nacional* translates as “the collective national essence, soul, or consciousness.” It harks back to the Inquisition, helped justify the Conquest, and its variants have figured in a host of reactionary movements ever since. It arises from and speaks to “the delirium for unanimity,” in the apt phrase of Argentine historian Juan José Sebreli. *El ser nacional* was first used in Argentina by Peronist nationalists in 1943, in *Cabildo*, a notoriously fascist, anti-Semitic magazine, in an article entitled “We Are One Nation.” One of the many ironies of Argentine society is that *el ser nacional* has been used by Peronists,

anti-Peronists, military dictatorships, and some far left-wing groups as well. To the Gentlemen of the Coup, *el ser nacional* resonated with divine purpose, with the country's grand destiny. It reinforced the message that the coup was tantamount to normalization, integration. The expression also served to locate the Process within each Argentine; to resist the Process was to deny one's self.

Stalwart were these Gentlemen of the Coup, invulnerable to the pettiness of doubt. For a small minority, this precisely was a problem. The night before the takeover, Videla received a worried letter from Retired Colonel Bernardo Albarte, who in the 1970s had been General Perón's personal delegate. Born in 1918, Albarte was brilliant and eloquent; in officers school, he had graduated first in his class. He wrote Videla to inform him that three days earlier, security forces had attempted to kidnap him; and that a young colleague of his had been murdered, then "left to rot in an unmarked grave, his stomach slit and his entrails exposed." Albarte expressed concern for "the funereal discourse of certain comrades who insist on classifying the dead as 'desirables' or 'undesirables' and on concealing the assassinations as 'excesses committed in the line of defense.'" He lamented "the lack of questioning, reflection, or criticism." Then he asked the man who would soon be leading the nation: "What does it portend for us Argentines if we allow a General to deprive us of democracy with the argument that it could lead to *an atheist, materialistic, totalitarian government?*" (emphasis in original). Within hours Albarte was dead: In the middle of the night, a "security squad" threw him out the window of his sixth-floor apartment located, ironically enough, on the Avenida Libertador.⁵

Albarte would not have been fooled by the coming double-talk about democracy. The Process of National Reorganization would entail the immediate "dissolution" of all republican institutions—the Congress, provincial legislatures, and municipal councils; political parties, trade unions, and professional as well as student associations. Sitting members of the Supreme Court would be "removed" and new judges appointed. These actions were being taken "to ensure the eventual restoration of democracy . . . and the revitalization of [its] institutions."⁶ The three commanders—Videla, Massera, and Agosti—carefully explained that they themselves would make decisions according to "a simple majority"—the very model of democratic rule. A model the rest of the country could follow "when it was ready."

The domestic press not only swallowed, but amplified, the double discourse on democracy. A March 25 editorial in the *La Prensa* is typical. Built

into the message is the underlying premise that Peronists must be routed and the party forever prohibited:

The truth is that a republic does not consist only in the observance of certain electoral and parliamentary rites. It rests—as the most enduring philosopher has taught us—on the principle of virtue. . . . Unless he were as penetrating as Tocqueville . . . an observer of our contemporary reality might commit the crass error of thinking that our democratic institutions have fallen. . . . We repeat that even though a government has fallen, the institutions fell in 1973 [with the return of Perón]. . . . On the ruins of the economic and moral crisis, we must create the conditions that will allow an authentic democracy to function. Without ire or hate, but without forgetting the immediate past whose sorry lesson must be incorporated into our history so that the coming generations can keep themselves alert.⁷

Lest anyone misunderstand, the junta stressed that the country was *not* entering a period of "revolution." Since 1930, that epithet had been assumed by a host of governments—both military and civilian, nationalist and progressive, paternalist and tailored to the free capitalist market. "Revolution" was, in fact, one of the junta's forbidden words. The days of spontaneity and froth were over. The country was being rescued by a *plan*, the Process for National Reorganization, whose basic objectives—"to eradicate subversion and to promote economic development based on the equilibrium and responsible participation of the various sectors of society"—would be realized with "rationality," "resolve," "structure," and "sobriety." By realizing these goals—its "sacred responsibilities"—Argentina "would join the Western, Christian concert of nations."

What was the initial response from this "concert of nations"? They immediately recognized the new government. Editorials in the major foreign press were overwhelmingly positive; many expressed wonder that the incompetent Mrs. Perón had been allowed to stay in office for so long.

Two days after the coup, the junta announced that General Videla had been designated President of the Nation. He, as well as the other two members of the ruling junta—Admiral Massera and Brigadier General Orlando Ramón Agosti—had assumed office "as acts of service" and would receive no salary. Newspaper and magazine articles introducing Videla all emphasized his deep religious beliefs, devotion to his family, and austere personal habits (manifest in his spare physique). Videla looked every inch the gentleman; when out of uniform, he favored English tailoring and Scottish

tweeds. (His wife's maiden name was Hartridge.) In a special, lavishly illustrated supplement, the women's weekly *Para Ti* described his public-school background as "similar to that of any other child." This they accompanied with a photo of a typical public elementary school. "From his father, also a military man, he learned early the meaning of the words discipline, valor, and sacrifice." This phrase was glossed with a picture of Videla gracefully drawing his saber at a military parade.⁸ According to the press, Videla was at once elite and Everyman; modest and successful; a man of the missal and the sword.

In his first address to the nation, Videla stressed the theme of "subordination," which, he said, "is not submission, nor blind obedience to capricious orders. To be subordinate means to consciously obey in order to achieve a higher objective. . . . One historical cycle has ended," Videla proclaimed, "another one begins."⁹ In this new epoch, all citizens were being called to battle. "Your weapons are your eyes, your ears, and your intuition. Use them, exercise your right to familial and social defense," said a communiqué issued to the public by the Fifth Army Corps. "Defense is not only military, but [a matter for] all who want a prosperous country with a future. . . . Citizens, assume your obligations as Reserve Soldiers. Your information is always useful. Bring it to us."¹⁰ One was expected to denounce individuals whose appearance, actions, or presence seemed "inappropriate." The junta emphasized, "The enemy has no flag nor uniform . . . nor even a face. Only he knows that he is the enemy."¹¹ In a front-page article in *La Prensa*, the regime warned: "The people must learn to recognize the 'civilized' man who does not know how to live in society and who in spite of his appearance and behavior harbors atheist attitudes that leave no space for God."¹² Using Mao's famous phrase, the Argentine generals held that "the guerrilla must not be allowed to circulate like fish in water."

As Colonel C. A. Castagno had declared even before the coup, "the delinquents (subversives) cannot live with us."¹³ As articulated by General Cristino Nicolaides, "an individual involved with subversion was *irrecuperable*"¹⁴ Yet Massera would still insist: "A government is an essentially moral entity. . . [and] must never abdicate the metaphysical principles from which the grandeur of its power derives . . . every citizen is unique and irreplaceable before God." To gain support for the nefarious Process, the admiral appealed to the goodness of Argentines, to the collective need to rally for a lofty cause.¹⁵

The key word in the admiral's statement is "citizen," an echo of the Nazis' Nuremberg Laws, which stripped Jews of their citizenship, officially designating them as aliens. In Argentina nationality became a function of

attitude. "The repression is directed against a minority we do not consider Argentine," said Videla, ". . . a terrorist is not only someone who plants bombs, but a person whose *ideas* are contrary to our Western, Christian civilization."¹⁶ In a ceremony marking the 123rd anniversary of the Rosario Police, Chief Augustín Feced took Videla's reasoning on citizenship a step further. Not only was the "subversive" not Argentine, "[he] should not even be considered our brother . . . this conflict between us cannot be likened to that between Cain and Abel."¹⁷ This quote, and other highlights of the speech, were published the following day in the newspapers. Feced, himself a sadistic torturer, was known in the camps as El Cura, "The Priest." According to "The Priest," not only was the "subversive" excluded from the Argentine family but from the whole Judeo-Christian "family of man." For the director of the Military Academy, General Reynaldo Bignone, subversives were not merely "anti-fatherland," they were agents of the "antichrist."¹⁸ The missing and the dead were not victims, nor merely enemies; they were demons. And so was anyone who even *thought* otherwise.

Every day there were headlines like this: "Shootout With 21 Subversives," "Extremists Die in Córdoba," "Five Guerrillas Fall." The victims of these "shootouts"—the vast majority of whom were in fact unarmed and murdered as *desaparecidos*—were invariably referred to as "seditious individuals," "subversive elements," "delinquents," and "criminals." Occasionally a supposed alias was provided; almost never were the individuals named. Sometimes the articles said, "Efforts to identify these delinquents have proven fruitless," implying that the whole issue of the missing was an invention of the "subversives" themselves who, after abandoning their loved ones, had wiped away all of their own traces ("the enemy has no face"). Some articles justified the shootings by saying the dead had tried to escape from prison (*intenta de fuga*). The victims were vilified as both "aggressive" and "cowardly." A not uncommon story in this vein (appearing as early as three days after the coup in *La Prensa*) involved a military ambush on the secret hiding place of a band of "terrorists." Immediately seeing the superiority of the "legal forces," the male subversive ignominiously attempts to flee, *using his children as a human shield*. So according to the official reading, the "subversive" is worse than merely "aggressive" and "cowardly": In trying to save his own objectionable life, he shows himself as essentially alien by violating the defining human pact, that of parents protecting their children. On a single page of *La Prensa* (April 2, 1976), there were three related articles (stories of this type were commonly clustered). Two formed a symmetrical pair: "A Policeman Dies After Trying to