



*FICCIONES: ARGENTINA IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S THE RETURN OF EVA PERÓN AND
COLM TÓIBÍN'S THE STORY OF THE NIGHT*

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*Ficciones: Argentina in V. S. Naipaul's *The Return of Eva Perón* and Colm Tóibín's *The Story of the Night*¹*

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on their travels to Argentina under the last military regime (1976-1983) and its aftermath, V. S. Naipul and Colm Tóibín produced narratives about the country that are worth examining for the different versions of our recent history displayed by both works for an English-speaking readership. In *The Return of Eva Perón* Naipaul turned his experience of Argentina into a series of virulent journalistic articles ascribing its post-colonial condition mostly to Argentineans themselves. For his part, Tóibín chose Argentina as the bleak backdrop to his first gay novel, *The Story of the Night*, an inhospitable home in which its main character has to find the fragments of his identity. From a comparative perspective, I briefly describe in this reflective paper the key themes used by Naipaul and Tóibín in their portrayal of Argentina, and I study the divergent points of view towards the times under consideration that the writers adopt in view of their differing ideological agendas. Whereas Naipaul's travelogue is grounded on its exceptional literary quality but on truths that call to be disputed; even though set in a relatively realistic context, Tóibín's novel summons the reader to a serious interrogation of the premises upon which the Argentine reality of the 1980s and 1990s is based. I finally discuss the forever-fictional quality attributed to or inflicted on the representation of the country by both journalists and writers. Throughout the text, I keep to a rather intimate tone and to my perspective as a member to the culture under representation.

KEYWORDS: Argentina, English literature, Cultural Studies, representation

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During my undergraduate studies in English Language Teaching (ELT), a History professor told me that, in the maps of the world drawn during the Renaissance, what is now Argentina and most of the area south of the Tropic of Capricorn, used to be labelled *Terra Australis Incognita*. At once, I became obsessed with the phrase in Latin because of the mysterious, fictional qualities of the places it described. The cartographers who coined it believed that that land had to be there in order to balance the continental areas in the North, but they had no evidence whatsoever of its actual existence. The name also made me persistently wonder whether, by the end of the 20th century, those of us in the Southern Cone were still believed to be tough men and women facing the hardships of a distant, unknown land. The representation of Argentina became then one of my main research interests and, as part of my graduate studies, I examined how my country and my people were represented in ELT textbooks at the beginning of the 2000s (Basabe). Yet, it was only in 2013, when I resumed teaching literature after my doctoral studies, that I started thinking about considering the ways in which Argentina and its people have been represented in fiction and non-fiction, especially in that intended for European and American readerships.

Due to the gravitational position of its author in the study of post-colonial societies, I decided that V. S. Naipaul's *The Return of Eva Perón*, published in book format in 1980, was a crucial text that deserved to be studied. *The Return of Eva Perón* is a series of articles that the Trinidadian-British novelist wrote for *The New York Review of Books* based on several of his trips to Argentina between 1972 and 1979, roughly covering most of the last military regime, with the purpose of studying the impact of iconic Eva Perón (1919-1952) on the local society. His initially ethnographic enterprise, however, resulted in a series of virulent journalistic articles ascribing Argentina's post-colonial condition solely to Argentineans themselves and avoiding in his description any reference, for example, either to the imperial policies that affected the country or to its de facto colonial economic condition throughout most of the 20th century. In an early review of literary texts devoted to the figure of Eva Perón in the Latin American context, Ciria concludes that this reasoning is not surprising, due to Naipaul's tendency to "reduce complex realities to trite explanations" (167), which clearly points at the conservative, sometimes superficial, explanations of post-colonial societies offered by

the author. This view is shared by Foster, who also declares, in an article written 20 years after the publication of *The Return of Eva Perón*, that “since the Second World War, no writer and no single text have exercised a greater influence over British and American perceptions of Argentina” (169). The conceptual significance of the text, together with the fact that it was still required reading for diplomats travelling to Argentina even well into in the 2000s (González), helped me deem Naipaul’s representation highly problematic.

In fact, the trouble with representational systems lies in the moments of arbitrary closure that are reached by the individual representations at play among them. Representations are not truly separable entities, but they constitute systems of representations, or “different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relationships between them” (Hall 17). These systems in turn reach closure when the linkages established among them become powerfully tied into articulated discourses. Naipaul’s version of Argentina and the Argentinians, for example, might have become the official Argentina for the foreign gaze. Yet, in turn, new representations may emerge and new systems of representations materialize.

For his bildungsroman *The Story of the Night*, Colm Tóibín chose the Argentina of the 1990s as the once inhospitable home in which Ricardo/Richard Garay, its main character, ultimately comes to terms with the fragments of his identity and fashions for himself a new persona before, suffering from AIDS, he is about to find his irreversible end. Published in 1996, the novel was Tóibín’s first piece of gay fiction, and, as the author declared in an interview in 1998, through it he tried to recreate “the anguish of the gay experience in ‘difficult’ societies” (Tóibín 3). As his native Ireland, Argentina insinuates itself *difficult* to Tóibín not only in terms of its peripheral post-colonial position but also at an intimate level of relationships where every move becomes political, which already suggests a different moment of closure from that of Naipaul’s *The Return of Eva Perón*.

Even though fiction might not be considered necessarily representational in the ethnographic sense of the word, at first sight, an improbable comparison appeared to me unavoidable. With different purposes in mind, both writers travelled to Argentina in the times of the dictatorship and its aftermath and they offered powerful descriptions of the local society to European and American

readerships. Even at the risk of having fallen into cliché and perhaps stereotyping, both have advanced their own agendas through their writing about us and our uneasy reality.

I overcame my initial uneasiness about comparing a piece of fiction and one that is basically non-fiction when I became acquainted with Susan Bassnet's *Comparative Literature*. "Today, comparative literature is in one sense dead. . . . But it lives on under other guises" (47). The universal claims of traditional comparative literature appear to belong in the past, but the field is constantly being revitalized and politicized by the possibilities of intercultural readings. Here, I chose to, trespassing generic boundaries, offer an account of the ways in which, as travel writers, both Naipaul and Tóibín create the culture they experienced and, from my perspective as a member of the culture that they construct, to question the premises on which their accounts were written. My contention, though, lies in their dissimilar nature and in the different responses they incite: Naipaul's travelogue stands as an exceptional piece of literary writing whose truth dares to be disputed and left unresolved; set in a realistic context, Tóibín's narrative fiction expects serious interrogation of the premises upon which the real stratus of his literary creation is grounded. In Bassnet's terms, I tried to examine "the politics of travelers' tales" (92).¹ In this reflective paper, I briefly describe in counterpoint Naipaul's and Tóibín's representations of Argentina, and I analyze the ways in which they amalgamate diverse, sometimes conflicting, voices in order to construct their texts. Last, in a rather personal, at times intimate, tone, I discuss the forever-fictional quality attributed to or inflicted on the country by both journalists and writers.

A SMALL PLACE

In *The return of Eva Perón*, Argentina is not Argentina. There is no difference between Zaire, Trinidad, Uruguay, or Argentina—all of them subjects of Naipaul's narrative—in that they are all "half-made societies" (3), those feeble, debilitating states unable to come to terms with their post-colonial condition whose description Naipaul had already advanced, for instance, in *The Overcrowded Barracoon*. There is, as in all colonial societies under his scrutiny, a priced product to be pillaged: the

1 Despite the fictional quality of Tóibín's work, his writing has oftentimes been classified as a type of travel writing (Wulff) in which modern categories are being reterritorialized in search of a home, a problem that apparently pervades much of contemporary Irish literature (Ryan).

land. Drawing on Sarmiento's *Facundo, or Civilization and Barbarism*, Naipaul embarks on long, lush descriptions of the stylized space: "The flat land stretches uninterrupted to the horizon. The sense of distance is distorted; things miles away seem close. The desolation would be complete without the birds [that] emphasize the alienness of the land and the fewness of men" (149-150). Yet, as a nation "created in the most rapacious and decadent phase of imperialism" (153), that spacious land would never offer its inhabitants any chance of becoming a civilization: "Argentina is a simple materialistic society, a simple colonial society" (152-153). Such a society does not make community, either, since "in Argentina the contract is not with other Argentines, but with the rich land, the precious commodity" (150). Visibly, Naipaul constructs through his apparently objective description a country that can only be defined in terms of its coloniality and whose culture is seldom acknowledged. The land, which Naipaul claims, "has not been hallowed by the cinema, literature or art" (145), for example, has remained a central theme in Argentine film, from *Pampa Bárbara* to *El Secreto de sus Ojos*.

For Naipaul, there remain only "vast *estancias* on the stolen, bloody land: a sudden and jealous colonial aristocracy" (103) and Buenos Aires, "the great city on the estuary" (145), "a city which has thought of itself as European, in a land which, because of that city, has prided itself on its civilization" (155). There is also the atavistic barbarism of Peronism and of the military regime, which Naipaul painstakingly describes. In any case, "Argentina is a land of plunder, a new land, virtually peopled in this century. It remains a land to be plundered; and politics can be nothing but the politics of plunder" (141). Argentina has become "no one's home. Home is elsewhere: Buenos Aires, England, Italy, Spain" (145), and Argentineans are "either hopelessly primitive or mimic men and women who are confined to an eternal status of dependency and peripherality" (AbdelRahman 172). As is usually the case in Naipaul's works, mimicry in *The Return of Eva Perón* points mostly to the futile adoption of the colonizer's habits and values and hardly to the possibilities of hybridization or of resistance that, according to Bhabha, the process frequently stimulates in post-colonial societies.

In *The Story of the Night*, the Argentine society is also portrayed as prejudiced and repressive. In relationship to the claustrophobic reality lived during the dictatorship, Ricardo declares, "we took no notice of anything public. We lived in a small place" (Tóibín 53). However, caught between

British and Argentine national identities, Ricardo/Richard Garay longs at least for the reconstruction of a social shelter. He might also be, in Naipaul's terms, a mimic man in that, after a failed attempt at becoming an English teacher, he chooses to embody the successful consultant working for and siding with the American lobbyists doing business in the country during the privatization of its state companies in the early 1990s. However, there is an acknowledgement of and also agency in that mimicry. "I enjoyed standing in front of them [American businessmen] ... mimicking their masculinity and seeming to be in control" (109) he claims. Yet, later, he feels "a terrible hollowness" (110), and he wonders "if any of them might feel the same fear... or [they] face[d] each morning with equanimity and calm courage" (110). As an Argentinean, a nationality that he decidedly adopts by the end of the novel, Ricardo feels he could act as an Englishman, but it is only "once I got out of my suit and tie and formal shoes, I changed completely and became a human being" (229). Whereas in Naipaul's version, *mimicry* stands for the mere reproduction of colonial traits; in Tóibín Ricardo seems to embody Bhabha's formula: "almost the same, but not quite" (86). Thus, in the supposedly realistic account, men appear to be inexorably devoid of agency, while in the novel, chances were offered them to act the way they act.

Argentine dependency and peripherality are also present in *The Story of the Night*. In a clearly deprecatory tone that visibly resembles Naipaul's version of the country, landing in La Rioja with his American employers at the times of Carlos Saúl Menem's (1930-) presidential campaign, triggers from Ricardo a foreseeable reflection: "That air of provisionality that I could sense everywhere in Argentina, as though the whole country could fade away, all of us go back to the places from which we came and leave this landscape bare as it was two hundred years ago"(165). This glimpse of the Argentine interior resonates with Naipaul's notion of the country as a land of plunder. Argentina stands for Ricardo as a small place where there are dysfunctional families that pretend to be strict and normal, where there is a coercive, corrupt State, and where there are political groups that have concealed interests and irregular ties to foreign superpowers. Yet, Argentina also makes for the main character in Tóibín's work, a society in the making. For him, there are clear reasons for the country's derelict state of affairs, as there are also chances for the reconstruction of its social contract, all

of them missing from Naipaul's narrative. Attributing their colonial condition not only to Argentineans themselves, Ricardo ponders during an informal meeting with American businessmen in New York, "Argentina after the humiliation of the war and the disappearances would have done anything to please the outside world, and privatization was the price the outside world required" (259). It is just then that they interrupt and ask him what he is thinking about that he looks so serious, and he answers, "home" (259), evoking in his imagination the place and the people to which he starts feeling he belongs. The unfathomable absence of bonds among Argentineans reported by Naipaul becomes a possibility in Tóbin's fiction.

At the beginning of the novel, a British expatriate suggests to Ricardo that Argentina was his "home" (62), but only after a long journey of identity crises that place becomes a concrete materiality for him. It is only by the end of the novel that Ricardo feels "the need to go home" (277) or that he "desperately want[s] to go home" (278). He finally finds in his becoming Pablo Canetto's partner "an alternative form of interpersonal relationship that mimics the nuclear family" (Ryan 29) or, in other words, a home: "I loved that sense of normality which began then in our lives, going to bed early together, worrying about shopping or washing clothes or paying bills" (226). In a globalized world, however, the possibility of reconstruction appears to be restricted only to the personal level, and the chances of a feeling of belonging in a community gradually fades away as the text advances and the couple constituted by Pablo and Ricardo progressively grow solitary and self-centered. Yet, some American members of their community enjoying themselves in late night Buenos Aires reassure both of them, "this [Argentina] is a very good place" (253), which ultimately reinforces their definite choice to belong in the local culture.

NATIVE INFORMANTS AND LOCAL VOICES

Bassnett claims that cultures are actually constructed and not merely described by the politics of travellers' tales. In that respect, she asserts that "the map-maker, the translator and the travel writer are not innocent producers of text. The works they create are part of a process of manipulation that shapes and conditions our attitudes to other cultures while purporting to be something else" (99). For Foster, *The Return of Eva Perón* makes a "case study" (169), which points to its non-fictio-

nal quality. However, an analysis of the ways in which the voices of its local informants are articulated in the text in unison with that of its narrator may make visible the mechanisms by which Naipaul constructs the version of Argentina he attempts to render to its readers.

Three clear sets of voices can be detected in Naipaul's ethnography, and I offer here brief descriptions and analyses of each one. First, there is a group of Argentine intellectuals that actively participate in the construction of Naipaul's version of the local reality of the 1970s. Naipaul considers them to be significant actors in the social and cultural life of the country, and so they become worth interviewing characters, whose words deserve to be quoted. Those voices are mostly urban, educated, higher-middle class, and belonging to what can be labelled the cultural *establishment*. In fact, they are often reduced to three or four people: Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986); Norman Thomas Di Giovanni (1933-), Borges's translator; Hermenegildo Sabat (1933-), a still well-known right-winged journalist and caricaturist; Mariano Grondona (1932-), a pro-military journalist and political analyst; an ambassador's wife, the guests at a dinner party in *Barrio Norte*; ladies and gentlemen from Tucumán, Mendoza, and Córdoba. From all of them, Naipaul gets an evident anti-Peronist description of the Argentine reality, which helps him support his thesis of perpetual chaos and unavoidable failure. Naipaul seems to have lost his abilities of objective observation, and his accounts become consistently single-minded tales of post-colonial corruption. However, those are also the voices that Naipaul judges to be mistaken, worried about fabricating for themselves an Argentine fantasy in order to avoid the miseries of barbarism. They are cast in the role of the decadent middle classes that mimic more than others do a pseudo-European consciousness.

Second, Peronism is given almost no place in the repertoire of voices building the text. Naipaul does not interview a single Peronist, and his key sources about that political movement are mostly newspapers and magazine clippings, Eva Perón's autobiographical pamphlet *La razón de mi vida*, and Juan Domingo Perón's (1895-1974) first book written during his exile, *La fuerza es el derecho de las bestias*. Those are used more sparsely throughout the text, and Naipaul never offers any clear political context to historically frame them. They are mostly provided as a token of Peronist irrationality and its lack of any serious logics. In its inarticulate presentation, the Peronist mottoes read

visibly fierce: “By 2000 we shall be united or dominated” (142); “Shall we burn down *Barrio Norte*?” (106); “Violence, in the hands of the people, isn’t violence. It is justice” (112). Likewise, Naipul sprinkles his text with aphoristic phrases in Spanish belonging to Argentina’s popular culture. “*Obedezco pero no cumpla*” (97); “*Dios arregla de noche la macana que los argentinos hacen de día*” (98); “*El último que salga que apague la luz*” (98). Spanish here seems not to be proposed as an alternative language producing a hybrid, disruptive textuality in the Anzandúan sense but just as a simple strategy to add local color to Naipaul’s piece of travel writing. Moreover, those statements reflect the common core of Argentines’ natural irresponsible and unethical behaviour in which Peronism finds fertile grounds and which Naipaul despises but whose simplistic argumentative nature calls to be questioned and ultimately challenged.

Last, there is Naipaul’s voice, the strongest and the most powerful in the text, yet mostly cloaked under the fabricated objectivity of the narrative in the third person and a highly limited use of the first person. Here, I must concur with AbdelRhaman’s clearly critical post-colonial stance, when he suggests that, disregarding the fact that power and knowledge are inextricably tied, Naipaul “believes in absolute truth, the one derived from his own analyses” (184). Apart from the decidedly selective use of local voices in his text, Naipaul’s language is always categorical and leaves almost no space for modalization. Most references to *The Return of Eva Perón* offered in this text contain the intensive verb to be, the fundamental indicator of existence, or cases of nominalization, or lists of abstract expressions, which quickly reach the status of factual generalizations. Naipaul claims, for example, that “they [Argentines] have a saint: Eva Perón” (106) or that “this was her work: a child’s vision of power, justice and revenge” (106), to conclude with a command: “don’t go to her autobiography, *La Razón de mi Vida*, That doesn’t contain a fact or a date” (113). Conclusive, forthright terms, such as *colony*, *plunder*, *mimicry*, *failure*, *terror*, *death*, boundlessly emerge from the text without any definition or a sensible context other than the one provided by the persistently similar settings of the other narratives in the volume –Zaire, Trinidad, Uruguay. All of these terms fix Naipaul’s repetitive, circular version of reality: the colony, for example, engenders mimicry, but mimicry established the permanence of the colonial condition. Thus, Naipaul claims his Argentina

is Argentina, and the strategies described above help create what Rushdie, ironically referring to Naipaul as a novelist when discussing his travel writing, has deemed “a highly selective truth, a novelist’s truth masquerading as objective truth” (quoted in AbdelRahman 184).²

Now, following Bakhtin (as read by Todorov), it can be stated that to the oversimplified monological truth advanced by Naipaul, the dialogical blend of voices proposed by Tóibín in his fiction can be opposed. Although *The Story of the Night* is retold by a potent first person narrator, the ultimate truth of Tóibín account is never monological and is never reached in any of the aspects the novel seeks to illuminate. Postmodernist theory has taught us that “there are only truths in the plural and never one Truth” (Hutcheon, 157) and that truth, as well as art, is “decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive” (Eagleton, vii). Ricardo, the first person narrator in Tóibín’s work, faces those qualities of truth in a dual play that readers are expected to follow all through the novel. First, the narrator has to confront dissimilar voices telling him different truths. Then, as a local translator or *lenguaraz* he has to translate those truths to foreigners, therefore constructing for himself his own, always-provisional, truth:

The first voice Ricardo feels compelled to listen to is that of his mother. For her, the Argentineans are savages, . . . , whatever mixture there is in them that makes them like that, they are savages, they will do anything. . . . Compare the Queen’s placid smile, her grace, her easy warmth, her modesty, her family life with the half-bred savages who run Argentina (53).

In English, Ricardo’s mother asserts her aspirations to belong in that transplanted aristocracy so much criticized in Naipaul’s account. Accordingly, as a child, Ricardo prefers his maternal English to his paternal Spanish: “My mother always spoke to me directly in English, and in school I spoke in English, and because of my colouring I always believed I was English” (13). Yet, later, in a passage in which Tóibín aptly uses Spanish to reproduce the local dictum of the times, a young Ricardo reassesses the reality constructed by the voices of his family in the context of the Falklands’ war (1982): “I had never seen before and never could have imagined, the look of involvement on each face, and the shouting ‘*Las Malvinas son Argentinas*’ all the voices together. . . . I shouted with the rest of them

² Naipaul himself (quoted in Ware 112) declares that “we almost begin with the truths –portable truths as it were, that can sometimes be rendered as aphorisms- and work through to their demonstrations.”

that the Malvinas were ours. I let my voice rise in the darkness with those of my countrymen and women” (67). Even so, the pride, the strength, and the communal bond eventually fade away with Argentina being defeated at the war, and we meet Ricardo feeling powerless and wondering: “how any of us would ever be able to face the world in the future” (73). Anyway, there is in his new truth a sense of self and belonging and perhaps of Argentine pride that overcomes the initial siding with only one version of an eternally divided society. In *The Story of the Night*, there are chances for Argentinians of togetherness, of being temporarily us, of becoming “a people” (67). This process has led Ricardo to find himself, halfway between the anglophilia of his mother and the apparent pride and warmth of his fellow citizens, his own voice

However, once Ricardo has achieved creating his own voice, his truth has to be translated to the Americans he works for in the 1990s: “I told her [Susan Ford] how the war had made it clearer to me that I was Argentinean” (81), his statement referring to the fleeting feeling of community engendered by the war. Even though in an interview to a local newspaper *Tóibín* discards any chance that his novel be autobiographical; as a writer, he shares with Ricardo, its narrator and main character, their being translators, and the fact that they succeed in conveying relativity to the versions of reality they offer to their interviewers. By the time he meets the Americans, for example, Ricardo cannot tell whether Perón had been a despot, a dictator, or a genuine mob leader; he can only state that “his rhetoric was full of nuance and ambiguity” and that “he made a certain class of Argentinean feel good” (96). Therefore, he positions himself within that transplanted aristocracy that had derided the general and politician. Most significantly, he can also straightforwardly interrogate his interviewers about a presumed American involvement in the disappearances (64). Those Ricardo himself starts denying (39), gets to know in a differed mode through the retelling of a Chilean expatriate (43-44), and finally assumes through the late but crude disclosure that one of his classmates at university has been one of the disappeared (118-120). The fading but forever present memory of the hint he had of the tortures and disappearances during the dictatorship remains, though, always untranslated, concealed under the guise of Argentine shame. In the only exact reference to the title of the novel, Ricardo remembers his conversations with his American employers, and he acknowle-

dges: “I did not tell the story of the night I saw the driverless cars revving outside the police station” (118).³

That night meets Ricardo experiencing one of his first sexual encounters, which may lead us to another voice in the text: his native language. Although Spanish seldom appears along the text, at the very beginning one single word introduces the entire ideological program of the novel, *entender*, and its interrogative version *Entendés?* (5-6), a question that, if understood as actually conjecturing on somebody’s veiled sexuality, marks the foundation of Ricardo’s search for personal and political integrity.⁴ The subversive power of Ricardo’s homosexuality would eventually evolve in the globalized environment of his American contacts or in the intimacy of his relationship with his partner Pablo in the liberal context of the 1990s. However, it is that initial hint at a destabilizing sexual orientation uttered in Spanish in times when its disclosure remains potentially dangerous that Ricardo’s personal and political positioning is anticipated truthfully and powerfully.

FICCIONES

Last, Bassnett also states that “travellers have pretensions towards faithfulness, insisting that we believe their accounts simply because they have been there and we have not” (103), or, in other words that they are entitled to tell us one truth we have not accessed and they have. Yet, we know now that that faithfulness is tainted by the re-plotment of what they see into their new narratives, for which they employ the traditional tropes of literature to configure stories their readerships can relate to (White 81-100). Having this and my previous considerations in mind, I conclude that Naipaul and Tóibín chose two divergent paths to make us *believe* their accounts.

Naipaul comes to Argentina in the 1970s “to bridge a creative gap” (2) but, as claimed by Ware, he has already lost “true wonder” (101). He arrives in the country with the preconception that any non-European society is doomed to failure, he describes the place accordingly, and he chooses not to give voice to any discourse that disagrees with his own. Following AbdelRahman’s thesis, Nai-

³ This indirectly refers to the electric prod, one of the cruel methods of torture used by the military during the dictatorship and for which they needed the extra electricity that they got in the way described in this passage.

⁴ *Entendés?* (Do you understand?) is the usual way in which Argentineans make sure their interlocutors are following their line of reasoning during a conversation. *Entender* (to understand) also refers, among the gay community, to the act of freely accepting one another’s sexuality, be it either hetero- or homo-sexual.

paul can also be classified as “the white traveller under the dark mask” (168), because he has almost blindly endorsed the ideas of cultural imperialism, his distinctive and persistent monological voice resonating all through his text and calling us to surrender to the universalizing project of Western civilization. Ware suggests then it might be at the expense of fair representation that the vast literary quality of the work might have come (102). *The Return of Eva Perón* makes prose of an immense aesthetic value, indeed. As Naipaul himself acknowledges, the fact that he cannot write a novel at that time “perhaps explains the intensity of some of the pieces and their obsessional nature” (2). Perhaps, we should read *The Return of Eva Perón*, then, not a case study or an ethnography but as difficult, artful fiction.

Fiction is the path explicitly chosen by Tóibín. Tóibín arrives in Argentina with the idea of travelling around the country in 1985. Instead, he becomes fascinated by the trial to the military junta that is taking place in Buenos Aires at the moment. He quickly falls in love with the city, but he does not decide to write a novel about Argentina at once. Almost a decade later, he chooses the country as the bleak backdrop to his first gay novel because, as he declares to a local newspaper (Tóibín), he judged the gay atmosphere in the country to be, as in Ireland, “uncomfortable, difficult”. After Part I, however, his fictional description in *The Story of the Night* overcomes the obstacle of falling into cliché and offers the keen, careful observation of a post-colonial ethnographer through the eyes and the voice of a post-modern character trying to cope with the chaotically globalized neo-liberal Argentina of the 1990s.

Neither Naipaul nor Tóibín could avoid attributing to or inflicting on the country a forever-fictional quality. The opening statement in *The Return of Eva Perón* runs like an invitation: “Outline it like a story by Borges” (95), followed by a brief account of the eerie return of the woman’s embalmed corpse to the country. The paragraph closes, “that, Borges said, is a story I could never write” (95). Opposite to the coarseness with which Naipaul bestows them initially, he later suggests that Argentineans “live in an imaginary space” (100) and that the situations that they believe they live have only a meagre correlate in the real world. Buenos Aires is, for most of them, “a city of the imagination” (125), and, highly unaware of their history, Argentineans inhabit, therefore, “a magic

debilitating world” (116). Similarly, Tóibín’s characters live in a world in which it is easy “to invent a whole new set of political views and express them fiercely *in your own apartment*” [emphasis added] (53). Argentineans described by an American in *The Story of the Night* “have always been like that, a mixture of such good sense and an amazing lack of something. I don’t know what it is” (Tóibín 257), and even Ricardo labels many of the events in his life “dreams” (182) or “partly true” (258). Throughout these *ficciones* and in their blend of fact and fiction, lie and truth, reverberates the Borghesian spirit hailed by both Naipaul and Tóibín; yet, it also resonates, perhaps resulting from both writers’ remarkable powers of observation, the Argentine need to fictionalize our place in the world. As firmly stated by the local poet Edgar Morisoli in his acceptance speech of an Honorary Professor degree at the university and I have already suggested at the beginning of this text, in the end, this is a place where you have to learn both how to live and how to endure, *padecer* (12).

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