

L'illusion Comique

For years of stupidity and shame, the methods of commercial advertising and of *littérature pour concierges* were applied to the governing of the Republic. Thus there were two histories: the criminal one, composed of jails, tortures, prostitutions, arsons, and deaths; and the theatrical one, tales and fables made for consumption by dolts. A preliminary examination of the second, perhaps no less despicable than the first, is the purpose of this page.

The dictatorship loathed (pretended to loathe) capitalism, yet, as in Russia, copied its methods, dictating names and slogans to the people with the same tenacity with which businesses impose their razor blades, cigarettes, or washing machines. That tenacity, as everyone knows, was counter-productive: the excess of effigies of the dictator led many to detest the dictator. From a world of individuals we have passed into an even more passionate world of symbols: the clash was not between parties or opponents of the dictator, but rather among parties and opponents of an effigy or a name. . . .

More curious was the manipulation of politics according to the rules of drama or melodrama. On October 17, 1945, it was pretended that a colonel had been seized and abducted and that the people had rescued him. No one bothered to explain who had kidnapped him, or how his whereabouts were known; nor were there ever legal charges pressed against the supposedly guilty parties; nor were their names ever revealed or even speculated on. Over the course of ten years, the acting grew considerably worse, with an increasing disdain for the prosaic scruples of realism. On the morning of August 31, the colonel, now dictator, pretended to resign from the presidency; his announcement was not made before the Congress, but rather to some sufficiently populist union functionaries. Everyone knew that the purpose of this maneuver was to provoke the people to beg him to withdraw his resignation. In case there was any doubt, bands of party hacks, aided by the

police, plastered the city with portraits of the dictator and his wife. Crowds listlessly gathered in the Plaza de Mayo, where the state radio broadcast exhortations not to leave and musical compositions to alleviate the tedium. Just before night fell, the dictator came out on a balcony of the Pink House. He was, as expected, acclaimed, but he forgot to renounce his renunciation, or perhaps he didn't do so because everyone knew he was going to do so, and it would have been a bore to insist. He ordered, however, an indiscriminate massacre of his opponents, and the crowds cheered. Yet nothing happened that night: everyone (except, perhaps, the speaker) knew or sensed that it was all a fiction. The same, to a lesser degree, occurred with the burning of the flag. It was said that it was the work of Catholics; the defamed flag was photographed and exhibited, but as the flagpole itself wasn't enough of a show, they opted for a modest hole in the center of the symbol. It is useless to list the examples; one can only denounce the duplicity of the fictions of the former regime, which can't be believed and were believed.

It will be said that the public's lack of sophistication is enough to explain the contradiction; I believe that its cause is more profound. Coleridge spoke of the "willing suspension of disbelief" that is poetic faith; Samuel Johnson said, in defense of Shakespeare, that the spectators at a tragedy do not believe they are in Alexandria in the first act and Rome in the second, but submit to the pleasure of a fiction. Similarly, the lies of a dictatorship are neither believed nor disbelieved; they pertain to an intermediate plane, and their purpose is to conceal or justify sordid or atrocious realities.

They pertain to the pathetic or the clumsily sentimental. Happily, for the enlightenment and security of the Argentines, the current regime has understood that the function of government is not to inspire pathos.

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