

Confused Oratory: Borges, Macedonio and the Creation of the Mythological Author



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In 1921, a young Jorge Luis Borges returned to Buenos Aires from Switzerland via Spain, possessed by the new and radical aesthetic sensibilities he had absorbed in Europe and eager to transplant them to his native turf (Borges, "Ultraísmo" 135; Fernández-Moreno, "Ultraísmo" 34–35). Upon renewing his former acquaintances at home, Borges was astonished and delighted to encounter many of those radical sensibilities in an old family friend of his father's generation. Macedonio Fernández, Borges discovered, had been sitting in complete isolation from the cosmopolitan fervor of Europe, hardly stirring from his simple Buenos Aires boarding house, yet had come up with a startlingly new vision of the world and the means to express that vision. Borges immediately determined that Macedonio's philosophical and aesthetic vision deserved dissemination.¹

Over the next forty-five years, Borges, along with other avant-garde writers of the Argentine *generación martinfierrista*, made periodic concerted efforts to establish Macedonio's reputation as a founding father of modern Argentine culture, a founder of mythological proportions, simultaneously definitive of Argentine culture and tran-

¹ Referring to Macedonio Fernández by his first name only is an established convention. While arguably ingenuous, the practice enhances Macedonio's mythological status, conferring intimacy, universal recognition and transcendence all at once.

scendent to its texts. Within ten years after the initial “discovery” of Macedonio—and more than twenty years before his death—this conversion from local character to living mythological figure was established enough to be summarized in an indelible portrait by Raúl Scalabrini-Ortiz:

El primer metafísico de Buenos Aires y el único filósofo auténtico es Macedonio Fernández. Su libro “No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos” es ya una biblia esotérica del espíritu porteño. Todo lo que se pueda decir, ya está en él. Lástima que sólo pocos elegidos pueden salvar el escollo de su idioma enmarañado. Es un alegato pro pasión, un ataque al intelectualismo extenuante. Su filosofía es la filosofía de un porteño: es la quintaesencia, lo más puro, lo más acendrado del espíritu de Buenos Aires. Por eso está sólo y espera; él es también, en gran parte, un eslabón en que el espíritu de la tierra se encarna. Posiblemente seguirá solo y seguirá esperando. Y así por los siglos de los siglos, porque Macedonio ya está para siempre el primero y más grande en la secuela de profetas porteños. Amén. (Scalabrini-Ortiz 123)

The first metaphysical thinker of Buenos Aires and its only authentic philosopher is Macedonio Fernández. His book, “No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos,” has already become an esoteric bible of the *porteño* spirit. Anything that can be said is already in it. It is a pity that only a few chosen can navigate the reefs of its tangled language. It is a plea in favor of passion, an attack on exhausting intellectualism. His philosophy is the philosophy of a *porteño*: it is the quintessence, the purest, the most distilled of the spirit of Buenos Aires. This is why he is alone and waits; he is also, in large measure, a link into which the spirit of the land joins. Possibly he shall continue alone and shall continue to wait. And thus it shall be for centuries of centuries, as Macedonio is forever the first and greatest in the line of *porteño* prophets. Amen.²

This passage from Scalabrini’s best-selling *El hombre que está solo y espera* (1931), setting the stage for a virtual apotheosis, served to solidify Macedonio’s reputation as a reclusive, Socratic figure, interested in passion and metaphysics as opposed to society, and in conversing as opposed to writing. Reading this tribute, one can see how Macedonio, while still relatively young, should metamorphose from a living cult figure into a veritable mythological one.

Macedonio’s considerable stature in twentieth-century Argentine letters today seems to rest entirely on this mythology. Among Buenos Aires’s intellectual and literary circles, it is easy to elicit anecdotes

² Translation throughout are mine.

attesting to Macedonio's peculiar personality and lifestyle.³ Less easy to find are people who can claim to have read—much less understood—many of Macedonio's writings. Among literary historians, Macedonio's importance seems to lie mainly in his friendship with, and influence on, Borges; in his role as a figurehead for the avant-garde *martinferrista* movement of the 1920s; and as a foil for Leopoldo Lugones and his *modernistas* (Fernández-Moreno, "Distinguir" 45).⁴

Had it not been for Borges's and Scalabrini's efforts, Macedonio might have remained unknown even to Argentines and to the Latin American writers and critics—such as Ricardo Piglia, Alicia Borinsky, Naomi Lindstrom and Noé Jitrik—who regard him as fundamental to modern and contemporary literature of the region.⁵ Borges and Scalabrini saw to the publication of *No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos* (1928) and *Papeles de Recienvenido* (1929), the only two monographs Macedonio published in Argentina in his lifetime.⁶ But these same efforts also contributed to detaching the texts from their author and the author from his context, a situation exacerbated by the fact that most of his work remained unpublished until the nineteen seventies, twenty to thirty years after his death. As a result, Macedonio Fernández's works are almost universally read through a postmodern lens.

This study challenges these interrelated traditions—the mythology of Macedonio as a hermit-like philosopher and the practice of postmodern readings of his works—by examining two interrelated

³ Macedonio lived a relatively conventional life until the death of his wife, Helena de Obieta, in 1920. At that point, Macedonio quit his law practice and took to living in a succession of Buenos Aires boarding houses and huts on friends' *estancias* (ranches) outside the city, various family members having taken charge of his four children (Fernández, *Selected Writings* 5).

⁴ *Modernismo* in the Spanish-speaking world precedes the avant-garde and is roughly analogous to parnasianism and symbolism elsewhere. The *generación martinferrista*, associated primarily with the *grupo Florida* of poets and artists and named after their most successful literary journal, *Martín Fierro* (1924–1927), was Buenos Aires's first and most noteworthy avant-garde generation. For many of their number, *modernismo* and Lugones, *modernismo's* best known proponent in Argentina, represented exhausted aesthetics that the *martinferristas* claimed to supersede.

⁵ Much of Borges's writing is sympathetic to Macedonio's vision, in particular those aspects emphasized by Floyd Merrell: Borges's attempt to reconcile nominalism and transcendental realism; his maintenance of the principles of deductive reasoning while demolishing the truths it rests on; his response to the "complexities, uncertainties, ambiguities" of modern life (3–15).

⁶ The short piece *Una novela que comienza* was published as a monograph in Chile in 1940 under the initiative of Luis Alberto Sánchez.

processes. First, we will consider some of the mechanisms of mythologizing employed by Borges, his generation of writers, and Macedonio himself. We will discuss the motives the *generación martinfierrista* had for elaborating this mythology, and Macedonio's motives for collaborating—up to a point—in this process. Second, we will take a close look at one key text of Macedonio's as a means of deducing how his own self-presentation and self-projection run counter to the mythology and the postmodern readings it has engendered. Borges and his generation had specific reasons for creating a Macedonio apart from, and transcendent to, the texts and the flesh-and-blood man who wrote them. The revisionist reading of Macedonio's writing will reveal that the mythological Macedonio in many ways obscures and contradicts Macedonio's own radical notions about the concepts of author, self and identity.

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In viewing Macedonio as a hermit-like literary philosopher, scholars have fixed on his valuation of paradox, his challenges to the received concepts of author, text and reader and, above all, his repudiation of the accepted concepts of "self."⁷ Critics have assumed that his principal aim is to frustrate and dismantle all faith in a demonstrably objective reality, using a kind of deconstructionist "pastiche," in Jameson's terms (Jameson 16–17), detached from historical and social circumstances. These postmodern readings have yielded fruitful and provocative observations, but they are highly anachronistic, attributing to Macedonio intentions and ideas that disregard the time and place in which he lived and wrote. This anachronistic practice is consistent with Borges's vision for Macedonio: myth, after all, transcends history.

The question of self is fundamental both to Macedonio Fernández's effort at overhauling narrative and to the problems posed by postmodern readings of his works. The general conclusion is that Macedonio's dissolution of self is similar to one attempted by Borges or other modernist writers of at least a generation later.⁸ But an

⁷ The self Macedonio challenges is a direct product of Cartesian philosophy, the model of subjectivity on which the modern self is elaborated.

⁸ Dissenting is Sonya Matalía, who documents differences between Macedonio's and Borges's attacks on self. But Matalía sees Macedonio's writing as deconstructive "babbling" (504). I argue that Macedonio's coherence lies precisely in his challenge to the autonomous self and its social and cultural consequences.

examination of passages from *Papeles de Recienvenido*, whose publication Borges successfully urged, will show that if Borges got his early ideas on the fallacy of self from Macedonio, he got them wrong.

Lucille Kerr observes that Borges, in keeping with modernity in general, fragments and dissolves individual identity, the idea of self and even the concept of subject, into a subjectless poetic voice. Kerr asserts that this subjectless voice effectively forces a redefinition of the concept of author. Writing on the famous vignette, "Borges y yo," Kerr argues that the voice "effects the disappearance of the author as a univocal and stable authority or origin," but that "[T]he suggestion that the author cannot be found in any single site potentially situates the author's figure everywhere" (2). According to Daniel Balderston, that voice, in Borges's poetics, has history as a constant referent, irreducibly beyond the text yet accessible only through text (16-17). In addition, Beatriz Sarlo argues that a primary motivation of Borges and other *martinferrista* writers was to establish a mythological foundation for Buenos Aires, a city without "ghosts" (43). James Holloway, Jr. details how, in Borges's poetry and narrative, the conversion into a "mythological framework" (19) of a singular historical moment and "block" of the city is personally attested to by Borges's lyric voice (31-33).

This mythological rendering is, in turn, fundamental to Borges's project of integrating the Argentine poetic "voice" into the cultural discourse of Western modernity. In other words, the stories told by that voice, whose identity is constituted entirely by the stories it tells, can be reduced only to history and mythology. With the self thus dissolved in the stories told, Borges must attribute genius to the voice itself in its success at expressing these fragments of Argentine identity. This conceptualization of poetic-voice genius could find no better incarnation than Macedonio Fernández. The "discovery" of Macedonio by Borges, then, is perfectly in keeping with the need to establish a distinctively Argentine mythological discourse.

The revelation of historical mythology in Macedonio Fernández is abetted by Macedonio himself, but requires a fundamental misinterpretation of both his writings and his lifestyle. One example of such a misreading: Macedonio's admirers note his words on the "Argentine character" as being especially suited to evolving completely new forms of human relations. For Macedonio, this observation demonstrates the aptitude of Argentines to transcend the very idea of nationality (*Teorías* 95). But the responses of the *generación martinferrista* to Macedonio's remarks reflect their zeal to create a national mythol-

ogy: they cite his ideas as asserting an Argentine "type" that is simultaneously specifically national and generically international.

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Critical to the present study are Macedonio's attitudes about his own individual identity: his sense of physical presence, his feeling of engagement in or irrelevancy to civic life and, most crucial here, his stance as author and his relationship to his own texts. This last question is the one critics and *martinferrista* writers rely on most heavily to maintain Macedonio's indifference to all aspects of material existence: his lack of interest in disseminating his own writing. Yet Macedonio himself was acutely aware of the potential consequences of his evident ambivalence toward publishing. Ironically, he reveals his awareness in a comment often cited by scholars as evidence for his absolute indifference:

Nací porteño y en un año muy 1874. No entonces enseguida, pero sí apenas despúes, ya empecé a ser citado por Jorge Luis Borges con tan poca timidez de encomios que por el terrible riesgo a que se expuso con esta vehemencia comencé yo a ser el autor de lo mejor que él había producido.⁹ (*Recienvenido* 90)

I was born *porteño* in a year very 1874. Not right away, but very shortly afterwards I began to be cited by Jorge Luis Borges with so little shyness of praise that through the terrible risk to which he exposed himself with this vehemence I started to become the author of the best of what he had produced.

Early on, then, Macedonio noted that his ambivalence toward publishing and self-promotion could result in attributing to him ideas and perspectives he never intended to lay claim to. Not only was Macedonio aware of the risks inherent in his status as a "famous unknown author," he was worried about the consequences.

The fact that the preponderance of his work was published posthumously has been the primary evidence of Macedonio's reputed indifference to publishing. Ana Camblong shows us, however, that Macedonio's famous reluctance to take the initiative to publish, especially to publish *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna*, his most read and discussed work, resulted from complex and deeply ambivalent ideas about the nature of authoring, promoting and publishing one's own

⁹Lindstrom and Rodríguez Monegal cite this passage in slightly different form (Lindstrom 16; Rodríguez Monegal 177).

writing. While Macedonio indeed published little in his lifetime, he was in fact obsessed with the promotion and eventual dissemination of his supposed masterwork.

Throughout his writing, including his correspondence, Macedonio is obsessed with alternative means of self-promotion in advance of his constantly deferred, never-accomplished entry onto the literary scene. Never publishing *Museo* through standard literary channels meant never allowing this self-promotion to result in self-realization. Accordingly, Macedonio is simultaneously always a “recienvenido,” a newcomer to the literary world, and never an established presence in it. And yet, as Camblong has shown, Macedonio very much wanted *Museo* to be read. Perhaps he hoped someone else would see his major works to publication; references to *Museo* in his letters (*Epistolario* 25, 37, 51, 53, 55, 61, 90, 153, 189–90, 191) as well as his willingness to share the manuscript, suggest as much. It is equally possible that Macedonio was astute to how a reliance on others could prove compromising. By 1931, well before *Museo* was finished, he had ample evidence of the consequences of Borges’s and Scalabrini’s efforts.

Macedonio’s obsession with creating readership outside the established channels of publication resulted in a lifelong act of pure genius—the campaign in absence: the self-promotion without an identifiable self; the perpetual, as-yet-unpublished newcomer to the literary world; the “autor accidentado,” or accidental author. In 1921, and again in 1927, Macedonio launched a farcical run for the Argentine presidency that served as a paradigm for this campaign in absence. The stated objective of the campaign was the “dissemination of the name” Macedonio Fernández without the presence of any person connected to that name (Borges, *Macedonio* 17).¹⁰ But even this undertaking served, ultimately, as a component for the mythology. Today’s store of anecdotes about Macedonio, the peculiar philosophical hermit, routinely include some of his more outlandish campaign tactics (García 23; Fernández-Latour 16; Isaacson 67–68; Marechal).¹¹

It is just these sorts of anecdotes that constitute the pith of a mythological figure. Macedonio Fernández’s legendary characteriza-

¹⁰ The campaign was also a tongue-in-cheek tribute to Argentine president Hipólito Yrigoyen, whose campaign successes seemed linked to his reluctance to appear in public (Rock 185).

¹¹ Carlos García, writing from Hamburg, notes that these anecdotal sources often confuse and conflate references to the two different presidential campaigns. He also insists on the seriousness of the campaign’s intentions.

tion as the Socrates of Buenos Aires blossomed and endured largely through anecdote, much of it apocryphal, and much of it generated by Borges and other *martinferrista* writers. The legend persists today, its varied episodes having agglomerated into a mythology. The most tentative inquiries among Buenos Aires's literary community yield colorful (and in a brief time, familiar) anecdotes about Macedonio's peculiar lifestyle, his wanderings, his primitive lodgings, his acquaintance with prostitutes, his unsanitary habits, and above all, the superiority of his personal conversation to his written texts.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the birth of this mythology, a good starting point is a little-discussed passage found in *Papeles de Recienvenido*. First delivered orally at a literary banquet in 1924, the passage in question constitutes Macedonio's debut on the Buenos Aires literary scene, the first of his famous "brindis" or oral dedications (Engelbert, *New Novel* 29–30). "La oratoria del hombre confuso" was not delivered by Macedonio himself, who had a legendary aversion to public speaking. Instead, it was delivered by Enrique Fernández Latour to an audience gathered to pay tribute to Uruguayan artist Pedro Figari. Macedonio, the author of this speech, it is important to note, was present in that audience.

Although arguably a formative moment in the development of the mythology of the accidental author, the "Oratoria" is certainly not the moment of its birth. Macedonio's "coming out" as literary newcomer had been anticipated for at least three years, since his "discovery" by Borges in 1921.¹² It had also been documented a year prior to the "Oratoria," also by Borges, in a published review of a book Macedonio had not yet written (Borges, "El Recienvenido"). By 1923, Macedonio was already established in a small literary circle as an absent participant and an unknown, unpublished author. In his very first public presentation—in his already anticipated coming-out as a literary *recienvenido* to Buenos Aires, where he has lived all his life—Macedonio Fernández turns presentation, presence and performance upside down. He subverts the terms of author and audience, actor and spectator, for he is absent as author but present as spectator to his own literary tribute.

He also subverts the terms of tribute, refusing the authority to pay homage to the guest of honor. The "Oratoria" consists of a long, digressive and frankly weird account of the narrator's troubles caused

¹² Carlos García, citing Borges's 1921 article "La lírica argentina contemporánea," places the initial responsibility for framing this authorial identity squarely on Borges.

by "el uso de la palabra" or "the use of the word" (51). The point of the account, it turns out, is to excuse the narrator's demurral of his very reason for being, that is, to offer a tribute. The narrative concludes with these words:

Tan infelices experimentos oratorios me han disuadido, doctor Figari, no obstante la admiración y afecto que quisiera atestiguaros, de dirigiros una sola palabra en el acto de homenaje que os tributamos. (53)

Such unhappy oratory experiences have dissuaded me, Dr. Figari, notwithstanding the admiration and affection I would like to attest to, from addressing a single word to you in the act of homage we are offering you.

Certain "oratory experiments" or "experiences" have led Macedonio to shun the role of an author of tributes. The "*experimento*," or "use of the word," that launches this bizarre adventure is a very peculiar kind of tribute: a *piropo*, or in Macedonio's words, a "*palabra*," to a passing lady, while seated at a sidewalk café, resulting in physical violence to the narrator. He describes thus the consequence of his "word":

Pensaba extenderme satisfactoriamente sobre las consecuencias geométricas que fluían de la posición recíproca especial tan bien preparada por mis palabras, cuando un golpe, rectilíneo posiblemente, hizo dos mitades de mi elocuencia y aun tuve que dividir ésta con un vigilante que se había tenido oculto en mitad de la calzada haciéndose notable por grandes señas a cuanto movimiento entorpecible y estorbable divisaba. (51-52)

I was thinking of stretching myself out satisfactorily upon the geometric consequences flowing from the reciprocal position so specially prepared by my words, when a blow, possibly rectilinear, broke my eloquence in two and I yet had to divide this with an officer who had been in hiding in the middle of the road making himself noteworthy with exaggerated signals at whatever hinderable and obstructable traffic he could spot.

As tempting as it is to conclude that the "Oratoria" is simply a humorous, nonsensical attempt to confound the terms of rendering homage and the social practices allowing for homage, closer examination shows that there is a great deal more going on here. Macedonio accepts an invitation to speak to a public, and to render tribute to an individual. But he uses the opportunity instead to expose the perils inherent in the language of tribute and the dilemma afflicting all public speech in modern society. He aims to reveal the error of performance innate in modern-day use of language.

Utterances, Macedonio suggests, no matter how sincere, heartfelt and chaste, are trapped by their subjectivity to our physicality,

geometric and clinical as well as sexual. Speech is subject to social, economic and political structures and the authority they constitute as well as to place, property and, as Borges later tells us, to history. Macedonio was acutely aware of these dilemmas.

The "Oratoria," moreover, features a preoccupation characteristic of *Papeles de Recienvenido*: the violence fostered by this dilemma. The subjectivity constituted in language inevitably leads to violent conflict, and Macedonio seeks an escape:

El dolor que sentía en aquel de los hombros arriba del cual pende una oreja no era de muelas ni de primera dentición sino del primer uso de la palabra. A mí me parecía que una vereda completa de las de frente a Plaza Congreso me había acertado en la clavícula. Si yo hubiera podido encontrar un reemplazante instantáneo de mí un segundo antes del golpe . . . Pero estos reemplazantes, suplentes, que todos quejosos se inscriben para las vacantes, no aparecen cuando se los busca para ayudarlos. (52)

The pain I felt in the one shoulder above which hangs an ear was not from wisdom teeth or from first teething but from the first use of the word. It seemed to me as if an entire sidewalk from in front of the Plaza Congreso had struck me on the collarbone. If I had been able to find an instant replacement for myself a second before the blow . . . But these replacements, substitutes, who, all annoyed, sign up for vacancies, never appear when one calls on them for help.¹⁵

What is the escape from this prison house of language, from the physicality, sociality and historicity it binds us to, and from the violence it fosters? The narrator tells us of a second encounter with authorities, then provides the solution in a neat verbal trick:

Pero en un movimiento político del cual yo ocupaba la acera—siempre las veredas me han dejado en la calle—pronuncié el siguiente discurso de espectador: "Viva el Presidente Cristóbal Colón Avellaneda." Al instante de terminarlo me vi rodeado de una baratura de bastones como no es de creer dado el alto costo de la mano de obra, los que estaban ya levantados, de modo que hecho el trabajo principal, nada era bajarlos en favor mío y de la ley de la gravitación de las manzanas universales mondada por Newton. Por esta vez me reemplacé yo mismo; con celeridad inapresurable hice ausencia de mi presencia y modestia de mi engreimiento. (52)

But in a political uprising in which I held the pavement—sidewalks have always left me out in the street—I pronounced the following spectator's speech: "Long live President Christopher Columbus Avellaneda." The

¹⁵ The Plaza Congreso remains today an important site of political protest.

instant I finished it I saw myself encircled by so many billy clubs up for a song one wouldn't believe it given the high cost of manpower, already raised so that the main work having been done, it was nothing to lower them in my favor and in favor of the law, picked by Newton, of the gravitation of universal apples. This time I replaced myself; with unhastenable celerity I made absence of my presence and modesty of my self-indulgence.

To make absence out of presence, submission out of the exercise of authority—refusal, in effect, of that first opportunity to speak—that is Macedonio's solution to this dilemma language has placed him in. In Lacanian terms, it is a rebirth, a return to the moment prior to "the first use of the word," the moment in which language allowed us constitution of ourselves as subjects, led us to the error of performance (Lacan 60–65, 83–84).¹⁴ Macedonio himself refers to the process in just these terms. Returning to the opening lines of the "Oratoria," we find:

El uso de la palabra es travesura que me ha costado una contrariedad por vez. Favoreciéndome certera y prontamente—como el tratamiento que dejó de seguir el extinto—con el efecto de que el encontrarme en casa luego pareceme recuerdo de resurrección: un bienestar de sobreviviente tras malestar de persona que está naciendo.

The use of the word is mischief that has cost me one mishap at a time. Favoring me quickly and accurately—like the course of treatment that an extinct being has left off—with the effect that finding myself at home seems like the memory of a resurrection: the well-being of a survivor coming after the discomfort of a person who is being born.

The narrator develops this notion further in the lines that follow. The use of "the word" allows him to soothe the "discomfort" brought on by birth by "certifying" his presence and the "authority" of his voice. He does so by asking his parlor maid for a glass of water, with the "*ánimo*" characteristic of a "muerto interrumpido o un interrumpido de morir." ["a dead man interrupted or a man interrupted in dying."] We, in effect, become subject when our voice allows us to subject another, such as a maid, and, in the process, keep death at bay. But speech, and the consequent ability to account for ourselves that constitutes consciousness, also effects a rebirth, an initial founding of self that follows the initializing birth, and a moment, moreover,

¹⁴ According to Engelbert, a passage in *Vigilia* describes the "mystic state" Macedonio seeks in almost exactly these terms (Engelbert 80–83).

that is renewed with each use of speech. Herein is Macedonio's problem. And the solution, also perfectly logical, is to revert the terms of that rebirth, making it a moment of absenting one's self instead of presenting one's self.

For Macedonio, this return or rebirth is the ultimate transgression, for it refuses to accept conflicts, or "difference" in Derrida's terms, as being inherent to language and the human condition. In this sense, Macedonio is completely at odds with Lacan's conclusions regarding this difference. Macedonio proposes, in this rebirth, to escape the sexuality (and throughout both *Adriana Buenos Aires* and *Museo*, Macedonio stresses the distinction between lust, which he considers bestial, and love, which he regards as essential) and the violence we are bound to by our language, and which eventually our language in its rawest, least premeditated form always reduces us to.

Reference to falling is also frequent in *Papeles de Recienvenido*. But having acknowledged the inescapability of falling, Macedonio transgresses its accepted principles. Suddenly Newton's "universal" laws are pointedly discarded, and falling takes on a completely new relationship with the human experience. The fall is not a fall from original grace, not a fall into the subjectivity wrought by the knowledge that language constitutes. Macedonio's fall—his rebirth—is a fall out of difference, out of the laws that confirm subjectivity, and into "pure being," as Macedonio calls it repeatedly throughout his writings.¹⁵

Thus Macedonio Fernández's debut as an author into the literary world, marked by this first public speech at an event in tribute to an artist, serves as the announcement of his rebirth as an author, his arrival as a public presence. But simultaneously, this debut and rebirth serve to repudiate the very terms of authorship and presence. On the one hand, the rebirth occurs on his own terms and completely reconfigures the parameters of author and subject by refusing "el uso de la palabra" and the violent presence it constitutes; on the other hand, the rebirth openly and aggressively exploits the tools of self-promotion begun several years earlier with Borges's bogus book review. Macedonio not only agrees to participate in the literary community and the events it organizes to promote itself, he seizes the opportunity with extraordinary force. Reading over the "Oratoria," it is easy to believe that his preparations for this moment were both

¹⁵ This "pure being" resembles Kristeva's "plenitude," but it pointedly transcends rather than exploits sexual difference.

calculated and thorough. For the next twenty years, Macedonio will be exploiting and subverting language, literature and their various arenas of production and presentation to tread the fine line between facilitating a mythology and perpetuating myth.

Although he never refers to myth, the identity that Macedonio Fernández was elaborating for himself corresponds in many ways to a mythical being. Mythical is the identity without a self, the individual who strives to make himself known yet refuses to appear. Mythical is the personality who is perpetually born and reborn, and whose death is perpetually postponed or interrupted. To this mythical end are the "Oratoria" *in absentia*, the campaign in absence, and the writer forever preparing to publish but never submitting himself for publication. The outcome of this campaign is an identity constituted entirely by language but refusing to be subjected by it. The myth of the accidental author was no accident.

Macedonio's challenge is to create and perpetuate this elusive, myth-like identity for himself while simultaneously precluding its consolidation into a defined persona with a prior and autonomous self. The predicament is especially complex since Macedonio takes advantage of the avant-garde literary fervor of the moment to foster his efforts. Macedonio's own oblique involvement with, and comments on, this avant-garde activity demonstrate his awareness of the delicacy of his position. On the one hand, his avant-garde comrades help realize the perfusion into the city of the mythical accidental author. On the other hand, this same association with the avant-garde risks reifying that myth into a fixed subject for an Argentine mythology.

Vicky Unruh tells us that one hallmark paradox of the avant-garde is its search for a "pure national voice," at once culturally unique yet completely original and independent of historical and institutional forces (208–31). Beatriz Sarlo affirms the importance to the Buenos Aires vanguard of voicing an "argentinidad" free of historical contingency and responsive to Argentine modernity. Thus the impulse to establish distinctive myths in a distinctive territory—the "orillas" or margins of Argentine life—and to give Buenos Aires its "fantasmas," or ghosts, without allowing for social and historical evolution; a kind of spontaneous generation of culture. This was the primary impulse, at the time, motivating those writers closest to Macedonio Fernández, particularly Jorge Luis Borges (Sarlo 43–50). Holloway and Madrid demonstrate that Borges's early treatment of Buenos Aires responds to just that impulse.

If, as the "Oratoria" tells us, Macedonio's resurrection takes place at home, it can only occur as the result of a venture into public. The public arena is comprehensive: it comprises intimate words proffered to a passing lady as well as political demonstrations vociferated in a public plaza. It also embraces the various disciplines that shape the culture Macedonio inhabits. The "Oratoria" implicates these disciplines with extraordinary efficiency:

Réstame explicar el origen de los pequeños errores de mi discurso que tanta deportividad provocaron. Tuve siglos antes uno preparado de encargo para recibir a Colón en su segundo viaje que efectuaba bajo instrucciones de hacer cuanto antes el descubrimiento de América, no fuera que los nativos lo verificaran primero que él. Pero como sucede con estos paseos apurados, muchos quedan sin hacer; y los historiadores han establecido que no hubo segundo viaje de Colón sino únicamente primero y tercero. (53)

It is left for me to explain the source of my speech's little errors which brought about such sport. I had centuries earlier prepared one to order to receive Columbus on his second voyage, which he performed under instructions to carry out the discovery of America straight away, lest the natives verify it first. But as happens with these rushed outings, many are left undone; and historians have established that there was no second voyage of Columbus but only a first and a third.

This short paragraph, taken with previously cited excerpts from the same short speech, throws into question both the foundational myths defining Spanish America's historical identity (Columbus's nonexistent second voyage) and the scientific method serving as Western modernity's way of thinking (Newton's contrived falling apples).

But most crucial, the public arena that Macedonio simultaneously courts and eschews centers on Buenos Aires's aesthetic revolution. In one sense, the standard assessment of Macedonio's "discovery" by Borges and his contemporaries is an accurate representation of the situation. Macedonio's choice of the moment at which to perform his debut as accidental author makes clear his recognition of the vital role this artistic community must play in his identity as an individual revolutionary. Both the content of his "Oratoria" and its peculiar form of delivery emphasize Macedonio's iconoclastic—and paradoxical—posture with regard to the avant-garde ferment. Macedonio poises just outside of the avant-garde, or above it, always invited but never joining, always revered but never worshipped, wandering, like Socrates, omnipresent within the walls of the city but never engaged

in its politics. It is also no accident that Macedonio's reputation precedes him wherever and whenever he allows himself to materialize, but especially prior to that moment of his subverted debut as a literary *recienvenido* and a giver of tributes, when he finally refuses the podium and fails to arrive. Macedonio's perpetration as myth is inseparable from his elusive relationship to the *martinferrista* generation.

The *mythology* of the accidental author, on the other hand, requires a concerted elaboration by others determined to assign Macedonio his place in a national literature—an ineffable, founding place. To the *generación martinferrista*, and to Borges especially, Macedonio is the individual incarnation of a cultural foundation mythology: *mythos* merged with *logos*, archived, institutionalized and non-evolving. To them, Macedonio is the founding father, the mythology behind which to reduce all of modern artistic expression in Argentina. Buenos Aires has gotten its *fantasma*.

But of course, myths and ghosts do not write books, and they certainly do not publish them, any more than Socrates could be the author of a Platonic dialogue or of his own enshrinement in Athenian culture. The *martinferrista* generation loved Macedonio like a father. But in their failure to understand fundamental aspects of his writing, they made him a founding father, a mythological father, disconnected from the concerns of publishing and publicity, thus robbing his writing of the power to maintain his absence. David Viñas puts it rather neatly, arguing that Macedonio was the Argentine avant-garde's only bow to the past and to myth: "a un padre nadie lo exhibe; lo reverencia o lo mata" ["nobody puts a father on display; they either revere him or they kill him"] (64). As Horacio González tells us, the *martinferristas* did both. They kept Macedonio Fernández's persona alive by "convertir la devoción a Macedonio en la epopeya de la oralidad" ["converting the cult of Macedonio into an epic of orality"] (173), one comprising anecdotes and homages and tributes—including a grave-side eulogy delivered by Jorge Luis Borges. They preserved Macedonio's authorship of his texts, but at the same time killed the "absent" Macedonio invested in those texts, burying and refuting "la secreta ambición de seriedad macedoniana" ["Macedonio's secret ambition to seriousness"] (González 174). For Macedonio, the obsession with writing, publishing and publicity was essential to staying perpetually a newcomer. Borges cared not for newcomers; he needed ghosts, and Macedonio Fernández was the ideal candidate.

If Scalabrini's portrait opened the way for the mythologizing of

Macedonio Fernández, Borges was most responsible for completing the process. There is an obvious irony in a grave-side eulogy, Borges's most famous and widely read commentary on Macedonio, published verbatim in the following issue of *Sur*. Celebrating the death of a man who devoted a good part of his life to combating the concept of self, Borges chose the moment of his "eternalization" to represent and archive Macedonio in a portrait we can accurately call mythological. This portrait assertively reinforces the picture of a thinker uninterested in his own identity and unburdened with any investment in his texts.

Borges enhances this portrait eight years later with the forward to his edition of selected writings of Macedonio. He begins with a characterization worthy of Scalabrini's near deification:

Mi última emoción, en Europa, fue el diálogo con el gran escritor judeo-español Rafael Cansinos-Assens, en quien estaban todas las lenguas y todas las literaturas, como si él mismo fuera Europa y todos los ayeres de Europa. En Macedonio hallé otra cosa. Era como si Adán, el primer hombre, pensara y resolviera en el Paraíso los problemas fundamentales. Cansinos era la suma del tiempo y Macedonio, la joven eternidad. (*Macedonio Fernández* 10)

My final emotional moment, in Europe, was my dialogue with the great Judeo-Spanish writer Rafael Cansinos-Assens, in whom were all languages and all literatures, as if he himself were Europe and all the yesterdays of Europe. In Macedonio I found something else. It was as if Adam, the first man, had thought through and resolved in Paradise the fundamental problems. Cansinos was the sum of time and Macedonio, young eternity.

In addition to reinforcing the transcendence to time and context of Macedonio's thought, Borges simultaneously makes a point of contrasting the ethereal, ahistorical *and foundational* quality of the Argentine Macedonio's words to the encyclopedically historical *European* Cansinos.

In this same portrait, Borges reiterates his assertion of Macedonio as divested of any interest in his own texts. After several pages of now-infamous anecdotes (including a discussion of Macedonio's cache of stale *alfajores*, to this very day a tired chestnut of Macedoniana in Buenos Aires), Borges informs his readers:

Macedonio no le daba el menor valor a su palabra escrita; al mudarse de alojamiento, no se llevaba los manuscritos de índole metafísica o literaria que se habían acumulado sobre la mesa y que llenaban los cajones y los armarios. Mucho se perdió así, acaso irrevocablemente. Recuerdo haberle

reprochado esa distracción; me dijo que suponer que podemos perder algo es una soberbia, ya que la mente humana es tan pobre que está condenada a encontrar, perder y redescubrir siempre las mismas cosas. (15)

Macedonio gave not the least value to his written word; upon changing lodgings, he did not take with him the literary and metaphysical manuscripts that had piled up on the table and that filled trunks and cabinets. Much was lost that way, perhaps irrevocably. I recall reproaching him for this absentmindedness; he told me that to suppose we can lose anything is arrogance, since the human mind is so poor it is condemned always to keep finding, losing and rediscovering the same things.

This attribution resounds suspiciously of Borges's own perspective on the nature of knowledge. Although there is no certainty that Borges did not himself first learn such ideas from Macedonio, nowhere in his writings does Macedonio voice precisely this sentiment. Others, including his son, Adolfo de Obieta, reiterate Macedonio's lack of initiative to publish and his tendency to lose or discard his own writings (Camblong xlvi-ii).¹⁶ But to dismiss the *necessity of publishing* one's words is not the same as *disdaining one's writing*.

Macedonio's self-effacement, however complex and engaged, is also ingenuous and spontaneous. Many of his compatriots, most notably de Obieta, attest to his shyness, his indifferent health, his peripatetic lifestyle, his disaffection from material comforts as well as from the material substance of writing. The volume of what Macedonio left unpublished, and arguably unwritten, is probably greater than what is contained in his *Obras completas. Museo de la Novela de la Eterna*, eternally promised, continually evolving (Camblong has identified seven manuscript variations), never realized in book form during Macedonio's lifetime, is the masterwork without a master, the ultimate vehicle of self-effacement.

Rather than signalling a disregard for his own writing, Macedonio's ambivalence about publishing more likely stems from a great preoccupation with the ultimate value of his words. Camblong's research reveals as much, both in Macedonio's own comments about the eventual fate of his manuscripts and in the evidence that Macedonio reworked some of those manuscripts—particularly the manuscript of *Museo*—almost obsessively. The redundancy of Macedonio's writing,

¹⁶ Adolfo Fernández de Obieta dropped the patronymic from his name in about 1930 when he entered military service.

including repeated verbal tricks, metaphors and paradoxes, suggests that Macedonio hoped to disseminate his ideas through sheer volume and frequency—and through the random abandonment of texts—rather than through the established channels of publication.

Borges acknowledges Macedonio's interest in the "mechanism of fame" as opposed to the acquisition of fame itself. He describes in detail Macedonio's presidential campaign, using many of the same colorful anecdotes found both in earlier and subsequent accounts. Borges is accurate when he notes the emphasis on the "difusión del nombre" of Macedonio (17). Again, Borges's error is in assuming that dissemination of name was, for Macedonio as for other campaigners, preliminary to dissemination of a persona. The posthumous anecdotes and the legend they constitute, circulated by Borges and other heirs to Argentina's avant-garde legacy, are a means of creating and maintaining such a persona.

Again, this appropriation of Macedonio's words and deeds fails to account for his particular perspective on the nature of names and identity. The perpetual, infinite dissemination of a name is, for Macedonio, the *counteractant* to establishing a public persona. Macedonio's persistent, unrestrained and evidently indiscriminate issuing of *words* is undertaken precisely in order to frustrate the solidification of an abstract identity as "philosopher," "author," or even "citizen." The same motivation led to Macedonio's "absenting" himself for his first ever public address, his "words" of homage to another public self and his supposed "debut" as an artistic persona. It is also why, as he tells us in that "Oratoria," Macedonio must "absent" himself from the consequences of using "words" in any way that allow for such a persona.

There are wide-ranging consequences to the misinterpretation of Macedonio's interest in dismantling the accepted concept of self and its corollary concept of character. The misunderstanding is maintained by an alacrity to welcome and adopt Macedonio's paradoxes without considering his motivations for elaborating and promoting them. Up to now, critics have almost unanimously asserted Macedonio's disaffection from material circumstances and social dynamics. The evidence here calls for an analysis of Macedonio's works in terms of response to material and social context.

Throughout much of Macedonio's writing run obsessions with both the physical body (especially the author's own) and the political city. Even the cursory glance taken here at the "Oratoria" reveals these obsessions and their interrelationship. The "offering of the

word" has *corporeal* consequences; the pronouncement of a public address engages a *political* discourse. Accordingly, the "Oratoria's" inversion of the acts of tribute and performance respond directly to *porteño* social and cultural constructions of the body and the city. It is not the material world that must be rejected, nor the words used to obtain that world. What Macedonio attacks is the use of words to construe an autonomous self for the body, and to contrive a personified political identity for the city.

To his admirers, Macedonio's paradoxical ideas, ludic prose, and championing of passion over intellect are his only reason for being; they are themselves the mythological foundation for an Argentine modernity, integral with yet transcendent to history. For Macedonio, paradox, play and above all, passion, are inventions for a new century, instruments for change. They can transcend history only because they respond to it. Expressed in even more basic terms, Borges's dissolved self, a voice constituted largely by textual and fictional history, serves to manage history—establishing it as irreducible—for the benefit of the Argentine *polis*. Macedonio's fragmented individual has the express purpose of repudiating history in order to beautify the *polis*.

The anecdotal legends, then, the real substance of the mythology, give us a Macedonio Fernández virtually opposite from the one found constituted by Macedonio's own writing. Borges and Scalabrini give us a father, a legend, a mythological figure, a persona who can live on after death, quite severed from the texts he supposedly cared little about. The Macedonio who writes and disseminates his writing exposes himself entirely—and exclusively—in his texts. Exposed are the components of an *individual*—an aesthetic sensibility, a social and political being, a corporeal entity—but most pointedly not a *self*. "Self," for Macedonio, is the function of institutions and establishments, and serves largely to legitimize and perpetuate them. He considers it a concept as pernicious to the individual as it is artificial to human nature. A constant in Macedonio's life and works is his refusal ever to impose himself, by means of words, deeds or physical presence. This insistence was clearly a function of always endeavoring to acknowledge a self that might impose. Only by recapturing the individual, reflected in words that respond to his context, can the reading of Macedonio Fernández's writing rescue him from a "self" that others have imposed on him.

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