

NEOLIBERAL PANIC: THE UNTIMELY HARD-BOILED CRITIQUE OF GERMÁN MAGGIORI'S *ENTRE HOMBRES*

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ABSTRACT. This essay analyzes a recently re-published crime novel by Germán Maggiori as a case-study in recent evolutions of the hard-boiled narrative mode that respond to shifts in the political and economic discourse around consumption in the Southern Cone. Rather than evaluate the novel's value, I hope to analyze its construction in terms of loyalty to, critique of, and pastiche from the commonplaces of the hard-boiled genre as it has been practiced in the Argentine tradition. I also analyze the way masculinity and homosexual panic sets a tone for the novel that connects power and paranoia, and which alters the terms in which contemporary corruption and violence is tied to the anti-communist panic of the dictatorship years which are all-too present in contemporary institutions of law and order. Focusing on the novel's subtle instrumentalization of commerce and its recurring fixation on market values, I then argue how the novel's satirical critique of the Argentine 1990s might be relevant once again in the present day, and beyond Argentina's boundaries.

KEY WORDS: crime fiction, Maggiori, neoliberalism, hard-boiled, satire, corruption

Introduction. The Temporality of Crisis and Accidental Timeliness

Ser cobarde es una miseria íntima que cotiza muy bajo en el mercado de la calle.
Maggiori, 2001: 39.

Germán Maggiori's pitch-black satirical crime novel, *Entre hombres*, was written in 1999 at the apex of a period that could be called Argentina's neoliberal honeymoon, published by Alfaguara México in 2001 after winning a prestigious Alfaguara "internet novel" competition juried by some of Latin American fiction's biggest names (Juan Villoro, María Fasce, Alberto Fuguet, and Rodrigo Rey, as well as Spaniard Nuria Barrios). Yet this break-out first novel failed to really make a name for its author, Germán Maggiori, or even to reach a second edition: despite a few glowing reviews

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in Argentina and abroad, it passed into obscurity and circulated (largely in bootlegs) only among crime-fiction aficionados, academic contexts, and connoisseurs. It is hard to tell whether the pitch-black subject matter (major systemic corruption of all branches of law enforcement, the violent ecologies of trans* sex work, and the calculated cynicism of a political class susceptible only to blackmail) helped or hindered the novel's reception, but it certainly contributed to its cult status during those years that it was out of print, as did its slang-heavy multi-perspectival narration and its Tarantino-esque non-chronological plot structure. These formal traits largely speak for themselves, and I will not belabor any of them, as few readers would disagree with that general assessment in 2001 or in 2013; I would instead like to focus on the novel's alternation between an almost nostalgic loyalty to the hard-boiled tradition (at the level of both language and plot) on the one hand, and emphatically topical references to neoliberal economics on the other, as if the fundamental joke of the novel hinged (as does the joke of the epigraph above) on the dissonance between the structure of the perennial hard-boiled social critique and the nihilistic relativism of an unfettered free market. In 2013, when the novel was released again to more substantial fanfare and with the public championing of Ricardo Piglia, it wore its having been out of print for 12 years as a badge of honor and insider credibility alongside the estimation of critics who refer to the novel's critique as mysteriously prescient and insightful in retrospect, as if its dissonant humor were just now ripening into intelligibility. To assess the novel and the peculiar temporality of its approach to genre and humor, I would like to explore a few topics that structure the sense of the novel internally before turning to its historical subtexts and its subsequently disjointed reception.

What I refer to above as the "fundamental joke" of the novel is, to my mind, the perverse engine of the novel's tonal wit (essential to the hard-boiled tradition, of course, and debatably more important to its readers than the narrative structure or content in most cases) and also of its allegory of corruption and mutual destruction. Seemingly all reviews and interviews published around 2013 refer to a "mysterious something" or literary remainder that saves the novel from being the mere pastiche of crime-pulp clichés (indeed, a summary of its sensational plot and stock characters would make it hard to argue that it were even possible to salvage the novel from being that pastiche). In the context of crime fiction's place in contemporary Latin American letters, there is something entirely familiar in the trope of "more than the sum of its clichés"—it's something like the standard sales pitch for a crime novel written with some satirical or critical punch. What's more, this rhetoric of an ineffable or undefinable remainder of literary subtlety is par for the course in Latin American crime fiction, which is fundamentally a genre of pastiche and recycling which never truly shed its

essential anxieties about authenticity or literary value, particularly when the latter is judged by the standards of psychological realism and the post-Boom marketplace for “unique voices”. For this reason, a careful consideration of how Maggiori positions his novel relative to the commonplaces of the genre will put into relief the very subtle ways in which he inflects them with a critique of contemporary history. I consider the novel a deliberate hyperbole of the “novela negra” formula that impressed genre aficionados with its relentless negativity, its pitch-black humor sustained by a density of slang and cocaine-addled rhythms, sneaking in alongside its brash linguistic and violent pyrotechnics some discreet references to the legacies of totalitarianism in law enforcement, generalized corruption, and the impunity of the political class.

Yet after establishing this critical assessment of the novel on its internal and generic terms, I would also like to inquire as to how and why the novel came to be publishable again and intelligible again at a much later date, in 2013, on the verge of a return to pre-2001 economic and political models which have since been ratified by the Argentine elections of December 2015 (a shift echoed in other parts of Latin America, such as the weakening of Chavismo in Venezuela and the opening up of Cuba to American investment). One could argue that the twelve-year hiatus from interest in the novel had less to do with an interruption in the usual sales and reception cycle of fiction than with the distinctness of that intervening historical interlude, which were in many ways experienced by the Argentine middle class as a break from the relentless neoliberalization of Argentina’s economy since the 1980s. From this point of view, the events of the currency crisis of 2001 robbed the novel not only of its sales cycle but more crucially of its horizon of meaning and the pertinence of its critique. I will argue that the novel’s critique, its sensibility, and its message were all very much specific to a historical period that ended abruptly just as the novel was hitting the shelves, and it would be years before a post-2001 epoch could be stabilized such that there would be much demand for (or sense in) a post-mortem on the values and obsessions of the 90’s. In 2016, the novel feels like a prescient antidote against the nostalgia for the 90s that propels the resurgence of neoliberal policies in contemporary politics.

**Between Men: A Pastiche of the Homosocial Boy’s
Club of Crime Fiction Lore**

It is hard to know if Maggiori’s choice of title is coincidental to this assertion or not, but I find the central argument of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (1985) entirely relevant to the sexual politics of Maggiori’s eponymous novel. She succinctly summarizes that argument in the introduction to her next book, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990; trans. Barcelona, 1998): “to

demonstrate the immanence of men’s same-sex bonds, and their prohibitive structuration, to male-female bonds in nineteenth-century English literature” (15). The precedent set by this specific piece of cultural history was formative for queer theory as a reading practice and as a historical heuristic for understanding triangular relationships between men and women in terms of their subtexts of same-sex desire (both psychic, emotional, and sexual) and in terms of patriarchal power-plays between men. This kind of reading, with or without direct reference to Sedgwick’s work or its legacies in queer theory¹, occupies a good amount of scholarship on unpacking the role of gender in the male-dominated space of crime fiction both internationally and in the Hispanophone case. I will not belabor it here except to say that the novel seems self-conscious about its hyperbole of machismo, foregrounding male competition and loyalty at every turn.

To wit, Maggiori’s novel is comprised almost entirely of first person accounts and free-indirect discourse by men and explicitly addressed to other men. These narratives navigate a long sequence of male-only social spaces, referring only in passing to biologically female characters and including only one whose speech is recorded firsthand in the novel, and whose brief stints of free-indirect discourse end with her sudden murder in the novel’s first section. (The critic and professor Elsa Drucaroff, specialist in crime fiction and Rodolfo Walsh, calls this innocent prostitute “the most dignified in the novel”²). Curiously, though, the many male-to-female trans* characters in the novel, some of whom recur and occupy central roles in the novel’s main narrative arc about hunting down blackmail materials, are given a substantial amount of space and agency in the otherwise oppressively masculine narrative. Tellingly, the omniscient narrator (in those sections not narrated directly by a character) is quite precise and respectful in his pronoun usage when referring to these female-identifying characters, as if to offer some apology for or counterweight to the homophobic morass of the characters’ thoughts and words about them, who few readers will be surprised to see systematically abused and brutalized throughout the novel.

Even more tellingly, the novel makes relatively few references to genital sexuality, breasts, faces, or other commonplaces of heterosexual desire, whereas every single woman (born or otherwise) is described at least once in terms of both the *shape* and the *market-value* of their “culo”, a word which appears in every chapter of the novel. This virtual catalog of hyperboles, folk sayings, evaluative similes, and fine-grained appraisals serves as a through-line connecting all the various narrators and their perspectives,

1 For an interesting application of Sedgwick directly to an author that bears directly on Maggiori’s style and tradition, see Martínez (2006).

2 See Chacón (2013).

which, in such a splintered and multi-perspectival novel, noticeably grounds the novel's semantic field. To wit, the effect of this inescapable anal sexuality is one of grounding the novel's stakes in homophobic *panic*, with each character fiercely defending his masculinity at every opportunity, as if each character were himself compromised by the sex tape that everyone is hunting. Or, to be more precise, as though there were some homology between the danger to which each character is exposed and that sexual shame to which the tape exposes its three precarious statesmen. It also bears mention here that the plot's climax hinges on the deductions and actions of the novel's deeply ironic "good cop", "el Loco Almada", whose abstinence from drugs and sex is presented as a limit-case of sublimation, channeled into an obsession with patriarchal order and violent catharsis aimed at sexual deviants. Unlike all the other characters formed by backstories in the military, the prison system, male-only gangs, or working in the torture camps of the dictatorship years, Almada has come up through the ranks of ultra-Catholic fascist vigilantism, and who, until his conversion in the last section of novel, purges his demons by torturing and killing prostitutes and homosexuals in late-night sprees, thus *embodying* homosexual panic quite literally (Maggiori, 2001: 78-9). This diffuse and persistent homophobia and concomitant fixation on [variously heterosexual] anality serves as a bridge between the novel's moral scatology (the moral abyss of the universe of the novel, troped in the cartoonishly excessive drug abuse and the ubiquity of non-consensual and/or pathological sexualities) and its political eschatology (the fragility of the political class and of law enforcement's competing fiefdoms).

Transition, Stasis, and Corruption

[There is]...a kind of paralysis...proper to democratic or to postdictatorship transition: a stagnation that materializes the moment individuals/collectives come to realize that the move past dictatorship supports the very structures it seems to overcome. However, such an experience is not equivalent to hopelessness. It is the exposure of the limit of transition: limit as stopping point, yes, but also as the opening of something more, as frontier.

Brett Levinson, *The ends of literature as neoliberal act*, 31.

It might seem a big jump to go from the novel's ubiquitous individual homophobic panics to a political and historical reading of paranoia in the novel, but it is something of a commonplace of the Southern Cone *novela negra* of the time period, evident everywhere along the spectrum from high-brow to low-brow crime fiction. Think, for example, of Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante* and *La literatura Nazi en América* (both 1996), Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980), *Ciudad ausente* (1992), and *Plata quemada* (1999), Luisa Valenzuela's *Cambio de armas* (1982), Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the*

Maiden (1991), most of Mempo Giardinelli's copious 1990's output, or Carlos Gamerro's *Las islas* (1998). Across all of these works, the deficient and partial apparatuses of criminal justice are put to the test by postdictatorial justice and vengeance, and in every instance, proven inadequate to that task of avenging and/or exorcising fascism from the post-dictatorial state. In the examples above more firmly situated in the crime fiction tradition, this inadequacy is often narratively exhaustive and allegorically foregrounded as a procedural impossibility. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the specificity of this period in Latin American history is inextricable from the specificity of its crime fiction, which cannot help but negotiate the all-too-living legacies of an illegitimate and criminal state as it depicts, and in most cases critiques, the criminal justice systems of those states that succeed them.

Yet what I find so unique and intriguing about Maggiori's particular variant on this aporic mode is the unflinchingly exhaustive way he hyperbolizes the cynicism of the *novela negra* tradition, which delights in exposing corruption as endemic or systemic, and which is ultimately something like optimistic. In Maggiori's limit-case of total and generalized corruption, it is implied that Argentina's criminal justice system has been irreversibly transformed by its decade of totalitarian culture, yet the neoliberal competition for power has turned what was once a hierarchy of brutalities into an uncontrollable Hydra of competing gangs and factions which might (if Argentina gets lucky) destroy each other mutually. Not only is the novel populated with torturers-come-detectives (Maggiori, 2001: 48) and spies who work at desks presided over by portraits of Mussolini and Hitler (2001: 69)³, but the novel even presents Geneva-Convention-violating interrogation techniques and cover-up methods as totally normal operating procedure for the cops discussing them, with all the tidiness of the North American procedural tradition.

Of course, the reference to tradition and cliché is crucial here, since the novel's characters seem to exhibit an almost stagy self-consciousness of occupying the realm of the hackneyed and speaking in so hyperbolically street-toughened a dialect as to seem cartoonish. Early in the novel, a character named Brando snaps his fingers "in his savage and anachronistic way" as he tells his band of low-lives to "scram" (*vajemos*) in a particularly self-conscious example. When bodies are to be disposed of, they are taken to a "ranch" where "Paraguayan gauchos" (2001: 26) adept in that most Argentine of obsessions, knifeplay, butcher humans and animals indiscriminately. (The nod to recent immigration from Paraguay in the novel, which might in another context be seen as a mere nod to globalized verisimilitude, seems

3 In this regard, the probably coincidental resemblance to Bolaño's near-contemporary *Nocturno de Chile* (2000) is interesting.

here to satirically undercut the nationalist and machista *topos* of the gaucho). What's more, crime fiction is the primary and dominant frame of reference, yet others float in and out with the free hand of satire: the orgy scene caught on film in the first chapter is compared first to a nineteenth century scene from the Indian Wars or from the gauchesco poetry that fictionalized them as national epic ("quedó desnuda como cautiva de aquel cacique sintético", 2001: 16), only to be compared a few lines later to a scene from "Titanes del Ring" (a homegrown *lucha libre* analogue to the North American WWF Wrestling popular from the early 70s until 1988). If anything, the knowing familiarity with which crime-fiction commonplaces and stock characters are deployed as a naturalized backdrop that needs only be sketched out minimally gives the novel a kind of "mad libs" feel every time the frame of reference veers towards banal pop-culture references or the Terminator films, just as an eerie gravitas is achieved whenever the brutality of the dictatorship years is offhandedly mentioned.

Of course, this "mad libs" feeling is largely a function of the contrast between the rigorously and predictably schematic structure of the novel's characters and events and the more free-ranging cultural references of its characters' imaginations. A contrastive parallel is set up throughout between career criminals and career torturer-policemen, and enforced by a narrative structure that ping-pongs across the "legal" divide, propelling us towards a confrontation between career criminals and [criminal] cops which satirizes the convention it meticulously follows by making the cops worse than the criminals. In ways that show the symbiotic relationship between sensational true-crime and formulaic crime fiction as well as the pop-psychological shorthand employed by both, the backstory given for each character with real agency in the novel simultaneously mythologizes and pathologizes their exceptional brutality as an adult in terms of childhood or adolescent trauma and abuse. The twist lies in the backstories of the three key detectives, whose functional equivalent to that childhood trauma was an adolescence devoted to opportunistically rising in the ranks of the dictatorship power structure as enterprising young torturers with exceptional talents which translate to their illustrious careers as crooked cops.

This homology between cops and criminals operates not only on the level of narrative structure and character development but also that of a language shared between them, as endeavors on both sides are troped with the same all-encompassing vocabulary of gambits, power-plays, and above all, "*jugadas*", bringing in another time-honored crime fiction trope: gambling as the dominant trope for crimes and actions. Indeed, a list of which settings recur in the novel is telling: the corner bar that is home to "The Friends of Fernet Club," the butcher shop and vacant lot nearby, Luci's trans* brothel, the office of Almada, Garmendia, and Diana, and the "Two

Worlds” casino. There is a timelessness to the crime-pulp clichés that evokes the hard-boiled tradition and the B-movie topoi of the casino and the members-only club, but they’re in an ironic tension with the newness of a globalized Buenos Aires, marked by frequent references to international finance, recent immigration, and both black-market and upscale imports, offering new fodder for old abuses of power. But it is the ironic dissonance between the traditional trope of crime (or mainstream entrepreneurship) as gambling and this novel’s specific concerns, so particular to the neoliberal age, to which I will now turn as the novel’s most unique and timely contribution to the crime-fiction tradition.

Monetary Fictions

Enmarcadas por la inflación desenfrenada de finales de la década de 1980 (cuando todavía dominaba, frente a las explicaciones economicistas, la clave explicativa política) y la crisis de 2001 (si no anticipada, prevista en el mismo revés de la modernización), las ficciones del dinero de la década de 1990 se escriben mientras atraviesan una de las grandes ficciones económico-sociales de la Argentina, como lo fue la paridad entre el peso y el dólar, que se daría en llamar la “ficción del 1 a 1”.

Alejandra Laera, *Ficciones del dinero*, 19.

This epigraph comes from the introduction to a recent work of Argentine literary criticism that analyzes a whole crop of 90s novels (Piglia’s *Plata quemada*, Chefjec’s *El aire*, Pauls’ *Wasabi*, Fogwill’s *La experiencia sensible*, and Aira’s *Varamo*) that centrally allegorize currency in the age of neoliberal speculation and sudden exposure to world markets, or as Laera puts it, that have money as their protagonist. While Maggiori’s novel does not share with these illustrious contemporaries a central allegorization of currency, I think the periodization is useful here because it is motivated by some of the same political and historiographical concerns: how to translate into the world of fiction the experience of accelerating consumption and market exposure, this new variation on the experience that Marshall Berman explored through the Marxian trope of “all that is solid melting into air”? What happens to the substance and structure of the novel in this accelerated neoliberal dissolution? While Laera’s five novels construct a fiction around a metaphysics of unstable and internationalized currency, Maggiori’s approach is more negative, undermining the familiarity of the formulaic crime novel with globalized non sequiturs and overt references to the little ways in the master narrative of “1-to-1” were moving the ground beneath the local crime fiction tradition.

My list above of the novel’s only repeated locations was, in a sense, partial—while no individual corner store is described twice in the novel, there

are, curiously, a lot of scenes in various different corner stores which posit the most banal commerce as a counterpoint to the novel's desperate scheming, negotiating, interrogating, and killing. The first of these scenes makes more explicit than any other scene in the novel the historical shifts elsewhere expressed as a slippage or interruption of the timeless *topoi* and clichés of the hard-boiled tradition. It is the only setting to be described in such detail, because it is the only scene where nostalgia and local color are insufficient to fill in the reader's mental picture. In another key contrast, *lunfardo*, street slang, and Brando's stagy sexual bravado are all moot and powerless here, because here only the dollar reigns:

The globalization bit and all that other bullshit had succeeded in turning the ancient corner store "Bowleg's" into a[n American-style] 'drugstore'. The sheet-aluminum sign that used to say "Candy 'n' cigs" had disappeared, and in its place was hung a lightup Lucky Strikes sign [...] Inside, piled up on the metal and acrylic display shelves, there was a whole catalog's worth of indispensable merchandise you couldn't live without: compact discs, comics magazines, Korean electronic games, anniversary cards (musical and standard), battery-powered hair dryers, potato chips and Swiss or Turkish chestnuts, mini-bottles of every type and grade of liquor, a collection of Zippo lighters and enough stuffed animals to feed all the moths in the world for various generations. Near the door, two fridges with glass doors and a Pepsi logo kept cold cans of soda and some sandwiches vacuum-wrapped against Styrofoam trays with a delicate film of polyvinyl. On a salmon-colored formica table rested a microwave and a coffeemaker next to a metal artifact about the size of an old vegetable drawer with a series of metal rollers on which spun browned hotdogs (Maggiori, 2001: 86-88).

There is no reference in the novel to economic policies or party politics, no direct references to the "1-to-1 fiction", just a senseless concatenation of its effects at street level, a kind of ethnography of street life in rapidly-changing times.

This scene might, on first read, strike the reader as gratuitous, but it actually serves as a kind of ironic counterpoint to the other corner store in the novel, presided over by the ancient and deaf Basque immigrant⁴ who has served for decades as a covert communications node. There are also, curiously, any number of idiomatic and folksy mentions of corner stores (*kioskos*) and shopkeepers (*almaceneros*) throughout the novel, such as, "he put the joint behind his ear like a shopkeeper's pencil" (2001: 88) in the mouths of

4 The word I'm translating as corner store here, "kiosco", is a Polish borrow-word, which shows how 19th and 20th century immigration from another moment of international openness and economic instability provided so many of clichés that would, by this time, be so domesticated by the national imaginary and tradition as to be contrasted with Korean electronic chachkies as economic allegory.

various characters of different ages, which underlines as shared between them all this Argentine *locus classicus* of the cornerstore. Yet the jarringly contrastive American-style convenience store, and the inner lair of the mass-media politician with his droves of media consultants, are the only two settings in the novel that would be out of place transposing the actions of the novel 30 or 50 years into the past. The convenience store haunts the rest of the novel in ways that the condensed opportunism and depravity of the villainous politician does not, however. Surprisingly, the corrupt politician (with his polymorphous sexuality played off for comic relief) is not set up as dangerous or ultimately responsible for the novel's boogeymen; he is, the novel seems to imply, simply doing his job as much as any other functionary of banal evil. The novel's two deepest concerns, judging from the number of offhand references made to them throughout, are consumption (*consumo*) and valuation (*cotización*), two buzzwords of the "1-to-1" years that clash and jar with the hardboiled street-slang inflecting every characters' speech.

One might even say that more than the caricature of the calloused political elite or any of the agents of reckless and merciless greed, Maggiori's real villains here are consumption and valuation themselves as cultural values concomitant with neoliberal economics. The drug industry and the exploitation of sex work are both troped as simply one more kind of big business, consolidated and internationalized along with all the others in a period of massive consolidation. The only local resistance to these ominous neoliberal forces that the novel seems to imagine is on the anonymous scale of neighborhoods, with patchy results. In the case of Lili's house, "the whole neighborhood was a freakshow that the neighbors swallowed without protest, as if they were OK with a retired whore selling blow in their neighborhood as if it was aspirin at a corner store" (Maggiori, 2001: 93), while in the case of Luci's brothel, "which sold the highest-valued [*cotizados*] trannies in Buenos Aires", the neighbors were driven "by the vertiginous drop in the valuation [*cotización*] of their homes" to drive it out by going to the press (2001: 183). The market-driven sensibility ratcheting up all the drug-addled mayhem of the novel is ultimately not presented as a force of nature or a foreign invader, but as a habit of mind, maybe even a generational one. Here, I think, lies the ineffable optimism and timeliness of the novel in 2016 that makes the ending so satisfying even though the final acts of violence happen offstage, as it were, tastefully elided.

Conclusions

To wit, I find the offstage ending satisfying along thematic lines exactly because it makes explicit and thematic what has been present in the novel up until that point only on the level of idiom, connotation, and incidental description. I am referring not so much to the events, but to the lead-up to the

showdown, in which the craziest of the police and the craziest of the criminals are inspired, respectively, by the rantings of a homeless ex-professor and by a mystical interpretation of the lyrics of a song by Argentine cumbia-kitsch icon Gilda. The detailed exegeses of each “mystical” text in those scenes where the two gladiators prepare for battle are, to my mind, the most fascinating and inspired in the novel: the ex-professor’s sermon on the moral danger of the contemporary era’s new [neoliberal] values embodied by the drug- and consumption-addled “*homo toxicus*”, is the most explicitly the novel ever discusses its stakes, while the bizarre reading of Gilda’s populist commonplaces are the closest any of the characters come to recognizing the limits of their airless and womanless worldview. These two characters, the fascist Almada suddenly redeemed through a zeal for clean living and the bottom-feeder Lefty obliterating his last neuron with a drug cocktail that could kill a horse, could be seen as the least sympathetic in many ways, yet they are paradoxically the best and worst examples of the *homo toxicus* at the core of the novel.

It is as though they have gone all the way through the process of adoption to the new neoliberal order and come out the other side, past the breaking point that many critics have read as a prediction of the 2001 crash, and that I would think might be yet to come for Argentine or for the world more generally. The optimism lies in the mutual destruction of all the criminals and corrupt cops—a kind of cathartic purging of the excesses of a pathological system that has overproduced violence and abuse. After the confrontation, the reader is treated to an idyllic epilogue in which the survivor (who ironically has gone by the nickname “El muerto” throughout the whole novel) turns over a new leaf and takes a break from his self-destructive life. Taking a break from hard drugs to practice a more honest trade, El muerto answers an ad in the paper to be a door-to-door salesman/confidence-man. He sells a Bible to a lonely widower, smokes a joint, loses his resolve, and quits. You could not ask for a less neoliberal ending—a charming and restorative kind of denouement, as if to assure the reader that there are more ways to go than forward, that not all that is solid will be melting into air just yet, that some forces of change might still fizzle out due to internal contradictions and instabilities. The novel is deeply Argentine in its language, its conception of the hard-boiled tradition, its frame of reference, and its cultural and political object of satire, yet it bears repeating that it was only published after winning an international first-novel competition judged by novelists whose works are all definitively pitched to (and published for) a broader Hispanophone readership. I think in many ways Argentina’s political discourse around neoliberalism and around rapid weakening of protectionism and internal economic structures positions it as a canary in the mineshaft for the rest of Latin America—and in this light, I

think it is an important document that I hope will contribute to a broader conversation about economics and cultural values outside of Argentina.

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