

ROBERT KOSTUCK

CARLOS ARGENTINO DANERI: A BRIEF CRITIQUE

With apologies to the memory of Jorge Luis Borges

VICTORIA OCAMPO, EDITOR OF THE INFLUENTIAL MAGAZINE *SUR*, once compared Carlos Argentino Daneri's work to "the buzzing of angels, or bees, or whirlwinds of cigarette butts and gum wrappers." She often complained that he smelled of fish and teased him about spending too much time sleeping on benches along the Rio de la Plata.

Adolfo Bioy Casares called him "the envoy of the dead," a reference to one of his manias—a lingering interest in Cementerio de la Chacarita, where he searched tirelessly and unsuccessfully for graves bearing the family motto "Tempus, Caelum, Amor."

In an undated letter to María Rosa Oliver, Pelegrina Pastorino referred to him as "a slippery fish," attesting to his perverse and restrained romantic inclinations, which nonetheless popped out at inopportune social gatherings.

His chronological compañero Jorge Luis Borges once broached the possibility that Daneri was a fictional character.

Composition books ostensibly in his adolescent hand have proved to be forgeries; the memories of his former teachers are vague and inconclusive. Prosaic records of his passage through the public schools of Buenos Aires are lacking. He spent one inconclusive year at El Universidad de Buenos Aires studying dentistry and another year studying economics. Both subjects surfaced years later during his relationship with Adelaide Publishing.

Unable to shake off his middle-class origins, Daneri spent hundreds of hours scouring the National Library's collection of yellowing newspapers, surreptitiously scissoring out any and all advertisements for the drapery and notions shops owned by his father, which he pasted into a scrapbook of

odd mementos. He could never forgive his father for being published before he himself was born. Jealously rankled, he kept the scrapbook beside the many bedsits within the city that he called home.

Apart from a handful of mimeographed tracts, Daneri first entered the Argentine stream of consciousness in 1942, when portions of his book-length poem *Mi visión del mundo* (My View of the World) won second place in the National Prize for Literature. Subsequent issues of *Sur* were deemed incomplete without one of his poems, reviews, or essays. His work was pedantic and accessible, but unnoteworthy of literary consideration—a fact he was objectively aware of but subjectively ignored.

Daneri rarely mingled with his contemporaries, eschewing participation in Buenos Aires' many literary salons. A notorious egotist and easily offended, he compromised his health penning accusatory missives to the editors of the city's many newspapers. Ten months were spent expressing his dissatisfaction and offence at money spent on an expensive water filtration system. He became inured to the mocking tones of literary critics and plumbing aficionados.

The same year, in a movie house in a forgotten town in the hinterlands, Daneri fell in love for the first and last time. The film *El más infeliz del pueblo* (The Saddest Person in Town) starred Luis Sandrini and featured up-and-coming actress Eva Duarte. Infatuation with Evita—his eventual “mermaid muse”—would become a lifelong obsession scattered throughout his poetry.

Philosophical fiction was already supplanting avant-garde poetry in the late 1930s, and the avant-garde was officially declared dead in September 1945 with the publication of Borges' story “The Aleph.” Undeterred, and following his tepid successes with *Sur*, a series of aborted attempts to publish *Mi visión del mundo* as a set of books followed. Mainstream publishers shied away from Daneri's poem in its entirety, dismissing it as either the ravings of a lunatic or the scribbles of a chimpanzee. In a letter to an editor at Pinguino de plata, Daneri estimated the length of his poem cycle to be over fourteen million words, adding that it was far from complete.

He eventually contracted with Adelaide Publishing in Buenos Aires to print a series of limited-edition excerpts from his projected opus. Dozens of poetry chapbooks appeared each year from 1942 until his death. Printed on non-archival paper with coloured pasteboard covers, many of these inexpensively produced volumes failed to survive the inevitable passage of time.

Mi visión del mundo was never published in its entirety, and these few fragile survivors represent Daneri's formal published oeuvre.

The first of these interminable volumes represents Daneri's clinging to the once popular Dadaist and Surrealist movements. Here his work retains the characteristics of the proletariat forcing a confrontation with bourgeois society, which (as he believed) controlled the arts in South America in general and Buenos Aires in particular.

Alluding to crystals, he subtly underscores the upper-class belief in the monetary value of precious and semi-precious gems. Veiling his dissatisfaction beneath paeons elucidating the discovery of rare earth minerals in South Africa (the subject of the poem), he seeks to illuminate the class antagonisms current in society:

trigonal-trapezoidal coordinates
 rhombohedral, cubic, tetragonal
 mysterious carbon atom spheres
 linked in squares and pentagons

quasiperiodic crystals making subtle
 aperiodic paradigm shifts into
 hard hyperplanic Bravais lattices
 delicate willow-like structures

The precision of this excerpt illustrates the beginning of Daneri's short-lived sharp wit and trenchant moral compass. Members of Buenos Aires' privileged class imagined themselves slandered, and libel charges were brought against Daneri and Adelaide Publishing, although they were eventually dismissed. That this brush with the law tempered his art is an inescapable fact. The following year saw the publication of a most *recherché*, albeit angry, example of the divine art of compromise:

phone calls, no post cards, cartoon cats
le chat, le chien, le Champs-Élysées
 Chartres Cathedral, the goddamn Seine
 of course not, why would I need to know?

The elite turned their backs on Daneri, the *hoi polloi* followed, and he

gradually became unfashionable. His National Prize red ribbon sustained his creative efforts for the rest of his life, and the fall from fame led to the necessity of continuing his job as an assistant librarian. A wardrobe stained with cancellation stamp ink, a receding hairline, and nicotine-stained fingers were his companions. The drudgery took its toll, and as he folded in on himself his infatuation with Evita became more pronounced.

Following a fundraiser for earthquake victims in January 1944, Daneri was graciously invited to give a brief address at a reception at Estadio Luna Park. Posterity does not record his remarks, but it was at this event that he was able to meet and shake hands with Eva Perón in a reception line. The moment was recorded—and published—before the end of the month:

a journey along the underground river
 the mermaid game. What do I bring?
 kelp, shells, pearls, coral. Shakespeare!
sirène pittoresque. What is her story?

The remainder of the decade was spent churning out nonsense, wish fulfillment fantasies, and recycled versions of his National Prize-winning excerpts from *Mi visión del mundo*. He became sentimental, tearful, and even more withdrawn. A newspaper erroneously reported his disappearance. A confusing and incomplete broadside was published in 1946, following the passage of the women's suffrage bill. Daneri confided in Adolfo Bioy Casares that his muse was leaving him.

On 9 January 1950, following her renunciation, Evita collapsed in public and was hospitalized. Subsequent surgery curtailed her appearances and travels. She received the title of Spiritual Leader of the Nation in June 1952, following Juan Perón's reelection as President of Argentina.

Unable to consummate his unrequited affections and aligning his work with the public knowledge of Evita's declining health, Daneri entered a flurry of activity and published the broadside *Santa Evita*, containing his most erotic work to date:

the conundrum, the imagined cornucopia
 kitchens littered with untested recipes
 garlic garlands, red pepper ristras
 gunny sacks of potatoes, onions, carrots

hollyhocks which may or may not exist
 planchette hands piercing, smoothing, reading
 from an envelope steamed open above a tea kettle
 our honest autumn planting season signatures

Two double broadsides, *Roma* and *Irkutsk*, and a special quadruple broadside, *Las afueras de Buenos Aires* (The Outskirts of Buenos Aires), completed this burst of middle-aged creativity.

Harkening back to the easy colloquialisms of the Surrealist movement, in *Roma* he writes,

across twelve hills, or, seven hills
 across blue eggshells, *nom de plume*
 across the volcanic cinder cones
 blue lions murmur their tones

and in *Irkutsk*,

Siberian bridal cerebellum antimatter
 judicial Lake Baikal seasonal seasoning
 samovar variety, while Orthodox icons
 soar above a river, now a polluted channel

Daneri, essentially forgotten, came into his own. Nostalgic salad days, the ephemeral quality of eternal youth—all discarded in favour of the direct approach. As Argentina's golden age dissolved, he transferred his erotic affectations to an easily recognizable, burgeoning national pride. The public took note, and *Las afueras de Buenos Aires* was reprinted in its entirety.

Newspapers, magazines, and newsreel crews clamoured for his attention. For a brief time he wore a well-earned laurel crown.

horizontal sunlight, the smaller of the two caimans
 poised below the concrete walkway alongside the lake
 a long-legged bird poses for life drawing on the edge
 croaks untranslatable alarm clock warnings and threats

we mirror remembering a tiny lizard's attempt
to swallow a cockroach twice as wide as its mouth
what snaps into place in memory's pantheon
what tumbles from pediments, forgotten

Eva María Duarte de Perón died on 26 July 1952 of metastasized cervical cancer. Her death was mourned by millions, and her tomb became a shrine.

Carlos Argentino Daneri died in abject obscurity in 1960 on a park bench facing the wide expanse of Rio de la Plata. When recovered, his body smelled of fish.