THE LEGEND OF SANTA EVITA IN TRANSLATION

Divya Johnson

Abstract

Translated from Spanish into English by Helen Lane, Santa Evita was written by Tomás Eloy Martínez. Seeing that “the only thing that can be done with reality is to invent it again,” Tomás Eloy Martínez brilliantly transposes Evita’s postmortem journey into an outrageous postmodern fictional montage wherein the author, represented as a fictitious character and narrator in the novel, spins a web of biography, history and myth into a effervescently farcical and sombrely perverse narrative, mellifluously illuminating the woman who “ceased to be what she said and what she did to become what people say she said and what people say she did.” The end-result is a gripping tale which sheds new light upon details that biographers and historians commonly leave behind, seeking to unfold “the unexplained blank spaces” of her domain while tracking the political, mythical, historical body of desires which Evita’s cadaver, the body of the nation, incorporates. And quite marvellously, in the interim, the textuality of Santa Evita undrapes the roots of the complex set of relations which provide an understanding of the corpus of discursive regularities that extend the representation of Argentina to Evita’s embalmed cadaver as the novel bares and reconstructs the miracles, desires, secrets, and mysteries including the fragments and revelations which triggered the narrative flow, as “little by little Evita began to turn into a story that, before it ended, kindled another.”
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Translated from the Spanish by Helen Lane and written by Tomas Eloy Martinez Santa Evita is the story of Eva Perón’s ascent from a childhood spent in the slums of Argentina to her fame as a prominent B-movie actress—and final position as the most powerful woman in the nation—is one of the more dramatic, not to mention bizarre, stories of the 20th century. It is not, however, the primary focus of this remarkable, fact-based novel by Tomás Eloy Martínez. Alternating between the first-person story of the author’s own search for the truth and a more traditional novelistic narration, Martinez instead tells the story of the post-mortem misadventures and convoluted conspiracies in which Perón’s body found itself involved after her death. Preserved to near-perfection, her body becomes the object of intrigue for the various parties seeking to control Argentina after her husband’s downfall. A floating signifier, ambiguously iconic even in death, the body comes to assume diverse, most often perverse, meanings for each person who seeks to possess it—the author, a lifelong anti-Peronist, not excluded. Throughout it all, Martinez weaves a hauntingly melancholy strand about the impossibility of writing history and the impossibility of escaping it. An extraordinary work in its own right, Santa Evita is also an advance antidote to the already building tide of Evitamania set to peak with the release of the film version of the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical.

Born in Argentina in 1934, Tomás Eloy Martínez immigrated to the United States in 1983. He had been forced to leave Argentina by President Isabel Perón’s government and had lived in exile in Venezuela for eight years, continuing to do so because of Argentina’s military dictatorship. A journalist and writer, Martinez’s many Spanish-language nonfiction books include Sagrado (1969), La pasión según Trelew (1973), Lugar común la muerte (1979), and Las memorias del general (1996). Most of these deal with Argentine history and/or Peronism in some form. To date, Martinez has published three works of fiction: La novela de Perón (translated into English as The Peron on Novel in 1987);
La mano del amo (1991; The Hand of the Master), and Santa Evita (retained this title—which means “Saint Evita”—in the English translation). According to Martinez, both La novela de Perón and Santa Evita resulted from years of research and interviews; the stories he gathered, however, could only be told through fiction. In a 1996 review in the New York Times Book Review Nicolas Shumway writes, “With these two books, [Martinez] affirms his place among Latin America’s best writers” (Shumway, p. 27).

Santa Evita begins with the death of Eva Perón, and then traces the movements of her corpse, using flashbacks to tell the story of her rise to power and her marriage to Juan Domingo Perón. The most influential Argentine leader of the twentieth century, Juan Domingo Perón was elected president in February 1946, three years after a military coup ended a period of Conservative rule. The time was ripe for a leader like Perón, who championed the working classes, composed largely of immigrants whose sense of class-awareness had been steadily increasing since the 1880s. In the 50 years before Perón came to power, Argentina had developed a large export economy, shipping beef and grain around the world, and experiencing periods of great prosperity enjoyed by the landowning classes. The introduction of foreign capital also helped develop the economy, as European and American investors, banks, and insurance companies contributed to the building of railroads and the handling of Argentina’s growing overseas trade.

For many Argentines the turn of the twentieth century had been a “Golden Age,” and although the new wealth did not trickle down to many workers, it lured hundreds of thousands of European immigrants to Argentina. Argentina’s economy before World War I was, however, a dependent one. Much of the beef and grain money had to be used to import large amounts of manufactured goods that were not produced in Argentina. What was needed was the development of an industrial sector that could produce many of these goods itself, but most of Argentina’s leaders before Perón were either neutral or openly hostile to such development.
Until 1916 power remained in the hands of Conservative leaders, politicians aligned with the landowners whose wealth depended upon the export trade. The Radical party was elected into office in 1916 and maintained power for 14 years, but it had no clear economic vision, and little was done to industrialize the nation. In 1930 the Conservatives overthrew the Radical party, an ominous beginning to what became the “infamous decade,” or the “era of economic fraud,” throughout which elections were rigged to keep the Conservative party in power. Its leaders remained hostile to Argentina’s wider economic development and to the working classes.

The author Tomas Eloy Martinez has used “magical realism” to tell the story. He weaves facts and fiction in and out and one does not know what is real and what is imagined. In any case, the way Evita’s body was dealt with by her supporters and opponents is like a mystery thriller fiction. Martinez has added more mystery by his story-telling. Sometimes it reads like the compilation of his own real efforts to uncover the secrets of disappearance of the body. Besides the corpse story, the author has also brought out excerpts from the life of Evita based on interviews with her butler, hair dresser and others associated with her closely. But one is not sure whether these were factual or fictional.

Though Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice staked a claim on the wife of the Argentine strongman Juan Domingo Peron back in 1978 with their musical “Evita,” her story, reinvented so many times by rumor and myth, more obviously lends itself to the hallucinatory brand of fiction practiced by writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Augusto Roa Bastos.

Although Mr. Martinez’s narrative is enlivened by some magical and highly perverse set pieces, though it possesses moments that genuinely illuminate the bizarre intersection of history, gossip and legend, the novel as a whole feels leaden and earthbound. In the end, it gives the reader neither a visceral sense of Evita’s life nor an understanding of the powerful hold she has
exerted on her country’s imagination.

As he did in an earlier novel about Eva Peron’s husband (“The Peron Novel,” 1988), Mr. Martinez -- an Argentine writer who is currently director of the Latin American Program at Rutgers University -- moves his narrative backward and forward in time, allowing various witnesses to Evita’s life to set forth their version of her story. Some of those witnesses -- who include Evita’s hairdresser, her mother, various acquaintances and several military intelligence officers -- are decidedly unreliable, their tales filled with contradictions. Still, as Mr. Martinez asks, “Why does history have to be a story told by sensible people and not the delirious raving of losers?”

“If history -- as appears to be the case -- is just another literary genre,” he argues, “why take away from it the imagination, the foolishness, the indiscretion, the exaggeration and the defeat that are the raw material without which literature is inconceivable?”

Again and again, we are given facts, rumors and speculation about Evita’s life. We are told about her impoverished childhood as the illegitimate daughter of a petty politician and a servant woman in a small farming village, and her move at the age of 15 to Buenos Aires, where she eked out a living as an actress. We learn of her first meeting with Juan Peron, her celebrated reign as the country’s first lady, and her agonizing death at the age of 33 from cancer.

We are told that Evita was hailed as a saint and denounced as a whore, that she was celebrated for her acts of generosity toward the poor and accused of embezzling money from the nation. We are told that thousands of young girls dyed their hair blond in imitation of Evita, and that 40,000 letters were written to the Pope attesting to the miracles she had worked.

But while much of “Santa Evita” takes place in flashback, Mr. Martinez is primarily concerned with Evita’s mysterious afterlife.
The Legend of Santa Evita in Translation

-- with the legends that came to adhere to her posthumously, and more particularly with the fate of her body, which was embalmed after her death.

According to Mr. Martinez, who claims that his story is based on actual interviews and years of research, the military leaders who helped overthrow Juan Peron in 1955 confiscated Evita's corpse because they feared that opposition leaders would use the body to rally their supporters. What's at stake, says one character, is "not the corpse of that woman but the destiny of Argentina."

As Mr. Martinez tells it, Evita's corpse (as well as several copies made out of wax, vinyl and fiberglass) soon began a series of peregrinations. The body was hidden in various Government buildings, hidden in an ambulance, hidden in an attic and taken on a boat to Europe. Each time, Evita's followers would track down the wandering body and shower it with flowers. There were whispers that the body had levied a Tutankhamun-like curse on those who disturbed its rest, and rumors, too, that it had been destroyed: dumped in the Atlantic, dissolved in acid or buried standing up in "a garden where it rains every other day."

Some of these scenes have a potent surreal power: Evita's corpse, laid out on a glass slab, suspended from a ceiling, like a levitating wonder; Evita's corpse, hidden in a theater, behind a movie screen that plays and replays the images she loved as a girl. Unfortunately, the passages between such scenes are too discursive, too labored to really sustain the reader's interest. In Helen Lane's awkward translation, many of Mr. Martinez's efforts to create poetic images (for instance, hordes of bees that haunt Buenos Aires in the wake of Evita's death) feel clumsy and contrived, and his efforts to evoke Evita's mythic power tend to devolve into vague abstractions. He writes of Evita's "will to power, blood, madness, despair" and describes her as "the woman with the whip, the celestial mother."
The word Evita, Mr. Martinez observes in another chapter, comes from the verb “To avoid. To evade. To elude.” In the case of this novel, Evita not only manages to elude the machinations of the military officers who longed to dispose of her corpse, but also eludes the imagination of Mr. Martinez. As for Evita’s body, it eventually wound up in the custody of her husband, who kept it in an open casket on his dining room table.

Where fiction ends and fact begins is one of the intriguing puzzles of this perverse and enigmatic but highly readable “novel” about the afterlife of Eva Peron, the small-time actress who turned her marriage to an Argentine dictator into a mythical career as the soul of that erratic and unhappy nation. Martinez (The Peron Novel, 1988) casts himself as a sort of investigative journalist digging out the strange tale of Evita’s corpse; but what he does with the material is far from journalistic, embracing instead a sense of mournful comedy. There seems little doubt that, under General Peron’s orders, Evita’s body (she died of a particularly painful and malignant cancer in her early 30s, at the height of her hysterical adulation by Argentina’s “shirtless ones”) was beautifully embalmed by a skillful Spanish embalmer. He seems also to have made several copies of his masterwork; most of the action of the novel revolves around the attempts by Colonel Moor Koenig of Military Intelligence to identify the real corpse, then to dispose of it in such a way that Peronistas, who see it as a symbol of all they cherished about the eventually discredited regime, can’t make symbolic use of it. In the process, he and his men become obsessed by the body’s magically hypnotic qualities, and their lives are unalterably changed. It is all a long way from the easy sentimentality of the Broadway musical, but further evidence of the extraordinary grip that remarkable yet banal woman still seems to exert over the Argentine imagination. No American reader can expect fully to share that degree of involvement with the subject, but this is nonetheless a captivating study of how magic and politics sometimes surrealistcally merge.
Tomás Eloy Martínez brilliantly transposes Evita’s postmortem journey into an outrageous postmodern fictional montage wherein the author, represented as a fictitious character and narrator in the novel, spins a web of biography, history and myth into an effervescently farcical and sombrely perverse narrative, mellifluously illuminating the woman who “ceased to be what she said and what she did to become what people say she said and what people say she did.” The end-result is a gripping tale which sheds new light upon details that biographers and historians commonly leave behind, seeking to unfold “the unexplained blank spaces” of her domain while tracking the political, mythical, historical body of desires which Evita’s cadaver, the body of the nation, incorporates. And quite marvellously, in the interim, the textuality of Santa Evita undrapes the roots of the complex set of relations which provide an understanding of the corpus of discursive regularities that extend the representation of Argentina to Evita’s embalmed cadaver as the novel bares and reconstructs the miracles, desires, secrets, and mysteries including the fragments and revelations which triggered the narrative flow, as “little by little Evita began to turn into a story that, before it ended, kindled another.” The novel is mixed with historical facts which not only captivates you in the way as it is written, but also introduces some light to certain facts that took place after Evita’s death, specifically, the outrageous destination given to Evita’s body which were never publicly revealed.

REFERENCES:


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