

MACEDONIO FERNÁNDEZ
Translated by Margaret Schwartz

from *Museum of Eterna's Novel*

Translator's note

Macedonio Fernández (1874-1952) is best known in his native Argentina as the mentor of a young Jorge Luis Borges, who later wrote of his friend, "I imitated him to the point of plagiarism." This confession, however, belies the longstanding anxiety of influence between the two writers, and explains why Macedonio—as he is affectionately known—is more of a local folk hero than an internationally renowned writer. Stylistically there's no comparison, but many of Borges' core themes (death, the nothingness of personality, the blurred line between dreams and reality) were first obsessions for Macedonio, who after his wife's untimely death abandoned his law practice and dedicated himself to what he called metaphysics. Despite Borges' quaint mythology of a man dedicated to meditation, stillness, and only incidentally to the written word, Macedonio wrote thousands of pages of manuscript in his life, most of which remained unpublished when he died, in 1952. His son, Adolfo de Obieta, organized and published these manuscripts, serving as literary executor, editor, and high priest of the cult of Macedonio until his death in 2002.

Museum of Eterna's Novel is Macedonio's most important work. He began what he called the "first good novel" around 1925, at the height of his involvement with the avant-garde literary scene in Buenos Aires. He would labor over the book for the next twenty-seven years, producing five full manuscripts in total, and many more pages of notes. Although *Museum of Eterna's Novel* eludes categorization, its many prologues and self-conscious use of authorial persona often lead to its characterization as a kind of proto-postmodernism. Macedonio himself would have shrugged off this label as unintelligible, and insisted instead that the novel is a sketch for a metaphysics wherein love conquers death.

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WHAT IS BORN AND WHAT DIES

Today we release to the public the last bad novel and the first good novel.¹ Which one will be the best? In order to prevent the reader from opting for his preferred genre at the expense of the other, we've arranged that these two novels be sold as an indivisible set. Considering that we're unable to impose a mandatory reading of both novels, at least there remains the Consolation of having devised an obligatory purchase of what one does not want, because it cannot be untangled from what one does want. Therefore, the Obligatory Novel will either be the last bad novel or the first good novel, depending on the reader's taste. There is one absurdity that must not be permitted: that the reader thinks the two novels are equally good, and congratulates us on such comprehensive "good fortune."

The Bad Novel deserves a homage; this is mine. This way, nobody can say I don't know how to do things poorly, that I didn't have the talent for this novelistic genre, that is, the bad. Thus I'll show the full scope of my capacities in the same day. It is true that I have run the risk of mixing up the bad thoughts of *Adriana Buenos Aires* with the good ones that constantly occurred to me for *Eterna's Novel*, but it's up to the reader to collaborate and sort out the confusion. Sometimes I found myself perplexed, especially when the wind made the manuscript pages blow around the room. Then I wouldn't know which page belonged in which novel because, as you know, I wrote a page of each novel per day; nothing could help me because the pagination was the same, the quality of ideas, paper, and ink were all equal—I had made an effort to be equally intelligent in each, to keep my twin novels from quarreling. How I suffered, not knowing if the brilliant page before me belonged in the last bad novel or the first good one!

Let the Reader take charge of my agitation and trust in my promise of a forthcoming goodbad novel, firstlast in its genre, in which the best of the bad of *Adriana Buenos Aires* and the best of the good of *Eterna's Novel* will be allied, and in which I will recollect the

1. Already in *The Newcomers Paper and The Nothing, Continued* (1944) these novels were so announced. As the Warning to *Adriana Buenos Aires* says, with its publication the original plan was restored, because although they were not sold as a set, the two novels have nevertheless appeared almost simultaneously. (ed. Aldofo de Obieta)

experience gained in my efforts to convince myself that something good was bad, and vice versa, because I needed it in order to finish a chapter of one or the other....

PROLOGUE TO ETERNITY

When the world hadn't yet been created and there was only nothingness, God heard it said: it's all been written, it's all been said, it's all been done. "Maybe that's already been said, too," he perhaps replied out of the ancient, yawning Void. And he began.

A Romanian woman once sang me a phrase of folk music and I have since found it tens of times in different works from different composers of the past four hundred years. There's no doubt: things do not begin; or they don't begin when they are created. Or the world was created old.

PROLOGUE TO THE NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN

The genre of there-never-was, so frequently invoked, without precedents that is, will make its debut here, since it itself has never existed, never has there been a there-never-was, yet there will be in the current year, and as is only fair, in Buenos Aires, the first city of the world to present itself in this category, the only city that is equally good for the conclusion of a trip around the world as for the start of one, a city that serves this purpose for trips started wherever else, as various world navigators have successively discovered, with any around the world trips—whether starting in Berlin or Rio de Janeiro—terminating, without regard for future plans, in Buenos Aires, where they linger, whispering disdain for the other legs of the trip, instead going off into the streets, tramways, and public works of Buenos Aires, buying a little house, getting married, producing offspring, all of which has the fullness and heroism of the fulminous completion of the whole trip.

With this genre, humanity will finally lay eyes upon the never-before-seen, a display of there-never-was; it won't be a bridge that's always dry, a conjugal frigidity, a religious war between peoples without religion, or other things that haven't been seen. The never-before-seen will really be seen; this isn't fantasy, it's something else: the first example in this genre will be a novel. I'm just about to publish it, as the manuscript critics have already claimed, admiring,

“It’s a novel that has never been written before.” And it hasn’t been written yet, but there’s only a little ways to go.

Such a collection of events is contained in the novel that there’s practically nothing left over to happen in the streets, houses, and plazas; the papers, confronted with this lack of current events, will have to content themselves with citing the novel: “In the novel of Eterna yesterday in the middle of the afternoon the following exchange took place”; “this morning Sweetheart is smiling”; “the President of the Novel, responding in person to the rumors circulating among his numerous readers, told us that today he will positively launch his plan for the hystericization of Buenos Aires and the conquest, in the name of aesthetic salvation, of our population by humor.”

“After Chapter V of the Novel we can be sure that it isn’t because of KNE (the Knight who does Not Exist) that Sweetheart’s existence is saddened today.” “This evening, the Novel will send its soloist orchestra—six guitars—to execute various obsequious polyphonies for the orchestras of the bars Ideal, Sibarita, and Real, so that they can listen to music for a change. The Polygraph of Silence will explain the reasons for this with erudite gestures, and he will circulate the bottomless collection plate of gratitude among the personnel of the orchestras, which will make the music of thanks as coin strikes against coin. The public will also serve as a harmony of contentment, as the listening orchestra, later momentarily laying aside its calling-the-waiter instruments in favor of its instruments of applause.”

This is a novel that was and will be futuristic until it’s written, just as its author is, who until today had yet to write a single future page although he has left it until the future to be a futurist as a proof of his enthusiasm for so doing, and brilliantly from there on—without falling into the trap of being a consecutive futurist like the ones that adopted futurism, without understanding it, in the present. And for that reason they have declared much to come for the novelist, who has everything in front of him, including his own genial sense of haste, which arises from having thought that with the speed of progress, posterity has been left behind; each day comes quicker, almost completely forgotten, contemporaneous events and that’s all, existing in the last journalistic edition of the day it appears. We all die already judged immediately, book and author, made classics

or corpses in a day, and meanwhile they recommend us to posterity, complaining of the present. And today, all is done with sufficient justice in twenty-four hours. The old posterity, with all the time it took to think about it, consecrated a multitude of nonentities as glorious artists; there's more equity and common sense in today's reporter: vacuous solemnity and moralisms were posterity's cheap and effective bribe, born until yesterday. I will look, trusting, for posterity's universal judgment of my novel in the latest edition of *Critique and Reason* on the thirtieth of September 1929, the day it appeared, which could not have been postponed, since all the postponements had already been used up in promises, with the most literary postponements having been used for prologues.

For the consecrated future literati that does not believe in, nor is able to estimate, posterity beyond each day's night, it won't make sense that authors feel a sense of urgency to write promptly for a prompt posterior judgment: with the speeds that posterity can reach today, the artist will outlive it and the next day will know whether he should or should not write better, or if he has already done it so well that he should content himself with the perfection of his writing. Or if now he has no literary accolades left other than the most difficult—the reader's. The actual ease of writing makes the legible scarce and has reached the point of superseding the injurious necessity of having readers in the first place: writing is for the fruition of art and at best is for knowing the critic's opinion. Sincerely, this change is lovely, it's art for art's sake and art for the critics' sake, which is art for art's sake all over again.

Horrible art and the accumulated glories of the past, which have always existed, are a result of the following: the sonorousness of language and the existence of a public. Without this sonorousness, all that would remain would be to think and to create; without a public clamoring, art would not be drowned. Under these conditions, Literature would be pure art, and there would be many more beautiful works than there are at present: there would be three or four Cervantes, the Cervantes of the *Quijote*, without the stories, Quevedo the humorist and poet of passion without the moralizing orator, various Gómez de la Sernas. We'll be liberated from the likes of Calderón, the Prince of falsetto, from lack of feeling, which is poor taste itself; from the likes of Góngora, at least from time to time, with his "Ay Fabio, o sorrow!" We'd have three Heines, each of sarcasm

and sadness, or D'Annunzios to limitlessly versify passion. Happily, we would have only the first act of *Faust*, and in compensation various Poes, and various Bovaries—with their sad affliction of loveless appetite, despicable and bloody—and this other, lacerating absurdity: Hamlet's lyric of sorrow, which convinces and breeds sympathy, despite the false psychologism of its source. We'll be free of the scientific realism of Ibsen, one of Zola's victims, and this magnificent artist for his part will be dismantled by sociology and theory of heresy and pathology, and instead of a dozen master works we'll possess a hundred, of true, intrinsic artistic worth, not mere copies of reality. These works will be typically literary, works of Prose, not of didactics, without any musical language (meter, rhyme, and sonorousness) or paintings with words, that is, descriptions.