

ing free market conditions for labor. The syndicalists saw legislation as either an attempt to institutionalize the subordination of the workers, as had been apparent with the abortive Labor Code introduced some years earlier by Joaquín González, or as capable, like the socialist measures, of providing only marginal benefits, which avoided the basic question of wages. Almost by virtue of their adherence to *laissez-faire*, the radicals escaped the difficulty of the socialists, who could be portrayed as trying to convince the workers to accept measures they did not particularly want.

The central problem with the question of benefits for the unions and the workers stemmed from its potential effects on the position of the conservative elite. In part the reforms of 1912 had been carried out to bring the workers sufficiently into the political system to undercut the position of the unions and the "foreign agitators." However, the railway strike of 1912 had shown that the elite still remained strongly opposed to an attempt to buttress working-class political participation by any material concessions. It was unable to do this because of its own vested interest in maintaining a supply of cheap labor and because of its links with foreign capital. In attempting to make changes, the radicals therefore ran up against the opposition of the elite. More than any other factor, this complex conflict of interests and objectives between the government and the elite shaped the character and the fate of the first radical government.

Note

For complete references and notes, consult the original version of this chapter in David Rock, *Politics in Argentina, 1890–1930: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 95–124.

Poems to Be Read on a Trolley Car

Oliverio Girondo

With the political democratization of the 1920s came cultural modernization, as well. Public education increased literacy levels and hastened the cultural integration of the children of European immigrants into nationhood. In the process, a new generation of writers and artists who enthusiastically embraced avant-garde aesthetics was born. Irreverent and playful, they opposed the homogenizing effects of modern culture while simultaneously transforming Argentina's local artistic traditions. Most representative was the group associated with the journal Martín Fierro (1924–27), where writers like Jorge Luis Borges, Raúl González Tuñón, Leopoldo Marechal, and Oliverio Girondo (1898–1967) published their texts. Important painters, such as Xul Solar, illustrated its pages. These two poems from Girondo's Twenty Poems to Be Read on a Trolley Car (1924) are written in the experimental and fragmentary style of a poetry that mimics the fast pace of modern life and the cultural fusions of a cosmopolitan society. Through interrupted images, they respectively portray the tumescent desires of working-class girls ("Exvoto" [1920]) and the entangled bodies of couples dancing to the violent rhythm of a milonga, a faster variant of tango, from the dizzying perspective of a passing cubist eye ("Milonga" [1921]).

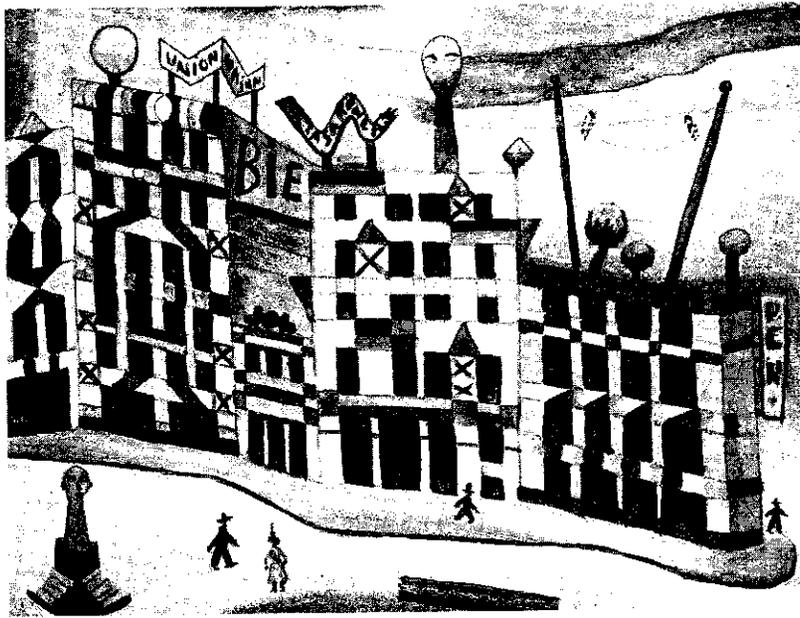
EXVOTO

To the girls from Flores

The girls from Flores, have sweet eyes, like sugar almonds from "El Molino," and they wear silk jumpsuits that sip their rumps like fluttering butterflies.

The girls from Flores, walk together arm in arm, broadcasting their trepidation, and if anyone looks them in the eye, they press their legs together, for fear their sex will fall out on the sidewalk.

As darkness falls, they hang their innocent breasts over the iron branches of their balconies and their clothes turn purple, feeling them naked, and at night, towed by their mamas—armored frigates—they go out and promenade on



Xul Solar, *Jol* (1926). Private Collection.

the plaza, so that the men can ejaculate words in their ears, and their phosphorescent nipples will light up and fade away like fireflies.

The girls from Flores live with the anxiety that their buttocks will go rotten, like apples that are past their prime, and their desire for men is so suffocating that they would like to be free of it, as from a corset, but they don't have the courage to cut their bodies into pieces and toss them out to all the men who pass them on the sidewalk.

Buenos Aires, October 1920

MILONGA

On the tables, beheaded bottles of "champagne" with white clown sashes, nickel buckets that replicate the skinny arms and backs of "cocottes."

The *bandoneón* sings with the yawning stretches of a stupid worm, it contradicts the rug's red hair, it magnetizes nipples, the pubes and pointy shoes.

Males whose bodies rupture in a ritual court, their heads sunk low between their shoulders, their lips thick with coarse remarks.



Trolley in Buenos Aires's downtown. The trolley brought speed and a new urban experience to the people of Buenos Aires. Courtesy Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires.

Females with their nervous rumps, bits of foam at their armpits and their eyes looking much too oily.

Soon the sound of shattering glass, the tables rise up, bucking, and end with four feet in the air. An enormous mirror and its pilaster come crashing down with all the people reflected in it; and, amid a breaking wave of arms and backs, a burst of fists and punches, seeming like a Bengali pinwheel.

The violet draped down, together with the lone policeman, enters the scene.

Buenos Aires, October 1921

Translated by Patricia Owen Steiner

THE LATIN AMERICA READERS

a series edited by Robin Kirk and Orin Starn

Also in this series:

The Peru Reader: History, Culture, Politics

Orin Starn, Carlos Iván Degregori, and Robin Kirk, editors

The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics

Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti, editors

LATIN AMERICA IN TRANSLATION / EN TRADUCCIÓN / EM TRADUÇÃO

Sponsored by the Consortium in Latin American Studies at

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University



THE ARGENTINA READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

Edited by Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham and London* 2002