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## Capítulo 10

# LOS MUNDOS DE ALFREDO BRYCE ECHENIQUE

Nuevos textos críticos



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*Los mundos de Alfredo Bryce Echenique (nuevos textos críticos)*

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## Between *Crónica* and *Cuento*: Alfredo Bryce Echenique's Storied Journal in *Guía triste de París*

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A guide to Paris by Alfredo Bryce Echenique could not be anything other than *triste*. Brycean melancholy, that Proustian sensibility that stretches to both fictional sides of the Atlantic, most permeates his writing in the French capital. Chez Bryce, brooding adolescents, disillusioned artists and writers, and love sick exiles face the daunting Parisian world of residential concierges, diplomatic farce, bourgeois clout and aristocratic posturing. Reminiscent of a popular song form that mixes rhythm and story, the «entries» in *Guía triste de París* compose a sort of Cole Porter song book of Latin Americans in Paris. The stories' brevity offers an array of narrative tunes rather than positing philosophical or cultural truths about Latin America and Europe and their on-going colonial resonance in the cultural imagination. Bryce incorporates his self-mocking tone into anecdotes that become intimate caricatures. The characters, often autobiographical, are sketched onto the walls and into the neighborhoods of the city. Rather than developing them as psychological entities, their outlines serve to highlight quirky cross-cultural situations. Bryce hurls them against the backdrop of Paris where their idiosyncracies loom and get the better of them. Each anecdote in this collection is dedicated to one or several personal friends of the author. The dedications to each piece form a sort of epigraphic code. While the characters do not seem to have any obvious connection to the dedicatory phrase that introduces them, some familiar names in the history of Latin American letters in Paris appear, such as Jean Franco and Cecilia Hare de Scorza. Many of the dedications are to couples or groups of individuals, suggesting warm recognition. In the Brycean world of eccentrics, obsessive personalities, and unlikely and generally disastrous love relationships (in this collection as well as in his other fic-

tion), these nods of recognition may be less than sympathetic parallels.

Bryce blends a variety of narrative modes in this collection of vignettes on displaced Latin Americans in Paris. For his seasoned readers, the titular association with travel guides immediately raises suspicion that we have more than just another generic experimentation. Indeed, his most infamous would-be Parisian hero, Martín Romaña, ends up writing travel guides under the pseudonym Maximus Solre at the end of *El hombre que hablaba de Octavia de Cádiz*. A reader may expect to find in *Guía triste de París* a third part to Martín Romaña's story, as if the diptych had become a triptych. However, Martín Romaña never appears in *Guía*, other than in the intratextual fantasies of Brycean humor. His production of journalistic essays may lead still other readers to expect straight-ahead chronicles, a selection of urban musings on the city. While the short pieces in *Guía* lean on an underlying *cronista* tone, they clearly differ from the articles now collected in *Crónicas personales* (1988) and *Permiso para vivir (antimemorias)* (1993). *Guía's* continuous dodging of formal adherence nods to but resists autobiography, the frame tale, the travel guide, the short story and the chronicle. Bryce blends *crónica* and *cuento* into a series of brief tales that highlight the absurdity of urban, social interactions. The entries' social (and auto-) critique simultaneously attacks the literary institutions of those genres, including the «institution» or motif of the Latin American writer in Paris.

The *crónica* has a particularly elaborate history as a form of urban narrative in which Paris plays a vital role. The list of Francophile chroniclers from Latin America, particularly the *modernistas* including Darío, Gómez Carrillo, the García Calderón brothers, and Balmacedo Torre, would fill more lines than I am willing to devote to them here.<sup>1</sup> The importance of Parisian city space and architecture, street names and maps, allows the chronicle to shape events and track their itineraries. From nineteenth-century descriptive realism and turn of the century journalistic immediacy, the Parisian chronicle offers a narrative urban snapshot for the Latin American gaze.

Bryce is well aware of this journalistic tradition, and how it has contributed to the text and language of Paris for Latin America. He transforms this tradition by fictionalizing the chronicle, adding as

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<sup>1</sup> See also pages 14-20 in my *Writing Paris* for a discussion of Paris and the *crónica* in Latin American modernist writing.

well a good dose of his own irreverence. In fact, he confesses in his short introduction to this collection that six of the stories began as chronicles that he later fictionalized: «al retomar esos seis textos para fraguarlos como cuentos, suprimí más elementos literarios que nombres de personas que vivieron en París o hechos reales que, en efecto, ocurrieron ese año, ese día y, a lo mejor, hasta a esa misma hora» (10). This purging fictionalization still maintains commentary on certain Parisian practicalities: the state of traffic, street cleaning, apartment rentals and Peruvian embassy office politics. The result is a series of comic portraits drawn in and on the architectonic absurdity of Bryce's Paris.

The intersection of cultural modes, in particular popular culture such as film and music, with the space of the city puts the short form of the chronicle in/to the service of intertextuality. Bryce weaves in song and film titles as if they were poetic verses (using «Deep in a Dream of You» as one of his story titles), and evokes the big business of international cultural production in his plays on words («no tenía ni para el metro [ya ni hablar de la Metro Goldwyn Mayer]» [157]). In the selection «La muerte más bella del 68», the narrator pits his own Hollywood cinematic preferences for Marlon Brando and John Wayne against the leftist student street movement in Paris in May of 1968. Under pressure to contribute to the leftist movement, he retreats into the «subversive» realm of North American cinema («era pecaminoso para la izquierda seguir viendo a estos actores maravillosos» [156]). Since the streets of the Latin Quarter only offered him student demonstrations, he avoids them, taking a taxi as far as he can afford. He then traverses the seventeenth arrondissement, then the Pigalle and Clichy neighborhoods into Montmartre, and eventually hides out in a movie theater. This parallel to Martín Romaña's reaction to the activism in Paris during the same period is typical of *Guía's* stories where fragments and shadows of Bryce's cultural construct of Paris resurface intratextually from previous fictions.

The unceremonious portraits in *Guía triste de París* strip away the glory and massacre the illusion of the nineteenth century «viaje a Europa». Like his compatriot Sebastián Salazar Bondy in his collection *Pobre gente de París* (1950), Bryce chooses to reveal the other side of Paris's prestige. However, his focus veers away from the grim fates of betrayal, poverty and illness that Salazar Bondy's characters

face.<sup>2</sup> The *tristesse* in *Guía triste de París* is lighter, a result of stubborn sentimentality more than misfortune. «Retrato de escritor con Gato Negro», for example, suggests an allusion to Julio Cortázar's Parisian story «Cuello de gatito negro». The narrator frames the story of matrimonial tension over a pet with the problem of excessive dog excrement on the city's sidewalks. In «El carísimo asesinato de Juan Domingo Perón», a young artist named Alfredo has the idiosyncratic habit of collecting empty jars of Nescafé, something the narrator always wondered about, until one day he sees them used as wine glasses.

European social class structure remains opaque to the narrators and characters throughout this collection, another reminiscence of the Martín Romaña volumes. The narrator calls Betty, the wife in the couple that fight over the cat, «[t]repadora, huachafa, acomplejada, ansiosa de borrar recuerdos peruanos para llegar a ser algo más en París» (69). The sixth-floor walk-up servants' rooms are always scenarios for social clashing between young Latin American writers and their multicultural laborer neighbors. The narrator in the story «Las porteras nuestras de cada día»:

vivía ahora en un infame cuartucho techero, poblado de obreros españoles, portugueses, sicilianos y qué sé yo qué inmigración más de aquellos años sesenta... ellos me envidiaban a mí, sí, pobrecitos. Cómo no iban a sentir envidia de un tipo que se pasaba la vida sentado, leyendo y estudiando, mientras ellos se mataban entre fábricas y edificios públicos. (120-21)

The most glaring social trespass is perhaps in «La gorda y un flaco», where the elite Limenian daughter of «un buen par de fines de raza, y mucho virrey y muchísimo pasado y aun más antepasados» (127-28), who marries the neighborhood baker, an immigrant from Spain. She abandons him and ends up in Paris, using her family influence to secure a job at the Peruvian embassy where she is charged with looking out for Peruvian students in Paris.

The acute social class tension between Latin American expatriots and the French aristocracy is one of Bryce's main sources of humor throughout his fiction. In «Deep in a Dream of You», the narrator, a jazz pianist in piano bars, converses with his lost love, Françoise, years after he had fallen in love with her. He is haunted by her

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Salazar Bondy, see pages 19-23 in my *Writing Paris*.

higher social class and by the age difference that also separates them. Resonant of Octavia de Cádiz, Martín's aristocratic university student with whom he had a prolonged affair, the situation between Roberto and Françoise is untenable. Roberto enumerates the obstacles to their relationship: «casado, treinta y cuatro años y desganado piano bar, contra dieciséis años, liceo y unos papis en Enghien» (144).

Bryce uses the space of the city to orient the story of this relationship and to underscore the social class divisions the characters map out:

Y tus padres y tu hermano me reciben *Night and day*, cuando no tengo que reemplazar a alguien en la Closerie de Lilas o en el Calavados, y a veces también en la rue Polonceau, marginales y peligro, en vertiginosa caída bajofondo que en esta casita se olvida porque es tan rodeada de jardín, tan blanca por dentro, por fuera, tan campiña, tan madera y cojines, tan la chimenea y su leña, tan confort. (145)

Roberto's apartment on Rue Saint Severin, an identifiably bohemian destination, along with the seedy settings of his piano gigs, contributes to dichotomizing the city/suburb dynamic. The frequent references to subway stops, street names, and neighborhoods in *Guía* provide an urban mapping for the Parisian clichés Bryce works at undermining through the critique of social class hierarchies. His experimentation with language, including neologisms that mesh French referents with Spanish syntax, comically spices his social critique. One Peruvian embassy worker's couch is described as «versallesco» (104), and another upper-class French woman named Claire who dates one of the poor Peruvian students plays in international golf tournaments «jetsetmente» (52).

The social class conflicts that structure many of these plots build on temporal as well as spatial tensions. Temporally, the stories combine memories of the past with the discourse's self-conscious, metafictional present. «Deep in a Dream of You» highlights the temporal dislocations that are common to many of these stories. Comprised of truncated dialogues, jazz lyrics and titles in English, the story's narrative perspective shifts between first and second person. Those gaps exacerbate the temporal jump to a phone call between Roberto and Françoise twelve years later, when she is no longer available. The story ends with a letter from a hospital physician notifying Françoise that Roberto has died and that his last wishes included a message to her. The temporal jumps and narrative shifts

make the story's correlation of memories and conversations a fantastic projection into contiguous pasts and futures.

The last story, «Debbie Lágrimas, *Madame* Salomon y la ingratitud del alemán», a novella-like piece, projects simultaneously into the future and the past as well. Here an aged narrator speaks from his senile and jumbled memories recorded several decades into the twenty-first century. The context of the story goes even further to exploit once again unlikely, even preposterous Parisian conjunctions when an Afro-Peruvian moves to Paris to study German. Guillermo Ojeda lives in Paris, always aware of his «presencia tan congoleñamente peruana» (188). Among his reminiscences, he recounts posing this questions to a North American friend about his status in Europe: «¿No será, siempre, que a pesar de los años y las Sorbonas de mi vida, yo seguiré siendo eternamente un recién desembarcado peruano en la vieja y diabla Europa?» (178-79). This story also ends with his death, at 113 years old, as the reporters arrive to tell the story of the oldest Peruvian.

One of the many ironies of this collection is that a conventional guide to a city is directed at potential future travellers, and suggests itineraries for a successful trip. Most of these pieces are musings about past urban unsettledness with limited itineraries (university cafeterias, Latin Quarter walk-up flats, gatherings of displaced Latin Americans who become diplomatic employees) that inevitably recount failures (usually laments about unrequited love). *Cronistas* in Paris during the early decades of the twentieth century strove to provide eye-witness accounts of the urban scene and to record what Enrique Gómez Carrillo called the fleeting, frivolous «sensation».<sup>3</sup> Bryce's *Guía*, however, does not attempt to examine the soul or record the pulse of Paris. Instead, with a self-deprecating tone, the stories uncover the motivations and display the contradictions of young Latin Americans who eventually grow old in Paris. These narrators, unlike the *cronista*, are always removed temporally from the scene, looking back on their Parisian exploits with humor, warmth and affection. One character's confusion on New Year's Eve encapsulates the simultaneous distance and intimacy of these narratives: «la señora Irene no había sabido encajar el asunto de los

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<sup>3</sup> «Por mi parte, yo no busco nunca en los libros de viaje el alma de los países que me interesan. Lo que busco es algo más frívolo, más sutil, más positivo: la sensación» (7).



años que pasan, como el que acaba de pasar, dicho sea de paso, y al que dentro de un instante vamos a decirle adiós, brindando al mismo tiempo por este 1972 que nos llega y que...» (40). The narrators recount their celebrations, feasts, pets and passions with a satiric edge to deconstruct the traditional trip to Europe and its class aspirations. This guide, in stead of a travel book for Parisian visitors, offers a self-conscious narrative scrapbook of foolish but endearing alter-Bryce-egos.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of my late friend and colleague, Susana Rotker, whose scholarship on the *crónica* launched a brilliant but tragically shortened career.