**b.**

from The Reader's Catalog

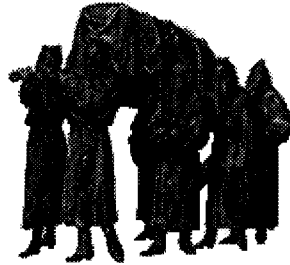
reviews

June 1998

[HOME](#) | [NYBOOKS](#) | [MARKET BASKET](#) | [INFO.](#) | [MAIL](#)

Vigilance

**A Lexicon of Terror:
Argentina and the
Legacies of Torture**
by Marguerite Feitlowitz

**Fred Murphy**

Between 1976 and 1983 the right-wing military juntas that ruled Argentina waged a war of selective terror against their own people under the pretext of suppressing a small urban guerrilla movement. The so-called "disappeared" (*desaparecidos*)—some 30,000 students, trade unionists, intellectuals, journalists, and others—were kidnapped from their homes or workplaces by military units, tortured in clandestine detention centers run by the army, navy, and air force, and then shot and buried in unmarked graves or else drugged and thrown from aircraft. The military regime collapsed in the wake of its disastrous war for the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands in 1983. Its leading figures were put on trial and sentenced to long prison terms but were pardoned in 1990 by current president Carlos Menem.

Most accounts of Argentina's "Dirty War" fall into one of two categories: either horrifying first-hand testimonies by survivors or dispassionate works in which political scientists and other academics seek to account for the military regime's origins, dynamics, and downfall. Marguerite Feitlowitz's *Lexicon of Terror* incorporates the best features of these genres but surpasses them in ways both creative and moving. The avowed focus of her book is the distortion and corruption of language by the Dirty War regimes, and thereby of Argentines' ability to understand and interpret for themselves what they were living through. As a translator of several contemporary Argentine playwrights, Feitlowitz says, she "became obsessed with the nefarious ways in which language can be used" and set out to decipher and explicate how the Argentine generals and admirals "used language with diabolical skill to confuse, disorient, and terrorize."

Over a period of several years Feitlowitz conducted many lengthy interviews with survivors of detention camps and relatives of the *desaparecidos* in order to construct a "lexicon of terror" and gain "a sense of how these words were *lived*." She supplemented her oral-history research with studies of the newspapers and mass-circulation magazines that uncritically purveyed the juntas' words and images. A central metaphor that she explores at length is the Nazi concept of *Nacht und Nebel* (night and fog), which captures the regime's deliberate and verbose efforts to obfuscate its actions and intentions and to portray its victims as the aggressors.

But Feitlowitz is not wholly preoccupied with language in a post-structuralist literary sense. Rather, she uses language as a jumping-off point to explore lesser-known episodes that cast additional light on Argentina's tragic recent history. Especially rich are her chapters on the contradictory responses by Argentine Jewish leaders and institutions to the regime's victimization of Jews and barely concealed anti-Semitism; on the destruction through terror of a nascent peasant movement in Corrientes and other rural northeastern provinces; and on the way the regime reshaped physical space—buildings, neighborhoods, public transport—to achieve its ends.

Most importantly, Feitlowitz pursues the story well beyond the military regime's failure, exposure, and collapse. She assesses the partially successful efforts in the 1980s to achieve a public accounting and the punishment of those responsible, as well as the setbacks in the 1990s under President Menem, who has sought to draw a curtain of impunity over the Dirty War regimes (though such retrograde efforts have been stymied in part by continuing revelations by guilt-ridden—or opportunistic—military officers such as Col. Adolfo Scilingo). Feitlowitz highlights in particular the inspiring involvement of many sons and daughters of *desaparecidos* who have joined with survivors to organize commemorations, dedicate monuments, and pursue innovative legal strategies to keep the unresolved questions of the Argentine past in public consciousness. She concludes:

Life for many in Argentina still means constant vigilance; an impending sense of disaster, carnal knowledge of fear. A sense that history never moves on, but circles, raven-like, round and round. Yet as the testimonies in this book make clear, the most castigated Argentines manage to maintain deep reserves of courage, clarity, and

tenderness. If indeed "the past is a predator," there is popular volition to meet the danger at its source, by exposing and resisting the entrenched politics of impunity and amnesia.

Fred Murphy has studied and taught in the Committee on Historical Studies at the New School for Social Research. A Fulbright fellowship enabled him to spend a year in Buenos Aires in 1992.

0-19-510635-0 Oxford \$30.00

n.b. price: \$24.00

[Order](#)

[Browse Our Entire History Section](#)

[More in Review](#)

[HOME](#) | [NYBOOKS](#) | [MARKET BASKET](#) | [INFO](#) | [MAIL](#)

Copyright©1997 R.C. Publications, L.P.