VERTICAL
THE CITY AND EMBLEMS
OF POWER

by Christian Ferrer

I

It was not, at first, the obelisk but the pyramid. Though rather modest in stature—just fifteen meters high—its primitive symbolic drive must have been intense. The first national monument, it was installed in the Plaza de Mayo on May 25, 1811 at the mandate of what was called the Junta Grande de las Provincias Unidas del Río de la Plata to celebrate the first anniversary of the Revolution. To erect it was to drive a stake into the ground. It was a tectonic statement: no foreign ruler would ever have power over these lands. By cutting the umbilical cord with the House of the Bourbons, a nation had been born or, rather, a project of a nation that would take some time to come together. It was, in any case, something yearned for: a new navel. The Pirámide de Mayo was erected in front of the city's fort, the residence of the Spanish viceroys. Once it was demolished, the present-day Casa Rosada would be built on the site. Pursuant to civil wars and the passage of time, the pyramid—no longer a site of interest—would fall into neglect. In the mid-19th century, it was remodeled and crowned with a statue—both projects were commissioned to French sculptor Joseph Dubourdieu, who included striking pyramids on the triangular frieze he was asked to make for the façade of the city's Cathedral. The three pyramids on the frieze contextualize the re-encounter between Hebrew patriarch Joseph and his eleven brothers. With this group of sculptures, Dubourdieu wanted to affirm that fraternity was the fundamental law, a desideratum that has rarely ruled in our history. That statue at the pyramid's zenith—a representation of freedom, a female figure bearing spear and shield—wears a Phrygian cap, by tradition an allegory for the republicanism and freedom that would guide the people and a sign of the freed slaves in ancient Rome. And, undeniably, on that May 25, 1811 some slaves were freed. It is not clear, though, why it is called a pyramid since its shape is that of an obelisk.

Plaza de Mayo. Archivo General de la Nación.

II

In ancient Greece there was a winged being called a sphinx. Half woman and half cat, the sphinx would hurl riddles at passersby misfortunate enough to run into her. Those who could not come up with the right answer were strangled and devoured. And that is how cities work as well, besetting inhabitants with so much pressure and distress. Though experienced as annoyance, it is in fact something else entirely: existential questions thrown in our path that demand an immediate response, matters of life and death, of daily survival, of desire, desperation, fruitless toil, interpersonal conflict, disjuncture and isolation, and a good many other insoluble problems. It is pointless to argue since there is no possible response: the very formulation of the questions borders on the unfathomable, the indecipherable. Sooner or later, inhabitants begin to suspect that they are mistaking what it is in fact a labyrinth—a word of unknown origin—for shelter and that, alas, the only thing that can be done is to coordinate or synchronize routine tasks. The correlate is malaise and despair. To keep citizens from breaking down entirely, to make these pressing mysteries intelligible, if only briefly, the metropolis opens up from within itself specific areas for the purpose of providing shelter and comfort, albeit inadequately—if not deceptively—for essentially defenseless human masses. Houses of worship, stadiums, movie theaters, commemorative sites, and "pink-light districts" evidence the eagerness for consolation, the struggle for life, the enigma of dream, the dramas of national history, and frustrations of a sexual nature. These places and others—gambling houses, shopping centers, and entertainment venues—are visited in search of relief or passing fascination before reality once again makes its presence felt and sets the wheel of fortune spinning once again.

The Obelisk is one of those meaningful pieces. But what does it symbolize, what need does it meet, if it partakes of that mission? The evident and oft-repeated reference to the imposing phallus does not suffice. It just does not measure up. Alberto Prebisch—the architect who built it—stated that it is "sheer and pure construction that symbolizes nothing," an exceedingly innocent claim that disregards the power of the collective imagination—irrepressible ivy that sprawls on any wall whether to lift it up or to bring it down. Once embedded, a construction of

such magnitude is no longer the domain of its builders or of the city government that commissioned its construction. It is at the mercy of the judgment and fantasy of the public that gathers around it or recalls it from having walked by. The Obelisk is, undeniably, an eloquent, but also an undaunted, icon. Convincing, yet inexpressive. No one could claim it incites contemplation even though it has clearly been embraced and endorsed as an image suitable for postcards and scale-model souvenirs. Tourist landmark for people from the outlying provinces and even from Greater Buenos Aires ever since the neighborhood habit of "going downtown" first took hold. And much more. If a flying saucer were ever to land in this city, it would certainly do it there. While at first the Obelisk may have been an intruder, it ended up a beloved if unlikely outbreak of family life. We don't know if recent urban projects like Tecnópolis or the Puerto Madero towers will lay roots. The Obelisk did instantly, almost like a graft, even though it clashed with the other monuments and statues spread throughout the city whose reliefs and figures stir affliction, respect, pity, or deep emotion before something beautiful and well shaped. It is not that we are indifferent to the Obelisk. By no means. It is just that it has no equal: it is unique. And, if it held a secret, it would keep it between four walls, like a pyramid holds a sarcophagus.

It is said that, as an old man, one of the most eminent French anthropologists of this century used to visit a museum where he would spend long stretches of time before a carved stone from a very remote age, as if engraved on its surface he might find the explanation for the enduring and often winding course of human development. His was a hopeless task. How different it would have been if a sphinx, rather than an obelisk, had been placed in the Plaza de la República. And that is not inconceivable. In 1926, the Spanish-language version of Oscar Wilde's *The Sphinx* was published in Buenos Aires, a poem first published in London in 1894. According to its translator, the poem was "a monstrous conjuring of religious paganism that reveres the thousand forms of love." What he meant was that the protagonist of the poem was a highly sexual being. In 1895—one year after the poem was published—Wilde was charged with sodomy and immorality and sentenced to two years of forced labor for "gross indecency." Meanwhile, as mayor of Buenos Aires—a post to which he was named in 1932—Mariano de Vedia y Mitre, the Argentine translator of *The Sphinx*, would order the construction of the Obelisk.

III

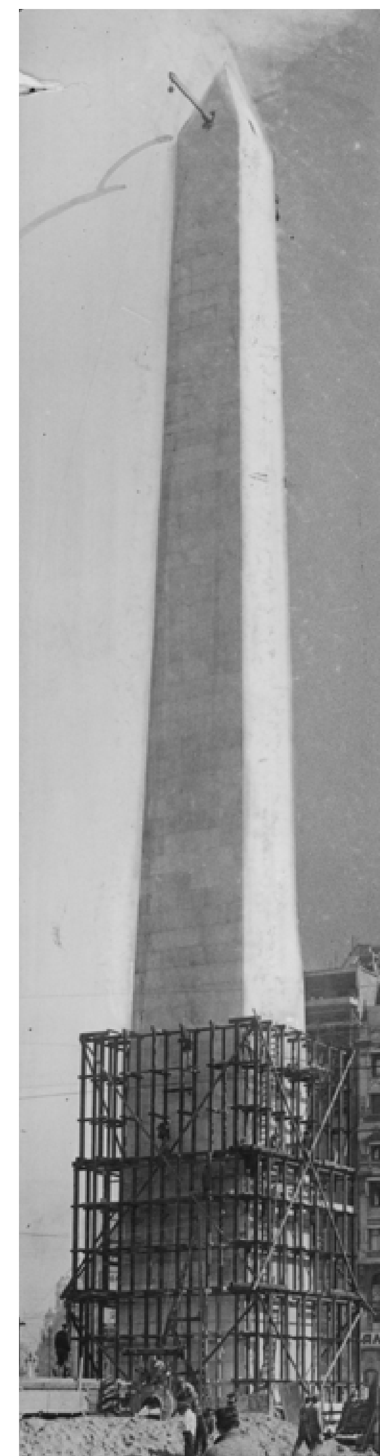
There was nothing remotely ingenuous about the institutional context in 1936, the year it was erected. The president, General Agustín P. Justo, had been chosen in elections riddled with fraud and the mayor of the city, Mariano de Vedia y Mitre, who had been designated by the executive branch, had taken part in the military coup of 1930, the first of many, it would turn out, in the 20th century. It is common to refer to these years as a period of fraud in Argentine history and, though that word captures neither the series of circumstances nor the framework in which they ensued, there was a good deal of that. In any case, the difficulties and misunderstandings that would beset the history of this country were taking hold. The ousting of Hipólito Yrigoyen by General José Félix Uriburu, who in turn was taken out by Justo, was followed by firing squads, imprisonments on the island of Tierra del Fuego, persecution of leftist members of the Radical Party and anarchists, the forced shutdown of newspapers and journals, and rigged elections. Those who had been ousted sought refuge, futilely it would turn out, in abstaining from elections, which meant that the government was left in the hands of those who had benefited from the coup, a sector interested in modernizing the country. Remember that it has always been necessary for architects and urban planners interested in transforming major sections of the city to have an alliance with a strong power that would offer its blessing.

Mariano de Vedia y Mitre undertook a great many public works: widening thoroughfares, improving the riverfront walkway, building hospitals, plazas, avenues, and subway lines. But the Obelisk would be his signature project; perhaps it is no coincidence that the first skyscrapers in Buenos Aires were erected during his tenure. Vedia y Mitre was a member of the Jockey Club and the Club del Progreso. He was from an important family, one of those that believed that steering the fate of the city was the duty of their social class. The opening at that time of what was called the North-South Avenue brought with it the problem of ordering traffic in the three arteries that would inevitably intersect: Corrientes, Diagonal Norte, and 9 de Julio. The logical solution was a traffic circle and a number of organizations and political parties soon began to rally behind the use of their own favorite forefather for the image to decorate its center. The Sociedad Sanmartiniana and the Sociedad Belgraniana rooted for San Martin and

Belgrano respectively, the members of the Radical Party for their mystical leader Hipólito Yrigoyen, who had died just a few years before. Perhaps the easiest way to settle this intense tug-of-war would be simply to call it off. This was not—or not merely—a struggle between idolaters: everyone sensed an impending shift in the imagination of Buenos Aires towards the Plaza de la República, a magnet that would pull everything into its orbit.

At stake in the struggle, then, was naming this metamorphosis.

The choice of monuments—like the names given to streets and plazas—is not necessarily an act of justice. Nor is it harmless, though in the end familiarity and the passage of time obscure origins. What's at stake in these battles over names is the course of historical memory, the honor due to the city's "distinguished families," the veneration of certain public men to the detriment of others, the exaltation of such-and-such a man of the time to the rank of illustrious citizen or representative figure. Even in the cases of stamps or of bills of legal currency—to say nothing of the repatriation of mortal remains—there are clashes in the name of the political history of the nation. It is not by chance that there are more streets in Buenos Aires named after Unitarios than after Federales. These clashes grow harsh at times, like when, during the last decade, it was decided not to place busts of certain former presidents in a room in the Casa de Gobierno or to remove a pair of portraits of former dictators from the Colegio Militar de la Nación. It is true that, as years go by, history becomes remote and even grows cold only to eventually drift into oblivion, but as long as what has happened is still the stuff of recent biography, passions do not flounder but blaze, and that is at stake in both the bestowal and the withdrawal of honor. Revolutions, military coups, returns to democracy, and popular uprisings tend to topple or uphold reputations and glories, especially if they are in the interest of whoever happens to hold power. The names of streets, alleys, lanes, thoroughfares, and even cities are laid to rest as new ones are imposed. Indeed, even entire residences—Perón and Evita's in 1955, for instance—can be reduced to rubble. When, not that long ago—just some twenty-five years—the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe came apart, mobs took down hundreds of statues. In one Russian base in Antarctica, a bust of Lenin was hurled into the ice. Many years earlier, in 1871, the Vendôme Column, erected by Napoleon Bonaparte, was taken down by participants in the Paris Commune; in 1936, at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, anarcho-syndicalists used pick and axe to bring



Taking out of the scaffolding, 1936. Archivo General de la Nación.

down the women's prison in Barcelona. For the Twin Towers in New York a duet of airplanes was used. But once that unleashed popular, or sectarian, wrath has quieted, the prerogatives of the powers that be are restored.

In the case of the Plaza de la República, Mariano de Vedia y Mitre commissioned architect Alberto Prebisch—a "modernist" who would eventually (in 1962) become the mayor of this city—to devise a quick and resounding solution to the problem before political passions got out of hand. Prebisch suggested an abstract monument. The obeliscal shape seems to have been the idea of Atilio Dell'Oro Maini, the mayor's secretary at the time and the minister of Education during a future military government. Perhaps the pre-cedent they had in mind was the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde in Paris, which was actually ancient, dating back to the age of the pharaohs. It had also been chosen in order to avoid disputes between different factions vindicating the French Revolution, which had also replaced the religious and monarchical names of parks and plazas with secular ones. Alberto Prebisch did not waste any time: he designed the Obelisk in the blink of an eye and, in just sixty days, it was completed. The construction was so strikingly quick that it was like a magic trick. On February 3, 1936—exactly 400 years after the first and failed foundation of Santa María del Buen Ayre by Pedro de Mendoza—the decree authorizing work on the project was signed. Construction itself began in March and the inauguration of the 67-meter-high, 170-ton monument with some 206 steps within took place on May 23, 1936. Happy ending. But, even though poet Baldomero Fernández Moreno would praise it as a "blazing silver sword," the Obelisk did incite controversy, to say nothing of ridicule and derision, at least for a time. Indeed, in 1939 the City Council passed what now seems like the implausible bill to take it down. The measure was immediately vetoed by the mayor. It was, then, left standing, and soon a tango—naturalization papers of a sort—would be dedicated to it. From then on, it was unquestionable, like those prehistoric standing stones forever in their place, indifferent to the hustle and bustle, the outbursts and delirium, of so many litters of human beings clamoring at their feet.

IV

There was a time when heaven and hell figured prominently on navigation maps and Jerusalem was placed at the center of the world. At that

time, before the secularization of the West, the highest point of any city was the cross on top of its church or the steeple on its cathedral. The etymology of the Greek word *obeliskos* is the sarcastic diminutive of *obelos* or "little steeple." In fact, the place where the Obelisk currently stands was once the site of the church of Saint Nicholas of Bari, patron saint of Turkey, Greece, and Russia, as well as of the release of prisoners, judges, bankers, brewers, shoe-shiners, newlyweds, young women eager to wed, and children, most of whom call him Santa Claus. Like so many Egyptian relics taken to Europe, his relics were transported from the Anatolian Peninsula to Italy once the Muslims took over the region. The church of Saint Nicholas of Bari in Buenos Aires was built in 1733 on Sol Street, later called San Nicolás, or Saint Nicholas, Street, and currently Corrientes Avenue. The surrounding neighborhood still bears the name of the saint. It was in 1812 that, from one of the church's towers, the Argentine flag first waved in the city of Buenos Aires, an event commemorated in an inscription on one of the walls of the Obelisk.

During those times of unwavering belief that the world was the work of the Creator, churches were built to provide the community with shelter and to last an eternity. But the brick Saint Nicholas church was demolished to make room for a concrete colossus rooted in polytheism —a turn of events particularly ironic considering that Saint Nicholas was a staunch enemy of pagan sects: he had a temple to Artemis, daughter of Zeus and the goddess of virgins, fertility, and childbirth, destroyed. Curiously, for several years the church of Saint Nicholas in Buenos Aires housed sisters of the Capuchin order and, next to the church, a shelter for "maidens" had been set up. Perhaps the act of putting an obelisk where a church had been symbolized the final passage from a religious city with Hispanic roots to a secular city ruled by open-minded men, the offspring of the so-called "Generación del 80," who did not, in their time, hesitate to expel from Argentina the papal nuncio and refused to let him back for some sixteen years. What's more certain, though, is that urban planning projects, that is, the destruction of existing urban grids, are part and parcel of Modernity—age of world disenchantment—a time when still "organic" cities made way for other, more mechanized, metropolises. If required by a city, a church could—at only minor cost—be replaced by a thoroughfare, a traffic circle, or an obelisk. Ecclesiastical power could no longer prevent the removal of certain holy sites; its

Obelisk.
Archivo General de la Nación.

City Hall workers engrave one of the Obelisk's sides, 1936.
Archivo General de la Nación.

influence and privilege were exercised by other means and in other places. It was not for nothing that, in 1934, after Buenos Aires had been the seat of the notorious XXXII International Eucharist Congress whose sea of processions was led by Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, later Pope Pius XII, the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons stripped President Agustín P. Justo—the man who inaugurated the Obelisk alongside Santiago Copello, Cardinal of Buenos Aires, who gave his blessing—of his membership.

V

Nonetheless, the Obelisk would be the site of the last and chaotic public anti-clerical demonstration to take place in the country. The events, which the very popular newspaper *Crónica* described under the headline "Battleground in the Plaza de la República with Wounded, Arrests, and Wreckage," took place in early April 1987, days before Karol Wojtyla, better known as John Paul II, would arrive in Argentina. Just a few blocks away, the altar where the Supreme Pontiff would speak to masses of the faithful had already been erected. The demonstration, which ended in strife, had been called by the "Committee against the Papal Visit," whose supporters were "youths in punk attire that upheld outdated anarchist ideas." According to the reporter assigned to cover the protest, "the strange punk youths with thick chains, jarring earrings, black clothing, hair standing on end, bracelets with steel spikes, and leather boots with sharp studs appeared from one moment to the next. The striking and unlikely group carried signs expressing clearly anti-papal sentiments like 'Wojtyla Go Home.'" Almost immediately, the police deployed violent diplomacy including the use of water cannons. Some of the punks were on motorcycles, as were other, non-punk protesters—specifically, what were known at the time as the "agency messengers," who were staging a demonstration in support of their labor demands. The newspaper explained: "The mixing of cyclists led to confusion amongst the police, some of whom ended up fighting amongst themselves as undercover officers mingled with others putting down the protest." Anyway, everyone—baffled passersby and onlookers, as well as reporters—ended up taking a beating. The confusion was heightened when, for good measure, many of the onlookers started singing the Peronist anthem at the top of their lungs. By the time the incident had ended, twenty were wounded and one hundred arrested. Graffiti of, among other things, the letter "A" remained

Horacio Coppola, *Plaza de la República, Día de la Bandera*, 1936.

on the walls of the Obelisk until city workers cleaned them off, rendering them immaculate once again. This "March against the Pope" was the last gasp of anti-clericalism in Argentina. But why at the Obelisk? Perhaps the anarchists considered it a dagger pointing into the heavens.

VI

At the same time the Obelisk was being built, another imposing monument was being erected some 600 kilometers away, in the province of Córdoba. This one was a private enterprise funded by an eccentric millionaire, Barón Biza by name, who, though now forgotten, was cause for much talk in his day. He was, in brief, a writer, businessman, pornographer, leftist, funder of revolutions, exile, frequent prison inmate, editor of opposition publications, hunger striker, holder of a municipal franchise, suicide, villain. A distant relative of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, he was also involved in politics. He was a supporter of the Yrigoyen-wing of the Radical Party and, hence, at the opposite end of the political spectrum from Buenos Aires Mayor Mariano de Vedia y Mitre. During the military coup against Yrigoyen, the two men had been in opposing bands and they continued to clash: in 1933, the city government pressed charges against Barón Biza for a recent book entitled *El derecho de matar* [The Right to Kill] that it deemed immoral and pornographic. Though he was acquitted in April 1935—by which time half of the Obelisk was standing—he would stand trial on the same charges ten years later.

In 1930, Barón Biza had married silent film actress and aviator Myriam Stefford, a bold woman who set out to fly through all the country's provinces, which numbered fourteen at the time, in a small plane. No one had yet performed that feat and, for seven days, all the newspapers tirelessly informed their readers of the details of each stop in the adventure until August 26, 1931, the day the plane came crashing to the ground in the province of San Juan. Myriam Stefford, just twenty-six at the time, was killed. Thousands attended her burial at Recoleta Cemetery, though that would not be her final resting place. A few years later, her widower would decide to honor her on a major scale with a mausoleum that would be, and still is, the tallest monument ever built in the country. It was known for a time as the "Monument to Love." Construction began in August 1935. Barón Biza was not daunted when he learned of the imminent construction of the Obelisk in Buenos Aires: he instructed the tomb's builder, engineer Fausto Newton, to make his even taller. It was a duel and he was determined to triumph.

Erected, appropriately, on the side of the road that leads to the town of Alta Gracia, the vertical tomb is shaped like the wing of an airplane. To lay its foundations, one hundred workers dug a hole fifteen meters deep. Into that cavity, they poured the first cement casting and, once it had dried, a strange ceremony, attended by only a few guests, was held. On that cement base a metal chest was placed and inside that chest was a glass tube inside of which, in turn, were the jewels—gold bracelets, pearls, rubies and emeralds, and a diamond—that Barón Biza had given to Myriam Stefford, a treasure worth a million dollars at the time. The chest was shut with a padlock. The rest of the cement casting was then laid to form a safe that would last forever. The bulk of the mausoleum—covered in glimmering mica whose shine has waned a great deal with time—reaches up into the sky. To reach the top, you have to wind your way up the 400 stairs inside. At the apex there are two windows; a lighthouse was even installed in the mausoleum to guide planes. The name Myriam Stefford is engraved on the steel door at the entrance and those who dare to go through it are met with the warning "Cursed be he who violates this tomb." Two slots, one vertical and one horizontal, are carved into one of its walls so that the light is in the shape of a cross as it travels to the crypt where the aviator's remains rest. The inauguration of the funerary monument, which is eight-two meters tall, was in August 1936, three months after the completion of the 67-meter-tall Obelisk in Buenos Aires. The megalomaniacal determination of an individual citizen had proven greater than that of the Buenos Aires mayor's office. Curiously, some twenty years later Barón Biza would be granted the concession from the city government to manage the two underground galleries below the Obelisk.

VII

Attempts have been made to conjure its white pallor, that is, its resistance to decipherment. Artist Marta Minujín once covered the base of the Obelisk with different flavors of ice cream so that passersby could taste it. On another occasion, she forged a replica stuffed with panet-

tone and, on another, she made the Obelisk recline at an art biennial. Social Welfare secretary during the third presidency of Juan Domingo Perón, José López Rega—also known as “the warlock”—made it into the tallest Christmas tree in the world. Another time, a group called the Organización Negra used it for feats of alpinism as some 15,000 persons looked on. One day, the Obelisk woke up to find itself covered with an enormous stretch of narrow pink fabric in celebration of World AIDS Day. Another time, it was sheathed in a covering in the shape of a pencil to commemorate the disappearance of six high-school students during the dictatorship of General Videla. The Obelisk had become, if not popular, friendly, even available to uses that its original builders—more solemn folk—would have found unthinkable if not downright disrespectful. It had become a place of assembly, and politics, sport, and art—three essential and dynamic forces in the city—monopolized its gatherings. It had become, then, a place of celebration.

In celebrating soccer victories, the phallic cult to the Obelisk reaches particularly great heights, despite the inevitable aftershocks of excess and disorder. In terms of political passions, the Plaza de la República has always been a meeting point for an array of factions, from abundant contingents of activists ready to head to the Plaza de Mayo to the million persons who, in late 1983, gathered there at the close of the political campaigns of the Unión Cívica Radical and of the Partido Justicialista (Peronist Party). It can also turn into an area of spontaneous protest, skirmishes and battles of all sorts, like the ones that took place in the final days of 2001 immediately before the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa, when the onslaught of police, mad rushes of citizens, and teargas turned those blocks into a phantasmagorical setting. Though in fact impenetrable, the Obelisk, during those days, seemed like the tower of a castle battled over.

Though—wall of mysteries—the Obelisk’s consistency may appear rock-like, sometimes, if you look at it out of the corner of your eye, it can give off a fleeting and encompassing—to say nothing of eye-catching—metallic glimmer as if it were magnetized, particularly around its apex that, because distant and unreachable, strains vision. Perhaps that is why one of the most remarkable things ever to happen there was the feat performed by the Zugspitz-Artisten company—Zugspitz is the name of the

Horacio Coppola, *Corrientes esquina Uruguay*, 1936.

highest mountain in Germany—that traveled around the world with its "Wondrous Show of Unique Sensation," landing in Argentina one October 17 in the fifties. It was during one of Perón's presidencies and, as is widely known, the Peronists have never neglected theatrics or skimped on surprise and extravagance. The tightrope walkers in the troupe contributed to the popular celebration with a number called "the deadly crossing" in which they walked on a steel wire that stretched from the peak of the Obelisk to a building diagonally across. They couldn't take a single false step.

There were horrors along with the celebrations. In the bad times that seemed to last forever, the Obelisk as the very heart of the city—if cities were ships, the Obelisk would be the mast—was chosen as the place from whence to send out ominous messages. In 1975, year during which eight hundred people were killed in political assassinations and bodies appeared on the street with no explanation, the city government installed a rotating ring halfway up the Obelisk bearing very visibly the words "Silence Is Health." Ostensibly aimed at drivers overly eager to honk their horns, its eloquent message reached everyone. Bear in mind that, at that time, crowds of pedestrians were scattered by beat cops who would call out "Circulate, circulate." Soon, signs that said "detention center" were placed at bus stops and love hotels were forced to adopt the euphemistic name "temporary shelter" suggesting a sense of unease. These were warnings and no one can say they went unnoticed. How to claim otherwise if, in July 1976, a man, tied up and gagged, was dragged from the back of a car and shot against one of the Obelisk's walls? A long time before, while the Obelisk was under construction, a worker had fallen into the air, that is, to his death, but he was a sacrificial victim of another sort.

VIII

Ancient Roman customs included the "Triumphal Procession." When a general had defeated a rival army, conquered a people, or usurped a territory, the senate authorized a glorious return to the city where the general and his soldiers would be welcomed by the cheering crowd. The procession would include chained prisoners of note who would often be sacrificed at the parade's culmination. On display in carriages lavishly outfitted for the occasion were objects forged in precious metals, fruit

of the sacking, as well as seized samples of the defeated people's cultural heritage. Even obelisks, it turned out, were portable trophies: at least ten were brought over to Rome from Egypt. One of them that measures some twenty-five meters high was, for a time, kept at Circus Maximus; today, it is at the Vatican, directly in front of St Peter's Basilica, in fact, perhaps a strange destination for an emblem of paganism. Another obelisk, this one called "Agonalis," crowns the Fountain of the Four Rivers. The 30-meter-tall piece was sculpted by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in the Piazza Navona in 1651 in honor of the world's largest rivers: the Río de la Plata, the Nile, the Ganges and the Danube. Constantinople "imported" Egyptian obelisks as well and, in the 19th century, a sort of obelisk fever gripped Western powers—France, England, and the United States—as they clamored to get an authentic obelisk for their capital cities. Later, many other countries would get theirs, building them expressly to imitate the originals. Egyptomania had set in.

Transporting them by boat was arduous, but not unfeasible. It had undoubtedly been harder to carve, lug, and raise them at their original sites —a process about which we know little if anything. As seized objects, they were, at times, simply uprooted pursuant to conquest. Other times they served as tributes handed over by the weak or colonized to flatter or to appease the powerful. And there was no shortage of gifts, motu proprio, to imperial countries; in these cases, it might take the obelisk decades to reach its destination. Consider, for example, "Cleopatra's Needle," twin obelisks from the age of the 18th-century Egyptian dynasty, gifts from different viceroys of modern Egypt; one was taken to Westminster, England, and the other to Central Park, New York. These passages, which followed the routes of trade and power, partook of a broader process of removing works of art—friezes, ceramics, statues—from ancient cultures or exotic countries, treasures generally speaking obtained by purchase, brute strength, or dealings with tomb robbers and sackers of archeological sites. Many of them ended up in museums; in the case of obelisks, the entire city would become an exhibition gallery. Though it is so ancient that its genealogy has been lost with time, the original motivation for obelisks and pyramids has never faltered: fascination with symbols of power.

The feat of erecting the Buenos Aires Obelisk in just two months, as well as its now familiar presence, obscure the efforts of the salaried workers

that built it, one block at a time. In the case of the ancient pyramids and obelisks, the myth of the sacred power of the rulers whose immortality had to be secured was the only way to efficaciously organize the thousands of slaves, servants, and craftsmen engaged in the task. With their bare hands, the living constructed a city for the dead, the "Valley of the Kings," the enormous stretch of the palaces of eternity where pharaohs and other members of the ruling class, including cats, were buried. While, compared to contemporary instruments and machines, the ones used in ancient Egypt were rudimentary, there are certain basic similarities: a sovereign center of coordination that assigned the specific tasks to be performed, as well as their Faustian, if not outright blinding, grandeur; the collective organization that made these works possible was composed of human bodies, an organic machine aimed at a single and supreme goal: perpetuating the name and power of the monarch forever more. Totems, whether ancient or contemporary, are usually raised by countless underlings that long to be what they never will.

Today, many manmade "wonders of the world" dazzle their admirers (tourists, the curious who look for images of them on the Internet, enthusiasts who adhere to the idea that "the bigger the better," particularly if the building is "extra-large" or very steep) while never letting on that their very existence is linked to an unwavering mechanical routine on which the city's ability to function depends: its labor processes, its schemes for the circulation, assembly and dispersion of the population, its connective communications, its consumer habits. It is a grand but marked, orbicular and monotonous, procession. And people in cars and buses repeat their daily circuit around the Plaza de la República, which is only slightly altered by the sudden appearance of the Obelisk—habitual yet extraordinary—to which they pay quick honor with a passing glance that attempts, but fails, to capture the mystery or key that might be sealed between its walls.

IX

Though a pyramid and located at the heart of a large plaza, it was the fate of another monument to be neglected, bypassed, largely unnoticed. There were other more common gathering points. The Socialists usually ended their public assemblies in Plaza Constitución; the Anarchists in

Obelisk, 1947. Archivo General de la Nación.

Plaza Lorea, next to the Congress building. Even a fountain—the one in the Plaza de Mayo—would become a more important symbol, or even a fetish, at least in the imagination of the Peronists. The Obelisk has always been a gathering point, even if marchers later headed elsewhere. In any case, since the beginning of the 20th century, most demonstrations supporting or opposing the government, whether civilian or military, have taken place in the Plaza de Mayo. From then on, in politics almost all eyes and outpourings have been aimed at the interaction between the Casa Rosada, seat of the executive branch—more specifically, its balcony—and the sea of political acronyms, factions, and signs that ended up burying another important political emblem in an implicit desert. Remember that, during the air raid on Plaza de Mayo in June 1955, the bombs were about to bring the pyramid crashing down. Not until the plaza—that theater of politics—was reduced to the zero degree of its function—representation—did something unexpected happen that rescued that pyramid from indifference. It was a Thursday in the month of April in the year 1977—times of dictatorship and manhunts throughout the city—when a few mothers wearing white handkerchiefs gathered there to demand their children; they were harassed by the police and other hellhounds, and even aggrieved by "plain and common" folk. Commanded to circulate—a state of siege was in effect—they did so around the Pirámide de Mayo along with other brave individuals who were too often arrested by the police as soon as they strayed, generally on their way out of the plaza proper. In any case, so many years later, around the symbol of the end to the colonial era, dictators were once again repudiated. This is now an essential episode in Argentine history. Befittingly, the ashes of Azucena Villaflor, a founder of the Madres de Plazo de Mayo who herself was disappeared outside the Iglesia de la Santa Cruz seven months after that first march at the pyramid, were placed by its side.

X

At the tiptop there are four windows, each one looking out on a cardinal point, which means that, like the Cyclops of yesteryear who "watch everything around them," the Obelisk has a radial panoptic face. And that—seeing without being seen—is integral to power. Examining and supervising while eluding all scrutiny. Opening up a visibility, holding the mechanisms and mechanics of domination in the dark. Power com-

bines the representation of rituals and spectacles that make it manifest and majestic with the administration of secrecy to hold back "common man." That's the way it's always been: the prince, the sultan, or whoever happens to preside flaunts his presence at the top while his diligent bureaucrats gather and file information that braces and lubricates the mechanism of the hierarchy. Later, as the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century took hold, the secret police would stick their noses into every crack, hideout, and even sewer. Nor were democratic regimes immune to these twists and turns, part and parcel of the principle of authority, with their attendant benefits for happenstance cronies. Today, intelligence services, which record and gather a nation's "unconscious," "see" by means of computer networks that are not only a means of collaborative interactivity but also of surveillance and control. Thanks to the fact that the "connected" citizen has become his own informant, never before has so much "private" information been in the hands of authorities, stored in a black box that refracts the transparency authorized for everything else. Despite so much talk of the virtues of a "transparent" society guaranteed by the social networks and the supposed reciprocal appropriation of power, political imagination the world over continues to be "elevated," which means that its course or Via Regia is ascending—and steep—and everyone knows that the top—and the privileged view—is for just a few. The taller the monument, the closer the vision to the traditional image of power. Regardless of its form, a panopticon's purpose remains unchanged. It can be hidden. The citizenry has never had access to the interior or the top of the Obelisk—that is, the epicenter of Buenos Aires—which, unlike ancient obelisks, is hollow and equipped with stairs. For decades and decades, only maintenance personnel were allowed in, along with—one might speculate—some leader who indulged his desire to take in his domain. In other ages, anyone other than a ruler, courtesan, or priest who dared to penetrate the interior was regarded as a blasphemer.

XI

It is impossible to know what will become of Buenos Aires over the centuries. The future of no city is guaranteed. Many impressive and powerful ancient cities are no longer on the map or are ruins of interest only to tourists or archeologists. Carthage was destroyed in four weeks. Tenoch-

titlán in a siege that lasted eighty days. Dresden was leveled in a hell of fire and destruction as thousands of bombers unleashed explosives in four consecutive attacks. Hiroshima was liquidated on the spot by a single bomb. Over the course of history, hundreds, thousands of cities have been besieged, sacked, devastated. If Buenos Aires were ravished by a biblical plague, abandoned, or forced to be uprooted, the Obelisk would remain, erect and inscrutable, right where it is. The last one standing.

XII

The tip of an obelisk is called a "pyramidion." It is hard to see, not because concealed, but because remote. If someone were to look down on us from there, though, we would look like lilliputians, insignificant filings gravitating towards the electromagnet. Only on the ground would we be on equal terms. So it must either be taken by storm or toppled, as if by magic, until we are finally face to face. But that reduction or destitution would mean some sort of decapitation or beheading. It was a common practice at the end of the battles between the different factions that, during the 19th century, fought over the right to settle Argentina for the leader of some band, victorious for now, to order beheadings. All were joined together, ultimately, in the cattle industry, since the butcher was often as well the best executioner of Christians. Isn't the Obelisk located, after all, between Lavalle Street, named for a general who ended with his head separated from his body, and Sarmiento Street, named for a general who applauded the beheading of provincial caudillo Ángel "Chacho" Peñaloza?

If the Obelisk were beheaded, it would be spliced onto the ghost of those dreadful civil wars relentless even as the methods changed, but also onto the anarchists' obsession with chopping off crowned heads, a custom that began with an invention devised by Dr. Joseph Guillotin—once named "civi optimo," that is, illustrious citizen—during the French Revolution. Remember that the removal of the crowned head of King Louis XVI, in 1793, shook the entire continent of Europe and, by extension, every corner of the world insofar as the emblems of power existed alongside the worship of the one who happened to hold them at a given moment, a combo later deployed by charismatic leaders. The divinity of power and the magnificence of its symbols formed and con-

tinue to form an "electric arc." Therein lies the possibility of rounding up crowds willing to build obelisks and pyramids, and later castles and palaces, factory towns and theme parks, star forts and space stations. To obey was divine, and perhaps the Obelisk—that adornment—is a barely repressed residual trace of sacred reverence for power, one of its forms of self-justifications, just as modern ideologies entailed as well a series of slogans, fictions, and secular miracles, many of them no less impressive. But, whoever enters the pyramidion will have to choose to be either part of the "eye that sees everything" or just another mortal. The weight will fall on his soul, rather than his eyes.

Since antiquity, obelisks and pyramids, like other formidable monuments, have been immemorial, hypnotic, concentric emblems; they are colossal, hermetic, and indestructible. In those terms they have been imagined, worshiped, and feared. It was not for nothing that the illustrations of Anarchist publications printed one hundred years ago depicted power in the shape of a wedding cake: at the bottom the bulk of the population, at the top the feasting few. Our political imagination has almost always tended to be vertical, and it will continue to be so as long we imagine, worship, and fear upward with enraptured eye. As long as we believe in them, these symbols are firm and unwavering. If we ceased to do so, their supremacy—that peculiar space between the sacred, the dreadful, the erotic, and the inaccessible—would tumble in a matter of seconds. It is a question of finding out—by means of sacrilege—what's inside. Perhaps nothing, or only what their idolaters place there. And that is why they symbolize both everything and nothing.