

REPRESSION AND RECONSTRUCTION
OF A CULTURE:
Argentina and the Proceso Militar

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REPRESION Y RECONSTRUCCION DE UNA CULTURA: EL CASO ARGENTINO. Edited by Saúl Sosnowski. (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1988. Pp. 244.)

FICCION Y POLITICA: LA NARRATIVA ARGENTINA DURANTE EL PROCESO MILITAR. Edited by René Jara and Hernán Vidal. (Buenos Aires: Alianza Editorial and the Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, Minneapolis, 1987. Pp. 121.)

The violent repression of the last few decades in many Latin American countries has hindered the process of cultural and intellectual exchange and impeded development of a critical discourse in the public sphere. Examination of the cultural production under a repressive system highlights two issues: how the intellectual sector and the individual as a member of that sector respond to the silence imposed on their discourse by the regime; and how the many voices of resistance from various cultural fields evolve and interact. The two collections of essays under review here pose this problematic as a point of departure, focusing on the specific case of Argentina.

Only recently have writers, literary critics, historians, and other intellectuals inside and outside Argentina been free to meet and exchange ideas on interpreting and reconstructing the history of Argentine culture during the period known as the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (1976–1983).¹ Two such encounters yielded the collections *Represión y reconstrucción de una cultura: el caso argentino* and *Ficción y política: la narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar*.²

These two volumes address the main socioliterary concerns that arise when analyzing how a culture maintains its identity when state forces of repression are used to silence any discourse not recognized as legitimate according to the regime's criteria. *Represión* offers analyses of the dynamics involved in the intellectual's relations with culture and society in a period of repression. *Ficción* complements this approach by

providing a theoretical perspective on the inventory of literary works and artistic strategies that resist the silence imposed by the military regimes. Both collections represent important steps toward establishing a field of comparative cultural and literary studies in which the Argentine experience will be an essential component.

The initial essays in *Represión* establish the historical, political, and economic context for the cultural polemics argued in the second part of the collection and in the theoretical positions taken by the contributors to *Ficción*. To explain the violence and rise of military dictatorships, contributors from several disciplines focus on the polarization of the Argentine socioeconomic structure that accounts for the Manichaeian perception of history as *civilización y barbarie*. The Argentine obsession with dominating the "other," exacerbated by a heterogeneous and dynamic population, accounts for the instability that results in state suppression of whatever it perceives as threatening.

Historian Tulio Halperin Donghi argues that the excess of talent, controversy, and dynamism in Argentine society quickly renders any institutional framework outdated and inflexible. He compares Chilean and Argentine universities as representatives of social institutionalization at large in reacting to changes in society. Halperin concludes that the measured change and continuity characteristic of Chilean institutions have been impossible to achieve in Argentina because of its dynamism. Halperin also believes that the stability afforded Chilean institutions produces mediocrity, but it may be a price worth paying.

For economist Mónica Peralta Ramos, coercive speculation accounts for Argentina's political instability and consequent repression. The speculative practices and rampant inflation that continue to threaten the new democracy arose from the failed economic policies instituted during the Proceso. More important, they are symptoms of the unresolved conflict between the major economic powers and the political institutions in Argentina. Peralta Ramos asserts that historically, the major economic interests in the manufacturing and agricultural industries in Argentina have not gained political control through the electoral system because of their small numbers and their inability to negotiate and build coalitions with other sectors. Thus their means of access to political power have been "los golpes militares, los comercios fraudulentos y la presión política de sus respectivos organismos corporativos" (p. 56). Argentine economic policies before and during the Proceso set these two industries against each other, and their defense was to rely on coercive speculation to achieve their goals. Such exercise of power outside the legislative process erodes the legitimacy of political institutions, and when this conflict reaches a crisis stage, violence is the main tool used to resolve it. This point was reached when demands for redistribution of wealth culminated in the explosive social protests of the late 1960s. In the years that followed,

the state increasingly adopted clandestine forms of repression to restore "order," a violation of constitutional statutes that further eroded the legitimacy of political institutions (p. 57).

Both Halperin and Peralta Ramos conclude that the democratic future of Argentina remains threatened by these historical and socio-economic factors. Their introductory essays reveal the complex set of variables that gave rise to the Proceso and set the stage for discussing the multiple interpretations inherent in each historical, economic, or political premise used to define the period. This diversity is especially clear in the case of political analysis.

José Pablo Feinmann and León Rozitchner both locate the origins of the Proceso in Peronism, yet they create two mutually exclusive paradigms to explain the Argentine political scene. Feinmann, a proponent of Peronism and historical revisionism, explores the historical subjectivity of "truth" as a "practice and political conquest" (p. 80). In his view, the "truth" of the national security doctrine imposed by the Proceso to annihilate an "internal enemy" was merely an extension of the bourgeois liberal "truth" first constructed in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo* (first published in 1845). In defending Peronism, Feinmann argues that mobilization and the militancy of the Argentine popular sectors legitimized a new truth as "struggle, conquest and domination" (p. 90), which would overthrow the institutionalized, liberal bourgeois truth that was democratic in name only. He ends by exonerating Peronism in his call for a new, democratic truth that would be participatory rather than "representative," as in the liberal scheme. Feinmann nevertheless admits that democracy also requires tolerance, a quality lacking in the Peronism of the past.

Rozitchner, in contrast, bases his argument on a critique of Peronism itself. He reasons that Perón's conception of politics as war contained the seeds of the crisis within Peronism that led to the Proceso. Juan Perón, rather than carrying forward the interests of the working class and thereby empowering it, created the illusion that he personally incarnated these interests. He was consequently able to rob the working class of the very power that he had used to legitimate his rule.

The disagreement among the authors of these introductory articles in *Represión y reconstrucción* points to the absence of any collective purpose of arriving at a consensus concerning the causes of the dictatorship. Rather, their contributions provide a multiperspective backdrop of social forces in conflict. In anticipation of the cultural and literary essays to follow, the reader is thus made aware of the impossibility of remaining neutral in the atmosphere created by the Proceso. The invitation to the Maryland conference of the same name where these essays were first presented affirmed that "no hubo manifestación alguna de la cultura que lograra permanecer al margen de la violencia ni quedar incontaminada

por un proceso de divisiones políticas cuyas raíces están en un pasado ya no cercano" (p. 16).

Certainly, the essays of the second part of *Represión* reflect this view. They make no attempt to discuss the cultural sphere from a theoretical distance that would allow individual anonymity within the collective, nor do they try to generate critical overviews of the period. Rather, these essays represent personal testimonies and subjective explorations of the Argentine cultural situation and the commitment that led each writer to choose exile or staying in the country and working under adverse conditions. The literary and personal consequences of making this choice and the interpretation of specific sociocultural events that inflamed and polarized the intellectual sector gave rise to the notion of two separate Argentine "cultures," which are frequently referred to as a "divided literature."

Included in *Represión* is Luis Gregorich's much-discussed essay, "La literatura dividida," which first appeared in *Clarín* in 1981. It delineated publicly for the first time the developing schism between Argentine writers in exile and those at home, explicitly repudiating the literature produced in exile.³ In the *Represión* collection, this essay serves as a point of departure from which Juan Carlos Martini and others can refute Gregorich's critique of the creative possibilities of exile while allowing Gregorich to restate his position and downplay his role in recognizing the existence of this division.

An indignant and accusatory tone permeates these discussions of the cultural ramifications of exile as well as the parallel examination of the cultural situation within Argentina. This polemic centers around the article published by Julio Cortázar in 1978, "América Latina: exilio y literatura."⁴ On one side, Liliana Heker takes issue with Cortázar's statement that "aquellos que un día decidan decir lo que verdaderamente piensan tendrán que reunirse con nosotros fuera de la patria" (p. 198). In an article published in 1980,⁵ Heker stated that the decision to leave Argentina did not automatically make one a martyr, just as the decision to stay did not define one as a collaborator or neofascist, and she went on to list other reasons for leaving the country. In her contribution to *Represión*, Heker explains why she took issue with Cortázar and restates her belief in the value of the work carried on by those inside the country. Opposing this argument is the strident essay by Osvaldo Bayer, who meticulously documents what he denounces as the collaboration and opportunism of the "hombres de cultura," all of whom he duly names and cites (p. 204).

The two essays by Gregorich and Cortázar mark the parameters of the cultural divisions and epitomize the diverse interpretations of key national events during the dictatorship. Several events in particular provoked a great deal of comment: Ernesto Sábato's actions and remarks, especially during the 1979 visit of the Committee on Human Rights of the

Organization of American States; the World Cup soccer tournament of 1978; the alleged anti-Argentine campaign that the regime exploited as propaganda against those in exile; and the Malvinas War. The debate over these events confirms the success of the dictatorship's attempts to divide intellectuals by instilling suspicion and mistrust among them. At the least, these efforts succeeded in exacerbating the divisions that already existed.

Beatriz Sarlo analyzes the methods by which the military systematically dismantled the intellectual community. She traces the history of this "doble fractura," which separated the intellectuals from the *pueblo* and divided the intellectual community itself. Sarlo maintains a critical distance from her subject, unlike others in the collection who offer personal testimonies as to the effects of division and exile on individuals. The isolation and personal and professional sacrifices experienced by intellectuals who chose exile are poignantly described in essays by Noé Jitrik and Tomás Eloy Martínez.

Despite their confirmation that the dictatorship successfully divided the intellectual sector, the voices represented here affirm the survival of Argentine culture in this period. Readers seeking an analysis of the literature produced during these years will be disappointed, however. The only contribution to *Represión* that addresses specific literary texts published during the Proceso is Jorge Lafforgue's catalogue of the tendencies of the era. Prefacing his inventory with the statement that democracy alone does not guarantee the creation of masterpieces, he indicates the diversity of works written under the dictatorship, which ranged from metafiction and textual experimentation with other genres like journalism and film to detective, adventure, and science fiction novels. Lafforgue considers 1980 to have been a turning point in the publishing business, when foreign titles on the best-seller list were displaced by two national novels: Jorge Asís's *Flores robadas en los jardines de Quilmes* and Martha Mercader's *Juanamanuela, mucha mujer*. His excellent outline also includes a useful bibliography.

The editor of *Represión*, Saúl Sosnowski, correctly warns the reader in his preface that the dissension endemic to the period was not overcome at the Maryland conference. Instead, the essays of justification and defense make it clear that what is left unsaid may be as important as what is made explicit. Consequently, the reader who lacks information about other rivalries or resentments beyond those alluded to in these pages is left with no criteria for evaluation. *Represión y reconstrucción* nevertheless delineates better than any other type of document the reasons behind the rancor that led to what is perceived as a divided literature.

What the Maryland encounter accomplished was the opening of a space where exclusively Argentine voices could enter into a dialogue for effecting a self-critique. According to Santiago Kovadloff, this step is

mandatory for reintegrating the Argentine intellectual sector. If any consensus was reached, it was that the future of the Argentine cultural sphere, like that of democracy itself, hinges on the willingness to listen to opposing voices.

The other volume of essays reviewed here, *Ficción y política*, analyzes the literature produced during the Proceso from a distanced and specifically textual point of view in an effort to formulate “totalizaciones críticas de la producción cultural” (p. 10). Believing that the institutional crises and cultural traumas of recent years in Latin America derive from a shared historical experience, editors René Jara and Hernán Vidal affirm the need to “discutir las bases para la reconstrucción de un universo simbólico de re congregación democrática de las culturas nacionales afectadas” (p. 9). The contributors to this collection attempt to establish such foundations via the theoretical framework that structures each article and analysis of individual texts. The theoretical framework employs three analytical strategies that unify the collection: first, narrative as a practice of cultural critique, and literary criticism seen as a process of deciphering codified social messages; second, marginalization as a “strategic space” cultivated by the writer; and third, national history as a repository of collective memory and a “discursive space” for competing interpretations.

The cultural field is interpreted as a space occupied by competing discourses by the six essayists featured in *Ficción y política* (Tulio Halperin, Daniel Balderston, Marta Morello-Frosch, Francine Masiello, Beatriz Sarlo, and David William Foster). The tasks of the good reader or literary critic become formulating a cultural critique of the text and deciphering its codes to reveal the relations of power operating in the society. According to Sarlo’s interpretation of Raymond Williams,⁶ the text functions as a critique of the present because art alone has the capacity to propose “representaciones figuradas incluso en momentos en que no se han hecho cargo de ellas el discurso más sistemático de la descripción y explicación objetivas o no han cristalizado las fórmulas de la ideología” (p. 33). Under a military dictatorship, the oppositional text is clearly defined with extraordinary precision, given that any deviation from the discourse authorized by those in power could result in censorship, imprisonment, exile, or even death.

Because of this context, the strategies of “allusion and elusion” outlined in Halperin’s contribution to *Ficción y política* predominate in these narratives. By such means, their codes communicate a specific message to the dissident reader while passing unnoticed by the censor. In an essay on the “significado latente” in the novels of Ricardo Piglia and Luis Gusmán, Daniel Balderston explores the ways in which reading and writing “between the lines” take on political significance. Historical truths that cannot be communicated explicitly are revealed indirectly by means of condensation, ambiguity, and fragmentation and through “oscuridad

del plan, contradicciones [y] omisión de nexos importantes del argumento" (pp. 120, 110).⁷

The fictive biography, another allusive strategy employed in the narratives of this period, is analyzed by Morello-Frosch. Composed of "pistas falsas, alusiones no aclaradas, elisiones constantes [y] opacidad que problematizan la adjudicación de sentidos totalizadores," these biographies deconstruct the relationship between subject and history in the traditional biographical pact that aspires to uncover universal truths authorized by those in positions of power (p. 61). Subjects excluded from official history find their voices in this new type of biography, which reveals the "relaciones de poder desiguales en las cuales el sujeto social puede dar cuenta oblicuamente de la historia que lo sesga" (p. 61).

It should be noted, however, that the allusive strategies outlined by Balderston and Morello-Frosch did not arise merely as means of evading censorship. Fragmentation, omission of important detail, insertion of texts from nonliterary sources, and other elements emphasizing the narrative's fictionality are rooted in a series of factors beyond the immediate need to evade the censor. Francine Masiello describes how the authoritarian state articulates a one-dimensional theory of reality according to whose norms all dissent is described in metaphors of illness (pp. 12–13). The cultural field is then divided between "us" and "others" by the official discourse, which employs the first person plural in an attempt to eliminate opposition, the sense of otherness, and ambiguity of thought. Masiello's study of the various voices of resistance to the dictatorship argues that "lo marginal transforma la oposición binaria de dominador y oprimidos, con el propósito de fragmentar cualquier discurso unificado que pueda apoyar al estado autoritario o aislar irremediamente al otro" (p. 13). Artists and writers cultivate space at the margins of society in order to call into question the "natural order of things" proposed by state discourse, in which reality is unified, transparent, and self-explanatory.

Beatriz Sarlo shares Masiello's view that literature presenting varying versions of reality and thereby contradicting a unified interpretation of that reality formally opposes authoritarian discourse. Sarlo then has to admit that all fiction opposes authoritarian discourse in that literature as such presents more than one closed interpretation of reality (p. 43). She reminds readers that this questioning of the narrative pact (the conventions that define narrative and its relation to the "real") also forms part of the current trend in the "crisis of realist representation." The complex and ambiguous strategies employed to reveal the narrative as construction are currently considered to possess the highest literary merit due to a series of factors associated with the development of the Left in Argentina during the 1960s and 1970s.

The use of marginal space to oppose the dominant culture has been a constant in twentieth-century Argentine literature, although its focus

has shifted with each generation. Masiello's excellent summary of these changes explains that in the 1920s, Roberto Arlt and other writers employed an anarchist language to challenge the dominant voices of the avant-garde. In the 1950s, the marginalized position was defended by the group associated with the journal *Contorno*, who recognized in writers like Arlt figures of alienation and resistance. The study of marginality expanded in the 1960s to include other popular art forms in the critique of foreign domination over national culture. The 1970s were marked by increasing state vigilance and repression, and the study of marginalized sectors shifted from questioning Argentine culture within a dependent context to formulating a scientific critique of the limits of the authoritarian regime. Along with the social sciences, literary criticism studied systems of representation that limited or facilitated group mobilization. Heterogeneity was valued over binarism as artists exploited the margin to forge alliances with other oppressed segments of society. At this juncture, critical discourse became increasingly pluralized (pp. 19–20).

Masiello goes on to review the journals published during the Proceso and their strategies for cultural critique at the most repressive moments. The critic's task became teaching the reader to decipher codified social messages and to identify opposing discourses circulating in Argentina (pp. 21–22). At this point, the journal *Punto de Vista* warned of the consequences of the realist illusion over the reader (p. 22). Sarlo explains, "En la medida en que el discurso del régimen se basa sobre la afirmación de un orden natural que la perversidad del enemigo ataca para transformar esa naturaleza en antinaturaleza, un discurso que problematiza las relaciones naturales e 'inmediatas' con el referente, afirma la cualidad convencional de toda representación y pone en escena el pacto narrativo que hace posible no sólo la escritura sino la lectura de un texto de ficción" (p. 42). Sarlo's and Masiello's essays in *Ficción*, when taken together, explain the historical and ideological reasons behind the development of the novelistic strategies associated with the new Argentine narrative.

According to the contributors to *Ficción*, the novel that best exemplifies the new narrative during this period is Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial*.⁸ David William Foster cites it and other works as proof of a national culture within Argentina during these years. Foster finds the novel's merit in its revisionist function as it rewrites official history. Masiello focuses on the way Piglia's text captures the nature of the discursive struggles among those on the margins of society. According to Morello-Frosch, Piglia makes literature itself a form of oral and written biography and therefore a form of historical hermeneutics, given that the past may be articulated only in narrating the lives of others (p. 66). Thus literary activity is returned to the public sphere from which it, as well as the subject of the biography, had been excluded. Sarlo finds in Piglia's

Respiración artificial the notion that history is the possibility of narrating failures and the story of the defeated, both of which help historians escape the nightmare of the present (p. 48). Piglia's story of what has been repressed in Argentine literature develops the thematics of Argentina's cultural ideologies and national identity (p. 49). Finally, Halperin analyzes this text as a watershed in the fictionalization of history.

Although all six essays in *Ficción* discuss the importance of national history in the literature of this period, Halperin's essay best analyzes how a new type of historical fiction is currently emerging. He traces the ways in which terror has modified the interpretation of national history at three different points of time. The "old consensus" or official history was the conception held by those who believed in an Argentine manifest destiny of economic expansion. According to this perspective, dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas embodied everything evil that prevented Argentina from emerging as a major power. With the economic downturn in 1930 and the ensuing era of institutional instability, however, a revisionist history began to surface that no longer blamed Rosas for the violence of national conflicts, reserving the "papel demoníaco" for the founding fathers. This version of history maintained the Manichaean interpretation of social interaction, according to which only one group was responsible for the nation's ills. The recent onslaught of terror has given rise to a third historical construct in which violence is neither a necessary constant of Argentine destiny nor a totally foreign element that erupts into an otherwise harmonious totality. Rather, violence is now seen as a new and disconcerting element each time it is experienced by its victims, witnesses, and perpetrators. Such a vision of history denies a determinist representation of Argentine reality and breaks the Manichaean contract that has bound Argentina to its turbulent past. Halperin's essay coincides with the other five in *Ficción y política* in recognizing the power that those operating on the margin can appropriate from the dominant culture to confront authoritarian discourse. The reader of these essays comes away with the impression that the "narrative and criticism written during these years were oriented toward one problem: how to permit the voices of otherness to define the terms of national culture" (Masiello, p. 27, translated by Lehman). Thus the "critical totalizations" introduced in *Ficción y política* to explore these voices of otherness are coherent and intellectually stimulating. To this degree, they achieve the goals projected by the editors in the preface.

Comparing these two volumes of essays immediately suggests areas for further investigation. Several important considerations have been overlooked in the collections because of the divergence in critical perspectives. While *Represión* leaves the reader perplexed at the diversity of what seem to be mutually exclusive interpretations of the period, *Ficción* presents a set of analytical strategies that smooth over those

disturbing differences. The contributors to *Ficción*, despite their insistence on the plurality and heterogeneity of the voices from the margin, do not address the debates going on within the marginal space itself, especially those involving exile and a “divided” literature. They imply that despite textual diversity and contradictions, the authors of those works form a united front against a common, monolithic enemy. *Ficción*, much more than *Represión*, is entrenched in the current trend in literary studies that focuses exclusively on the text as a collective and anonymous construct rather than as an “interpretation” by a human author. Conversely, the reader of *Represión* recognizes that even if the text were jointly attacking a “unified subject” and naive “realism,” the authors of those texts were less disposed toward working together to oppose a common enemy. *Represión* never allows the reader to forget that individuals who face repression find it as difficult to comprehend the voices of their allies as it is to struggle against those in positions of power.

One consequence of this difference in approach is that the theme of exile and the issues posed by a “divided literature,” which pervade *Represión*, are ignored by the authors of *Ficción*. *Represión* reconstructs the debate over individual decisions to continue writing from within Argentina or to be exiled and rendered incapable of influencing the internal workings of the cultural apparatus except from afar. *Ficción*, in contrast, offers no theoretical analysis of the production of the period in terms of the consequences of exile. Works created in exile will by their nature establish a different discursive relationship to the regime from that maintained by works produced within the country. One wonders how separation from the immediate exigencies of censorship changes the strategies of allusion and elusion so important to the authors of *Ficción*.

Although both collections view Argentine cultural production during this period from a variety of perspectives, it is surprising that neither volume addresses the issue of whether other groups traditionally recognized as marginalized from the socioliterary canon participated in the opposition to the regime. Apart from Foster's essay in *Ficción*, one finds little discussion of what women writers were producing during this period. Nor do these contributors mention writers from the interior, who have been excluded from mainstream literary studies and often differ markedly from those in Buenos Aires. Such exclusion begs the question of what characterizes the distinction between marginal and nonmarginal aspects of society. Because these collections critically acclaim the creative and ideological freedom that marginality affords, one tends to assume that the works they define as apolitical or not opposing the status quo in the way they recognize should be ignored or discredited.

Notwithstanding these omissions, *Ficción* and *Represión* together provide powerful tools for studying the way in which key events in the national memory are subject to widely divergent interpretations. They

sample the various strategies that can release Argentine history from the monumentalism of its one-dimensional readings (that is, to ally with either Rosas or Sarmiento) and allow it to become a discursive space of competing interpretations. In their theoretical and anecdotal analyses of the discourses produced during the recent dictatorship, these collections do not yet offer a definitive picture of Argentine cultural production during the *Proceso*, and most certainly, the questions they leave untouched will prove significant in studying culture and repression. But these two volumes do offer for public debate a number of important issues relevant to a comparative study of the nature of cultural survival during a period of violent repression.

NOTES

1. The military junta under General Jorge Rafael Videla, which overthrew the government of Isabel Perón on 24 March 1976, planned a total transformation of Argentine society to be called the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, a name historically associated with the generation of 1837. "Proceso" came to be used as a shorthand reference to the free-market economic policies instituted by José Martínez de Hoz, the finance minister whose unprecedented five-year tenure became a symbol of the entire era of the dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. See Juan E. Corradi, *The Fitful Republic* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1985).
2. The conference from which the essays in *Represión* originated, which bore the same name as the book, took place in December 1984 at the University of Maryland; the collection was published in 1988. The studies prepared for *Ficción* were presented at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in March of 1986 and were published in 1987. A follow-up to the Maryland conference, entitled "Argentina: represión y reconstrucción de la cultura; segunda parte," was held in Buenos Aires in August of 1986. As of July 1989, this group of contributions has not been published.
3. Luis Gregorich, "La literatura dividida," *Clarín*, 29 Jan. 1981.
4. Julio Cortázar, "América Latina: exilio y literatura," *Eco* no. 205 (Nov. 1978).
5. Liliana Heker, *El Ornitorrinco*, no. 7 (Jan.-Feb. 1980).
6. Sarlo here cites Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
7. Here Balderston quotes Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952).
8. Ricardo Piglia, *Respiración artificial* (Buenos Aires: Pomaire, 1980).