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THE DISCOURSES OF ARGENTINIAN LITERARY CRITICISM AND FRENCH LITERARY THEORY (1953-1978)¹

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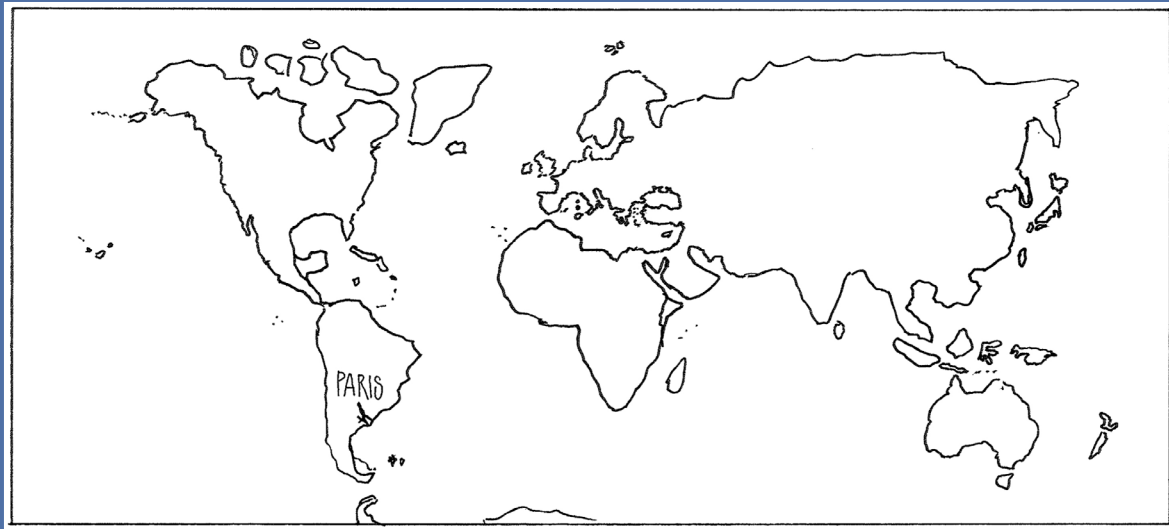
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Abstract || Post-World War II French critical theory was a key pivot-point in the renovation of Hispanic American literary thought during the 1960s and 1970s. Starting from a text by Nicolás Rosa and Foucault's concept of discourse, the article addresses the reception of said theory in Argentina, both in its political and epistemological dimensions, with a particular emphasis on the critical uses of that tradition, and the collective nature of the problematization of literature in relation to other practices and discourses.

Keywords || Literary Theory | Argentinian Criticism | Intellectual History | Nicolás Rosa | Structuralism

Modern discourses verge on the limits of the thinkable. Perhaps this liminality is the source of the traditional resistance against the recognition of their breadth and strength. When Michel Foucault planned to write, in *Les mots et les choses* (1966), a history of knowledge that would rupture with the old history of ideas, he had to take recourse in the concept of *discontinuity* to point out the internal workings of the *epistemes* that his book described. Now, a quick reading could create the impression that, in his archaeological description, different orders of intelligibility follow each other across history as if by magic; whereas at another level of analysis, discourses, which establish the limits of the thinkable, overlap in the present as geological strata, and are sustained and transformed in their usage. But Foucault had renounced conceiving of change from the perspective of continuity—as was the usually the case then as regards the history of mentalities, the evolution of science, or the turns of tradition—and resisted introducing into his study any totalizing idea which, transcending its subject, could provide continuity to a the very history that he attempted to unpack. His book seemed to observe culture with the eyes of the person who analyzes a fossil; by doing so, the *epistemes* he referred to might appear as the secret vault of history when, in truth, his work described a few slices in the historical development of a new object of knowledge: the discourse.

Even Foucault would react very soon to this problem, pointing out (for example in *L'archéologie du savoir*, 1969) the practical nature of discourse. The acknowledgement of the existence of discursive practices allowed for the reconnecting of discourses with the rest of social practices and mechanisms, while keeping it undiluted, making the study of discursive practices—as acts—possible, in their different contexts of production.

Now, what are the relationships that literary criticism established with what Foucault named as “discourses”? Established in a border position where different force fields meet and crisscross, while they fight for hegemony, the strength of literary criticism is intimately connected with its lack of authority. In modern times, criticism obtains its authority by delegation; at the same time, this radical illegitimacy affords an intimate relationship with literature which, as Alberto Giordano wrote, activates “un conocimiento dispuesto a perderse antes de perder el deseo de lo extraño que esa experiencia le transmitió en su origen” (1999: 12-13).

In this essay I propose a couple of complementary exercises: firstly, to note the relationship of an area of Argentinian literary criticism with its own discourse; and secondly, and via that first problematization, to sketch the historical panorama of Argentinian literary criticism and pinpoint its transformations, since the founding of the magazine *Contorno* in 1953 to the apparition of *Punto de vista* in 1978, in relation

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1 | This article is the result of a research stay at the Centro de Estudios de Teoría y Crítica Literaria in Universidad Nacional de Rosario, between June and August 2013, under the guidance of Adriana Astutti. Thanks to Adriana Astutti, Nora Catelli, Miguel Dalmaroni, José Luis de Diego, Germán García, Alberto Giordano, María Teresa Gramuglio, Noé Jitrik, Jorge Lafforgue, Judith Podlubne, Roberto Retamoso, Juan B. Ritvo, Oscar Traversa, Vicenç Tuset and Miguel Vitagliano, for their interviews, their generosity in answering my questions, and all their support for this research.

to French literary thought. This chronological section, marked by strictly literary phenomena (*Litera*—widely known nowadays following its reediting in facsimile in 2011 but barely read in its time—published its last issue in 1977) will make visible the discourses (that is, the spaces of intelligibility that define the possibilities and limits of what is thinkable in a given enunciative situation), their transformations, and the discursive task conducted by certain groups, journals and authors, which contributed to their displacement.

The history of the reception of French critical thought in the different Hispanic-American fields after World War II has not been written, and moreover, has yet to be read in relation to its specific concordances and divergences. Far from discovering a mechanical process of influence, it is possible to detect in its three main areas (Spain, Mexico and Argentina) a whole series of appropriations, interpretations and modulations with respect to their own traditions, which radically transform the polemics in their original context. The specific tension produced between the original field and the reception field involves, among other facts, the fact that the theoretical debates and epistemological polemics of the French field will be largely ignored in the reception fields. Bearing in mind these problems, this article aims to be a contribution to an intellectual history of literary criticism, which cannot ignore the question of the international circulation of discourses, and with it, its uses and appropriations. The theory of literature that started to inform the discourse of criticism a few decades ago was received, to a great extent and with few exceptions, from its French irradiation. As authors like Emil Volek have critically noted, the reading of Russian formalism and Prague structuralism has been filtered by the French reception and uses of these traditions,² to the point that it is possible to say that literary theory, and afterwards, theory as discourse, emerged in France at some moment in the 70s around the strong core of structuralism.³ As we belong to that history, and some of our contemporary critical modes stemmed from that crisis, this study can offer us tools to think about some of the challenges and blind spots of our present.

1. The discourses of criticism

Would it be possible to draw the map, or even its main contours, of Argentinian criticism of the period? In 1981, in a key moment, one of the starring characters in its renovation, Nicolás Rosa sketched a general map of Argentinian literary criticism from 1940 and his present-day in about 30 lines. His narrative included “una ruptura fundamental” of the critical discourse—which the author located, nonetheless, with a political event: the fall of Peron in 1955—: the fundamental break opened by sociological criticism (either Marxist or

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2 | Thus, Volek—highly critical with Jakobson’s reading and transmission of this tradition—translated from the original some texts of the Russian formalists and Bhakhtin’s circle for a Spanish readership, without the French mediation (and mistakes). Volek, in his introduction to the volume, writes: “Semejante a los años veinte, los sesenta fueron un período de fermentación febril: aparecían movimientos, contra y post-movimientos, en una rápida sucesión. Estos movimientos por su parte canibalizaron en gran medida las manifestaciones vanguardistas, formalistas y postformalistas de los años veinte” (1992: 17).

3 | For a corroborated history of this problem, see Milner (2008).

Sartrean) in the heart of positivist historicism as well as in stylistics. Since that moment, this discourse would oscillate “entre dos posturas, el método sociológico y el inmanentisco estético”, which according to Rosa, was only destabilized “por la brusca renovación del psicoanálisis” (1987a: 81-82), which introduced a third path for the problematization of literature. In barely fifteen pages, the author aimed to establish the limits of the critical discourse of a whole period; these limits would constitute—as Roland Barthes desired—what was intelligible in a certain time.⁴ Rosa was adamant with respect to the appropriateness of building this map of criticism—which included critical texts from the time⁵—through which it was possible to begin to question the specific ways they were combined: “Estos puntos extremos y las propuestas más coherentes y homogéneas que se encuentran entre ambos, forman el panorama de la crítica literaria contemporánea desde 1940 hasta la actualidad” (Rosa, 1987a: 81-82).

Is it possible to reduce the inventiveness of criticism to the spaces enclosed by these “puntos extremos” and their specific combinations? The interstice opened by the psychoanalytic renovation—which thus appeared as the vanguard of criticism—tended, however, to occlude, in Rosa’s panoramic view, one discourse that was notably absent: where does structuralism fit, then, in this distribution of discourses? It was restricted to a variety of “una estilística formalista y dessemantizada” (81) which in some exceptional cases, as in Ana María Barrenechea’s,⁶ “acaba en una valiosa integración de los análisis propuestos por la semiología literaria y sobre todo por la lingüística textual” (Rosa, 1987a: 83). The reason for this is the particular academic reception of structuralism in Argentina, where—as was the case in Spain—it first appeared filtered through stylistics.⁷ According to Vicenç Tuset’s reading, “el efecto obturador de esa apropiación habría retrasado los desarrollos del estructuralismo” (Tuset, 2012: n.p.; 2013). This stylistic reading, which assimilates structuralism to a sort of taxonomy, does not acknowledge that what distinguished structuralism from the old positivism, was its establishing an epistemological break with the classical opposition between human and natural sciences.⁸ This epistemological argument—and the consequences that stemmed from it—became visible since 1969 with the founding of the journal *Los libros* and the publication of articles and critical reviews such as José Sazbón’s (who in 1976 published *Saussure y los fundamentos de la lingüística*, a selection of texts by Saussure with a new preliminary essay which tries to put forward for reflection the difference that the stylistic reading had omitted [Tuset, 2012]). In fact, it is worth noting that Rosa as an author—along with Noé Jitrik, Oscar Masotta or Josefina Ludmer, to cite just a few⁹—and *Los libros* as a space were, in those years, among the main agents of the aforementioned discursive transformation.

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4 | “La critique n’est pas un ‘hommage’ à la vérité du passé, ou à la vérité de ‘l’autre’, elle est construction de l’intelligible de notre temps” (Barthes, 1963: 507).

5 | Rosa’s text was originally an introduction to volumes 113 and 114 of the series *Capítulo*, devoted to Argentinian criticism.

6 | Ana Barrenechea was educated at the Philology Institute in Universidad de Buenos Aires under Amado Alonso and Raimundo Lida. Answering to Sarlo and Altamirano’s survey from 1981, Barrenechea writes: “Amado Alonso nos introdujo en los métodos de la estilística según la escuela alemana, replanteados por su capacidad creadora y sin los excesos psicologistas que por momentos afectaron a Spitzer. También nos formó en su concepto del lenguaje que atendía a la noción de sistema, base del estructuralismo posterior” (Num. 129: 46). In 1957 Barrenechea published *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Borges* (México, El Colegio de México). After Adolfo Prieto’s disproving book (*Borges y la nueva generación*, Buenos Aires, Letras Universitarias, 1954), Barrenechea opened the possibility to appreciate at the level of his writing. Now, as Rosa states, her reading of Borges “termina por convertirse en una pura taxonomía clasificatoria a la manera de la retórica clásica” and “esta taxonomía de las formas (análisis de los procedimientos de estilo) y de los contenidos (los temas) mantiene en última instancia la distinción forma-fondo dualista, sustancialista, psicologista” (1987b: 270).

7 | Amado Alonso’s translation of *Cours de linguistique générale* by Saussure (Buenos Aires, Losada, 1945), and his

In spite of this caveat—and bearing in mind the preciseness of his arguments and the vindication of psychoanalysis as the vanguard of theoretical renovation at the very moment when *Punto de vista* was openly diverging from these proposals—these lines allow us to *reconstruct the limits of the discourse of a period*. To think about literature in Argentina between 1940 and 1980 was—and we are referring to the hegemonic discourses of the period—to think in terms of a self-sufficient immanence or a determining transcendence; facing these, and in an emergent state, “formas más nuevas pero todavía no suficientemente compactadas” (1987a: 82) were tentatively sprouting, trying to communicate the inside and outside of the text, two dimensions that demanded thought but which resisted a simultaneous consideration. The very historicization of this problem already places Rosa in a third, still undetermined space—in which he includes himself along with Josefina Ludmer, Jorge Rivera y Beatriz Sarlo—with respect the two positions.

This situation allows us to understand the passion that courses by Rosa at the Universidad Nacional de Rosario could generate, in the early 1970s, in a twenty-year old Roberto Retamoso:

Las tradiciones más importantes de la teoría literaria tenían que ver con el campo de la lingüística y la inmanencia del análisis textual o con la perspectiva de la crítica sociológica, de espíritu marxista, que tenía que ver con los abordajes contextuales, y que de algún modo llevaba a perder de vista la especificidad del texto. Entonces, Nicolás [Rosa] nos dio acceso a Kristeva, y al posestructuralismo en general, lo que representaba una perspectiva teórica que permitía vincular esas dos tradiciones. Visto esto epocalmente, fue muy impactante para nuestra generación: para nosotros fue algo próximo a una “revelación”.¹⁰

In the next pages we will try to note some of the paths and moments along which the gap which resulted in such problematic communication between the inside and the outside of a text was forged. This interstice, which Rosa attributes to psychoanalysis, was already sketched in his own works from the early seventies, or in a book like *Cien años de soledad, una interpretación* (1972), by Josefina Ludmer, in which, while influenced by psychoanalysis, “no puede ser definido como crítica psicoanalítica” (1987a: 70), as Rosa acknowledges. What it is at stake in these writings is a literary renovation, and to the role attributed to literature in the articulation or interrelation between its subject and the social body. Only when a specific productivity of writing was revealed, by means of categories such as “labor” or “production”, was it possible to affirm that the mistake of *Contorno* “no provenía de una concepción errónea de lo político sino de la ausencia de una concepción de lo literario” (Rosa, 2003a: 47). As there was no theory of the sign—even readings of Sausurre reproduced a pre-Sausurrean theory of language, and in this sense, pre-Heideggerian—it was impossible to claim the political

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prologue have been seen, in this sense, as a “una maniobra de asimilación, desactivación de lo que el *Cours* pudiera tener de renovador” (Tuset, 2010: 2).

8 | José Luis Pardo has described this transformation succinctly and precisely (2001).

9 | Rosa, with his well-known haughtiness, is cited in third person in page 89, where he refers with—ancient-distant—study of David Viñas, published in 1970 in *Crítica y significación* as “el primer texto de la nueva crítica que inaugura coherentemente una metodología innovadora”.

10 | Personal interview (Rosario, Monday, July 15 2013). See also Retamoso (2007).

value of writing beyond its instrumental character, as a *medium* that served an external, anterior finality. The dichotomy turned rapidly into an aporia: “Sólo caben dos opciones: o se reniega del signo, que en una perspectiva revolucionaria puede ‘significar’ política pero no ‘hacerla’, o se lo somete a una precisa actividad transformadora para dotarlo de una operatividad por fuera de su propio alcance que lo convierta en ‘otra cosa’” (48). The journal *Contorno* thus opposed the ideas of *Sur*, just at the moment when the Sartrean theory of commitment—which was justified by the essential transitivity of language as means of expression, communication and revelation (*prose*) and by its deviation from a non-significant *poetry*—¹¹ opposed a depoliticized view of art such as could be found in Paul Valéry or the NRF previous to World War II. Both in France as well as Argentina, this opposition established a field in which—as is often the case with oppositions—it was possible to find a common articulation, hinge or problematization, revealing that they belong to a same discursive space.

1.1. The statute of criticism, theoretical dependences and the problem of mediation

En la conmocionada vida política que vivimos los argentinos desde hace algunas décadas plantearse problemas relativos a esa actividad más o menos mendicante que se denomina “crítica literaria” puede parecer extraño, evasivo o, por lo menos, arrogante. La política, en sus formas menos conversadas —por decirlo así—, llena el espacio mental, emotivo y aterrado de muchos argentinos, si no de todos, que contemplan cómo viejas y quizás desgastadas formas de la relación social se vienen abajo con un estrépito de clavos que cierran para siempre más de un féretro.
(Noé Jitrik, 1975: 8)

Practicing criticism in the period was highly sensitive. Literary criticism, in an intellectual field violently shaken by political imperatives, often had to become activist or ask for forgiveness, as Jitrik’s quote exemplifies. To understand the critical interventions of the time in their specificity, the aforementioned epistemological problems need to be complemented by attention to politics. In the sixties and especially in the seventies, the Argentinean intellectual field would become absorbed by a wave of politicization that tended to limit—if not abolish—its autonomy. Juan Luis de Diego’s conclusions, in reference to writers, are also valid for the practice of criticism of the time:

Un escritor no necesariamente es un intelectual, un intelectual no necesariamente es un político, un político no necesariamente es un revolucionario. Si llegó a haber una simbiosis entre el primero y el último de los términos de la serie es porque los setentas se caracterizaron precisamente por una supresión casi total de las mediaciones entre el campo literario y el campo político. (2001: 25)

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11 | Jean-Paul Sartre expanded on these reflections in “Qu’est-ce qu’écrire?”, the first chapter of *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1948).

Such a comparison, so often crowned by the stereotype of dependence, constituted a difficult obstacle for the most politicized spectrum of the field opposed to theoretical renovation. In this sense, as Jorge Panesi, has noted, the Argentinean intellectual field was dominated, from the late seventies until 1974 (1985: 171) by a discourse that considered cultural colonialism—the ideological weaponry of imperialism—as an invisible enemy aimed at impregnating bodies in order to perpetuate economic dependence. Used by Peronism and nationalism to reject the adoption of foreign-sounding models and modes of thinking,¹² the discourse of dependence would work as a slogan for the subordination of the diversity of social practices to a political imperative, which would unify and erase these differences. Even in *Los libros*, one of the main actors in the renovation of criticism, there was an important populist group that managed to prevail, starting in 1973 with issue 29, when the founder of the journal, Héctor Schmucler, abandoned the Board of Directors from then on would be comprised by Beatriz Sarlo, Ricardo Piglia and Carlos Altamirano. Germán García would also abandon the journal at that moment to found *Literal*, a publication which—at the apex of the politicization of the field—probably posited the most explicit critique to the political imperative, in texts like “No matar la palabra, no dejarse matar por ella” or “El matrimonio entre la utopía y el poder” (num.1, November 1973).¹³

The problematics of dependence, and the revolutionary discourse it often invokes, succeed by referencing the real and the people—its epiphany—which, as Miguel Dalmaroni reminds us, populism understands as “one y bueno” (2004: 37). Intellectuals—and the true writer in its *Literal* version—would be the one who goes astray, separating herself from the people and need, and becoming suspicious. This device aimed to largely eliminate social mediation in the name of a totalizing principle and a revolutionary imperative. And in that context, the critic—as mediator—became suspicious, if not totally dispensable.

In questioning the relationships of Argentinean critical thinking of the period with its *otherness*; in looking for the link between Argentinean literary criticism and French literary theory, to what extent and under what conditions would it be appropriate to talk about “dependence”? From that context, Rosa himself engaged with the issue and problematize it: “Si la dependencia cultural consiste en una transcripción de códigos culturales, esa copia nunca es directa y se produce como una relación discontinua entre el Modelo y su Copia donde aparecen variables y modificaciones en las dimensiones pertinentes” (2003b: 74). Thus, Rosa proposed a methodological principle, consisting in the negation of the exclusive preeminence of the *source* for the study of the specificity of *uses* and *appropriations*. This way, it would be a question of forfeiting a mechanical understanding

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12 | An example of this attitude is Eduardo Romano's argument against Noé Jitrik's first works, in which—because he cited Maurice Blanchot in some sections, an author totally unknown in Argentina—he perceives “criterio de confrontación del producto nacional con el modelo extranjero regulador” that “se verificaba al mismo tiempo que los sectores oligárquicos resumían, después de la caída de Perón, el esquema tradicional de nuestra economía agropecuaria exportadora de materias primeras e importadora de productos manufacturados; en términos culturales, exportadora del *ser* nacional e importadora del *deber ser* universal falsamente unificador” (Romano, 1972: 16). As this excerpt shows, this idea is based on position an almost mechanical relationship between culture and economics, in which foreign thought is identified in most cases with ideological colonialism.

13 | The first text reads: “La literatura insiste en el lenguaje, en la *mediación* que la palabra instituye, afirmando la imposibilidad de lo real” (VV. AA., 2011: 6); “para cuestionar la realidad *en un texto* hay que empezar por eliminar la pre-potencia del referente, condición indispensable para que la potencia de la palabra se despliegue” (7); “una cierta *distancia de la letra siempre será recomendable*” (10). Or this accusation in the second text: “Si una determinada concentración de poder está en condiciones de inscribir en el presente una utopía cívico-cuartelera, meramente restitutiva de un ayer tan imaginario como la ‘potencia’ que se proyecta en el futuro, es porque los mismos grupos que podrían oponerse al proyecto se han mutilado con el cuento de la realidad, la eficacia y la táctica” (44).

of these relationships and asking ourselves instead about the uses of these discourses and how they have been transformed in the new context. This change of perspective, that frees us from knowing the autonomous working of these cultural codes in their original context, implies a displacement of the focus on the study of objects, as it is “en la copia donde debemos leer las propiedades del modelo para verificar sus variaciones y su inscripción ideológica” (74)¹⁴.

The type of analysis proposed by Rosa consists, then, in studying the “copy” for what it is, while it is linked to a “beyond” that acts as model. He would conduct this study in the journal *Sur*, where he maintains—categorically—that “representa en la historia de la literatura argentina una reposición ahistórica de las tendencias iluministas en cuanto se valora la Cultura como medio de la ‘ilustración’ y se reconoce en el Espíritu la réplica de la Razón” (2003b: 75). Rosa’s move, then, involves a discursive analysis which nonetheless places discourse in relation with something that exceeds it, and in relation to which it obtains its specific value. This dimension, in which texts reveal their multiplicity, is what can be called—in a specific sense, constituted a priori to this third critical discourse—history¹⁵. In the seventies we see the emergence in Argentina, both from semiotics and psychoanalysis, of the suggestion of “la necesidad de un camino que *parta del mensaje* (y no de una presuposición sobre el código) para conocer cualquier rasgo de la organización significativa del discurso. Ese *partir del gesto* —del significante siempre inicialmente resistente y opaco, a trabajar desde la teoría—” (Steimberg, 1999: 77), will be the element shared by the analysis of the “discourse of the subject” (semiotics) and “the subject of discourse” (psychoanalysis), which opened a breach in the traditional critical approaches. In the new critical discourse, history would manifest as excess in critical texts. Rosa himself would illustrate this idea in the nineties, affirming that “todo texto no se define por su lectura sino por su ilegibilidad, por su resistencia a ser leído” (1992: 83).

1.2. Critical uses of theory

Este discurso de bárbaros y civilizados, de padres y de madres, de ascendencias y descendencias, de hijos y entenados, de mestizos, cuarterones y bastardos, este delirio de filiaciones y atribuciones es también un fantasma compartido entre la literatura y la crítica latinoamericanas (Rosa, 1992b: 27)

If we refuse to talk about dependence, and yet, we insist on imagining discourses in relation to the “beyond” that is their original context, the concept of “uses” can be helpful, to understand, for instance, the alleged “eclecticism” of *Contorno*. Horacio Crespo, refuting this “derogatory” description, points that such a move is only possible if one ignores “los mecanismos de apropiación por parte de la intelectualidad latinoamericana de las elaboraciones teóricas efectuadas en los países centrales” (Crespo, 1999: 430). Argentinian

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14 | This question reappears in many writings of the period. If Rosa’s perspective is purely discursive, Eliseo Verón, in 1973, will ask, from a sociological perspective, about the social and international circulation of discourses (and, in his case, of structuralism). To do so he will start from a realization: the available theories do not allow having a clear and broad idea of these relationships. The notions of *influence* and *diffusion* are not enough to realize these processes because “esta difusión no se produce de manera uniforme, como una transferencia lineal de una cultura a otra. Así entendida, la noción misma de ‘difusión’ es engañosa y de hecho un tal proceso de difusión no existe” (Verón, 1974: 97-98).

15 | This image of history, having renounced the will of totalization, would be very different from the one from the nineteenth century: “El estudio de la historiografía del siglo pasado era el intento monumental de escribir toda la historia del mundo, o por lo menos de Occidente y del Cercano Oriente. Recuerdo mis lecturas adolescentes de Henri Seignobos o de Philippe Laurent, y más contemporáneamente la de Leopold von Ranke. Estos intentos tienen su reflejo en la literatura desde Honoré de Balzac, Romain Rolland, hasta *En busca del tiempo perdido* de Marcel Proust. Las historias comparatistas sólo son un reflejo no necesariamente causal de la filología comparada. Reunir a los especialistas más destacados dentro de una serie que intentaba la completada” (Rosa, 1999: 16).

intellectual history cannot be understood without the specific game that, while situating it in the center, projects it phantasmatically to the periphery; and the uses of theory in Argentina would be especially productive (that is, transformative). That is what allows him to say to Susana Cella, while writing about a Jitrik text from the sixties, that “la adopción del término ‘escritura’ con la remisión a Barthes no significa ‘aplicación’ de una teoría, significa nombrar una referencia que induce a teorizar” (Cella, 1999: 53). This is something evident in works by Masotta o Rosa, who practice a constant rewriting of their referents. Masotta does so privileging the biographical register in a way that it becomes polemical; Rosa, by means of a theoretical movement that starts from “models” and groups and reconstructs them in a creative way, becoming self-reflective while separating from them at the very moment that he activates them. As Cella notes somewhere else, it is possible to discern in Rosa’s works a resistance to a simply instrumental use of theory, a “negativa, constante en su práctica crítica, a todo aquello que pueda estar vinculado con la ‘aplicación’ de tal o cual teoría a los textos literarios” (Cella, 1997: 13).

Among this sector of criticism there is a central dimension worth noting: their relationship with their literary tradition and their corresponding will for intellectual intervention. The consciousness of the specificity of their situation—which in Masotta becomes the thematization of the social determination of the subject of enunciation—will be a central topic in Rosa’s writing:

Si es posible importar saberes técnicos sobre los que apoyar la reflexión teórica, es imposible generar un discurso crítico fuera del entramado social donde se ejerce: la actividad crítica sólo podrá dar cuenta de los fenómenos literarios argentinos o americanos porque son los únicos objetos “adecuados” a esa reflexión, son los únicos que pueden engendrar una transferencia positiva, una reincidencia dialógica suficiente. Somos lectores de lo universal, pero sólo somos escritores de lo particular. (Rosa, 1987c: 12)

Some of Rosa’s disciples and peers, such as Roberto Retamoso and Miguel Vitagliano, continue nowadays to cite this last sentence approvingly and to vindicate this attitude.¹⁶

We can witness this critical relationship and the resulting will of a theoretical intervention in works by Noé Jitrik (who writes about Horacio Quiroga, José Hernández, Julio Cortázar, Estaban Echevarría, Roberto J. Payró, José Luis Borges or Macedonio Fernández), Josefina Ludmer (about Gabriel García Márquez, Ernesto Sábato, Vicente Leñero, Juan Carlos Onetti or Manuel Puig) and Rosa.

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16 | Roberto Retamoso: “Yo me identifiqué plenamente con esos principios que nos transmitió Nicolás: la teoría podía ser universal pero la crítica era siempre una crítica de lo singular; y lo singular, en nuestro caso, era lo argentino. Yo tenía lecturas de autores argentinos y me puse a trabajar mucho sobre los escritores de la primera vanguardia argentina –Borges, Oliverio Girondo, sobre el que hice mi tesis de doctorado–. Así, leía mucho a escritores argentinos y latinoamericanos, como César Vallejo; particularmente, los poetas de la vanguardia” (personal interview, Rosario, Monday, July 15 2013). Miguel Vitagliano, referring to his years of collaboration with Rosa: “Trabajábamos siempre con una de las frases de Nicolás, una idea que yo sigo planteando a mis alumnos: ‘Somos lectores de lo universal, pero escritores de lo particular’. Nosotros siempre trabajábamos con literatura argentina. Dábamos nuestras vueltas, pero siempre volvíamos a la literatura argentina” (personal interview, Buenos Aires, August 2013).

2. Literary theory in Argentina

*À mesure que l'auteur atteint un public plus étendu,
il le touche moins profondément.* (Sartre, 1948: 294)

The transformation of that *writing of the particular* of Argentinean criticism will be connected to a great extent, and starting in the second half of the seventies, with literary theory, accessed fundamentally by means of post-war French critical thinking that turns Argentinean critics into *readers of the universal*. The referents—diffused through books, journals, and *new magazines*—are evident; the question is, then, to which *uses* will Argentinean criticism put them to work.

Sartrean commitment and structuralism, which in post-war France revolutionized the criticism of writers (with Jacques Rivière's *Nouvelle revue française* and Jean Pulhan) as well as academic criticism (ruled by the uses and habits of 19th century philology), will be the engines of the transformation of literary criticism in Argentina and of the very idea of literature. Critics such as David Viñas, Adolfo Prieto, Oscar Masotta, Noé Jitrik, Nicolás Rosa or Josefina Ludmer parted ways, in different waves, with the discursive space of *Sur*—a space that otherwise represented many structural similarities with *Nouvelle revue française*—to include, via new journals like *Contorno* (1953-1959), *Los libros* (1969-1976) y *Literal* (1973-1977), a new conception of literature, one intimately linked, and yet not equivalent, to politics. Readings and translations of Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes were fundamental in this displacement, and in a second moment, those of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and the group *Tel quel*.

In what follows we will compare the problems affecting criticism in France and in Argentina by means of the two main axes of our study: the epistemological one and the political one. This itinerary will allow us to see some of the specificities of the Argentinian literary theory and criticism of the period, and to note some critical displacements and transformations in the international circulation of discourses.

2.1. The epistemological problem: between phenomenology and structuralism

We should start establishing an initial general fact: what in France—in a context of renovation in the academia that entailed the promotion of human sciences—was experienced as an inescapable epistemological conflict, demanding a theoretical resolution of one sort or the other, arrived in Argentina mainly as a dispersed series of complementary approaches all of which pointed to the renovation of criticism. In the early fifties in France, one could only read Lévi-Strauss in *Les temps modernes* on the condition to ignore the radicalism of

his proposal. When Sartre was forced to read the anthropologist's work in his own terms, a real dispute erupted, because the concepts, transported from one discourse to the other, change meaning, and become truly *theoretical monsters*, combining—and quite freely—elements from different systems to engender a new unity. If we consider that any monster has a discursive dimension, we might ask where did the monstrosity reside, whether in the object itself or in the reflection that a discursive configuration caused in the eyes of the observers.

The functioning, on both sides of the Atlantic, of the theoretical discourses—and specifically of “structuralism”—with respect to the problem of foundations and epistemological assumptions, can be summarized in two episodes. The first involves Lévi-Strauss, who in 1963 will still maintain the impossibility of mixing structuralism and phenomenology as Paul Ricœur would recurrently propose, trying to turn structuralism in an instrument that would become meaningful in the framework of a phenomenological theory.¹⁷ Lévi-Strauss emphatically opposed such assimilation, and in an interview for the magazine *Esprit*, he answered a question by Ricœur as follows:

Ce que vous cherchez —et là je ne pense pas vous trahir parce que vous le dites et même vous le revendiquez—, c'est un *sens du sens*, un sens qui est par derrière le sens; tandis que, dans ma perspective, le sens n'est jamais un phénomène premier: le sens est toujours réductible. Autrement dit, derrière tout sens il y a un non-sens, et le contraire n'est pas vrai. (Lévi-Strauss, 1963 : 637)

This (failed) meeting is but another piece of evidence of the centrality of epistemological debates in France. In contrast, in Argentina a more immediate interest—and with fewer prejudices—for criticism prevailed, with the exception of a few cases, such as Eliseo Varón's, disciple of Lévi-Strauss. In this respect, it is worth noting the following anecdote as told by Noé Jitrik in the context of the 1978 Cérisy Colloquium on Latin-American literature:¹⁸

Participé en el encuentro, en el que decidí hablar de Lezama Lima. Y lo vinculé a Blanchot, a Auerbach y a algunas otras cosas. Cuando hablé, estaba en el público Todorov; y, cuando terminé, levantó la mano y dijo: “No entiendo cómo puede estar citando a tanta gente diversa y opuesta entre sí”. A mí me dejó aterrado. Porque yo, efectivamente, había manejado a gente diversa... Pero lo que creo que no había apercibido era que yo lo que hacía era sacar de ellos lo que necesitaba. Yo dije: “Esto en América Latina es así. Nosotros manejamos una enorme cantidad de cosas disímiles entre sí, pero no entramos en esa polémica”.¹⁹

In France, epistemological discussions would be quite intense from the outset, even when Simone de Beauvoir's mistaken early reading of Lévi-Strauss as existential in *Les temps modernes* had been clarified;²⁰ in the Argentinean intellectual field of the sixties, more

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17 | After the publication of *La pensée sauvage* by Lévi-Strauss, the journal *Esprit*—a significant title, which gathered a group of hermeneutists and intellectuals close to Christianity—will publish in 1963 a monograph on “La pensée sauvage et le structuralisme” (Num. 322, November 1963). Its objective was to generate a debate on structuralism and a topic “qui devrait dominer pendant longtemps un secteur essentiel de notre époque: celui des sciences de l'homme, de leurs méthodes et de la contribution qu'elles estiment pouvoir apporter à la question posée depuis toujours par les philosophes sur *le sens de la présence humaine dans le monde*” (Ricœur, 1963: 546, my emphasis).

18 | The colloquium sessions were later published later (VV. AA.: 1980).

19 | Personal interview to Noé Jitrik (Buenos Aires, August 2013). The critic adds: “Aquí no estamos afiliados a uno para deshacernos de otro. Estamos en esta circulación, que es la característica típica de transformación respecto a los modelos —digamos mejor informaciones— que nos llegan de otra parte. Eso es lo que creo que hay que percibir: si hay o no hay. Porque efectivamente hay repetidores. La cita es el tobogán para la repetición automática de autoridades. Pero el otro efecto es una transformación de una información que uno recibe, y que le da un carácter de otra índole. Eso marca un poco la peculiaridad de la cultura letrada latinoamericana. / Tenemos el caso de Borges. Decir que Borges imita o está modelado por el pensamiento... ¿de quién? ¿De Hobbes? ¿O de Berkeley, porque lo menciona? ¡Es terrible! En función de eso uno puede decir que esa versión

concerned with political rather than epistemological issues, Sartrean existentialism and Lévi-Strauss' structuralism would coexist without much problem even in the work of one author.

It is possible to illustrate the multiple amalgams of the seventies by looking at texts from the period. Next, we will note, Noé Jitrik's work on method in the early seventies, where "structuralist" methods are grafted onto an idealist perspective and, later, onto works by Oscar Masotta and Nicolás Rosa from the same years. This chronology will allow us to see how, in reality, these transformations were an eminently collective endeavor.

2.2. The "structuralism" of the seventies (Jitrik, Masotta and Rosa)

In an eminently methodological work from 1962, Jitrik tried to isolate the narrative procedures of the novel in order to gain access, through them, the author's consciousness. Thus, his study was based on the premise that "la lectura nos pone ciertamente en contacto con una tesis o un punto de vista que el autor, por mecanismos diversos, voluntarios o casuales, nos ha querido hacer llegar" (Jitrik, 1962: 9). This way, in a theoretical transition that only in the seventies will start to be seen as a problem, he seamlessly passed from the technique to the author. As María Teresa Gramuglio wrote in the same years, "en el universo novelístico hay una técnica, un artificio elegido detrás del cual está el autor, que en su modo de construir la representación del mundo imaginario propone también una forma de entender el mundo real" (Gramuglio, 1967: 15).

At this point, Jitrik was still heir to an idealistic stylistics which he was not opposed to combining with a Sartrean perspective. "Lo trascendente de una novela, lo irreductible, no puede ser calibrado más que por la emoción creadora" (Jitrik, 1962: 139-140). The primacy bestowed on the unspeakable continued to rule an analytical method that considered technique as an instrument. Influenced by a philosophy of consciousness, Jitrik would posit a univocal continuity between consciousness and narrative technique. Thus, he aimed to "buscar en los procedimientos narrativos los puntos de vista, las opiniones y las ideas del autor" (140). And it was in the author's consciousness where a totalizing unity was to be sought. For the critic, the formal description of the work did not suffice ("el análisis de los procedimientos no alcanza a la obra como totalidad ni la toca" [125]) and it needed some sort of *totalization*. Both from the perspective of the writer ("es posible también que para muchas novelas el procedimiento no sea lo decisivo como tampoco siquiera lo más importante") as from that of the critic ("parece admitirse que el estudio del procedimiento narrativo, o sea de las formas del relato, ayuda parcialmente a desentrañar una obra y es tan sólo uno de

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de que Borges es un escritor europeo es falsa. Borges es un típico producto de escritor latinoamericano, en el sentido de una transformación de una información que anda por ahí, que es vastísima y que explica otro tipo de fenómenos".

20 | *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Lévi-Strauss PhD dissertation defended in 1948 and published in 1949, was commented in articles by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Claude Lefort (1951), two writers who, sharing a same doctrine to a large extent, would support to completely different critical judgements: the former, highly favorable; the later, highly negative. That first reception already indicates the central position of Lévi-Strauss' thinking in the post-war French intellectual field, when Simone de Beauvoir—in what constitutes a symptomatic reading "mistake"—could celebrate him as she considered him close to existentialist humanism.

entre los caminos que existen...” [126]), the use and description of the form were considered secondary activities.

The description of these procedures constituted, therefore, an instrument for the elaboration of a phenomenology of literature divided in two parts: writing and reading. Jitrik noted how “el circuito demuestra ser perfecto y capaz de dar justificativos a la existencia de la literatura aunque se componga de dos soledades en cierto modo psicológicas a las que se agrega una tercera, tal vez metafísica, la de la obra misma que está ahí, pura existencia, esperando que el lector venga a ponerla en movimiento y a crearla” (127-128).

Thus, the critic—who refused to separate form and content—nonetheless placed form in a subordinate relationship to consciousness: “El procedimiento narrativo es, efectivamente, una forma pero lo es en un plano estructural, necesario, en el nivel de la conciencia creadora por así decirlo.” The notion of “choice”, which appeared explicitly, made reference to Barthes’ 1953 theory of writing. Such was the “strategy”—if we think that Jitrik’s journey is ruled by his conscious choices—to displace the study of literature towards the “plano de los riesgos sociales” (141). As form, and with it, “los procedimientos narrativos son objetos históricos”, “esta manera de concebir lo formal [...] confirma las posibilidades de un análisis literario que se atreva a encontrar los puntos de contacto que indudablemente existen entre los elementos de la novela, la realidad exterior y los requerimientos tempo-culturales”. From here it was possible to formulate the following statement, critical to the arguments of the critic and his group: “De aquí se llega a la imagen de la obra literaria como un objeto que ocupa un lugar en el mundo de los objetos culturales” (142).

With this book and these explanations, Jitrik aimed to “introducimos en un ámbito o clima que haga lo más concreta posible la tarea de acordar un fenómeno literario con la realidad de la cual procede y sobre la cual quiere actuar” (143). The resulting dialectics of the work with the author and with reality were fundamental in his proposal; and his idea, as the author himself affirmed, “ha sido tomada de trabajos de Maurice Blanchot y Jean-Paul Sartre” (142), two corpus of works which could be combined without much problems at the time.

Masotta’s case is, in this sense, paradigmatic of the easy coexistence of Sartre’s ideas and structuralism in the Argentinean intellectual field of the seventies. In the same period, Rosa would sustain this equation, in *Crítica y significación* (1970), by means of the concept of *signification*, which refers both to the Sartrean social mediation and to the linguistic mediation analyzed by structuralism. Only in 1968, with the publication of Masotta’s *Conciencia y estructura*, the two elements would begin to be considered in terms of a *disjunction* (one

that nonetheless is not yet solved in the fragment of “Roberto Arlt, yo mismo” that appears on the back cover of the first edition of the book.)²¹ Of course, once the two terms are set, it is inevitable that the union between the two finally falls apart.

Masotta and Rosa’s proposals from the seventies could only be maintained by ignoring the differences dividing structuralism and existentialism. A cursory reading of chapter XI of *La pensée sauvage*, published by Lévi-Strauss in 1963 and translated in Mexico in 1964, would make such an arrangement highly problematic. The difference is made explicit in “Marx y Sartre” (pp. 13-14), and article by José Sazbón in the third issue of *Los libros* (September 1969), where Sazbón—who is reviewing two texts by Sartre—establishes that this author has lost the hegemony that was assigned to him in the past: “¿‘Situación’ de la razón dialéctica? ¿No estamos retomando por nuestra cuenta los mismos términos del Sartre del 45, del 60? ¿Y no han sido barridos, acaso, sustituidos por los novísimos conceptos de *lugar* del saber, de *espacio* epistemológico?”. His conclusion is categorical: “El esfuerzo sartreano parece, pues, visto en perspectiva, inútil.” To sustain his judgment, Sazbón relies precisely—without referencing it—on the Lévi-Strauss’ text, cited almost verbatim: “El fin último de las ciencias humanas no es constituir al hombre, sino disolverlo: la empresa de Sartre carecería de sentido” (13).

In this context, and next to Sazbón, Eliseo Verón will be responsible, as a “pure academic”, for delimiting the differences in the same way that Lévi-Strauss would do it in France: their *epistemological* distance with respect to Sartre and humanist existentialism; their *scientific* distance with respect to essay writing and metaphors of Barthes; their distance, again *epistemological*, with respect to Ricœur’s appropriation for a phenomenological hermeneutics. Verón, without avoiding public confrontation, nonetheless places the core of his works primarily in the academic system (Steimberg, 1999: 65) which, as he himself notes, is always threatened by external forces that try to—and more often than not, manage—overcome it.²²

2.3. Two structuralisms: sciences and structural *doxa*

The two hegemonic discourses of literary criticism in the fifties were stylistics and a Marxist-oriented sociology. However, both shared the fact that they stemmed from a philosophy of consciousness. In that context, Sartrean proposals moved between a subject considered within phenomenology, and a historical thinking anchored in Marxism. The “epistemological obstacle”²³ of stylistics, along with the particular political and institutional contexts of Argentina, will mean that structuralism—and those publicly acknowledged as its representatives—arrive with a specific configuration.

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21 | “A la alternativa ¿o conciencia o estructura?, hay que contestar, pienso, optando por la estructura. Pero no es tan fácil, y es preciso al mismo tiempo no rescindir de la conciencia (esto es, del fundamento del acto moral y del compromiso político)” (Masotta, 2010: 238).

22 | Thus, for Verón, the most serious problem of the scientific aspect of structuralism in Argentina was the precariousness of scientific practice, which was either “nula” or “se halla institucionalizada en un grado ínfimo” (Verón, 1974: 102).

23 | In José Sazbón’s expression, inspired by Bachellard, which Sazbón applied to Saussure (Sazbón, 1985: 9).

It is interesting to compare, in this sense, the evaluation of Eliseo Varón and Adolfo Prieto with regards to the reception of structuralism. Verón neatly distinguishes two periods of penetration: from 1959 (when Lévi-Strauss' perspective was included in the final section of Gino Germani's course in Systemic Sociology at Universidad de Buenos Aires, a year before the first Spanish translation of Lévi-Strauss appeared in a *Cuaderno* published by the Instituto de Sociología of the same university [Lévi-Strauss, 1960]) until 1966 (Verón, 1974: 103); and from then, until the moment when he wrote his article (1973). In the first period the reception was strictly academic (and therefore, its readings were controlled); starting in 1966, though, "la influencia del estructuralismo en la Argentina se incorpora a otros mecanismos culturales, en general (con algunas excepciones) fuera de las instituciones oficiales de educación o investigación", in a moment when a large part of the professorship would renounce their university positions. According to Verón, "el momento más intenso de la 'moda' estructuralista puede ubicarse alrededor de 1969," the year when *Primera Plana* published an interview with Lévi-Strauss, who was also featured on the cover (105).²⁴

When Prieto refers to "una apresurada apropiación de los supuestos del estructuralismo" (1989: 23) he alludes to the structuralist *doxa* of the second period, connected with its journalistic diffusion. The rapid transformations of the circuits of cultural communication, the Latin-American *boom* and new periodicals such as the one just mentioned, will make possible that a critic as Noé Jitrik is identified as a structuralist because he had lived in France between 1967 and 1970, and had published, in 1971, *El fuego de la especie*. In an interview in the nineties, Jitrik affirms that, "Cuando volví a la Argentina, me hicieron una patente de estructuralista, que era una patente ilegítima que nunca compré" (1996: 33). And in 1982, in his answer to Sarlo and Altamirano's *Encuesta*:

Siempre fui algo ecléctico; no veía ningún riesgo en leer a Blanchot y a Auerbach casi simultáneamente; algunas entonaciones de este último todavía me resuenan y me ayudan a pensar. Como muchos, me interesó vivamente la eficiencia estructuralista pero creo que ninguno de mis trabajos puede ser inscripto, honestamente, en el estructuralismo, seguramente por deficiencias mías; lo que más me interesó en este movimiento fueron ciertas imágenes de las que yo podía apropiarme y desarrollar por mi cuenta sin sentir que estaba pagando ningún tributo de tipo colonialista o algo similar. (1981: num. 146, 455)

It is sufficient to read his books published in the seventies to see that it could hardly be a proper structuralist someone who in 1962 *still* claimed that "por el camino del examen de los procedimientos de relato elegidos puede llegarse a penetrar la novela como obra literaria a través de uno de sus aspectos, el de las intenciones del autor" (Jitrik, 1962: 138), and who *already* in 1971 published *El fuego*

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24 | The interview was published in *Primera Plana*, year 7, Num. 341, pp. 60-66, 1969.

de la especie, as Eduardo Romano—with certain relief—noted in his review for *Los libros* (Romano, 1972: 16).

Over this lapse, however, it is possible to discern the specific productivity of the Argentinean criticism of the time. And, beyond the effects of trends, the first amalgam of structuralism and phenomenology in literary criticism is understood when we note the function and value of both discourses in the Argentinean intellectual field. These discourses could go hand in hand in a first moment because they opposed both traditional stylistics as well as—in Rosa's expression—a "sociologismo vulgar" (1987a: 81). That is, by the way, what happened in France and for a long time with two discursive formations quite different: the one heir of the writing of Blanchot-Bataille, and the structuralist, together in the front run against the hegemony of existentialism since the fifties. The moment when in Argentina becomes possible to differentiate between Sartre-ism and structuralism will be, no doubt, an important step in the discursive transformation of the field. But if in France, the objective of the non-Sartrean literary criticism was to liberate literature from Sartre's *commitment*, in Argentina, in a first moment, it will involve to free criticism from the immanentism of stylistics.

The difficult reception of Jorge Luis Borges for some part of the Left, and his different posterior rereading can serve to better understand, by means of an especially significant case, some of the transformations of Argentinean criticism. Borges reading will be divided, in a first moment, between an "external", sociologist-bended reading, and an "internal" or stylistic reading. The conception of literature that will become prevalent in France, and the theory that will come out of it, will be fundamental reference points in the transformation of the specific statute of literature in relation to the rest of social practices.

Borges work—pointing out the limits and possibilities of the critical scene—could not be read by leftist critics in the seventies in its literary specificity. The first book devoted to Borges will be Adolfo Prieto's *Borges y la nueva generación* (Buenos Aires, Letras Universitarias, 1954), which offered a highly critical and openly condemnatory. In the name of a commitment reminding of Sartre, in the book (published in the same year when the second issue of *Contorno* paid homage to Roberto Arlt) Borges appeared as the representative of the obsolete world that should be destroyed in the name of *history*. Conversely, Ana María Barranechea will begin to appreciate Borges, three years later, by focusing on his *style* in *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Borges* (México, El Colegio de México, 1957). Now, Borges could not be read and appreciated by the Left until the critics could communicate history and literature in a non-sociological, non-Sartrean way. Noé Jitrik will contribute significantly in this sense with "Estructura y significado en *Ficciones* de Jorge Luis Borges", about

which Nicolás Rosa said that it is the only piece of criticism “que ha puesto los datos en el camino justo eliminando, para elaborar su trabajo, el supuesto contenido metafísico de la obra de Borges” (20). In this precisely article, titled “Borges y la crítica”,²⁵ which we will comment shortly, Rosa will establish the conditions for a critical reading of Borges by the Left that did not renounce the materiality of his writing. Thus, Rosa ends up maintains that “un texto no mantiene ya relaciones de manifestación o reflejo sino que es posible leerlo como una producción social, como un lenguaje particular en donde no habla un sujeto individual sino la combinatoria de un sujeto que se enuncia en las leyes de un sistema” (21). We are in 1972, and something has radically changed in the epistemological horizon; something that makes possible to read a Rightist author without the need to make reference to the real person, and even discover in his writing, against all expectations, a potentially subversive vein.

2.4. The political issue: Sartre, revolution and literary commitment

Politics were, in the Argentina of the sixties, the “región dadora de sentido de las diversas prácticas, incluida por cierto la teórica”, in Óscar Tóran expression (1991: 15). Even when this statement can be nuanced, the appeal of politics (and from a certain point, of *the political*) is a fundamental axis to understand the Argentinean cultural scene, and particularly, the exercise of literary criticism. Both Marxist sociology and Sartre’s theories on the topic of commitment (which started to be elaborated since the 2nd World War and find their culmination in the “Déclaration” that opened *Les temps modernes* (1945) and the publication, first in installments and later as a book, of *Qu’est-ce que la littérature*), were decisive for the politization of literary criticism. There were two major questionings to the Argentinean reception of Sartrean ideas on literature: its dogmatism and its theoretical inconsistency. The charges of dogmatism, basically targeting the Contorno group, involves the relationship with Borges’s works. Borges was for the members of the journal—and especially for Adolfo Prieto, author of *Borges y la nueva generación* (1954)—a paradigmatic case of a playful literature that forgets about mankind and its history. For Prieto—presenting himself as the spokesperson for the Argentinean youth of the time—Borges, as representative of a obsolete generation, “ofrece el caso singularísimo de un gran literato sin literatura; un hombre que pasó treinta años ejercitándose como escritor sin reservarse un poco de tiempo para preguntarse qué es escribir” (Lafforgue, 1999: 70). Thus, relying in a sui generis reading of Sartre, Borges is presented as “espejo al revés donde mirar lo que no se tiene que ser” (74).

The critics have noted the apparent disagreement between what happened in France and Argentina. As Masotta wrote in 1965,

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25 | Published in Num. 26 of *Los libros*, May 1972 [pp. 19-21] and reedited in 1987 in *Los fulgores del simulacro*.

Adolfo Prieto, basándose en Sartre, ha dicho que su poesía no era poesía, que sus ensayos no eran más que hojas o apuntes esporádicos. Todo basándose en Sartre y sugiriendo que el prestigio de Borges reenviaba a la mentalidad estéril de un grupo de exquisitos. Mientras todo ocurría dentro del libro de Prieto, Sartre conocía en Francia la obra de Borges y la hacía publicar en una revista que ha testimoniado lo suficiente sobre su modo de comprender el compromiso para ser tachada de exquisita. (Masotta, 1965: 47)

The case is widely known, and can be summarized with the words of Daniel Link:

Se sabe que exactamente en el mismo momento en que Prieto declaraba la inutilidad de la literatura de Borges, su mentalidad estéril y su estética elitista, Sartre conocía en Francia la obra de Borges y la publicaba en *Les temps modernes*, como una literatura que podía recuperarse desde la izquierda. (Link, 1994: 28)²⁶

Prieto's attitude—the one of the critical leftist generation—supposes an analysis of the limits of Argentinean criticism since the Borges case. Rosa, returning on the issue, interprets as a symptom the Left's inability to read the specificity of Borges writing, and through that limit, evinces “un predominio del voluntarismo crítico que podría ser religado, en una primera instancia, a una concepción populista del fenómeno literario” (Rosa, 1987b: 259). The limits of political criticism are made evident by “la imposibilidad de la crítica autotitulada de izquierda para describir el funcionamiento de una obra que aparece como ‘extraña’ a nuestra historia cultural, la realidad de sus posibles significados y la posibilidad de ubicarla dentro de sus verdaderos parámetros”. But he also confirms that “la crítica de la izquierda nacional, de gran valor político [...], como trabajo crítico no opera una verdadera ruptura” (260). The sociology of literature of the members of *Contorno* comes at the cost of ignoring “su elemento material y fundamental: la materia prima de la obra” (261).

The second criticism, that with notes the inconsistency of the theory of literary commitment, finds its corroboration in a certain temporal gap, which allows us to qualify Link's statement quote previously. The acceptance of the Sartrean critical proposal arrived precisely when Sartre abandoned it, in noting the powerlessness of literature in 20th century society. Thus, in the lapse of a few years—from 1939 to 1952—Sartre will end up placing the writer and literature in an unsustainable situation. After realizing, already in the early fifties, the impossibility of the literary engagement, literature will become for him the site of the private neurosis of the author, as he will discuss in *Les mots* (1964), his autobiography as author, where it reads: “Longtemps j'ai pris ma plume pour une épée, à présent je connais notre impuissance. N'importe: je fais, je ferai des livres” (Sartre, 1962: 205). Over these years, Sartre passed to see literature as a private problem, although in 1972 he is still visibly trapped in the contradiction

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26 | We should understand, though, that the publication of Borges or Beckett—to cite just a couple of examples—in *Les temps modernes* participated of the all-inclusive will of the journal, and did not allow to read those authors but from the category of literature of the absurd (Hidalgo Nácher, 2015).

of exteriorly condemning writing as a bourgeois institution.

Bien que j'aie toujours contesté la bourgeoisie, mes œuvres s'adressent à elle, dans son langage, et —au moins dans les plus anciennes— on y trouverait des éléments élitistes. Je me suis attaché, depuis dix-sept ans, à un ouvrage sur Flaubert qui ne saurait intéresser les ouvriers car il est écrit dans un style compliqué et certainement bourgeois. Aussi les deux premiers tomes de cet ouvrage ont été achetés et lus par des bourgeois réformistes, professeurs, étudiants, etc. Ce livre qui n'est pas écrit par le peuple ni pour lui résulte des réflexions faites par un philosophe bourgeois pendant une grande partie de sa vie. J'y suis lié. Deux tomes ont paru, le troisième est sous presse, je prépare le quatrième. J'y suis lié, cela veut dire : j'ai soixante-sept ans, j'y travaille depuis l'âge de 50 ans et j'y rêvais auparavant. Or, justement, cet ouvrage (en admettant qu'il apporte quelque chose) représente, dans sa nature même, une frustration du peuple. C'est lui qui me rattache aux lecteurs bourgeois. Par lui, je suis encore bourgeois et le demeurerai tant que je ne l'aurai pas achevé. Il existe donc une contradiction très particulière en moi : j'écris encore des livres pour la bourgeoisie et je me sens solidaire des travailleurs qui veulent la renverser. (1976: 61-62)

Sartre—for whom freedom is the essence of human truth—thinks about the writer under the model of the intellectual; the worker who, having achieved prestige and autonomy through the sale of the product of his labor, makes a conscious and responsible use of his freedom by committing with the political fate of his contemporaries. This approach, which will be key in Argentinean specific proposals connected to the discourse of dependence, will be often exceeded by political projects that, in the name of the people and revolution, deem it possible to manage without the intellectuals.²⁷ Many young students from the sixties and seventies will be thus faced with the dilemma of choosing between loyalty to politics or to literature. The transformations in the theory will allow, as Retamoso noted, an unprecedented articulation of both registers.

2.5. The imperatives of the vanguard and the politics of literature

In these years we can witness a task of continued renovation on the reading of texts, and through it, of the critical and theoretical practice. This transformation will specially affect the unsolved relationship between the “inside” and the “outside” of the text. The itinerary of authors like Jitrik, Masotta or Rosa reveals how these relationships were reconfigured and become more precise, in a truly collective task by means of study groups and journals such as *Los libros*. New theoretical perspectives are introduced, and in turn, are tested in relation with contemporary literary texts and their own tradition, as well as criticized by their peers, in a movement of constant revision of the critical practice.²⁸

Los libros, a journal that opened with the proposal of “la creación de un espacio”, emerged following the model of *La quinzaine littéraire*.

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27 | “Este concepto-consigna, que llamaremos en adelante ‘discurso de la dependencia’, ocupó el lugar central en las discusiones críticas a fines de la década del sesenta hasta 1974. [...] El discurso crítico de la dependencia se muestra, triunfante el peronismo, confiado y optimista en la acción y la lucha. [...] La sensación de que el tejido social juzga prescindible la acción de los intelectuales desaparece y se instala otra sensación positiva: se marcha junto al pueblo para lograr en el futuro la liberación. [...] Ese discurso sostiene un principio ideológico fundamental: *el estrechamiento de las distancias*. Hacer crítica es hacer política” (Panesi, 1985: 171 y 174).

28 | The two volumes of *Nueva novela latinoamericana*, edited by Jorge Lafforgue (Buenos Aires, Paidós, 1969 and 1972) reveal an attitude—typical of a field in constant transformation—that presents critical works both as intervention and as document by the dating of the texts. Thus, literary criticism, while pointing towards literature, also points towards itself as something that must be overcome. Such is Héctor Schmucler’s point in his review of Lafforgue’s second volume, when he affirms that “la fecha que, en cada caso, data la entrega de los ensayos [...] señala el estado en que se encontraba una crítica que intentaba romper los esquemas tradicionales” (1972: 17).

Its objective, rather than the production of original texts, was to *read* “un mes de publicaciones en Argentina y en el mundo”. The cover—repeated in its negative form in the following two issues—emphasized this *reading relationship*. A woman dressed with raincoat and boots, earrings with a ball, glasses and short hair—an unmistakably modern look—appears reading a small book. She is reading standing up with a half-flexed leg and her head inclined on the book she holds cozily in her hands. A man, wearing suit and tie, and holding another book, seems intent in reading her book. The double situation at work—as the woman was reproduced four times—was of her intimate reading (intimate yet demystified: the size of the book, her looks and body indicated so) and the debate and exchange of readings that—in her relation with the other—became public. The gesture of “reading over the elbow”, of discovering the other’s reading, was precisely what was at stake. Such was the “space” that the journal aimed to “create”. A space in which, via the materiality of that written—“books” did not refer to the sanctity of the works, but rather to the materiality of writing—criticism would become possible.

And that would be precisely what literary critics would actively carry on by reading themselves. Thus, Josefina Ludmer, in her review of *Crítica y Significación*—a book about which Ricardo Piglia noted retrospectively “que era como un libro nuestro”²⁹—presented the book as one more step in the path of criticism: “El camino es trabajoso y quizás todos lo sembremos de errores, pero es el único, para la crítica argentina, que señala el punto de partida de una productividad real: *Crítica y significación* plantea (significa), tanto para Rosa como para todos los críticos que escribamos después de él, ese camino como abierto al rigor” (Ludmer, 1970: 5). And Jitrik, writing about Ludmer’s first book two years later, presented it as a book that “sintetiza una tendencia e implica un indiscutible progreso en la llamada en conjunto ‘crítica’ que de todos modos desde hace tiempo viene postulando su crisis” (Jitrik, 1972: 14-15). The critical texts got thus inserted in a general scheme in which they were perceived as interventions on a collective task subject to the “crítica de control” (De Diego, 2001: 86) of their peers.

That same gesture can be found in the text by Rosa that we mentioned in reference to its relation with Borges, in which he stops to discuss the way in which Jitrik reads Borges. The position attributed to the critic is ambiguous: on the one hand, Jitrik would be a privileged representative of the critical vanguard (having reached further than most of his contemporaries); but on the other hand, and as a representative of that contemporary criticism, his approach is still lacking, given that “del análisis de los significantes parciales de un texto se pasa abruptamente a la significación ‘social’ de ese mismo texto, reubicando prioritariamente el análisis de contenido que se había pretendido descartar,” in a logic in which “el estrato ‘inferior’

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29 | Cited in Somoza and Vinelli (2011: p. 14).

estaría ocupado por el significante y los ‘superiores’ por el significado” (Rosa, 1987b: 269). In the critical system of the period, in which Jitrik participated, the centrality of the author was transferred to the character; and textuality ended up being reduced to a manifestation of the author’s consciousness.

In “Estructura y significación de *Ficciones*, de Jorge Luis Borges”, included in *El fuego del a especie* (1971), Jitrik continues to maintain, indeed, as a hindrance from the past, the centrality of characters in Borges’ work. However, as Rosa notes, “el personaje dentro de ese sistema tan particular que es la escritura borgiana es sólo un índice textual como cualquier otro” (1987b: 265). The historical difficulty of challenging inherited categories and critical practices was evinced by Rosa with the example of Jitrik, as representative of the criticism of the times, and in 1972, of “el problema no resuelto de la ligazón entre el significante ‘social’ (histórico, económico, político, etc.) y el significante ‘literario’, y que es en última instancia la ligazón del sentido” (269). What is interesting is that Jitrik—and this reveals the circuit of theoretical-practical production of the times, rather than causality or influence—would seem to take into account these appreciations.

In *Producción literaria y producción social* (1975), answering to the political and literary imperatives, Jitrik vindicates the political power of literature, as a specific sphere of production rather than as an instrument. In this new critical space opened in the second half of the sixties and expanded in the seventies, Jitrik would renew his discourse and, getting close to a certain textualism—a structuralism filtered by Althusser, Macherey, and Kristeva’s notion of “textual productivity”—, he coined the concept of “critical work”. As in his contribution to the collective volume *Literatura y Praxis en América Latina*—that included a conference from 1973 (Jitrik, 1974)—his perspective had turned clearly materialistic. In his prologue, Jitrik claims that “la literatura no es más que uno de los canales por los que circula, con su poder y su turbulencia, la vida social” and demands “para la Argentina y para América Latina una independencia productiva en todos sus campos”, with the aspiration for a “un autoconocimiento mediante medios propios de conocimiento y reflexión” (Jitrik, 1975: 8). The *specificity* of literature is thus established; and from that position it is possible to affirm that “es desde la literatura que pretendemos, al reconocer en ella una energía verdadera y con sentido, dirigir un discurso que tenga que ver con el discurrir del conjunto social” (11).

In this itinerary, we could stop to study some of the milestones of the criticism of the time, such as *Cien años de soledad. Una interpretación* (Buenos Aires, Tiempo Contemporáneo, 1972) or *Onetti. Los procesos de construcción del relato* (Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1977) by Josefina Ludmer, or *Léxico de lingüística*

y *semiología* (Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1978) by Nicolás Rosa. However, these lines want to evince, precisely, the importance of a collective task that, even more than the works themselves, it is possible to trace nowadays through the reading of the journals of the period. That is why we want to close this section with a statement by Jitrik from 1975, in which he refers this collective process of transformation of criticism:

Gracias al esfuerzo de muchos, de a poco, secretamente, sometiendo a la “crítica literaria” a un ataque riguroso, se está produciendo el rescate de una actividad, de una producción que se realiza en el más denso de los materiales con que se maneja el hombre: el lenguaje. Considerada la literatura —y la crítica— como “trabajo”, puede empezar a abandonar sin riesgos su ambigua residencia, la del privilegio y la intocabilidad, para empezar a tocarse no solo con el restante trabajo humano sino con lo que el trabajo humano procura y espera, en el campo de la transformación del lenguaje, de sus propias fuerzas. (12)

In this book, Jitrik presents the concept—which he says, “ya considero adquirido”— de “Trabajo Crítico” (13), which breaks away with the old Sartrean—and of vulgar Marxism—distinction between “action” and “writing” (the later, being in itself also action, was degraded to “secondary action”). This is the discursive space that the literary criticism of the seventies had managed to problematize:

Tenemos por un lado los actos (puesto que hablamos de la sociedad), por el otro los textos; ahora, desde la perspectiva de lo que podría obtener el “trabajo crítico”, podemos decir que los textos son también actos —y no por la mera razón de que son “productos” producidos— en la medida en que hagan actuar, en que susciten una acción que se pueda emprender con ellos, desde ellos, en ellos. (15-16)

The intrinsically political value of literature is pinpointed via the discovery of reading and writing as productive actions: “La lectura es, por consecuencia, un tema político, y de arrastre, resulta serlo también la escritura y, en general, todo el campo que parecía o bien al margen del movimiento social general o solo vinculado a él porque en los textos lo representaba” (16). This critique of representation will acquire different modalities—not always equivalent—in the seventies. The objective of this text was not to analyze their differences, but rather note the space of emergence in which they appeared and in which they communicate among them, turning the connection between literature and politics an inescapable problem of the period.

In those years, the vanguard critical field will need to configure in two extreme poles—that will coexist for a long time in the journal *Los libros*—, one privileging the political vanguard (as the group of Sarlo and Altamirano in the final stage of the journal) or the literary vanguard (like Germán García and Osvaldo Lamborghini). To be complete, this map needs to incorporate a third scientific pole—

dominated and highly contested—that finds its supports in the precarious Argentinean academic institutions of the time, its most advanced example being that of Verón.

3. Closing of a period in criticism

This situation would begin to change—for obvious political but also theoretical reasons—in the late seventies. The article that we cited at the start, from 1981, ended with a presentation of Sarlo’s work;³⁰ and the sequence indicated a hierarchy in relation with the present. Once *Literal* and *Los libros* closed, the last nucleus of members of *Los libros* promoted the journal *Punto de vista* (1978). Rosa participated in it, but his theoretical option clearly represented a minority that did not identify with the journal’s ideas. Novel sociologist historicism of the group displaced Rosa’s interest in textuality and psychoanalysis³¹ and marked the closing of a period.

In the late seventies, a whole series of theoretical approaches were already available. Without renouncing them, but in complete opposition to textualism, the journal proposed a renovation and a critical return on its own tradition, at a political as well as epistemological level. In the sixth issue, published in 1979, Beatriz Sarlo introduced an interview to Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart by looking backwards:

Algún día se escribirá esta historia de adopciones y préstamos. Responder a ciertas preguntas: por ejemplo ¿qué consecuencias tuvo Althusser sobre la teoría social e histórica, en los últimos años de la década del sesenta y primeros de la actual, en esta región? ¿por qué el estructuralismo de Barthes, Todorov y Kristeva aspiró a ocupar el campo de la crítica como única forma de la “modernidad” teórica? ¿qué mecanismos reflejan tan directamente el prestigio de la lingüística, en su problemática calidad de “ciencia piloto”, sobre las disciplinas sociales? Un capítulo no desdeñable de la historia teórica de los últimos diez años se tramará con las respuestas a estas (y otras) preguntas. (Sarlo, 1979: 9)

These words opened a new period for the critical discourses in Argentina, a period in which the reference to history would be displaced again and take another meaning. The French influence—which at the time started to leave the central position in the international intellectual production—, while it did not disappear, began to be questioned; and while in France the theoretical vanguard, embodied by Barthes, Lacan or Tel quel, was becoming obsolete, and when theory was risking to become a fetish, some of the proponents of these discourses were looking for new theoretical horizons for their thinking.

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30 | “Beatriz Sarlo aparece aquí como representante de una línea que intenta continuar, con el empleo de nuevas categorías, las preocupaciones fundamentales de la crítica sociológica: la diacronía literaria, la historia de la literatura, la transformación de las substancias y las formas literarias y las formaciones ideológicas correspondientes. El empleo correcto de los formalistas rusos (sobre todo los conceptos de ‘serie’ y de ‘sistema literario’) permite una reubicación del clásico modelo comunicacional (autor-obra-lector), considerado ahora en su régimen de sobredeterminación interna y externa y sustentado en una profundización de cada uno de sus elementos como productores de una formación ideológica particular: una estética” (Rosa, 1987a: 91-92).

31 | Rosa collaborated occasionally in the first issues of *Punto de vista*, but rapidly distanced himself from it. A glance at his two contributions, which can be read in *Punto de vista* (Rosa, 1978 and 1979), show how his textual proposal did not fit with the journal’s line.

The relationship between readability and unreadability was again stabilized, and the relationship between literature and society—more so than with politics—irrupt anew in a different way. In contrast with the primacy of psychoanalysis and a reading that privileged the emergence of textual *traces*, sociology came back renewed to *Punto de vista*, reminding the documentary value of literature. Thus, Sarlo and Altamirano, in 1983, would vindicate “a dos expulsados por la ola crítica de los años sesenta y setenta: el autor y el lector, no como meras funciones textuales, sino también como sujetos sociales cuya actividad es esencial en el proceso literario; y, finalmente, la historia, porque pensamos, con Raymond Williams, que una perspectiva sociológica no puede afirmarse sin afirmar al mismo tiempo la perspectiva histórica” (Altamirano and Sarlo, 1983: 12). This vindication of the author and the reader opened a new period in Argentinean literary criticism in which the hegemony of Parisian theory—in a moment when that vanguard had already dissolved—would start the process of becoming—as it still does nowadays—*history*.

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