

## CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY IN RECENT ARGENTINE LITERATURE

*TESTIMONIOS*. Novena Serie, 1971–1974. By VICTORIA OCAMPO. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 1975. Pp. 256.)

*LOS PAPELES PRIVADOS*. By EDUARDO MALLEA. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1974. Pp. 275.)

*ANTOLOGÍA*. By ERNESTO SÁBATO. (Buenos Aires: Librería del Colegio, 1975. Pp. 165.)

*LA CULTURA EN LA ENCRUCIJADA NACIONAL*. By ERNESTO SÁBATO. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1976. Pp. 145.)

*PRODUCCIÓN LITERARIA Y PRODUCCIÓN SOCIAL*. By NOE JITRIK. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1975. Pp. 172.)

The task of describing the literary and cultural achievement and impact of Victoria Ocampo in a few words is truly an impossibility. Born into a wealthy Argentine landowner family, she became one of the first liberated women in the midst of a male-dominated Argentine society. More than that, she established herself as the undisputed patroness of River Plate belles lettres, art, and music by founding in 1931 the journal and publishing house, Editorial Sur, which she is still heading today. It is safe to say that every important Argentine writer has been associated with Sur at some time and that Victoria Ocampo had a hand in starting the career of countless compatriots including Jorge Luis Borges. She became not only the catalyst that brought national and cosmopolitan expressions of art, music, and letters together (her mansion in San Isidro saw a constant flow of famous guests, from Stravinsky and Ortega y Gasset to Rabindranath Tagore and Graham Greene) but also travelled extensively in Europe and the United States, giving conferences and meeting established as well as young writers and artists. Her writings extend from Bach to Virginia Woolf and her translations from Albert Camus to Dylan Thomas.

Her series of *Testimonios* began as early as 1935 and has continued, interspersed with books of essays, translations, and dialogues with Jorge Luis Borges and Eduardo Mallea, up to the present time. The latest volume, *Testimonios IX*, brought out by Sur in 1975, features essays, reminiscences, and speeches published or delivered between 1971 and 1974. Divided into nine segments, Victoria Ocampo has chosen topics that vary as widely as her life-long experiences with arts and letters on several continents. She recalls events surrounding the founding of Sur at the insistence of the Jewish-American writer Waldo Frank and her countryman Eduardo Mallea some forty years ago; she talks about her encounter with Virginia Woolf to the French biographer Viviane Forrester; there are *racontes* of being with Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus, in New York and her home in suburban Buenos Aires; there is an insight into the affaire Wagner and his patron-king Ludwig of Bavaria; we have other themes featuring a cast of well-

known characters, but always couched in terms of proudly presenting Argentine culture within the mainstream of classical or perhaps European culture. Two selections seem to warrant special mention. The first one, called "After Forty Years," deals with the trajectory of Sur and its main function: to bring together the best talent from the Old and the New World in order to build a strong link between the virgin land of the pampas and the classical heritage of the Western World, truly in the tradition of Sarmiento and Alberdi. The second, entitled "The Prudence of History," constitutes a brilliant defense of women's rights in a country traditionally ruled by a patriarchal system as far as social and legal patterns are concerned. In spite of her elitist inclination that clashed with the uglier side of Argentine populism during the Perón years, Victoria Ocampo, the first woman to be elected to the Argentine Academy of Letters, has been instrumental in bringing about social changes through cultural means that have improved the status of the Argentine woman; and she is certainly justified in writing about this feat.

In 1971 a mature Eduardo Mallea published *Gabriel Andaral*, reflections of a novelist whose thoughts and commentaries made to another imaginary being, Virgilio Valdés, were transcribed by the author. In the prologue to the 1971 work, Mallea proposed to have *Gabriel Andaral* be the first of several epistolary novels dealing with the literary and philosophical insights presented by this personage. In 1974 Mallea continued this proposed series with *Papeles privados*, also published by Sudamericana in Buenos Aires. The format and style remain faithful to that of the first volume. Maxims, *pensées*, brief anecdotes and quotes from English, French, and Italian literature fill the 273 pages of this book. At this point the reader might be tempted to exclaim that such an amorphous assortment would hardly qualify to be called a novel. It must, however, be kept in mind that Mallea considered the novel as a somewhat hybrid genre in which there would be ample room to combine linear development with essay-like thoughts, even at the expense of incurring some critic's wrath. Second, Mallea has proven himself to be guided by *la gana*, the intuitive force that shaped his fictional efforts without an overriding concern for form. Finally, the experimental writing that has been present in the Latin American novel of the last two decades and brought about the dissolution of traditional narrative structure furnished Mallea with an additional model for his own peculiar form of self-expression that made him the dominant fiction writer and essayist of Argentina in the 1930s and 1940s. One has but to mention *La bahía de silencio*, *La ciudad junto al río inmóvil* and *Historia de una pasión argentina*.

What, then, does *Papeles privados* constitute as a cultural and literary work? Probably the self-affirmation of a seasoned intellect reflecting on a lifetime of impressions, influences, thoughts, and the eternal anguish of having failed to produce the one supreme work that would sum up creativity, wisdom, and artistry for posterity. Thus he writes: "We shoot our arrow at some target but the target tends to disappear." Mallea's target consists of an elusive goal: the final achievement of the striving artist or writer. But he also had Gabriel Andaral say: "We are served by our best talents, but they can also trick us." Aware of the dangers and limitations concerning the writer and his craft, Mallea tries to distill

insight and wisdom from a lifelong adventure with his native spirit and his European heritage. In a sense, Mallea has offered us in *Papeles privados* an abstraction of the essayistic elements that are found in a number of his novels, but of course at the expense of drama, ambience, and action that form the backbone of a novel.

*La cultura en la encrucijada nacional* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1976) is a fairly slender volume containing sixteen essays by Ernesto Sábato, one of the major voices of Argentine literature in the last twenty-five years. Sábato holds the reputation of an intellectual who renounced a promising career in physics after a *crise de conciencia* in order to devote his talents to the search of political, social, and cultural truth, largely on a national level. Having at one time embraced communism only to reject its Stalinist phase, he became a self-styled populist, a position that at times brought him into the periphery of *peronismo*. But already in his important book of essays, *El escritor y sus fantasmas* (1963), he defends a humanistic point of view that tries to establish an Argentine perspectivism, to borrow Ortega y Gasset's term. In the majority of the essays that make up *La cultura*, Sábato fluctuates between universality and *perspectivismo*. Thus he addresses himself to a most Argentine dilemma: the problem of national versus European culture and literature.

In several of his essays Sábato upholds the universalist position of telling the Argentines that their national culture is heavily indebted to European traditions since the pampas had only produced a few humble ostriches. Thus it would be in order to assign a greater value to the music of Bach and Beethoven than to *guaraní* folklore. After praising the universality of the national epic, *Martin Fierro*, he goes on to discuss Jorge Luis Borges and Roberto Arlt as two Argentine writers who, although in opposed literary camps, have both been inspired by European literary models. Rejecting the romantics' search for absolute originality, Sábato then makes a plea for the acceptance of a national literature that is rooted in the best examples of European writing.

But Sábato creates his own counterpoint. In the essay "Nosotros, los bárbaros" he defends a new world spirit that overcomes the worn-out cultures of the old continent; and in "Seamos nosotros mismos" he comes out swinging against intellectual colonialism and attacks the Argentine francophiles who get ecstatic over Gallic *verve* and the "Byzantine" Nouveau Roman. In "Lengua nacional y conciencia nacional" he declares that "the language is the blood of the spirit" and as such must reflect the history, customs, and character of a people. Here Sábato already practices a Vasconcelos-like *perspectivismo*, and his justification of the tango as an instrument of national expression is just one more example of his search for a national identity.

It is no coincidence that Sábato mentions Sarmiento as an example of the Argentine spirit. The great nineteenth-century writer and statesman tried to bring Europe's civilizing elements across the Atlantic to lay the foundation for a modern Argentine nation, while at the same time battling the classicist Andrés Bello over the right to express himself in a national language. In this book of essays, then, Sábato adds his voice to the dispute of a nation in search of itself.

Ernesto Sábato's *Antología* (Buenos Aires: Librería del Colegio, 1975) con-

tains selections of his three novels as well as four essays, two of them recent ones. Z. Nelly Martínez chose the respective selections and wrote an introductory study that includes biographical data, a selected bibliography, and a synoptic interpretation of his three novels. In his first novel, *El túnel* (1948), Sábato recreates himself in several of his characters, especially in the figure of the irrational artist Castel who kills the one person capable of understanding him and who suffers the tortures of alienation from mankind and its shameful history. In *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (1962) he amplifies his vision by placing the novel in a wider context, one that includes the Argentine civil war, peronismo, an archetypal vision of the forces of irrationality that rise to invalidate the inauthentic life, and a sense of national destiny that points towards a flight from the Babylonian big city to the as yet uncontaminated frozen South. His third novel, *Abaddón, el exterminador* (1974), retains a number of the characteristics and problems exposed in his earlier fiction. But here, to quote Martínez, "*Abaddón* announces the dawn of a new civilization and prophesizes the advent of a superior spiritual era in which the artist or creative force is the prophet as well as the agent of redemption" (p. 23). Throughout his novels Sábato has retained certain constants: the attack against the Socratic tyranny of reason that has led to the mechanization of society and the inauthentic life, to quote Jean Paul Sartre; the need to express his own fate in terms of a quest to find his place—as a son of Italian immigrants—within a hybrid Argentine culture; and the hope to find the keys to the enigma of Argentina's destiny. Martínez's carefully chosen selections give the reader an excellent insight into the essence of Sábato's fiction.

The four essays selected for this *Antología* share a common denominator: the confrontation of the socially conscious individual and the "total man." In "Nueva literatura y revolución" he chastises those whose youthful impatience forces them to put literature at the service of a socioeconomic cause. In "Más sobre las misiones transcendentales de la novela" and in "Marxismo y existencialismo" he expresses his despair concerning what he considers to be a catastrophic moment for mankind and turns to the prophetic voices of visionaries like Blake and Kafka. In the final essay, "¿Como reconstruir al hombre argentino?," Sábato attacks false nationalism and misdirected patriotism. Written just before the return of peronismo, the essay calls for spiritualizing Argentine society instead of racing towards a "robotlike" materialistic way of life exemplified by the United States and the Soviet Union. The need to spiritualize humanity, then, brings Sábato the novelist and the essayist together.

In 1975 appeared *Producción literaria y producción social* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana) containing five essays by Noe Jitrik that are based on papers or articles that came out between 1969 and 1974. As such Jitrik largely ignores the questions dealing with Argentine cultural or ideological currents that were raised by the other authors considered in this review. His chapter on the Argentine fiction writer Julio Cortázar is almost exclusively dedicated to the short story "El perseguidor"; and the segment on García Márquez takes up the Colombian prose writer's most famous work, *Cien años de soledad*. In both chapters Jitrik attempts to establish a link between the critic as an all-encompassing, all-understanding complement to the artistic product and the literary work per se. In the chapters

dealing with works of the Uruguayan Juan Carlos Onetti, the Mexican Juan Rulfo, and the Argentine precursor of Borges, Macedonio Fernández, the author continues his examination of the literary product as a social signifier. Perhaps the unifying element in these essays is furnished by Jitrik's questioning of the role of the critic in the light of traditional and modern approaches to literary form and the need to find the true nature of this form by overcoming the added burden of the critical assertion.

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