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Review/Reseña

Alejandra Laera. *El tiempo vacío de la ficción: las novelas argentinas de Eduardo Gutiérrez y Eugenio Cambaceres*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004

From National Icons to Oblivion: The Story of Popular Literature

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The story of popular literature, especially that produced prior to the twentieth century, is one that involves lots of forgetting. Sometimes this forgetting is purposeful as in the case of critics who fail to mention such texts in literary histories, erasing their existence over time. At other times this forgetting is a gradual process. Authors of popular literature are often anonymous or write under a

pseudonym, or when they sign their real names, these tend to fade away. Like their authors' names, the texts themselves are often forgotten because they did not survive or were not meant to be preserved in library collections, and because the success of such stories attracted the wrath of critics and opponents. It is no surprise, then, that reprints of popular literary texts are rare, as is their inclusion in academic settings today. Likewise, until recently the scholarly study of popular literature, its creators, and its impact across social classes, has not been "popular." For her bold focus on one of Argentina's most prolific writers of popular literature, Eduardo Gutiérrez, and on the more recognizable though understudied author of naturalist novels, Eugenio Cambaceres, Alejandra Laera's *El tiempo vacío de la ficción* is a welcome contribution to the fields of Latin American popular culture and literary studies.

Gutiérrez's texts have fared better than other creations of popular literature. Many Argentines and Uruguayans today, as well as Latin Americanists across Latin America and in the U.S., recognize the iconic character of Juan Moreira, the good gaucho gone bad as a result of a corrupt system of justice, and protagonist of one of Gutiérrez's novels by the same name. Moreira's reputation expanded nationally and internationally in the 1880s, thanks largely to theatrical representations of the novel adapted for the stage and carried throughout the Argentine countryside, the rural interior of Uruguay, and southern Brazil by traveling circus troupes. Several reprints of the novel were published throughout the twentieth century, the last one under Laera's charge.[1] Gutiérrez's other

[1] See Eduardo Gutiérrez, *Juan Moreira* (Buenos Aires: Editorial El Boyero, 1951), *Juan Moreira* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1961), and *Juan Moreira*, with a prologue by Josefina Ludmer, ed. Alejandra Laera (Buenos Aires: Perfil Libros, 1999). Laera also edited the following reprints of Gutiérrez's novels for the praiseworthy Perfil Libros series: *Hormiga negra*, with a prologue by Jorge Luis Borges and a note by Alejandra Laera (Buenos Aires: Perfil Libros, 1999) and *Antonio Larrea (Un captián de ladrones en Buenos Aires)*, with a note by Alejandra Laera (Buenos Aires: Perfil Libros, 1999).

characters and texts have not enjoyed the same luck. Though best sellers when they were first printed and then reprinted two or three times later, their gaucho characters have drifted from the status of national icons toward oblivion. Similarly forgotten are the novels of Eugenio Cambaceres. He did not write popular literature, and though a member of Argentina's literary elite, his novels were not well received. *Pot pourri* was translated into English and published recently in Oxford University Press's Library of Latin America series, but the rest of his novels have not shared the same fate. Laera's study aims in part to combat this process of forgetting by placing both writers in new critical light.

Laera proposes to outline the formation of the genre of novel writing in Argentina. She argues that Gutiérrez and Cambaceres were the driving forces behind the emergence of the novel in Argentina in the 1880s, and that only then and thanks to them did this form of writing become a widely practiced one. Part of the argument offers a reappraisal of Doris Sommer's understanding of the links between novels and nation in Argentina. In contrast to Sommer, who highlights texts like Domingo Sarmiento's *Facundo* and José Mármol's *Amalia* as foundational fiction, Laera successfully illustrates that the connections between novel and nation in Argentina did not develop until the 1880s. Prior to this decade, there were some articulations of the nation in writing, but the novel was not the privileged form; few novels in the strict sense of the word were composed. Novels of the sort Sommer points to as representative of this trend were read by very few people and were not successful editorial endeavors by any measure. In contrast, close to 100 novels were published during the 1880s. Yet they contained no cohesive, coherent national project. The real unity broke down along the lines of popular novels, on the one side, and novels that pretended to be expressions of high culture, on the other (20). Among these two groups there was a certain uniform project, or at

least a common objective. “Los dos *novelistas* del ochenta,” writes Laera, “los que construyen una posición específica, son Eduardo Gutiérrez y Eugenio Cambaceres: ellos constituyen el género con sus novelas populares y sus novelas modernas, con sus similitudes, sus diferencias, sus intercambios” (21).

Grouping these two writers together may seem odd at first, but the logic Laera follows for doing so is convincing. Unlike other writers during the 1880s, both Cambaceres and Gutiérrez renounced political careers and interaction in politics. Laera argues that the time separating their last days of public service (Cambaceres in the legislature and Gutiérrez as a soldier) and the appearance of their first texts was one of leisure and *vacío* that bridged the gap between reality and fiction. She suggests that Gutiérrez and Cambaceres wrote liminal fictions, or fictions that sit on the border between reality and fiction / invention. She characterizes both authors and their work this way because she claims that they wrote what others were not willing to write—stories about decadent and degenerating elites and ruffians who would become national icons and, in the case of Juan Moreira, a national hero. Theirs were *not* stories that allegorically represented the nation. Rather, they were tales about people left in the margins of late nineteenth-century Argentina. Gutiérrez was the most successful of the two at bridging reality and fiction, for he poured through police records, interviewed rural residents, and spoke with prisoners in order to compose his narratives.

The layout of the book is fairly conventional. In the introduction Laera explains how Bartolomé Mitre (one time president of Argentina and historian) and Vicente Fidel López (statesman and historian) both dabbled in novel writing as a leisure activity. It was something both did when they could afford to, when they were not dealing with more serious political matters or worrying about contributions to newspapers and the story line for their histories of Argentina. But although both saw novels linked to the

empty space of free time, both also considered the new form promising for forging sentiments of national identity. Moreover, Mitre, López, and Sarmiento all understood novels as part of civilizing projects. Civilized nations must have writers of novels. The free time associated with the writing and reading of this type of text is what Laera calls the "tiempo vacío de la ficción."

This introductory idea that informs the title of the book is not carried over in the chapters that follow. Instead, Laera proceeds by offering an overview of novel writing and the publishing market during the decade of 1880, and then devotes a lengthy chapter to Gutiérrez's and Cambaceres's novels. In chapter 2 she avoids looking closely at the reception of popular novels with gauchos, as she terms them, and the appropriation of their meanings by readers and listeners, in favor of pointing out the conditions that made this appropriation possible. Similar in format to chapter 2, chapter 3 studies Cambaceres's four novels one by one. The beneficial component of this painstaking approach is her focus on the market forces that were connected to the publication of these novels and the links made between scientific racism that surrounded the arrival of immigrants to the Río de la Plata and the scientific discourse of the texts. In both chapters 2 and 3 she offers a limited discussion of the ways advertising accompanied the publication of the texts and how the new relationships between editors and authors, between authors and newspaper owners, and between editors and newspaper companies, all began to alter the ways literary texts were produced, distributed, and marketed. In the second part of the study Laera aims to illustrate how the novels of these authors configured the urban space and governed modes of interaction, in addition to constructing identities (208). The last two chapters follow the format of previous ones, with chapter 5 focusing on adulterous relations in the texts of Cambaceres, and the final one narrowing in on the political meanings and implications of Gutiérrez's stories.

There are several aspects of *El tiempo vacío de la ficción* that deserve praise. One of these is the detailed analysis of the transition from *folletines*, or the serial publication of chapters in newspapers, to the publication of novels, in the case of Gutiérrez. Close to thirty of his texts went through this process. Another strong point is a close look at the marketing strategies of the papers in which Gutiérrez's stories appeared, and how these strategies made their way into the novels. This is particularly the case of chapters 2 and 6. Likewise, Laera does a good job illustrating how the novels incorporated news into the story, and how news, or at least news in the papers that published the *folletines*, mentioned events in the novels and played off these in headlines to keep readers reading. Yet in spite of these noteworthy traits, *El tiempo vacío de la ficción* also has several weak points.

To begin, one of the primary objectives of the book, namely outlining the conditions for the appropriation of the messages in Gutiérrez's novels is not satisfactorily dealt with, and this, in turn, hinders the overarching attempt to communicate the formation of the genre of the novel in Argentina. One of the attendant claims of this argument is that "de la vida real a la tradición oral y de ambas a la letra folletinesca de la prensa, la novela popular incorpora en su textualidad la instancia de la prelectura e instaura un nuevo tipo de circulación, escrita y urbana" (127). There is no doubt that *Juan Moreira* (1879-80), *Hormiga Negra* (1881), and many other novels Gutiérrez wrote in the 1880s set new records for quantities of texts in circulation, but this popular literature did not inaugurate a new *type* of circulation for popular literature. *Martín Fierro* (1872, 1879) and, more to the point, gauchesque newspapers of the 1830s and 1840s on both sides of the Río de la Plata enjoyed tremendous editorial success and were the first texts to inaugurate a new circuit of transmission in urban and rural circles. These earlier papers were built on oral tradition, and the messages they disseminated in print made their

way back into oral culture thanks to the ways they were read, primarily aloud in group contexts. Gutiérrez's texts followed some of the same modes of transmission, although they did find a new form of diffusion in the site of the circus, a site that Laera does not examine.

Laera resorts to a close reading of the texts as a formula to reveal their interaction with readers and their role as cultural commodities in Argentine society. This hermetic treatment of the texts provides illuminating interpretations of the novels themselves, but it is not effective for the larger purpose of studying how readers reacted to the novels. Nor does it do justice to the claim of portraying the social conditions that made Eduardo Gutierrez's compositions the best sellers they were or the attitudes that allowed Eugenio Cambaceres's novels to attract attention of Buenos Aires's upper crust. Throughout the study there are moments where Laera offers powerfully convincing insights about how these novels fit into the larger historical context of the end of the century. Chapter 6 is the best example of this effort. But these glimpses are not fleshed out and are not maintained from one chapter to the next as this reader had expected, nor is there any attempt made to put them in the larger context of Latin American cultural production during this moment. So chapter 4, for example, which aims to demonstrate how the texts reconfigured the urban landscape and modified people's mobility, promises alot, but leaves much to be desired given that the analysis is centered on the mobility of fictional characters. Another example of the limitations of this approach comes from the chapters on Gutiérrez's novels, in which no attempt is made to explore the possible sympathetic resonance gaucho characters had for readers who may not have been familiar with the changing social position of the gaucho in the 1860s and 1870s, but who were nonetheless affected by the fencing of the countryside, conscription, corruption, and the arrival of massive waves of immigrants. These factors

combined in ways that allowed characters of the texts to attract sympathy and, occasionally, literal empathy. In fairness to Laera, studying the emotions behind the commercial success of Gutiérrez's or others' texts is a complex task when sources are available to accomplish it, and one that is near impossible when not.

Another component of the book that makes the reading difficult at times stems from the feel of the narrative and how the author deals with her audience. *El tiempo vacío de la ficción* is based on Laera's dissertation (Universidad de Buenos Aires 2001). With long chapters and highly detailed notes, at times the book lapses into dissertation mode. These characteristics make *El tiempo vacío de la ficción* rich reading for the specialist of Argentine literature, but more challenging to process for non-specialists and readers who are are not familiar with the texts Laera analyzes.

These criticisms aside, *El tiempo vacío de la ficción* is a laudable effort to bring some of the most widely-read works of popular literature and a handful of more well-known yet understudied naturalist novels into the purview of mainstream literary and culture studies. Laera's book is part of the larger effort taking place in Latin American cultural studies, cultural history, and literary studies to study sources of popular culture, specifically pre-twentieth-century popular literature and forgotten national icons that have yet to be rescued from oblivion, in order to better understand canon formation and critical traditions. Laera's prose and organization do not lend themselves to making the book in its entirety suitable for classroom adoption, though specific selections like the introduction, chapters 1, 2, and 6 would be useful readings in a graduate seminar on popular culture or on nineteenth-century literature, for example. Specialists of Argentina and the Southern Cone will find the book an important contribution, and students and scholars interested in the fascinating figures of Eduardo Gutiérrez and Eugenio Cambaceres should consider it a must read.