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978-0-521-12121-7 - *Sur*: A Study of the Argentine Literary Journal and its Role in the Development of a Culture, 1931-1970

John King

Excerpt

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Introduction

Tout cela d'un goût exquis, évidemment.¹

This book is concerned with the problem of reading and interpreting the Argentine literary magazine *Sur*, which was published regularly between 1931 and 1970, and irregularly thereafter, as an elegant fusion of fiction, poetry, philosophy, plastic arts, history and social commentary. That a magazine should be chosen as a research topic reflects the reality of Argentine literary life in the twentieth century. Such publications offered many writers their main opportunity to put forward ideas in the form of works of literature and critical or general essays. Most magazines only lasted for a few years or, in some cases, a few issues, but *Sur*, thanks to the quality of its contributors and the sound financial base of its founder, Victoria Ocampo, was to have an important influence on several generations.²

There have been no substantial accounts written of literary magazines in Latin America, and few studies exist of their European and North American counterparts.³ There are signs that more attention is being focused on this area, but the research for this study, and in particular the methodological and theoretical issues that it raises, have evolved, to a large extent, in a critical vacuum. The lack of a coherent body of criticism imposes certain necessary limitations on the work. Francis Mulhern has argued in his recent study of the English critical magazine *Scrutiny*:

It will doubtless be noticed that the book lacks a systematic theoretical and methodological preamble . . . This is largely a matter of necessity. Few precedents exist for the study of a journal as such; it would evidently have been inadequate to construct a schema, by derivation and specification from the existing conceptual resources . . . and it would just as evidently have been illegitimate to elicit one by induction from the investigation of a single case.⁴

What his work has demonstrated and what this book sets out to achieve is a detailed case study which pays attention to the magazine as history and as text. It will be argued that *Sur* should not just be

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treated as an anthology that came out every month or two, but rather as a process – with its own internal history and conflicts – which developed in a certain political and cultural setting. Its discourse remained remarkably coherent throughout the period of its publication and can therefore, if my methodology is successful, be reliably charted through the changing conditions of Argentina in the mid twentieth century.

The main focus will therefore be literary history. It will locate the journal within the very specific development of Argentine letters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and then seek to explain how it elaborated and altered these tendencies throughout the forty years of its regular publication. *Sur*'s view on literature and life became the most powerful force within Argentine letters during this period and all other forms of cultural expression can be defined by their adherence to, or disagreement with, its central premises. The literary world cannot be divorced from the wider historical context and particular attention will be paid to developments within Argentine and world history to which the magazine was forced to respond and which shaped its course, in particular the growth of fascism and communism, the Second World War and the rise and fall of Juan Domingo Perón.

Complex problems arise when dealing with a composite text, for it is necessary to identify links between a number of diverse texts without reducing a complex enterprise to a crude general classification of content. Raymond Williams has argued in an influential essay on the 'Bloomsbury fraction' that the critic of a literary magazine or a cultural group must establish two factors: the internal organisation of a particular group and its proposed and actual relations to other groups in the same area of enquiry and to the wider society.⁵ Certain magazines declare their intentions and thus offer guidelines for subsequent analysis. Other magazines, in the apparent heterogeneity of their material, present more complex problems. Historians of ideas have pointed out that there is a very substantial difference between the great reviews of the nineteenth century that attempted to speak for a wide cross-section of educated opinion and the little magazines of the later period that sponsored the new, 'in the vanguard of the war against established literary, artistic or political properties'.⁶ In most cases, the little magazines set out a manifesto or a programme which determines their selection, proclaiming the foundation of new movements and developing their doctrines explicitly and polemically.⁷ Poggioli makes the distinction:

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The romantic, nineteenth century periodical . . . [is] . . . essentially an organ of opinion, exercising an avant-garde function only insofar as it leads and precedes a vast corps of readers in the labyrinth of ideas and issues: but the avant-garde periodical functions as an independent and isolated military unit, completely and sharply detached from the public, quick to act, not only to explore but also to battle, conquer and adventure on its own.⁸

Every magazine maps out a space for itself in the intellectual field,⁹ establishing the boundaries between its own work and other tendencies: in the case of little magazines, the boundaries are very clear.

With magazines such as *Sur*, which never declared its principles in an opening manifesto and which lasted many years longer than the brief and scintillating life-span of a little magazine, the search for unity is more complex and must be sought in a body of practice or a general ethos rather than in any declared statement of principles.¹⁰ It can be argued that to impose an order on such established, long-running magazines as the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, the *Revista de Occidente* or *Sur* is to simplify and distort. How can such diverse, seemingly eclectic material be seen as part of a coherent project? Jorge Luis Borges, the main writer in *Sur*, whose literary development will provide a major focus for the text, has tended to see the magazine as eclectic rather than dynamic:

Et puis, Victoria [Ocampo] avait une conception assez curieuse [de la revue littéraire et ne voulait publier que des textes des collaborateurs illustres et ne voulait pas des notes, sur le théâtre, les films, les concerts, les livres . . . et tout cela est la vie d'une revue, non? C'est à dire, c'est ce que veut trouver le lecteur; tandis que s'il trouve un article de quarante pages signé Homère et un autre de cinquante signé Victor Hugo, ça le fatigue.¹¹

Whilst there is much truth in what Borges says, there was more to *Sur* than a random anthology of foreign luminaries. Not even the bulkiest review can be boundlessly eclectic, and as soon as the element of choice is introduced, the question of a principle or a programme, however implicit, becomes inescapable. As has been said, *Sur*, in fact, offered a surprisingly coherent discourse: a small group of writers, with a particular attitude to Argentina and universal letters, remained together for several decades engaged in a collective enterprise.

The analysis of this group and its literary production moves the present study into an area in which traditional disciplines are sometimes uneasy. Literary studies, in particular, have tended to be predominantly interested in the 'text-in-itself', relegating questions of literary production to the background. As it happens, this is especially the case with critics of Borges, who take their cue from that writer's own aesthetics and mock the social text. John Sturrock, a recent

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English critic of Borges, has remarked that there is nothing in the stories of Borges for those whose tastes are moralistic or sociological; everything in them for those whose tastes are literary.¹² A study of *Sur*, it will be argued, can add to this rather one-dimensional view, by locating writers in their social and ideological context, as well as in the more abstract world of literature. Most literary critics now accept the fact that texts exist in an intertextual world, that conventions, precursors and styles restrict the notion of individual production. Rather fewer of them consider, especially in the case of a writer like Borges, that institutional and ideological determinants might act in a similar way.¹³

History and sociology are also uneasy with cultural groups for, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, 'the group, the movement, the circle, the tendency seems too marginal or too ephemeral to require historical and social analysis.'¹⁴ Yet it is possible to examine what these groups have accomplished and their relationship to the society in which they live. The *Sur* group had specific ideas as to their own identity and function, which can be observed in the magazine, in memoirs and through a series of extensive interviews with the main protagonists. It will be necessary to emphasise at certain points the personal relationship of family and friendship, for inclusion and exclusion from the group often depended on these very personal factors. A close-knit group managed to achieve the status of a cultural institution, 'naturalising' in this way their often very idiosyncratic views.

As such, they caused a fierce literary polemic over many years and it will be an aim of this study to offer meta-commentary on the development of Argentine literary criticism with respect to the magazine. Most criticism has tended to be Manichean and it is an important task both in considering *Sur* and for the development of the discipline in general, to understand how and why such a polarised position has occurred. The debate has focused around two poles which can broadly be defined as liberal/populist or universalist/nationalist. *Sur* articulated a liberal, universalist stance and it was natural for opponents to define themselves in opposite terms. The debate has become so polarised that the real significance of the magazine is often lost. In this world of simple dualities, *Sur* has been condemned as *extranjerizante* (a dismissive term, referring to those intellectuals whose ideas and attitudes are formed by foreign, in particular European, models), cosmopolitan and élitist in contrast to an 'ideal' Argentine

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culture which should be popular and nationalist. No real attempt has been made to examine the validity of these labels. This study will attempt to locate *Sur*'s 'cosmopolitanism' within a very specific Argentine tradition and will examine critically the concept of élite culture which seems to presuppose some homogeneous stable entity, with its own monolithic world-view.¹⁵ It will hope to offer a balanced view of the development and limitations of a particular élite group and in this way refocus attention on important concerns that become confused when critics line up in opposing camps, and as David Viñas has said, make an act of faith: 'En los dos andariveles no se critica. Ni se piensa, claro está. Se reza o se cocina.'¹⁶ In this way the study seeks to draw the attention of literary critics and cultural historians to a crucial area of cultural analysis which has generated a good deal of heated but often facile debate at a narrowly political level, but has been largely neglected by serious studies of literature.

Four further points should be made concerning methodology. The study draws on an exhaustive statistical analysis made by the magazine itself on two occasions: in 1950, after twenty years of publication; and in 1967, towards the end of the period of its regular publication.¹⁷ These works list the numbers of contributors, the subject matter of their articles and the date of publication. They are, of course, necessarily limited insofar as they do not attempt to interpret and make sense of this raw material. This study will not therefore dwell on detailed statistical analysis at any given period, but will attempt to illustrate and analyse the most important tendencies. It is not enough to say that the magazine published a specific number of Argentine or European writers. This bald statement immediately raises the more complex questions: Why then? Why there? Why thus?¹⁸

Secondly, the chapter divisions correspond in the main to historical trends within the period. This is the most logical procedure, since the content of the magazine was very much determined by four major historical periods: the ideological divisions of the 1930s, the war years (1940–5), the first Peronist régimes (1946–55) and the attempt to 'modernise' Argentine society between 1956 and 1970. Internal shifts within the magazine are also registered, but these are not sufficient to give shape to the magazine's history. Events in the wider society ultimately determine the development and eventual demise of *Sur*.

To map the development of a magazine within its historical context is to write, in microcosm, a history of twentieth-century Argentine literature. This is a complex task, especially since there is a lack of

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supporting monographs. General histories of literature vary in quality and studies of specific periods or groups are only just beginning to appear. The work draws on interesting analyses of the 1920s and the 1960s. Peronism, however, still remains largely unexplored in the cultural field and the 1930s and early 1940s tend to be totally ignored by critics as the wilderness period between the avant-garde of the 1920s and the 'boom' of the late 1950s and 1960s.¹⁹ This study offers a reading of the whole period but is aware that many more studies of Argentine cultural history are necessary before the successes and limitations of the *Sur* project can finally be appreciated.

Thirdly, it will be seen that most attention will be given to the magazine's publication of *ensayos* and *cuentos*. It also published poetry, as all literary magazines do, but this was never a major concern of a coherent group within the magazine. My treatment of poetry reflects its effective weight in the magazine's affairs. Equally, *Sur* often published short notes on art exhibitions by eminent critics such as Julio Payró and Damián Bayón, and on concerts, by composers and music critics like Alberto Ginastera and Juan Carlos Paz. These were not, however, substantive essays on aesthetics, but rather contemporary comments on cultural life in Argentina.²⁰ It is in the essays on contemporary events or universal culture and in the short stories that the complexity of *Sur*'s enterprise can be most successfully analysed.

Finally, in order to give the reader an idea of the debates within and surrounding the magazine, extensive use is made of quotations. These quotations are important since they help to define the 'tone' of the magazine and they also provide valuable additions to the existing bibliography on particular writers. A writer such as Borges is very selective in ordering his 'complete works' and an analysis of the journals to which he contributed throughout his life reveals a number of interesting observations on Argentine history and society, as well as on national and universal literature. Since they are intended as source or archival material, the quotations are given in Spanish in the text, but a non Spanish reader will be able to follow the main arguments in the book without any difficulty.

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I

The cultural context

La Historia Argentina, que era la de nuestras familias, justo es recordarlo . . .¹

Argentine letters in the nineteenth century: 'gentleman' and 'professional' writers

In artistic matters, absolute beginnings are extremely rare: we find instead continuities and breaks with the past. *Sur* was always very conscious of historical precedent and saw its own development as part of the Great Tradition of Argentine liberalism, which had been expressed, in its purest form, by the 'generations' of 1837 and 1880. Even though, as will be argued below, the magazine arose out of the specific cultural and social conditions of the early 1930s, its significance cannot be understood without reference to the formative years of Argentine history. For Victoria Ocampo, there was only one history in Argentina, that which had been forged by her family and friends, and which had to be defended against the mass movements of fascism and communism spawned by the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The most significant historical reference point for the magazine was the life and work of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. In an issue devoted to Sarmiento in 1938, Ocampo included a photograph of that great liberal patriarch which had been dedicated to one of her ancestors, also called Victoria Ocampo.² Sarmiento was one of the family, and his classic statement on the need for Argentine development, *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (1845), was a model for *Sur*'s later enterprise. Like *Sur*, *Facundo* was written at a time of cultural crisis, when the Federalist dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas was attempting to organise the country under his exclusive rule and shut it off from outside influences. Sarmiento and his contemporaries Esteban Echeverría (*El matadero*, 1838) and José Mármol (*Amalia*, 1851) wrote against Rosas from exile and developed a coherent political programme which would be expressed within a Manichean conceptual framework.

In broad terms, the Unitarian group sought to develop the

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potential riches of the littoral provinces, at the expense of the backward interior with its basic cottage industries, and promote a dynamic export economy linked to the expanding British Empire. The traffic would pass through the city of Buenos Aires and yield a high revenue which would benefit the whole country. The central city of Buenos Aires would control a process which would encourage foreign investment, technology and immigration.³ Refracted through the Romantic prose of Sarmiento, this struggle between liberalism and autarky became a battle between civilisation and barbarism, and engendered a series of opposites, in which the first term was always positive: Europe/America; liberalism/autarky; Buenos Aires/ Córdoba; water, the sea/pampa; liberal élite/gaicho; social order/excessive individualism; mind/matter; Paz, Sarmiento/Facundo, Rosas.

In Sarmiento's analysis, therefore, his own liberalism had four characteristics. Firstly, it was anti-democratic: the masses, despite Sarmiento's literary, Romantic admiration of gaicho skills, were a threat; brute forces that could be manipulated by a dictator. Liberalism was equated with economic development and material progress, as the boom years of the 1880s witnessed. Progress was also equated with European models, which represented civilisation, and national or popular symbols were perceived as backward and threatening. Finally, liberalism was anti-personalist: it mistrusted local caudillos, be they Rosas or his twentieth-century incarnation Perón.⁴ In this tradition, *Sur* articulated an élite, modernising, European cultural practice, which mistrusted mass civilisation and had to fight against personalist leaders.

The next important cultural moment for *Sur* was the development that took place under the 'generation of 1880'. After a long and bloody battle, the nation-state was consolidated according to Sarmiento's dream: the great landowners of the littoral provinces, working through the city of Buenos Aires, controlled the growth of the export economy, which became enormously profitable when allied with British capital and technology. With Europe a ready market for Argentine foodstuffs, it was inevitable that Argentina should become part of the international trading system. Enormous wealth was generated by the eager acceptance of the world division of labour, and was to cause profound transformations in Argentine society. David Rock provides some telling figures. 'Between 1880 and 1910 the value of its [Argentina's] exports had increased sixfold. After 1860 total

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production had grown at an annual average of 5% per year, population by 3.4%, the crop area by 8.3% and the railway system by 15.4%.⁵ Yet this wealth caused the development of a very distinct political and social system.

In the main, a small group of traditional Creole families took advantage of these favourable external conditions to collaborate with the expanding British Empire. It has been estimated that less than 2,000 families owned a land area equivalent to Italy, Holland, Belgium and Denmark added together.⁶ The wealth of this class was enormous: they often lived in Buenos Aires, or in Paris, as *rentiers* (the Ocampo family is a good example of this tendency), and controlled commerce and politics as an oligarchy. Yet this simple system was broken up, to a certain extent, by the high rate of urban development in the late nineteenth century, which created a more complex social structure of working-class and middle-class sectors. The middle-class groups were in the main white-collar workers, professional men and bureaucrats: the export economy did not create a strong, indigenous industrial sector. The working class was largely made up of immigrants, for immigration had increased enormously. Immigration was concentrated in Buenos Aires and other littoral urban centres, where there were more opportunities for social mobility than in the rural areas.⁷ This concentration created problems for the élite, who tried to exclude immigrants from the political system. Yet as politicisation of the urban middle and working classes increased, a more flexible model had to be adopted, partially to assimilate middle-class groups. This was largely effected by the Sáenz Peña law of limited suffrage (1912), and the growth of the Radical Party, which acted as a broker between the oligarchy and middle-class groups dependent on State patronage. A more democratic pluralist society therefore emerged, but one that was still controlled in the last instance by the élite. The dependent middle-class groups were included in the system, but the working classes, first- and second-generation immigrants, were still perceived as a threat.⁸

These tensions were reflected in the cultural sphere in a process that David Viñas has called the development from the 'gentleman' to the 'professional' writer.⁹ Victoria Ocampo, born in 1890, grew up in the society of the 'gentleman' writer and her subsequent narrative style bears a strong resemblance to that of Miguel Cané and Eduardo Wilde in its decorous, yet colloquial tone, its sense of a private conversation among equals, and the vivid descriptions of European

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cultural centres. These men of the 1880s cultivated a genre of travel literature in their dispatches from various diplomatic centres. They created the impression of a class sure of its position at home and confident of its reception abroad. Their observations on politics and social developments are often less important than their ability to tell an anecdote or record a scene. The generation of 1880 was a gentleman's club – its redoubt the Jockey Club – and its writers described the intimacy of the group, an intimacy that Ocampo sought to maintain in the very different conditions of the 1930s. Her actions would always be greeted suspiciously, however, for she was a woman in a man's world.

The writer-politician or the gentleman-diplomat gave way, in part, to the professional writer. The term professional does not refer to the ways in which writers earned their living, for the market was still restricted and the reading public small. It was impossible to live from the proceeds of writing, except as a journalist. Roberto Giusti, one of the most important critics of the early twentieth century, remarked that at the turn of the century, 'Una persona de recursos medianos podía adquirir, si lo deseaba, todos los libros impresos en el día. Editores propiamente no los había. El autor se pagaba la edición.'¹⁰ The concept of professionalisation referred instead to the writer's perception of himself as a writer. The key movement in this respect was *modernismo* and its main advocate and practitioner Rubén Darío. The *modernistas* advocated the separateness of poetry from its social context and the need to extend and perfect the craft of literature.¹¹ It was, of course, a revolt within a system: for all its rejection of bourgeois positivist values, it relied on the patronage of the oligarchy, especially that of the great newspapers such as *La Nación*, in which the writers worked as journalists. *La Nación*, as David Viñas has pointed out, was one of the most important cultural institutions in Buenos Aires. It published poetry, literary essays and *crónicas*, short essays evoking people and places. 'Llegar a escribir en *La Nación*, convertirse en "un hombre de *La Nación*" era el ideal de vida que empezaba a fijarse y una categoría de validación social de los intelectuales.'¹² The *modernistas* were adept essayists, and some of the techniques of journalism – an agility of style, an emphasis on freshness and newness – could also be seen in their verse. Despite these conditions, Darío longed to escape from journalism into the purer world of poetry and it was his assertion of the separate space of literature that helped to define it as an independent career. The Romantic theme of a public unable to