

Editor's Preface

Suspending Belief

Noé Jitrik is one of Latin America's foremost literary critics, with almost a half-century of critical production. He has influenced many younger scholars, directed major literary projects, and been central to the professionalization of literary criticism in the continent, a role similar to that played by Antônio Cândido in Brazil and by the late Angel Rama of Uruguay. He is also the author of a solid body of work on literary theory and of numerous works of fiction and poetry. This volume will show something of the range and depth of his literary essays, focusing on his work on Argentine and more broadly on Spanish American literature.

Jitrik was born in 1928 in Rivera, on the western edge of the province of Buenos Aires, in a town that was then largely Jewish, in keeping with the initial emphasis (by Baron Hirsch and other organizers of the emigration of Jews from eastern Europe to Argentina and southern Brazil) on rural and small-town settlements. He studied at the University of Buenos Aires and began his teaching

career at the university level in Córdoba, the third city of Argentina and a provincial capital. Involved with the polemical cultural journal *Contorno* in the 1950s (led by David and Ismael Viñas, with participation by such others as Ramón Alcalde, Adolfo Prieto, and Tulio Halperín Donghi), he published his first articles there and was a member of its editorial board in 1958–1959. Subsequently he devoted himself to university teaching, first at the University of Córdoba (from 1960 to 1966), then for a few months at the University of Buenos Aires in 1966 before his teaching career (like that of many others) was interrupted by General Onganía's military dictatorship and its sharp consequences for the institutions of higher education in Argentina. From 1967 to 1970 he taught at the University of Besançon in France, then was back briefly at the University of Buenos Aires before his longest period of exile, in Mexico. In Mexico City Jitrik taught at the Colegio de México from 1974 to 1980 and at the UNAM (the National University of Mexico) from 1981 to 1992. In 1987 he began dividing his time between Mexico and the University of Buenos Aires, eventually becoming director of the Instituto de Literatura Hispanoamericana of that institution. In addition, he has taught as a visiting professor in countless universities in Argentina, as well as in Mexico, the United States (Indiana University and the University of California, Irvine), Puerto Rico, France, and Venezuela.

With his wife, Tununa Mercado (a noted fiction writer, one of whose books is available in English translation from the University of Nebraska Press), and their two children, Jitrik spent intense and productive years in exile in Mexico. This period is crucial to an understanding of Jitrik's critical production; up to then his critical writing had focused largely on Argentine literature, but his writing of the Mexican period and subsequently was more broadly concerned with the literature of Spanish America. Essays on García Márquez, Carpentier, Neruda, Lezama Lima, and numerous Mexican writers are examples of this interest. Few Argentine critics of his generation have ranged as widely in their writings.

Jitrik's first book was a polemical discussion of Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938), considered the national poet of Argentina in the first decades of the twentieth century; it was provocatively titled *Leopoldo Lugones, mito nacional* (Leopoldo Lugones, A National Myth; 1960). Also from 1960 is a book on Horacio Quiroga (1878–1937), the writer (born in Uruguay but who lived for much of his life in Argentina) best known for his stories of life in the jungle of the province of Misiones. Other books from the 1960s include monographic

studies of Esteban Echeverría and of Sarmiento's *Facundo*, the important collection of essays *Escritores argentinos, dependencia o libertad* (Argentine Writers: Dependency or Freedom; 1967), and an anthology of writings of the Argentine generation of 1880 (1968). This period of Jitrik's writing, focused on the nineteenth-century period of national consolidation in Argentina, makes frequent use of models from dependency theory and other elements of Marxist analysis.

The 1970s, the period of Jitrik's most intense engagement with French new criticism, saw the publication of his monographic studies of José Hernández, Sarmiento, and José Martí (all 1971), and the important collections *Ensayos y estudios de literatura argentina* (Studies on Argentine Literature) and *El fuego de la especie* (The Fire of the Species) (also both 1971); from the latter collection we have included the essays on Cortázar's *Bestiario* (*Bestiary*) and on Echeverría's "El matadero" (The Slaughter House), widely considered the first short story in Spanish American literature. In 1973 he published an important study of the Argentine avant-garde writer-philosopher Macedonio Fernández (later the pretext for an extended essay on character in narrative, *El no existente caballero* (The Non-Existent Gentleman; 1975), and in 1975 the collection *Producción literaria y producción social* (Literary Production and Social Production) whose title again indicates the influence of Marxist thought and dependency theory, though this model is now conjoined to methods drawn from semiotics and French structuralism. His final major work of the 1970s was *Las contradicciones del modernismo* (The Contradictions of Modernism; 2nd ed., 2000), a significant contribution to criticism of Spanish American *modernismo*, the fin de siècle movement led by Rubén Darío (and exemplified most importantly by Leopoldo Lugones in Argentina); in this book Jitrik, basing himself on a close reading of a few poems, examines the movement's transnational character, the ways in which it was important to the emergence of autonomous intellectual voices, and its relations and conflicts with bourgeois national projects of the time.

The 1980s saw the publication of *La memoria compartida* (Shared Memory; 1982), a collection of long critical essays that range widely across Spanish American literature (Neruda and Carpentier) as well as Argentine literature (Sarmiento and Arlt). Also from this decade are *La lectura como actividad* (Reading as an Activity; 1982), Jitrik's first attempt to systematize his thinking about theories of critical production, and a book of essays on the writings of Chris-

topher Columbus, *Los dos ejes de la cruz* (The Two Axes of the Cross; 1983). In 1984 he published *Las armas y las razones* (Arms and Reasons), a collection mostly of political essays that set forth a critique of Argentine populist thought, particularly of Peronism. Another major collection is the 1987 *La vibración del presente* (The Vibration of the Present), from which I have drawn essays on Borges, José María Arguedas, and the avant-garde; it also includes essays on José Lezama Lima, Juan Rulfo, Juan José Saer, and others. In 1987 he published two more books on literary theory. The last major collection of that decade is *El balcón barroco* (The Baroque Balcony), from which I have selected two essays; it also includes studies of José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes, and several essays on literary semiotics (including the semiotics of theater).

Recent books include *La selva luminosa* (The Bright Forest; 1993), *El ejemplo de la familia* (The Example of the Family; a 1998 anthology of his essays on Argentine literature), and *Suspender toda certeza* (Suspending All Certainty), a 1997 anthology of his critical essays edited by Gonzalo Aguilar and Gustavo Lespada, with a critical introduction by the editors that is the best study of Jitrik's thought to date. In addition to the essays collected in his many books, he is the author of at least eighty uncollected essays.

His reflection on literary theory includes *Procedimiento y mensaje de la novela* (Process and Message of the Novel; 1962) on point of view and narration; *El no existente caballero* (1975) on fictional character; *La lectura como actividad* (1982) on reading; *Temas de teoría: el trabajo crítico y la teoría literaria* (Theoretical Topics: Critical Work and Literary Theory; 1987), his most systematic presentation of his ideas on "critical work"; *Lectura y cultura* (Reading and Culture; 1987), further thoughts on reading; *Historia e imaginación literaria* (History and Literary Imagination; 1995) on the historical novel; and *Los grados de la escritura* (Degrees of Writing; 2000), a series of semiotic reflections on the activity of writing, stemming from such familiar concepts as correction, drafts, beginnings, developments, and endings. Jitrik is also the author of more than a dozen books of poetry and fiction, including the recent novels *Mares del sur* (The Southern Seas; 1997) and *El Evaluador* (The Examiner; 2002).

Honored by the Modern Language Association as an honorary fellow and by the University of Puebla in Mexico with an honorary doctorate, Jitrik is widely recognized, though little of his work has been translated. His current major project is editing a twelve-volume history of Argentine literature (with five volumes published to date).

Jitrik in his theoretical writings establishes a distinction between “crítica literaria” (literary criticism) and the option that he prefers, “trabajo crítico” (critical work), with emphasis on the change from noun to adjective. Criticism, for Jitrik, is a productive activity. Yet it is also an activity at the service of the text, a process of self-questioning that follows lines opened by the text. As such, it is necessarily open. One of the lessons of Jitrik’s prolific reflections on literature is, in fact, the insistence with which he varies in approach, in analysis, even (or maybe especially) when he returns to the same texts. “Critical work” is unceasing. *Línea de flotación: ensayos sobre incesancia* (Flotation Lines: Essays on Incessance; 2002), published in Venezuela, is a collection of essays (edited by Roberto Ferro) on this “unceasing” quality of critical work. The difference is described well in his essay on Roa Bastos’s great historical novel *Yo el Supremo* (1974), which I have included in this selection:

In this sense this text is unusual, although a general law could be stated according to which there is not really a reading when the relationship with a text does not provoke a suspension of all guarantees of certainty, whether the text be obscure or transparent. Of course such guarantees affect a knowledge that in an inert way attempts to reaffirm itself or that can be submitted to the demands of difference. For me, only the activity that allows that second possibility, that vertigo, can really be called “reading.” And in my opinion, by its very nature this book elicits it, foments it, and fosters it.

Already in the introduction to *El fuego de la especie* (1971), Jitrik outlines the difference between various schools of criticism that were significant at the time (stylistics, sociological criticism, and so forth) and what he calls criticism that is “a reading itself and, therefore, also a hypothesis about reading, a model of readings that are the most complete and profound ones possible” (10). And in this same introduction he argues (from his first exile, in France) that what makes the intellectual’s work “dangerous” is that work’s nature of “continuing, insisting, seeking, presenting hypotheses, without fear of exile or of marginalization” (12).

Gonzalo Aguilar and Gustavo Lespada, in their introduction to *Suspender toda certeza*, recall that Jitrik himself has written, recalling Coleridge’s famous phrase, on the “willing suspension of disbelief,” that “there is no real reading of a text that does not produce a suspension of the guarantees of certainty” (9).

Aguilar and Lespada observe that this radical questioning is what they term a condensation or crystallization of Jitrik's way of reading, which they see as constantly in debate with literary ideas of textual autonomy and immanence. They also relate this attitude of radical questioning to Jitrik's perceptive, often polemical, stances with regard to the relations between literature and politics (represented here by the essay on Argentine nationalism, a sharp critique of Peronism, which also contains a polemic with some of Jitrik's contemporaries, David Viñas most notably, for the cultural nationalism or "populism" of much of their critical production).

One of the difficulties we have come upon in translating and presenting the essays here is the variety of critical approaches that Jitrik has taken over the years, and the diversity of critical vocabularies he has used. While without doubt the major influence on his approach is French structuralist thought (and its background in linguistics), he has also used the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, of semiotics, of Marxism, and of various other critical discourses along the way. This is necessarily a small selection from a large body of work; even in Spanish, though, some of the essays included here are from books that are out of print, and Susan Benner has completed the bibliographical references in a way that is current now but may not have been so when the essays were originally written.

I will now briefly introduce the essays included in this selection, giving information on original publication and also on English translations that are available of the texts that Jitrik is analyzing. I have selected essays on Latin American works that are readily available.

"Complex Feelings about Borges" was first published in French in *Les Temps Modernes* in a special issue on Argentina under military dictatorship in 1981. It was also published in "Sábado," the Saturday edition of *Unomásuno*, May 23, 1981 (Mexico) and was included in *La vibración del preente* (Mexico City, 1987). Jitrik published several other essays on Borges, but this is the best known. Viking Penguin has published three volumes—Borges's complete fictions, selected nonfiction, and selected poetry—many in new translations.

"Between Being and Becoming: Identity, Latinity and Discourse," was originally presented as a conference paper at the symposium "La latinidad, su sentido en América Latina" in May 1984 at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma

de México in Mexico City, and was published in *El balcón barroco* (Mexico City, 1988).

“Form and Signification in Esteban Echeverría’s ‘The Slaughter House’” is also from *El fuego de la especie*. It was republished in *Suspender toda certeza* in 1997. Echeverría’s “The Slaughter House” (El matadero; 1871), translated by Angel Flores, is available in Roberto González Echevarría’s *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

“Canon and Margin” first appeared in the literary journal *Orbis Tertius* in La Plata, Argentina, in 1996, under the title “Canónica, regulatoria y transgresiva.” It has also appeared in Italian translation in the *Rivista Trimestrale* (Rome, 1998).

“From History to Writing” was Jitrik’s keynote address at a conference on the historical novel in Latin America held at Tulane University in 1985 (and published in 1986). In it he develops his ideas on the ways in which the literary and documentary facets of historical fiction interact, ideas developed later in the essay on Augusto Roa Bastos (included here) and in the book *Historia e imaginación literaria* (1995).

“Notes on the Latin American Avant-garde” is from *Las armas y las razones: ensayos sobre el peronismo, el exilio, la literatura* (1984), Jitrik’s first publication in Argentina after the end of the military dictatorship. It was originally published as “Papeles de trabajo: Notas sobre la vanguardia latinoamericana” in the *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 15.8 in 1982.

“Beneath the Sign of the Baroque” also comes from *Las armas y las razones*, having been presented first as an invited lecture in Berlin in 1982. In it Jitrik develops some general ideas about the relations between Latin American and European literature.

“The Rise and Fall of Argentine Nationalism” appeared for the first time in *El ejemplo de la familia* (1998). In this essay Jitrik provides an eloquent critique of Argentine nationalism, particularly Peronism (a subject he had already explored in a number of political essays, notably those in *Las armas y las razones*, 1984), and extends this to the cultural nationalism that is an important current in Argentine intellectual thought.

The essay on Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, “Autobiography, Biography, Narrative: Sarmiento and the Origins of Argentine Literature,” is one of Jitrik’s numerous essays on the Argentine “author of a nation,” as he has been termed

(see Halperin-Donghi, Jaksic, Masiello, and Kirkpatrick volume, which includes a translation of Jitrik's essay "El *Facundo*: la gran riqueza de la pobreza"). Two of Sarmiento's texts are now available in new translations: his *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, translated by Kathleen Ross, was issued in 2003 by the University of California Press, and his *Recuerdos de provincia*, translated by Elizabeth Garrels as *Memories of Provincial Life*, is forthcoming shortly from Oxford University Press.

Another essay on autobiography, "Autobiography, Memoir, Diary," appeared in *El ejemplo de la familia* (Buenos Aires, 1998).

"Martí in the American Library" first appeared in the *Diario de Poesía*, a Buenos Aires periodical devoted to poetry, in issue 37 in 1996. It refers to an event held a year earlier at the University of Buenos Aires on the centenary of Martí's death. As stated earlier, Jitrik's first work on the Cuban poet José Martí dates from 1971. This essay from the mid-1990s is a reflection on the reception of Martí, focusing particularly on the ways in which critics (in Cuba and elsewhere) have used Martí to argue for the political commitments of poetry. At the same time, Jitrik uses some of these polemics to suggest that Martí's esthetics, his notions of beauty, exceed his political circumstance. In this essay Jitrik provides a further reflection on the functioning of literary canons, the subject of another essay in this collection.

"The Riches of Poverty Revisited" comes from *La selva luminosa*. The title of the essay refers to an earlier Jitrik essay on Sarmiento's *Facundo*, "El *Facundo*, la gran riqueza de la pobreza" (in *La memoria compartida*, 1982). Translations of the poetry of César Vallejo are widely available in English; perhaps the best known are those of Robert Bly and Clayton Eshleman; a good critical book on Vallejo is Jean Franco's *César Vallejo: The Dialectics of Poetry and Silence* (1976).

Jitrik's essay on José Bianco, "Lack and Excess in José Bianco's *Shadow Play*," was published in *El ejemplo de la familia* in 1998. Bianco, best known as the editor of *Sur* from 1937 to 1961, was the author of splendid literary essays and of a few works of fiction; his novellas *Sombras suele vestir* (1941) and *Las ratas* (1943) are available in English translation as *Shadow Play; The Rats: Two Novellas*, translated by Daniel Balderston, Latin American Literary Review Press, 1983.

"The Suffering Narrator" comes from *Vertiginosas textualidades* (Mexico City, 1999). Onetti's *Los adioses* is available in two English versions: "Goodbyes," in *Goodbyes and Stories*, translated by Daniel Balderston (Austin, 1990), and

"Farewells," in *Farewells; and, A Grave with No Name*, translated by Peter Bush (London, 1992).

"Arguedas: Reflections and Approaches," first presented in France in a symposium on José María Arguedas, was originally published in *La vibración del presente* (Mexico City, 1987). Arguedas's novels *Yawar Fiesta* and *Deep Rivers* (*Los ríos profundos*) are available from the University of Texas Press in brilliant translations by Frances Barraclough.

"Notes on the 'Holy Place' and 'Otherness' in Cortázar's *Bestiary*" comes from *El fuego de la especie* (Buenos Aires, 1971). Cortázar's *Bestiario* is available in English as *Bestiary* (London, 1998), in translations by Alberto Manguel, Paul Blackburn, Gregory Rabassa, Clementine Rabassa, and Suzanne Jill Levine.

"*I, the Supreme* as Historical Novel" is also from *Vertiginosas textualidades*. Jitrik's ideas on the historical novel are further developed in *Historia e imaginación literaria: las posibilidades de un género* (Buenos Aires, 1995). Roa Bastos's *I, the Supreme*, in a brilliant translation by Helen Lane, was published by Knopf in 1986.

"Thirty Years Later" was the prologue (under the title "Treinta años después") to a collection of interviews with Latin American writers that had appeared in the pages of the *Paris Review*. Jitrik edited this collection, titled *Confesiones de escritores. Los reportajes de The Paris Review: escritores latino-americanos* (Writers' Confessions: Interviews from the *Paris Review* with Latin American Writers). In this essay Jitrik reflects thirty years later on the so-called boom in Latin American literature, taking the occasion of the publication of the interviews to provide a fascinating account of sharp changes in the institution of literature in Argentina, and more generally across Latin America, in the 1960s.

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