

# PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES IN THE ANALYSIS OF JEWISH ARGENTINE LITERARY WORKS

*Naomi Lindstrom*  
*University of Texas at Austin*

In recent years, considerable scholarly and popular attention has been extended to the Jewish populations of regions beyond those traditionally discussed—the United States, Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. Particular attempts have been made to record and analyze the experience of Jews residing in Latin America. The dramatic deterioration in the situation of the Argentine Jewish community over the past five years has given special visibility to this group, both because of widespread concern over the human rights issues involved and because of the appearance of Jewish-Argentine exiles in the United States and other areas heavily covered by the media. The difficulties experienced by Jewish citizens of Latin American countries certainly are deserving of attention, but one would hope that the interest aroused by these circumstances would lead to a more general curiosity about the many aspects of Jewish culture in this region.

This essay will survey criticism of Argentine literature that employs a Jewish-studies approach or contains elements of such an approach. The discussion's dual goals are to characterize some of the problems that traditionally have hampered the development of a critical literary approach to issues of Jewish identity and community, and to identify some of the more promising efforts to achieve new critical perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

Systematic examination of literary reflections of Jewishness is one of the truly underexplored areas in Argentine literary criticism. Although literary works with Jewish thematic material display varying degrees of artistry, the vast majority are grounded in the real-world circumstances of immigration, settlement patterns, and the problems of retaining a coherent Jewish identity in a massively Catholic-Hispanic society and handling conflicts with the "mainstream" society. Critical studies mainly reflect these emphases, but several brief studies or passages offer clues to ways in which literary analysis may be expanded and strengthened.

In order to examine the existing problems in this field of study

and to consider ways in which criticism has begun or might begin to improve, this essay has been organized into three sections. The first section examines criticism dealing with Argentine works with Jewish themes written during the period from 1880 to 1920. The second section discusses commentary on writings of the modern period, from 1920 to the present. The final section offers suggestions on avenues of research that could be helpful in expanding and upgrading critical coverage of Argentine works with Jewish themes, along with examples of representative unexplored research problems.

*Criticism on Argentine Works with Jewish Themes Written between 1880 and 1920*

Criticism of the pre-1920 period demonstrates the dearth of serious discussion of the literary manifestations of Jewishness. The existing commentary traditionally has centered on a few literary works in which Jewish or anti-Jewish themes are so prominent that the text can scarcely be analyzed without mention of this sociological feature. Recent articles by Kessel Schwartz and Germán García provide useful compendia of notable authors concerned with Argentine Jews.<sup>2</sup>

Schwartz includes writers eager to publicize the successes or the sufferings of Jewish immigrants, Alberto Gerchunoff (1884–1950) being the most famously sanguine and Carlos Grünberg (b. 1903) the most indignant about the treatment accorded Argentine Jews. Also included are celebrated proponents of literary anti-Semitism such as Julián Martel (real name José María Miró), Hugo Wast (real name Gustavo Adolfo Martínez Zuviría), and others. His discussion of pre-contemporary literature also mentions authors who simply commented in passing on the Jewish-Argentine scene. Schwartz provides a good general outline, including both writers who are Jewish and writers who work with Jewish themes, such as the unusual work of Pedro Orgambide, an allegorist who employs the Jew as an exemplar of many contemporary problems.

A worthy, but indirect, source of insights into the Jewish elements in Argentine literature is the criticism of David Viñas. Viñas's fiction such as *Dar la cara* (1962) and *Los dueños de la tierra* (1959) makes the protagonists' problematic Jewish identity central to the works' thematic material. In critical commentary, however, Viñas avoids focusing on any one ethnic group, concerning himself instead with class structure and the relations of prestige identities such as upper-class British, French or Frenchified, and traditional Hispanic-Catholic to the less prestigious "immigrant" identities, the most historically notable being Italian and Jewish. Viñas is concerned with the image of the man of letters as the product of an elite, therefore a suitable literary creator and participant in national affairs. From this perspective, Viñas studies the rise of the

“gentleman-writer” typically associated with British-style sociability, French education, and so on, in contrast with writers who might have been able to provide an alternative to this monolithically genteel (and Gentile) culture. He describes, for example, the entrance of writers like Max Dickman and Alberto Gerchunoff into Argentine literary life, then, by analyzing their social position, concludes that these “immigrant last-name” writers were upwardly mobile, middle-class individuals who essentially endorsed the general social statements made by elite writers.

Juan José Sebreli, a well-known cultural and social critic, has made a worthwhile attempt to expand the range of materials generally included in examining the Jewish presence in literature. His 1968 anthology, *La cuestión judía en la Argentina*, brings together excerpts from the writings of the expected authors like Martel and Gerchunoff, as well as those who commented briefly on the Jewish situation or represented Jewish characters as a peripheral feature in their fiction. His excellent selection and editing illuminate the complexities of attempting to identify any one characteristic attitude toward the Jewish population, for even within the work of a single author, contradictory and ambiguous elements are inherent.<sup>3</sup>

In short, there is no shortage of works to study, but the critical coverage tends to be sparse and does not focus on the specific textual features that convey an author’s image of Jewishness. Selected examples will demonstrate some of the critical problems that have presented themselves in this area of study.

The treatment of the anti-Jewish components in Martel’s novel *La bolsa* (1891) is suggestive of some of the critical problems. A major critical issue would appear to be whether Martel chose the Jew as a conventional target for general apprehension about the arrival of lower-status (non-Hispanic, non-British, non-French) immigrants in Argentina. This line of argument, pursued by Sergio Bagú and others, is summed up in Noé Jitrik’s *La revolución del 90*.<sup>4</sup> If this is the case, *La bolsa* should then be grouped with texts expressing a generalized anxiety about immigration, such as Eugenio Cambaceres’s novel *En la sangre* (1887), rather than with writings germane to the understanding of the Jewish situation. Countering this interpretation is the argument that the novel relies on fashionable French doctrines of the late nineteenth century that specifically attribute undesirable racial characteristics to the Jewish population. The latter reading of the novel has been expounded by Beatriz de Nobile and Carmelo M. Bonet.<sup>5</sup> Critical discussion often avoids any attempt to reconstruct the exact intentionality of the work, instead characterizing it as a text exhibiting both anti-Jewish and xenophobic tendencies.<sup>6</sup> In other words, discussion of the Jewish element in Martel tends to be largely descriptive.

*La bolsa* is a complex novel, one capable of sustaining analytical

discussion. Yet because of these inadequate approaches, the anti-Jewish passages have yet to be subjected to literary analysis that would reveal how the text does the work of conveying the sinister threat allegedly posed by new immigrants. Martel's evocation of the horrors of an ethnically mixed society, summoned up with a nightmarish intensity, is certainly the kind of textual phenomenon that literary analysis can address. This and other aspects of the novel's rhetoric and patterns of transmitting meaning surely need closer attention, if critics are to understand the specifically literary manifestations of anti-Jewish feeling. Martel's novel has begun to receive detailed attention for its artistic construction, but this scrutiny has not yet been extended to its treatment of Jewish themes.

Alberto Gerchunoff's *Los gauchos judíos* (1910) has also attracted critical attention, not because the work is a rewarding literary text, but because the Jewish theme receives such a heavily ideological treatment. A recent examination of Gerchunoff by Saúl Sosnowski, although brief, appears promising in pointing toward a more literary consideration of Gerchunoff's treatment of Jewish characters.<sup>7</sup> Sosnowski is principally concerned with a more recent generation of Jewish writers, but for comparative purposes, examines the evident falseness of Gerchunoff's social portraiture. In Sosnowski's view, the novel achieves this skewed vision through a persistent strategy—conscious or not—of omissions. This programmatic “leaving unsaid” succeeds in obliterating from the novelistic world the peculiar economic and social-status problems of the Jewish population in Argentina. This idea of literary silences and their resultant truncated and decontextualized view of Argentine Jewry is potentially a very useful one because it moves from simply identifying Gerchunoff's ideological agenda to examining how this false consciousness is textually elaborated so as to be persuasive to readers.

Sosnowski's commentary has wider implications precisely because he proves the applicability of literary analysis to a phenomenon typically assumed to be too simple to bear such scrutiny—the glowing idealization of the Jewish situation. If Gerchunoff can sustain this much close literary study (Sosnowski only suggests the general outline of a possible examination), then conceivably other outdated or sentimental texts could be analyzed to reveal the patterns employed in shaping a particular image of Jewishness in the reader's mind. While the literary (as opposed to ideological) component of Sosnowski's study is essentially rhetorical analysis, worthwhile results could be expected from the utilization of newer critical approaches like semiology and discourse analysis, which have proven their usefulness in clarifying the often complex ways in which even—less—sophisticated texts structure communication. Textual analysis, then, is the most needed new development in the field.

*Criticism on Argentine Works with Jewish Themes Written after 1920*

The literary studies examined so far represent criticism of literature reflecting conventional realism, which is appropriate because the lack of artistic finesse with which the Jewish element was usually conveyed discourages a complex literary analysis. With the onset of more contemporary literature in Argentina, the critical possibilities increase. The *vanguardia* output of the 1920–40 period offers works that virtually invite consideration of the organizing devices used to turn nonartistic matter into literary artifact.<sup>8</sup>

Jewish material in the work of the poet César Tiempo (born Israel Zeitlin in 1906) exemplifies the renovation of literature achieved by the avant-garde movements, which nonetheless were concerned with conveying real-world experience in recognizable form. This realistic tendency manifested itself in the choice of such tasks as details of daily life in the new immigrant community in Argentina and the rendering of Jewish observance, as well as the utilization of anti-Semitic behavior as a theme. This aspect of Tiempo's work is the one most easily recognized. He also had a feeling for artistic play, however, and continually sought textual strategies that would move away from the "stodgy" realism of earlier generations. Tiempo, like many of the new writers of the *entre-guerre* period, considered literary activity not only as communication, but as a game and as theatre.

Tiempo's role as an artistic game-player has received critical attention, particularly his famous hoax of "discovering" a nonexistent prostitute-poet and publishing her works. Attention has also been focused on efforts to convey aspects of Jewish experience, but critical discussion of this feature has been based on realistic assumptions.<sup>9</sup> Information and commentary about Tiempo's experimental side is included in the reissue of his hoax, *Versos de una. . .*<sup>10</sup> Tiempo's work still presents a number of undiscussed critical problems, possibly the foremost being his attempt to move the elaboration of Jewish themes away from the prevailing model of documentary realism.

Around 1940 significant developments in Jewish-Argentine literature occurred with the revival of sociologically oriented fiction. The writers involved in this phenomenon were generally more subtle and competent writers than the realists of the previous century (despite notable exceptions in both groups). Their main concerns were the structure of the Argentine elite and military establishment, the patterns of hierarchical governance found throughout society, and Argentina's difficult position in a world dominated by various forms of imperialism and neo-colonialism. Questions of Jewish identity in these contexts strongly concern Bernardo Verbitsky (1907–79), Bernardo Kordon (b. 1915), David Viñas (b. 1929), and Germán Rozenmacher (1936–71). Kessel Schwartz's

earlier-cited article contains an excellent listing and summary of the works most appropriate for this kind of examination.

The literary opus of this entire generation has been understudied thus far, especially its formal aspects. Critique of national and international ideology, admittedly a salient feature, has claimed more attention than their cultural, personal, and artistic aspects. Much could be done to identify and analyze the uses of this group's Jewish material, both as social exposé and as part of a work of art.

The bulk of commentary on the work of Germán Rozenmacher illustrates a particular problem facing analysts of literary works in which Jewish and Jewish-Argentine identities are primary issues. Because of the impact of these issues in such works as Rozenmacher's famous play *Réquiem para un viernes a la noche* (1967), critical response to this work has often continued the debate over assimilation, the maintenance of Jewish observances, and the compatibility of Jewish and Argentine selfhood. The resulting commentary may be worthwhile, but it inevitably moves the critic and reader away from considering the work itself and from examining how the play organizes its message and presents its strategies.<sup>11</sup>

An alternative to this extrinsic approach is suggested by Sosnowski's work on Rozenmacher.<sup>12</sup> This approach presupposes that the critic will not seek to address the real-world issues involved, but rather will assess how adequately Rozenmacher's text has set forth the questions raised for the reading or theatergoing public. Sosnowski's analysis of Rozenmacher's work focuses on its highly literary structuring of the Jewish subject matter, moving from sociological to artistic considerations.

Latin American "new writing" offers one notable example on the Jewish-Argentine topic, "magical" *Pueblo Pan* (1967) by José Chudnovsky (1916–66). This novel is unique not only in its extremely mythical and nonmimetic representation of Argentine Jews, but in its optimism toward the future, truly an anomalous stance in recent Argentine writing. Although this singular work is often mentioned or briefly described, thorough critical study of it remains to be done.

### *Conclusions for Future Critical Efforts*

In surveying a relatively underdeveloped field, it is helpful to specify areas in which further research would be productive. To predict where the study of Argentine Jewish literature may go in the future, one should first consider what kind of study has predominated thus far. Although the existing critical literature exhibits some variety, most of it calls upon literature to bear witness to aspects of the Jewish experience in Argentina. Critics have been preoccupied most with literature's rendering of either the Jews' perception of life in the New World or the perception of Jewish immigrants by the non-Jewish Argentine population. This domi-

nant concern is readily justifiable, given the need for information and insights about the nature of Jewish life in Argentina.

This testimonial approach, however, has left other aspects of the literature largely unexamined. In particular, little consideration has been given to the literary text as a unique form of discourse. To look at the specifically literary features, models of analysis would be needed that could focus on those characteristics that distinguish literary communication from more pragmatic forms like the essay and the memoir. A more literary examination could rely on any of the prevailing critical approaches with strong formalist or language-centered bases, ranging from the neo-Aristotelian study of literature as a specially structured form of rhetoric to the newer developments in unity of the work, structuralist criticism, or the continuations of structural thought that include semiological analysis, discourse analysis, and the newer approaches to literary language.

Criticism of these kinds would enable investigators to examine, for example, the element of Jewishness used to create a discourse of "the other." In this context, the text is designed to stand markedly outside the mainstream culture's typical language by using expressive conventions that offer an alternative to it. One work that might lend itself well to such examination is Israel Zeitlin's *Sabado Domingo* (1938), which contains some conventional material, but also represents an innovative effort to break down the barrier between Jewish and Christian religious language.

*Sabado Domingo* accomplishes this rupture of constraints largely through linguistic means such as the innovative fusion of holy-day terms that are incompatible in real-world usage. The processes by which this "impossible" discourse reconciles religious cultures and languages, as well as the relation between this alternative discourse and real-world religious expression with its sharp boundaries between categories, could be explored most fruitfully through a study examining category constraints, means of violating these strong conventions, and the new set of discourse conventions implicit in the author's utopian, ecumenical-universalistic language.

Even when substantial linguistic innovation is not a feature of the text, an emphasis on the processes of signification may reveal new aspects of the writing. For example, in many works, the ethnicity of the Jewish character may become a more universal sign of "otherness," as in Verbitsky's *Es difícil empezar a vivir* (1941), in which the recognition of "the other" in oneself is painfully achieved through a general raising of sociocultural awareness. The protagonist moves away from an uncritical identification with prevailing social assumptions to a sense of the many questionable aspects of Argentine society and his own somewhat alien position with respect to that society. This phenomenon could certainly

be treated at a purely thematic level, but a semiological approach would be able to look at the elaboration of a sign both particularistic (the individual developing a sense of his Jewishness) and universal (the individual assuming a more alienated and questioning stance toward the society around him).

The two research problems outlined above are offered as representative examples of the many critical questions that deserve future investigation by means of models focused on issues of language and meaning. By bringing to bear upon Jewish-Argentine writings the principled critical analysis of communicational and signifying process, this field of study will be able to illuminate what is most literary in the texts under examination.

## NOTES

1. While this paper limits itself to the study of imaginative literature, considerable essayistic and historical work also exists. See for example, Robert Weisbrot, *The Jews of Argentina from the Inquisition to Perón* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979). Martin H. Sable, *Latin American Jewry: A Research Guide* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978) lists works including Mario Diamant and Máximo Yagupsky, *Conversaciones con un judío* (Buenos Aires: Timerman, 1977); Alberto Klein, *Cinco siglos de historia: una crónica de la vida judía en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Cuadernos de Estudios Judíos, Comité Judío Americano, Oficina Sudamericana, 1976); Boleslao Lewin, *La colectividad judía en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Alzamor Editores, 1974); *Cómo fue la inmigración judía a la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1971); *El judío en la época colonial* (Buenos Aires: Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, 1939); Tuba Teresa Ropp, *Un colono judío en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca de Memorias del Instituto Científico Judío, 1971); and Lázaro Schallman, *Historia de los "Pampistas"* (Buenos Aires: Congreso Judío Latinoamericano, Biblioteca Popular Judía, 1971).
2. Kessel Schwartz, "The Jew in Argentine Literature," *The American Hispanist* 3 (19):9–12; and Germán García, "Los judíos," in his *El inmigrante en la literatura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1970), pp. 62–64.
3. Juan José Sebrelí, *La cuestión judía en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Tiempo Contemporáneo, 1968).
4. Noé Jitrik, *La revolución del 90* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor, 1970), pp. 112–13.
5. Beatriz de Nobile, *Análisis de La bolsa* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor, 1968), pp. 29–30; and Carmelo M. Bonet, introduction to Martel's *La bolsa* (Buenos Aires: W. M. Jackson, 1944), pp. xv–xvi.
6. See Gladys Onega, *La inmigración en la literatura argentina 1880–1910* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1969), pp. 109–23; and Germán García, "El chauvinismo racista," in his *El inmigrante en la literatura argentina*, pp. 93–99.
7. Saúl Sosnowski, "Contemporary Jewish-Argentine Writers: Tradition and Politics," *Latin American Literary Review* 6 (12):1–14.
8. Notable is the tremendous vogue for cabbalistic influence found especially in the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Xul Solar (Alejandro Schultz Solari, 1887–1963). The most complete study of the avant-garde cabbalistic trend is Saúl Sosnowski, *Borges y la cábala* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Hispamérica, 1976). On Xul Solar see Osvaldo Svanascini, *Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1962). Also Naomi Lindstrom, "Xul Solar. Star-Spangler of Languages," *Review of the Center for Inter-American Relations* 25–26 (1980): 117–21; "La síntesis de Xul Solar," *Américas* (June–July 1979): 21–24; "Xul Solar: los principios organizadores de su proyecto totalizador," *Hispamérica* 25–26 (1981): 160–64.

9. For realistic criticism see, for instance, Julio Noé's commentary in *Historia de la literatura argentina*, edited by Rafael Alberto Arrieta (Buenos Aires: Peuser, 1959), pp. 122–23.
10. This reissue was published by Rescate in Buenos Aires in 1977.
11. An example of this issue-centered commentary is Nestor Tirri's *Realismo y teatro argentino* (Buenos Aires Ediciones: La Bastilla, 1971), pp. 117–21.
12. Saúl Sosnowski, "Contemporary Jewish-Argentine Writers," and "Germán Rozenmacher: tradiciones, rupturas y desencuentros," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 6 (1977): 93–110.