

The Thrust of Demand: Literary Writing and Cultural Democratization in Argentina, 1900-1930

GERALDINE ROGERS

Abstract: This article focuses on ordinary people's interest in writing and publishing their texts during the first decades of the twentieth century in Argentina. In that period, the demand for participation and self-representation through literary writing founded an auspicious ground in newspapers and magazines "for the people", which had sections devoted to publishing or commenting on the works of readers. This article focuses on the emerging aspirations of a broad readership that was willing to exercise a right to the word, the way in which these demands found a place to be expressed, and how they were read and processed in different areas of the cultural field: the cultural market, left-wing culture and professional writers.

Contributor: Geraldine Rogers is Professor of Argentinean Literature and Professor of Cultural Studies in the Postgraduate Master on History and Memory at UNLP (Universidad Nacional de La Plata) in Argentina. She is also a researcher at CONICET (National Council of Scientific Investigations) and director of the digital book collection *Biblioteca Orbis Tertius* (<http://bibliotecaorbistertius.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/>) at UNLP. She is the author of *Caras y Caretas. Cultura, política y espectáculo en los inicios del siglo XX argentino* ("Culture, Politics and Entertainment in early Twentieth-Century Argentina," 2008) and *La galería de ladrones de la Capital de José S. Álvarez, 1880-1887* ("José S. Álvarez's The Gallery of Thieves in the Capital, 1880-1887," 2009), as well as an edited collection with Miguel Dalmaroni entitled *Contratiempos de la memoria en la literatura argentina* ("Setbacks in Memory in Argentinean Literature," 2009).

For a long time now we have been hearing from every kind of ruling group that people are never satisfied, never even grateful. Indeed this thrust of demand has been so deeply learned, and is so deeply feared, that one can see, on all sides, a ruling philosophy of delayed and graded concessions, for, as has been said, today's concession is tomorrow's springboard.

- Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*.

1. Introduction

The gradual democratization of writing is a fundamental aspect of the transition to modernity, which developed in different places at different rates. In Argentina, from the final decades of the nineteenth century onwards, important transformations took place in all areas. Society was modified by the arrival of European immigration, urban development and literacy campaigns, thus allowing the emergence of democratizing features in the beginning of the twentieth century. The transformation of the country, particularly of the city of Buenos Aires, came together with more people's involvement

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in an active public life¹. In 1912 the enactment of a new suffrage law had extended political participation, establishing the secret and mandatory ballot for all Argentinian adult men. In 1916, through that system, President Hipólito Yrigoyen's triumph meant a wider political representation for the masses. By that time, producers and consumers of a new kind were entering the cultural field. The new native-immigrant sectors introduced reading and writing practices which did not earn the same symbolic prestige as the elite, but had the adherence of the new readership. The popular mass press was one of the places where culture from below began to conquer public spaces and acquire more visibility. Popular mass periodicals were part of the culture that accompanied political changes. By then, the rising cultural industry coincided with politics, two areas strongly interested in the "popular", which began to link the democratizing logic with the logic of the market, two instances that depended on big audiences.

In this context, new demands for cultural participation emerged. Mass culture encouraged a participatory imaginary which included the reader as an active and demanding actor. In particular, popular periodicals testify to the desire many readers had to become writers. This was one of the most relevant phenomena—and, at the same time, one of the most resisted ones—of the emerging culture. The new cultural practices affected institutions, aesthetic principles and mechanisms of recognition, causing a reaction in the intellectuals with elitist habits². This article deals with the aspiration of going from consuming to writing literature in periodical publications, which were a favorable space not only for entertainment, but also for individual expression and the communication of experiences by writing.

The next pages will show that increasing aspiration in a number of cases found in two different areas of the Argentinean printed culture at that time³. One of them is the successful mass popular press (the very important and long lasting *Caras y Caretas* and *Crítica*, and other not-so-well-known magazines of songs and drama), and the other are some left-wing periodicals. Through them, this article will show several examples of the readers' demand for writing and will show the way in which three professional writers of those times (Horacio Quiroga, Roberto Arlt and Elías Castelnuevo) testify to this phenomenon, which was one aspect of the cultural democratization which some of them resisted but from which all of them benefited as writers.

¹ In *La política en las calles: Entre el voto y la movilización* ("The Many and the Few: Political Participation in Republican Buenos Aires") Hilda Sabato studies the mechanisms of organization and expression of civil society which, from 1862 onwards, progressively led to the formation of a public sphere in Argentina.

² In his key work *La ciudad letrada* ("The Lettered City") Angel Rama focused the power of written discourse in the historical formation of Latin American societies. He showed, from the colonial times onwards, the elitist, concentrated and hierarquical profile of writers, at least until the end of the 19th century, when the gradual emergence of a mass reading public and new kind of writers entered the cultural field.

³ Most of the periodical publications quoted in this article belong to the popular circuit; this means that very often they lack page numbers and sometimes they lack exact date (sometimes they only have the number of the issue and the year, and not more). In each case I have included the available details. All the translations of the quoted texts from now on are mine.

2. Graphomania: a new cultural demand

In the first decades of the Western twentieth century, the control of high culture began to be undermined by the ordinary people's interest in art, which sometimes contrasted with the scarcity of symbolic capital from which they came. As Walter Benjamin noted, mass culture made aesthetic objects available to an audience that had no specific knowledge, and reviews were becoming the common patrimony of ordinary people who would state their opinion not as specialists but as mere consumers in the market.

Periodical publications of the wider circuit contributed to the vulgarization of literary culture, at a time when bringing things spatially and humanly closer was starting to be one of the main social massive aspirations. In these magazines and newspapers the emergence of new subjectivities could be observed, with new forms of writing and reading. An equalizing tendency also encouraged many people's expectations to become writers. Newspapers and magazines opened that possibility, as a part of the historical transformation of the whole of cultural production. In the writing sphere, the situation by which a small number of authors were substantially differentiated from the readership as a whole was becoming extinguished. With the growing expansion of the press, an ever larger number of people were capable of getting, though sometimes only occasionally, to be on the side of the writers. In this way, the contrast between author and readership would lose its systematic nature, becoming functional and circumstantial, with readers willing to be writers—one of the most relevant phenomena of the emerging culture.

In Argentina, the first decades of the twentieth century show an ever-growing expansion of publications. Numerous aspects of the publishing market of those times have been dealt with by a large amount of bibliography⁴. These critical works have outlined the production and consumption map of this varied group —magazines, newspapers, leaflets, and pulp fiction which could be then bought in kiosks, subway stations, and newsstands— which continued and developed a phenomenon that had begun by the end of the previous century. These commercial materials, which were frequently promoted as “popular” and “national”, included representations and self-representations of writers and of the public. In them, the public's role not only as consumer, but also as producer, stood out.

In that period, the overabundance of ordinary people who wanted to write —and to see their own texts in print — was the subject of scientific observation and a target of mockery as a popular disease: *graphomania*. Horacio Quiroga¹, whose professional career as a writer had begun in 1905, testifies as to what extent the hobby of writing had expanded twenty

⁴ This works had been written, among others, by Adolfo Prieto, Beatriz Sarlo, Jorge Rivera, Sylvia Saítta, Graciela Montaldo, Verónica Delgado and Fabio Espósito, Nora Mazzioti. Some of this works are included in this article's bibliography.

years later, when he published in *El Hogar* and *Babel* a partly ironic “handbook available for all” and “tricks of the trade” for amateur storytellers¹. Popular magazines made jokes about this, but also stimulated the proliferation of amateur writers, with special sections devoted to publishing or commenting on the works of readers-writers who would send in their texts. All these are clear signs of the emerging aspirations of a broad readership that was willing to exercise a right to the written word”.

3. From *Caras y Caretas* magazine to *Critica* newspaper

The weekly magazine *Caras y Caretas* had been a pioneer by setting up in Argentina some key characteristics of journalism for the masses. As from 1898, it made a set of cultural products available, from a material and symbolic point of view (it was cheap and its texts and images were easy to understand), to people who had just become literate. If, as was usually said, the popular press was “the people’s book”, *Caras y Caretas* was among their favorites: it was a kind of cheap, entertaining, easy-to-carry and collectable encyclopedia for those who did not frequent bookshops or libraries.

From its beginning, this magazine strongly encouraged the desire of going from consumption to literary writing, as can be seen from the very first version of the magazine published in Montevideo at the end of nineteenth century. In an 1890 Uruguayan issue, a subscriber had sent his free collaboration with the following remark: “Yo tengo como apetito / De ver mío algún escrito/ En sus Caras y Caretas”⁵. When the magazine was established in Buenos Aires, it included a section called “Mail with no stamp”, where the works of improvised writers who would send their compositions in for eventual publication were briefly reviewed. The observation of consecutive issues shows the inclusion of collaborations as a result of the mailing of those works. This exchange confirms the readers’ growing desire to become producers. The unpaid character of these collaborations, the critical comments of the board of editors, and the tone of caustic humor with which many of these works were rejected show that sending texts meant for readers a longed-for opportunity to see their name and their writings in print.

The overabundance of authors was the object of satire in reference to writing as a popular craze. A 1903 article entitled “New diseases”⁶, signed by the chief editor, mentioned a patient who wanted to be cured of an addiction to writing literature. In 1901, when referring to the would-be new national dramatists, a satirical example was given which dealt with the case of a man who was studying dentistry but had the “alma

⁵ “My longing is to see / something written by me / in your *Caras y Caretas*” (Perico Manguela, “Presentación” [“Presentation”], in *Caras y Caretas*, 5 October 1890).

⁶ García, Luis. “Enfermedades nuevas” (“New diseases,” in *Caras y Caretas*, 27 June 1903).

de poeta y una fantasía con vuelos de cóndor”⁷ which allowed him “viajar constantemente entre el Parnaso y el aula odontológica”⁸. This matter came up all the time. Reprimands to amateurs sometimes included acid comments: “este final de siglo en que si ya no hay animales que hablan no son pocos los que escriben”⁹, to reproduce just one example of the typical derogatory attitude of the cultural legislators and judges with elitist habits.

In this regard, the position of the magazine was ambiguous: if, on the one hand, they encouraged the readers’ aspirations to get to the category of author, on the other, they censured the indiscriminate proliferation of texts which were considered wrong. Thus, the “Mail with no stamp” section punished the amateurs who sent their collaborations, and critically pointed out their flaws in style, topic, orthography, syntax or rhythm, mocking their blunders and answering to “the incurables” without the slightest diplomacy.

Caras y Caretas shaped the materials it published. It dictated the amount of 1,256 words for the writer of a story to “caracterizar a sus personajes, colocarlos en ambiente, arrancar al lector de su desgano habitual, interesarlo y sacudirlo”¹⁰, a limitation that, some years afterwards, the professional writer Horacio Quiroga would value as the origin of his mastery in the short story.

In a similar way, the magazine’s comments on the compositions sent by readers helped their training by calling their attention to several aspects of writing (as criticising poor metaphors, imperfect rhymes, or incoherent plots of their texts), which shows that, even though it allowed the emergence of a new group of producers, this did not always take place in an unconditional way, for *Caras y Caretas* sought to establish minimal correctness criteria and good writing. The “Mail with no stamp” section is a clear indication of the emerging aspirations of a wide audience which desired to appropriate a cultural resource—the right to the written word—thus far reserved for only the learned ones. The existence of semi-literate writers of odes or epithalamiums shows the heterogeneity and the unbalance in the circulation of different kinds of knowledge, as well as the sharp contrast, not only individual but also collective, between the appetites for cultural capital and the real cultural assets.

In the decade of 1920, the newspaper *Crítica*—founded in 1913—managed to set itself up as “the people’s newspaper”, highlighting the features that had been introduced by *Caras y Caretas*: a miscellaneous structure, contemporary photography, fictionalized

⁷ “The soul of a poet and a fantasy that flew like the condor,” (Eustaquio Pellicer, “Sinfonía,” in *Caras y Caretas*, 27 July 1901).

⁸ “Constantly travel back and forth between Parnassus and the dentistry schoolroom,” Eustaquio Pellicer, “Sinfonía,” in *Caras y Caretas*, 27 July 1901).

⁹ “This end of the century when, if there no longer are animals that speak, those who write are not few,” (Francisco Grandmontagne, “El honrado hijo de criminales,” [“The honest son of criminals”], in *Caras y Caretas*, 11 March 1899).

¹⁰ “To describe his characters, place them in an environment, pull the reader off his everyday apathy, make him interested and shake him,” (Horacio Quiroga, “La crisis del cuento nacional” [“The crisis of the national short story”], in *La Nación*, 11 March 1928, qtd. in Quiroga 1993).

news, graphic satire, dependence on advertising, regular payment to writers, and attractive special supplements with unprecedented print-run surges. Its popular and working-class-oriented stance, together with the participatory imaginary it encouraged, help explain its extraordinary success with its readership. This newspaper, which claimed to be “the people’s and for the people”, would also organize screenwriting contests, and would publish articles whose subject was how to write scripts, besides having a special section—“She writes”—that invited women to become writers. It also published translated notes from magazines or newspapers from abroad in which the predominant theme was the writing of screenplays: how to write them, what qualities they should have, who could write them, and so on.

4. Popular magazines on songs and drama

From the mid-1910s onwards, cheap periodical narrative collections summoned “all authors capable of producing, but lacking the possibility to publish their novels”¹¹. The advice columns show that non-professional writers would send their manuscripts to the editors of weekly novels, who only asked for “clear handwriting” in the case of improvised authors who were not able to type their texts. These collections would also organize literary contests, whose winners would be rewarded with different kinds of prizes: sometimes with money, sometimes only with the publication of the texts. The latter seemed to be, usually, reward enough for those whose most important goal was to see their own compositions in print.

There is also important evidence of these phenomena in another kind of periodical publication of the second decade of the twentieth century: the mass-popular magazines of songs and drama. They were produced by authors and entrepreneurs who re-boosted the journalistic and theater circuits by promoting a plentiful production that contributed to the circulation of plays (in particular, one-act farces called *sainetes*) and song lyrics (in particular *tangos*, but also *valses*, *estilos*, *fox-trots*, *tonadas*, *zambas*, *cuecas*, *milongas*).

Indeed, there was an expanding solidarity between entertainment and printed materials: large print-run newspapers and magazines contributed to the spreading of the public image of actors and actresses who were starting to include song lyrics in their plays (several of the most successful *tangos*, which subsequently became ‘classics’, have their origin in the theatre; this explains the presence of narrative monologues and melodramatic components in them). They were produced by businessmen who re-supplied the circuit by promoting a substantial production. These publications contributed to the circulation of songs, published dramatic texts and reviews of plays.

Magazines on songs—such as *La Milonga popular*, *Canciones populares-Tangos*, *El alma que canta*, among others—had great success. They offered different kinds of popular lyrics and photographs of singers. Sometimes, they also provided sheet music,

¹¹ “Un año de vida”, (“A year of life,” in *La Novela Semanal*, 18 November 1918).

giving the readers the chance to rehearse the compositions on their own. Among these materials, they advertised current plays in which these songs were included. It is evident that these were commercial strategies of the “popular” publications but the readership which responded to their appeal got to envision itself, to some extent, in the role of producer. In fact, they had a space for readers’ submissions, which usually turned into real collaborations.

Often the texts sent by the readers for publication also turned into causes for debate. Sometimes these magazines included pieces of correspondence between readers—who had circumstantially become authors—accusing one another of usurpation and piracy. One piece in *La Milonga popular*, for example, was about a person accused of plagiarism for having sent, with his signature, some poetry that included two stanzas by other authors; the magazine offered a detailed explanation of differences and similarities between the compositions, and it published the two of them in order to allow readers to compare and establish where the responsibilities lay¹². Such magazines frequently raised contentious allegations and scandals concerning these matters, which seem to have been of great interest at the time. Indeed, the fact that the problems of authorship and intellectual property rights were becoming matters of discussion in which the readers were involved is an indication of parity between producers and consumers which the mass culture was making possible to imagine. In fact, magazines such as *La Milonga popular* or *El alma que canta* opened composition contests “For new authors of both genders”, or contests of lyrics for *tangos*, in which readers would not only take part as contestants, but also as judges and commentators.

Along with the magazines on popular songs, there was a boom in theatre magazines such as *La Escena*, *El Teatro Nacional*, and *Bambalinas*. They offered full texts, critical works and information on current play listings. They published *sainetes* and other recently-premiered dramatic texts by the most successful companies in the theatre market, with leading actors and actresses of the time who sang *tango* songs in those plays. In the 1920s, these magazines were so successful that they were often reissued, and several of them went from being published bimonthly to weekly.

By 1920, the development of theatre activity was so expansive that amateur authors proliferated. For them, the magazines used to publish articles such as “How to write a comedy”, and used to organize competitions of unpublished works, which were rewarded with publication. Some magazines would organize contests for unpublished works, which would be rewarded with publication, and others would urge their readers to write theatre reviews on each week’s premieres. Even through irony—as in the case of a piece that deals with someone who had never read a play, but wanted to write one in only a few days—these magazines showed an image of virtual equivalence between producers and consumers. The reason for this —and, at the same time, its consequence —

¹² “Ladrones literarios: Acusados y acusadores” (“Literary thieves: Accused and accusers,” in *La Milonga* 16, 1922).

was the growing enthusiasm for becoming an author of texts, as is often seen in magazines on songs and drama.

Periodical publications on the broader circuit, whose repeated strategic terms “people” and “popular” were explicit in their headlines and in the texts and images chosen, would selfishly guide the readers to consume the products they advertised, although it is evident that they were not exhausted in the mere consumption: they were a place in which readers could also imagine themselves as producers. As we saw in the examples above, these publications incorporated the reader as an active and demanding figure, allowing him to picture himself composing and publishing short stories, song lyrics, plays, or pieces of criticism. These pieces would be written and read in private environments or in participatory spaces such as groups, clubs, committees or neighbourhood centres, which were favorable for the use and the updating of what the market offered. Examples abound, and they are a clear indication of a mass culture that was trying to be in tune with the demands of an audience that, by means of literary writing, was willing to go beyond the role of a mere consumer. This was the role to which it seemed to be restricted by definition, but now it was claiming for itself a right to the written word, which had, until then, been only kept for a minority.

5. Popular writing in left-wing magazines

In 1927, the left-wing magazine *Claridad* proposed the abolition of copyright in order to suppress the proliferation of improvised writers, “un sinnúmero de ‘escritores semi-analfabetos’ considerados ‘mercachifles atraídos por el olor del dinero’, who were “algo denigrante y molesto para nuestras pretensiones de cultura”¹³. In this way, the magazine showed its concern about the effects of the democratization and the commercialization of culture. But in left-wing culture this policy was sometimes combined with (and also in conflict with) the idea that, potentially, anyone could write: every individual was by himself creative and everyone could become an artist if he or she had the opportunity to develop his potential¹⁴.

In 1921, the anarchist magazine *Cuasimodo*, directed by the pedagogue Julio R. Barcos, included the following announcement:

ES USTED ESCRITOR INÉDITO?
 ¿Tiene usted algo que decirle a la humanidad?
 ¿Es usted autor de alguna poesía, epigrama, trabajo de carácter literario, sociológico, científico o filosófico? ¿Cultiva usted el género anecdótico, la fábula, el apólogo o la crítica razonada?

¹³ “A number of semi-literate ‘writers’”, considered “hucksters attracted by the smell of money”, who were “annoying to our claims of culture,” (“Por los teatros” [“For theatres”], in *Claridad* 138, 10 July 1927).

¹⁴ Similar ideas began to circulate in Russia since the revolution of 1917, with the rise of the Proletkult or “Proletarian culture association” (Lucena 2006).

Remítanos su trabajo, franqueado como original de imprenta y se lo publicaremos, pues las páginas de CUASIMODO están a disposición de todos los que piensen provechosamente y no hallen terreno propicio para esparcir el germen de su pensamiento.¹⁵

Since the early twentieth century, the anarchist movement encouraged the rise of amateur authors, promoting the writing of various kinds of texts, but especially those with a revolutionary orientation. The rise of theatre in anarchist circles led many people to rehearse the writing of monologues, comic pieces, interludes, farces and dramas of several acts. Most of these texts suffered from schematism and had numerous defects: "Se nos presentan algunos dramaturgos," the anarchist newspaper *La Protesta* stated in 1908, "con obras inverosímiles, artificiosas y de escaso interés, pero que son sociales porque incendian una fábrica, torturan a un burgués o dan coscorriones a un cura, y todo esto en tres o cuatro actos y un sinfín de cuadros"¹⁶.

Elías Castelnuovo¹⁷, who was born in 1893 to a poor family of immigrants in Montevideo, was semi-literate. He began to make his way as an industrious man, able to fix and build all sorts of things and to perform various tasks. These also included, when needed, the skill to "escribir una obra teatral para tres voces masculinas, proceder a los ensayos, hacer de director, de traspunte y de primer actor"¹⁸. Writing was one among many other facets of the proletarian "know-how" and of the many improvised and necessary jobs to be done.

Castelnuovo settled in Buenos Aires in 1912. There, he became a reader of the anarchist newspaper *La Protesta*, to which he later became an important contributor. He first worked as a typesetter in a printing house and began to write literary stories. For some time, he put his texts "en sobres de descarte del taller, que solían ostentar en la cabecera el membrete de alguna casa comercial,—un molino o una mueblería"¹⁹ and sent them to newspapers and magazines that received spontaneous collaborations. In this way, some years later he began to be known and managed to publish his first book. In the *Memoirs* he wrote by the end of his life, he gave autobiographical details of the

¹⁵ "ARE YOU AN UNPUBLISHED WRITER? Do you have something to say to humanity? Are you an author of some poem, epigram or any literary, sociological, scientific or philosophical works? Do you write anecdotes, fables, or reasoned criticism? Send us your work, stamped as original printing and we will publish it, because the pages of *CUASIMODO* are available to all who think usefully and do not have a propitious ground for spreading the germ of their thought" (*Cuasimodo* 19, 10 July 1921).

¹⁶ "We have some playwrights whose works are unbelievable, artificial and of little interest, but they are of social interest because in them someone sets fire to a factory, tortures a bourgeois man or gives noogies to a priest, and all this in three or four acts and endless scenes," (qtd. Suriano 166).

¹⁷ Elías Castelnuovo (1893-1982) became an important left-wing editor and a writer. In his short stories and dramas he depicts poverty and social problems, and in his essays he addresses the relationship between art and social change.

¹⁸ "To write a play for three male voices, to go to rehearsals, to perform as a director, as a manager and as a leading actor" (Castelnuovo 55).

¹⁹ "into envelopes which had been discarded by the workshop and which had in their letterheads the names of business houses —such as mills or furniture shops" (Castelnuovo 109).

emerging phenomenon that took place in the early decades of the century: the rise of a new kind of "popular" writer, in a favorable environment to the democratization of writing.

During this period, the idea that anyone could create literature and see his or her works in print began to settle. It could happen sporadically (i.e. publishing a collaboration in a popular magazine), or it could become a more permanent activity through which to acquire a public name and make a living as a popular artist. The individual aspiration to rise from the cultural underground by means of the written word and, perhaps, to be recognized as an author began to be part of the worker's dream. But rather than in the left-wing culture, it was in the popular market culture where the more convincing and successful staging of these desires of self-representation and empowerment through writing took place

6. Professional artists facing amateurs

The evaluation of this phenomenon by professional writers was ambivalent, as in the case of Horacio Quiroga mentioned above. Although they would defend some aspects of cultural democratization from which they benefitted, they would also demand some criteria of distinction, which mass culture was putting at serious risk, amid a lawless "democracy of letters" left to the plunder of anyone in mass publications.

In an article called "The literary profession", Quiroga intended to highlight the difference between occasional writers—who, in their leisure time, used to quickly and carelessly 'shoot' little novels (since "literature has become, for the public, a bold way to produce money")—and artists:

La profesión literaria no es lo que el público ignaro se figura. La novela semanal y lo que su pago tentador fueron una lotería. Infinitos seres que no volverán a escribir se enriquecieron—en la medida de lo posible—con una sola obra. Nunca habían escrito, ni reincidirán. Gozaron un instante de fortuna [...]. Pero muy distinta es la posición del hombre que debe dedicarle, no sus horas de ocio, sino las más lúcidas y difíciles de su vida, pues en ellas le van dos cosas capitales: su honra, pues es un artista, y su vida, pues es un profesional.²⁰

²⁰ ["The literary profession is not what the ignorant public imagines. The Weekly Novel and its tempting payment were like a lottery. Many people who will never write again have got rich —as much as it is possible— by writing only one piece. They had never written before, and they will not relapse. They enjoyed a moment of fortune [...]. But very different is the position of the man who has to spend, not his leisure hours, but the most lucid and difficult ones of his life, for in them he places two fundamental things: his honour, because he is an artist, and his life, because he is a professional," (Horacio Quiroga, "La profesión literaria" ["The literary profession"], in *El Hogar* 951, 6 January 1928, qtd. in Quiroga 1993).

He aimed at establishing the symbolic and economic value of literary texts written by professional artists, whose works were guaranteed by an artistic commitment that led to differentiate them from those carelessly written by opportunistic amateurs, disloyal competitors in the labour market²¹.

Another example of this can be read in some articles by Roberto Arlt²², whose self-image as an improvised writer did not prevent him from reacting, with a professional zeal, against amateurs who were publishing in song magazines such as *La Milonga popular* or *El alma que canta*, which organized composition contests that were open to everyone.

In many articles published in his section in *El Mundo*, he deplored “la cáfila de escritorzuelos desocupados, recitadores de radio, compositores de tango y declamadoras profesionales...”²³, and all the improvised authors, who were given encouragement by magazines in competitions in which anyone could participate, not only as a competitor but also as a juror. In 1928, he wrote a piece called “Popular music and poetry”, where he stated that

Hay que leer Alma que canta o cualquiera de esas revistas destinadas a la difusión de la letra de los tangos. Prima un romanticismo de almacén y todo va tan falseado que lo ridículo de estas composiciones sólo puede satisfacer el alma de fabriqueras analfabetas y de vagos ídem, ídem. Y si todavía ese romanticismo estuviera cargado de un poco de belleza, vaya y pase. Pero allí todo está cargado de grosería, de cosas tan inmediatas y repulsivas a veces que son de imposible reproducción. Y lo que ocurre es esto: que los compositores de letras son unos burros. Esa es la verdad. En cambio, cuando interviene un artista, la cuestión cambia de inmediato.²⁴

²¹ Two decades before, Ruben Darío expressed similar ideas, stressing the symbolic and economic value of literary texts, guaranteed by the existence of a *style*, which lead to differentiate professional writers from amateurs and journalists —both competitors in the labor market (Rogers 2010).

²² Roberto Arlt (1900-1942) was born in Buenos Aires in a family of immigrants. His innovative novels *El juguete rabioso* (1926) *Los siete locos* (1929) and *Los lanzallamas* (1931) are now part of the canonical Argentinean literature. He published everyday “Aguafuertes” (“Etchings”) in the newspaper *El Mundo* between 1928 and 1942.

²³ “The gang of unemployed scribblers, radio reciters, *tango* composers,” (Roberto Arlt, “Algo más sobre el gaucho” [“Something more about the *gaucho*”], in *El Mundo*, 5 December 1932, p.4, qtd. in Arlt 1998).

²⁴ “You have to read *Alma que canta* [sic] or any of these magazines destined to the spreading of *tango* lyrics. There is, above all, a raw romanticism and everything is so distorted that the ridiculousness of these compositions can only satisfy the soul of illiterate factory workers and lazy people. If only the romance had a little beauty, one could accept that. But there, all is full of coarse things, so immediate and repulsive at times that they are impossible to quote. And what happens is this: the composers of lyrics are donkeys. That’s the truth. Instead, when an artist intervenes, the situation immediately changes,” (Roberto Arlt, “Música y poesía populares” [“Popular music and poetry”], in *El Mundo*, 3 November 1928, p.4, qtd. in Arlt 1998).

Roberto Arlt's argument was defending a professional interest. It presented his position as a writer who, though working in a newspaper, was primarily an artist. Two years later, he insisted on the same issue in a piece entitled "Treason in *tango* lyrics":

Salvo dos o tres autores de tango, el resto de los letristas hacen coplas verdaderamente infames [...]. El tango gira en torno de la vida del pobre. En la existencia del pobre, lo más anormal es quizá el amor y la traición en el amor. El hombre se gana la vida trabajando y la mujer tiene que sudar en la batea y en la cocina y ni tiempo para respirar le queda. Pretender que gente así se dedique al amor, es pedir gollerías. Que se hagan traición, una estupidez [...], el vago que no tiene nada que hacer [...] agarra la guitarra y, si tiene un poco de imaginación, empieza a hilvanar coplas [...]. El pueblo repite los malos versos. No analiza. Bueno ¿quién analiza aquí? Y los copleros escriben.²⁵

These two fragments reproduce the presupposition of inequality that still prevailed in the "lettered city" (Rama), an order that fixed the limits within which different types of intelligence acted: an order in which this or that topic could interest some but not others, and in which different writing practices did or did not have the right to claim a space. Hence, this implied that the poor would have no time or interest in singing about betrayed love, that the balladeers would write for lack of a better occupation, and that the people, unable to analyse, would simply repeat these kinds of awful verses. Among the refused compositions, Roberto Arlt also rejected some *tangos* which later became classics²⁶. But what matters here is not the error in literary assessment, which is only verifiable from the present time. If we were to highlight that misjudgement, we would have to make a list of signatures and compositions which, in fact, emerged from this system of magazines and contests and now make up the canon of Argentinean popular culture²⁷. It is not the lack of accuracy in the forecasting that matters here, but the reaction of a literary order that, even from a column in the newspaper *El Mundo*, resisted being assaulted by the demands for participation by the many who formed a new stratum in the literary milieu. Emboldened by improvised knowledge and by the desire to write, they were trying to overcome the role of passive consumers.

²⁵ "Except for two or three *tango* authors, the rest of the lyricists make truly infamous songs [...]. *Tango* lyrics deal with the life of the poor. In poor people's lives, love and betrayal of love is perhaps the most unusual thing. Men make a living on working [...] and they barely have time to breathe. Assuming that this kind of people are so devoted to love, is asking for too much. Thinking that they betray each other is stupid. [...] The bum who has nothing to do [...] grabs the guitar and, if he has a little imagination, he begins to 'weave' songs. [...] People repeat bad verse. They don't analyse it. Well, but who actually analyses here? And the *copleros* keep writing" (Roberto Arlt, "La traición en el tango" ["Betrayal in tango"], in *El Mundo*, 4 December 1930, p.4).

²⁶ I.e. "Esta noche me emborracho" ["Tonight I will get drunk"] by Enrique Santos Discépolo.

²⁷ Among such titles and names of authors, there would be the *tango* "Mano a mano" and Pascual Contursi, Homero Manzi, Celedonio Flores, among others.

7. Conclusion

This article has highlighted a relevant phenomenon that requires more in-depth and systematic research: the ordinary people's interest in writing and publishing their texts in Argentina during the first decades of the twentieth century. In that period, what Williams calls the "thrust of demand" for participation and self-representation through literary writing created an auspicious ground for newspapers and magazines "for the people".

The cultural critique often focuses on the manipulative and degrading components of mass culture. However, this blurs other necessary elements for the understanding of the anything-but-simple processes of cultural circulation. The view presented here, without disregarding the manipulative strategies of the cultural industry, has attempted to make the other side of the coin also visible: the fascinating world involved in the desire of literary production by the wide readership, and the way in which these demands for participation found a place to be expressed. As we have seen above in the cases of three important authors —Horacio Quiroga, Roberto Arlt and Elías Castelnuovo—, the writers who at that time were developing their career in magazines and newspapers sensed that emerging phenomenon. Ordinary people's urge to write was one of the results of the cultural democratization that enabled the three of them to become professional writers.

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