

Elsa Drucaroff (2011)

Los prisioneros de la torre. Política, relatos y jóvenes en la postdictadura

Buenos Aires: Emecé, 530 p.

Reviewed by Candela Marini

Duke University

Elsa Drucaroff's *Los prisioneros de la torre* has caused quite a commotion among the Argentine academic community, a good sign of the possible new debates. Drucaroff intended to attract attention – that of the general public, but especially the critics – to the rich and significant literary production of the new generations in Argentina. In her book, she objects the literary void that is said to have followed the generation of militants – the one that fought and suffered the last military dictatorship, 1976-1983 – and the alleged lack of creativity and commitment in the post-dictatorship generations. Both ideas should in fact be credited to a perception bias by the older generation, which largely seems to have failed to acknowledge more recent literary production.

Drucaroff is a researcher, critic, writer and professor with a long and dedicated career. She currently teaches at the University of Buenos Aires. *Los prisioneros de la torre* inserts itself into the Argentinean tradition of essay-writing, since it goes beyond a literary critique of the novels and short stories published between 1990 and 2007 by those born in and after 1960. This book is at once

a political statement about literature and the role of writers and critics, a psychological reflection of the fears, traumas and silences that are within each generation, and a sociological diagnosis of what has happened since the return of democracy and especially since the 2001 crisis to the present day. Last but not least, it is a direct confrontation with the figures that have dominated the intellectual sphere of production: David Viñas, Noé Jitrik and, above all, Beatriz Sarlo. Drucaroff's book is a wake-up call to the academic community: critics need to pay more attention to the New Argentine Narrative (NNA), and expand their views and criteria to current methods and discourses, which differ significantly from those during the dictatorship.

Claiming that there is such a thing as a NNA, different but just as rich and valuable as previous epochs, is a big enterprise. Drucaroff's ambitions and objectives in this project are enormous, a fact that she is well aware. First, she must define who the new generations are and in which ways they differ from previous ones (still producing literature). She has to survey a large and

diverse literary corpus not always found in the traditional spaces of publication, by exploring blogs, online magazines, and publications in small circulation. She also wants to identify tendencies and common themes (David Viñas' *manchas temáticas*) in a corpus of literature that until now was non-existent to many. Her reading is one of the many that are possible; yet, she does not claim to have the final word. On the contrary, hers is the first of what we hope will be the beginning of many heated readings and discussions about the NNA. The book is divided into thirteen chapters. Throughout the first five she presents her argument and begins a debate on the common beliefs of today's Argentine literature. According to Drucaroff, it is untrue that the post-dictatorship generations are apathetic and socially uncommitted. They do not share the idealism and activism of the militant generation, because they grew up in very different political realities. Yet, this does not mean that their cultural productions are indifferent to their surrounding world. On the contrary, the themes and perspectives that are common to many of these works express a deep uneasiness with the post-dictatorship reality. There is nothing to fight for anymore; the young of the past are an example impossible to emulate; and the parental advice "be a rebel as we were" is more than a tricky predicament. It is nevertheless once she leaves behind her discussion with Beatriz Sarlo that Drucaroff starts discussing the characteristics she sees repeated in the NNA, such as the cynical air that accompanies the "democracy of defeat" of the 90's, the presence of ghost-

like characters, and the recurrent theme of filicide.

As a revalorization of this new body of literature, this book has long been needed. But in fighting the blind spots and biased perceptions of Sarlo and other important Argentine literary critics, Drucaroff reveals some of her own. She chooses, for instance, to leave poetry aside. She claims to do so purely for practical reasons, but there is also a tacit implication that poetry – as the prejudice goes – is something different, which resists any kind of sociological analysis. Drucaroff clearly privileges a literature that engages with reality, one that proposes a reading of its contemporary society. But how do we delimit that? She is not aiming at some kind of social realism (her analysis of Mariana Enriquez's writings, for instance, is an example of how literature can be political even when not directly shown), but her reading does seem to approve of only a certain kind of literature. This appears to contradict her intention of opening our eyes to all that is new and break apart from the accepted canons of producing literature. In this respect, her long, condemning analysis of César Aira's literature – an author of great success not only among the literary authorities, but also among young writers – does not seem justified. Halfway through the book, Drucaroff not only continues her debate with Sarlo, but also deems it necessary to dispel one writer's fame before making room for the new generation of authors. As a result, what was at first exciting and refreshing becomes a sort of internal battle that only postpones the stated central concern of the book: the new literature. The critique is

necessary, but at points it seems to exhibit the very same plainness it critiques. At the same time, the theory Drucaroff uses to sustain her arguments against this criticism and against Aira's literature seems out of place. Early 20th century Russian formalists Bajtin, Shklovski and Tinianov are some of the names that resonate the most. From José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) she takes the image of how each generation succeeds the previous one forming a tower thus the name of the book. This dated theoretical foundation is a dubious platform to launch a renovation of the Argentinean literary criticism, especially when one of her demands to the NNA is their lack of essay-writing. It is actually when she dialogues with Andrés Neuman, Sol Echevarría, Aníbal Jarkowski, or her own students, that a gust of fresh air starts to flow and the most interesting observations are made.

A final comment concerns the literature she leaves aside. Drucaroff does an exhaustive reading of what is being produced in Buenos Aires and she closely follows the debates taking place among the people studying or working at the University of Buenos Aires. However, there is no mention of what is happening outside the capital city – just a few names from Córdoba and Santa Fe find their way into her book. So again, if we are trying to open our eyes to a vivid literary activity that not long ago was completely ignored, we need to stop reducing Argentinean reality to what is happening in Buenos Aires.

All in all, Drucaroff's book offers itself to all kind of criticisms and dialogues, because that

is exactly what it intends to do. The book not only attempts at a possible reading of what is being produced by the new generations, it is also a call to *read* those texts and to debate their message. It is, in this sense, very successful. For all those interested in Argentine literature, it is a book that needed to be written and needs to be read.