

Strife for 'the popular': *Claridad* against *avant-garde* writers in *Crítica* (Argentina, 1926-1927)

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Summary

Between 1926 and 1927, the left-wing magazine *Claridad* started a campaign of aggression and discredit against *Crítica*, the popular newspaper that had incorporated several writers who had links to *Martín Fierro*, the most important *avant-garde* magazine. The target of the attack was the new alliance between literary art and mass popular culture and the legitimacy of certain written forms of representing 'the popular'. This campaign concentrated important cultural aspects of this period: far from being a mere episode of competition in the market or in the literary field, it needs to be interpreted in an incomparably greater front, the strife for hegemony in the wide space of mass culture, in which an important left-wing cultural project decided to fight for 'the popular' in the twenties.

In the decade of the 1920s *Crítica*, the most popular newspaper in Buenos Aires, added to its editorial staff several writers who had links to the aesthetic *avant-garde* of the *Martín Fierro* magazine. A picture¹ taken at the inauguration of the paper's new headquarters in 1927 shows its director with some of them; "the people's paper" had also become "the house of the poets", whose modern song was now in unison with the rotary press:

En la casa de los poetas hay un gran stock de alegría.
¡Cómo canta la Hoe
Se alza una canción estremecida;
por un lado tritura el papel blanco
y por el otro parte la hoja florecida.
Afiche: los hombres sonoros,
la máquina grávida...
*Crítica, Crítica, Crítica!*²

*(In the house of the poets there's a huge stock of joy.
How does the Hoe sing!
A shuddering song rises;
The white paper is shred on one side,
The blossoming sheet comes out of the other.
Poster: the resonant men,
The filled machine...
Crítica, Crítica, Crítica!)*

With a contradiction characteristic of those times of change, the very *avant-garde* writers who expressed their rejection of the market were trying to conquer an expanded space of circulation. In 1926, the *Martín Fierro* magazine owned two small publishing houses destined to take the work of the *avant-garde* writers to "*la gran masa del público*"³ (MF 1926a: 259). Such strategies show an interest in participating in the process of modernization not only by means of aesthetic proposals but also by means of expansion in the market, an aim shared with other cultural producers that were located in a completely opposite place, be

¹ Picture taken on September 1927 and reproduced in *El libro del tango* (Ferrer 1980: 281).

² González Tuñón, Raúl. "Poema a la Hoe" (Tálice 1989: 131) [our translation].

³ "*The great mass of the readership.*" [our translation]

it aesthetically or politically. That was the case of the left-wing magazine and publishing house *Claridad*, whose initiatives were, in this regard, successful beyond comparison: as one of its protagonists tells, its books were extraordinarily well distributed, whereas the endeavors of the *Martín Fierro* group were supported by a small number of readers and were drowning in financial problems (Yunke 1941: 324). Some objective studies on the editorial world in that period corroborate this diagnosis.

Nevertheless, however meager were the results of the aesthetic *avant-garde*'s attempts to enlarge its readership by means of their own institutions for circulation and publicity, the same cannot be said as regards the relationship some of those writers started with the mass media. In particular, the success of the newspaper *Crítica* caused several of them to find there, at least partially, a living and a space for the circulation of their aesthetic ideas and their literary practice. From 1925 onwards, the paper took on Nicolás Olivari, Jacobo Fijman, Conrado Nalé Roxlo, Enrique and Raúl González Tuñón, Ulises Petit de Murat, Pablo Rojas Paz, Horacio Rega Molina, Córdova Iturburu, Carlos de la Púa, Roberto Arlt, and Jorge Luis Borges.⁴ As a critical reaction to that profitable alliance, the magazine *Claridad* began a campaign of aggression and discredit through articles that were destined to criticize the contributions of some “*periodistas de la nueva sensibilidad*”⁵ in the popular newspaper. The following pages shall deal with that series of writings –published between 1926 and 1927– and the important implications they brought about.

Left-wing culture, aesthetic *avant-garde* and mass popular culture

The periodical publications *Claridad*, *Martín Fierro*, and *Crítica* are paradigmatic of three phenomena –the Left, the *avant-garde* and the mass culture—whose correlation is indispensable to understand the transformations that took place in the decade of the 1920s. While the first two are considered “little magazines” with an aesthetic-ideological orientation made by the so-called “new generation”, *Crítica* was a massive newspaper that sought the interest of a much broader and heterogeneous readership.

Martín Fierro. Periódico quincenal de arte y crítica libre (Bimonthly newspaper of art and free criticism, 1924-1927) was the main organ the aesthetic *avant-garde* of the Florida group had. Its renovating program was based on the interest in formal innovations, the desecration of art, and a local –but at the same time, cosmopolitan– inflection. Although its concrete acts were much less radical than its declarations, the Manifest written by Oliverio Gironde stated a rejection for academic solemnity, a search for the new, and a re-definition of the idea of art. Besides, the magazine held a particular interest in declaring the autonomy of the artistic field in opposition to the pressures of politics or the market. In order to be reaffirmed as modern artists, the writers of the “new sensitivity” rejected a mass culture with which they were actually linked in their practice. Their concrete practices –among which, there is the hiring of several *avant-garde* writers to the editorial staff in *Crítica*– show a productive exchange of resources between modern art and mass culture.

Claridad. Revista de arte, crítica y letras, tribuna del pensamiento izquierdista (Magazine of art, criticism and literature, a rostrum for left-wing thinking, 1926-1941) was one of the most important left-wing magazines of the Boedo group. Founded by Antonio Zamora, it held a Project of cultural politics destined to the formation of committed readers, showing in literature a predilection for realistic aesthetics of a limited formal complexity. This magazine, as well as the *Los Pensadores* collection of weekly leaflets, and the cooperative publishing house *Claridad*, were part of a project that sought to offer good reading materials

⁴ Even though Carlos de la Púa and Roberto Arlt did not get to contribute to *Martín Fierro*, they were considered “*Martín Fierro* enthusiasts” (González Tuñón 1976: 17).

⁵ “*journalists of the new sensitivity*” [our translation]

that were responsible from a moral point of view, and useful because of their pedagogical value. Their goal was to counteract the influence of commercial cultural products offered by opportunistic businessmen and supported by an unaware readership. Acting on that diagnosis, the idea was to create an alternative trend oriented to a social transformation from a left-wing socialist perspective, with the assumption of an intrinsic relationship between culture and pedagogy (Montaldo 1987).

Even though its declared aim was not commercial but educational, *Claridad* was a profitable project. Its eclectic and affordable proposal was in tune with the needs of a new thirsty-for-reading-materials readership that was interested in an active participation in the social and cultural world. On the basis of its confidence in reading as a powerful means of transformation and the conception of cultural agents as responsible people, the magazine fought the “bourgeois writers”, among which it included those who unscrupulously sold their pen in the market –authors of serials or weekly novels that fed the people’s carnal passions instead of educating them– as well as the avant-garde poets, who were exclusively concerned with formal innovations.

The controversy between “*martinfierristas*” and “*boedistas*” is a classic of the Argentinean ‘20s. The mutual accusations –that could be read in the pages of *Martín Fierro* and *Claridad*– were an effective propaganda strategy of the writers to settle in the public scene, bringing attention to different conceptions of literature, the market and the readership. The “*martinfierristas*” accused the “*boedistas*” of being commercial, of having a coarse realist aesthetic, and of giving the readership emotional blackmail and bad writing. On the other hand, writers from *Martín Fierro* received accusations of being elitist and of having an uncommitted aestheticism.

Crítica, founded by Natalio Botana in 1913, managed –as from the 1920s– to get itself in the position of “the people’s newspaper”, emphasizing the features that had guaranteed the success of mass journalism since the beginning of the century: a miscellaneous structure, topicality photographs, fictionalization of news, graphic satire, a sustenance on advertising, a regular payment to producers, and attractive special issues with unprecedented print-run surges (Rogers 2008). With sensationalism, it covered not only crime news but also published denunciations on public matters and social problems. It covered the life of workers and the world of poverty from a point of view that tried to be in tune with the most vulnerable sectors of the population, revealing conflicts and injustices (Saítta 1998). Its popular and working class-oriented bias together with the participatory imagery it encouraged help explain its extraordinary success with the readership. Its pages included the reader as an active and demanding figure, inviting him/her to participate in surveys and contests, or to write diverse complaints and requirements. This way, the newspaper that declared to live “on the people and for the people” coincided with the modern expressions of politics in their common interest for “the popular”, which in Argentina was beginning to be coordinated with the massive, connecting the democratizing logic with that of the market, two instances that depended on large readerships. Although this construction was based on real components, its illusory factor lied in the main role the mass readership had as a consumer. From the beginnings of the century onwards, the popular aspect of urban culture cannot be considered apart from the process of construction of the massive, with the access of the crowd to a greater visibility and social presence.

An outrageous episode

In February 1927, *Claridad* published an unusual piece of news, which –at the same time– was a report: two writers of the newspaper *Crítica* –Enrique González Tuñón and Carlos de la Púa– had schemed to set fire to Antonio Zamora’s publishing house and attempted to strike its owner. The second of the perpetrators was caught red handed by the police, and finally, the newspaper businessman Natalio Botana interceded to set him free.

The case was more likely to appear in the yellowish section of crime news of the *Crítica* newspaper than in the “Magazine of art, criticism and literature, a tribune for left-wing thinking” directed by the victim. The origin of the situation had been a slanderous article that a few days earlier egged on the group of writers linked to the *Martín Fierro avant-garde*, who were now successfully frequenting mass journalism: Enrique González Tuñón, Carlos de la Púa, Roberto Arlt, Nicolás Olivari, Raúl González Tuñón, Horacio Rega Molina, and Jacobo Fijman. It was doubtless a provocation. So much so, that Zamora devoted several pages of the following issue to comment on the incident and re-published the article with an overtly quarrelsome tone: “*Para que nos asalten otra vez. Este es el suelto que motivó el asalto. Denuncia contra Crítica*”⁶ (C 1927f).

The incident, which was apparently trivial, holds important aspects of the cultural field of that period, paying down the centrality that is generally attributed to the literary controversy “Boedo vs. Florida”. In this regard, this case calls attention to a significant change: if, until then, the target for the Boedo writers had been the group formed around the *Martín Fierro* magazine, as from July 1926 –when *Claridad* was founded– the aggressions shifted toward the newspaper that had employed several “*martínfierristas*”. The shift seems to show that the “engominados de Florida”⁷ (Yunque 1926:13) themselves were beginning to have less importance as contenders than those very same writers in the media institution that was getting more and more consolidated as “the people’s newspaper”⁸, and against which it was absolutely necessary to compete for the large readership.

The dispute for public space and for the market was central in this period of modernization (Montaldo 1999b). *Claridad* –just like the majority of those who considered themselves “learned”– denied legitimacy to successful phenomena such as the tango, one-act farces (*sainetes*), or large print-run journalism, whose unquestionable popular component lied in the amount of people who responded to their seduction and seemed to get the utmost enjoyment of them. The magazine took it for granted that the consumers of mass culture were living in a state of false consciousness, which –because of its left-wing perspective on culture and on the people– turned out to be –at the very least– problematic. While the cultural industry was profiting from its being in tune with the new collective aspirations, the managers of *Claridad* saw nothing there but manipulation, from an enlightened conception that saw culture as a tool that must provide “from above” elevation or progress for those “from below”. Thus, at the same time that it led an undertaking to the enlargement of its readership and the accessibility of reading materials, it disproved other projects of a commercial nature, without noticing that, in the midst of the mercantile logic that ruled them, there also had to be similar elements of recognition and identification in the experience of those who participated in their consumption.⁹ Indifferent towards the needs that that area of the expanding culture might have been fulfilling, it was devoted to strongly challenge it. In this context, the great growth of the “people’s newspaper” and its overwhelming massivity were a reason for well-grounded concern.

In 1927, *Claridad* as well as *Crítica* achieved material progress that showed the soundness of their projects. Zamora, who prior to being the director of the magazine had been

⁶ “So that they attack us again. This is the piece that caused the assault. Denunciation against *Crítica*.” [our translation]

⁷ “the slicked-down haired Florida guys” [our translation]

⁸ According to Tálce: “El secreto de su triunfo estuvo en hacer el diario del pueblo. En bregar por la justicia social y combatir el privilegio” (1989: 81) “The secret of its triumph was to make a newspaper for the people, fighting for social justice and struggling for that privilege.” [our translation].

⁹ “If the forms of provided commercial popular culture are not purely manipulative, then it is because, alongside the false appeals, the foreshortenings, the trivialisation and short circuits, there are also elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a re-creation of recognisable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding. The danger arises because we tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas they are deeply contradictory; they play on contradictions, especially when they function in the domain of the ‘popular’” (Hall 1981: 234).

a proofreader in Botana's newspaper, had set up a corporation in order to get, with a lot of effort, his own place and machinery. In September he inaugurated the new building, which was far from town, but had two floors, room for 500 people and conference –and political meeting– rooms. In the same month, *Crítica* also began a new cycle with the opening of a huge seven-floor building in Avenida de Mayo, especially designed for the “*inmensa entidad periodística que vive del pueblo y para el pueblo, y en la cual colaboran miles y miles de hombres*”¹⁰, as it was stated in its own pages (Tálice: 126).

It was in this period of uneven achievements when Zamora unleashed his aggressive campaign against *Crítica*. This is still another piece of evidence of the fierce competition that existed in the cultural market, but, in this case, it also implied a political battle: in it, *Claridad* intended to fight for the representation of popular culture in the journalistic field and the influence on the readers through the powerful resort of writing. The onslaught can be read, then, as a sign of a moment in which the left-wing magazine detected the –perhaps most important– obstacle for its project, and rechanneled its attacks towards the most important opponent: mass journalism.

A profitable and irritating alliance

In September 1926, *Claridad* included in its pages a short play (C 1926 e) whose fictional setting was the Tortoni café, where Jorge L. Borges, Enrique González Tuñón and Nicolás Olivari were conversing. The scene held a satirical view on the young *avant-garde* writers and on the collaboration some of them did in Botana's newspaper. González Tuñón was depicted as someone who “*hace rato jeringa en Crítica con sus tangos y compadradas*”¹¹ and, in Olivari's smart outfit, there was a hint to the profits he had gained when becoming a strikebreaker at a union level, which affected the newspaper. This had to do with a conflict that in those months in 1926 was taking place between the newspaper and the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense (Graphic Federation of Buenos Aires): in March, Botana had decided to eliminate a work shift and dismiss eighteen employees; in protest, the union began a strike. In the midst of this situation, the newspaper hired new contributors who did not support the complaints. Several articles denounced the various negative consequences of that measure. Among them were the constant lies in the news, generated by those new writers, who were more inclined to fictional hypertrophy than to factual truth:

*Con un sentido ridículo de la economía [Botana] ha contratado en el mal paso de una huelga, a una docena de muchachos sin responsabilidad periodística de ninguna clase. La presencia de estos literatos en ciernes en esa casa, sólo la explica la exigüidad de sus sueldos. Son los periodistas de la neo-sensibilidad y se diferencian principalmente de los otros en que cobran menos*¹² (C 1927a).

This way, *Claridad* condemned the director as well as these writers, who not only lacked professionalism and ethics, but who also now had a highly important mass media for their aesthetic propaganda, using the newspaper as “*un vehículo de sus antojadizas opiniones literarias, de sus desatinos idiomáticos, de sus injurias para los que no les van a la zaga*”¹³.

¹⁰ “immense journalistic entity that lives on the people and for the people, and in which thousands and thousands of men contribute.” [our translation]

¹¹ “has been bugging in *Crítica* for a while with his tangos and showing-off...” [our translation]

¹² “With a ridiculous sense of economy [Botana] has hired, in the hard times of a strike, a dozen boys with no journalistic responsibility of any kind. The presence of those writers-in-the-making in that house is only explained by the meagerness of their wages. They are the journalists of the new sensitivity and their main difference from the others is that they are paid less.” [our translation]

¹³ “a vehicle for their whimsical literary opinions, their idiomatic mistakes, their insults for those who were not as good as them.” [our translation]

The various arguments were aiming at giving a negative image of an association that, in practice, showed itself to be beneficial:

Un diario moderno, insistimos, no se hace con improvisaciones, ni se contenta al lector que lo sostiene, con vaciedades cursis y con los insultos y groserías que provocan las rencillas literarias y de que se hizo vehículo 'el pasquín al cianuro', como lo ha bautizado el inteligente literato que hay en el despreciable Leopoldo Lugones (C 1927 II).¹⁴

Criminal Literature

As can be seen, to the accusations in reference to the strike, others of a moral, pedagogical and aesthetic nature were added. As from June 1925, Enrique González Tuñón had began to publish, in the popular newspaper *Crítica*, a set of glosses of tangos that were praised in the pages of the *avant-garde* *Martín Fierro* as “*el primer intento serio de literatura popular, urbana y netamente argentina*”¹⁵ (MF 1926b). *Claridad* was really far from agreeing with that evaluation: in November 1927 it published an open letter that requested Botana to eliminate those texts that aestheticized the ‘whore-house’ tango and criminal marginality:

Los que suscriben esta nota, en representación del pensamiento de un setenta por ciento de los lectores de ese diario, velando por la salud moral de la población, por el buen gusto y por la dignidad del periodismo, solicitan que suprima usted del diario que dirige, los comentarios de los tangos que aparecen periódicamente y que constituyen una muestra de analfabetismo, de malevaje, y de mugre espiritual que tiene que desaparecer de nuestro ambiente¹⁶ (C 1926f).

What *Claridad* objected, in this and other similar texts, was the legitimacy of certain forms of written representation of “the popular”. According to that perspective, *Crítica* successfully exploited a literature that tried to embody the soul and the voice of a poor area (*arrabal*) through certain themes, characters and modes of language. It was a pure artful device, with an unreal geography that was only inhabited by “low class people” –show-offs (*compadritos*), criminals, prostitutes–, not representative of the actual working-class suburbia (C 1926 h). The slang (*lunfardo*) in which they expressed themselves was affected and did not respond to nothing but a trend that had been encouraged for some time *ad nauseam*: this way of speaking had gained currency in theatre first, then in newspapers and magazines, and finally in songs and books –“*Tenemos ya poetas y músicos malevos*”¹⁷. Botana’s newspaper actively contributed to that corrupting process: “*a los redactores de Crítica se [les] deberá un día el haber introducido en la literatura nacional los más bajos valores lingüísticos, como el lunfardo, antes conocidos únicamente en las tablas*”¹⁸ (C 1927o). This complaint implied the inoculating force of the written letters in a malleable readership, which was influenced by the

¹⁴ “A modern newspaper, we insist, is not made with improvisations, neither is the reader who supports its content with corny nonsense or with the insults and coarseness that cause literary disputes and have become a vehicle for the ‘rag into cyanide’, as it has been called by the clever writer who the despicable Leopoldo Lugones is.” [our translation]

¹⁵ “the first serious attempt of popular, urban and strictly Argentinean literature” [our translation]

¹⁶ “The undersigned, on behalf of about 70 per cent of the readers of this newspaper, watching over the moral health, good taste and journalistic dignity of the population, request of you to eliminate from the newspaper that you are director of the comments on tangos that appear periodically and are a sample of illiteracy, criminality, and spiritual filth and should disappear from our environment.” [our translation]

¹⁷ “We now have malevo poets and musicians” [our translation]

¹⁸ “The writers in *Crítica* will one day be considered responsible for bringing into our national literature the lowest linguistic values, such as lunfardo, formerly known only on stage.” [our translation]

“spiritual poison” of a “malevo literature”: “*Sabido es que la literatura ejerce una influencia poderosa en las masas y que contribuye poderosamente a modelar el carácter de los hombres, que son como los monos, seres imitativos*”¹⁹. In order to counteract these effects of *Claridad*, a campaign was led “*contra toda la producción que atente contra el lenguaje y exalte la personalidad del malevo, del ladrón ‘simpático’ y del asesino*”²⁰ (C 1927n), in an attempt to challenge the theater and mass journalism for the representation of popular spaces and characters.

In February 1927, *Claridad* aimed at the author of the *tango* glosses by means of a piece of “*Noticia para el periodista milonguero*”²¹ (C 1927b), in which it commented on the recent prohibition of *tango*, shimmy and fox trot in Russia because of their being indecent and bourgeois genres. This was the complete opposite of what was taking place in *Botana*’s newspaper, which stood as popular media, but offered materials that caused the readership to become brutes and reproduced the conditions of domination. The article shows the personal tone with which Zamora regarded the confrontation, for not only did he question some notions about culture and ways of writing in general, but he also judged the moral stance of actual people, who could be identified because of their public behavior. In that sense, it is evident that there was a double target: to denounce and to provoke. That is, to bring the authors under the spotlight in front of the readers, but also to generate a reaction from the persons in question. In case there was any doubt left as regards who were the attacks directed at, another page of the same issue (C 1927d) made things even clearer:

*Lo peor que trae Crítica es el suplemento. Allí el señor Rega Molina se desahoga como marrano, haciendo epitafios contra lo que él llama sus “enemigos literarios” (...) El señor Rega Molina –prototipo del plumífero sietemesino– ha constituido con otros escritores como él: Olivari, Tuñón, Arlt, Fijmann– un grupo de afinidad (sic). No vamos a defender la moralidad del diario, pero con la incorporación de estos elementos el diario se ha prostituido (C 1927 e).*²²

Furthermore, with the entrance of Carlos Muñoz del Solar –better known as Carlos de la Púa or “Muñoz, the *Malevo*”– a “*cultor cínico del compadraje y malevaje literarios*”²³ was joining them, which so much as confirmed the criminal kind *Crítica* belonged to:

*Estos muchachos que imitan pésimamente el estilo de Castelnuovo y lo plagian pésimamente, se han largado a exaltar la mugre y la roña de los mugrientos. Uno le canta perpetuamente a los piojos y otro escribe perpetuamente sobre las liendres. Cada uno por su parte descubrió un género nuevo de literatura: el género piojoso y el género liendrudo. El diario del pueblo se ha convertido, en poco tiempo, en el diario del hampa (C 1927 e).*²⁴

¹⁹ “It is widely known that literature exerts a powerful influence on the masses and that it mightily contributes to the modelling of the character of men, who are like apes, imitative beings.” [our translation]

²⁰ “Against any production that threatens the language and extals the character of the malevo, the ‘nice’ thief and the murderer” [our translation]

²¹ “News for the milonga enthusiast journalist” [our translation]

²² “The worst thing about *Crítica* is the supplement. In it, Mr. Rega Molina unburdens himself like a cry-baby, writing epitaphs against those whom he calls ‘his literary enemies’ (...) Mr. Rega Molina –a prototype of the feathered two-month-premature baby– has made, together with other writers like him: Olivari, Tuñón, Arlt, Fijmann, a group with affinity [sic]. We shall not defend the morality of the newspaper, but, with the addition of these elements, the paper has prostituted itself.” [our translation]

²³ “cynical practitioner of the literary showing-off and malevo behavior” [our translation]

²⁴ “These boys, who dreadfully imitate the style of Castelnuovo and dreadfully plagiarize it, have set themselves to exalt the filth and the dirt of the filthy. One is constantly singing to lice and another one is constantly writing

As usual with controversies in those days, the tone of the article was slanderous, provocative. Aesthetic-literary judgments were intertwined with moral values, and accusations were very close to incrimination: because of its new writers, *Crítica* had become the shelter for the worst types of people, its columns were “in the service of delinquency”, feeding “the blood of crime” with their celebration of prostitutes and murderers: “*Botana no debe sentirse orgulloso de semejante cuerpo de redacción que ha transformado el diario en un tacho de basura donde va a parar toda la resaca social de los bajos fondos*”²⁵. Effectively, the inflammatory article caused the scandalous episode it wanted.

Attacks and counterattacks

The magazine devoted several pages of its following issue -nº 131, February 1927- to comment, at great length, on the incident. The first article on the subject, entitled “*Crítica pretende amordazar a Claridad*” (*Crítica* intends to gag *Claridad*), explicitly denounced Enrique González Tuñón and Carlos de la Púa as the frustrated assailants:

*El 24 del mes pasado, redactores del diario Crítica, agredieron a nuestro director, Antonio Zamora. De buena fuente sabemos que se proponían incendiar nuestra casa; pero esto no pasó del proyecto. Uno de los ‘hermanos Karamasoff’, Enrique González Tuñón llevó al malo Carlos de la Púa (...). Armado este de una piña americana, le amagó un golpe a Zamora y la cosa no pasó a mayores porque cayó un vigilante. El bardo De la Púa fue preso; pero gracias a la intervención de Botana pronto recuperó su libertad (C 1927 j).*²⁶

The person responsible for the newspaper was being accused of condoning the attack: “*No queremos incluir en estas consideraciones a todos los redactores del diario, sino a los que participaron del asalto y particularmente al señor Botana que los dirige*”²⁷. According to the article, the attack showed *Crítica*’s fascist stance, with bigotry towards whoever wrote against it, and incoherence when condemning violence, only to exert it on dissidents; everything proved its criminal nature, for not only did it show a suspicious liking of criminal matters, but it also committed unlawful activities such as plagiarism. Already in November 1926, *Claridad* had accused the newspaper of publishing verses that had been taken from its pages without stating their source (C 1926g). A “Second warning” in February 1927 repeated the complaint: “*muchas publicaciones se sirven de nuestro material sin dar noticia de dónde proviene. Nos parece que por lo menos, honestamente deberían mencionar nuestra revista. Esto va para el diario Crítica y para la revista Crítica Social*”²⁸.

In the same issue, Zamora himself would sign the article called “*Fue víctima de una tentativa de asalto el director de Claridad*”²⁹, in which, in the first person, he narrated the

about nits. Each one of them has, in turn, discovered a new literary genre: the lice-ridden genre and the nit-ridden genre. The people’s newspaper has become, in no time, the newspaper of the underworld.” [our translation]

²⁵ “*Botana must not feel proud of such staff, which has turned the newspaper into a dustbin where all the dregs of society from the underworld end up.*” [our translation]

²⁶ “*On the past 24th, some writers of the newspaper Crítica, assaulted our director, Antonio Zamora. We know, from a good source, that they intended to set fire to our house; but this did not get to go beyond the idea. One of the ‘brothers Karamasoff’ [sic], Enrique González Tuñón, took the bad man Carlos de la Púa with him (...). The latter armed with an American thump, faked a hit to Zamora, and the thing was of no further consequence, for a watchman appeared. The bard De la Púa was arrested, but thanks to Botana’s intercession, was soon freed.*” [our translation]

²⁷ “*We do not want to include all the editorial staff of the newspaper in these considerations; only those who took part in the assault and, in particular, Mr. Botana, who directs them.*” [our translation]

²⁸ “*many publications use our materials without stating where they come from. We think that, at least, they should honestly mention our magazine. This is regarding the newspaper Crítica and the magazine Crítica Social.*” [our translation]

²⁹ “*The director of Claridad has fallen victim to an attempted assault*” [our translation]

attack on the hands of “*una banda de malevos que está al servicio del diario boycoteado Crítica*”³⁰. And he detailed: “... *me encontraba yo esperando un tranvía en la calle Independencia y Santiago del Estero, cuando a la voz de: ‘ese es el director de Claridad’, dada desde un automóvil, por el cocainómano González Tuñón, fui agredido por el sujeto Carlos R. Muñoz*”³¹. Without hesitation, Zamora was accusing De la Púa of attempted murder and arson:

Se tenía el proyecto de asesinar me y quemar las oficinas de la editorial que dirijo, como acto de venganza por la campaña contra la mala literatura que se realiza desde las columnas de Claridad en cuyo último número se publicó un suelto reflejando la catadura del diario venenoso de la tarde y de algunos de sus secuaces (C 1927 g).³²

The victim also brought attention to the police’s connivance, who had quickly released the suspect after Botana’s intercession, which confirmed the newspaper’s corruption. The article devoted some crushing lines to Enrique González Tuñón as well:

Se dice escritor y que pertenece a la vanguardia literaria conocida con el nombre confuso de la ‘nueva sensibilidad’, no sólo carnereó –y qué vieja es la sensibilidad crumira– sino que se creyó en el caso de defender al amo hasta con asaltos. Esta sería la famosa vanguardia literaria! (C 1927 g)³³.

In the same issue, a letter by Leónidas Barletta –one of the notable signatures in Boedo– was published as well. It was addressed to Botana under the heading of “*El malevaje periodístico*” (journalistic *malevo* behavior) (C 1927 h). The letter, which regretted the change undergone by the newspaper since the hiring of the strikebreakers of the new generation, who felt at ease among “*pederastas, morfinómanos y jugadores*”³⁴, and who had led the newspaper to “*hacerse moralmente insignificante*”³⁵. It also condemned the extreme to which these violent barbarians had allowed themselves to get: “*si no fuimos a las manos cuando Crítica nos injurió y calumnió, fue porque consideramos que es una brutalidad obligar a nadie a que no diga lo que piensa poniéndole un puño en la boca*”.³⁶

Journalism and popular representation

The same basis for interpretation, in keeping with the conflict between civilization/barbarism, would reappear in an article of the same issue, which dealt with the assailants from a different flank. Even from the heading it confronted two contrary forms – “*Claridad and Crítica*” (C 1927i)–, attributing the role of disinterested judge and of a moral

³⁰ “a gang of malevo men who are at the service of the boycotted newspaper *Crítica*” [our translation]

³¹ “...there I was, waiting for a streetcar in the crossing of *Independencia* and *Santiago del Estero*, when, after the shouting of ‘that’s the director of *Claridad*’ came from a car, uttered by *González Tuñón* –a cocaine addict–, I was attacked by *Mr. Carlos R. Muñoz*” [our translation]

³² “They had the plan of murdering me and setting fire to the offices of the publishing house that I direct, as an act of revenge for the campaign against bad literature that is being carried out from the columns of *Claridad*, in whose most recent issue, a leaflet depicting the ‘tasting’ of the poisonous evening newspaper and of some of its accomplices was published.” [our translation]

³³ “He calls himself a writer, and says he belongs to the literary avant-garde that is known by the unclear name of ‘the new sensitivity’. Not only did he blackleg –and how old the *crumira* (strikebreaker) sensitivity is!–, but he also assumed he had the right to defend his master even with assaults. This is what the famous literary avant-garde is supposed to be!” [our translation]

³⁴ “*pederasts, morphine addicts and gamblers*” [our translation]

³⁵ “become morally insignificant” [our translation]

³⁶ “If we did not get physically violent when *Crítica* slandered and calumniated us, it was because we believe that it is savage to force anyone not to say what they think by putting a fist in their mouth.” [our translation]

preservation of the journalistic field to one of them. According to the article, what caused discomfort was that “*los redactores de Claridad –gente que no vende por dinero su pensamiento– estén con el dedo índice acusando todas las porquerías que [en Crítica se] hacen*”³⁷; what was upsetting was that “*la pequeña Claridad esté atenta y vigilante y no deje pasar ninguno de sus errores sin la consabida reprimenda*”³⁸. On the contrary –as it stated–, the writers of the newspaper were guided by an utterly materialistic interest. The criticism was not unfounded, because if, in general terms, the incompatibility between art and the market had defined the principled attitude of the *Martín Fierro* magazine, with the hiring of its writers by *Crítica*, these parameters were no longer held in practice. If, in 1924, the magazine of the aesthetic *avant-garde* condemned the “*boedistas*” for overlapping those variables in their mass publications of inexpensive books and leaflets, it was now Zamora’s magazine that was condemning the *avant-garde*’s incursions in Botana’s newspaper and in other equally suspicious undertakings (C 1927a). It is evident that, in a field with conflicting systems of recognition, the marked effort to conquer a broad readership as well as the anti-materialistic prejudice against that very same interest were widely shared.

The article held the dichotomy it had announced in its heading with a strategy of inversion of arguments and retribution of accusations. Some charges, to which the “*boedistas*” usually had to respond were: mercantilism, also ignorance of the language, terrible writing, tackiness, sentimentalism, and demagoguery towards the readership; and now, these very same charges were being brought to the “*martínfierristas*” who were at the service of *Crítica*:

*Los redactores con que cuenta son en su mayoría poco menos que analfabetos. Se han creado una situación a base de puercas concesiones al mal gusto del populacho. ¿Es otra cosa esa sección de comentarios tanguísticos, en la que se exalta el puro malevaje? Enrique González Tuñón, que es el autor de esas porquerías, estaría bien en ‘El alma que canta’, pero nunca en un diario que desea conseguir el respeto del público. Le podrían acompañar Carlos de la Púa y Nicolás Olivari, dos pedestres ejemplares de la cursilería arrabalera. Si por lo menos tuviera la gracia gruesa de Last Reason. Pero a Olivari, por ejemplo, es facilísimo reconocerlo por su prosa de escolar de tercer grado. Esas tiradas sentimentales, que aparecieron sobre el circo, se deben indudablemente a su pluma. Tiene todavía –parece mentira después de tres años– las mismas barbaridades idiomáticas de cuando nos visitaba y poníamos todo de nuestra parte un poco de buena voluntad en corregirle.*³⁹

At this point, it is evident that, if Botana’s newspaper had set itself –and mainly accomplished– to be acknowledged as “the voice of the people”, the magazine directed by Zamora insisted very hard in its attempt to challenge that representation by brandishing its own authority based on learned, civilizing and moral values.

In August 1927 *Claridad* published an article (C 1927j) that helped the strategy of questioning *Crítica*’s legitimacy because of its sensationalism, its demagoguery and its low

³⁷ “The writers in *Claridad* –people who do not sell their ideas for money– should be pointing their finger in accusation of all the trash that is made [in *Crítica*].” [our translation]

³⁸ “little *Claridad* has to be alert and watchful, and should not overlook any of their mistakes without the corresponding reprimand.” [our translation]

³⁹ “Most of the writers it has are almost illiterate. A situation has been caused on the basis of filthy concessions to the populace’s tastelessness. Is that section of tango commentaries in which the pure criminal behavior is extolled– any different? Enrique González Tuñón, who is the author of that trash, could work well in ‘El alma que canta’ (‘The singing soul’), but never in a newspaper that seeks the respect of the readership. Carlos de la Púa and Nicolás Olivari, those two ordinary specimens of low life tackiness, could go with him. If at least they were as coarsely funny as *Last Reason*. But Olivari, for instance, is quite easy to recognize in his (third grade) schoolboy prose. These sentimental publications that appeared about the circus are undoubtedly his. He still commits –which is hard to believe, after three years– the same idiomatic barbarities as when he used to visit us and we gave him all our efforts, perhaps out of our good will, to correct him.” [our translation]

language, nominating itself as the only option that was authentically popular in the journalistic field. The piece made a diagnosis on national journalism as from negative aspects that had become generalized in mass journalism, and explicitly focused its criticism on Botana's newspaper. According to this scenario, an only exception stood out amongst the poverty of the popular press: *Claridad*, "el valor periodístico positivo por excelencia de la actualidad argentina"⁴⁰ in the popular field.

This latter article makes the axis of the so-far-discussed strife explicit. The campaign led by *Claridad* against *Crítica* is far from being an isolated episode of the competition in the market or some mere late vicissitudes of the widely known controversy between "boedistas" and "martinferristas". It should be interpreted at an incomparably greater front –that of the strife for hegemony in the broad space of mass culture–, in which a left-wing cultural project set on to battle for 'the popular' in the 1920s.

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⁴⁰ "the positive journalistic value par excellence in today's Argentina" [our translation]

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