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**CONSOLIDATION
AND ITS DISCONTENTS:
THE FUNCTIONS AND
LIMITATIONS OF WRITING
IN DOMINGO FAUSTINO
SARMIENTO'S POLITICAL
IMAGINARY**

.....
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Como muchos de sus pares, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento deseaba la unificación política y cultural de la Argentina para que se integrara plenamente en la economía capitalista mundial. A partir de una lectura de *Argirópolis*, un texto programático en que Sarmiento propone una reestructuración radical del mapa político del Río de La Plata, este trabajo examinará el papel decisivo que tiene la escritura en este proceso de reconfigurar y consolidar el espacio nacional. Si en *Viajes* Sarmiento repara en las nuevas tecnologías de escritura que facilitan la homogeneización del territorio norteamericano, *Campaña en el Ejército Grande* señala las condiciones sociales y geográficas que obstaculizan la implementación de esas innovaciones tecnológicas en Sudamérica.

As Domingo Faustino Sarmiento recounts in *La campaña en el ejército grande*, the inhabitants of Rosario warmly receive the advancing army led by the General Justo José de Urquiza. No one, it would seem, receives as enthusiastic a welcome as Sarmiento himself: a Rosarino informs him that “[s]us escritos de V. los saben de memoria todos. *Argirópolis* lo tienen hasta los soldados; y los que nada han leído saben por la *Gaceta*, que es V. el enemigo más terrible que ha tenido Rosas” (168). The anecdote depicts Sarmiento’s growing political stature, thus offering the reader an alternative to the victor of Caseros, whom Sarmiento portrays throughout *Campaña* as yet another barbarous caudillo, unfit to oversee the rapid modernization of Argentina desired by Sarmiento’s generation of Romantic intellectuals. Significantly, while Sarmiento typically identifies *Facundo* as the source of his fame, here he refers to *Argirópolis* (1850) – an uncharacteristically programmatic text, which proposes a radical reconfiguration of the nations of the River Plate in order to integrate them into the industrialized, global economy dominated by Europe and the United States. The inclusion of the anecdote suggests that Sarmiento seeks a broad diffusion of his utopian vision, which would extend far beyond the “centenar de personas” (77), the limited circle of illustrated readers that Sarmiento directly addresses in the prologue to *Recuerdos de provincia*.

The incident, then, does not merely reveal Sarmiento’s personal political ambitions; it signals the essential role that Sarmiento assigns to newspapers and books in the formation of the modern nation state. Set in the midst of the struggle for the reorganization of Argentina, the episode epitomizes the effort of Spanish American *letrados* in the decades following independence to secure an influential position in this process by courting and attempting to mold a large, popular reading public (Rama 43-9). If, as Benedict Anderson has cogently argued, print media played a pivotal role in the process of nation building by creating a sense of simultaneity across newly constituted territories (34-5), both geographic and cultural conditions inhibited the rapid implementation of this technology of writing in Spanish America. In this brief intervention, I will examine how Sarmiento, through a series of works anticipating the fall of Rosas, proposes a newly consolidated Spanish America and advocates various forms of mass communication to achieve and maintain this reconfiguration of territory. Secondly, I will show how in *La campaña en el ejército grande* Sarmiento confronts the concrete limitations on writing in the function of political unity and progress.

The reordering of geographic space¹ is an essential component in constituting the modern state. As Henri

Lefebvre observes, “each new form of state, each new form of political power, introduces its own particular way of partitioning space, its own particular administrative classification of discourses about space and about things and people in space” (281). The state cannot simply assert its power over a demarcated extension of territory; it must regulate the social relations within its borders. Though the “necessarily territorial definition of the state might seem to represent a solidification of the bond between geographical space and society,” the state must effect an abstraction of space and “justify its authority over society through such abstract principles of social intercourse such as democracy, liberty, moral right, etc.” (Smith 80). The assertion of abstract principles achieves a homogenization (and, in Anderson’s terms, simultaneity) of the national subject, thereby reducing the importance of physical space as a component of identity.

The interdependency between the production of space and republican ideals is particularly evident in the writings of Rosas’s political opponents. Liberal intellectuals not only called for the creation of institutions that would foment these principles, they also vehemently criticized the lack of political and economic coherence between the provinces of the Argentine confederation. While certain thinkers, such as Juan Bautista Alberdi, were willing to concede that Rosas had achieved a degree of national unity, by the end of Rosas’s regime, “internamente la consolidación de un Estado nacional ha avanzado mucho menos de lo que las aspiraciones indican” (Halperín Donghi, *De la Revolución* 392).² In 1846, calling for the free navigation of rivers, Florencio Varela argues that “el objeto, pues, de los que gobiernan debe ser propender, por todos medios, a crear en las diversas provincias del Estado los mismos intereses, los mismos estímulos, salvar siempre las diferencias que la naturaleza ofrece” (143). By permitting unimpeded fluvial traffic, the state effects a homogenization of its territory that Varela considers more “natural.” In *Bases*, Alberdi more explicitly formulates the integration of provincial, national, and global interests:

“Nuestros contratos o pactos constitucionales en la América del Sur, deben ser especie de contratos mercantiles o sociedades colectivas formadas especialmente para dar pobladores a estos desiertos que bautizamos con los nombre pomposos de Repúblicas; para formar caminos de fierro, que supriman las distancias que hacen imposible esa *unidad indivisible* en la acción política.” (203)

The Constitution of 1853, of course, converts these ideas into official political doctrine. At its core, this project predicated an emptied, abstracted space – the so-called *desierto* – that a massive flow of people and goods would occupy and order.

It is in *Facundo* (1845) that Sarmiento first reflects extensively on the negative consequences of the Argentine desert. In particular, he critiques the unique form of sociability that has developed in the small, isolated communities that sparsely inhabit national territory. A Herderian sense of geographic determinism, however, permits him to claim that “hay una organización del suelo, tan central y unitaria en aquel país” and that, despite the tyranny of Rosas, “otro tiempo vendrá en que las cosas entren en su cauce ordinario” (61). As the topographic metaphor suggests, he shares with Varela the belief that the free navigation of rivers will accelerate this unification.

By the time he publishes *Argirópolis* (1850), however, Sarmiento has come to advocate the intervention of a strong centralized government to overcome the “accidents” of nature. The very cartographic perspective that permitted Sarmiento to predict the eventual unity of Argentina, now leads him to declare that “[s]i se consulta el mapa geográfico de la República Argentina se notará que es, casi sin excepción de país alguno en la tierra, el más ruinosamente organizado para la distribución proporcional de la riqueza, el poder y la civilización por todas las provincias confederadas” (56). *Argirópolis* counters the optimism of *Facundo* when it states that “a la sabia y meditada deliberación del congreso le toca remediar por leyes previsoras *este error de la naturaleza*” (70, italics mine). Though Sarmiento continues to insist (somewhat obsessively) on the unobstructed navigation of rivers, the primary argument of the text is that the island “Martín García,” located at the mouth of the Paraná River, should be established as the capital of the “Estados Unidos del Río de la Plata,” a political entity comprised of Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Central to the revised political landscape is an underlying belief that successful participation in the global economy depends on increasingly large, cohesive political units. Indeed, for Sarmiento, it is a question of brute economic simplicity: “Esta propensión a aglomerarse las poblaciones se explica fácilmente por las necesidades de la época. La ciencia económica muestra desde el mecanismo de las fábricas hasta la administración de los Estados, que grandes masas de capitales y brazos soportan con menos gasto el personal que reclaman” (79).

As the name of the imaginary republic suggests, *Argirópolis* reflects Sarmiento’s increased admiration for the United States. Indeed, in his letter to Valentín Alsina, written in 1847 and included in his *Viajes*, Sarmiento expresses in hyperbolic, prophetic terms the process of the consolidation of nations. Addressing the “reyes del la tierra,” he asks “[c]uando los Estados de la Unión se cuenten por centenares, y los habitantes por cientos de millones, educados, vestidos y hartos, ¿qué vais a oponer a la voluntad soberana de la gran República en los negocios del mundo?” (336). The prodigious economic growth and rapid territorial expansion make the relatively new United States a model for Sarmiento, particularly following his disillusionment with Europe. Given the internal fractures that will soon erupt in the Civil War, it should be noted that Sarmiento’s portrayal of the United States is not a rigorous study in the tradition of his much admired Tocqueville, but instead a giddy account, grafted with chronicles and studies that he had read prior to setting foot on North American soil. The United States allows him to project an utopian vision onto the New World; in the words of William H. Katra, “parece que Sarmiento, como amante novicio, no quisiera ver o aprender aspectos de la sociedad norteamericana que hubieran desafiado la ilusión rosada que anteriormente había formado” (862). While Katra certainly exaggerates Sarmiento’s ingenuousness, his comment nonetheless calls attention to the tactical function that the representation of North America has in Sarmiento’s political imaginary.

Throughout his account of his brief stay in the United States, Sarmiento scrutinizes the customs of North American society. While he devotes a few paragraphs to the political process, he pays particular attention to the technological advances that facilitate communication and transportation across vast stretches of territory. These advances create and sustain a sociability that is evident even in the smallest town:

“Mi aldea, pues, tiene varios establecimientos públicos, alguna fábrica de cerveza, una panadería, varios bodegones o figonerías, todos con el anuncio en letras de oro, perfectamente ejecutadas por algún fabricante de letras. Este es un punto capital. Los anuncios en los Estados Unidos son por toda la Unión una obra de arte, i la muestra mas inequívoca del adelanto del país. Me he divertido en España i en toda la América de Sud, examinando aquellos letreros donde los hai, hechos con caracteres raquíuticos i jorobados i ostentando en errores de ortografía la ignorancia supina del artesano o aficionado que los formó.

El norteamericano es un literato clásico en

materia de anuncios, i una letra chueca o gorda, o un error ortográfico espondría al locatario a ver desierto su mostrador.” (*Viajes* 299).

The idealized description of small-town America converts the sign maker into an artist and the consumer into a discerning man of letters. In addition to transmitting commercial information without error or confusion, the advertisements operate as models of a homogenized and functional aesthetic. Contrary to Sarmiento's own foundational graffiti,³ the signs announce their conformity with the social order, articulating it in a comprehensible language and in letters that are regular and easily reproducible. Culture and commerce reinforce one another mutually, assuring the fluid exchange of goods and information in a stable, national market in which the citizen can move easily about. (In this way, the citizen too becomes an object of exchange: reduced to a set of functions, he can be seamlessly integrated at a variety of established points in this market.) Tulio Halperín Donghi notes that “el omnipresente aviso comercial pareció a Sarmiento, a la vez que un instrumento indispensable para ese nuevo modo de articulación social, una justificación adicional de su interés en la educación popular” (*Una nación* 50). The ads not only (re)produce a consistent reception, they also render the landscape universally – or, rather, nationally legible, thus comprising a functional form of writing that is both symbol and instrument of modern civilization.

Another innovation that Sarmiento greatly admires is the telegraph, which allows the direct and instantaneous transmission of text across great distances. He frequently praises the rapidly expanding use of this invention in the United States, commenting that “sus líneas de telégrafos eléctricos están hoy, únicas en el mundo, puestas a disposición del pueblo, pudiendo en fracciones inapreciables de tiempo, enviar avisos i órdenes de un extremo a otro de la Unión” (313). The telegraph succeeds in synchronizing American territory, in stark contrast to Argentina, where “el siglo XIX y el siglo XII viven juntos: el uno dentro de las ciudades; el otro en las campañas” (*Facundo* 95). As David Viñas proposes, the telegraph can also function as a metaphor for Sarmiento's writing:

“Morse is tied specifically to the *writing style* of Sarmiento, particularly if we consider three fundamental aspects: velocity, economy, and penetration. Sarmiento is tantalized by the mighty seduction of those long and frenetic sheets of perforated paper, the product of Morse's telegraph. Indeed that invention carries several connotations: punctuality; the inexorable

demands of the clock...; and the relationship of the metallic pen with the white surface of the page.” (214)

There is yet another important aspect of the telegraph that should be mentioned: it annuls the geographic distance between its author and its intended reader. While advertisements exemplify the benefits of popular education, the telegraph embodies the progress of science. In light of the prologue of *Recuerdos de provincia*, which Sarmiento begins by complaining about two purloined letters and, more generally, the inefficient dissemination of “las publicaciones que deben su existencia a circunstancias del momento” (80-1), Morse's invention allows messages to be read instantly and securely. The closed circuit of the telegraphic network, as depicted by Sarmiento, overcomes the defects of traditional mail.

A third form of communication that is the object of frequent comments by Sarmiento is the newspaper. He praises the United States for being “el único pueblo del mundo que lee en masa, que usa todas sus necesidades, donde 2,000 periódicos satisfacen la curiosidad pública” (*Viajes* 313). The use of the newspaper in the United States thus seems to embody the ideals that Sarmiento exposes in “El diarismo,” an article published in 1842, in which he declares “[e]l diario es para los pueblos modernos lo que era el foro para los romanos” (*OC I* 40). In the same article, he criticizes the Chilean press for focusing excessively on political mudslinging and not paying enough attention to the customs and broader interests of society. Ultimately, he laments the small base of readers, resigned to the fact that “hay pocas, poquísimas personas con relación a la población general que tengan gusto y hábito de leer periódicos” (44).

While *Viajes* presents the widespread use of new modalities of writing, *La campaña en el Ejército Grande* – both the story of its publication and its form and content – narrates the difficulty of massively disseminating information across large expanses of territory in South America. Published in three parts, the first two in Rio de Janeiro and the third in Santiago de Chile, *Campaña* is a chronicle of Sarmiento's experiences as the official *boletín* of Urquiza's army during his campaign against Rosas. In the dedicatory letter to Alberdi, he attributes the fragmented publication of the book to the demands of others, including Alberdi himself. He insists in that “era mi ánimo no publicar mi *Campaña* hasta pasado algunos años” (*Campaña* 118), a statement that he later reiterates in his polemic with Alberdi (*Las ciento y una* 234). Whether or not his claim is true, the extra-textual intervention calls attention to the heterogeneous parts that comprise the text, which Sarmiento calls “un laberinto de fragmentos”

(*Campaña* 112): a series of letters written by Sarmiento, other participants in the campaign and other political and intellectual figures, excerpts of an earlier book (*Argirópolis*), articles originally published in *Sud América*, a prologue to the "Complemento," dedicatory letters to Mitre and Alberdi, and a chronicle of the campaign that contains articles from the bulletin that Sarmiento published in the field, diary entries, correspondence, and official decrees of the Ejército Grande. *Campaña* even records the loss and recuperation of many of these documents; as Sarmiento informs Mitre (112) and later repeats in the chronicle itself, his assistant "había perdido las maletas que contenían el plano topográfico, el diario de la campaña y otros documentos" (212).

The toponyms that head the various letters (Santiago, Copiapó, Concepción de Uruguay, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, etc.) and divide the chronicle of the campaign (El Rosario, Arroyo del Medio, Caseros, Palermo, Buenos Aires) signal the diverse loci of writing. While with the Ejército Grande, guided by an English topographical map, Sarmiento navigates the Pampa, "que había descrito en *Facundo*, sentida, por intuición" and which "veía por primera vez en la vida" (167). Later, after the battle of Caseros, he expresses the desire to "pasar algunos días en Buenos Aires; quiero conocerla, pues nunca he estado en esta ciudad" (228). Thanks to his position in the Army, Sarmiento is able to see places that he has only read about in books as he draws closer and closer to the seat of power. *Campaña* thus narrates three distinct itineraries: Sarmiento's first-hand encounter with the referents that structure the axiomatic binary opposition of civilization and barbarism; that of the texts that constitute the work, from the international correspondence until its supposedly unexpected publication; and, contrasting with this confused migration of documents, the chronological account of the trajectory of the Ejército Grande. The text thus accounts for its own disorder and lack of a fixed place of enunciation. In this respect, one can apply to *Campaña* the observation that Graciela Montaldo makes with respect to *Viajes*, albeit in an intracontinental context: "es... una forma de dar vuelta el mapa o construir un mapa que tiene un centro móvil" (68). Underscoring the displacement of its author(s) and its publication, Sarmiento puts the precariousness of the text in relief.

Campaña, moreover, gives an account of the practical difficulties with which Sarmiento struggles while trying to publish the bulletin during the campaign. The episodes that refer to its publication demonstrate the importance that the press has for Sarmiento and reveal the degree to which his political persona depends on his capacity to distribute his works to the broadest audience possible. After receiving

permission from General Urquiza, Sarmiento purchases a printing press in Montevideo that turns out to be extremely cumbersome. Upon disembarking in Rosario he discovers that there is no carriage to carry it and, additionally, he receives a letter from Elías, the secretary of Urquiza, which reads, "El General me encarga de decirle que la prensa de Chile ha estado *chillando* en vano contra Rosas" (171). Furious, Sarmiento considers abandoning the campaign, but later calms himself and decides to continue with what he believes to be "la única novedad, la única fuerza activa del campamento" (173). Regarding Elías and Urquiza's mockery as a threat to discredit his labors of the preceding decade, he responds to Elías, receiving in turn a dry response that assures him that "este es un negocio completamente arreglado, pues el Sr. gobernador se ha mostrado muy afable, hablando sobre V" (99).

Sarmiento obstinately attempts to find a mode to transport the press and, finally, procures "una hermosa carreta para cargar con mis tipos y mis alemanes [the printers], la cual marchó siempre a la cabeza del ejército" (187). The image is eminently comical: Sarmiento, "el único oficial del ejército argentino que en campaña ostentaba una severidad de equipo, estrictamente europeo" (169), crosses the Pampa proudly seated atop a wagon that carries a massive, clunky printing press. The story of the printing press, one of the many anecdotes that illustrate the unequal conflict between Sarmiento and the indifferent Urquiza, reveals how contumaciously Sarmiento attempts to modernize, indeed, to civilize warfare in order to transform his country politically and socially. Scandalized by Urquiza's insistence that his followers use the red ribbon (*la divisa punzó*) and the illiterate, poorly dressed troops of the army, he reaches the conclusion that "mientras no se cambie el traje del soldado argentino ha de haber caudillos" (169). Thwarted in his attempts to advise Urquiza directly, Sarmiento engages in a symbolic war against the very army in which he is enlisted. The printing press thus possesses a double function beyond its obvious, practical use: it represents, at least to Sarmiento, technological progress and, in turn, the difficulty of implementing said technology on the battlefield and in Argentine society.

Both the ordeal of the printing press in *La campaña en el ejército grande* and the very structure of the work illustrate the enormous distance between the innovative forms of writing that Sarmiento celebrates in his depiction of the United States and the limitations of the printed word in Spanish America. The community that Sarmiento imagines – in its grandest, most utopic sense, the "Estados Unidos del Río de la Plata," as he designates it in *Argirópolis* – lacks not only a cohesive identity, but also the effective means to create it. In the context of this ambitious project, his writing not only reflects the need to modernize its own

means of production and distribution; it both thematically and structurally evidences the predominance of dispersion over diffusion. Read conjointly, *Viajes*, *Argirópolis* and *Campaña* represent the distance that separates reality from the modern nation-state imagined by Sarmiento while they offer themselves – and, more generally, writing itself – as a means to mediate this gap.

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Footnotes

¹ Notes

I am using the term "geographic space" as defined by Neil Smith: "the totality of spatial relations organized to a greater or lesser extent into identifiable patterns, which are themselves the expression of the structure and development of the mode of production" (83).

² In "La República Argentina 37 años después de su Revolución de Mayo," Alberdi admits that Rosas has succeeded in consolidating power, thanks to brute force: "Dentro del país, Rosas ha enseñado a obedecer a sus partidarios y a sus enemigos; fuera de él, sus enemigos ausentes, no teniendo derecho a gobernar, han pasado su vida en obedecer, y por uno y otro camino ambos han llegado al mismo fin" (123).

³ "A fines del año 1840, salía yo de mi patria desterrado por lástima, estropeado, lleno de cardenales, puntazos y golpes recibidos el día anterior en una de esas bacanales sangrientas de soldadesca y mazorqueros. Al pasar por los baños de Zonda, bajo las Armas de la Patria que en días más alegres había pintado en una sala, escribí con carbón estas palabras:
On ne tue point les idées." (*Facundo* 32).

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