

The Argentine Writer and Tradition

I wish to formulate and justify here some skeptical proposals concerning the problem of the Argentine writer and tradition. My skepticism does not relate to the difficulty or impossibility of solving this problem, but rather to its very existence. I believe we are faced with a mere rhetorical topic which lends itself to pathetic elaborations; rather than with a true mental difficulty, I take it we are dealing with an appearance, a simulacrum, a pseudo problem.

Before examining it, I want to consider the most commonly offered statements and solutions. I shall begin with a solution which has become almost instinctive, which appears without the aid of logical reasoning; it maintains that the Argentine literary tradition already exists in the gauchesque poetry. According to this solution, the vocabulary, devices and themes of gauchesque poetry should guide the contemporary writer, and are a point of departure and perhaps an archetype. This is the usual solution and for that reason I intend to examine it at some length.

This same solution was set forth by Lugones in *El payador*; there one may read that we Argentines possess a classic poem, *Martín Fierro*, and that this poem should be for us what the Homeric poems were for the Greeks. It seems difficult to contradict this opinion without slighting *Martín Fierro*. I believe that *Martín Fierro* is the most lasting work we Argentines have written; and I believe with the same intensity that we cannot suppose *Martín Fierro* is, as it has sometimes been said, our Bible, our canonical book.

Ricardo Rojas, who has also recommended the canonization of *Martín Fierro*, has a page in his *Historia de la literatura argentina* that almost seems to be commonplace and is really quite astute.

Rojas studies the poetry of the gauchesque writers—in other words, the poetry of Hidalgo, Ascasubi, Estanislao del Campo and José Hernández—and sees it as being derived from the poetry of the *payadores*, from the spontaneous poetry of the gauchos. He points out that the meter of popular poetry is the octosyllable and that the authors of gauchesque poetry employ this meter and ends up by considering the poetry of the gauchesque writers as a continuation or enlargement of the poetry of the *payadores*.

I suspect there is a grave error in this affirmation; we might even say a skillful error, for it is evident that Rojas, in order to give the gauchesque

poetry a popular basis beginning with Hidalgo and culminating with Hernández, presents this poetry as a continuation or derivation of that of the gauchos. Thus, Bartolomé Hidalgo is, not the Homer of this poetry as Mitre said, but simply a link in its development.

Ricardo Rojas makes of Hidalgo a *payador*; however, according to his own *Historia de la literatura argentina*, this supposed *payador* began by composing hendecasyllabic verses, a meter by nature unavailable to the *payadores*, who could not perceive its harmony, just as Spanish readers could not perceive the harmony of the hendecasyllable when Garcilaso imported it from Italy.

I take it there is a fundamental difference between the poetry of the gauchos and the poetry of the gauchesque writers. It is enough to compare any collection of popular poetry with *Martín Fierro*, with *Paulino Lucero*, with *Fausto*, to perceive this difference, which lies no less in the vocabulary than in the intent of the poets. The popular poets of the country and the suburbs compose their verses on general themes: the pangs of love and loneliness, the unhappiness of love, and do so in a vocabulary which is also very general; on the other hand, the gauchesque poets cultivate a deliberately popular language never essayed by the popular poets themselves. I do not mean that the idiom of the popular poets is a correct Spanish, I mean that if there are errors they are the result of ignorance. On the other hand, in the gauchesque poets there is a seeking out of native words, a profusion of local color. The proof is this: a Colombian, Mexican or Spaniard can immediately understand the poetry of the *payadores*, of the gauchos, and yet they need a glossary in order to understand, even approximately, Estanislao del Campo or Ascasubi.

All this can be summed up as follows: gauchesque poetry, which has produced—I hasten to repeat—admirable works, is a literary genre as artificial as any other. In the first gauchesque compositions, in Bartolomé Hidalgo's *trovas*, we already see the intention of presenting the work in terms of the gaucho, as uttered by the gaucho, so that the reader will read it in a gaucho intonation. Nothing could be further removed from popular poetry. The people, while versifying,—and I have observed this not only in the country *payadores*, but also in those from the outskirts of Buenos Aires—have the conviction that they are executing something important and instinctively avoid popular words and seek high-sounding terms and expressions. It is probable that gauchesque poetry has now influenced the

payadores and that they too now abound in *criollismos*, but in the beginning it was not so, and we have proof of this (which no one has ever pointed out) in *Martín Fierro*.

Martín Fierro is cast in a Spanish of gauchesque intonation, and for a long while never lets us forget that it is a gaucho who is singing; it abounds in comparisons taken from country life; however, there is a famous passage in which the author forgets this preoccupation with local color and writes in a general Spanish, and does not speak of vernacular themes, but of great abstract themes, of time, of space, of the sea, of the night. I refer to the *payada* between Martín Fierro and the Negro, which comes at the end of the second part. It is as if Hernández himself had wanted to show the difference between his gauchesque poetry and the genuine poetry of the gauchos. When these two gauchos, Fierro and the Negro, begin to sing, they leave behind all gauchesque affectation and address themselves to philosophical themes. I have observed the same while listening to the *payadores* of the suburbs; they avoid using the dialect of that area and try to express themselves correctly. Of course they fail, but their intention is to make their poetry something elevated; something distinguished, we might say with a smile.

The idea that Argentine poetry should abound in differential Argentine traits and Argentine local color seems to me a mistake. If we are asked which book is more Argentine, *Martín Fierro* or the sonnets in Enrique Banchs' *La urna*, there is no reason to say that it is the first. It will be said that in *La urna* of Banchs we do not find the Argentine countryside, Argentine topography, Argentine botany, Argentine zoology; however, there are other Argentine conditions in *La urna*.

I recall now some lines from *La urna* which seem to have been written so that no one could say it was an Argentine book, the lines which read: ". . . The sun shines on the slanting roofs / and on the windows. Nightingales / try to say they are in love."

Here it seems we cannot avoid condemning the phrase "the sun shines on the slanting roofs and on the windows." Enrique Banchs wrote these lines in a suburb of Buenos Aires, and in the suburbs of Buenos Aires there are no slanting roofs, but rather flat roofs. "Nightingales try to say they are in love": the nightingale is less a bird of reality than of literature, of Greek and Germanic tradition. However, I would say that in the use of these conventional images, in these anomalous roofs and nightingales, Argentine architecture and ornithology are of course absent, but we do find in them the

Argentine's reticence, his constraint; the fact that Banchs, when speaking of this great suffering which overwhelms him, when speaking of this woman who has left him and has left the world empty for him, should have recourse to foreign and conventional images like slanted roofs and nightingales, is significant: significant of Argentine reserve, distrust and reticence, of the difficulty we have in making confessions, in revealing our intimate nature.

Besides, I do not know if it is necessary to say that the idea that a literature must define itself in terms of its national traits is a relatively new concept; also new and arbitrary is the idea that writers must seek themes from their own countries. Without going any further, I think Racine would not even have understood a person who denied him his right to the title of poet of France because he cultivated Greek and Roman themes. I think Shakespeare would have been amazed if people had tried to limit him to English themes, and if they had told him that, as an Englishman, he had no right to compose *Hamlet*, whose theme is Scandinavian, or *Macbeth*, whose theme is Scottish. The Argentine cult of local color is a recent European cult which the nationalists ought to reject as foreign.

Some days past I have found a curious confirmation of the fact that what is truly native can and often does dispense with local color; I found this confirmation in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon observes that in the Arabian book *par excellence*, in the Koran, there are no camels; I believe if there were any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this absence of camels would be sufficient to prove it is an Arabian work. It was written by Mohammed, and Mohammed, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were especially Arabian; for him they were a part of reality, he had no reason to emphasize them; on the other hand, the first thing a falsifier, a tourist, an Arab nationalist would do is have a surfeit of camels, caravans of camels, on every page; but Mohammed, as an Arab, was unconcerned: he knew he could be an Arab without camels. I think we Argentines can emulate Mohammed, can believe in the possibility of being Argentine without abounding in local color.

Perhaps I may be permitted to make a confession here, a very small confession. For many years, in books now happily forgotten, I tried to copy down the flavor, the essence of the outlying suburbs of Buenos Aires. Of course, I abounded in local words; I did not omit such words as *cuchilleros*, *milonga*, *tapia* and others, and thus I wrote those forgettable and forgotten books. Then, about a year ago, I wrote a story called "*La muerte y la*

brújula" ("Death and the Compass"), which is a kind of nightmare, a nightmare in which there are elements of Buenos Aires, deformed by the horror of the nightmare. There I think of the Paseo Colón and call it rue de Toulon; I think of the country houses of Adrogue and call them Triste-le-Roy; when this story was published, my friends told me that at last they had found in what I wrote the flavor of the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Precisely because I had not set out to find that flavor, because I had abandoned myself to a dream, I was able to accomplish, after so many years, what I had previously sought in vain.

Now I want to speak of a justly illustrious work which the nationalists often invoke. I refer to Güiraldes' *Don Segundo Sombra*. The nationalists tell us that *Don Segundo Sombra* is the model of a national book; but if we compare it with the works of the gauchesque tradition, the first thing we note are differences. *Don Segundo Sombra* abounds in metaphors of a kind having nothing to do with country speech but a great deal to do with the metaphors of the then current literary circles of Montmartre. As for the fable, the story, it is easy to find in it the influence of Kipling's *Kim*, whose action is set in India and which was, in turn, written under the influence of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the epic of the Mississippi. When I make this observation, I do not wish to lessen the value of *Don Segundo Sombra*; on the contrary, I want to emphasize the fact that, in order that we might have this book, it was necessary for Güiraldes to recall the poetic technique of the French circles of his time and the work of Kipling which he had read many years before; in other words, Kipling and Mark Twain and the metaphors of French poets were necessary for this Argentine book, for this book which, I repeat, is no less Argentine for having accepted such influences.

I want to point out another contradiction: the nationalists pretend to venerate the capacities of the Argentine mind but want to limit the poetic exercise of that mind to a few impoverished local themes, as if we Argentines could only speak of *orillas* and *estancias* and not of the universe.

Let us move on to another solution. It is said that there is a tradition to which Argentine writers should adhere and that that tradition is Spanish literature. This second recommendation is of course somewhat less limited than the first, but it also tends to restrict us; many objections could be raised against it, but it is sufficient to mention two. The first is this: Argentine history can be unmistakably defined as a desire to become separated from

Spain, as a voluntary withdrawal from Spain. The second objection is this: among us, the enjoyment of Spanish literature—an enjoyment which I personally happen to share—is usually an acquired taste; many times I have loaned French and English works to persons without special literary preparations, and these works have been enjoyed immediately, with no effort. However, when I have proposed to my friends the reading of Spanish works, I have evidenced that it was difficult for them to find pleasure in these books without special apprenticeship; for that reason, I believe the fact that certain illustrious Argentines write like Spaniards is less the testimony of an inherited capacity than it is a proof of Argentine versatility.

I now arrive at a third opinion on Argentine writers and tradition which I have read recently and which has surprised me very much. It says in essence that in Argentina we are cut off from the past, that there has been something like a dissolution of continuity between us and Europe. According to this singular observation, we Argentines find ourselves in a situation like that of the first days of Creation; the search for European themes and devices is an illusion, an error; we should understand that we are essentially alone and cannot play at being Europeans.

This opinion seems unfounded to me. I find it understandable that many people should accept it, because this declaration of our solitude, of our loss, of our primeval character, has, like existentialism, the charm of the pathetic. Many people can accept this opinion because, once they have done so, they feel alone, disconsolate and, in some way or another, interesting. However, I have observed that in our country, precisely because it is a new country, we have a great sense of time. Everything that has taken place in Europe, the dramatic happenings of the last few years in Europe, have had profound resonance here. The fact that a person was a sympathizer of Franco or of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War, or a sympathizer of the Nazis or of the Allies, has in many cases caused very grave quarrels and animosity. This would not occur if we were cut off from Europe. As far as Argentine history is concerned, I believe we all feel it profoundly; and it is natural that we should feel it in this way, because it is, in terms of chronology and in terms of our own inner being, quite close to us; the names, the battles of the civil war, the War of Independence, all of these are, both in time and in tradition, very close to us.

What is our Argentine tradition? I believe we can answer this question easily and that there is no problem here. I believe our tradition is all of

Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have. I recall here an essay of Thorstein Veblen, the North American sociologist, on the pre-eminence of Jews in Western culture. He asks if this preeminence allows us to conjecture about the innate superiority of the Jews, and answers in the negative; he says that they are outstanding in Western culture because they act within that culture and, at the same time, do not feel tied to it by any special devotion; "for that reason," he says, "a Jew will always find it easier than a non-Jew to make innovations in Western culture"; and we can say the same of the Irish in English culture. In the case of the Irish, we have no reason to suppose that the profusion of Irish names in British literature and philosophy is due to any racial pre-eminence, for many of those illustrious Irishmen (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) were the descendants of Englishmen, were people who had no Celtic blood; however, it was sufficient for them to feel Irish, to feel different, in order to be innovators in English culture. I believe that we Argentines, we South Americans in general, are in an analogous situation; we can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences.

This does not mean that all Argentine experiments are equally successful; I believe that this problem of tradition and Argentina is simply a contemporary and passing form of the eternal problem of determination. If I am going to touch the table with one of my hands and I ask myself whether I should touch it with my left or my right, as soon as I touch it with my right, the determinists will say that I could not act in any other way and that the entire previous history of the universe obliged me to touch it with my right hand and that touching it with the left would have been a miracle. However, if I had touched it with my left hand, they would have said the same: that I was obliged to do so. The same thing happens with literary themes and devices. Anything we Argentine writers can do successfully will become part of our Argentine tradition, in the same way that the treatment of Italian themes belongs to the tradition of England through the efforts of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

I believe, in addition, that all these *a priori* discussions concerning the intent of literary execution are based on the error of supposing that intentions and plans matter a great deal. Let us take the case of Kipling: Kipling dedicated his life to writing in terms of certain political ideals, he

tried to make his work an instrument of propaganda and yet, at the end of his life, he was obliged to confess that the true essence of a writer's work is usually unknown to him. He recalled the case of Swift, who, when he wrote *Gulliver's Travels*, tried to bring an indictment against all humanity but actually left a book for children. Plato said that poets are the scribes of a god who moves them against their own will, against their intentions, just as a magnet moves a series of iron rings.

For that reason I repeat that we should not be alarmed and that we should feel that our patrimony is the universe; we should essay all themes, and we cannot limit ourselves to purely Argentine subjects in order to be Argentine; for either being Argentine is an inescapable act of fate—and in that case we shall be so in all events—or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask.

I believe that if we surrender ourselves to that voluntary dream which is artistic creation, we shall be Argentine and we shall also be good or tolerable writers.

Translated by J.E.I.