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EPIC OF THE GAUCHO

by Catherine E. Ward.

Gaucha and *tango* are probably the two Argentine words most foreigners have heard of. Both have become traditional institutions rather than actual realities, but they are still good representatives of the two most characteristic faces of Argentina. The tango is the music of the city; tough, sentimental., quick-witted, sexy, it makes the most of the character it has grown out of its hybrid origins. The Gaucho is the man of the Pampa, the "real" country that encloses the city and remains aloof from it; the expert horseman and cattle-worker, with his primitive life and sententious speech, deeply rooted in the land. And the archetypal Gaucho is Martin Fierro, hero of the popular epic which has become the Argentine national poem.

It would be difficult for anyone to visit Argentina and not come across *Martin Fierro*; as a national institution it is worked hard. A steady stream of editions fills the bookshops, with copies bound in cowskin or poncho fabric as tourist attractions: quotations from it appear in advertisements on fences and on decorative tiles in suburban villas: its mine of quotable aphorisms can be called into play on most occasions.

The background of *Martin Fierro* is the 60's and 70's of the nineteenth century: the years of civil wars between Buenos Aires and the Federalist provinces, and of political confusion in the city, which meant neglect or exploitation of the country people to the point of their extinction. The old semifederal life of the country settlers and huge *estancias* (ranches) was disrupted: conscription drained the land of men; corrupt local government and an inefficient frontier force provided them no protection.

The poem relates the adventures and sufferings of its hero from his own point of view. In the first part he is press-ganged into the frontier army against the Indians, and after several years, unpaid and in appalling conditions, he deserts. He finds his home destroyed and his family lost; gets involved in fights and becomes an outlaw; and eventually, with his companion Cruz, escapes across the desert Pampa to try their luck with an Indian tribe. The second part takes up the story seven years later. Life with the Indians proves still worse: Cruz dies in a plague; and after killing an Indian to rescue a captive woman, Fierro returns to his own part of the country. He meets his sons, and Cruz's son, who in turn tell their stories, and engages in a singing contest with a challenger who turns out to be seeking vengeance for a brother whom Martin Fierro killed in a fight years before; finally, after a farewell speech of advice to the sons, he rides off into the distance. Interspersed with the plot are digressions on Gaucho skills and the lore of the Pampa, comic incidents, passages of proverbial wisdom, and lyrical flights on metaphysical themes; and throughout, like a chorus, laments at the Gauchos' unjust fate.

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The author of *Martin Fierro*, Jose Hernandez, was born in 1834 in Buenos Aires of old Spanish-Argentine families. His father dealt in cattle on ranches on the Pampa south of the city, and he grew up there, working with the Gauchos, until the fall of the dictator Rosas in 1852 brought on a period of civil wars. Hernandez campaigned as a soldier and as a journalist on the side of the Federalists against the Unitarians in Buenos Aires, but his chief loyalty was always to the country people, whose rights he championed in pamphlets and newspapers (including for a short time one of his own). He went into exile several times, to Brazil and Uruguay; eventually he settled in Buenos Aires and became a deputy and a senator. He died in 1880.

The two parts of his long, poem (it has over 6.000 lines altogether, in six-line verses) were published in 1872 and 1879. The first part had an extraordinary popular success: copies of the cheap yellowish pamphlets were ordered wholesale by stores deep in the country, the Gauchos accepted it as their own, and it was recited and read aloud to those who could not read. The second part (twice as long as the first and more varied) was written by popular request, and equally successful. Its first printing was of 20.000, after 48,000 copies had already been printed of the first part alone.

In spite of its popularity, however, the poem attracted no interest in cultured circles of the time, whose sights were all set on Paris; there had been a number of earlier works in Gaucho idiom, but the fashion for these had passed. Martin Fierro was not treated seriously as literature until 1913, when a series of lectures by Leopoldo Lugones dealt with it in terms of universal epic and heroic poetry. It is now an accepted part of the school curriculum -- a classic to be bored by or to rediscover.

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As literature, Martin Fierro has a curious position. It is a primitive poem written by an educated man, a genuinely popular work, not a rustic poem intended for sophisticated readers, but not limited, either, to its popular audience. It can be read on various levels: as an entertaining story, as a protest against social injustice and a record of historical conditions, for its special poetry born of the character of its hero and his world, and for its practical philosophy of life in general.

A foreigner can approach Martin Fierro on any of these levels, but to anyone who enjoys proverbs one of the best things about it is aphorisms. These are by no means always banal folk wisdom, but have a bite to them, like this practical comment from a reformed cardsharp:

*Más cuesta aprender un vicio
Que aprender a trabajar.*

It's harder to learn to be crooked than it is to learn honest work.

-- or this astringent piece of advice on the realities of friendship:

*Su esperanza no la cifren
Nunca en el corazón alguno --
En el mayor infortunio
Pongan su confianza en Dios --
De los hombres, solo en uno,
Con gran precaución en dos.*

Don't sum up all your hopes in any one heart ever;
in the worst of troubles put your trust in God
among men, in one only, or with great caution, two.

The language of Martin Fierro is both colloquial and dignified. The narrative, with its colourful dialect expressions, is quick and humorous, and the more heightened, lyrical passages use simple images with a quaint formality reminiscent of the poetry of the Bible. The story is told in the first person as if sung to the guitar in the traditional Gaucho manner: the language of the poem carries its own rhythm and would have nothing to gain from the addition of a tune, but it can well be imagined half-recited, half-intoned, to an expressive accompaniment. Needless to say any translation of a poem like this is bound to be imperfect, as apart from technical difficulties, there could be no equivalent dialect in another language that would draw on the same range of images. Rather than go into these problems, as a translator, I would like to try to express what I most admire in *Martin Fierro*, and what seemed most worth attempting to communicate in another language. Four excerpts can illustrate this.

*Al sentirse lastimao
Se puso medio afligido.
Pero era indio decidido,
Su valor no se quebranto --
Le salían de la garganta
Como una especie de aullidos.*

*Lastimao en la cabeza
La sangre lo enceguecía;
De otra herida le salía
Haciendo una charca ande estaba...
Con los pies la chapaliaba*

Sin aflojar todavia.

When he felt he was wounded he started to groan a bit,
but he was tough as indians come and his courage didn't break –
out of his mouth there came a noise like the howling of a dog.

He was wounded in the head and the blood got in his eyes –
from another gash it fell and made a puddle where he stood –
he was splashing in it with his feet and still without weakening...

In this literal and horrifying description of a fight to the death we have the poem at its simplest level and superbly done: a vividly pictured adventure story.

Martin Fierro is essentially a male and heroic poem. Like the *Iliad*, its raw material is blood and courage: man's survival or death are its primary laws, and its moral themes are images of that battle – the necessity for mental courage in the face of suffering. The world of *Martin Fierro* might be one from pre-history. Its landscape, the treeless pampa, is non-human, neutral as the flat sea it resembles. Human life and society exist on it like islands, and consist of basic elements: food and clothes, the family, work, companions, singing. Martin Fierro's ideal life as described at the beginning of the poem is simply these, and his greatest sorrows are being deprived of them. The poem's protests hardly get to mention the lack of further social refinements such as education or religion. A Gaucho needs all his courage and skill to preserve his life as it is, against natural obstacles; the agents of evil in the poem are the authorities who interfere to destroy this simple pattern.

*Habia un gringuito cautivo
Que siempre hablaba del barco
Y lo augaron en un charco
Por causante de la peste –
Tenia los ojos celestes
Como potrillito zarco.*

There was a gringo boy captive -- always talking about his ship –
and they drowned him in a pond for being the cause of the plague.
His eyes were pale blue like a wall-eyed foal.

The pathos of this stanza is much rarer in the poem than the violence of the first passage, but it illustrates a contrasting point: Hernandez's skill (when he chooses) in organizing detail into dramatic effects, while remaining in the character of the unlettered gaucho narrator. Here he uses a quite Shakespearian device of bringing a scene to life by an unexpected homely touch: the captive boy's blue eyes among the dark faces of the Indian executioners, and a sudden reminder of a wider world with the ship he talked about -- the immigrants' ship that had brought him to the country.

However, parts of the poem show considerably less art of this kind than others, and it is often hard to tell how far the naive or even banal elements in it are deliberate, as appropriate to a gaucho singer, or simply due to Hernandez himself not noticing the difference. On the whole the impression is that although Hernandez was deliberately imitating naive storytelling, he probably also shared the gauchos' unsophisticated tastes. In any case, the naive repetitions are balanced by the evident care taken throughout the poem to produce effects by contrasts -- comic after serious passages, digressions after excitement, and so on.

A more important point is that the poem itself does not show signs of moralistic writing down, in spite of the explicit didactic aims that Hernandez set out in his Prefaces -- by reaching the gauchos indirectly in their own language, he hoped to influence them to respect themselves and learn more 'civilized' feelings. The most Hernandez can be accused of on this score is that *Martin Fierro*, his hero, is not a typical example of a gaucho: by most accounts the gaucho soldiers were a bloodthirsty lot, and even in peacetime they were given a bad name from the many outlaws and semi-savage casual workers who roamed the land -- there can have been few such sensitive and God-fearing citizens among them as *Martin Fierro*. But the answer to this is that a hero can be *archetypical* without being average-typical: one of the protests of the poem is that to the authorities the gauchos are merely bandits, with no allowance for their human merits and rights.

The next two quotations also illustrate contrasted elements in the poem, this time of content rather than form. First something of the poem's high style:

*Soy gaucho, y entiendenlo
Como mi lengua lo explica --
Para mi la tierra es chica :
Y pudiera ser mayor --
Ni la vibora me pica
Ni quema mi frente el sol.*

*Naci como nace el peje
En el fondo de la mar --
Naidas me puede quitar
Aquello que Dios me dio --
Lo que al mundo truje yo
Del mundo lo he de llevar.*

*Mi gloria es vivir tan libre
Como el pajarito del cielo . . .*

I am a gaucho, and take this from me as my tongue explains to you –
for me the earth is a small place and could be bigger yet –
the snake does not bite me nor the sun burn my brow.

I was born as the fish is born in the bottom of the sea;
no one can take from me what I was given by God –
what I brought into the world I shall take from the world with me.

It is my glory to live as free as a bird in the sky . . .

This is the *bravata* --the singer's bravura piece of defiant boasting. Here, at the beginning of the poem, he is presenting his credentials; he does so again in a similar tone at the start of the second part, and at the end the voices of Hernandez and Martin Fierro merge in a confident claim for immortality. The exaggeration is poetically right and exhilarating. In a world empty or hostile to man, the powers of human imagination must be built up defiantly if they are to exist at all. In such a world, man -- the only vertical on a flat horizon -- stands or falls by the value he puts on himself.

So much of the poem is taken up with the gaucho's suffering and laments at the hostility of the world outside (*sufrir* is probably the poem's most frequent word), that it is a relief when the picture simplifies into the natural hostility of man against nature. Faced with the challenge of the desert pampa, or even of natural disasters like the plague, or the Indians' savagery, the gaucho can hold up his head and be active even in sorrow, whereas in a prison or an army camp, man-made ordeals, he can only suffer passively. These bravura passages of self-assertion are like acts of faith, and in them the poem takes off into pure poetry: the simple images hold more than they say.

Finally, some of Martin Fierro's parting advice to his sons:

*Nace el hombre con la astucia
Que ha de servirle de guia --
Sin ella sucumbiria,
Pero sigun mi esperencia --
Se vuelve en unos prudencia,
Y en los otros picardia.*

A man is born with the astuteness that has to serve him as a guide.
Without it he'd go under -- but in my experience
in some people it turns to discretion, and in others, dirty tricks.

*El que obedeciendo vive
Nunca tiene suerte blanda --
Mas con soberbia agranda*

*El rigor en que padece --
Obedezca el que obedece,
Y sera bueno el que manda.*

No one whose job is to obey has an easy time of it,
but if he's proud he only increases the hardships he has to bear –
if you're the one to obey, then obey so the one who's boss does his job well.

*Procuren de no perder
Ni el tiempo, ni la verguenza --
Como todo hombre que piensa
Procedan siempre con juicio --
Y sepan que ningun vicio
Acaba donde comienza.*

Do your best not to lose either time or your self-respect.
As you're men with power to think use your judgment when you act --
and keep in mind that there's no vice which ends as it began.

The last quotations showed the poem's metaphysics, here are examples of its practical morality. And it is their practical quality which is chiefly interesting about these sayings: in a world where no morality can be taken for granted, any ideal not based on immediate reality would perish.

There are two sets of moral aphorisms in the poem: Martin Fierro's parting advice, which these verses come from, and an earlier episode when the old thief Viscacha gives his advice to one of Martin Fierro's sons. They are clearly intended to be contrasted. Old Viscacha is cynical to the point of living like a dog, and his advice consists in getting the maximum to eat with the minimum of trouble and no scruples; Martin Fierro is concerned with surviving within the laws of society and one's own conscience, by keeping one's self-respect. But what gives point to the difference between the two sets of values is that in so many ways they are alike. It is not simply a contrast between material and spiritual values; both them are based on the necessity to survive by one's wits in a hard world. Viscacha says:

*Jamas llegues a parar
A donde veas perros flacos.*

Don't you ever stop off at a place where the dogs don't look well fed.

*El primer cuidao del hombre
Es defender el pellejo...*

The first concern a man has is taking care of his own skin...

*Hacete amigo del Juez,
No le des de que quejarse...*

Make friends with the Judge, don't give him a chance to complain of you...

and Martin Fierro:

*Ansi como tal les digo
Que vivan con precaucion –
Naide sabe en que rincon
Se oculta el que es su enemigo.*

*El hombre, de una mirada
Todo ha de verlo, al momento –
El primer conocimiento
Es conocer cuando enfada.*

It's as a friend I warn you to be on your guard in life.

You never know what corner your enemy's lurking in...

A man has to see how things are in one glance, right away.

The first thing you have to know is to know when you're giving offence . . .

But although their motives are similar in kind (self-preservation), they are different in scope. Martin Fierro's morality is "better" than Viscacha's because it is bigger -- practical on more levels. He includes Viscacha's world-view whereas Viscacha does not include his. The conditions of Martin Fierro's world are more complex because he includes the factor of conscience, and therefore defers to laws of psychological cause and effect which do not enter into Viscacha's calculations.

Martin Fierro's values are also convincing because they are upheld by his experience in the poem, and the development of his character. In the first part he is by no means entirely respectable, notably in the incident when he picks a fight and kills the black man at a dance. There is no indication at the time that either he or the reader is expected to feel ashamed of this, and presumably, it was acceptable by normal gaucho standards. When he first introduces himself Martin Fierro boasts "that I never fight nor kill / except when it has to be done"; and even much later in the poem he appeals to a primitive code of honor by making the excuse that the black man was the first actually to draw blood with his knife. But meanwhile, in the course of the story, Martin Fierro grows older and wiser (or sadder), and another more humane morality evolves through him. When the dead man's brother claims his vengeance, Martin Fierro is prepared to fight but not from choice -- he accepts the company's decision to stop the fight. Some critics find this conclusion unsatisfactory; the Argentine writer J.L.Borges has a story in which he makes Martin Fierro come back later to fight the second Black and be killed himself. It might be still more "realistic" to make Martin Fierro win again, and be forced to accept the responsibility for yet another death on his hands. . . . But the actual rather ambiguous ending is not out of keeping with the way Martin Fierro's character has been moving. Perhaps a primitive code of honor and an ethic of avoiding unnecessary violence are incompatible. In any case, by the time Fierro comes to sum up what he has learned from life, in his advice to his sons, he puts his change of heart into words:

*El hombre no mate al hombre
Ni pelee por fantasia –
Tiene en la desgracia mia
Un espejo en que mirarse –
Saber el hombre guardarse
Es la gran sabiduria.*

Man does not kill man, nor fight just out of vanity.
You have, in my misfortunes, a glass to see yourselves in:
the greatest wisdom a man can have is to know how to control himself.

*La sangre que se redama
No se olvide hasta la muerte –
La impresion es de tal suerte
Que a mi pesar, no lo niego –
Cae como gotas de fuego
En el alma del que la vierte.*

Blood that is spilt will never be forgotten till the day you die.
It makes so deep an impression -- in spite of myself, I can't deny it --
that it falls like drops of fire into the soul of him who shed it.

This is acceptable, and respectable, because it is not a morality imposed by commandment from above. Its motives are entirely practical: given the condition that man has a conscience, he must for his own sake take into account the effects of his own actions on himself. And as Martin Fierro says to his sons, the only advice it is possible to give is simply to pass on one's own experience. Without losing his character as a gaucho, by the end of the poem Martin Fierro grows into a kind of Everyman, whose experiences and conclusions hold good not only in his own world, but in other more complex places and times.

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