



Enrique Policastro (1898-1971): *Ombúes* ( private collection )

## MARTÍN FIERRO THE GAUCHO

### Introduction

When José Hernández was born in 1834, Argentina was entering a period of nearly twenty years' dictatorship under Juan Manuel de Rosas, which was to be succeeded by a further period of political confusion and civil wars. The work and the life of Hernández are closely involved with this stage of his country's history.

The River Plate Provinces had achieved independence from Spain in 1810-16; in the following years Paraguay, Bolivia and Uruguay separated into their present forms and the Argentine nation was defined. Republican government was decreed but there was conflict over the form it should take, between the opposing parties of Federalists and Unitarians. As a rough distinction: the Federalists, in favour of a federation between independently governed provinces, were the provincial landowners and *caudillos* (leaders) supported by "the people" -- representing the old order from Colonial times, when the land was divided into immense estates; the Unitarians, in favour of centralized government with Buenos Aires as capital, represented largely the commercial and intellectual interests of the city, more accessible to European liberal ideas. In the late 1820's, increasing confusion under Unitarian rule led to a take-over by Rosas, a Federalist governor of Buenos Aires province who, however, had by 1835 established a personal dictatorship over the whole country.

Buenos Aires did not become the official capital of Argentina until 1880. Until the mid-eighteenth century the colony had faced towards the older cities in the north-west, nearest to Peru, the seat of Spanish rule; no direct trade across the Atlantic was allowed, and Buenos Aires was a small backward town, isolated by hundreds of miles of the flat treeless pampa inhabited only by unconquered nomadic Indians. It first became a capital in the late eighteenth century when Spain made a separate viceroyalty of the River Plate countries; it had the advantage of contact with Europe across the Atlantic, but its right to be the seat of government was disputed by the other provinces -- hence years of civil wars both before and after the static period of Rosas's tyranny.

Hernández took an active part in these struggles: his life stretches from the last years of the old semi-feudal society prolonged by Rosas, to the 1880s when progress in the form of railways, enclosure of land with barbed-wire fencing, large-scale immigration, etc., was approaching its peak.

Hernández's parents both came from established colonial families: chiefly Spanish but including French and Irish ancestors; Argentine for at least three generations. His father was not rich and worked as a cattle-dealer, travelling frequently between distant ranches. His mother's family, Puerreydon, was a prominent one; José was born on their property on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, and brought up there by his grandmother while his parents were away in the country. He had both Unitarian and Federalist relations; when he was six his mother's family, as opponents of the Rosas regime, were forced to emigrate, and he then stayed with his paternal grandfather and attended a private school.

His mother died when he was ten; at about this time he became ill and was sent on doctors' orders to live with his father, who was working on huge cattle ranches south of Buenos Aires. He got well, learnt to ride and grew exceptionally strong. Here he joined in the traditional life of an *estancia* (ranch) and the gauchos who worked it -- experts with horses and cattle, the children of the pampa whose spokesman he was to become. The ranches he lived on were close to Indian territory: Hernández must have encountered both the friendly Indians who worked with the gauchos, and the hostile tribes whose raids had continually to be fought off.

This life continued until he was eighteen, when his father was killed by lightning, leaving him with a younger brother. In the same year, 1852, Rosas was deposed and a period of intermittent civil wars set in, for almost the next twenty years. During this period Hernández took part as a soldier and as a journalist on the side of the Federalists, but chiefly, and apart from party politics, in defence of the gauchos and country people whose way of life was being destroyed by conscription, neglect, and corrupt local government.

The fall of Rosas led to a confusion of loyalties, with battles first between pro- and anti-Rosas Federalists, then between Buenos Aires (largely Unitarian) and the Federalist provinces. Hernández first joined the pro-Rosas militia; later in Buenos Aires city he joined the party in favour of reconciliation with the Federalist provinces, and wrote for that party's newspaper. A few years later the Buenos Aires government changed, and he was forced to leave for the Federalist rival capital at Paraná in Entre Rios province to the north-east. Here he lived for the next ten years (1858-68): working first at manual labour (he was a huge, black-bearded, gentle, man -- "like a strong-man in a circus", his brother described him); later at various posts in the Federalist government, including stenographer to the Senate; and always producing newspaper articles and pamphlets. He married in Paraná in 1863, and eventually had seven children.

Hernández fought for the Federalists in the series of battles leading to their eventual defeat; as a journalist he criticized his own party when necessary as well as violently attacking the Unitarians. During this period he can be thought of now as an antithesis in ideas to Sarmiento, the great Unitarian president and educationalist: Hernández as champion of the values of the primitive life based on the land and its work; Sarmiento as representative of change and civilization in the European (or North American) manner.

In 1869 Hernández was able to return to Buenos Aires, and started his own newspaper there, called *El Río de la Plata*; after a year this was closed by Sarmiento when there was a new Federalist rising. Hernández fought with the Federalists in their final defeat and after it went into exile: first in Brazil and then in Montevideo, where he worked as a journalist for the next few years -- Uruguay, across the River Plate estuary from Buenos Aires, being always closely related to Argentina in politics and sympathies.

He began his narrative poem *El Gaucho Martín Fierro* in a Brazilian village, and continued it in Montevideo and in the small dockside hotels where he stayed when paying secret visits to Buenos Aires to see his family. The poem was printed very cheaply, in a yellowish pamphlet full of misprints, in 1872.

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Hernández's poem aimed to speak to the country people in their own language about their own troubles. It tells the adventures and opinions of an archetypal gaucho suffering the hardships and injustice of the times: from a contented life working on a ranch, the unsuspecting hero is press-ganged into the ill-treated frontier militia; he deserts to find his home abandoned and his family lost, becomes an outlaw, and finally escapes across the frontier to try his luck living with the Indians. It is written in the words, images and proverbs of the gauchos -- almost a sub-language of Spanish: humorous, contentious, and lyrical, in rhymed stanzas supposedly sung to the guitar, the gauchos' traditional instrument.

Argentine cultural circles were at this time ruthlessly orientated towards France; there had been a school of "gaucho" poetry some years earlier, but this was considered a rustic idiom for which the vogue had passed. *Martín Fierro* was ignored in the city but had an unprecedented popular success in the country, where it was

accepted as genuine *gaucho*. 48,000 copies were reprinted in the next six years; it was ordered wholesale by provision stores deep in the country, read and recited at local gatherings to those who could not read.

By 1874 Sarmiento was no longer President and Hernández had returned to live in Buenos Aires. He went into business with his brother, dealing in cattle and land, owned a bookshop; and took part in politics: he was elected Deputy in 1879 and later Senator.

The 1870s and 80s saw a wave of material changes in Argentina. The Indians were exterminated or resettled, railways spread across the pampa, a flood of immigration altered the whole balance of the population and swelled the capital to disproportionate size. Hernández continued as champion of the country people in their perennial struggle against a remote bureaucracy. As a politician he toured country districts, a much-loved figure who was popularly identified with the hero of his poem -- even in the city he was known as "Martín Fierro".

Popular demand led him to write the sequel -- *La Vuelta de Martín Fierro* (The Return of Martín Fierro), published in 1879. It was twice as long as the first part, and (unlike some sequels) as good or better. It is more varied and more serious, and perhaps more studied: Martín Fierro, from being a straightforward hero to whom a series of adventures happen -- largely picaresque in spite of their social message -- becomes a more subjective figure, older and wiser, with a universal dimension: almost an Everyman.

The second part of the poem follows on from the first with the story of Martín Fierro's life with an Indian tribe, with his companion Cruz, who dies there, and his return to his own country. After this come long separate stories told by Fierro's two sons and by Cruz's son (one the celebrated episode with old Viscacha), then the curious lyrical *payada*, or singing contest, between Martín Fierro and a challenger (who turns out to be the brother of the man Fierro killed in Part One); and finally a concluding passage of aphoristic wisdom. *La Vuelta* had no more of a literary success, and no less of a popular one, than the first part. It was printed in ever-increasing numbers, and by the end of the century there had been more than twenty editions of the two parts together.

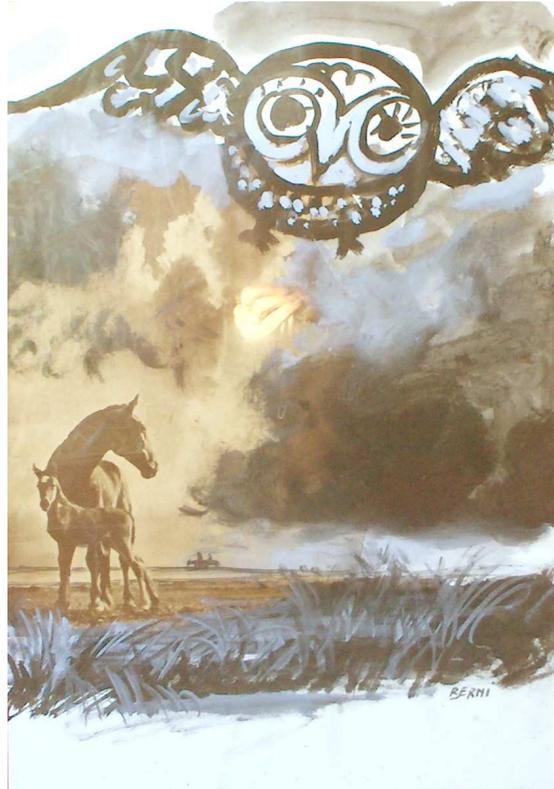
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Hernández's concern with social justice for the gauchos is expressed as strongly as ever in the second part of the poem. In other ways however, he had by that time grown nearer to Sarmiento's "progressive" ideals (just as Sarmiento grew to have increased respect for the values of the land and its people). In 1880, when Buenos Aires was finally voted official capital of the nation, Hernández supported the motion in a long speech in Congress, urging the development of the country along the lines of the North American states, to take its place in international affairs. For this attitude he has been accused of disloyalty to Federalism, but in the same speech he warns against the obstacles created by excessive party-feeling in a nation emerged so recently from the bitter experience of civil wars. His positive loyalties remained consistent: it is always the land and its people that he urges to be considered foremost as the basis of the nation's strength and wealth. In 1884, when he was Senator, Hernández was invited to tour the world studying cattle breeding at government expense. He refused, on the grounds that improvement should begin at home, and instead wrote a handbook of ranch management, *Instrucciones del Estanciero* -- the other work of his that is still read, reminiscent of *Martín Fierro* in its aphorisms and good sense.

Hernández died in 1886, aged fifty-two, of a heart attack -- caused, according to some accounts, by chagrin at the state of the country. His last words, reported by his brother, were "Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires..."

Living through a period of the virtual formation of a modern state. Hernández must indeed have suffered from seeing unique chances frustratingly lost; in what he cared most about, the land, he saw the extinction of the gauchos' old way of life with no planned settlement to take its place -- to this day in Argentina, the capital and the interior are separate worlds, and their voices still seek a true synthesis in government. But throughout his life, in a chronically unstable political scene where he was more often than not in the minority, Hernández seems to have possessed the vital quality of persistence: managing to survive, and taking any opportunity to press his cause regardless of the likelihood of immediate success. He, and still more his spokesman Martín Fierro, voice a spirit of the land that is still valid, even though the gaucho's life as Hernández knew it has disappeared with the isolation that formed it.

Although *Martín Fierro* continued to be reprinted, it was not established as the national classic it is today until 1913, when it was first studied seriously as an example of epic literature by Leopoldo Lugones, in a series of lectures collected in his book *El Payador* (The Singer.). It is now firmly ensconced in the Argentine school curriculum, and is worked hard as a national institution. Quotations from it appear on advertisement hoardings, and it provides ornamental mottoes for suburban villas; editions appear continually, new artists illustrate it, and no critic escapes his obligation to opine on it. It has become a classic: to be bored with, to react against, or to rediscover.



Antonio Berni (1907-1981): *Pampa* (private collection)

### *Note on the Translation*

The difficulties of translating *Martín Fierro* must be obvious. As it is written in a language unique to its geographical and historical circumstances, no dialect of another language could be entirely appropriate: even with a similar background (as with North American cowboys, for instance); the inherited traditions, religion, etc., would alter the type of images used.

In this translation (originally with a bilingual edition in mind) the aims have been, in this order: (a) to follow the text as closely as possible, especially in the imagery; (b) to make the translation read fluently in current but neutral (i.e. non-dialect and international) English; (c) to keep a rhythm in the translation giving an idea of the shape and movement of the original. The poem is written almost entirely in six-line rhymed stanzas, with almost invariably a strong pause at the end of every second, fourth, and sixth line, so that the lines fall into pairs. In this translation those six lines are printed as three long divided lines: with very few exceptions each long line in English corresponds to two short lines in the Spanish, though for the sake of fluency the order of phrases may be rearranged. This should help readers whose Spanish is limited or who are unfamiliar with River Plate idioms, towards reading the original. For this reason too, closeness to the text was given priority over trying to find rhyme or strict rhythm in English (an English translation with these priorities reversed already exists in Walter Owen's of 1933, which renders the poem's colloquial element often very successfully, though arguably not its poetic dignity).

The translation follows the original punctuation with the dashes which Hernández used freely to mark pauses -- particularly before the last two lines of a stanza where a proverb often comes as a punch-line. Images have been translated directly wherever possible, though sometimes expanded to make the point of comparison clearer. Where there is any considerable departure from the original, the literal translation is given in a note. Exceptions are cases where there is a saying in English with nearly precise equivalent meaning (e.g. "by the skin of my teeth" for *con el hilo en una pata*). Untranslatable jokes (e.g. at 1/5/11) are explained in notes, attempting to show the type of humour in the original even if there is no equivalent. In general, words in Spanish have been avoided except when they have no translation (such as *poncho* and *mate*), or have an important specific meaning (*criollo*), with the names of some animals.

Frequently used general terms (gaucho, indian, pampa, christian) have not been given capital letters. Capitals have been used for abstract concepts (Law, Government) or words alien to gaucho life that the narrator may be emphasising, sometimes ironically. "Negro" (probably less offensive in Spanish) has been replaced by "black" or the humorous "darky", except for the protagonist of the singing contest at II.30 which has been left as in the original.

An earlier version of this translation, edited by the State University of New York, Albany, NY, was published in 1967, courtesy of the Pan-American Union in Washington, with illustrations by Antonio Berni. It has also been used for an edition in English accompanied by works by Argentine painters, published by the Zurbaran Gallery, Buenos Aires, in 1996.

### ***Pronunciation***

The chief characteristics of pronunciation in Argentine (River Plate) Spanish are as follows.

c followed by e or i, and z, are pronounced as s (*cinco, zorro*).  
ll (double l) and y pronounced 'zh' as French 'j' or hard as 'dg' in 'bridge' (*yo, criollo*).

Other dialect pronunciations are frequently (not invariably) imitated in the spelling of the original poem, e.g.: s for x (*esplico* for '*explico*'); f for sb (*refalar* for '*resbalar*'); j for sg (*dijusto* for '*disgusto*'); j for f (*juerte* for '*fuerte*'); gu for h (*guella* for '*huella*'); gu for b (*gueno* for '*bueno*'); gu for v (*guelta* for '*vuelta*'); l for d (*alvertir* for '*advertir*'); also -ao for -ado (*encontrao* for '*encontrado*'). Words can be shortened (*virtu* for '*virtud*', *dotor* for '*doctor*', *inorar* for '*ignorar*', *pa* for '*para*', *ay* for '*ahí*', etc.)

### ***Books consulted***

Francisco I. Castro: *Vocabulario y frases de 'Martín Fierro'*. Editorial Kraft, Buenos Aires, 1957 (2nd ed).

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Leopoldo Lugones: *El Payador*. W.H. Hudson: *Far Away and Long Ago*.

*C.E. Ward (1967)*  
*Kate Ward Kavanagh (2007)*