

## *The Cult of the Gaucho and the Creation of a Literature*

BY EDWARD LAROCQUE TINKER

COLONIALS, for the most part, are too busy making a living and developing new lands to devote much time to writing, but if they do achieve leisure, an inferiority complex in matters cultural makes their first tentative efforts mere imitations of European models.

Generations of freedom were needed before the United States discovered that novels about lords and ladies by authors who had never seen one were lifeless trash. We had little literature with real roots in the soil until Emerson announced we had "listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," and advised our writers "to explore and poetize the near, the low, the common," because "things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote."

This famous speech in "The American Scholar" did a great deal to destroy our subservience to British example, and to teach us the vital interest and importance of our own life and country as raw material for literature.

The Latin-American Republics underwent the same experience: the only differences being that their vinculation was to Spain and France, not England, and their general realization of the value of indigenous material came some half century after ours.

Argentina and Uruguay were no exceptions, but their literary development may be treated as one because their

history is inseparable and their culture, climate and heredity are practically identical.

When their writers turned to their own land for inspiration and subject matter, it was inevitable that they should choose the gaucho for their theme; for, in these cattle-producing areas, this class, like our own cowboy, played a romantic and often heroic part. It produced a vital tradition and a large body of folklore that inspired a truly national literature as native as the ombú; the first to spring from the soil and to sweep away the barriers of a snobbish preference for everything European. But one must know something of the gaucho himself to understand how this came about.

Under Spanish rule, Argentina and Uruguay were undivided, and on their broad pampas roamed unnumbered wild horses and cattle, descendants of those brought over by the early settlers. These were the greatest source of wealth and gave rise to a body of fearless riders called *gauchos* that made a business of hunting wild cattle for their hides and tallow or driving them to estancias to be branded and gentled.

Huge expeditions were organized for these hunts, with as many as a thousand head of saddle horses and great convoys of lumbering two-wheel carts. Once in sight of a herd, the gauchos hamstringed as many as possible with their long knives, called *facones*, or with the *medialunas*, which were bamboo spears with crescents of sharpened steel. It was no trick for 18 to 20 horsemen to maim 700 or 800 animals in an hour. Then, after a smoke and rest, they began the grisly task of slitting their throats and skinning them. The meat, except what little they could eat, was left for the vultures and wild dogs to devour. It was a cruel and very wasteful business.

After six months or a year of such a hunt, there came the problem of disposing of the skins for which the financiers had risked their money, and the gauchos their necks.

Spain regarded her colonies as regions for exploitation, and would not permit them to trade with any but the mother country. She tried to force the estancieros and cattle hunters to send their hides, tallow, and ostrich plumes in great ox carts across the Andes to Peru, through hundreds of miles of Indian-infested country, and then overland up the Pacific coast to Panama, where they were loaded on galleons for Spain. She refused to allow the money received in payment to be used for purchases in Europe, unless carried in Spanish bottoms and forwarded to the Argentine by the same circuitous and costly route. So it was infinitely simpler and more lucrative to smuggle the hides out to British and Dutch vessels that hovered off the coast and to take in exchange their scarce European goods. Thus the gaucho was practically forced to become a lawbreaker, and soon felt himself superior to all authority.

They were, for the most part, the mestizo descendants of Indians and the white women captured in raids; or of Spanish criminals, adventurers, or deserting soldiers, who had solaced their loneliness with squaws. Life in the open made these men as lithe as pumas, strong as bulls, tough as hickory. Like our cowboys, they lived in the saddle and could ride anything that wore hair. "Man without a horse," they said, "was nothing." Meat and maté (tea of Ilex leaves) was their sole diet, their saddle their pillow, and their poncho their blanket. With no more than this they traveled far and fast over their seas of grass, for they knew every trail and swale as intimately as a market-gardener his acre plot.

Dark-complexioned and Indian-featured, these men must have been a fearsome-looking lot with beards unshorn and long hair kept out of their eyes by a *vincha*, a browband. They wore shirts open at the throat with a handkerchief knotted around their neck, and, strangely enough for such

lustly cattle-pirates, full, long, cotton drawers, with lace at the bottoms on gala occasions. Over these a large square of hand-loomed cloth, called a *chiripá*, was pulled around the waist and tied over the stomach by its two upper corners. The rest of it that hung down behind was drawn forward between the legs and tucked under the belt in front. It looked something like an oversized parti-colored diaper, and was invented by the Conquistadores who, when the seats of their pants wore through, swaddled their nakedness in a blanket, and appropriately christened their new article of apparel a "*chiripá*"—a Quechua word meaning "against the cold." Their cowhide belts were wide and decorated with coins in accordance with the wealth of their wearers, and were held together by elaborate silver fastenings—*rastras*. In the matter of boots—*botas de potro*—they copied the Indian. These were made from a tubular section of skin from the hind leg of a horse or cow, with the part covering the hock joint making a natural heel. Toes were allowed to protrude so the rider could grip the rawhide strap, ending in a knot, that served as stirrup. His spurs were heavy, with enormous rowels, "nazarenas," because they suggested the "crown of thorns," and the *facón* was stuck in the back of his belt. With it he cut the throats of cattle, and skinned them, or pared laces from their hides to make reatas or to mend gear. It came in handy to slice off slabs of *asado*, and to pick his teeth after he had eaten it. With his poncho wrapped around his left arm and his *facón* in his hand he fought his duels.

He was a tireless horizon-hunter, who worked only sufficiently long enough to buy maté, tobacco, and cheap perfume for his *china*; or to indulge in a gambling spree at horse racing or *taba*-throwing, or absorb more than was good for him of the rum called *caña*. Then, he'd drift across the illimitable pampas on his faithful *pingo*, slaughtering a

cow for a single steak or a colt for a pair of boots—whose horse or whose heifer was a matter of complete indifference. Someone has figured that, as a pair of gaucho's boots lasted only two months, every 1000 gauchos slaughtered 6000 head of other people's stock a year to keep themselves shod. This became such a drain that a law was finally passed making it a crime to wear the *botas de potro*.

In addition to the *facón*, the gaucho had two other effective weapons, both of which he copied from the Indians. One was an eighteen-foot bamboo spear and the other the *boleadoras*—three lengths of plaited rawhide about two yards long joined together, and to each free end a ball of stone or lead encased in rawhide was attached. Holding one ball in his hand and swinging the others around his head, the gaucho would gallop after a horse, cow, or ostrich, and launch the *boleadoras* at their legs to entangle and throw them. He became so skillful that it is said he could bring down a duck on the wing.

A favorite pampas sport was for a gaucho to allow a companion to throw the *boleadoras* at his horse as he galloped by full tilt. If the rider did not land on his feet like a cat as his mount turned a somersault, he was the butt of jibes for many a month.

The roughest game was Pato—"The Duck." The news traveled by grapevine that a game was called for a certain day, and early in the morning 300 or 400 gauchos on their swiftest *pingos*, with silver-mounted bridles gathered at the appointed *pulpería*, or pampa "pub," and began to shout "Pato"! "Pato"!

The proprietor would finally appear with a live duck sewn in a rawhide cover, to which four stout leather handles were firmly attached. Four mounted men each grasped one of the handles, and, at the word, drove spurs into their horses in an Homeric tug-of-war, until one managed to wrest

the *pato* away from the others, and careen off with the whole horde galloping after. They swept across the pampa like a desperate cavalry charge, as each individual strove to snatch the duck. A thousand hoofs raised an impenetrable cloud of dust, and woe betide the poor devil who found himself afoot in the path of this stampede. Riders were killed when their horses stumbled, and passions ran so high that *facones* were drawn and differences settled with cold steel.

At last some iron man on the fleetest horse was able to reach the *pulperia* designated as goal, with the *pato* under his arm. He had risked his neck and his best horse for fame and the right to have the duck roasted for his delectation.

Many participants and by-standers were killed at this rough game, and Rosas finally banned it. Only recently has it been revived with rules that are more humane.

The game that required the greatest skill and daring, however, was called "La Maroma"—the name of the wooden crosspiece that connects at the top the two portal posts of a corral. The gaucho about to perform this feat seated himself on this crosspiece like a trapeze performer and, as his companions drove a herd of wild cattle at top speed through the gates, he dropped on the bare back of a cow and rode it to a standstill. The slightest slip or mistake in timing meant that he would be trampled to pieces.

If age or the fascinations of some *china* stilled his wanderlust for awhile, the gaucho usually settled down in a one-room sod hut with a reed roof, and a flapping hide for a door. The cow supplied his every need; his chairs were the bleached heads and hips of cattle, his canteen a carved horn, and a bovine udder, dried in the sun, provided a four-legged bowl.

The gaucho's uncleanliness, ignorance, and mixed blood, his wasteful slaughtering of other people's livestock, and the callousness with which he abducted a girl or slit an enemy's throat combined, in early days, to make him a despised

figure; and Hernández summarized this when he made Martín Fierro say bitterly:

They call him a drunken gaucho beast.  
If he goes to a dance, he's an upstart boor;  
He's a brawler, if he defends himself;  
If he doesn't—they do him in.

His illiteracy was inevitable, and cleanliness was hard to achieve on the dry pampa, while his brutality was inherent in his calling for, as Sarmiento pointed out, he was accustomed to slaughtering steers from infancy, and this cruel act necessarily familiarized him with bloodshed and hardened his heart against the groans of the victims. It might have been explained with equal accuracy as an atavistic resurgence of his Indian blood. But, in any event, to survive in his difficult environment, he had to be tough and ruthless.

That he had pushed back the frontiers and made possible a huge cattle empire counted for nothing, and it was not until he began to display his ability as a soldier in combatting the European invaders that society's opinion of him began to change. He had every quality of a superb guerrilla cavalryman. His untrammelled life on the plains developed his phenomenal horsemanship, ferocious courage and fanatic independence, while from his Indian blood he inherited a fatalistic stoicism and an ability to endure hunger, thirst, and hardship.

Gauchos were the backbone of the armies. They fought the Portuguese invaders in 1771, helped in 1807 to retake Buenos Aires from the British and played a valiant and deciding role in the battles that resulted in the independence of Argentina in 1810 and Uruguay some years later. They shed their blood in Peru and Chile, in the fighting that followed between the patriots and the adherents of the Spanish Crown. When the civil wars broke out that ended

in the dictatorship of Rosas, some joined the Unitarians, others the Federalists.

In the words of Dr. Ricardo Rojas, the encyclopedic authority on Argentine literature, "They fought and died defending an ideal: a democracy which they did not understand, but which they felt with an innate frenzy."

This patriotic heroism tinged the despised cattle rustler with romance, and transformed him into a national hero.

#### THE GAUCHO IN VERSE

The power of poetry figured largely in this change, for the gaucho had inherited, together with the manners of his Spanish peasant ancestors, their ancient ability to improvise verse. He had a passion for song, and, even in huts that did not possess the most rudimentary utensils, a native guitar, or *charango*, whose sounding box was often the shell of an armadillo, could always be found. Those among them who had the gift of balladry in a marked degree were called *cantores* or *payadores*, and they wandered from place to place, stopping wherever people gathered—at wakes or weddings, *pulperías* or the roadside camps of bullock-drawn freight trains, at ranchos or the fires of acrid-smelling bones, cowchips and thistlestalks, around which a few gauchos huddled under the stars. Everywhere they went they were welcome, for they were the only theatre and newspaper the natives had. It was for this reason that Leopoldo Lugones called them, "the most significant group in the formation of our race."

When two singers of fame met, they often indulged in a duel of song, in which each tried to best the other in extempore rhyme. These contests, called *payadas*, sometimes lasted for two or three days. When rivalry was too intense, the contestants exchanged their guitars for *facones* and



decided which was the better poet by fighting until one or the other was severely wounded—to the great joy and excitement of the audience.

Sarmiento wrote that when the *cantor* relied on the inspiration of the moment alone, his verses were generally heavy, monotonous, and irregular, full of images drawn from rural life of horses and scenes of the pampa, which he made pompous and metaphysical.

Many of their songs, however, had poetic charm and much of the conciseness and allusive quality of the Japanese haikku—characteristics found in the following verse:

De aquel cerro verde  
 Quisiera tener  
 Hierbas del olvido  
 Para no querer.

From that green mountain  
 I would like to tear  
 Herbs of forgetfulness  
 That I might not care.

As a general rule these ballads were modeled on the old Spanish *romance* of the fourteenth century, and were composed in its simple verse form—eight syllabled lines with the second and fourth rhyming. There were, however, variations on the basic pattern that gave rise to exotic names like *gato*, *triste*, *cielito*, *pericón*, *huella*, *vidalita*, *chacarero*, and *escondido*. Some of these were names of dances for which the *payadores* provided the music and sang the verses between figures.

In the beginning the subjects were gallantry, passion and tragedy, but a few were the exploits of some person, like Santos Vega, who became a fabulous folklore figure. But, after the gaucho had won fame as soldier and patriot, the *payadores* forsook songs of broken hearts and sighing swains,

of sloe-eyed señoritas, and Robin Hood cattle thieves, to celebrate love of country, hate of Spain, battles won and gaucho prowess.

These songs began to modify the low opinion held by the public. While they were still cast in the mould inherited from Spain, their content and spirit could only have sprung from New World soil. They were colored by pre-Columbian echoes of Indian chants, and exotic words culled from Quechua, Charruá or Guarani dialects. Black Africa contributed some of its melodies, superstitions, and dances; and the songs of these illiterate *troubadores* came to embalm the life story of a new race, to express their soul and psychology.

At last an anonymous balladeer recognized the salty savor of gaucho talk and, in 1777, published the first known verses to be printed in this tangy idiom—a poem addressed to Viceroy Cevallos, congratulating him upon his victory over the Brazilians. Maziel (1727–1788) employed it and so did Panteleón Rivarola (1754–1821) in 1806, in his two odes on the defense and reconquest of Buenos Aires. But these were merely sporadic instances and it remained for Bartolomé Hidalgo (1788–1823) to make poems in gaucho talk and verse form a respectable branch of literature worthy of perpetuation on paper. Born of poor parents in Montevideo, he was a young barber in the city of his birth when the revolution against Spain exploded. As the victorious Argentine army marched through in 1811 to fight the Brazilian invaders at Paysandú, his spirit took fire and he exchanged his razor for a sword. He soon became paymaster of the patriot army and, after some years of service in which he took part in several battles, he went to Buenos Aires, married, and settled down in a position in the customs service. His work was light, so he had time to write many *cielitos* during office hours. He also tried his hand

at more sophisticated verse, but unsuccessfully, and his fame will rest on his three *Diálogos patrióticos* that appeared between 1820 and 1822. In these, his two brain children, the gaucho Ramon Contreras, and the *capataz* Chano, engaged in rhymed reminiscences of the battles in which they had taken part. Hidalgo wrote of such matters with vividness and authority; he himself had experienced everything he described, and his ear for gaucho intonation was impeccable. Before he died of galloping consumption in 1823, he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had firmly established this essentially Argentine form of poetry as a popular and recognized form of art. A year after his death, his accomplishment received its final accolade by the inclusion of some of his gaucho poems in the first anthology of Argentine verse—"La Lyra Argentina."

A few minor poets, like Juan Godoy (1793-1864), twanged the gaucho lyre, but the next really important practitioner of this form of patriotic poetry was Hilario Ascasubi (1807-1875). His agitated and adventurous life followed the usual pattern of these frontier balladeers, divided between poetry, politics, civil war, and journalism. Even his initial appearance in this world was in keeping, for he was born midst thunder and lightning on a black night in 1807, as his mother lay beneath a huge, two-wheeled oxcart camped by the roadside on a journey from Cordoba to Buenos Aires.

As a youngster of twelve he shipped as cabin boy on *La Rosa Argentina* reputed to be a Portuguese corsair, and sailed to England and France, and from there to Chile, returning home by way of Bolivia. Happening to stop in Salta, this eighteen-year-old gave himself the imposing title of *professor imprentero*, and set up a modest printing establishment with an historic press the Jesuits had brought over from Spain in 1764—the first to arrive in the region now known as Argentina. It was initially installed in a college in

Cordova and produced some items now excessively rare; and when the Jesuits were expelled and their college closed, the printing equipment was partially destroyed. The part that survived was later found in a cellar and was freighted in ox-carts to Buenos Aires, where Governor Juan de Vertiz Salcedo set it up in an orphanage to teach the inmates a trade. The press took the name of the institution—"Los Niños Expósitos" (the Orphans)—and was given the exclusive right to print catechisms, spellers, etc., for ten years. Its first known item in its new location was dated 1780, and was made under the supervision of D. Augustine Garrigós. Finally the plant was transported to Salta, where Ascasubi acquired it to print his *Revista de Salta* and his famous *Canto de la Victoria de Ayacucho*.

Twelve months of inaction was all he could stand before this adventure-loving youth of nineteen deserted journalism to join the "Casadores" of the Unitarian forces. He was soon promoted to a captaincy. While he was gone his printing equipment met a sad but heroic fate. It was melted into bullets to repel Quiroga's attack on Salta in 1830.

During the next three years the young officer came to know intimately every type of gaucho that gathered around the army campfires—scouts, outlaws, balladeers and broncho-busters—and his vivid memories of these men provided him with literary material for the rest of his life.

Finally he took up his pen again and attacked Rosas in an ill-fated journal, *El Arriero Argentino*, whose initial bow was also its last. The vindictive tyrant never forgave him for this, and took advantage of a civil suit over the purchase of some shirts to have Ascasubi imprisoned and condemned to death. For two years he languished in jail; but, on learning his execution was imminent, he managed to escape by jumping out of a window into a moat thirty feet below. He found refuge in a monastery where he had studied as a child and, after some narrow squeaks, managed to reach Montevi-

deo. In this haven for Argentina's political exiles he lived for the next two decades. He married the daughter of a rich family of Uruguay and with part of her dot, this balladeer, cabin boy, captain of gaucho lancers, and "professor of printing" opened, of all things, a bakery. It made a great deal of money, however, enough to permit him to insert an advertisement in the newspapers offering food and lodging to any penniless political refugee from the Argentine for the first five days of his stay in Montevideo. Eventually he was even able to buy a vessel and outfit an expedition against Rosas for his old chief, General Lavalle.

When General Oribe attacked Montevideo, Ascasubi joined the "Argentine Legion" and helped defend the city. In-between times he flooded the press with fiery patriotic verse in the gaucho dialect, and invented Paulino Lucero as his ventriloquistic dummy. One of his *cielitos*, *Media Caña del Campo*, was sung by payadores at every campfire, and a thousand copies were distributed among the troops and citizens to bolster their morale.

When these poems were collected and published in 1853, under the grandiose title of *Paulino Lucero, o los Gauchos del Rio de la Plata, Cantando y Combatiendo contra los Tiranos de las Republicas Argentina y Oriental del Uruguay*, they formed an interesting account of the more dramatic episodes in the long siege of Montevideo and were a mine of information for the student of local manners and customs.

When the Federal dictator, Rosas, was finally defeated in 1851 by Urquiza, who had been one of his generals, Ascasubi returned to Buenos Aires and launched a newspaper, *Aniceto el Gallo*, in which he published numerous poems, attributed to a fictitious character of the same name as the paper. In them he made the gaucho Aniceto preach Unitarian principles to the Federalist followers of Urquiza. It was a short-lived venture that lasted but a year (1853-4) and probably made no converts, for passions ran too high. These poems,

brought out in 1864, might be described as a social romance in rhyme, while his previous volume, *Paulino Lucero*, was more a political polemic in gaucho verse.

It was Ascasubi who originated the idea of building the Colón Theatre and labored valiently to raise the funds. But, no sooner had the foundations been laid, than the scheme collapsed, and his fortune was lost in the general débâcle. To help him out, the Government sent him to Paris in 1860 to recruit European soldiers for the Argentine army. He remained five years during which he consorted with many of the great Gallic writers of that day.

Later he made a second voyage to Paris, and there, old and lonely, his mind turned back to Argentina. He remembered the fabulous payador, Santos Vega, who had become a folk myth, and chose him as the narrator of a long and rather naïve epic of a *gaucho malo*, who, after many misdeeds, repented and died in the bosom of the church. It was called *Santos Vega, o los Mellizos de la Flor* (1851, 1872) and, although as a poem it has little artistic value, it is invaluable as a record of the life and customs of the country, the places and the people. It has, too, a temperate, nostalgic quality, not possessed by his other two books, probably because age and distance had calmed the political passions of his youth. The author, however, lost a great opportunity when he made Santos Vega merely the passive teller of the tale, instead of taking advantage of his colorful life and adventures to make him the hero.

Bartolomé Hidalgo lifted the oral folk songs of the *payador* to a recognized position as printed poetry. Hilario Ascasubi developed it as a political weapon and increased its importance and popularity; and these two writers together laid the foundation for the eventual canonization of the gaucho.

Both had slavishly imitated gaucho speech and *payador* verse form; but with Eteban Echeverría (1805-1851) a new

school was born that regarded pampa talk as an illiterate jargon, and wrote their gaucho poems in correct Castilian, with only an occasional patois term to give color.

With him, the gaucho epopœia passed from the pampa to the plaza, from the pen of the countryman to that of the cosmopolitan; for although he was born in Buenos Aires in 1805, he went to Paris at the age of twenty to study at the Sorbonne. There he came to know Lamartine and Chateaubriand. The romantic possibilities of the New World had captured the imaginations of these two French writers, and they eagerly catechised the young student from across the seas on the exotic life and ways of his homeland. Quite naturally this interest shown by two such stars in the literary firmament gave Echeverría a new appreciation of the importance of his own country as literary material.

He became a thorough romanticist and, on his return to Buenos Aires, was the first to try his hand at this genre of poetry in *Elvira, ó la Novia de la Plata*, which appeared in 1832, and was followed by *Los Consuelos* two years later. They were distinctly Byronic in flavor and met with little or no success. Annoyed and disappointed, he published a bitter attack on the critics, and retired to Mercedes, a tiny town on the Rio Negro, to immerse himself in the simple gaucho life of the countryside. "La Cautiva," the first national epic worthy of the name, was born of this sojourn, and appeared in 1837 in a collection of his verse called *Rimas*. It was a mannered and romantic poem describing the capture of Brián and his wife by the Indians, who bound him between two spears to await torture after his captors had slept off the orgy with which they celebrated their victory. María was left at liberty because one of the caciques had cast lustful eyes upon her white charms, and while the Indian slept she stabbed him, and crept over the bodies of unconscious braves to cut her husband free. As they fled, a prairie fire overtook them, and Brián weak from loss of blood fell to the

ground and urged her to save herself. She, however, took him on her back, struggled to the river, and swam to the other side with her burden. Here, in spite of her bravery and self-sacrifice, he died; and, when rescuing gauchos arrived and informed her of the death of her son, it was more than she could bear, and she too expired.

*La Cautiva* is notable because it introduced for the first time in Argentine literature the Indian and the white woman captive, and also because it is the initial gaucho poem to be written in pure Castilian. The previous authors, like Hidalgo and Ascasubi, had accented their Creolism and reproduced with complete fidelity every intonation of the pampa patois; but Echeverría, with his European education, believed that to follow this course was to promote a rhymed jargon to the rank of poetry. True poetry, he insisted, was never a servile copy, but must be a poetic interpretation of nature.

Far more than a mere *costumbrista* rhymster, he was a writer of vivid prose as well, and his novelette, *Matadero*, written to expose the brutality of Rosas' henchmen, is as passionately realistic as anything Steinbeck has ever done. He also published many political and literary essays that have preserved a clear picture of the thought of his day; and he taught his countrymen the same lesson Emerson taught us in his *American Scholar*.

"If poetry," Echeverría insisted, "wishes to gain influence, it must have an original flavor of its own, and reflect the colors of the physical nature that surround us. It must be the most elevated expression of our predominant ideas, and of the sentiments and passions that spring from the shock of our social interests. Only then, and if freed from the bonds of all foreign influence, will our poetry come to be as sublime as the Andes; strange, beautiful and varied as the fertile soil which produces it."



In 1837, Echeverría, with the help of some friends, among them Juan María Gutierrez and Juan Bautista Alberdi, founded the Asociación de Mayo, where the young and hot-blooded intellectuals could meet and discuss their ideas. It established branches in various *provincias*, and, as a matter of course, began to plot for the overthrow of Rosas. As a result the leaders were soon forced to flee for their lives to Montevideo and to launch their literary attacks from that safe haven. Echeverría remained there for years, and finally died in that city, alone and penniless, in 1851.

In the year Echeverría passed on, there was born in Buenos Aires the man who was to bring the gaucho poem written in pure Spanish to its finest flowering. He was Rafael Obligado (1851-1920), the son of wealthy landowners, who grew up to be a passionate bibliophile and a very great gentleman. His life was passed in the calm of his library, where he studied and wrote verses, which were finally collected and published in 1885 in a small volume titled *Poesías*. He was a perfectionist and, like Whitman, Obligado continued to polish his old verses and add new ones until he issued another and enlarged edition in 1906. His poetry and his delightful and scholarly personality attracted the best minds of Buenos Aires, and every Saturday a brilliant literary salon was held at his house, to which every distinguished foreign visitor to Buenos Aires always came.

Very patriotic, although not in the aggressively militant manner of the previous poets, Obligado strove in a quiet way to give a truly national flavor and expression to the arts, science, and letters of his country. With this in view, he founded the "Argentine Academy" that has become so effective a tool for this purpose. Naturally, to a man of his tastes, pampa folklore made a strong appeal, and he published a well-chosen collection of *Leyendas Argentinas*. In the course of his study, he had become fascinated with

the possibilities of a real gaucho character, the *payador* Santos Vega.

Ascasubi, Gutierrez, and Bartolomé Mitre, the historian and *costumbrista*, had already helped to transform Santos into a kind of Paul Bunyan of the pampa, but this did not discourage Obligado. The others had been content merely to relate his adventures, but he went deeper and made of his poem an allegory, a sympathetic and symbolical account of the rise and disappearance of the gaucho as a class. The whole underlying scheme became apparent in the final scene where Santos Vega, the hitherto invincible *payador* meets the devil, in the person of Juan Sin Ropa.

The two champions, one the embodiment of the whole race of gauchos, the other the symbol of the irresistible power of progress, engage in an Homeric contest of song. Santos Vega loses and dies of a broken heart, while Juan Sin Ropa disappears in a flash of fire leaving behind an odor of sulphur.

Speaking of Juan Sin Ropa's victorious song, the poet writes:

Era el grito podoroso  
del progreso, dada al viento  
el solemne llamamiento  
al combate más glorioso.  
Era, en media del reposo  
de la pampa ayer dormida,  
la visión enoblecida  
del trabajo, antes no honrado;  
la promesa del arado  
que abre cauces a la vida.

It was the irresistible call of progress, flung on the wind; the solemn invitation to a more glorious combat.

It was the noble vision of labor, formerly not honored, in the midst of the quiet pampa, until yesterday asleep.

It was the promise of the plow that opens a furrow to life.

Obligado's *Santos Vega* topped all other gaucho poems of the school begun by Echeverría—the cultured school, it might be called, in contradistinction to the creole school of Hidalgo and Ascasubi.

The poets of this genre, however, had merely set the stage for one to come, the greatest of them all, José Hernández, the author of *Martín Fierro*. They had proved the value of the pampa *payada*, and had educated a large and appreciative public for verse done in this manner; and, in addition, had experimented with a racy new dialect, born of the soil. All this Hernández fell heir to, and the circumstances of his early life fitted him to take full advantage of it; because, though he was born at the country place of his mother's family, in 1834, he went to live with his father on his two huge estancias on the then frontier when he was nine years old. Here the boy spent the next eleven years, living on horseback and learning from the gauchos every trick of riding and cattle handling, until there was not in the whole countryside a more fearless or expert cow hand. He learned the art of guerrilla warfare, too, because he was forced on many occasions to help to beat off the Indian attacks that frequently occurred.

When he was nineteen, he left home to take part in one of the battles of the civil wars that devastated Argentina for years, and fought with all the courage of the gaucho he was. Space will not permit a study of the bloody campaigns that occurred between Unitarians and Federalists. Suffice it to say that it took real manhood to engage in them, for the victors usually slit the throats, like cattle, of any of the enemy they were able to capture.

Again and again in his life, Hernández engaged in these struggles, and in-between whiles edited political newspapers and fought as valiantly with his pen as he did with his sword. Sometimes also he held various important posi-

tions in the provincial governments, and finally became a senator and served on the directorates of various important institutions. In his active and exciting career he was at once a man of the sword and the salon, the pen and the pampa.

For the gaucho he never lost his deep affection and complete understanding, and it was this that made it possible for him to write *Martín Fierro*. What first inspired the undertaking is not certain, but it has been suggested that he got the idea from *Los Tres Orientales*, written by an Uruguayan, Antonio Luccich. My friend, Walter Owen, who made a superb English version of *Martín Fierro*, says that this is not impossible and explains that Luccich sent a copy of his poem to Hernández on June 14, 1872, and *Martín Fierro* did not appear until the end of that year, which would have allowed the Argentine two or three months in which to write the four hundred, six-line stanzas of the part that first appeared. This Hernández could have done because he had a facile pen and was accustomed to write quickly and to work late.

The distinguished critic Jorge Luis Borjes has supported this theory in an article in which he printed side by side a series of selections from these two poems that bore a striking resemblance one to the other.

Hernández, in his classic, followed the Creole school, chose the octosyllabic line of the ancient Spanish *romance*, and wrote in the racy jargon of the gaucho—a mixture of New World with the Old, of archaic Spanish and Indian accretions. This makes the book a philological legacy of the utmost importance, for its author was a past master in the tangy talk that had rung in his ears since childhood.

*Martín Fierro* was published in two parts, their appearance separated by seven years. The first came out in 1872 and describes the hero's wandering life among the *Christianos*,

his unmerited persecution by the authorities, and his enforced service in the army. This became so unbearable that he deserted with his friend, Cruz, and crossed the frontier to take refuge among the Indians.

All through the poem, one feels the author's deep resentment of the many injustices visited on the gaucho, a resentment he epitomizes in a few pregnant lines:

The wretched gaucho's a waif and stray,  
Cast out in the wilds to roam;  
His wrongs never stir a single heart,  
To take up the outcast gaucho's part,  
And give him his rights as a citizen—  
A church, and schools, and a home.

The poem met with an immediate success, but, in spite of this, Hernández did not publish the last portion—*La Vuelta*—"The Return of Martín Fierro"—until 1879.

It was longer than the first, and gave an account of Fierro's life among the Indians after he and Cruz had deserted from the army, into which they had been inducted by force. There were excellent descriptions of aboriginal customs in war and peace, and it told how Martín Fierro, after the death of Cruz, returned to civilization only to find his rancho in ruins and his family dispersed. On the way he encountered an Indian chief who had killed the child of a white captive under her eyes and was in the act of beating her unmercifully. Martín attacked the Indian, who defended himself with *bolas*, a wicked weapon consisting of two round stones attached to either end of a rawhide thong. Then ensued a battle that was Homeric—one of the best descriptions of a fight ever written. Here it is in Walter Owen's lusty and vital translation:

He lashed the air with two *bola* shots,  
Round his head like rings they spun;  
One grazed my arm with a glancing hit,  
A hair's breadth would have splintered it:  
Those balls of stone whizz through the air  
Like bullets from a gun.

Aijuna! I'll say he was quick and sly—  
He missed me by simple luck;  
The blood worked up to his ugly head,  
Till like a colt he was seeing red:  
He would feint at me with the right-hand ball  
Before with the left he struck.

But a bitter turn Fate served me there  
As we circled round and round,  
I saw my chance and went rushing in,  
While he backed away to save his skin.  
My foot tripped up in my *chiripá*  
And headlong I hit the ground.

Not a moment's grace to commend my soul  
To the hands of Almighty God  
Did the savage give; as he saw me fall  
He sprang like a ravening animal.  
As I twisted my head, beside my ear  
I heard the *bolas* thud.

And onto my back with tooth and nail  
He leapt like a clawing brute  
He was reckless then that I'd still my knife,  
He was blind with his rage to have my life,  
Not a ghost of a chance he let me have,  
To straighten and get my foot.

No trick or dodge could the brute unlodge  
Though I tried them every one;  
Flat under him I lay full length,  
I couldn't turn over with all my strength.  
As strong as a bull that Indian was  
And he seemed to weigh a ton.

The captive that lay in her tears and blood  
Half killed by the murderous whip,  
When she saw my plight forgot her pang,  
Like an arrow there to my help she sprang,  
She gave the Indian a sudden tug  
That made him loose his grip.

As soon as again to my feet I got  
At each other again we tore,  
Not a pause for a breather could I get  
I was soaking wet with my dripping sweat,  
In all my fights I've never been in  
Such a touch-and-go before.

As madder and madder the savage grew  
I calmed down more and more—  
Until the Indian has made his kill  
There's nothing his ravening rage can still—  
Till one of his whirling cords I cut  
And began to press him sore.

As he staggered back, I leapt and closed  
With lightning thrust and slash.  
Though he kept his feet and escaped my grip  
He lost the fight by that fatal slip;  
I got home once with a scalping chop  
And once with a belly-gash.

I got him again with a ripping lunge,  
He began to humpf and puke;  
He was failing fast with each breath he took,  
He knew he was done, but even then,  
With never a flinch he rushed again,  
With such a yell that it seemed to me  
That the earth and the heavens shook.

And there, thank God, I finished him;  
Well home I rammed my knife.  
I was weary and sore, but desperate;  
I lifted him up as one lifts a weight;  
And gutted there, from the raking steel  
I threw him off when I knew by the feel,  
That he hadn't a spark of life.

When I saw him dead I crossed myself,  
The help of heaven to thank;  
The kneeling woman beside me there,  
At the Indian's body could only stare,  
And then to the skies she raised her eyes,  
And in tears on the ground she sank.

From Walter Owen's translation of *Martín Fierro*  
by José Hernández. Farrar Rinehart.

The poem was at once authentic folklore, an important sociological document, and the most beloved of Argentine classics; for the people of the pampa saw their lives reflected in *Martín Fierro* as in a mirror, and in his sufferings and wrongs they read their own. Wherever gauchos gathered or lounged in rancho or *pulpería*, they were bound, eventually, to discuss *Martín's* adventures, and they talked of him, Cunninghame Graham said, "as if at any moment he might lift the mare's hide which acted as a door and walk in."

Not only did the countryfolk endow the book's character with life, but they went even further; for Hernández, heavily bearded and built like a circus strongman, with his deep resonant voice that earned him the nickname of the "wooden rattle," was so close to their mental picture of what *Martín Fierro* looked like that the two were merged in the mind of the public, and passersby in the street often addressed Hernández as "Don *Martín*." This led him to remark ruefully that he was a father christened with his son's name.

This great gaucho classic has sold more copies than any other Latin-American book—even Rodó's *Ariel*, Jorge Isaac's *Maria*, or Sarmiento's *Facundo*. It has been serialized in newspapers, and repeatedly pirated. For the rich it has been published in luxurious formats, and innumerable artists of note have tried their hands at illustrating it. For the poor it has been printed on the backs of calendars, or



in pulp-paper pamphlets decorated with crude woodcuts, which, like any necessity—cotton goods, sardines, or the cheap rum called caña—were kept on the shelves of every *pulpería*.

This was not surprising for here at last, was the complete and definitive portrait of the gaucho, heroic in size, painted against his pampa backdrop. It sang his virtues and explained his faults with added poignancy because it was the story of the last stand of a vanishing class. Hernández may have idealized him, but he created from his essence a national figure and an indigenous epic. The history of the gaucho was the history of his country.

Ricardo Rojas summed it all up when he said that *Martín Fierro*, in its unity and subject matter is for Argentina's literature what *La Chanson de Roland* is for the French, or *El Cantar de mio Cid* for the Spanish.

Hernández' masterpiece was the apogee of poetry in the true tradition of the *payador*—a genre that was vital and alive as long as it was written by men who had lived the life of the pampas. But once it fell to the pen of the city-bred, it began to lose robustness and veracity. Estanislao del Campo (1835–1880) was one of these, and with him began the decadence of gaucho verse. He was a Buenos Aires boy, who, at eighteen years of age, deserted a salesman's job to enlist in the army. After fighting in the battles of Cepeda and Pavón, he was promoted to a captaincy by General Mitre; and, when the war was over, served in various government posts until his death in 1880.

His literary output was meagre and his fame rests on a single humorous poem, *Fausto: Impresiones del Gaucho Anastasio el Pollo en la representación de esta ópera* (1870).

Some say Ricardo Gutierrez suggested that he write this poem, others that he got the idea from Hidalgo, who made his character Ramon Contrera tell his friend Chano about

his experiences in Buenos Aires during a patriotic fiesta. However that may be, in the del Campo poem, Anastasio el Pollo goes to Argentina's capital to collect a debt and, being kept waiting several days, he drifts into the Colón theatre and witnesses a performance of "Faust." On his return journey he meets a friend and gives him a naïve account of the opera, couched in gaucho talk. It is amusing but a trifle synthetic, and, although regarded as the greatest humorous poem in Argentine literature, it is inferior in sincerity, vigor and inspiration to "Martín Fierro." It is, however, a link in the transition from native verse in gaucho form to cultured poetry about native subjects.

#### THE GAUCHO ON THE STAGE

After *Martín Fierro*, the *costumbrista* poetry of the plains steadily deteriorated, but the gaucho saga rose, phoenix-like, from the ashes, and was revived in prose and on the stage.

There had been a play with pampas plot and characters as early as 1792, when "El Amor de la Estanciera" was given in Buenos Aires, but it was not good enough to overcome the snobbish addiction to European drama at a time when a feeling of nationalism had not yet been born. Spanish and French plays continued to hold the boards with but few exceptions, until, in the last quarter of the 19th century, the fortuitous friendship of a circus clown with an old Frenchman served to catapult the gaucho play into popular favor and to give it a recognized position on the legitimate stage.

This was how it happened. Eduardo Gutierrez (1853-1890) was a Buenos Aires-born journalist who in the 1860's developed great facility as a "pulp" writer and in his short life produced some thirty novels that appeared first as

newspaper serials. He reeled off historical tales, gaucho romances, and murder hair-raisers with equal ease, his characters drawn from folklore or police-court records. Like Hernández, his favorite subject was the persecuted gaucho of the 1850's and he worked out a stereotyped plot, repeated again and again in most of his stories. The hero, invariably a brave and generous *payador*, was always victimized, either by officials, pulpería-keepers or estancia-owners. This never dampened his spirits, for when this Criollo Robin Hood was not singing and drinking at bars and *bailes*, he was serenading or abducting a veritable parade of sloe-eyed *chinas*, or defeating the police in their attempts to capture him. Murders were as plentiful as mosquitoes in a Louisiana swamp, and there were wakes, horse races, and bronco-bustings to give variety. Like our Western dime novels, to which these tales bore a marked resemblance, action and melodrama were infinitely more important than plausibility—which was completely ignored.

His best-known novel, *Juan Moreira*, was a typical example of his technique. His hero was, in reality, a fat, red-faced, pock-marked Gallego, a political thug who had come to notice by murdering a man at the behest of a governor. From these unromantic facts dug from the police records, Gutierrez contrived a glamorous black-bearded figure, lithe, daring, handsome and as open-handed as Robin Hood.

He dashed off this story in installments and rushed them to the newspaper without rewriting or even correcting proof, and when the serial was finished, Juan Moreira stepped from the page to become one of the immortals of Argentine folklore.

In 1884, Gutierrez was asked to write an act to be given for charity, and arranged a pantomime version of his famous Juan. It was to be presented during a performance of the circus of the Carlo brothers, but as this acrobatic team and

their company were all North Americans, there was no one who could sing the gaucho songs that were the only vocal interlude in the performance. So Gutierrez asked that the lead be given to a Uruguayan, José J. Podestá, a famous clown in the Humberto Primo circus, who could both sing and ride.

The action took place in the ring, and from the moment Podestá, in a long beard and gaucho costume made his entrance on horseback at a wild gallop, the pantomime was a success. The public, satiated with stilted European plays, foreign to their environment, were delighted to see their own folkways on the boards, and screamed and yelled with enthusiasm at the ghostly gauchos, who spoke with their hands alone, and fought, loved, and died in a silence broken only by the occasional singing of a *gato* or *estilo*.

Later Podestá formed a circus of his own and continued his impersonization of Juan Moreira. When he reached Recife, the ex-clown hired the shed of an old French friend and circus fan, Leon Beaupuy, in which to give his show. The morning after the first performance the impresario found his ancient *amigo* watching the animal trainers rehearsing their charges, and asked him how he liked the pantomime. Beaupuy answered that the meaning of some of the gestures was rather obscure and suggested that it would be more easily intelligible with spoken lines. Podestá approved the idea, and when the circus reached Chivilcoy in 1884, gave the first performance of "Juan Moreira" with dialogue adapted from the novel. It was produced with the greatest realism. Mounted men galloped in and out at top speed. A campfire was built and a side of real lamb was roasted, as gaucho heroes sat around and sang to guitars, and a circle of dogs surrounded the fire sniffing and slavering at the aroma of cooking meat that was also wafted to the nostrils of the audience.

The act was on a par with the Indian attack on the Deadwood coach in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and its rescue by dauntless cowboys, who galloped in and shot the savages out of their saddles.

*Juan Moreira* with dialogue was an even greater success than the pantomime, and it started a veritable parade of pampas plays. Podestá produced one based on *Santos Vega*, and another on *Martín Fierro*. Other playwrights also entered the field and wrote successful "horse dramas" like Martiniano Leguizamón's *Calandria* that had a long run in 1896.

As the struggle of the gaucho for survival reached its various stages, the treatment of the theme was changed. The earliest group of dramatists portrayed the persecuted pampa hero and his adventures in outwitting the authorities; the second, his losing fight for survival against growing industrialism and the invading horde of agricultural immigrants; while the contemporary playwrights, influenced by the new discoveries of mental science, are emphasizing the psychological aspects of life on the estancias, the family antagonisms, frustrations and love entanglements.

The sociological changes that were transforming the wild and wandering horseman of the plains into a farm hand with a fixed abode were a challenge and an inspiration to South America's greatest playwright, Florencio Sánchez (1875-1910). Born in Uruguay in 1875, he early became a restless journalist who wandered from town to town in Argentina and Uruguay. He took part in the revolution that occurred in his native land in 1896, and finally became an anarchist; but there is no evidence to show that he was ever more than a mere theoretical one.

Due to a strike on a newspaper, Sánchez found himself out of work and began to write a play in his enforced leisure. His bohemian way of life precluded any savings, so he

almost starved and was forced to purloin telegraph blanks on which to finish his work. Its name, *M'hijo el doctor*, suggests the plot—the conflict between the old ways as typified by an illiterate gaucho father, and the new in the person of his well-educated son. It was an immediate success when it was produced in Buenos Aires in 1903 and in the six years that followed Sánchez wrote twenty hits.

The best of these was probably *La Gringa*.<sup>1</sup> In it, a slipshod, easy-going gaucho, Catalicio, loses his small rancho to a hard-working Italian immigrant. The Argentine's son falls in love with the daughter of the new owner, who refuses his consent to the marriage until the boy is able to prove that he is not just another "lazy Creole." When the young couple are finally united, the Italian father predicts a splendid future of work and achievement for this mingling of the blood of the New World and of the Old. In this play Sánchez indicated, with the prescience of the true artist, the path Argentina must take to achieve success—a road down which she has since travelled far.

In 1909 Uruguay fulfilled Sánchez' dearest wish and sent him abroad on a wandering mission. But his health had been undermined by his way of life and he died in Milan of galloping consumption the next year.

Many other excellent gaucho plays, like Enrique Larreta's "El Linyera" (1932), have enriched this native theatre since then; and the popularity of this genre continues. As proof that it is still an active and vital part of the Argentine theatre, one need only point to Alberto Vacarezza's *What Happened to Reynoso*, which appeared in 1936 and ran for over a thousand performances.

<sup>1</sup> Translated into English by Prof. Alfred Coester and published by the Dramatists' Alliance of Stanford University, California.

## THE GAUCHO IN PROSE

When the gaucho legend fell to the pen of city-bred poets, after it had reached its apogee in *Martín Fierro*, and began to lose in truth and vitality, it was revived, as we have seen, on the stage. That it was also resurrected in the novel and short story is due, in part, to Argentina's great statesman and author, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888), who aroused new interest by including in his famous *Facundo* brilliant descriptions of four types of gaucho—scout, trailer, outlaw, and folk singer.

It is rather anomalous that this should be true, because the book is a diatribe, delivered with all the passionate intensity of Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, against the gaucho's brutality, ignorance, and prejudice, and against the caudillo who led him.

While Sarmiento insisted that the free range rider would disappear like the prehistoric animal, because he was unable to adjust to changing conditions, he could not conceal a certain nationalistic pride in the courage, hardihood, and complete independence that had enabled the gaucho to survive as long as he had. It was this that gave the class new importance in the minds of the writers who followed and helped to persuade them that the gaucho would make as good a hero for a novel as he had for a poem.

If Eduardo Gutierrez' "dime-novel" fiction is disregarded, it was in Uruguay, rather than Argentina, that *Facundo* first exerted this particular influence. Here, Eduardo Acevedo Díaz (1851-1924), an author of wide experience as politician, revolutionary, and exile, published a trilogy that immediately placed him in the front ranks of Rio Platense writers. These historical novels, *Ismael* (1888), *Nativa* (1890), and *Grito de Gloria* (1894), gave a vivid picture of Uruguay's struggle for independence and the gaucho's part in winning it. Nobody had a more profound understanding

of the motives and psychology of his fellow countrymen than did Acevedo Díaz, and his fourth book, *Soledad*, played a large role in determining literary trends. It became the model for his fellow writers, because its characters were so warm and lifelike, its portrayal of folkways so brilliant and accurate.

He fathered a whole school of Uruguayan nativista novelists, among them Javier de Viana (1869-1926), who grew up in the cattle country. As a young man he went to Montevideo and became a journalist, supplying the newspapers with innumerable stories of pampa life written in dialect with phonographic accuracy.

The gaucho Acevedo Díaz has described was a proud, free, courageous individualist; but, by the time Viana began to write, the foot-loose rider had been hobbled by barbed wire and was well on his way to being an abject, brutish, and diseased farm drudge, who solaced his loss of freedom by becoming a confirmed alcoholic. It was this unhappy type that Viana chose to portray with a fearless realism that gave his somber pages real value as a human sociological document and made them mines of information about the folkways of the countryside.

Typical of his stories was *Facundo Imperial*, the tale of a proud and virile gaucho, condemned to military service by a corrupt judge. The captain of his company develops amorous designs upon the new private's wife, and orders him beaten because he is not acquiescent. Viana describes in ghastly detail the repeated floggings with rods of quince pickled in salt, while the bugler sounds his trumpet to drown the screams of the victim. Finally the unfortunate man's spirit is so broken that he becomes meek as a sheep, servile, and hypocritical, and no longer objects to the captain's affair with his wife. It was this kind of tragic degeneration that Viana depicted with a terrible realism reminiscent of Zola.



His literary style was at times faulty, marred by a certain pseudo-psychologic analysis that was a relic of a few years spent at medical school; but his facile spontaneity, the vividness of his scenes and characters, and the lively local color more than made up for these shortcomings.

His best work was done between 1896 and 1905 for, although he continued to write until his death in 1920, his growing indulgence in alcohol and the necessity of contributing two or three stories a week sapped the vitality and interest of his later work. For that reason his fame will rest upon *Campo* (1896), *Guri* (1898), *Gaucha* (1899) and a few of his early short stories.

Carlos Reyles (1868-1938), in his novel *Beba*, published in 1897, took up the story of the Uruguayan estancia where Acevedo left it in *Soledad*. The older writer had described conditions on the primitive estancias with their unfenced range and half-wild cattle. Reyles told of the second stage in their development when Scots and Englishmen bred up the native herds and flocks by introducing blooded bulls and rams. This so increased the value of livestock that land had to be fenced and new methods of handling introduced—changes so drastic that the entire life of the gaucho was revolutionized.

*Beba* was the first “modern” novel of positive value produced in Uruguay; and, although Reyles was a man of the study rather than the open and never took part in the actual work, his descriptions of these changes in estancia management are particularly valuable, because he was one of the rich owners who introduced these innovations on his properties. Because it was written when he was in closest touch with the people and the soil of his country, *Beba* is his best book. Its success encouraged him to go to France, and there he came under the influence of Baudelaire, Ibsen, Huysmann, D’Annunzio, and others of like mind, and

caught something of their self-conscious concern with *fin-de-siècle* neuroses. His succeeding novels are colored with a pseudo-psychological analysis and a European urbanism that robbed them of their indigenous quality. He threw no more light on pampa life until he published, just before his death, *El Gaucho Florido* (1935) based upon his youthful memories of the primitive, wild-cattle estancias owned by his father.

Another Uruguayan, Justino Zavala Muniz (1897- ), was a very different type of person from the aloof and cosmopolitan Reyles. He was essentially a man-of-action, pampa born, and weaned on the tales of his grandfather, General Justino Muniz, a rugged old caudillo of the back country who had played a part in many bloody episodes. His youth was spent around his father's *pulpería*, where he absorbed all there was to know about the customs and idiosyncracies of the countryside; and, as a complete post-graduate course, he himself took part in various revolutions and saw death and fighting at firsthand.

A passionate urge made him write his first book—a desire to vindicate the memory of his grandfather, who had been accused of treachery to his political party. This resulted in one of the most interesting of South American books, *La Crónica de Muniz*, published when its author was only twenty-four years old. It gives a lusty and stirring picture of the ancient gaucho leader, and of his innumerable fights and adventures. It is biography and history, but something more besides, because he has woven those picturesque figures and violent days into a novel that vibrates with vigorous reality, and succeeds at the same time in attaining the author's chief aim—the rehabilitation of his grandfather's reputation.

This first book dealt with the political scene, but his second, *Crónica de un Crimen* (1926), had to do with judicial

aspects and tells the tale of an obscure gaucho, "El Carancho," who, after he had lost the first round against the march of progress, turned outlaw, murdered an entire family from mercenary motives and committed numerous other acts of bloody brutality. Where the previous volume had been a chronicle of action, this one was a psychological study of a criminal personality.

For his third book, Zavala Muniz, like W. H. Hudson in *Far Away and Long Ago*, drew on his childhood memories of his father's *pulpería*, and did a sharp and comprehensive canvas of the pampa life that revolved around that institution. He called it *Crónica de la Reja*—"la reja" being the grating that protects the proprietor of these combination saloons and general stores from possible attacks by intoxicated customers. The gaucho hero was the exact antipode of "El Carancho" because, instead of becoming an outlaw in his reaction against changing conditions, he adjusted himself nobly to the life of an estancia peon.

Zavala Muniz also contributed to the gaucho theatre, but his most important work remains his vital trilogy of *Crónicas*.

There are many other Uruguayans deserving of mention, but the four already discussed are sufficient to show that this group, for the most part, were recorders of violent action and painters of *costumbrista* backgrounds rather than delvers into the subconscious motivation of man. New researches and discoveries in this field were to have a profound influence on Rio Platense literature; and to find the new psychological approach to fictionwriting one must turn back to Argentina. There an author of Irish descent, Benito Lynch (1885- ), brought out a first novel, *Los Caranchos de la Florida* (1916) and followed it with *Raquela* (1918) and *El Romance de un Gaucho* (1930), the latter written entirely in pampa patois. These books had none of

the bravoura of those that preceded them, but were characterized instead by a sensitive and penetrating appreciation of character. In this they reflected the author himself for like many who prefer a hermit existence, his powers of observation and judgment were not calloused by too frequent encounters with the crass selfishness of the world, and so he was able to retain the sensitivity of the true artist. This appeared in the simplicity and delicacy of his work that stressed the delineation of personality rather than the mere recording of the actions of the super-assertive male. Nevertheless, the people of his tales were not lacking in strength and possessed a natural and most appealing humanity.

Lynch has been a fairly prolific writer and, among all the novels of the pampa saga, his have been among the best and most subtly interesting.

However, it remained for Ricardo Güiraldes (1886-1927) to do the most perfect portrait of the gaucho in prose, just as José Hernández, in *Martín Fierro*, had painted the definitive picture in verse. The newcomer was a man of superb talent, but meagre output; and with him the national saga finally passed from the pen of the practical man to that of the cosmopolitan intellectual. His technique, unobtrusively sophisticate, had the sincerity and simplicity of the true artist and was a product of his international upbringing. His father was a rich *estanciero* belonging to the class that ruled the country like mediaeval barons until the end of the 19th century, and with the same care for their dependents. Born on the family estancia of La Porteña in 1886, he was taken to Europe at the age of two, and returned four years later, speaking French and German as fluently as his native tongue. From then on, his boyhood was spent on the estancia, where he learned the secrets of saddle and trail from a grand old gaucho of the primitive school, who was later to be the model for *Don Segundo Sombra*.

As a very young man he resumed his trips abroad, made a tour of the world, and became as much at home in Paris as he was in Buenos Aires. He was never, however, an expatriate, for his love of country always called him home.

He made his literary debut in 1915 with two books, a collection of short stories, called *Cuentos de Muerte y de Sangre*, and a small volume of poems, *El Cencerro de Crystal*, both of which showed a contemporary French influence. An autobiography of his childhood, *Raicho* (1917), followed, and then *Rosaura* (1917) and *Xaimaca* (1923), but none of these books created any particular stir. However, they did serve to gather around him a group of young writers who launched a literary magazine of protest in 1924, called *Proa*, that reflected an anomalous melange of French "ultra" trends, together with a growing nationalism that took fresh interest in the Argentine background and folklore. This resulted in a back-to-the-soil literary movement under the banner of *Martín Fierro*, and probably inspired Güiraldes to begin the book that was to make his reputation.

In very bad health, he went to live at La Porteña, the family estancia, and there renewed his intimacy with the sturdy old gaucho who had been the mentor of his youth. Each morning he went to an ancient ombú near the house and, settling himself in a natural armchair formed by the roots, began to write of his boyhood life wandering the pampa with the old cattleman. It served to brush away dark thoughts and he worked feverishly because he knew he was doomed.

Unlike W. H. Hudson, who wrote of his Argentine youth in faraway London after he had become an old man, Güiraldes had the great advantage of having his models at his side and of being in the very heart of the country where the action of his book had occurred. Although he possessed the mellow judgment of the complete cosmopolitan and had

a thorough understanding of the subtle literary technique of Europe, his passionate feeling for his country and his subject kept any note of artificiality out of his novel. With simplicity and entire sincerity he told of his flight with Don Segundo Sombra and of the five years they spent together roaming the pampa. It is hardly a novel; rather a succession of delightfully told impressions that flutter through the pages like movie episodes across the screen; yet which give a vivid and human picture of every facet of the gaucho's life and points of view. There is no love interest, only the boy's hero-worship for Don Segundo, a character that is superbly drawn with lean restraint; and the transformation of an eager youth into a man possessed of the virtues of the plains' horseman—courage, Quixotic sportsmanship, and innate personal dignity—is depicted with a sympathy and insight only possessed by genius.

*Don Segundo Sombra* had an immediate success, because it was colored with the same sort of enchantment that made *Huckleberry Finn* immortal.

Paul Groussac, the literary critic, has complained that it was a story of the wild written by a man of society, that the smoking jacket peeped out from under the *chiripá*. But this criticism cannot seriously detract from the book as a lovely and sensitive work of art that has been accepted as a national classic.

Ricardo Güiraldes had little time in which to savor his success for he died within a year of the publication of *Don Segundo Sombra* in 1926. His funeral was a tribute to the integrity of the picture he had drawn, for two hundred and fifty sad and silent gauchos, mounted on horses of every color, their silver bridles scintillating through the thin dust raised by a thousand hoofs, followed his coffin to the grave.

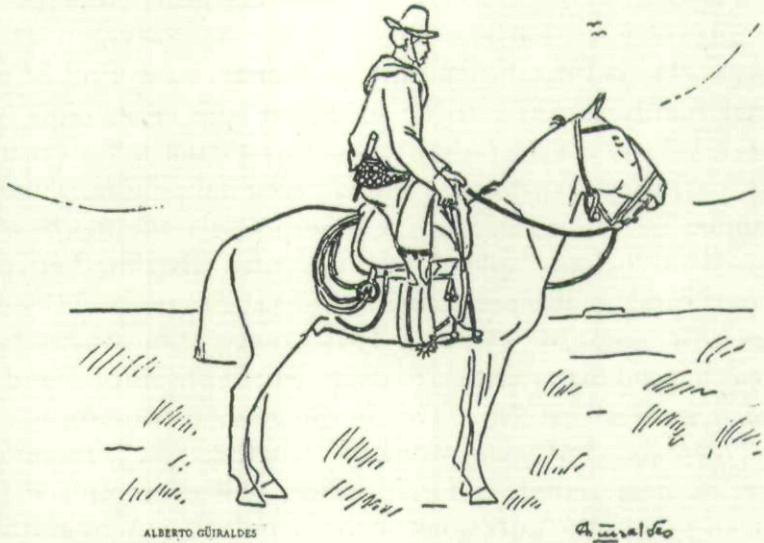
We have now traced the first indigenous literature of the Rio Platense region from its roots in the folk songs of

the *payadores* to its full flowering in poetry, prose, and on the stage—"Martín Fierro," "Don Segundo Sombra" and the plays of Florencio Sánchez. It has not withered since those masterpieces and, while it is not the most important today, it is still a live and vigorous branch of South American literature, with many talented young writers producing successful novels and short stories of this genre.

Nevertheless, it has become the fashion in intellectual circles—due, possibly, to the increased cultural dominance of the city and the current passion for modernity—to decry the gaucho as brutal, ignorant, and dirty, as a kind of national family skeleton to be locked in the closet and forgotten. It is claimed that when this theme fell to urban novelists, they transformed the tattered hobo-on-horseback, hounded by the police, into a superb and virile figure who dressed in barbaric splendor and divided his time between killing rural policemen, singing to a guitar, and laying siege to susceptible *chinas*. This exaggeration of his true status has led many critics to decry gaucho literature and to hold it in small esteem. This is the general reaction of the intelligentsia, but one wonders whether the stream-of-consciousness romance, for instance, will ever replace the gaucho tale in the affections of the populace, any more than E. E. Cummings' *Wasteland* will appeal to as large an audience in the United States as does the *The Lone Cowboy*.

But, notwithstanding this, nothing can uproot the cult of the gaucho from the hearts of the people, for his contribution to his country in blood, sweat, and courage has been too great; too many poets and writers have sung his praises and gilded his record. This, whether with reason or not, has made him a beloved folk hero, and Ricardo Güiraldes best expressed the depth of this feeling when he dedicated *Don Segundo Sombra*: "To the gaucho I bear within me, sacredly, as the monstrance bears the holy wafer.

Even though the gaucho, like our own cowboy, has disappeared from the scene forever, he persists in literature as a spiritual force. His legend has become a national symbol that inspires courage, self-reliance, and patriotism in every schoolchild and that gives to the European immigrant and his offspring a sense of nationality that makes them true citizens of the New World.



ALBERTO GÚRALDES

G. G. G.



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