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Martín Fierro: The Image of Colloquiality

David William Foster

Un libro destinado a despertar la inteligencia y el amor a la lectura en una población casi primitiva, a servir de provechoso recreo, después de las fatigosas tareas, a millares de personas que jamás han leído, debe ajustarse estrictamente a los usos y costumbres de esos mismos lectores, rendir sus ideas e interpretar sus sentimientos en su mismo lenguaje, en sus frases más usuales, en su forma general, aunque sea incorrecta [. . .].

—José Hernández, “Cuatro palabras de conversación con los lectores,” preface to *La vuelta de Martín Fierro*¹

(A book destined to awaken intelligence and love of reading in an almost primitive population, to serve as a profitable pastime, following exhausting tasks, for thousands of persons who have never read—such a book must adapt itself strictly to the uses and customs of those selfsame readers and render their ideas and interpret their feelings in their own language, in their own customary phrasing, in their own general form, even though it may be incorrect)²

La poesía gauchesca, que ha producido—me apresuro a repetirlo—obras admirables, es un género literario tan artificial como cualquier otro.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “El escritor argentino y la tradición”

(Gauchesque poetry, which has produced—I hasten to say it—admirable works, is a literary genre that is as artificial as any other.)

All teaching is, to a great extent, proleptic. This is so because the accumulation of knowledge is, more often than not, structured in terms of looking toward major paradigm shifts that mark, if not an orderly progress, at least a perceptible movement toward phenomena that have some sort of iconic value for a culture. Evolutionary theory, Einsteinian relativity, the Big Bang theory, the Magna Carta, U.S. independence—all of these are examples of perceived paradigm shifts that can be used to structure courses in their respective natural or social sciences. In literature, one might teach toward, so to speak, Shakespeare or the *Quijote*, Proust or Faulkner, Rubén Darío or García Márquez. Or, in the case of nineteenth-century Latin American literature, toward *Martín Fierro*. It matters little what the perceived importance of these literary phenomena may be, whether enshrined and unimpeachable classics or simply particular moments of cultural imaginary and consciousness that can decline and resurge in importance through the generations. What does matter is that not only is it impossible to conceive of a course dealing with the period or genre they represent without their being present, but in addition it is not uncommon or unreasonable to see a course structured so as to emphasize the importance of their appearance at a particular cultural juncture.

As one customarily explains to students, *Martín Fierro* was first published in 1872, the work of the landowner turned national senator José Hernández (1834–86); Hernández wrote the poem while holed up in the luxurious Hotel Argentino across the street from the Casa Rosada during a legislative tenure. *Martín Fierro* enjoyed such enormously popular success, particularly among the rural and rustic subjects who are its subject, that it inspired enough imitations (and sales) for Hernández to compose a sequel in 1879. These two parts are called, respectively, the *Ida* and the *Vuelta*. There are many folklore-like legends as to the success of Hernández's composition, which may be viewed as a single two-part work or as two separate endeavors, particularly in view of the significant shifts in viewpoint and social ideology between them: the first part is a romantic paean to the disappearance of so-called gaucho life, while the second part emphasizes the necessary melding of the gaucho into the Argentine project of modernity that included the subjugation of the land and its economy to import-export capitalism. From the point of view of the Argentine oligarchy and its supporters, the latter is a necessary process, whereas from the point of view of populist stances (whether from the right or the left), the second part of the poem vitiates the presumed authenticity of the first part's vision of the Argentine *Volk*. The critical history of *Martín Fierro* is vast and complex with regard to these issues, and this is not the opportunity to review them adequately. Suffice it to say that, unless one wishes to reduce Hernández's work to a futile gesture of false sociocultural consciousness (e.g., Borges's

provocative dicum in *Otras inquisiciones* that *Martín Fierro* is “la autobiografía de un cuchillero” [Borges, “Sobre ‘The Purple Land’ ” 734] [the autobiography of a knifeman]) and dismiss it from the curriculum, it would be inconceivable to teach a course on nineteenth-century Latin American literature, whether survey format or monographic in nature, without including both parts or a significant selection from them.

One might well ask in what ways is José Hernández’s *Martín Fierro* the occasion for pedagogical prolepsis. Argentine literature is noticeably absent in at least the first half of any survey of Latin American literature. A colonial backwater, Buenos Aires is, among what will emerge as the major centers of cultural production in Latin America, singular for the absence of any array of literary works that might attract attention beyond the most dogged efforts of the literary historian. Current very weak hypotheses regarding the importance of literary history (or, at least, of the importance of its chronological arc) translate into a largely justifiable ignorance of anything before Esteban Echeverría’s remarkable hybrid text, *El matadero* (written in 1839, but not published until 1871), reputed to be the first short story in the Latin American canon. With Echeverría, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo* (1845, also a remarkable hybrid text), and Hernández’s *Martín Fierro*, Argentina suddenly comes to dominate the syllabus, even if it is somewhat unfair to note that although Buenos Aires would subsequently be the major center of Modernismo, actual Argentine writers never quite matched the level of other Latin Americans who ended up publishing there. Non-Argentine poetry (and some prose) of Modernismo may return to dominate the conclusion of a survey of nineteenth-century Latin American literature, but the intensity of cultural production in the period is nevertheless uncontested, even if it is not always “survey course-worthy.”

For an Argentinist, of course, finally being able to focus a survey course on Argentines, if only for the half-century between 1830 and 1880, is important in a classroom where for a significant majority of students, Latin America means mostly Mexico. However, such minor pleasures aside, the Argentine triumvirate serves to underscore the significant emergence of a consciousness of national identity throughout Latin America, even when one might go on to contest that consciousness, both in terms of questions over whose national identity and of counter-projects in favor of an overarching Hispanism resistant to the behemoth presence of both the United States and Brazil. Indeed, *Martín Fierro* is unique in combining a metropolitan-centered production (written from Buenos Aires with the clear influence of traditional Spanish literary sources) and a sensitivity to the nuances of rural life that go far beyond the often ironically toned local-color (*costumbrista*) writing that was still the dominant mode for representing the socially underprivileged. Indeed, *Martín Fierro* has often been seen as an example (at least as regards the *Ida*) of protest

literature in Latin America in that it was used as part of the appendix on “Literatura de la Raza” in the legendary Castañeda Shular et al. anthology of Chicano literature (1972). Although one may well question the extent to which Hernández’s poem qualifies as protest literature in terms of the conditions of its composition, it is unquestionable that it has been used as such. The most recent example is Roberto Fontanarrosa’s graphic narrative version of the text and the 2007 feature length film, *Fierro*, based on that version: both texts exercise a firm commitment to antiestablishmentarian views and the populist belief that the Argentine nation belongs not to the people, but rather to an untouchable and impune oligarchy in the service of entrenched foreign interests (see also Fernando E. Solanas’s famous *Los hijos de Fierro* [1972]).

Martín Fierro’s dramatic renunciation of so-called civilization at the end of the *Ida* is one of the most prominent motifs of Argentine cultural history. At a time of strong commitment on the part of official ideology and its hegemonic public discourse regarding the merits of Western civilization, one aspect of which meant the destruction of the allegedly barbarian indigenous peoples of Latin America, the proposition of “fleeing” civilization and seeking refuge among native peoples could only be understood as, in the first place, outrageous and, in the second, a profound indictment of civilized society as being more barbarous than that of the barbarians. The fact that, by the time of the *Vuelta* seven years later, Hernández was ready to demonstrate the contrary, showing his main character impelled to return to civilization after witnessing the cruelties of indigenous society, is irrelevant: the *Ida* enshrines a monumental hyperbole as the synthesis of oppression of the common people by the *criollos* and Buenos Aires-centered system of power. Hernández subsequently retreated from this position and proceeded to address the need for the common people to become part of the system, a shift that speaks to the ideological exigencies of his own social subjectivity. But, in the way in which important works of literature, especially particularly extensive and complex ones, lend themselves to proliferating interpretations, the Argentine cultural imaginary has accorded particular—if arguably unbalanced—emphasis to the closing stanzas of the *Ida* as the most abiding image from *Martín Fierro*, and it accounts for the populist reputation the poem has had for a century. Ricardo Güiraldes proceeded, fifty years later, to reconfirm the subservient nature of gaucho culture (whether socio-historically authentic or mythologized) to the landed oligarchy with *Don Segundo Sombra* (1927), and Argentine popular culture (particularly in the service of icons for tourists) underscored gaucho culture as the quintessence of the Argentine *ser*. But Sombra’s role as the loyal retainer cum tutor does not diminish the counter-image of Fierro as a highly resonant social outcast.

One of the most prominent dimensions of *Martín Fierro* is that of language. One need not enter into the long—and probably futile—debate over

whether or not Hernández's poem exemplifies the epic mode. Leopoldo Lugones's famous defense of this position is driven by the way in which, in the end and taken as a whole, the poem does support oligarchic interests in mythologizing the gaucho as part of a substratum of its own view of the land as a transcendent signifier of its own power and source of wealth. Lugones's ideologeme of "la Grande Argentina" (Great Argentina) is predicated on the land and, in turn, on the subservience to it of those who work it: this proposition is precisely what the conclusion of the *Vuelta* reinforces, carrying with it the assimilation to the land of the gaucho progeny, a land which their fathers had previously renounced. The question of *Martín Fierro* as epic poetry, in addition to raising theoretical issues as to the pertinence of medieval cultural models for modern society, raises equally important issues regarding the appropriateness of European models for Latin American culture and the extent to which any culture of note is likely to be something other than "the Argentine example of X," where X stands for a paradigmatic European model; González Echeverría has written very persuasively against such a mode of literary historiography. The need to make *Martín Fierro* into a character of epic proportions may strike one as one strategy for investing Argentine literature with world status: a national literature that has a great epic poem must be a first-rate literary tradition.

Far more interesting for this discussion is the matter of language in *Martín Fierro*. There are various ways of approaching language in the poem. One that has a certain amount of currency is to attempt to identify the tropes and allusions to epic poetry that might confirm Hernández's poem as Argentina's contribution to the genre, such as the very opening of the composition, where (supposedly) *Martín Fierro* himself addresses the audience with the Homeric formula: "Aquí me pongo a cantar / Al compás de la vigüela" (Borges *Poesía gauchesca* 578) (Here I begin to sing / to the rhythm of my guitar). This is an introit in which the classic *vihuela* (albeit represented by a colloquial pronunciation) substitutes for the more mundane *guitarra* (a substitution that cannot be explained away for metric reasons) in an apparent bid to "dignify" the poetic enterprise. One could well survey the poem for such aggrandizing features that, while working in conjunction with colloquialism, nevertheless could be viewed as supporting Hernández's epic aspirations—or at least his conscious use of those models to differentiate his more cultivated effort from the strictly untutored *poesía gaucha* (gaucho poetry). The latter was, at the time, a body of compositions originating among popular composers who would not have known Homer, even if they did know the remnants of the Spanish ballad tradition on which their compositions were based and which, in turn, derived from the Spanish medieval epic tradition, the extant texts of which were also likely unknown to them.

In the attempt to be more specific about the linguistic importance of *Martín*

Fierro, I propose that one should examine the concept of colloquiality that underlines it: the way in which, no matter what its models or Hernández's own paradigms of literary expression may have been, the poem achieves a level of colloquiality that is an integral dimension of its enormous popularity, as much among other Latin Americans, who are appreciative of its patina of populist authenticity, as among Argentines invested in promoting its presumed uniqueness in the Latin American canon. The alleged colloquiality of *Martín Fierro* is, to be sure, a textual effect: the poem is not really colloquial in any valid sociolinguistic sense of the word. Rather, it projects an aura of colloquiality that is the consequence of important and strategic discourse strategies such that it sets itself apart from both what is more properly colloquial (the actual lived speech of rural gauchos) and what is more literary (official literature, one culminating example of which might be Lugones's own 1916 *La guerra gaucha* [The Gaucho War], which is almost unreadable even for highly educated readers). It is important, then, to explore the ways in which *Martín Fierro* is characterized by this "effect of colloquiality."

By colloquial speech, one understands a register of the spoken language circumscribed by the give-and-take of daily life. It does not simply mean any spoken speech, because the latter can include the reading of prepared texts (TV news reports, political speech, and formal institutional enactments of language, as in legal, religious, and academic proceedings). It can include, if not the reading of previously written texts, the spoken enactment of language that bears significant overlap with written texts (class lectures, religious sermons, extemporaneous argumentation). Although these examples are spoken—and are, therefore, susceptible to certain markers of colloquial speech in pronunciation and intonation—they are characterized by being grounded primarily in the conventions of written language as regards organization, syntactic and grammatical unification and consistency, and rhetorical expedience. By contrast, colloquiality *strictu sensu* is marked by the image I have used of the give-and-take of daily life: not only certain phonological features that we identify as informal, but more significantly the meandering, discontinuous, abruptly shifting, and often syntactically and grammatically inconsistent and incoherent nature of an instrument of communication that accompanies (the chaos of) lived experience and problematical interpersonal interaction.

Literature, in this sense, is rarely strictly colloquial, although it may use one or another feature of colloquiality for rhetorical purposes that range from "seasoning" a particular segment to conscientious attempts to recreate in a verisimilar fashion the give-and-take of interactive daily speech. But mostly the reader is presented with a sort of tokenism of colloquiality, some array of linguistic features such that it is to be understood that one is not reading a written text but hearing purportedly real people talk—a Mickey Spillane effect, perhaps. It is only an effect, rather than a materially sociolinguistic

transcription, in that the reader must still imagine most of the linguistic features of Spillane's enunciation, the actual pronunciation, intonation, voice quality that we begin to get in filmed versions of his character, since even the putative realism of film is more a matter of conventions than of sociologically accurate transcription.

In the case of *Martín Fierro*, any distinctiveness of the text vis-à-vis a sense of colloquiality is the consequence of a number of literary conventions that contextualize it. The most important, certainly, is the fact that an allegedly authentic gaucho is the narrative voice. From the outset of the poem, there is an intimate first-person narrator who "sings" in his own voice and undertakes to tell his own story. Yet the ending of the *Ida* must break with this illusion, recounting in an impersonal and omniscient fashion Fierro's decision to destroy his guitar (now identified as such with this noun) and undertake with Cruz the abandonment of civilization: "Ruempo, dijo, la guitarra" (I smash, he said, my guitar). This is the first line of stanza 389, and the third-person direct discourse marker "dijo" is the first time that a voice other than Fierro's is introduced into the text. In the following six stanzas, it is unclear whether it is Fierro who continues to speak or whether the voice that has enunciated the aforementioned "dijo" is the one that is concluding the poem. This is crucial in the case of the declaration "Y ya con estas noticias / mi relación acabé" (stanza 394) (And so with these events / I have ended my story), since they could be legitimately attributed either to Fierro or to the omniscient narrator who has reported the destruction of the guitar. In either case, the voice sustains the image of colloquiality. That is, there is no significant shift between the presumed gaucho register of Fierro and that of the omniscient narrator, associable or not with Hernández himself (who, as a professional journalist, would hardly have customarily spoken Spanish in such a register).

The overall effect of this conflation of linguistic register between Fierro and a framing narrative voice is to confirm the validity of the illusion of colloquiality that dominates the composition. That is, this register is offered as irreproachably valid for a major literary composition within the emerging national culture of Argentina. It was one thing for there to exist, in a disjunctive category, traditional Spanish ballads and other oral materials as part of a colonial inheritance, and it was another thing for there to exist a stratum of *poesía gaucha*, compositions that circulated on the basis of the inherited oral tradition and that addressed a marginal social group, whether or not that group could accurately be described as "gauchos." But it was still another thing for such compositions to have been formulated and diffused as part of a grassroots commitment to independence from Spanish domination, whether or not such compositions can be tied directly to any emerging distinctively national consciousness. Such compositions constituted, surely, a legitimate cultural production, viewed either in terms of romantic folk aesthetics or in terms of a

contemporary interest in the marginal or non-hegemonic. But such compositions, as much as they might at the time have provoked interest in social changes in the Río de la Plata region, could not aspire to “equal time” with those penned by the prevalent literary spokespersons tied to the leading bourgeoisie—Esteban de Echeverría, for example, who is the paradigm of the institutional literary spokesperson of his day across a range of literary genres, but especially in the privileged domain of poetry.

What Hernández does with *Martín Fierro* is aspire to make a particular image of colloquial expression a viably competitive model for Argentine literature. Such a norm of colloquiality, for both reported speech and narrative framing, would not in the end generate a sustained tradition in Argentine literature. Readers would have to wait for the third decade of the twentieth century, when Roberto Arlt, who also wrote across the range of literary genres, modeled a norm of colloquiality, including the perennially dreaded use of the *voseo* second-person verb conjugations, and revalidated colloquiality as a paradigm for national literature. In the fifty-year period separating *Martín Fierro* from *Los siete locos*, with few exceptions Argentine literature aspires to an enforced educated norm that resolutely overlays the colloquiality even of many of its characters. Or, to put it differently, whenever colloquiality is present in the case of the high realists of Argentine narrative, it is seen as a trace of their alleged degeneracy and marginalization, not as a valid representation of distinctive Argentine linguistic expression. With Arlt and the vast majority of authors contemporary to him and who succeed him, something that can be called a distinctive Argentine colloquial register emerges as dominant, although there are some significant resistances to it (Eduardo Mallea’s fiction, for example).

Yet, while *Martín Fierro* did not immediately establish a productive paradigm for Argentine writing, in modeling what its reading (and, significantly, hearing) audience perceived as a valid colloquial register, the poem was able to establish a place for itself in the emerging national canon both because of and despite that colloquiality. In this sense, one understands the perceptiveness of those—Borges among them—who have insisted that the language of *Martín Fierro* is, after all, a literary artifice and that it does not stand up to rigorous sociolinguistic analysis. Yet its coherent or cohesive image of colloquiality is what is significant, in the sense of providing non-hegemonic sectors of the Argentine populace something other than the dominant modes of literary expression. It may not have mirrored with precision their modes of speech, but it nevertheless served to validate them.

A second convention of contextualization is that of privileged knowledge. One can assume as a fundamental given of cultural production that there is a privilege of understanding, interpretation, and representation: the operant principle is that an example of cultural expression justifies its bid for our

attention on the basis of the same calculus of privilege it pretends to offer. Of key importance here is whether that privilege is persuasive or not. Works of literature based on conspiracy theory are perhaps particularly illustrative, if often trite, examples: Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* (2003), to name one. Hernández frames his poem in terms of the privilege of hearing an authentic gaucho voice tell his own story, a story presented in such a way as to ask the audience to understand that Martín Fierro has a unique story to tell, one that has not been heard before, and indeed one that no one has previously dared to tell. Thus, from the outset a controlling verb is that of *desvelar* "Que el hombre que lo desvela / Una pena extraordinaria" (Hernández stanza 1) (For a man who is haunted / by an extraordinary suffering): echoing a venerable *topos* of Western literature whereby the poetic voice exhorts a series of superior sources of inspiration for guidance, Hernández's supposed real-life narrator would have us understand that he has something important to tell, if only he can be sufficiently inspired to tell it: "Ninguno me hable de penas, / porque yo penado vivo" (stanza 20) (Let no one speak to me of suffering, / because I live suffering). Such a declaration is designed to signal to the audience that what is about to be told is of monumental importance: the enduring prominence of *Martín Fierro* is a correlate of the degree to which readers down the generations have agreed with this proposition.

Moreover, whether it be Hernández's omniscient narrator, mimicking the gaucho protagonist in a fully assimilated manner, or Fierro himself who utters the closing words of the *Ida*, *Martín Fierro* concludes with a ringing endorsement of the privilege of its narrative expression: "y aquí me despido yo / que he relatado a mi modo / males que conocen todos. / Pero que nadie contó" (stanza 395) (and here I take my leave / for I have recounted in my own fashion / evils that everyone knows / but no one has told). The link between the evocation of popular, rural colloquiality and the emphatic announcement of the significance of what is being narrated serves, retroreflexively, to confirm the importance of the poem's exceptional efforts to sustain that image.

I would insist, furthermore, that the fact that Hernández's composition is cast as poetry is integral to the image of colloquiality. This initially appears to be a contradictory statement. One might subscribe to the romantic notion that how the *Volk* speak is, essentially, a form of naive poetry (naive to the extent that it is not a consciously formulated display text under the formal rubric of "literature"). Such a proposition has its inviting aspects, reinforced by some of the ways in which a more sociolinguistically validated colloquiality emerges in the twentieth century as a major strand of Argentine culture production.

Hernández's poem, however, is easily identifiable as an example of institutionalized literary practices, insofar as he uses the traditional octosyllabic sextet of Spanish literature—indeed, the sextet is more conventionally "literary" than the *cuarteta* (quatrain) characteristic of *la poesía gaucha*. One

can compare Hernández's versification with the predominant modes of academic or institutional poetry of the period. An academic poet like Olegario Andrade (1839–82), although he did have a preference for the *cuarteta*, as an institutional poet, he made use of the stately hendecasyllable. What is decisive here, however, is that Hernández uses an institutionalized format, with the full narrative elaboration that has led some to associate it with the highly privileged mode of epic poetry, as a vehicle for telling the story of marginal lives that have previously been insignificant in Argentine cultural consciousness. Certainly, this poetization of the purportedly insignificant provides an initial measure of validation that would, historically, acquire diverse ideological incrustation as part of the history of populism in Argentina. But that poetization, as much as anything else, served to legitimate the existence of a colloquial register of Argentine speech. It may be more a well-wrought image than it is sociolinguistic documentation, but it would prevail in Argentine (and Latin American) literary history as a cultural model of monumental proportions.

In terms of the study and teaching of Latin American literature, Hernández's poem is of considerable iconic status. As one moves from colonial literature to the emergence of the various national literatures (a process in which Argentina plays a key role), the texts exemplify the evolving *norma culta* of peninsular Spanish, with only sporadic exceptions. Colonial authors might incorporate words drawn from indigenous languages as part of the real-world indexing of their works. But, as Spanish writers living in Latin America or Latin American writers raised in the dominant colonial cultural centers, their written Spanish bears little that can be called distinctively Latin American. It was this essential linguistic unity of Latin American Spanish during the colonial period that Andrés Bello, with his normalizing (although not altogether colloquially insensitive) grammar, first published in 1847, sought to restore and maintain in the face of regional and national fragmentation resulting from national literary projects. There are many reasons to defend a *norma culta* for Latin America. Yet this fragmentation, of such concern to Bello, seems almost an inevitable fact of nation formation in the nineteenth century. As a model for the narrative of the rural life of the *gauchos* and as a model for elaborating an image of their colloquial register, Hernández's *Martín Fierro* is also inevitably a work of literature toward which a course syllabus looks.

It is this iconic value of *Martín Fierro* as a document of linguistic ideologies that makes it important to any project that would propose to grapple with the question of a liberal education. Language is routinely recognized as a unique facility of the human species. While other species may have complex systems of communication, human verbal language, with its interlocking systems and its capacity for the infinite generation of meaning, along with its affective and poetic functions, sets it off from the comparatively much more

primitive forms of communication of nonhuman species. The need to understand how language works and how it serves as perhaps the most powerful instrument or vehicle of cultural production is crucial to the notion of a liberal education. It is ironic that programs in the humanities only deal sketchily with linguistics, the systematic study of language as an abstract phenomenon and language systems as material, culturally bound manifestations of language.

Since all natural languages are culturally bound, it is impossible to examine questions relating to the development and use of language without reference to sociohistorical issues. Hernández's narrative poem may be of enormous interest for the examination of certain social and political issues of late nineteenth-century Argentina, but it holds—or should hold—considerable fascination for students of literature for the way it intersects with important issues of linguistic ideology in the development of Latin American societies, in the nation-building project of Argentina, and in the debate in Argentina over rural versus urban priorities in that project. I would maintain, therefore, that a proper examination of what I have called the image of colloquiality in *Martín Fierro* ought to be part of the way in which we advance a proper understanding of the sociocultural ideologies of language. The language of *Martín Fierro* is not that of the real, historical gauchos (whoever they may have really been), nor is it coterminous with the different varieties of colloquial Argentine Spanish, especially in specific rural settings. It is not, to put it succinctly, *the* Argentine dialect, in any dimension, of the Spanish language. Rather than enabling the proof (or the repudiation) of any of these affirmations, the study of the question of colloquiality in *Martín Fierro* is a crucial undertaking for the way it brings into focus the imperative for a principled and theoretically grounded examination of language as essential to a liberal education.

Notes

1. All citations of Hernández's work refer to the Borges and Casares anthology, *Poesía gauchesca*.
2. All translations are my own.

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