

The Argentine Writer and Tradition (1943)

Jorge Luis Borges

A world-renowned writer, essayist, poet, and translator, Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges Acevedo (1899–1986) is best known for his short fictions which challenge the limits of genre, playing on dreams, possible worlds, literary theories, and an encyclopedic range of intertexts, most notably in the stories collected in *Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949). A master of parody, pseudo-scholarship, and enigmatic detective stories, Borges influenced the South American magic realism of the 1960s and much work in literary theory since then. Born in Buenos Aires to parents of mixed Spanish, Portuguese, and English descent, Borges gained fluency in several languages, reinforced when his family moved to Europe in 1914. He returned to Argentina in 1921, bringing home the latest avant-garde trends in European literature, which shaped poems and essays that he published in surrealist journals. Over the years, he translated many works from English, French, and German, including writing by Poe, Kafka, Hesse, Woolf, Gide, and Faulkner. Both anti-fascist and anti-communist, he opposed the populist authoritarianism of Argentina's president Juan Perón during the decade 1946–1955, losing his position at a municipal library as a result. Following the fall of Perón, Borges was appointed Professor of Literature at the University of Buenos Aires and director of the National Library – a somewhat ironic honor, as he had begun losing his sight in the late 1930s and was entirely blind by then.

Always an exceptionally cosmopolitan writer, Borges enjoyed worldwide fame beginning in the 1960s, influencing writers such as Gabriel García Márquez in Colombia, Italo Calvino in Italy, and Abe Kobo in Japan. In the essay given here, Borges envisions the European cultural tradition as a whole seen from abroad. He rejects "local color" as an imported value in favor of a universalism in which one's

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national character will be most deeply revealed. Anticipating Pascale Casanova's emphasis in *The World Republic of Letters* on peripheral writers' ability to challenge and change the canon of world literature, Borges asserts that "we can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences." His world-encompassing understanding of what tradition should be – "we should feel that our patrimony is the universe" – foregrounds today's global span of literature.

I would like to express and justify certain skeptical propositions concerning the problem of the Argentine writer and tradition. My skepticism is not related to the difficulty or impossibility of resolving the problem, but to its very existence. I think we are faced with a rhetorical theme, suitable for pathetic elaboration, rather than a true cerebral difficulty; it is, to my mind, an appearance, a simulacrum, a pseudo-problem.

Before examining it, I would like to consider its standard expressions and solutions. I will start with a solution that has become almost instinctive and presents itself without benefit of any rationale: the one which affirms that the Argentine literary tradition already exists in *gauchesco* poetry. Consequently, the lexicon, techniques, and subject matter of *gauchesco* poetry should enlighten the contemporary writer, and are a point of departure and perhaps an archetype. This is the most common solution, and for that reason I intend to examine it at some length.

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

Ricardo Rojas, who has also recommended the canonization of *Martín Fierro*, has written a page, in his *Historia de la literatura argentina*, that appears to be almost a platitude, but is quite shrewd.

Rojas studies the poetry of the *gauchescos* – the poetry of Hidalgo, Ascasubi, Estanislao del Campo, and José Hernández – and finds its origins in the poetry of the rural improvisational singers known as *payadores*, that is, the spontaneous poetry of the gauchos themselves. He points out that the meter of this popular poetry is octosyllabic, the same meter used by the authors of *gauchesco* poetry, and he concludes by considering the poetry of the *gauchescos* to be a continuation or magnification of the poetry of the *payadores*.

I suspect that this claim is based on a serious mistake; we might also call it a clever mistake, for it is clear that Rojas, in order to give popular roots to the poetry of the *gauchescos*, which begins with Hidalgo and culminates with Hernández, presents it as a continuation or derivation of the poetry of the gauchos; therefore

Bartolomé Hidalgo is not the Homer of this poetry, as Mitre said, but only a link in the sequence.

Ricardo Rojas makes a *payador* of Hidalgo; nevertheless, according to the same *Historia de la literatura argentina*, this supposed *payador* began by composing lines of eleven syllables, a meter that is by its very nature barred to *payadores*, who do not perceive its harmony, just as Spanish readers did not perceive the harmony of the hendecasyllabic line when Garcilaso imported it from Italy.

There is, to my mind, a fundamental difference between the poetry of the gauchos and *gauchesco* poetry. One need only compare any collection of popular poetry with *Martín Fierro*, *Paulino Lucero*, or the *Fausto*, to become aware of this difference, which exists equally in the lexicon and in the intent of the poets. The popular poets of the countryside and the outskirts of the city versify general themes: the pain of love and absence, the sorrow of love, and they do so in a lexicon that is equally general; the *gauchesco* poets, on the contrary, cultivate a deliberately popular language that the popular poets do not even attempt. I do not mean that the idiom of the popular poets is a correct Spanish, I mean that whatever may be incorrect in it results from ignorance. In the *gauchesco* poets, on the contrary, there is a quest for native words, a profusion of local color. The proof is this: a Colombian, a Mexican, or a Spaniard can immediately understand the poems of the *payadores* – the gauchos – but needs a glossary in order to reach even an approximate understanding of Estanislao del Campo or Ascasubi.

All of this can be abbreviated as follows: *gauchesco* poetry, which has produced – I hasten to repeat – admirable works, is as artificial as any other literary genre. The first *gauchesco* compositions, the ballads of Bartolomé Hidalgo, attempt to present themselves in accordance with the gaucho, as if spoken by gauchos, so that the reader will read them with a gaucho intonation. Nothing could be further from popular poetry. When they versify, the people – and I have observed this not only among the *payadores* of the countryside, but also in the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires – do so in the conviction that they are engaging in something important; therefore they instinctively reject popular words and seek out high-sounding words and turns of phrase. In all likelihood, *gauchesco* poetry has influenced the *payadores* by now, so that they, too, abound in Argentinisms, but initially this was not the case, and we have evidence of that (evidence no one has noted) in *Martín Fierro*.

Martín Fierro is written in a *gauchesco*-accented Spanish, and for a long while the poem does not allow us to forget that the person singing it is a gaucho; it abounds in comparisons taken from life in the grasslands; and yet there is a famous passage in which the author forgets this concern with local color and writes in a general Spanish, speaking not of vernacular subjects but of great, abstract subjects: time, space, the sea, the night. I am referring to the *payada*, the improvised musical face-off between *Martín Fierro* and El Moreno that occupies the end of the second part. It is as if Hernández himself had wished to demonstrate the difference between his *gauchesco* poetry and the genuine poetry of the gauchos. When the two gauchos,

Fierro and El Moreno, start singing, they forget all *gauchesco* affectation and address philosophical issues. I have been able to corroborate this by listening to *payadores* in the surroundings of Buenos Aires; they reject the idea of versifying in street slang, in *orillero* and *lunfardo*, and try to express themselves correctly. Of course they fail, but their aim is to make of poetry something high, something distinguished, we might say with a smile.

The idea that Argentine poetry must abound in Argentine differential traits and in Argentine local color seems to me to be a mistake. If we ask which book is more Argentine, *Martín Fierro* or the sonnets in *La urna* by Enrique Banchs, there is no reason to say that the former is more Argentine. It will be said that in Banchs' *La urna* there are neither Argentine landscapes nor Argentine topography nor Argentine botany nor Argentine zoology; nevertheless, there are other specifically Argentine conditions in *La urna*.

I can recall a couple of lines of *La urna* that seem to have been written expressly to prevent anyone from saying that this is an Argentine book; the lines are:

*El sol en los tejados
y en las ventanas brilla. Ruiseñores
quieren decir que están enamorados.*

[The sun glints on the tiled roofs/and on the windows.
Nightingales/mean to say they are in love.]

A denunciation of "the sun glints on the tiled roofs and on the windows" seems inevitable here. Enrique Banchs wrote these lines in a house on the edge of Buenos Aires, and on the edges of Buenos Aires there are no tiled roofs, there are flat, terrace roofs; "nightingales mean to say they are in love"; the nightingale is not so much a real bird as a bird of literature, of the Greek and Germanic tradition. Nevertheless, I would maintain that in the use of these conventional images, in these incongruous tiled roofs and nightingales, although neither the architecture nor the ornithology is Argentine, there is the Argentine reserve, the Argentine reticence; the fact that Banchs, in speaking of a great sorrow that overwhelmed him, of a woman who left him and left the world empty for him, makes use of conventional, foreign imagery such as tiled roofs and nightingales, is significant: significant of a reserve, wariness, and reticence that are Argentine, significant of the difficulty we have in confiding, in being intimate.

Furthermore, I do not know if it needs to be said that the idea that a literature must define itself by the differential traits of the country that produces it is a relatively new one, and the idea that writers must seek out subjects local to their countries is also new and arbitrary. Without going back any further, I think Racine would not have begun to understand anyone who would deny him his right to the title of French poet for having sought out Greek and Latin subjects. I think Shakespeare would have been astonished if anyone had tried to limit him to English subjects, and if anyone had told him that, as an Englishman, he had no right to write *Hamlet*, with its Scandinavian subject matter, or *Macbeth*, on a

Scottish theme. The Argentine cult of local color is a recent European cult that nationalists should reject as a foreign import.

A few days ago, I discovered a curious confirmation of the way in which what is truly native can and often does dispense with local color; I found this confirmation in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon observes that in the Arab book *par excellence*, the Koran, there are no camels; I believe that if there were ever any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this lack of camels would suffice to prove that it is Arab. It was written by Mohammed, and Mohammed, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were particularly Arab; they were, for him, a part of reality, and he had no reason to single them out, while the first thing a forger, a tourist, or an Arab nationalist would do is bring on the camels, whole caravans of camels on every page; but Mohammed, as an Arab, was unconcerned; he knew he could be Arab without camels. I believe that we Argentines can be like Mohammed; we can believe in the possibility of being Argentine without abounding in local color.

Permit me to confide something, just a small thing. For many years, in books now fortunately forgotten, I tried to compose the flavor, the essence, of the outskirts of Buenos Aires; naturally I abounded in local words such as *cuchilleros*, *milonga*, *tapia*, and others, and in such manner I wrote those forgettable and forgotten books; then, about a year ago, I wrote a story called "Death and the Compass," which is a kind of nightmare, a nightmare in which elements of Buenos Aires appear, deformed by the horror of the nightmare; and in that story, when I think of the Paseo Colón, I call it Rue de Toulon; when I think of the *quintas* of Adrogué, I call them Triste-le-Roy; after the story was published, my friends told me that at last they had found the flavor of the outskirts of Buenos Aires in my writing. Precisely because I had not abandoned myself to the dream, I was able to achieve, after so many years, what I once sought in vain.

Now I wish to speak of a justly illustrious work that the nationalists often invoke. I refer to *Don Segundo Sombra* by Güiraldes. The nationalists tell us that *Don Segundo Sombra* is the characteristic national book; but if we compare *Don Segundo Sombra* to the works of the *gauchesco* tradition, the first things we note are differences. *Don Segundo Sombra* abounds in a type of metaphor that has nothing to do with the speech of the countryside and everything to do with the metaphors of the Montmartre salons of that period. As for the plot, the story, it is easy to discern the influence of Kipling's *Kim*, which is set in India and was, in its turn, written under the influence of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the epic of the Mississippi. In making this observation, I do not wish to devalue *Don Segundo Sombra*; on the contrary, I wish to emphasize that in order for us to have this book it was necessary for Güiraldes to recall the poetic technique of the French salons of his time, and the work of Kipling, which he had read many years before; which is to say that Kipling and Mark Twain and the metaphors of the French poets were necessary to this Argentine book, to this book which is, I repeat, no less Argentine for having accepted those influences.

I wish to note another contradiction: the nationalists pretend to venerate the capacities of the Argentine mind but wish to limit the poetic exercise of that mind to

a few humble local themes, as if we Argentines could only speak of neighborhoods and ranches and not of the universe.

Let us pass on to another solution. It is said that there is a tradition of which we Argentine writers must avail ourselves, and that tradition is the literature of Spain. This second piece of advice is, of course, a bit less narrow than the first, but it also tends to restrict us; many objections can be made to it, but two will suffice. The first is this: Argentine history can unequivocally be defined as a desire to move away from Spain, as a willed distancing from Spain. The second objection is that, among us, the pleasure of Spanish literature, a pleasure I personally share in, is usually an acquired taste; I have often loaned French and English works to people without any particular literary erudition, and those books were enjoyed immediately, without effort. However, when I have suggested that my friends read Spanish books, I have found that these books were difficult for them to enjoy in the absence of special training; I therefore believe that the fact that certain illustrious Argentine writers write like Spaniards is not so much a testimony to some inherited capacity as it is evidence of Argentine versatility.

I now arrive at a third opinion on Argentine writers and tradition, one that I read not long ago and that greatly astonished me. This is the opinion that we Argentines are cut off from the past; that there has been some sort of rupture between ourselves and Europe. According to this singular point of view, we Argentines are as if in the first days of creation; our search for European subject matters and techniques is an illusion, an error; we must understand that we are essentially alone, and cannot play at being European.

This opinion strikes me as unfounded. I understand why many people accept it: such a declaration of our solitude, our perdition, and our primitive character has, like existentialism, the charms of poignancy. Many people may accept this opinion because, having done so, they will feel themselves to be alone, disconsolate, and in some way, interesting. Nevertheless, I have observed that in our country, precisely because it is a new country, there is a strong feeling for time. Everything that has happened in Europe, the dramatic events there in recent years, has resonated deeply here. The fact that a given individual was on the side of Franco or the Republic during the Spanish Civil War, or was on the side of the Nazis or the Allies, was in many cases the cause of very serious disputes and estrangements. This would not happen if we were detached from Europe. As for Argentine history, I think we all feel it deeply; and it is only natural that we should, because that history is very close to us, in chronology and in the blood; the names, the battles of the civil wars, the war of independence, all of it is, in time and in family traditions, quite near.

What is Argentine tradition? I believe that this question poses no problem and can easily be answered. I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have. Here I remember an essay by Thorstein Veblen, the North American sociologist, on the intellectual preeminence of Jews in Western culture. He wonders if this preeminence authorizes us to posit an innate Jewish superiority and answers that it does not; he says that

Jews are prominent in Western culture because they act within that culture and at the same time do not feel bound to it by any special devotion; therefore, he says, it will always be easier for a Jew than for a non-Jew to make innovations in Western culture. We can say the same of the Irish in English culture. Where the Irish are concerned, we have no reason to suppose that the profusion of Irish names in British literature and philosophy is due to any social preeminence, because many of these illustrious Irishmen (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) were the descendants of Englishmen, men with no Celtic blood; nevertheless, the fact of feeling themselves to be Irish, to be different, was enough to enable them to make innovations in English culture. I believe that Argentines, and South Americans in general, are in an analogous situation; we can take on all the European subjects, take them on without superstition and with an irreverence that can have, and already has had, fortunate consequences.

This does not mean that all Argentine experiments are equally felicitous; I believe that this problem of the Argentine and tradition is simply a contemporary and fleeting version of the eternal problem of determinism. If I am going to touch this table with one of my hands, and I ask myself, "Will I touch it with the left hand or the right?" and I touch it with the right hand, the determinists will say that I could not have done otherwise and that the whole prior history of the universe forced me to touch the table with my right hand, and that touching it with my left hand would have been a miracle. Yet if I had touched it with my left hand, they would have told me the same thing: that I was forced to touch it with that hand. The same occurs with literary subjects and techniques. Everything we Argentine writers do felicitously will belong to Argentine tradition, in the same way that the use of Italian subjects belongs to the tradition of England through the work of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

I believe, moreover, that all the foregoing discussions of the aims of literary creation are based on the error of supposing that intentions and plans matter much. Take, for example, the case of Kipling: Kipling dedicated his life to writing in accordance with a given set of political ideals, he wanted to make his work a tool for propaganda, and nevertheless, at the end of his life he had to confess that the true essence of a writer's work is usually unknown by that writer; and he remembered the case of Swift, who while writing *Gulliver's Travels* wanted to raise an indictment against mankind and instead left behind a children's book. Plato said that poets are the amanuenses of a god who moves them against their will, against their intentions, as the magnet moves a series of iron rings.

Therefore I repeat that we must not be afraid; we must believe that the universe is our birthright and try out every subject; we cannot confine ourselves to what is Argentine in order to be Argentine because either it is our inevitable destiny to be Argentine, in which case we will be Argentine whatever we do, or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask.

I believe that if we lose ourselves in the voluntary dream called artistic creation, we will be Argentine and we will be, as well, good or adequate writers.