*“The Argentine Writer and Tradition” (1943)*

*Jorge Luis Borges*

* Key Dates:
  + Argentine War of Independence (1810-1818)
  + Col. Juan Perón and Military Control (1946-1955)
* Key Terms:
  + *Payador* (noun, plural: *payadores*): popular singer; performer of popular songs in verse, accompanied on guitar; subject of folkloric and literary studies.
  + *Gaucho* (noun, plural *gauchos*): farmer-horseman, working in livestock farming; a countryperson living on the pampas; settler of European descendant; Argentine “cowboy”; national symbol.
  + *Gaucho* (adjective): pertaining to the lifestyle and mythology of gauchos; gaucho literature, ex. Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926).
  + *Gauchesco* (adjective): evocative of gaucho style and sensibility; gauchesco poetry, ex. José Hernández, *Martín Fierro* (1872).
* **Thesis for Essay: *“I would like to express and justify certain skeptical propositions concerning the problem of the Argentine writer and tradition. My skepticism is […] related to […] [the problem’s] very existence”* (392).**

🡪 The problem referred to here is the muddled origins of where Argentina’s distinct national literary tradition came from and more accurately what it even is.

🡪 Borges rejects this problem in its nature because he does not perceive national literary traditions as being completely insular and distinct from other literary traditions.

🡪 In this essay, he specifically responds to three “solutions” to the problem: 1.) that Argentine tradition is in *gauchesco* poetry; 2.) that it comes from Spain; 3.) that Argentine is nationalistically “cut off” from Europe.

* **Claim by Argentine Nationalists: *“the Argentine literary tradition already exists in* gauchesco *poetry”* (392).**

🡪 Lugones believed that *Martin Fierro* (By José Hernández) can be similarly to the ways the Homeric Poems were for the Greeks; *the* foundational literary text that marks the Argentine tradition.

🡪 José Hernández is considered to be a *gauchescos* poet, a tradition including Hidalgo, Ascasubi, Estanislao del Campo

🡪 Ricardo Rojas agrees but takes his argument one step further: *gauchescos* poets developed out of the “poetry of th rural improvisational singers known as *payadores*, that is, the spontaneous poetry of the gauchos themselves” (392).

* + **Borges’ Counterclaim to Rojas: *“There is, to my mind, a fundamental difference between the poetry of the gauchos [payadores] and* gauchesco *poetry”* (393).**

🡪 Payadores (popular poets):

- versify general themes

1.) “the pain of live and absence”

2.) “the sorrow of love”

- use “high-sounding words” and “turns of phrase”

1.) reject local color

🡪 Gauchesco Poets

- quest for native words (local color)

\*\*\* “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”

(393). \*\*\*

* + ***Is* Martin Fierro *of a gauchesco poet or payadores?***

🡪“[It] is written in a *guachesco*-accented Spanish, and for a long while the poem does not allow us to forget that the person singing it is a gaucho. […] 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” (393)

🡪 “It is as if Hernández himself had wished to demonstrate the difference between his gauchesco poetry and the genuine poetry of the gaucho” (393).

* + **The case for *La Urna*: *“The idea that Argentine poetry must abound in Argentine differential traits and in Argentine local color seems to me to be a mistake”* (394).**

🡪 *La Urna* (by Enrique Banchs) does not use local color or Argentine imagery – he even uses imagery from other traditions:

- “tiled roofs” are mentioned, but there are none in Buenos Aires (where he was when writing this)

- “the nightingale” is mentioned, but this is more a symbol used in Greek and Germanic traditions than a reference to a real bird

🡪 But the poems represent an “Argentine reserve” or an “Argentine reticence”

- “The fact that Banchs is speaking of a great sorrow that overwhelmed 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” (394).

🡪 In other words, Banchs uses influences from a foreign literary tradition as tools to mark something distinct about Argentine people. A form of appropriation, in essence.

🡪 Similarly, “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” (394).

\*\*\* “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” (394). \*\*\*

* + **Paradox? *“The Argentine cult of local color is a recent European cult that nationalists should reject as a foreign import”* (395).**

🡪 Does seem strange that Borges is, on the one hand, saying local color should be rejected as inauthentic because it is a foreign import while, on the other hand, pointing out the importance of importing images, techniques, etc. from foreign literary traditions.

🡪 Further adding “I believe that we Argentines can be like Mohammed; we can believe in the possibility of being Argentine without abounding in local color” (395) only adds to this paradox.

* **Borges and *Don Segundo Sombra*: what “foreign” influences can we see?**

🡪 Foreign Influence: Kipling’s *Kim* ; Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*

🡪 “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 techniques of the French salons of his time, and the work of Kipling; [but this makes *Don Segundo Sombra*] no less Argentine for having accepted those influences” (395).

* **Argentina and Spain: *“Argentine history can unequivocally be defined as a desire to move away from Spain, as a willed distancing from Spain. […] 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”* (396).**

🡪 Borges is trying to move away from any claims that Argentine is inherently connected to Spain’s literary history and should look there for an answer to the “problem” of the Argentine writer and tradition. Argentina is not dependent upon their colonial past.

* **Is Argentina “cut off” from Europe? What is the Argentine Tradition?**

🡪 Borges says no. That this sentiment comes from a desire to feel “interesting” in their separation. But that there are feelings of similarity between each that cannot be ignored (Europe and WWII; Argentina and Colonialism; Spain and Franco)

🡪 “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” (396).

* **How could Argentina have a “greater right” to this tradition?**

🡪 According to Borges, Argentine people can “Act within that culture and at the same time do not feel bound to it by any special devotion” (397). A level of separateness *within*. Also a level of “irreverence” that can have “fortunate consequences” (397).

🡪EX: Irish writers (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) felt themselves to be different from English tradition and were able to make innovations to English culture.

* **Determinism and Argentine Tradition**

🡪 “Everything we Argentine writers do felicitously will belong to Argentine tradition” (397).

🡪 “We cannot confine ourselves to what is Argentine in order to be Argentine because either it is our destiny to be Argentine, in which case we will be Argentine whatever we do, or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask” (397).

**Questions – Jorge Luis Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition”**

1. *What is “the problem of the Argentine writer and tradition”? Why is Borges skeptical about “its very existence” (392) as problem?*

🡪 The problem referred to here is the muddled origins of where Argentina’s distinct national literary tradition came from and more accurately what it even is. Borges rejects this problem in its nature because he does not perceive national literary traditions as being completely insular, nationalistic, and completely distinct from other literary traditions. In this essay, he specifically confronts three “solutions” to the problem: 1.) that Argentine tradition is in *gauchesco* poetry; 2.) that it is born out of Spain; 3.) that Argentine is nationalistically “cut off” from Europe.

1. *How have literary scholars (such as Lugones and Rojas) constructed a tradition for Argentine literature? On what grounds does Borges disagree with this construction?*

🡪 Lugones believed that Martin Fierro (By José Hernández) can be similarly to the ways the Homeric Poems were for the Greeks; the foundational literary text that marks the Argentine tradition. José Hernández is considered to be a *gauchescos* poet, a tradition including Hidalgo, Ascasubi, Estanislao del Campo. Ricardo Rojas agrees but takes his argument one step further: gauchescos poets developed out of the “poetry of th rural improvisational singers known as payadores, that is, the spontaneous poetry of the gauchos themselves” (392). Borges responds by first showing key differences between payadores and gauchescos poets. Gauchescos poetry – the poetry that supposedly represents the natural character of Argentina is “as artificial as any other literary genre.”

1. *What are some of the most common elements that supposedly “prove” a literary text’s Argentine character? How does Borges critique this?*

🡪 The most common element that supposedly “prove” a literary text’s Argentine character is their use of local color. Borges critiques this by showing how the use of local color is not used in the payadores tradition (which supposedly is foundational for Argentine texts). He also shows how “foreign” literary images – such as the ones in La Urna – can be used to reveal an Argentine character. He states that local color is a development from Europe.

1. *“The Argentine cult of local color is a recent European cult that nationalists should reject as foreign import” (395). Explain what seems to be a paradox.*

🡪 It does seem strange that Borges is, on the one hand, saying local color should be rejected as inauthentic because it is a foreign import while, on the other hand, pointing out the importance of importing images, techniques, etc. from foreign literary traditions.

1. *Do you agree with Borges’s defense of Enrique Banchs’s use of European images (such as tiled roofs, nightingales) in ‘La urna’ (394)? How would you react to the use of such ‘conventional’, ‘artificial’ images in a poem set in your own locality?*

🡪 I agree. I think the use of images that exist beyond one’s locality can be used to create a strong image, if they are more “conventional.” It also depends on where you live. Part of the joy is having other people read with you; if your locality is so small that no one else can understand, it would be burdensome.