

## "VERSIONES, PERVERSIONES"<sup>1</sup>: BORGES AND PYNCHON ON THE MARTÍN FIERRO THEME

"Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits," states Michel Foucault in a celebrated essay on today's much pondered question of authorship.<sup>2</sup> My study will deal with the game of writing as played by Jorge Luis Borges and by Thomas Pynchon in, respectively, the very brief story "El fin" (from *Ficciones*, 1953) and the *Martín Fierro* echoes present in the masterful novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Borges, in the Prólogo to the "Artíficios" section of *Ficciones*, wrote that "casi nada" in "El fin" is his invention: "todo lo que hay en él está implícito"<sup>3</sup> in José Hernández' famous romantic epic poem *Martín Fierro* (1872, 1879). In a later story loosely based on the Argentine poem, "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz" (from *El Aleph*, 1969), the great  *cuentista* refers to the Hernández work as "un libro cuya materia puede ser para todos... pues es capaz de casi inagotables repeticiones, versiones, persiones" (53). In his brief study of *Martín Fierro*, also from 1953, Borges neatly summarizes the content of "El fin": "Podemos imaginar una pelea más allá del poema, en la que el moreno venga la muerte de su hermano."<sup>4</sup> As Rodríguez Monegal has written, "en Borges, el *Martín Fierro* vuelve a ser escrito. La lectura crítica se transforma en escritura."<sup>5</sup>

The game finds brilliant continuation in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Throughout the convoluted texture of this huge World War II novel, a group of anarchic Argentines moves in and out of the reader's focus; in the major episode concerning them, the exiles are preparing to film a German version of the gaucho epic, all of them possessed by hopeless "nostalgia like seasickness"<sup>6</sup> for Argentina, for "the sunsets south of Rivadavia, where the true South begins" (306)—the last phrase clearly echoing the following phrase from Borges' "El Sur" (also from *Ficciones* and also containing echoes of *Martín Fierro*):

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges has referred to *Martín Fierro* as a book capable of "casi inagotables repeticiones, versiones, persiones" ("Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz," *El Aleph*, (Buenos Aires; Emecé Editores, 1957, p. 53).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué Harari, Ithaca, New York, Cornell UP, 1979, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, Prólogo to "Artíficios," *Ficciones*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1981, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *El 'Martín Fierro'*, Buenos Aires, Ed. Columba, 1953, p. 293.

<sup>5</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "El *Martín Fierro* en Borges y Martínez Estrada," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 1974, 302, p. 87-88.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, New York, Bantam, 1976, p. 306.

“Nadie ignora que el Sur empieza del otro lado de Rivadavia.”<sup>7</sup> Earlier in the novel Pynchon entertains the reader with several playful paragraphs of variations (“changes on the text,” in his words) of the phrase “You never did the Kenosha Kid!” (69-70). Eight hundred pages later, the game continues with Gerhardt von Goll, the megalomaniac director of the *Martín Fierro* film, working on a “really offensive and tasteless film” (869) significantly titled *New Dope*, of which “all the images... run in reverse”<sup>8</sup> —“Irreversible is actually reversed...” (870). E. Santí has remarked that “El fin “attempts to provide “una (u otra) definitiva conclusión al *Martín Fierro*.”<sup>9</sup> Thomas Pynchon, in his turn, offers the reader still another variation—rather, still other variations—on the *Martín Fierro* theme. At one point, the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow* asks a member of the Argentine group if she is willing to play the game: “Will you go to the Heath... and wait there for your Director to come? (454). Hernández’ nineteenth-century poem inspired the Borges story, which may well have been an inspiration for Pynchon’s *Martín Fierro* episodes. “Irreversible is actually reversed” indeed, as the game of writing “Transgresses its limits.”

As mentioned above, “El fin”, concerns a fatal meeting between the outcast gaucho Fierro and El Moreno, whose brother—in the Hernández poem—Martín had senselessly killed in a fight; near the close of the epic, the gaucho defeats El Moreno in a lengthy *payada*, or singing contest. Their meeting in the Borges story occurs in the general-store of the paralyzed Recabarren, who watches through his bedroom window the fight which ends with Fierro’s death. Borges’ title appears to have its source in line 4484—“hasta el fin he de seguir”—of the poem (Santí 313).

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the Argentine Squalidozzi meets the novel’s hapless protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop, in a Zürich cafe and entrusts him with a message to some friends of the anarchic exiles. The Argentines, to one of whom “Borges is said to have dedicated a poem” (446), have hijacked a German U-boat and are planning to establish an open settlement in the chaos of post-war Germany: “In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless,” Squalidozzi tells the AWOL American lieutenant (308). Like Dahlman in Borges’ “El Sur,” it appears that “only the hope of dying from [nostalgia] is keeping them alive” (446). Squalidozzi explains as follows the Argentine “national tragedy”:

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<sup>7</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “El Sur”, *Ficciones*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1981, p. 198. —Edward Mendelson considers another *Ficciones* story, “El acercamiento a Almotásim,” the “concealed and unacknowledged source” of Pynchon’s second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 1966, (“The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49,” *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Edward Mendelson, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978, p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Clerc, “Film in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *Approaches to Gravity’s Rainbow*, ed. Charles Clerc, Columbus, Ohio State UP, 1983, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> Enrico-Mario Santí, “Escritura y tradición: El *Martín Fierro* en dos cuentos de Borges,” *Revista Iberoamericana*, p. 87-88, 1974, p. 313.

Fences went up, and the gaucho became less free. It is our national tragedy. We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that openness: it is a terror to us. Look at Borges." (307)

Later, on the run like many of the novel's numerous characters, Squalidozzi meets Gerhardt von Goll, the famous film director and equally famous black-marketeer known as "Der Springer." Von Goll convinces the Argentine's to make with him a film version of *Martín Fierro*. The narrator comments:

Martín Fierro is not just the gaucho hero of a great Argentine epic poem. On the U-boat he is considered an anarchist saint... It goes back to the old basic polarity in Argentina: Buenos Aires vs. the provinces, or... central government vs. gaucho anarchism... (449)

At this point, Pynchon gives us a sample of the beginning of the supposed *Martín Fierro* filmscript:

A shadowed plain at sundown. An enormous flatness. Camera angle is kept low... Horses, cattle, fires against the growing darkness. Far away, at the horizon, a solitary figure on horseback appears, and rides in... (449-450)

In "El fin", the dying storekeeper sees a similar picture through his bedroom's barred window:

La llanura, bajo el último sol, era casi abstracta, como vista en un sueño. Un punto se agitó en el horizonte y creció hasta ser un jinete, que venía, o parecía venir, a la casa. Recabarren vio el chambergo, el largo poncho oscuro, el caballo moro... (184)

According to H. Rasi, "El relato adquiere... los caracteres de un libreto cinematográfico adecuado a la técnica de cámara anclada."<sup>10</sup>

After quoting in Spanish the opening six lines of *Martín Fierro*, the narrator proceeds to summarize the epic for the benefit of the many readers who most likely have never heard of the Romantic gaucho poem. Pynchon's interpretations of the Hernández poem reveals his customary sympathy for those whom he calls the "Preterite," society's outcast and misfits—among them, of course, Slothrop:

It is the period of... bringing the country under the control of Buenos Aires. Martín Fierro is soon sick of it... He deserts. They send out a posse, and he talks the sergeant in command [Cruz, of the *El Aleph* story] over to his side. Together they flee across the frontier, to live in the wilderness, to live with the Indians.

That's Part I [*El gaucho Martín Fierro*, 1872]. Seven years later, Hernández wrote a *Return of Martín Fierro*, in which the Gaucho sells out: assimilates back into Christian society, gives up his freedom for the kind of constitutional Gesellschaft being pushed in those days by Buenos Aires. A very moral ending, but completely opposite to the first. (450)

The epic ends with the singing duel, as noted above. Borges' tale ends with a physical duel, in which Fierro is killed; as he goes to his death, Fierro says to El Moreno: "Deja en paz la guitarra, que hoy te espera otra clase de contrapunto" (187).

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<sup>10</sup> Humberto M. Rasi, "Borges frente a la poesía gauchesca: crítica y creación," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 1974, 335, p. 87-88.

Pynchon's *Martín Fierro* counterpoint comes to a close near the end of the enormous novel. The Russian captain Tchitcherine (about whom more later)—who “has never read *Martín Fierro*” (711)—comes across the Argentines gathered at the movie set; they are hopefully beginning rehearsals, although still waiting for their “Director to come”:

The boliche is stocked with real liquor, the pulperia with real food. The sheep, cattle, horses, and corrals are real. The huts are weather-proof and are being slept in. When von Goll leaves—if he ever comes—nothing will be struck. (715)

The scene which they are rehearsing as the Russian watches through his binoculars—still another framing device—is the *payada* of Part I: “he sees two men, one white, one black, holding guitars” (711). The narrator has commended earlier that “The only part of the epic that really has von Goll fascinated is a singing duel between the white gaucho and the dark El Moreno. We read no more of Squalidozzi and his friends in the open novel, but it is significant that our last glimpse of the Argentines involves the very moment of the Hernández poem which inspired “El fin”. The *Martín Fierro* theme has further echoes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, particularly in the characterization of three of the novel's principal characters: Tchitcherine, his black half-brother Enzian, and Slothrop himself.

The closing lines of “El fin” read as follows: “Cumplida su tarea de justiciero, ahora [El Moreno] era nadie. Mejor dicho era el otro: no tenía destino sobre la tierra y había matado a un hombre” (187). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Martín-El Moreno pair are named Tchitcherine and Enzian. The Russian captain passes in and out of the novel's many plots, always in search of his black half-brother Enzian, whom Tchitcherine hates with a totally irrational hatred and fully intends to kill. According to S. Simon, “Tchitcherine's would-be conflict with his darker half... is Pynchon's treatment of the doppelganger theme.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas El Moreno in the Borges story destroys his life's entire purpose with the death of Fierro, as well as taking upon himself the gaucho's burden of homicide, the Russian—thanks to his lover's withcraft—does not even recognize his “double” when he finally encounters him:

Enzian on his motorcycle stops for a moment... to talk to the scarred, unshaven white. They're in the middle of the bridge... The two men nod, not quite formally, not quite smiling. Enzian puts his bike in gear, and returns to his journey...

This is magic. Sure—but not necessarily fantasy. Certainly not the first time a man has passed his brother by, at the edge of the evening, often forever, without knowing it. (857)

Their meeting takes place “at the edge of the evening”, as in “El fin” (“bajo el último sol,” 184), but while darkness triumphs in the Borges story, the white magic of the enamored young witch Geli staves off tragedy for the Russian; love wins out over hate. About one hundred pages earlier, we remember, Tchitcherine had come across the Argentine exiles rehearsing the *payada* scene

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<sup>11</sup> Scott Simon, “Beyond the Theater of War: *Gravity's Rainbow* as Film,” *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Richard Pearce, Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1981, p. 132.

from *Martín Fierro* (711). The sight recalls to him a strange, almost mystical experience which he had undergone years ago; he realizes that he is watching “a scene with the same structure as the male-female singing contest in the middle of a flat grassland in Central Asia... a coming-together of opposites” (ibid.). This “coming-together of opposites”—“Mejor dicho era el otro”—of years earlier repeats itself in the encounter with Enzian. In spite of what a critic has called “the ferocity of his despair,”<sup>12</sup> Pynchon gives us in the Tchitcherine-Enzian doubling a much more optimistic ending than Borges gave to his Fierro-El Moreno story. The settings of the final encounters prefigure their resolutions. There is a fated hopelessness in Borges’ “Un lugar de la llanura era igual a otro...” (186), but Tchitcherine and Enzian talk “in the middle of the bridge” (857), meeting each other half way, speaking to each other as man to man.

In *Martín Fierro* criticism, it is a commonplace that the character of Martín finds a double in Sergeant Cruz, whom the gaucho “talks... over to his side” (GR 450) and with whom he flees to Indian territory, where Cruz dies; in Borges’ “Biografía,” Cruz finally “comprendió que el otro [Martín] era él” (57). In Pynchon’s novel, the protagonist Slothrop shares with Tchitcherine several basic similarities; both have been used by their governments (like the original Martín Fierro), both are wandering through the Zone in search of Enzian and the mysterious 00000 rocket, both have many chance affairs with women as they go along. In Borges’ tale, Martín Fierro fails in his efforts to “assimilate back into Christian society” (GR 450), unlike Hernández’ gaucho, whom Pynchon accuses of “selling out” (ibid.). Borges’ Martín tells El Moreno of the “buenos consejos” which he gave to his children: “Les dije, entre otras cosas, que el hombre no debe derramar la sangre del hombre” (185); the two men then, however, proceed to their ill-fated duel, the tragic ending of “El fin” being Borges’ mejor variation on the epic.

We have seen in the ending of the Tchitcherine-Enzian episode Pynchon’s variation on the closure of “El fin.” In the case of Slothrop, considered as also a Martín Fierro doubling, the novelist offers us still another variation, a strange open variation that may be in a sense a reply to both Hernández and Borges. Simply stated, Slothrop drops out of corrupt civilization and “assimilates” back into *nature*, not “Christian society”: “He’s kept alone... he likes to spend whole days naked, ants crawling up his legs, butterflies lighting on his shoulders...” (724). His final appearance, which McConnell well describes as “in fact a dis-appearance” (180), has religious resonances:

At last, lying one afternoon spread-eagled at his ease in the sun, ... he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection... later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn’t recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of public clouds into Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural... (728-729)

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<sup>12</sup> Frank D. McConnell, “Thomas Pynchon and the Abreaction of the Lord of Night,” *Four Postwar Novelists: Bellow, Mailer, Barth and Pynchon*, Chicago and London, The U of Chicago P, 1977, p. 197.

Usually in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the rainbow symbol refers to the parabolic arc of the V-2 rocket, but in the above passage the Biblical rainbow—God's promise in Gen. 8:21-9:17 that natural cycles will continue—comes readily to mind. In a conversation with Squalidozzi, Von Goll had remarked that “even the freest of Gauchos end up by selling out” (451), but a bit later he tells the Argentine that, through his art, he can lead the exiles back to Eden: “‘I can take down your fences and your labyrinth walls, I can lead you back to the Garden...’” (ibid.). Thus Pynchon, in his *Martín Fierro* variation, causes Slothrop to disappear into nature, to become “no one” like Borges' Moreno, but in a very different sense. What in Borges' story is the key concept of “la aniquilación de la individualidad” (Rodríguez Monegal 296) becomes in Pynchon's novel a sort of “sacrificial death [“he becomes a cross himself”] which... at least established the chance for a birth and rebirth of the human world” (McConnell 196-197).

For Foucault, “Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: it is now a voluntary effacement...” (142). The game of writing here indeed “transgresses its limits.” Borges exercises “la magia del texto que desrealiza todo” (Rodríguez Monegal 296), as he gives us his “El fin” variation on *Martín Fierro*. The “voluntary effacement” of Slothrop causes one to think of Pynchon's determined insistence on privacy: “[he leads] a deliberate nonexistence, which is one of the most suggestive metaphors of his work itself” (McConnell 160). In his seminal essay on “The Death of the Author”, Roland Barthes reminds us that “it is language which speaks, not the author...”,<sup>13</sup> a most important reminder indeed.

In Pynchon's summary of the plot of *Martín Fierro*, we noted that the comments that Martín “sells out” (450), that the gaucho “gives up his freedom for the kind of constitutional Gesellschaft being pushed in those days by Buenos Aires. A very moral ending, but completely opposite to the first [part]” (ibid.). Both Pynchon and Borges, as we have discussed, give their *Martín Fierro* variations quite different endings from that of Hernández, but both “El fin” and the sections of *Gravity's Rainbow* concerned with the *Martín Fierro* theme contain what I consider to be “very moral endings.” In the Argentine story, one may recall, repeats to his antagonist the pious advice he had earlier given his sons: “el hombre no debe derramar la sangre del hombre” (1985); he then attempts to do just that. El Moreno, acknowledges that homicide is wrong: “[Fierro] hizo bien [by advising his children not to kill]. Así no se perecerán a nosotros” (ibid.). The two combatants, therefore, begin their duel with full consciousness that what they are doing is against nature. (Borges, of course, is not a conventionally religious man.) Thus Martín's death and El Moreno's assumption of the burden of homicide of “el otro” is clearly poetic justice, morally as well as aesthetically more satisfying than Hernández' didactic ending: nevertheless, as Borges has noted (*El 'Martín Fierro'* 293), the

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1983, p. 142.

ending of "El fin" is intimated in the poem itself: e.g., "Ya conozco yo que empieza/Otra clase de junción."<sup>14</sup>

If Borges' Fierro and El Moreno are fully conscious of their actions, Tchitcherine is literally bewitched by his young lover into avoiding fratricide. Enzian, however, articulates Pynchon's customary stress on man's at least partial<sup>15</sup> freedom to choose: "I told Slothrop he was free. You are free" (770). Squalidozzi equates the Argentines' "perversity and guilt" to that of the Americans:

"We tried to exterminate our Indians, like you: we wanted the closed white version of reality we got— but even into the smokiest labyrinths, the furthest stacked density of midday balcony or courtyard and gate, the land has never let us forget...

Fences went up, and the gaucho became less free." (306-307)

Slothrop's final assimilation into nature—though, like Tchitcherine's avoidance of fratricide, not a *rational* decision on his part ("no a thing in his head, just feeling natural", 729)—also constitutes "a very moral ending", although it is a very different ending from that of Hernández. This ending is certainly "completely opposite to the first."

While I agree with T. Cooper's statement that, on the whole "Pynchon shows the greater social urgency. Borges... stands closer to uninhibited philosophical or aesthetic play...",<sup>16</sup> it is worth noting that both "El fin" and *Gravity's Rainbow* are *historical* fictions. Perhaps the following comment made by Pynchon in the Introduction to his recently published book of early stories explains in part both author's choice of the historical genre:

I think we all have tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror [concerning "Our common nightmare The Bomb," 18] in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it—occasionally ... offset to a more colorful time and place.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the considerable difference in their ages (Borges was born in 1899, Pynchon in 1937), both authors are our contemporaries and subject to the unique fears shared by twentieth—century humanity.

Recabarren, the paralyzed *pulpero* of "El fin", watches the Fierro-El Moreno duel through the "**framing device**" of his window; but, like Dahlman of "El Sur," he may be reliving in his illness his reading of the gaucho epic. The Argentines of *Gravity's Rainbow* act out their reading of the Hernández poem, as does Alonso Quijano with his books of chivalry. Tchitcherine, we recall, 'has never read *Martín Fierro*,' but he watches through his binoculars a scene

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<sup>14</sup> José Hernández, *Martín Fierro*, 11, 4479-4480, Buenos Aires, Espasa-Calpe Argentina, S.A., 1938, p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> My article "Fateful Labyrinths: *La vida es sueño* and *The Crying of Lot 49*" (*The Comparatist*, 1983, 7, p. 57-74, Pynchon's treatment of man's limited freedom his use of the labyrinth symbol in *Lot 49*.

<sup>16</sup> Peter L. Cooper, *Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World*, Berkeley, U of California P, 1983, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories*, Boston-Toronto, Little, Brown and Company, 1984, p. 19.

from the filming of the epic which recreates a remembered experience of his own.

Borges and Pynchon, engaged in the serious game of writing, thus illustrate by means of their *Martín Fierro* variations Barthe's remark that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (142). Writing, while still a game, reverts to magic. In the Borges story, Recabarren makes use of a cowbell to summon his son to his bedside: "El hombre postrado se quedó solo; su mano izquierda jugó un rato con el cencerro, como si ejerciera un poder" (184). Unable to leave his bed, the storekeeper "empowers" his subconscious mind—through the magic of a remembered text—to satisfy "una frustrada lectura, la cual, a su vez, significa una nueva versión de los hechos" (Santí 319). While Tchitcherine was in Central Asia trying to introduce a standardized alphabet into an oral culture, he witnessed the posting of "the first kill-the-police commissioner signs"—which bring results: "and somebody does! this alphabet is really something!" (414). The written alphabet harnesses, states the narrator, "the magic that the shamans, out in the wind, have always known..." (ibid.). Der Springer, who "sees himself as a ubiquitous god figure" (Clerc 121), also works a kind of magic: "'It is my mission,' he announces with the profound humility that only a German movie director can summon, 'to sow in the Zone seeds of reality... My images, somehow, have been chosen for incarnation'" (451).

When José Hernández first published *Martín Fierro*, the poem seemed so real to the gauchos that many of them thought that Martín was a real man. The narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a century and one year later, asks his readers the following question: "Will the soul of the Gaucho survive the mechanics of putting him into light and sound? Or will someone ultimately come by, von Goll or another, to make a Part II, and dismantle the dream?" (452). Far from "dismantling the dream," Borges in "El fin" and Pynchon in his great novel have brilliantly utilized the magical game of writing to perpetuate and to transform, simultaneously, Hernández' Romantic version of the "soul of the Gaucho." Again, "s'ouvre le champ pour les jeux d'écriture."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre-Yves Petillon, "American Graffiti: S-k log W," *Critique*, 1985, 462, p. 1105.