

Point and Counterpoint: On the Manuscript of “El fin” (1953)

Daniel Balderston

The final story that Borges wrote in his own hand, before his blindness, has what is in retrospect the moving title “El fin”: he was arriving at a turning point in his career, one which would deprive him of the most intense and private facets of his writing practice, his direct engagement with his books and notebooks, and that at the same time would nudge him toward a more public career, one which (through dictation, public talks and interviews) would make him world famous. The story is tinged with melancholy: the narrator Recabarren has been felled by a stroke, and from his cot in the back of his *pulpería* he will witness (sometimes aurally, sometimes visually) the final encounter between the Moreno of the *payada* in *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879), the younger brother of the Moreno killed in the first poem, and José Hernández’s gaucho protagonist, who will die at the end of the story. The story sets out a new ending to Hernández’s poem, an ending for its protagonist, and at the same time what turns out to be a real ending for Jorge Luis Borges *as a short story writer in his own*

hand: after this he will be reliant on others, or on microphones and tape recorders, to complete his work.

The manuscript of the story is in a Mérito notebook that is now in the Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections Library at Michigan State, part of a number of important recent acquisitions by Michigan State from Joanne Yates, the widow of Donald A. Yates, who was a faculty member there for many years and hosted several visits by Borges to East Lansing (which is itself the subject of a Borges poem). I am currently working with an international team on the Borges notebooks that are in libraries in the United States, so soon there will be a lot more information about the materials in them.



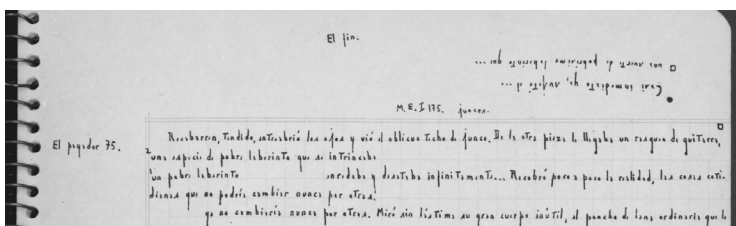
In the 29 pages that contain Borges's writing in this notebook, the manuscript of "El fin" occupies pages 6 to 9, after the manuscripts of "El Dios y el Rey," published in 1954 in *La Nación*, and "Diálogo del asceta y del rey," published in 1953 in the same newspaper, and before the preface to the second edition of *Historia universal de la infamia*, issued in 1954 in the individual volume series of the *Obras completas* (later gathered into the *Obras completas* of 1974 that most

Borges scholars are familiar with), and the manuscript of "Delia Elena San Marco." After that the notebook includes various short texts, mostly gathered in the 1960 book *El hacedor*, largely in Leonor Acevedo de Borges's hand; also, it contains the introduction to the new series of the magazine *La Biblioteca*, a note on Ortega y Gasset ("Nota de un mal lector") and a text on Cynewulf.¹ It is not my intention here to talk about the variety of

1 The list in the inside back cover on the contents of the notebook is, as is the case with many Borges's notebooks, in Leonor Acevedo de Borges's hand: she was very much the guardian of this kind of material.

other materials in the Mérito notebook, but the fact that the almost thirty pages of the notebook are preserved in their original spiral binding allows us to see the precise sequence of the writing and the evidence of several writing “campaigns,” and of course to reconstruct the precise chronology of what was composed in this notebook (for instance, “El Dios y el Rey” was published later than “Diálogo del asceta y del rey” and “El fin,” but the evidence from the notebook shows that it was written earlier).

The four pages of the manuscript resemble those of “El Sur” that are now in the Fondation Martin Bodmer in Geneva, a manuscript published in a facsimile edition by Michel Lafon near the end of his life in *Deux fictions*: many possibilities are set out on the page, in series, without strikethroughs. They also resemble the manuscript of “La secta del fénix” in a crucial respect: in these late stories, written as Borges was undergoing a series of increasingly unsuccessful operations to try to save his eyesight, he notes down some of the works he consulted as he wrote the story: bibliographical annotations are a feature of many of the manuscripts of his essays and notes for classes and lectures but do not figure in the manuscripts of his short stories until this final period from 1950 to 1953. Another “fin,” then, marked by an awareness that he might need to rely on others (particularly on his mother) to confirm the page references and precise passages or quotations that he had in mind when he would dictate his later stories.



In this manuscript, the references begin right away: the first one is to the use of the word “juncos” (reeds, with a reference to line 175 of *El gaucho Martín Fierro*, Hernández’s first long poem in 1872), and to Lugones’s *El payador* from 1916, the book that emerged from a series of lectures on Hernández and the *Fierro* poems and that argued for the epic and founda-

tional status of the poems,² a position of which Borges was always skeptical. The reference to page 75 of *El payador* is to the beginning of the fourth chapter, “La poesía gaucha,” of the Lugones book, in which the Argentine poet discusses the importance of the *pulpería* as a public space in the Hernández poems, a space of sociability (as Sarmiento had already argued in his 1845 *Facundo*) and, in the plot of the poems, of violent conflict.³ Other references in the manuscript will appear in due course: specific page references to Carlos Alberto Leumann’s critical edition of the *Martín Fierro* (1945), to lines of the second poem, and to Ezequiel Martínez Estrada’s *Muerte y transfiguración de Martín Fierro*. And there are references to two novels of gaucho life, Enrique Amorim’s *El paisano Aguilar* and Ricardo Güiraldes’s *Don Segundo Sombra*.⁴

What is not in the left margin is also of interest: there is no reference to the *Grettis Saga* or to Borges and Delia Ingenieros’s discussion of it in *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* just two years earlier, in 1951. As I have argued in an article on the 1953 manuscript of “Destino escandinavo”, one of the most fascinating aspects of this late story is that Borges imagines a

2 I should clarify that in this article I will always refer to the Hernández poems in the plural since, as Julio Schwartzman has shown (447), Hernández never published *El gaucho Martín Fierro* and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* as a single poem, something that would not happen until several decades after his death.

3 Lugones writes: “No era grande, que digamos, la necesidad de comunicación social entre aquellos hombres de la llanura. La pulpería con sus juegos y sus libaciones dominicales bastaba para establecer ese vínculo, muy apreciado por otra parte, pues los gauchos costeábanse en su busca desde muchas leguas a la redonda. Perteneecía, por lo común, a tal cual vasco aventurero que llevaba chiripá y facón antes de haber aprendido a hablar claro, conciliando aquella adaptación campesina con la boina colorada a manera de distintivo nacional. Detrás del mostrador fuertemente enrejado en precaución de posibles trifulcas, que echaba al patio, *manu militari*, por decirlo así, con vigorosas descargas de botellas vacías alineadas allá cerca como previsoires proyectiles, el pulpero escanciaba la caña olorosa o el bermejo carlón de los brindis, mientras algún guitarrero floreaba pasacalles sentado sobre aquel mueble. Tal cual mozo leído deletreaba en un grupo el último diario de la ciudad. Otros daban o recibían noticias de la pasada revolución o pelea famosa entre dos guapos de fama. Todo ello en lenguaje parco y reposado que parecía comentar el silencio de los campos peligrosos” (75).

4 *Don Segundo Sombra* was a text that Borges had mixed feelings about (and would make the butt of jokes in two of the texts written in collaboration with Bioy Casares, “La noche de Goliadkin” and “Catálogo y análisis de los libros de Loomis”). In 1952 he published “Sobre *Don Segundo Sombra*” in *Sur*; the manuscript of that essay is in a notebook in Texas.

new ending for *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* and narrates it using the realist techniques he saw at work in the Icelandic sagas of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly the *Grettis Saga*. That is, he revisits the most local of the literary traditions of the River Plate through the lens of the prose narrative of medieval Iceland, cleverly questioning the nationalist appropriation of the gauchesque poems, an issue that he also takes up in “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (1951) and in his writings on the Hernández poems.

There is also no reference in the margin, or anywhere in the manuscript, to the origin of the name of the central figure in the story, the paralyzed owner of the *pulpería*, Recabarren. Characters’ names in Borges are always significant, as I have argued elsewhere with respect to the surnames Lönnrot in “La muerte y la brújula,” Tzinacán in “La escritura del dios,” Dewey in “El hombre en el umbral” and Hladík in “El milagro secreto.” There is no one named Recabarren⁵ in the Hernández poems or for that matter anywhere in the gauchesque tradition, but a very famous Recabarren spent two periods in Buenos Aires during Borges’s youth and, given his father’s and Macedonio Fernández’s political sympathies, may well have been a touchstone of political discussions in the home on Calle Serrano or even of a chance encounter: the Chilean socialist Luis Emilio Recabarren (1876-1924).⁶ Recabarren was the founder of numerous workers’ newspapers, a crucial figure in the history of socialist parties in Chile, and the founder of the Communist Party of Chile: he was a sort of Chilean version of the *gauchipolítico* tradition that Sarmiento mentions in the Montevideo chapter of his *Viajes* and that Ángel Rama famously uses as the title of his study of the *gauchipolíticos rioplatenses* (Centro Editor de América Latina, 1982). The most important of these figures was, like Recabarren, a printer and editor: Hilario Ascasubi was someone whose vast works occupy about two thirds of the two-volume edition of *Poesía gauchesca* compiled by Borges and Bioy Casares (published, apparently after some delay, by the Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1955). Borges and Bioy were

5 Recabarren is a Basque name, and as Lugones wrote in *El payador*, the owner of the *pulpería* was often a “vasco aventurero.”

6 Pablo Neruda wrote a poem about Recabarren: “Tu nombre era Recabarren. Bonachón, corpulento, espacioso...” It is included in *Canto general* (1950), published just three years before the composition of the Borges story.

intensely aware of the political circumstances of the composition of the gauchesque poems, as their many notes attest. With a tacit homage to that of another *imprentero*, editor and activist writer, Borges (quietly, but firmly) remembers how political a writer Hernández was, both in his polemics with Sarmiento (*La vida del Chacho* and *El gaucho Martín Fierro*) and in his support for the new political order that was taking shape in 1879, just after Julio Argentino Roca's campaign against the Indians and just before the elections of 1880, which led to turning Buenos Aires into the federal capital and to the founding of a new city, La Plata, to be the capital of the province of Buenos Aires (where Hernández would famously become a provincial senator, known by the nickname of "el senador Martín Fierro").

Recabarren, the name of the character through whom the action is filtered or focalized, is a tacit homage, then, to a complex series of political figures and events, and to the fact that the gauchesque genre was written in the voice of the gauchos by a lettered class of political activists; it was not, as Lugones and Rojas rather naively or tendentiously proposed, a spontaneous poetry of the people, but an imitative use of popular voices for esthetic and political ends (and I do not mean to separate the political and the esthetic here: the gauchesque genre was precisely the forging of an instrument to invent subaltern voices and to put them into circulation).

Now a few more examples of how the marginal annotations show Borges's preparatory work as he is writing the story. First, as already noted, Borges writes "juncos" (reeds) in the first line of the manuscript and puts a line reference to *El gaucho Martín Fierro*, to a section of the poem that takes place in a *pulpería*. There is no explicit mention of reeds in the poem, but well-known illustrations of *pulperías* clearly show roofs made of dry reeds, as is the case in an early photograph by Benito Panunzi of a "pulpería de frontera"⁷ from about 1867.

The interior of such a *pulpería* is seen in one of the illustrations that Hernández proudly included in the first edition of *La vuelta de Martín Fierro*, the first illustrated book published in Argentina, as he notes in the preface (and on the cover).⁸

7 Image from Luis Priámo, ed. *Buenos Aires: Ciudad y campaña 1860 / 1870* (75).

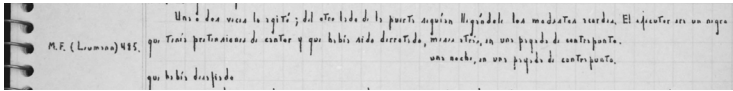
8 Image from the facsimile edition of the first edition of *La vuelta de Martín Fierro*, also in Martínez Estrada lxxx.



Canto por cifra, de contrapunto entre Martín Fierro y un negro.

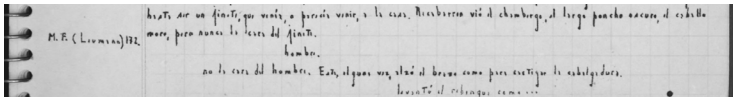
This is the very scene of the *payada* that is the backdrop of the story.⁹ In this engraving the public space of the *pulpería*, where Fierro and the Moreno are competing, is clearly demarcated by the iron bars from the private space where the owner or manager works; in “El fin” the space of the *pulpería* is demarcated in precisely this way.

There are five annotations to Carlos Alberto Leumann’s critical edition of the Hernández poems. They are, in succession, to part of one of the Moreno’s songs, in which he claims that this will be a competition between “un cantor de media talla / Con otro de talla entera” (485, *La vuelta de Martín Fierro*, canto 30):



This is the first of two times that the phrase “payada de contrapunto” is used in the published story, and each time Borges in the manuscript checks the quotation from the Hernández poem with a specific source: here to the Leumann critical edition and later, in the dialogue between Fierro and the Moreno, to Martínez Estrada. In the manuscript the phrase appears six times: because of their importance to the story, the same words appear again and again.

Next, the passage in the third canto of *El gaucho Martín Fierro* in which Fierro describes his horse and its trappings:



The stanzas of the poem indicated here read:

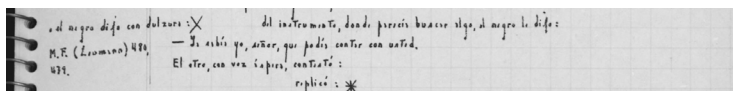
Yo llevé un moro de número,
Sobresaliente el matucho!
Con él gané en Ayacucho
Más plata que agua bendita—
Siempre el gaucho necesita
Un pingo pa fiarle un pucho.

9 A few years later, a commemorative edition of *El gaucho Martín Fierro* and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro*, the latter with this and the other nine illustrations, was published with a note by him as director of the National Library.

Y cargué sin dar más güeltas
 Con las prendas que tenía,
 Gergas, poncho, cuanto había
 En casa, tuito la alcé-
 A mi china la dejé
 Media desnuda ese día. (Leumann 172, *Ida* 361-72)

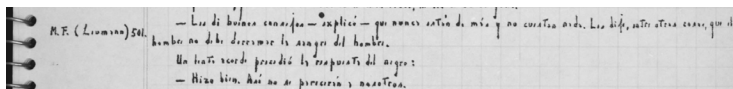
Interestingly, though, the details that Borges uses in his description of Fierro—his hat, his poncho—are not mentioned in these stanzas of the Hernández poem; he refers only to the kind of horse, the “moro,” and he doesn’t refer to the trappings of the horse, which Fierro enumerates in the poem.

Next, there are two references to Leumann that are grouped together, both to the beginning of the *payada* (*La vuelta*, canto 30):



The first songs in the *payada* are the ones in which the younger Moreno asks Fierro to define a series of abstractions—measure, weight, quantity—and expresses his desire to learn, leading perhaps to the phrase in the story about his speaking “con dulzura.”¹⁰

Next comes a reference to the advice that Fierro gives his sons and Cruz’s son, that includes the idea that he has learned that killing is bad (“El hombre no mate al hombre/ Ni pelee por fantasía”: *Vuelta* 4733-34), and that blood once spilled is never forgotten (“La sangre que se redama/ No se olvida hasta la muerte”: *Vuelta* 4739-40), among other things:

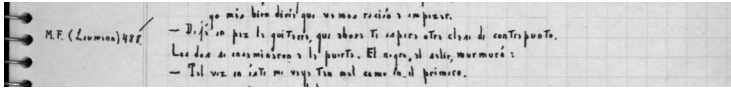


This of course is a reference to a long and important section of *La vuelta de Martín Fierro*, one in which Hernández proposes that the way forward for his character and Fierro’s sons (as well as Cruz’s son) and, by implication, for the nation as a whole is to find peaceful solutions to conflicts. Borges mischievously refers to this in a story that undoes the sage advice that

10 There are a number of musical terms in the story, and this may be another one, since “con dulzura” is used in music to refer to a slow, gentle tempo.

Fierro, who defines himself as more friend than father, gives to his (and Cruz's) sons.

The final reference to the Leumann edition refers to the end of the *payada* in which Fierro celebrates his triumph and cruelly says “Al fin cerrastes el pico” (*La vuelta*, canto 30):



The “otra clase de contrapunto” refers, of course, to the duel that will follow in the story, but the use of “contrapunto” is interesting because of its musical connotations and also the possible reference to Aldous Huxley’s 1928 novel *Point Counterpoint*, a celebrated experimental novel at the time; it is germane to the story because Huxley experiments with contrasting points of view, something that Borges does here by displacing the focalization from Fierro and the younger Moreno to Recabarren.¹¹ The quotation from the poem is very specific: Fierro tells the younger brother that if they are not careful “Otra clase de junción” (*Vuelta* 4480) could start.

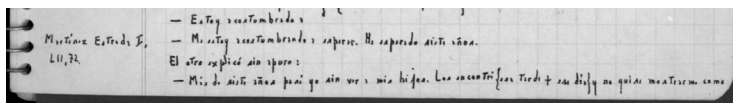
Leumann (1886-1952) had just died when this story was written; of particular interest here is that he not only was the editor of the critical edition of the Hernández poems in the edition that Borges consulted here but also the author of *El poeta creador: cómo hizo Hernández “La vuelta de Martín Fierro”* (1945), an early study of Hernández’s compositional practices, and an important source for later studies of his poems. (Notably, this book includes a study of one of Hernández’s manuscripts, also studied in the Archivos edition many years later.) Interestingly, all of the references to Leumann are in the first page and a half of the manuscript, while all the references to Martínez Estrada follow on the bottom of page 2 and on page 3.

Another important source, of course, was Ezequiel Martínez Estrada’s massive study *Muerte y transfiguración de Martín Fierro*, first published in 1948, which includes a discussion of the *pulpería* as a space of sociability (I.114-15). Borges knew Martínez Estrada well, and their political fall-

11 Huxley was a friend of Victoria Ocampo’s, and there is considerable correspondence between Huxley and Ocampo in the Houghton Library at Harvard. Borges reviewed various of Huxley’s books and wrote an article on “La dinastía de los Huxley”: see <https://www.borges.pitt.edu/i/huxley-aldous>.

ing out was still a few years in the future (after the overthrow of Perón in 1955); though Borges was disturbed by Martínez Estrada's insinuation that Martín Fierro and Cruz were more than buddies (Bioy Casares, *Borges* 1229), in general his references to Martínez Estrada before 1955 were highly favorable. In the early 1950s Martínez Estrada and Leumann would have been the most significant scholars of the Hernández poems, so it makes sense that Borges would have consulted *Muerte y transfiguración* on several occasions during the writing of this story. The left margin shows that he did so at least three times, with specific volume and page references.

Borges's page references to the first edition of Martínez Estrada's book are, like his citations of Leumann, to the poems themselves, not to the commentary. The first reference to Martínez Estrada is at the bottom of the second page:

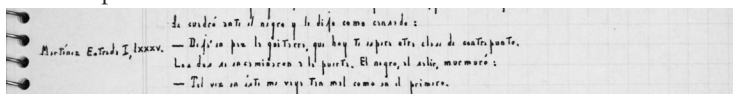


Here Borges recalls Fierro's narration of the chronology of his adventures, in canto XI of the *Vuelta*:

Diez años de sufrimiento,
 Y no son pocos diez años
 Para quien ya llega a viejo,
 Y los he pasado así,
 Si en mi cuenta no me yerro:
 Tres años en la frontera,
 Dos como gaucho matrero,
 Y cinco allá entre los Indios
 Hacen los diez que yo cuento. (Martínez Estrada I.iii, *Vuelta* 1584-1592)

The second reference here, to page 72 of Martínez Estrada's commentary, refers to the same canto of the *Vuelta*, in which Fierro claims, rashly as it turns out, that nobody remembers his killing of the older brother: "Que naides se acordaba / De la muerte del moreno" (*Vuelta* canto 11, 1597-98).

The following reference to Martínez Estrada is on page three of the manuscript:

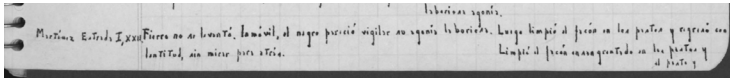


This is a precise reference to lines 4475-80 of the *Vuelta*:

Y ya que nos conocemos,
Basta de conversación;
Para encontrar la ocasión
No tienen que darse prisa—
Ya conozco yo que empieza
Otra clase de junción. (Martínez Estrada l.lxxxv, *Vuelta* 30, 4475-80)

Note that Borges refers twice to this passage, at the beginning of the second paragraph of the story and then again near the end, in the dialogue between Fierro and the younger brother. He refers, then, to both editions he has at hand here, to both Leumann and Martínez Estrada. Of course in the poem that other type of encounter—a knife-fight to the death—does not occur, but Borges pays attention to the implicit threat of violence in Fierro’s words.

The third and final reference to Martínez Estrada reads:

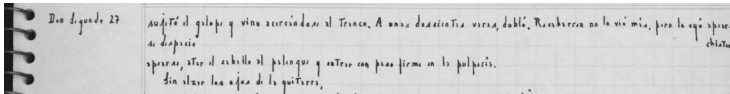


This is a reference to an important passage in the poem that comes right after Fierro has killed the older brother:

Limpié el facón en los pastos,
Desaté mi redomón,
Monté después, y salí
Al tranco pa el cañadón. (Martínez Estrada lxxii, *Ida* 1:1249-52)

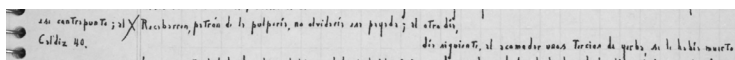
This is of course the detail that he uses at the end of “Hombre de la esquina rosada,” when the narrator, a young man at the time of the killing of Francisco Real, reveals his identity to his audience (one of whose members is named “Borges”) many years later, when he says that when he got home at the end of the action of the story he checked his knife and it was clean, without a drop of blood.

There are also references to two novels of gaucho life, both published several decades before this story. First, Güiraldes:



On the page in question of *Don Segundo Sombra*, in the first edition of 1926, the following is said about the social function of the *pulpero*: “Detrás del mostrador estaba el patrón, como siempre, y de pie, frente a él, el tafe Burgos concluía una caña” (27). Thus, in this story, the function of the Recabarren *qua pulpero*, already defined to some extent by Sarmiento and Hernández, is made explicit through the marginal reference to the Güiraldes novel, Güiraldes of course being the owner of a significant *estancia* in San Antonio de Areco and, hence, someone who was presumed to be in the know about the implicit social codes of the *llanura*. Borges, who did not have as much direct experience of this aspect of country life, would have relied on sources like Güiraldes, Amorim and Bioy Casares for this kind of detail.

Borges also consulted a little-known work by Juan Francisco Caldiz, *Lo que no se ha dicho de “Don Segundo Sombra,”* published in La Plata in 1952, a study of the vocabulary of the Güiraldes novel. His annotation appears next to the phrase “tercios de yerba”:



Caldiz writes, with regard to “la denominación de los fardos que contenían yerba mate,” that “siempre se les llamó ‘tercios’ y no *cuartos*” (39-40), so Borges follows Caldiz, not Güiraldes, on this point. A review of this book by Olga S. de Boneo in *Los cuarenta* in the first half of 1952 calls it an “opúsculo irreverente” and accuses him of irresponsibility and bad faith for questioning Güiraldes’s knowledge of the Argentine countryside on the basis of his own experience “desde 1896 a 1901” of the gauchos’ use of a few words. In his writings on gauchesque poetry Borges takes special delight in this sort of polemic, as for instance that between Rafael Hernández and Estanislao del Campo over the use of the “overo rosao,” a color of horse that Rafael Hernández, the poet’s brother, argues would never have been used by a gaucho.¹² In his references to this sort of polemic Borges always takes the position of a bemused outsider, and I imagine that he was amused by Caldiz’s polemic with Güiraldes, who by then had been dead for twenty-five years and could not defend himself.

12 Borges and Bioy have a long footnote on this controversy in *Poesía gauchesca* 2.302, and Borges refers to it elsewhere.

There is also a reference in the manuscript to a page of Enrique Amorim's *El paisano Aguilar*, but I will mention it a bit later, as Borges weaves it into the story in a complex way. The sources consulted show that Borges, as was his habit, checked and rechecked references (see *How Borges Wrote* 29-30). Now, then, for a new reading of the story, possible only with access to this manuscript.

Borges begins his story with a careful setting of the stage: the slanted roof made of dry reeds in the room in the *pulpería* where Recabarren is lying on a cot; the labyrinth of chords played on a guitar outside; the scene outside of the window, in which Recabarren can see, "más allá de los barrotes de la ventana, [como] se dilataba la llanura y la tarde," a gaucho approaching on horseback. Recabarren rings a bell and a boy, perhaps his son, eventually comes to see what he needs (the first reference to the stroke that had felled him is oblique, like the reed roof: "Miró sin lástima su gran cuerpo inútil"). Though the sounds of the guitar are mentioned in the second sentence of the story, it is only in the second paragraph that there is a reference to the guitar player, who is sitting in the front room of the *pulpería* (the store area): "El ejecutor era un negro que tenía pretensiones de cantor y que había sido derrotado, meses atrás / una noche, en una payada de contrapunto." He mentions a boy "de rasgos aindiados" (who is perhaps Recabarren's son). On the second page of the manuscript, a slightly mysterious annotation is at the top of the page: "catre de tientos (Amorim 178)."¹³ This is again part of Borges's imagining the scene in visual detail, since this particular kind of cot, with leather thongs to hold the boards together, is typical of the homemade furnishings of nineteenth century dwellings in rural Argentina: Recabarren's "catre de tientos" is a "rasgo" or "detalle circunstancial" that evokes the whole dwelling, an idea that Borges had developed two decades earlier in "La postulación de la realidad," in his speculations on techniques of creating narrative verisimilitude from minute details that provoke the reader to imagine a whole from a tiny fragment. In this case we can see his imagination at work: the reference to Enrique Amorim's *El paisano Aguilar* is the following:

13 Borges and Bioy have a note about "tientos" in the glossary at the end of the second volume of *Poesía gauchesca*: "Tirilla de cuero crudo" (2.788).

¡Hijos del campo, nacidos del azar, al azar concebidos! Hijos de la soledad, del bostezo, del aburrimiento. Hijos engendrados bajo los techos de los ranchos, por los hombres de *las casas*. Hijos de los caminos, de la entraña fácil o necesitada, que se expone bajo las carretas, entre los barrancos, por los pajonales. Hijos del surco humano, aguardador de la semilla, como la única alegría de la existencia. Hijos de las trastiendas de las pulperías o de los maizales quebrados, donde la mujer se tumba de cara al cielo. Hijos de los cuartuchos del servicio, de paredes de tablas, por donde silba el viento en invierno. Los hijos de las calmosas noches tropicales, con nubes de mosquitos y ladridos de perros. Los hijos del catre de tientos, de la cama escasa; de la sábana áspera y el colchón de paja. (178)

From this rather grandiloquent and emphatic description in Amorim,¹⁴ Borges extracts a tiny detail, the “catre de tientos,” and through it raises the possibility that on that very cot, a few years before, the boy who helps Recabarren after his stroke was engendered: “Un chico de rasgos aindiados (hijo suyo, tal vez) entreabrió la puerta.” The detail in Amorim of the construction of the cot and the emphatic description of illegitimate births, “guachos,”¹⁵ as Amorim says at the beginning of the next paragraph, suggests the succinct description of the mestizo boy, “rasgos aindiados,” which is all that Borges will say on that subject; enough, though, to imagine older stories, “imaginar una realidad más compleja que la declarada al lector y referir sus derivaciones y efectos” (219). He doesn’t even use the “catre de tientos,” which becomes simply a “catre” in the published version (519). However, the precise visual detail is essential for Borges to imagine his story, but unlike Amorim he allows the detail to tell the story, not the narrator, better still, to suggest a story that is not told.

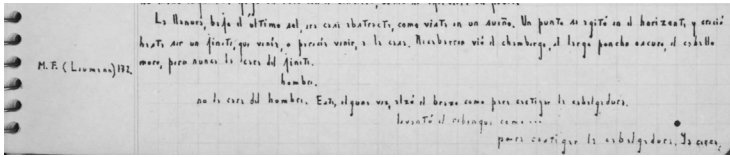
In *How Borges Wrote I* showed how Borges often explores a variety of alternatives across a semantic field, not cancelling any of them, and only

14 Amorim was the husband of Borges’s first cousin Esther Haedo, and Borges spent much time at Las Nubes, their country estate near Salto, Uruguay, which is where, for instance, he wrote “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” and “La noche cíclica.” He also travelled to the northern region of the frontier between Uruguay and Brazil with Amorim, and wrote at least the third English poem during one of those trips (see *Poemas y prosas breves*, 71-81). Amorim filmed his visitors, who included Borges, Guillermo de Torre, Norah Borges and even Walt Disney; in one of those home movies Borges sips yerba mate.

15 Of course *Don Segundo Sombra* is also the story of the *guacho* Fabio Cáceres, who only discovers at the end of the novel that he is the illegitimate son (and heir) of the late owner of the *estancia*.

subsequently chooses among the possibilities that he has laid out before him. A wonderful example of this practice is the description of the strumming of the guitar (the first, oblique mention of the younger brother): first, “una especie de pobre laberinto que se intrincaba,” then “un pobre laberinto que enredaba y desataba infinitamente,” then, upside down at the top of the page, “Una suerte de pobrísimo laberinto que . . .” The final version reads: “De la otra pieza le llegaba un rasgueo de guitarra, una suerte de pobrísimo laberinto que se enredaba y desataba infinitamente” (519). The music of the guitar as a modest variety of labyrinth: the image ties the “primitiva poesía de los gauchos” to a game of hide-and-seek, where Fierro is drawn into the center of a labyrinth.

Another good sample of Borges’s compositional techniques is the bottom of the first page of the manuscript:

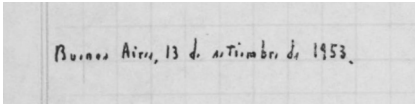


La llanura, bajo el último sol, era casi abstracta, como vista en un sueño. Un
/punto se agitó en el horizonte y creció
hasta ser un jinete, que venía, o parecía venir, a la casa. Recabarren vio el cham-
/bergo, el largo poncho oscuro, el caballo
moro, pero nunca la cara del jinete.

M.F. (Leumann) 172 hombre.
no la cara del hombre. Este, alguna vez, alzó el brazo como para castigar
/la cabalgadura.
levantó el rebenque, como . . .
para castigar la cabalgadura.

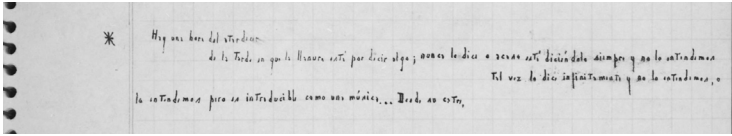
Here, as in many of Borges’s manuscripts, the alternatives are laid out in succession, without strikethroughs: “la cara del jinete,” then “hombre,” then “la cara del hombre.” The black dot after “cabalgadura” takes us to the top of the page where the next sentence, “Ya cerca, sujetó el galope y vino acercándose al tranco” leads to an alternative that is upside down: “Casi inmediato ya, sujetó el . . .” The published version reads: “Recabarren vio el chamberg, el largo poncho oscuro, el caballo moro, pero no la cara del hombre que, por fin, sujetó el galope y vino acercándose al trotecito” (519). The marginal reference suggests that this is another element that

Borges took from the first description of Don Segundo Sombra in the Güiraldes novel.



The manuscript also gives a precise place and date when the story was finished, “Buenos Aires, 13 de setiembre de 1953”.

On the final page of the manuscript, after the date and place of composition, Borges writes part of a new ending of the story, one that will be incorporated into the published versions.



* Hay una hora del atardecer
de la tarde en que la llanura está por decir algo; nunca lo dice o acaso / está diciéndolo siempre y no lo entendemos
Tal vez lo dice infinitamente y no lo entendemos, o lo entendemos pero es intraducible como una música... Desde su catre,

This phrase is an echo of one of the most important sentences in Borges’s essays, the definition of the esthetic fact, or beauty, at the end of “La muralla y los libros” (1950): “La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo: esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético” (633).¹⁶ By inserting an echo of the 1950 essay into this story, he makes more evident that some of these elements—music, mythology, weathered faces, twilight, certain places—are associated in his imagination with the space of the pampas and with the Hernández poems, or with the mythology of the gauchesque tradition writ large. After quoting from “La muralla y los libros,” the rest of the final paragraph of the story narrates what Recabarren sees from his cot:

Desde su catre, Recabarren vio el fin. Una embestida y el negro reculó, perdió pie, amagó un hachazo a la cara y se tendió en una puñalada profunda,

16 María Celeste Martín and I published the manuscript of this essay in *Ensayos* (2019). This particular passage emerges from a particularly intense stage of writing and rewriting.

que penetró en el vientre. Después vino otra que el pulpero no alcanzó a precisar y Fierro no se levantó. Inmóvil, el negro parecía vigilar su agonía laboriosa. Limpió el facón ensangrentado en el pasto y volvió a las casas con lentitud, sin mirar para atrás. Cumplida su tarea de justiciero, ahora era nadie. Mejor dicho era el otro: no tenía destino sobre la tierra y había matado a un hombre. (521)

Here Borges does not need to note down another string of quotations because they are so familiar to him. In the Hernández poem Fierro cleans his knife on the grass after killing the older brother, as already noted (*Ida* 1249-52). Borges had already imitated that passage in the final line of his 1933 story “Hombre de la esquina rosada,” where the cleaning of the knife is the key “circumstantial detail” that confirms that the narrator is the one who killed Francisco Real. This is, then, both a quotation from Hernández and a self-quotation, yet another signal that Borges is inscribing his work as an Argentine writer in that tradition, yet also modifying it.

And perhaps no rewriting of tradition is as eloquent of Borges’s thinking in 1953 as the fact that the dialogue between the younger brother and Fierro that occupies much of the middle of the story is an implicit homage to a narrative tradition that could not be more distant from the twilights and places that are at the center of the gauchesque tradition. Borges writes:

–Les di buenos consejos –declaró–, que nunca están de más y no cuestan nada. Les dije, entre otras cosas, que el hombre no debe derramar la sangre del hombre.

Un lento acorde precedió la respuesta del negro.

–Hizo bien. Así no se parecerán a nosotros.

–Por lo menos a mí –dijo el forastero y añadió como si pensara en voz alta–: Mi destino¹⁷ ha querido que yo matara y ahora, otra vez, me pone el cuchillo en la mano.

El negro, como si no lo oyera, observó:

–Con el otoño se van acortando los días.

–Con la luz que queda me basta –replicó el otro, poniéndose de pie.

Se cuadró ante el negro y le dijo como cansado:

17 “Destino” is an important word for Borges in those years, figuring also in “El pudor de la historia,” “Flaubert y su destino ejemplar” and “Destino escandinavo.” Josefina Ludmer comments that in the two stories that Borges wrote about the Hernández poems, Cruz finds his destiny and the younger Moreno loses his (235).

–Dejá en paz la guitarra, que hoy te espera otra clase de contrapunto. (520)¹⁸

In *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, published in 1951 with Delia Ingenieros, there is a pertinent comment on the narrative technique of the Icelandic sagas:

El estilo es breve, claro, conversacional [...] El orden es estrictamente cronológico; no hay análisis de los caracteres; los personajes se muestran en los actos y en las palabras. Este procedimiento da a las sagas un carácter dramático y prefigura la técnica del cinematógrafo. El autor no comenta lo que refiere. En las sagas, como en la realidad, hay hechos que al principio son oscuros y luego se explican y hechos que parecen insignificantes y luego cobran importancia. (70)

A few pages later there is an extensive quotation from the *Grettis saga* that reads in part:

“Entonces Atli dijo: ‘Alguien me busca y trae un mensaje, que ha de ser muy urgente’. Abrió la puerta y miró; no había nadie. Ahora llovía con violencia y por eso Atli no salió; con una mano en el marco de la puerta, miró en torno. En ese instante, saltó Thorbjörn y le hundió con las dos manos la lanza en la mitad del cuerpo. . .

“Atli dijo, al recibir el golpe: ‘Ahora se usan estas hojas tan anchas’. Luego cayó de boca sobre el umbral. Las mujeres salieron y lo hallaron muerto. Thorbjörn, desde el caballo, gritó que él era el matador y se volvió a su casa”. (74)

Clearly Borges has this technique in mind when he intersperses the dialogue between the younger brother and Fierro with mentions of the light and the time of year.¹⁹ “Ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares”: like

18 In the manuscript this is a section with intense rewriting, with several false starts marked by diagonal slashes.

19 Another sign of Borges’s attention to the backdrop of his story—the weather—is the final sentence of the first paragraph of the story: “Habitado a vivir en el presente, como los animales, ahora miraba el cielo y pensaba que el cerco de la luna era señal de lluvia” (519). Here there is a marginal note: “D.h.a. IV, 1188.” This reference to the *Diccionario enciclopédico hispano-americano* (this volume was published in 1890) is to the article on “cerco,” a word with a wide variety of meanings in Spanish but the relevant one is this: “Aureola que a nuestra vista presenta el Sol, y a veces la Luna, con variedad de color e intensidad.” The Montaner and Simón encyclopedia gives two examples of this, both of them are relevant to the relations between what is visible on the moon and what weather is coming. The first is from Alonso Martínez de Espinar reads in part: “Cuando la luna tiene cerco. . . , es señal de temporal de agua,” while the example from

the detail quoted from Tennyson's *La mort d'Arthur* in "La postulación de la realidad," "And the moon was full," these mentions make the reader fill out the dialogue by imagining the place and time where the words are spoken; they are *circumstantial details*, a crucial term for Borges in his theory of verisimilitude.

This manuscript gives a lot of evidence for how Borges constructed his narrative out of specific details in the Hernández poems, from the commentaries on it, and from novels of gaucho life by Güiraldes and Amorim. What it doesn't show (but can be inferred from the chronology of its composition) is how deeply Borges is indebted to the narrative techniques of the Icelandic sagas, works that he had commented on at length in 1951 and 1952. It is from them that he chooses a strategy to tell a story in an oblique way, shunning the grandiloquence that marked so many readings of the Hernández poems in the period from 1910 to 1950. As with other texts of the period (including "Destino escandinavo") this choice was also a political one, an implicit critique of cultural nationalism in a text that is itself an exploration of a classic, a work that, as Borges would say a bit later in "Sobre los clásicos" (1965), does not close off the possibility of new readings: "Clásico es aquel libro que una nación o un grupo de naciones o el largo tiempo han decidido leer como si en sus páginas todo fuera deliberado, fatal, profundo como el cosmos y capaz de interpretaciones sin término. Previsiblemente, esas decisiones varían" (773). By reading *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* against the grain, Borges opens up the possibilities for his new story, one that is based on an intimate knowledge of gauchesque poetry and of novels about gaucho life, but which is recast in an understated prose, with an attention to circumstantial details, thanks to his engagement with the Icelandic sagas. A distant reading of the gauchesque, as oblique as Recabarren's vision from his cot.

Daniel Balderston
University of Pittsburgh

Lope de Vega reads in part "Esta noche poco vela / La blanca luna en el cielo. / Andará como la viuda, / Con los cercos de humedad, / Espera llover sin duda." This connects to the reference to the weather during the dialogue between Fierro and the Moreno, which is a detail that also appears in the Icelandic sagas. The scene-setting makes the weather a dynamic element in the story.

WORKS CITED

- Amorim, Enrique. *El paisano Aguilar*. Montevideo and Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Sociedad Amigos del Libro Rioplatense, 1934.
- Balderston, Daniel. "Descubrimientos secretos: Reflexiones en torno al manuscrito de 'Destino escandinavo' (1953)." *Lo que los Archivos Cuentan* 3 (2014): 213-28.
- . *How Borges Wrote*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2018.
- Bioy Casares, Adolfo. *Borges*. Ed. Daniel Martino. Buenos Aires: Destino, 2006.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Deux fictions*. Ed. Michel Lafon. Geneva: Fondation Martin Bodmer and Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010.
- . *Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- Borges, Jorge Luis and Delia Ingenieros. *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951.
- Caldiz, Juan Francisco. *Lo que no se ha dicho de "Don Segundo Sombra"*. N. pub.: La Plata, 1952.
- "Cercos". *Diccionario enciclopédico hispano-americano*. Barcelona: Montaner y Simón Editores, 1890. 4: 1188-89.
- Güiraldes, Ricardo. *Don Segundo Sombra*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1926.
- Hernández, José. Facsimile edition of the first editions of *El gaucho Martín Fierro* and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro*. Preface by Jorge Luis Borges. Buenos Aires, n. pub., 1962.
- . *Martín Fierro*. Edición crítica de Carlos A. Leumann. Buenos Aires: Estrada, 1945.
- . *El Martín Fierro*. Critical edition by Éliida Lois and Ángel Núñez. Paris: Colección Archivos, 2001.
- Ludmer, Josefina. *El género gauchesco: Un tratado sobre la patria*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1988.
- Martínez Estrada, Ezequiel. *Muerte y transfiguración de Martín Fierro*. 2 vols. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1948.

Neruda, Pablo. “Recabarren.” *Canto general. Obras completas*. Vol. 1. Ed. Hernán Loyola. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 1999. 551-56.

Príamo, Luis, ed. *Buenos Aires: Ciudad y campaña 1860 / 1870*. Buenos Aires: Fundación Antorchas, 2000.

Schwartzman, Julio. *Letras gauchas*. Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2012.