

AMERICAN AND ARGENTINE LITERARY TRADITIONS
IN THE WRITING OF BORGES' "EL SUR"



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"El Sur", Borges said in 1956, "es acaso mi mejor cuento", and, we can add now, one of the most widely read pieces of his repertoire. Borges also said in several occasions that the story could be read in more than one way, which explains, in part, the variety of comments that it has generated. Efraín Kristal has suggested that to write "El Sur" Borges could have been inspired by Thomas Mann's "The Wardrobe" (133). For John T. Irwin the story is "a figurative account of Borges' career as a [southern] writer" and it could also be "an oblique evocation" of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (171, 175). On his part, Juan José Saer (287-8) understands the story is an anti-epic account (the protagonist dies in a bed) that reflects Borges' critical position against the novel whose narrative strategy seems to follow Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and Ernest Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro".¹ Ricardo Piglia, in turn, sees in the story the tension between two contradictory tendencies

¹ Saer actually cites the French film based on Bierce's famous story; Kristal suggests Bierce's story could be the source of "El Milagro Secreto", 132-33.

in Borges's inner life: the world of culture and the world of the "elementary and simple life"; and he also indicates that the origin of the story is in Borges' account and reflection on Nathaniel Hawthorne's death contained in his essay on the American author (*Crítica* 151; *Formas* 123-124). Beatriz Sarlo reads the story as an allegory where the creole and indian world take revenge over the urban and lettered space, which also symbolized the tension between the populist and cosmopolitan traditions within Argentine culture (104-105). And Emir Rodríguez Monegal, whose general interpretation of the story largely overlaps with Sarlo's and Piglia's, suggested that the story was inspired, in part, by Borges' personal experience in a 1934 when, in a trip to the Uruguayan countryside, he saw a man shot dead in a bar (262, 436).

Here I will explore Borges' creative process in "El Sur", particularly the sources he used and some of the ways he did it. I am aware of the limitations of this type of Menardian exercise and, consequently, I do not claim that I can reconstruct the whole creative process, but only bits and pieces of it. Yet, I hope that the findings I present here will allow me to propose explanations and interpretations that differ from the ones mentioned above and that they will also afford the opportunity to see (in blurry snapshots) Borges at work. I will argue that "El Sur" is a comparative rewriting of both North American and Argentine traditions of frontier literature, of the Western and the Gauchesca genres. More specifically, I will argue Borges' story is, to a large extent, a rewriting of Owen Wister's classic *The Virginian: a Horseman of the Plains* (1902), the foundational novel of the Western genre that established the figure of the cowboy as the hero in the struggle between good and evil². I will also show that Borges undertook this rewriting as part of a silent dialogue with Van Wyck Brooks, one of the most prominent and controversial American literary critics of the first half of the Twentieth-century,

² In *Don Segundo Sombra y el Virginiano: Gaucho y Cowboy*, John Donahue has studied Wister's and Ricardo Güiraldes' classics as two cases of frontier literature. As far as I know his work is the only case in which *The Virginian* has been discussed in relation to Argentine literature. In this study (a work of comparative literature) the author only wants to underscore the similarities and differences between the two novels.

whose influence on Borges has not been discussed by critics yet.³ As part of the exploration of Borges' writing process I will also show some of the ways he used art (more specifically, illustrations of other books) in the creation of his own fiction, a question that has been left largely unexplored. Finally, although my purpose here is mainly to explore "El Sur", in the process of developing my argument I also hope to shed some (certainly very limited) light on some aspects of other works by Borges, such as *El Hacedor*, *Introducción a la Literatura Norteamericana*, "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)", and "El Fin". In this respect, I believe that some evidences presented here will suggest the possibility of placing some of these works (particularly the rewritings of Hernández's poem) within the same creative moment of comparative reflection between the North American and Argentine literary traditions.

VAN WYCK BROOKS

It was Van Wyck Brooks' critical work what triggered Borges' writing of "El Sur". It is important to understand Borges' readings and uses of Brooks, whose critical work was one of the sources of Borges' reflections on American literature. Borges' assessment of Brooks' work seemed to have gone through two different moments, paralleling Brooks' own sharp turn in his critical trajectory. One of Borges' points of entry into Brooks' work and American literary criticism was the Brooks - De Voto debate of the 1930s on Mark Twain and the American frontier.⁴ In this exchange Borges, who admired Twain, Harte, and American literature in general, clearly sided with the DeVoto. But Borges did not limit himself to just witness the combat: in his own way he got into the heated exchange. In 1935, ostensibly motivated by Mark Twain's centennial, he published in *Sur* (the literary journal cofounded in 1931 by Victoria Ocampo and Waldo Frank, a close friend of Brooks) a critical commentary elo-

³ Balderston, Gallo & Helfft (55) register Brooks as part of the Borgesian references, but without any comment on his significance in Borges' writing .

⁴ For a summary of this debate and its relevance in the literary life of the US in the 1930s and 1940s, see Cardwell.

quently entitled "Una vindicación de Mark Twain", where he proposed to vindicate "Mark Twain's memory" against "the ultrajes" contained in Brooks' *The Ordeal of Mark Twain (Borges en Sur, 13)*. Borges, who denounced Brooks as an "intelectual avanzado de New York City" (in quotation in Borges) as well as his importation of European critical views, made clear that one of the purposes of his article was to denounce Brooks "mistakes" "before they spread here [in Argentina]". In this piece, he celebrated that "la depresiva tesis de Brooks ha sido aniquilada con esplendor por Bernard DeVoto, en el apasionado y lúcido libro *Mark Twain's America*" (14). Borges' fiction also revealed itself as another venue for his participation in the debate that occupied a central place in American literary life. It was also in 1935 that Borges published *Historia Universal de la Infamia*, his first volume of short stories which included "El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell" based on the story on "Murel's gang" referred by Mark Twain in *Life on the Mississippi* and on the information and comments on this southern criminal contained in *Mark Twain's America*.

In May 1938 Borges again charged against Brooks in one of the many "syntetic [literary] biographies" that he published in *El Hogar*. This time in his criticism he also included Lewis Mumford and Waldo Frank who, like Brooks, were among "aquellos escritores americanos cuyo habitual y provechoso ejercicio es la denigración de America". In an eloquent observation that he presented as paradox Borges said that "Brooks ataca la aldeanería de América y esa aldeanería es la que lo aplaude". And in a caustic and devastating comment Borges concluded that "La mayor virtud [de *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*] es haber provocado la apasionada y lúcida replica de Bernard DeVoto: *Mark Twain's America*" (OC 4: 366).

Yet, this short biography also hints, in an apparent contradiction, of a certain appreciation of Brooks' work. To begin with, not only Borges did devote to Brooks one of this biographies but it was one of the only two devoted to literary critics; all the other pieces referred to writers and philosophers of the stature of T. S. Elliot, Langston Hughes, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Benedetto Croce, Paul Valéry, George Santayana, James Joyce, etc. In addition, Borges mentioned that Brooks had compiled "la famosa antología" *American Caravan* and that he had received ("merecido") the annual prize

of the literary journal *The Dial* for his work and its "influencia continental" and, more important, Borges cared to mention that this "consagratorio" prize had been also awarded to Sherwood Anderson and T. S. Elliot. And, not the least, Borges comments suggested that he had followed Brooks work with a certain detail.

But Borges reading, and more important, his uses of Brooks will change from the 1940s on, which to a certain extent paralleled the changes that had occurred years earlier in Brooks' own criticism and its reception by important sectors of the American literary establishment. A harsh and implacable critic of American literature and culture in the 1910s and 1920s, from the mid 1930s on Brooks took a quite different approach, one that materialized with *The Flowering of New England (1815-1865)* in 1936 (for which Brooks received the Pulitzer prize in 1937). For some critics, from a "pointed, argumentative and analytical manner" Brooks' writing had given way to "a prose of anecdote and local color" full of "decorative allusions" (Cardwell, 55). From a "somber and despairing" criticism that "cried out against America for ruining her writers" Brooks had gone to what Edmund Wilson (by all accounts a sympathetic critic), called a "second phase", one in which Brooks had "gone too far in the direction of glorification" of American writers; "he seemed now to be *too much* pleased (...) there was no longer any tension or conflict" (10-11).

But Wilson recognized important qualities in Brooks' work: the author was concerned with "literature mainly from the point of view of its immediate social significance". As such, it was not "quite a history of literature" nor "a history of the New England mind": it was "rather a history of New England society as reflected in its cultural activities"; moreover, Wilson said, he is "our only real master, since the death of Vernon Parrington, of the social interpretation of literature inside the national frame". Wilson also praised Brooks' method: he had "mastered the whole art of this historical-biographical narrative", which he achieved by describing the writers and their circumstances using "phrases taken without quotes from their own works" (12, 13, 16-17).

The Flowering of New England (1815-1865) was the first of a series of five volumes that Brooks devoted to the history of American literature: it was followed by *New England Indian Summer (1865-1915)*

(1940); *The World of Washington Irving* (1944); *The Times of Melville and Whitman* (1947), and *The Confident Years (1885-1915)* (1952). In spite of his criticism of Brooks' earlier works, the evidence suggests that Borges accepted some of his interpretations in these volumes and, probably more important for our purpose, he borrowed heavily from them. In some cases, like in his 1949 conference on Hawthorne or his 1979 reflections on Poe and the detective story, Borges' made explicit references to *The Flowering of New England* (OC 1: 685 ; 4: 189). In most cases, however, Borges' debt is not so obvious. In 1944 Borges wrote a prologue to a Spanish edition of *Bartebly*, in which he criticized the neglect in which critics had kept Melville for long years and also mentioned those commentators who since the 1920s had vindicated him. The list of the latter certainly did not include Brooks, who only published his volume on Melville and Whitman three years later, in 1947. Yet, for the new Spanish edition of 1971 Borges decided to add a Posdata whose reference to the Far West clearly echoes Brooks' argument in his volume of 1947: "(...) los grandes escritores americanos procedieron de un área limitada: New England. Eran virtualmente vecinos. Inventaron todo, incluso la primera revolución y el Far West".⁵

But the influence of Brooks' criticism on Borges' work went further. In the last of the five volumes, published in 1952, Brooks decided to entitle the whole series *Makers and Finders: a History of the Writer in America, 1800-1915*, a title that he said came from Walt Whitman's lines in the poem "Mediums", in *Leaves of Grass*: "Poems and materials of poems shall come from their lives, they shall be makers and finders". The lines, Brooks said, suggested "the purpose and hope with which (...) I have tried to define *the American tradition in letters*".⁶ Both, Whitman's "Mediums" and Brooks' uses of it, I would like to suggest, motivated Borges to address the question of Argentine and his own literary traditions in the book titled, not coincidentally, *El Hacedor* (1960), a literal translation of the English

⁵ OC 4: 110; for the New England invention of the Far West see *Melville and Whitman*, 101-102.

⁶ *Confident Years*. All underlining throughout this work is mine, unless otherwise noted.

word that does not exist in Spanish. Borges' dialogue with Whitman's poem can be seen in numerous instances, most notably in the epilogue: "*They shall illustrate Democracy and the kosmos*" / "*Un hombre se propone dibujar el mundo*".⁷ But the relationship between Brooks' uses of "Mediums" and Borges' work is most clear in his short essay "Martín Fierro" where he explores the overwhelming influence of Hernández's poem in defining the Argentine literary traditions. After enumerating the wars of independence, Rosismo, Peronismo, and Lugones, in a comparative comment that echoes both Whitman and Brooks, Borges reflects about how *Martín Fierro* has erased those experiences from Argentine culture: "*También aquí las generaciones han conocido esas vicisitudes comunes y de algún modo eternas que son la materia del arte. Estas cosas, ahora, son como si no hubieran sido (...)*" (OC 1: 797). And in his prologue to *El Matrero* Borges engaged again in similar comparative reflections: "En Francia, donde las tradiciones son tantas, Voltaire no es menos clásico que Ronsard (...); Whitman, en los Estados Unidos, no desplaza a Melville ni a Emerson" (OC 4: 105). And *El Hacedor* seems to be precisely that, an effort to reinstate a much more varied and richer national experience and literary tradition.

Makers and Finders also provided the blueprint for some sections of Borges' *Introducción a la Literatura Norteamericana* (1967).⁸ Brooks' influence in Borges historical narrative can be seen in at least three

⁷ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 402; OC 1: 854. See also "Oda compuesta en 1960", OC 1: 834; "El Hacedor", OC 2: 311.

⁸ Borges does not list or cites any critical source for the writing of this work. I do not, in any way, suggest that Brooks' work was the only or the most significant source of information or interpretation for Borges. Throughout all his writings it is clear that he knew the work of other American literary critics. I have checked other critical works cited by Borges and compared their treatment of certain authors and topics with Brooks', and the relationship between the *Introducción* and the latter emerges clearly. Other critical works that Borges consulted include John Macy, *The Spirit of American Literature*; D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*; Mark Van Doren, ed. *Walt Whitman*; Ludwig Lewisohn, *Expression in America*. The specificity of Brooks critical work also becomes clear when compared to other literary histories of the period such as William P. Trent, John Erskine, Stuart P. Sherman, and Carl Van Doren, (eds.) *The Cambridge History of American Literature*; and Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby (eds.), *Literary History of The United States*.

ways. First, there are sections of the *Introducción* whose organization mirrors Brooks' plan, like the grouping of Whitman and Melville in the same section, followed by the section on "El Oeste", which seems to follow the volume of 1947.⁹ Second, Borges' is a narrative method constructed as a long series of short biographies intertwined with comments on the writers' work, which is precisely what Edmund Wilson praised Brooks for (the "art of this historical-biographical narrative"). Third, parts of the text itself and the details and insights Borges refers to, speak, more than anything, of Borges borrowing. Thus, while Brooks says of Whitman's work during the Civil War that "Sometimes he dressed wounds, sometimes he found that his personal presence accomplished more than medical nursing (...)" (*Times* 223) Borges writes that "(...) se cuenta que su sola presencia calmaba los sufrimientos de los heridos (...)" (*Introducción* 24)

In his *Introducción* Borges also used *The Confident Years (1885-1915)* (1952), for which Brooks received a nomination for the National Book Award of 1953 (finally awarded to his academic archrival Bernard DeVoto for his *The Course of Empire*). Borges' comments on Stephen Crane and, specially, on Theodore Dreiser reflect well his careful reading of this volume. In his comments on Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* Brooks says: "Yet, Crane himself had known nothing of war in 1895 outside of books, old magazines and old illustrations" (*Confident* 137). On Dreiser, Brooks would say that

(...) his own favorite pastime (...) was to "view the activities of others" as he walked the streets (...) [and that] (...) he was so struck by the cruelty of life (...) that he felt he was obliged to explore the mystery of it. (...). He felt that he could no longer remain on the surface reporting events, that somehow he must interpret his observations (...). (*Confident* 307, 308-09)

Borges, in a typical condensed translation established a comparison between Crane and Dreiser: "El primero imaginó la realidad; el

⁹ In this section, in addition to Mark Twain and Bret Harte (the two main figures studied in the 1947 volume) Borges includes Frank Harris and Jack London, whom Brooks studies in this same order in a single chapter in his volume of 1952. Borges reflections on Harris echo Brooks, *Confident Years* 226; *Introducción* 30.

último nos deja la impresión de haberla estudiado" (*Introducción*, 34).

Borges' whole section on Dreiser is a translation and interpretation of Brooks' information and insights on the Hoosier novelist contained in the *Confident Years*. A comparison of some sections allows an interesting opportunity to see Borges at work. Brooks pointed out Dreiser's contradictions thus:

[Dreiser's] own inconsistencies were striking, for, fatalistic as he was, he acted as if he believed in free will, as if men most certainly could control their fate. (...) he investigated strikes and aided workers. As a young man he had wondered whether something could not be done to diminish the inequalities of life, a feeling that drew him into socialism and communism later (...) all his activities were based on the assumption that man has a fighting will. (311-312)

In Borges translation and rewriting, Brooks' comment comes down to these lines: "(...) se convirtió al comunismo y visitó Rusia. Pese a la dureza y violencia de sus doctrinas, hubo en él un fondo romántico" (34).

Dreiser's biography in *Introducción* gives us a special opportunity to weigh Brooks' influence on Borges because this was not the first time that he wrote about the midwestern novelist. Actually, Dreiser had been one of the writers featured in the "synthetic biographies" published in *El Hogar* in the 1930s; thus the differences between the two borgesian biographies highlights even more the reading of *The Confident Years*. Take Borges comments on Dreiser and religion. In his biography published in *El Hogar* Borges said: "Es hijo de padres católicos. (...) leyó los *Primeros principios* de Spencer y perdió con dolor y sinceridad la fe de sus padres" (OC 4: 382).

Yet, the *Introducción* Borges said: "Hijo de inmigrantes alemanes, austeramente religiosos (...)" (34), which puts a different emphasis on the origins and the nature of Dreiser's religious background; a change that can be traced back to a notable event mentioned by Brooks that caught Borges' attention:

(...) the mother of the Dreisers [passively acquiesced in fate and] accepted help for her family from the mistress of a brothel in which her son Paul lived [while the father was] a religious fanatic who reviled

his wife for accepting the aid of the devil when he totally failed himself to support the household. (*Confident*, 309-310)

A LITERATURE OF THE AMERICAS

It was also in *The Confident Years*, more precisely in the chapter "The Further West" in which Brooks studied the literature written on the American West and the frontier experience in the late nineteenth-century, that Borges found a comparison between Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) and *Martín Fierro* and *Don Segundo Sombra* (the only reference to Latin American literature that Brooks made in the five volumes). Brooks was certainly not original in this comparative reading of Argentine and American literatures. Both traditions had been read together before in American literary circles, specially by Brooks' longtime friend Waldo Frank, who had been involved in the English publication of Guiraldes' classic in 1935.¹⁰

More important, by 1952 Borges himself had been reflecting for a long time on the societies and literatures of the two Americas. Borges' criticism in the 1930s is specially revealing of this effort. In 1938, the world of Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* will mobilize Borges's sensibility and encouraged this comparative reflections:

Ríos de agua morena, quintas desordenadas, negros esclavos, guerras ecuestres, haraganas y crueles: el mundo peculiar de *The Unvanquished* es consanguíneo de esta América y su historia, es criollo también. Hay libros que nos tocan físicamente, como la cercanía del mar o de la mañana. Este -para mí- es uno de ellos. (OC 4: 372)

The Civil War, the death of Colonel Sartoris shot by a rival, the slaves of the family, the struggling lady to keep the family afloat. Borges could easily read the novel as his family's. But he also probably recognized how family memories nourished the literature of the grandson of Colonel Falkner, which, it is possible to infer, Borges must have seen as a "criollo" component:

¹⁰ Frank, "Introduction" to *Don Segundo Sombra: Shadows on the Pampas*; see also Holmes, who refers to the gauchos as "these cowboys of the South" (7). Holmes was, possibly, one of Brooks' readings.

(...) Solo los países nuevos tienen pasado; es decir, recuerdo autobiográfico de él; es decir, tienen historia viva (...) uno de mis abuelos [Colonel Francisco Borges], hacia 1872, comandó en las últimas guerras contra los indios. ("Tareas y Destino de Buenos Aires", *Textos recobrados* 153-154).¹¹

So, North and South, shared the epic history of Independence, civil wars, and nation building, blended with the history of the families, who still remembered (and wrote about it).

The two worlds (and their writers) also shared their roughness and violence. In his review of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* Borges compared the defining role of these qualities in the kinship of American and Argentine literatures:

También la brutalidad puede ser una virtud literaria. Nos consta que en el siglo XIX los americanos del Norte eran incapaces de esa virtud. Feliz o infelizmente incapaces. (Nosotros, no: nosotros ya podíamos exhibir *La Refalosa* del coronel Ascasubi y *El Matadero* de Esteban Echeverría, y la escena del asesinato del negro en el *Martín Fierro* y las monótonas escenas atroces que despachaba con profusión Eduardo Gutiérrez...). He dicho que las letras americanas eran incapaces de brutalidad (...).

En menos de treinta años todo ha cambiado (...) el realismo no ha sido nunca tan intenso y tan minucioso como ahora en los Estados Unidos de América (...) *Of Mice and Men* es (sin paradoja) simultáneamente, brutal y conmovedor. (OC 4: 376)

But the most important point of departure for these comparative reflections was the common frontier experience and the types and literature they generated. Borges' most celebrated (and obvious) evidence in this respect are the North American stories in *Historia Universal de la Infamia* (1935), particularly "El asesino desinteresado Bill Harrigan", in which he rewrote the story of Billy the Kid, as told by Walter Noble Burns in his classic *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1925).¹² In his vindication of Mark Twain, in 1935, he compared (in agree-

¹¹ Irwin establishes a similar comparison between Faulkner and Borges.

¹² On Borges' use of sources (that also included Ashbury's *The Gangs of New York*) for this story see Di Giovanni 119-128.

ment with Waldo Frank) *Don Segundo Sombra* with *Huckleberry Finn* as two “essential” books of “our America” and, more important, he attacked Brooks’ thesis establishing an explicit comparison between the North and South American frontiers and the literatures they had generated:

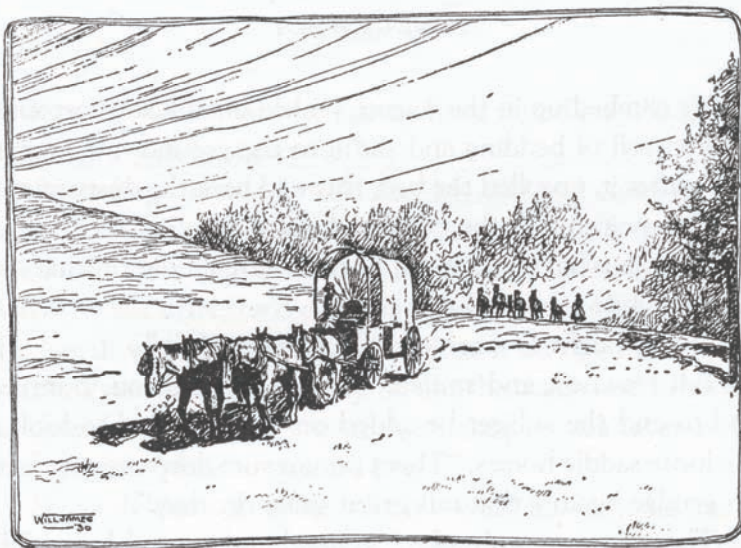
Mark Twain compuso Huckleberry Finn en colaboración con el Mississippi, río americano y barroso. Deplorar esa divina colaboración, hablar de frustraciones y represiones, es como lamentar que la provincia de Buenos Aires falseó de tal manera el genio de Hernández que este redactó el Martín Fierro. (Borges en Sur 16, 14)

Borges’ readings and comments were not limited to classics or first rate figures. His curiosity and interest on the American frontier could take him to popular “western” authors such as Will James, who moved him to establish a comparison, this time more specific and, as we will see, with different consequences. On January 7, 1937, in a synthetic biography of James in *El Hogar*, Borges said:

Nuestra República Argentina posee una vasta literatura gauchesca-Paulino Lucero, el Fausto, Martín Fierro, Juan Moreira, Santos Vega, Don Segundo Sombra, Ramón Hazaña- obra exclusiva de literatos de la capital, documentados por recuerdos de infancia o por un veraneo.

Los Estados Unidos no han producido libros análogos de un prestigio correspondiente- el cowboy pesa menos en la literatura de su país que los hombres negros del Sur o que los chacareros del Middle West y no ha inspirado hasta el día de hoy un buen film- pero pueden jactarse de este casi escandaloso fenómeno: libros de cowboys, compuestos por un cowboy auténtico. Compuestos e ilustrados por él. (OC 4: 335).

Once again, Borges established a clear comparison between the two frontiers, the types, and the literature they generated, which included an indictment of the “western” (in books and movies) as a second rate genre. One of James’ books, that Borges mentioned, was *Lone Cowboy: My Life Story* (1930), whose first chapter opens with one of James’ illustrations and in which the cowboy thus tells the beginning of his life:



It was one June day in 1892 when a long-reach wagon pulled by four tired horses came to a stop (...) bordering a little creek that run into the Judith Basin in Montana. The young woman who had been driving the team climbed down off the wagon seat (...) [the cowboy took] a roll of bedding and slid it to the ground (...) the tent was set up and a comfortable camp was made (...) it was many days before the town was reached, and, that night, without the help of a doctor, the woman went thru the suffering of childbirth... I had come into the world. (...) I was born close to the sod, and if I could of seen far enough I could of glimpsed ponies thru the flap of the tent on my first day (...). My dad was a Texan (...) [I had] some Spanish blood on my mother's side. I was about a year old when I lost my mother, and, by the time I was four, my dad went and joined her across that Range Beyond. (...) If I'd been born a month later I'd been a Canadian, and four months sooner would of made me a Texan. (...) soon as was possible, my dad (...) took us to town (*I don't know which town it was*). After a spell there, *we drifted on north some more just for a short ways and my dad found a cow outfit to work for where me and my mother had a good roof over our heads"* (1-3).

Borges was clearly interested on *Lone Cowboy*, which he referred to as an “autobiography”. So as part of his synthetic biography for *El Hogar* he translated the first passages of James’ book and summarized part of his life. Typically, Borges’ translation did not exclude changes that, actually, amounted to a rewriting.¹³ James’ refers to the “tired horses” but Borges prefers “una carreta fatigada”. Borges also introduces a geographic change, since in this passage James does not refer to the “Bitter Root Mountains”. But probably more important, Borges says that James was born in the wagon, while the text makes clear that his parents camped and he was born in a tent. Here, Borges preferred the “western” connotation provided by the illustration and decided to tell one of the possible stories suggested by James’ drawing. As we will see, Borges had an attraction for illustrations and liked to work in a sort of counterpoint between them and their corresponding texts, which he used in his own writing. Borges thus told the beginning of Will James’ life in the American frontier:

Una de la primeras noches del mes de junio de 1892, una carretada fatigada que venía de Texas hizo alto en un paraje desierto de los Bitter Root Mountains, cerca de la frontera del Canadá. Esa noche, en esa carreta perdida, nació Will James, hijo de un tropero de Texas y de una mujer con alguna sangre española. James quedó huérfano a los cuatro años. Un viejo cazador lo recogió (...). Will James se crió a caballo (...). A impulsos de la pobreza o de su voluntad, ha sido peón de estancia, tropero, domador, capataz, soldado de caballería. (OC 4: 335).

This transient beginning of a semi-nomadic and obscure frontier life that, however, could still refer to an origin, is the past Borges will give to Sargento Cruz in his 1944 “Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)”:

¹³ This way of working was not exceptional in Borges. For a solid study that shows how Borges repeatedly engaged in this type of translation and rewriting, which became part of his creative process see Kristal 88-184, especially the case of “Emma Zunz”.

El seis de febrero de 1829, los montoneros que, hostigados ya por Lavalle, marchaban desde el Sur para incorporarse a las divisiones de López, hicieron alto en una estancia cuyo nombre ignoraban, a tres o cuatro leguas del Pergamino; hacia el alba, uno de los hombres tuvo una pesadilla tenaz: en la penumbra del galpón, el confuso grito despertó a la mujer que dormía con él. Nadie sabe lo que soñó, pues al otro día, a las cuatro, los montoneros fueron desbaratados por la caballería de Suárez y la persecución duró nueve leguas, hasta los pajonales ya lóbregos, y el hombre pereció en una zanja, partido el cráneo por un sable de las guerras del Perú y del Brasil. La mujer se llamaba Isidora Cruz: el hijo que tuvo recibió el nombre de Tadeo Isidoro." (OC 1: 561).

To begin with, we should note the relationship in the dates of the beginning of both lives. Borges, who marked "las repeticiones, las variantes, las simetrías" between the deaths of César and a gaucho of the province of Buenos Aires in the 1800s, seemed to have created a similar relationship between the births of a cowboy and a gaucho. The day of the beginning of Cruz's life story (6 de febrero or 6/2) seems to be an Argentine reading (inverted with respect to the American way) of one of the possible days James' life started ("una de las primeras ... del mes de junio", e.g. June 2 or 6/2) and, to maintain the symmetry, the year is also an inversion (92 becomes 29). In both cases the parents' journeys follow a south/north direction. In the two stories the parents stop in an unidentified place ("hizo alto en un paraje desierto" / "hicieron alto en una estancia cuyo nombre ignoraban") whose location can be inferred by the proximity of a more defined place ("cerca de la frontera" / "a tres o cuatro leguas del Pergamino"). The birth or the conception of the cowboy/gaucho occurs at night and orphanhood marks the lives of both frontiersmen. In this second rewriting of *Lone Cowboy*, Borges also seems to have gone back to James' text ("I don't know which town it was" / "cuyo nombre ignoraban"; "my dad found a cow outfit (...) where me and my mother had a good roof over our heads" / "hicieron alto en una estancia", "[el] galpón"). The beginning of Cruz's life, then, is a rewriting of Borges' own translation and rewriting of *Lone Cowboy* as it appeared in *El Hogar* as well as a new rewriting of the first passages of James' book. Then, once again, as in the North American stories of the *Historia Universal de la Infamia*, the literature of American fron-

tier fed Borges fiction; but here a different operation emerges: the “pampeanization” of the original story, the realization and deployment of the “criollo” content that Borges perceived in the North American literature. In this appropriation of the Western tradition Borges may have been encouraged by James’ himself who conveyed the idea that the American and Argentine experience were interchangeable. He said that he and a friend wanted to

ship to South America, Argentine. I’d heard of that country many times before, because about then it was in most every cowboy’s mind to go down there and start in the cow business for himself. Many cowboys did go and done well. (277)

Certainly, there must be other factors that explain Borges’ rewriting of James’ passages; the relationship between *Lone Cowboy* and “Biografía” is not easy to understand and a thorough exploration of this question is not the purpose of this article. Yet, I would like to briefly engage in a tentative and very general speculation. In “La Poesía Gauchesca” Borges advances his interpretation of the “índole esencialmente novelística del *Martín Fierro*, hasta en los pormenores”. To justify his reading he underscores, among other things, that the poem was written in the

siglo novelístico por antonomasia: el de Dostoieski, Zola, el de Butler, el de Flaubert, el de Dickens. (...) pero prefiero unir al de nuestro criollo el de otro americano, también de vida en que abundaron el azar y el recuerdo, *el íntimo*, insospechado Mark Twain de *Huckleberry Finn*. (OC 1: 197)

Borges noticed, however, a limitation in Hernández’s novelistic development of the protagonist:

Fierro cuenta su historia, a partir de la plena edad viril, tiempo en que el hombre *es*, no dócil tiempo en que lo está buscando la vida. *Eso algo nos defrauda*; no en vano somos lectores de Dickens, inventor de la infancia, y *preferimos la morfología de los caracteres a su adultez. Queríamos saber cómo se llega a ser Martín Fierro*. (196)

And this seems to be one of his purposes in the narration of Cruz’s life. In an often quoted passage Borges said:

Mi propósito no es repetir su historia. De los días y noches que la componen, sólo me interesa una noche; *del resto no referiré sino lo indispensable para que esa noche se entienda.* (OC 1: 561)

That is, Borges wants to know "cómo se llega a ser" Sargento Cruz. So, disappointed (only in part, as we know it), Borges must have decided to fill in the gap in Hernández's work and created a novelistic past for Cruz (whose story, as Borges said, was the same as Martín Fierro, and whom, for the sake of fictional effectiveness probably looked less intimidating than Fierro, "uno de los hombres más vívidos, brutales, y convincentes que la historia de la literatura registra" (OC 4: 88). Then, Borges, who said that the protagonist of the poem "tenía que ser genérico, para que todos pudieran identificarse con él; por eso Martín Fierro no tiene padres conocidos (*Nací como nace el peje/ En el fondo de la mar*)" (OC 4: 87), searched for the beginning of the life of a frontier figure in the kindred tradition of American literature and he picked the life story told and illustrated by a frontiersman himself, a "scandalous phenomenon" that North American letters "could boast about" (and the gauchesca could not -not coincidentally, Will James is, with Mark Twain, the other American author mentioned in the essay on the gauchesca). So *Lone Cowboy* may have been part of what motivated Borges to engage in this rewriting of Hernández's poem. But as I said, it is not my intention to systematically examine this question here, yet I would like to underscore that the identification of this source of "Biografía" suggests a role for the North American literature in Borges' rewriting of the gauchesca.¹⁴

¹⁴ Borges' rewritings of *Martín Fierro*, particularly "El Fin" and "Biografía", have received the attention of critics. The most complete studies are (in chronological order) Barcia, Corbatta, García Morales and Klinting. These otherwise very solid works have not identified James as one Borges' sources nor discussed the role of North American literature in his rewriting of Hernández's classic; my (admittedly) tentative interpretation also differs from theirs.

THE VIRGINIAN IN "EL SUR"

In 1902 Owen Wister, a Philadelphia-born and Harvard-educated lawyer, published *The Virginian*, and thus founded the Western genre. A *bildungsroman* largely based on Wister's trips to the American frontier in the 1880s, the story is told by the Eastern visitor or "tenderfoot" (essentially Wister's point of view) who arrives in the West and meets the Virginian, a rough and good natured cowboy who gradually initiates him on the ways of the frontier, at the same time that the young cowboy's stature in that society is rising. The initiation of the tenderfoot coincides with the arrival of a young schoolteacher from New England who will also become gradually acculturated to the ways of the Far West, a process that will culminate in her marriage with the Virginian, who, in turn, will be thus tamed by the culture and sophistication of the East. The plot is mainly driven by the rivalry between the Virginian and Trampas (the archetype of the frontier bully and criminal) and the young cowboy's decision to maintain order in the frontier and enforce the law, which ends in the hanging of his own friend, who became a cattle rustler and broke the law. The novel advances the argument that "the forces of good (equated with moral order) invariably triumph over forces of evil (equated with moral disorder)" (Seelye XVII).

In *The Confident Years*, that came out in the first week of January of 1952, (*Publishers'*, 161, 82) (that is, more than a year before "El Sur" was published in *La Nación*, on February 8, 1953) Brooks commented on *The Virginian* and placed it in a tradition dear to Borges: "for the frame and for much of the picture one looked backward to Bret Harte and forward to the "Westerns' of the movies". Yet, Brooks found it disappointing because "there was a touch of the histrionic (...) in Wister's "Virginian", who emerged from no great depth in the author's mind" (89, 91). Moreover,

Wister missed the authenticity not only of the characters of Melville and Cooper but of certain South American cowboys of poetry and fiction, the gaucho Martín Fierro, the hero of the Argentine epic poem, and Ricardo Güiraldes's Don Segundo Sombra. The vast plains of the La Plata basin resembled the northern cow country as the gaucho's life paralleled the cowboy's;* yet neither Owen Wister

nor any other American writer equaled the impressiveness and depth of these two tales. How like an Anglo-Saxon Texan was Martín Fierro by the lone camp-fire, squatting on a well-bleached ox-skull, -a Georgia O'Keeffe,- thumbing his guitar, singing his melancholy song; and the silent Don Segundo Sombra, so full of the wonder of the pampas, was in many ways like Kit Carson, the old plainsman and scout. This wandering horse-breaker and trainer, a master of all the pampa arts, the making of bridles and hobbles, the curing of distemper, skilful with the lasso, at the rodeo, at the round-up, was a great authority also with the countryside. A familiar of all the big ranches, yet always moving on, the real "owner" of the pampa by virtue of his adroitness and strength,-albeit all his wealth was on his back,- he resembled Kit Carson in his grave reserve, his distaste for noise and boastfulness, his loyalty, fairness, courage and wisdom in council. (90-91)

It was probably this comparison (a type of speculation in which, as we have seen, Borges had engaged and enjoyed before) that triggered Borges' use of Wister's classic in his short fiction (as I will suggest below, it must have been the comment about *Martín Fierro* that set Borges going). Although *The Virginian* had been absent from Borges' references, one suspects he was familiar enough if not with the book at least with the character and the story, that by the early 1950s had been filmed 4 times.¹⁵ More interesting, *The Virginian* continued (until now) to be absent from his references, even in the section on "westerns" in his *Introducción*, in which Zane Grey is the only author Borges mentioned (*Balderston Universe*, Balderston et al. *Enciclopedia*). In addition, in "El Sur" Borges used some of Brooks's own reflections on the literature and culture of the American frontier, also contained in the chapter "Further West".

It is important to establish the relationship between the texts, which will allow us to see (occasionally, imperfectly) Borges at work. *The Virginian* is the main source for the story, in which a borwegian operation transforms the (American) West in the (Argentin-

¹⁵ I have found no evidence that Borges ever commented on this film. The 1929 version, starring Gary Cooper, was directed by Victor Fleming, a director on whom Borges commented more than once (see Cozarinsky).

ian) "El Sur". Borges himself, in his typical games of hide and seek, hinted at this in at least two different ways. In a conversation about this short story, in which the only literary source that he mentioned was Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, Borges said to his interviewer:

(...) hay otra razón que es muy importante, es el hecho de que Sur es un monosílabo, y un monosílabo agudo. Porque si usted dice Este y Oeste, casi no pueden usarse, en cambio en inglés sí, "West", bueno es una sola sílaba, y suena bien, no?, "to the West" (...). (Ferrari 74)

And in the story itself Borges planted one of his typical false (or at least, twisted) attributions, whose purpose was both to mislead the too inquisitive reader but also to leave a trace. When Dahlmann was walking toward the "almacén", "Algo en su pobre arquitectura le recordó un grabado en acero, *acaso* de una vieja edición de *Pablo y Virginia*. Atados al palenque había unos caballos" (OC 1: 528).

The clue is hidden in the title of another book and its view is obstructed, in part, by the intimidating presence of *Martín Fierro* and *Las Mil y Una Noches*, the other two books mentioned in the story that have normally attracted the attention of the commentators (the latter even more than the former), a fact that, I believe, sheds light on how these tricks work. This is the only occasion throughout Borges' complete works in which he makes reference to *Paul et Virginie*, which suggests a practical and specific use of it (Balderston *Universe* 277). Yet, Borges' reference has other dimensions. It is a Nineteenth-century literary gesture, for Saint-Pierre's classic was one of the most successful romantic works that by the mid-twentieth century had gone through more than five hundred editions (the bulk of them in the Nineteenth-century) and, similarly, it was one of the most variedly illustrated books ever, with more than two hundred illustrated editions (Toinet 1-6, Adhema 133-140). Thus, not only the book but also its illustrations became part of the Nineteenth-century literary experience and imagination. Remembering one of those illustrated editions Flaubert would say of *Madame Bovary*: "Elle avait lu *Paul et Virginie*, et elle avait rêvé la maisonnette de bambous (...) de grands arbres plus hauts que des clochers (...)" (Cited in Adhemar 134). If Borges' intention was also to leave a trace, then, the

reference to *Paul et Virginie*, because of the sheer number of illustrations, is the equivalent of sending the reader to look for a needle in (the wrong) haystack. But Dahlmann says "acaso", that is, it could be something else. Actually, the engraving Dahlmann remembers is one of Charles M. Russell's celebrated drawings that adorned Wister's classic and that depicts Medicine Bow, the small town where the eastern narrator arrives and most of the action occurs. The drawing, in effect, shows a rustic building with three horses standing in the front and hitched to the post (*TV*, 1929, 382). So, as Daniel Balderston has pointed out, "there is no doubt that most of the references in Borges's work lead somewhere, and often in quite unexpected directions" ("Culture", 178).

The Virginian (specially the first four chapters), provides most of the setting and the overall argument of "El Sur". We should probably begin with the protagonist. Most critics agree that Juan Dahlmann, a librarian and a man of letters who enjoys *Martín Fierro* and whose predecessors include some with a glorious military past represents Borges. This is not the only time that Borges hides himself in the protagonists of his stories or, as an author, in pseudonyms. But this time he names his protagonist Juan Dahlmann¹⁶ and gives him(self) a german background ("sangre germánica"). Why? Wister himself was of German descend, grew up in a Pennsylvania heavily influenced by german immigrants and, in his youth was sent by his parents to Germany to study music, all information Borges could find in Brooks' comments. That is, Dahlmann is not only Borges but also Wister. And I would like to suggest that there could be another reason for Borges to establish (through Dahlmann) a kinship relationship with Wister. In "El Sur" Borges said that "a la realidad le gustan las simetrías y los leves anacronismos" which he will repeat in "La Trama" (1960): "Al destino le agradan las repeticiones, las variantes, las simetrías" (*OC* 1: 793): Wister was, like Borges, the grandson of a lettered Englishwoman whose first name was also (as

¹⁶ It has been noted that Borges used before this fictional name in a story published with a pseudonym in *Revista Multicolor*, 1934. But what apparently has changed is the first name and the spelling of the last name of the protagonist, *Borges en Revista Multicolor*, 58.

Borges' legendary grandmother) Fanny (Kemble), a celebrated Shakespearean actress about whom Borges must have read in several volumes of Brooks's *Makers and Finders*.¹⁷

Wister's motive to go West for the first time was to recover from poor health and this personal experience surfaces in *The Virginian*, whose hero writes the Eastern narrator: "It must be a poor thing to be sick (...). You will be well if you give over city life and take a hunt with me (...) [I will] show you plenty of elk and get you strong.", and the narrator indeed observed "the great beauty of the weather, and how well and strong the fine air was making the writer feel".¹⁸ The good air and healthy rural lifestyle of the West was a well known therapy for many Easterners, who thus, developed a special relationship with the West. Theodore Roosevelt, who went West to recover from an emotional breakdown, bought a ranch and wrote extensively about his experience, was probably the most notable case. The trip West to recover from poor health, then, became part of the American imagination, an experience nicely articulated by Trampas in the 1946 Hollywood version of *The Virginian*, who says that "no one comes out West except for one of three things: 'health, wealth or bad reputation'". Thus, Dahlmann, who suffered an accident that almost cost him his life, embarked on a common American experience and went to "El Sur" "a convalecer a la Estancia". And, as in Wister's case, in Borges' story there is an autobiographical component related to the author's health: in December 1938 he did suffer an accident similar to the one experienced by Dahlmann, although in the story he added a fictional touch to this real episode (Vázquez 161).

One of the outcomes of this typical American experience was that the civilized Eastern visitors would end up being very knowledgeable about the rough life and the nature of the West. In his diaries Wister had recorded "innumerable details" about pack-horses, hunting, round ups, etc and "in his Western camping trips [Roosevelt] observed everything, 'from bears to mice'" and [naturalists] "were

¹⁷ And in the 11th edition (1911) of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; on her relationship with Wister, 3rd. New vol. to the 11th ed., 1922, 1031.

¹⁸ *TV*, (Penguin edition), 55, 88. All references to the text follow this edition.

astonished by the President's knowledge especially of birds: he knew by sight almost all of the warblers that baffled ornithologists" to the extent that he "bewildered" his friend and naturalist Stewart Edward White who knew everything about "the woods, the forest creatures, the networks of streams that covered this logging country (...)" (*Confident* 88, 323-24) (commenting on Brooks' work, the critic Edmund Wilson said that reading *Makers and Finders* you could find out "why some cousin who had to go West for his health taught you to name the birds without a gun" (17)). Yet, it took time to become knowledgeable. Articulating this fundamental aspect of the Western experience, that Wister also defined as "Eastern helplessness", the narrator said that at the beginning of his trip

I was justly styled a tenderfoot (...) laying my inexperience of Western matters bare to all the world, begging to be enlightened upon rattle-snakes, prairie-dogs, owls, blue and willow grouse, sage-hens, how to rope a horse or tighten the front cinch of my saddle (...) (44, 243).

Borges, aware of his own urban and learned limitations, identified with this moment of Wister's experience and, thus, got Dahlmann into similar "Western" reflections:

[Dahlmann] creyó reconocer árboles y sembrados que no hubiera podido nombrar, porque su directo conocimiento de la campaña era harto inferior a su conocimiento nostálgico y literario, (*OC* 1: 527)

Wister's Eastern narrator rides a train that takes him from the "far shores of civilization" to Medicine Bow, "his station" and, at dusk, he "*descended, [as] a stranger in the great cattle land*". He will soon find out about the inconvenient caused by the railroad: "I learned news that made me feel stranger indeed. My baggage was lost; it had not come on the train; (...) *by way of comfort, the baggage-man remarked* that passengers often got astray from their trunks". After getting out of the train Wister's narrator enjoys "the great sunset light of Wyoming" (4). Dahlmann rides the train to "El Sur" and when he is about to arrive it is also a railroad-caused inconvenient that turns him into a stranger: the guard "le advirtió que el tren no lo dejaría en la estación de siempre, sino en otra, un poco anterior y apenas

conocida por Dahlmann. (*El hombre añadió una explicación...*). Thus, also at dusk, the train stopped “*casi en el medio del campo*” (OC 1: 528).

After meeting the Virginian, the Eastern visitor walks into a saloon, where he has his first contact with the semi-barbarous world of the frontier:

I took my seat at supper.

Canned stuff it was,-corned beef. (...)We had a strange coffee, and condensed milk; I have never seen more flies. *I made no attempt to talk, for no one in this country seemed favorable to me. By reason of something,-my clothes, my hat, my pronunciation, whatever it might be,- I possessed the secret of estranging people at first sight.* Yet, I was doing better than I knew; *my strict silence and attention to the corned beef* made me in the eyes of the cow-boys at table compare well with the over-talkative commercial travelers.

The Virginian entrance produced a slight silence. (...) [while having dinner the Virginian] *placidly attended to his food.* (12-13)

Wister’s description anticipates, in part, the climate of strangeness and hostility that Dahlmann feels in the “almacén”. Borges makes his protagonist follow into the Eastern visitor’s steps (Dahlmann “*decidió comer en el almacén*” and “*se acomodó junto a la ventana*”) and echoing the visitor’s and the Virginian’s feeling about the dinner in the saloon Borges says that Dahlmann “*Ocioso, paladeaba el áspero sabor y dejaba errar la mirada por el local*” (OC 1: 528).

The Virginian not only provided a substantial part of the argument for Borges story: in “El Sur” Borges also rewrote and recreated (in translation) some of Wister’s passages. In the evocative introduction written in 1902 Wister said that

[the west pictured in this book] It is a vanished world. *No journeys, save those which memory can take, will bring you to it now. The mountains are there, far and shining, and the sunlight and the infinite earth, and the air that seems for ever the true fountain of youth-but where is the buffalo, and the wild antelope, and where the horseman with his pasturing thousands? So like its old self does the sage-brush seem when revisited, that you wait for the horseman to appear. But he will never come again. He rides in his historic yesterday. You will no more see him gallop out of the unchanging silence (...).* (XXXIX-XL)

Borges split this passage and thus it becomes part of Dahlmann's thoughts while he travels to "El Sur":

(...) vio *jinetes* en los terrosos caminos; vio zanjas y lagunas y *hacienda*; vio *largas nubes luminosas que parecían de mármol*, y todas esas cosas eran casuales, *como sueños de la llanura*. (OC 1: 527)

So the "far and shining mountains", without equivalent in the pampas, become "largas nubes luminosas que parecían de mármol" that suggests a stony quality and, like the former, can be seen high against the sky; and all things in the plains, not just the horsemen who rode in the past and who are no longer there, seem to be part of a dream. And Wister's journey of memory reads "Dahlmann pudo sospechar que *viajaba al pasado y no solo al sur*. De esa conjetura fantástica (...)" (OC 1: 528).

Borges' references to the landscape and atmosphere of the pampas also show his rewriting of Wister's perceptions. Thus,

There lay the town in the *splendor of the Wyoming space*. (...) *Over all this map hung silence like a harmony, tremendous yet serene*. (287-288)

in "El Sur" it becomes

Ya se había hundido el sol, pero *un esplendor final exaltaba la viva y silenciosa llanura*, antes que la borrara la noche. (...) (OC 1: 528)

Finally, Dahlmann's feelings about his first steps in the unknown world of the pampas clearly echoes the sentiments of Wister's Eastern narrator in his first hours in Wyoming:

I had stepped into *a world new to me indeed, and novelties were occurring with scarce any time to get breath between them*. (11-12)

Borges says

Dahlmann aceptó la caminata como *una pequeña aventura*. (...) *para agregar otro hecho a aquel día* (...) resolvió comer en el almacén. (OC 1: 528)

Borges also resorted to Brooks's comments on Wister's novel and on Theodore Roosevelt's experience in the West to formulate Dahlmann's reflections and sentiments of his own experience in the pampas. Of *The Virginian* (in a comment that included Will James' life story), Brooks said:

[*Owen Wister*] wrote elegiacally, as Mark Twain had written of the Old Mississippi (...) *for the cowboy was vanishing* (...) their day was over when the barbed-wire fence arrived and the "long-drive'ended (...) *though cowboys of a kind were to last* as long as there were cows. The cowboy-artist Will James, who was born as late as 1892, had forty years of cowboy adventures before him (...) [James said that] he was living in the twentieth-century much of the life that was generally supposed to have ended about 1890*. *Yet, no doubt the classical type of the cowboy that Owen Wister pictured had passed his prime when Wister began to write* (...)

*'It strikes me as funny now', Will James says in *Lone Cowboy*, 'When I hear tell how the cow country was all shot in 1890. This was sometime no earlier than 1907', he adds referring to some typical incident of cowboy life. (89-90)

In an implicit dialogue with this comment on the closing of the American frontier and the disappearance of the authentic cowboy, Dahlmann sees the old gaucho who, Borges suggests, belongs in the past and, with no little humor, assimilates Brooks' reflections to Evaristo Carriego's and Martiniano Leguizamón's nostalgic criollismo (OC 1: 114) and, thus, "acriolla" the North American experience:

se dijo, rememorando *inútiles discusiones con gente de los partidos del Norte o con entrerrianos, que gauchos de esos ya no quedan más que en el Sur.* (OC 1: 528)

Brooks also commented on the evolution of Roosevelt's feelings and conduct as he gradually experienced the risks of the frontier:

Roosevelt, the tenderfoot, *distrustful of his own prowess*, he said, afraid of mean horses, *gun-fighters*, and grizzlies at first, had followed a principle of William James and *by acting as if he was not afraid* had actually, and quickly enough, *ceased to be so.* (86)

When Dahlmann confronts danger in his own semi-barbarous world his sentiments clearly echo Roosevelt's initial hesitations and, then, so does his assertive attitude:

Dahlmann *se dijo que no estaba asustado, pero que sería un disparate que él, un convaleciente, se dejara arrastrar por desconocidos a una pelea confusa. Resolvió salir.* (OC 1: 529)

ART IN "EL SUR"

To write the story Borges also used drawings and illustrations of books: several passages and lines in the story are the literary rendition and deployment of Borges's observations of those pieces of art. Borges' attention to the relationship between literature and art can be detected early in his life. In 1927, in an essay titled "La Pampa", in which he discussed several literary representations of the pampayan landscape, he quotes *Martín Fierro* when the two protagonists go into indian territory (*Cruz y Fierro de una estancia/ Una tropilla se arriaron*) and reveals that his preference is (at least partially) influenced by an artistic representation of that piece of literature:

Estos versos no declaran ningún paisaje, pero lo persuaden a la conciencia del que los oye (...). (Los cuadernos primitivos de Martín Fierro traen allí una lámina, *tan inmortal en mi recuerdo* como las estrofas. En esa lámina hay más tierra que cielo y la raya del horizonte está elevadísima, como desde una altura, y la bien dibujadita tropilla y los dos jinetes tranquean *despacio* el llano, humildes, casi ausentes ya, irrevocables del todo). (*Recobrados 1919-1929*, 293)

[A digression and an insight into Borges' gaze. The above quotation continues thus: "La pampa está definida directamente por su grandeza (...) en la relación varonil de R. B. Cunninghame Graham, "laird" escocés (...)". Then Borges extensively quotes Cunninghame's *El Río de la Plata* (1914) on the origins and meaning of the word pampa and its vastness. Yet, in "Los Indios", a sketch included in Cunninghame Graham's *A Hatchment* (1913), to which Borges makes no reference, we found this:

José Hernández, in his celebrated *Martín Fierro*, has described how Cruz and his friend took refuge with the Indians, and well do I remember, for we all knew the whole book by heart (...). The wood engraving, primitive and cheap, in which *Cruz y Martín* were shown jogging on at the *trotcito* wrapped on their ponchos, driving the *tropilla*; and with the foal, looking like a young camel, bringing up the rear, *is quite as well fixed in my memory* (...). The line beneath it always impressed us, and we all tried to get the last verses to recite, so as to round up with the epic, "*Al fin, por una madrugada clara, vieron las últimas poblaciones*", the *poblaciones* being, if I remember rightly, some low and straw-thatched ranchos, surrounded by a ditch. (*Sketches* 72-73)

Like Alberdi's *Memoria Descriptiva, El Matadero, El Facundo*, and (as we will see) *The Purple Land*, in the Twentieth-century Borges seems to follow the gaze of the English traveler, and he says it in "Sobre *The Purple Land*" (1941):

Percibir o no los matices criollos es quizá baladí, pero el hecho es que de todos los extranjeros (sin excluir, por cierto, a los españoles) nadie los percibe sino el inglés. Miller, Robertson, Burton, Cunninghame Graham, Hudson. (OC 1: 736)

Borges will show again his inclination for the interplay between writing and art in the 1938 synthetic biography of Will James, in which, as we have seen, he appropriated and displaced one of James' illustrations and, thus, rewrote the beginning of *Lone Cowboy*; in 1949, in his Epilogue to *El Aleph* he said that "A una tela de Watts, pintada en 1896, debo *La casa de Asterión* y el carácter del pobre protagonista" (OC 1: 629). And in 1952, in Brooks's comments on *The Red Badge of Courage* (that, as we have seen, Borges used in his *Introducción*), he read that Stephen Crane had engaged in a similar experiment, although, it seems, in a more systematic and larger scale. Brooks said:

Yet Crane himself had known nothing of war in 1895 outside of books, old magazines and *old illustrations*.
Before writing the story (...) Crane had pored over the drawings of Winslow Homer, those campaign sketches of the Civil War (...). *The atmosphere*

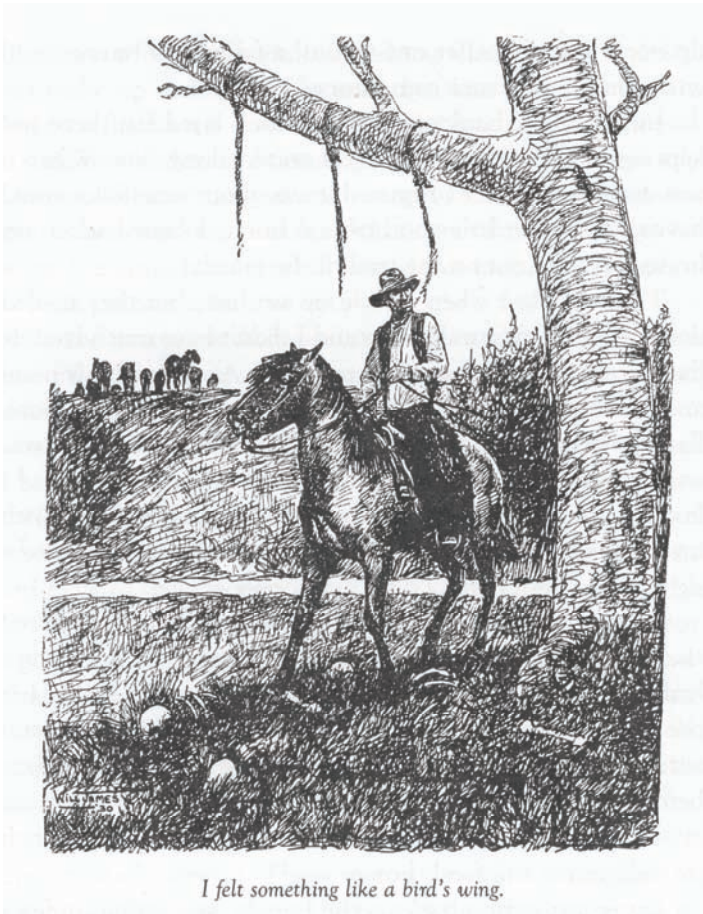
of Homer's drawings reappeared in Crane's book, and Henry might have been one of Homer's figures (...). (137-138)

Then, Borges engaged (again) in a similar experiment: some of the feelings, part of the atmosphere and, some of the figures of "El Sur", were written after several illustrations. To begin with, he returned to *Lone Cowboy*, that he used to fictionalize his accident in December 1938, when he was quickly climbing the stairs and did not see a window sash that was opened and hit it with his head. Testimonies indicate that the accident was severe ("pieces of glass had gotten into his head. The scars are still visible" (Rodríguez Monegal 321) and that occurred during the day, as Borges was going to have lunch with a friend. But in the story Borges downplayed the seriousness of the accident (which allows Dahlmann to keep climbing, get to the end of the stairs and knock at the door) and changed the time of the day, suggesting it happened in the evening: "(...) subió con apuro las escaleras; algo en la oscuridad le rozó la frente un murciélago, un pájaro?" (OC 1: 525).

Borges, who said that "pocas cosas me han ocurrido y muchas he leído"¹⁹, here echoes Will James' account and the cowboy's artistic representation of a similar sensation that he had had in a, however, completely different situation. James said that once,

when it was dark enough "past midnight" "I was just riding back to the bunch, and going under a limb of a cottonwood, when I felt something like a bird's wing touching my face. I stopped my horse and looked up the limb, and there I could see three short pieces of rope dangling from it. There'd been a "hanging bee" at that spot a year or two before. Cattle rustlers or horse thieves (...). (229-230)

¹⁹ OC 1: 854. Also "¿Me será permitido repetir que la biblioteca de mi padre ha sido el hecho capital de mi vida? La verdad es que nunca he salido de ella, como no ha salido nunca de la suya Alonso Quijano", OC 2: 202.



Borges also used at least one of Charles M. Russell's drawings that illustrated some of the editions of *The Virginian*. As I mentioned before, in a passage of "El Sur", Borges himself refers to one of them, which corresponds to some of the Eastern narrator's first impressions in the West. The visitor says of Medicine Bow:

Town, as they called it, pleased me the less, the longer I saw it. (...). Twenty-nine buildings in all (...). Yet, this wretched husk of squalor spent thought upon appearances; many houses in it wore a *false front*

to seem as if they were two stories high. There they stood, rearing *their pitiful masquerade* (...). (10)

And in a passage that, as we have seen before, Borges rewrote and that corresponds to Russell's illustration, Wister says

There lay the town in the splendor of Wyoming space. Around it spread the watered fields (...) making squares of green and yellow crops; and *the town was but a poor rag* in the midst of this quilted harvest. (287)

Then, Borges not only condenses and rewrites the visitor's impressions but also completes Dahlmann's observation with a quick rendition of a detail in the only illustration of Medicine Bow and the surrounding landscape contained in Wister's classic.



Thus, Borges passage reads:

Algo en *su pobre arquitectura* le recordó un grabado en acero, acaso de una vieja edición de *Pablo y Virginia*. *Atados al palenque había unos caballos*. (OC 1: 528)

But here, as in the case of Cunninghame Graham before, Borges was following Brooks' gaze who, Borges must have noticed, had relied, in turn, on Russell's drawing when he recreated the world of the Far West. Medicine Bow, Brooks said, "swarmed with cowboys

leaning over bars (...) while their patient, experienced *cow-ponies stood hitched to the posts*" (89).

Borges also returned to the 1894 edition of *Martín Fierro* (the "primitive edition" he had referred to in 1927) that, about the same time, he used in his critical study of Hernández's poem (1953).²⁰ From this edition he used another wood engraving that, like the one he mentioned in 1927, illustrated Hernández's poem. Thus, the figure of the old gaucho that Dahlmann sees when he comes into the "almacén" is, in part, Borges' rendition of the engraving that illustrated the "payada" between Martín Fierro and the black man in *La Vuelta de Martín Fierro*.



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

²⁰ *Obras Completas en Colaboración*, (hereafter cited as *OCC*), 557, 558-59. This is the 14th edition of *El Gaucho Martín Fierro* and the 10th edition of *La Vuelta de Martín Fierro*, published by the Librería Martín Fierro, in Buenos Aires. These editions seem to follow exactly the first editions of both parts of the poem. In 1984 Borges wrote a few words and was interviewed for a facsimilar edition of the first editions of both parts, which included this engraving; José Hernández *El Gaucho Martín Fierro*, similar de la primera edición en formato 12x 20 cm. It includes "Diálogos con Jorge Luis Borges", by Roberto Alifano.

Since Borges suggests the gaucho is a remnant of a time gone by, he turns him into a much older figure (a transformation that, in turn, I would like to speculate, might be based on the traits of an old indian drawn by Russell and, who, in effect looks "oscuro" and "reseco"). In addition, he seems to have completed the description with clothing worn by other gauchos also depicted in the illustration ("el poncho de bayeta"). Thus, Borges rendition of the old engraving reads

En el suelo, apoyado en el mostrador, se acurrucaba, inmóvil como una cosa, un hombre muy viejo. Los muchos años lo habían reducido y pulido como las aguas a una piedra o las generaciones de los hombres a una sentencia. Era oscuro, chico y reseco, y estaba como fuera del tiempo, en una eternidad. Dahlmann registró con satisfacción la vincha, el poncho de bayeta, el largo chiripá y la bota de potro (...). (OC 1: 528)

In this passage, then, the gaucho is part of the past and he might not be part of the reality ("estaba como fuera del tiempo, en una eternidad"); yet, later in the story this changes:

En ese punto, algo imprevisible ocurrió. Desde un rincón, el viejo gaucho extático, en el que Dahlmann vió una cifra del Sur (del Sur que era suyo), le tiró una daga desnuda que vino a caer a sus pies. (OC 1: 529)

Thus, in a key moment of the story the figure of the gaucho seems to acquire life and reach out to Dahlmann's reality, a movement between two dimensions (a representation of the past and the present reality), which might have been suggested by Brooks's comments on Theodore Roosevelt's experience in the West. In Roosevelt's autobiography, Brooks said,

(...) he recalled that the men he had lived with might have walked out of [Frederic] Remington's pictures or Owen Wister's stories- the drawings and writings of two of his friends who had known the ranch-life of the eighties and sketched it (...). (87)

This was not the first (nor the last) time that Borges used this illustration from *Martín Fierro*. Critics have noticed the similarities and

repetition (and their different meanings) between this passage of “El Sur” and another in “El Hombre en el umbral” (1952):

A mis pies, inmóvil como una cosa, se acurrucaba en el umbral un hombre muy viejo (...) Los muchos años lo habían reducido y pulido como las aguas a una piedra o las generaciones de los hombres a una sentencia. (Balderston *Context* 13-14, 107, 172 n26)

Yet, it is possible to see how the idea of the man’s position and, even more clear, the description of his clothes is another view (to an extent, an orientalized gaze) of the same gaucho: here Borges substitutes the doorstep for the counter and, vaguely says that “largos harapos lo cubrían” and refers to “el turbante que le rodeaba la cabeza”, which is one possible perception of the gaucho’s hat, that does look like a turban (OC 1: 613).

As another way of illustrating this aspect of Borges’ creative process and, more specifically, this period of his fictional project (in which, however, I do not include “El Hombre en el umbral”), I would like to point out that in “El Fin”, published a few months after “El Sur”, Borges used *Martín Fierro*’s illustration again, this time to recreate the encounter between Fierro and the black man, the passage for which the illustration had been (essentially) originally drawn. In his rewriting of Hernández’s poem Borges introduces the owner of the “pulpería”, a shadowy (but indispensable) figure in the backdrop, and a kid whose character is essentially of no consequence in the story but whose presence responds to Borges’ observation of the half-naked boy who is only dressed with a chiripá (like many representations of indians), has rather long hair and is extending and moving his arm (“Un chico de rasgos aindiados”, “el chico ... le dijo por señas”). But in “El Fin” Borges will also use other of the original illustrations of Hernández’s classic: he relied on the engraving that depicts the moment when Martín Fierro and the captive woman return to civilization (“alcanzamos con salud/a dibujar una sierra/Y al fin pisamos la tierra/en donde crece el Ombú/ .../Alcanzamos a una Estancia” -a passage that Borges quoted extensively in his critical study of 1953), an illustration also displayed in the cover of *La Vuelta de Martín Fierro*.



Borges picks and excludes different parts of the engraving. He observes the steep, thatched roof of the building and assumes that that is the way it looks from the inside; then he imagines the scene from the perspective of the house (there is actually a person standing in the front and the building does seem to have bars in its side); he adds his own perspective (the reader can see the black horse, the dark poncho, the hat, but it can not see the horseman's face); he excludes the woman riding alongside (as he does not seem to find a role for the woman of the other engraving either); he notices that the riders seem to be trotting on a road that takes a sharp turn to the right, and that once they get to its end, they may not be seen from the door of the building. Thus, Borges comes up with Recabarren's perspective and his observation of the approaching Martín Fierro:

Recabarren, tendido, entreabrió los ojos y vio *el oblicuo cielo raso de junco*. (...) Afuera, más allá de *los barrotes de la ventana*, se dilataban la llanura y la tarde (...) *un jinete que venía*, o parecía venir a la casa. Recabarren vio *el chambergo, el largo poncho oscuro, el caballo moro, pero no la cara del hombre*, que (...) vino acercándose al *trotcito*. A unas doscientas varas *dobló*. Recabarren *no lo vio más* (...). (OC 1: 519-20)

CRIME AND LAW IN THE FRONTIER: THE WESTERN AND THE GAUCHESCA

In the 1956 prologue of "Artificios", Borges said that "[“El Sur”] es posible leerlo como directa narración de hechos novelescos y también de otro modo" (OC 1: 483). Later, in an interview, Borges was more extensive on the interpretations and meanings of the story. His intention, he said, was to write a story that, like Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, could be read in several ways. More specifically, Borges said that "El Sur" could be read in three different ways:

como un hecho real (...) tal como está contado (...) luego, podemos suponer que la segunda parte del cuento es una alucinación o es un sueño del personaje cuando está sufriendo la acción de la anestesia. Y luego también podemos suponer (...) que todo el cuento es una especie de fábula (...) a cada uno lo mata lo que quiere (...) podríamos suponer que el protagonista quiere mucho al Sur, que apenas conoce. Cuando llega al Sur, el Sur lo mata (...). Pero yo creo que esta explicación es un poco rebuscada, y que mejor es suponer que en la primera parte del cuento ocurre lo que llamamos realidad; es decir, el accidente, la operación. Y que lo demás corresponde a la muerte que él hubiera querido tener. En este caso este cuento sería autobiográfico, ya que, bueno, mi abuelo se hizo matar (...). Y yo en algún momento hubiera podido desear una muerte así (...). (Ferrari 72).

Critics agree, implicitly or explicitly, that the story can be read in many ways. E.g., there is no question about its autobiographical meaning (Borges liked to dream about an epic death like his grandfather's) and that there are elements that suggest that the second part of the story (the trip and the incident in the almacén) is only part of an hallucination. And although Borges seemed to downplay the reading of the story as a fable, I will show that there are elements that indicate that the protagonist is killed by what he likes. Most of my effort, however, will focus on reading the story "como un hecho real (...) tal como está contado" or, perhaps more precisely, as a "directa narración de hechos novelescos", since what it seems to matter more are not the facts but their literary and ideological implications.

To begin with, in "El Sur" Borges "condenses" to the point of "miniaturization" *The Virginian*, that is, he rewrites the foundational

novel of the Western genre. This is what Borges, who only trusted the "brief forms" of narrative and who never wrote a novel, also did with *El Quijote* in his story "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote". That is, Piglia says, Borges' great contribution to the Argentine novel (*Crítica* 108).

But Borges did more than just condensing the foundational work of the Western genre: he rewrote it in a North American-Argentine comparative perspective that considered their different traditions in ethics and the rule of law. These questions were at the center of Borges' critical essays and fiction throughout his life. In "Una sentencia del Quijote" (1933) Borges said that in North America exists "la pasión de la legalidad" and that "el individuo se identifica con el estado" (*Recobrados 1931-1955* 63), that is, with the rule of law, which does not happen in Argentina, a question that he would revisit in "Nuestro pobre individualismo" (1946). The point of departure for these reflections was a passage of Quijote, that Borges believed, summarized the Hispanic American ethics and legal culture: "allá se lo haya cada uno con su pecado" and that "no es bien que los hombres honrados sean verdugos de los otros hombres, no yéndoles nada en ello". Thus, while for Americans "su héroe natural es el polizonte- mejor si aficionado-", for Argentines, who do not feel passion for legality, the police is a mafia and sentiments like friendship ("la amistad es una pasión") or courage rank higher than law. This was confirmed, Borges believed, by one night of Argentine literature, when a sergeant of the rural police shouted that he would not consent the crime of killing a valiant man and took the side of Martín Fierro (*Recobrados 1931-1955* 62, 64; *OC* 1: 658).

For Borges, the American inclination toward the rule of law was based on their ethics, an idea that also fed his fiction: "Siempre me ha sorprendido la obsesión ética de los americanos del norte" and said that the short story "El soborno" wanted to reflect precisely that (*OC* 2: 72-73). In the story the plot is organized around the ethical qualities of the protagonist, that Borges defines thus: "lo rige la curiosa pasión americana de la imparcialidad. Quiere, ante todo, ser *fairminded*". This cultural trait, Borges at times seems to believe, was uniquely American (the episode, he says at the beginning of the story, happened "en uno de los estados de América. Entiendo que

no pudo haber ocurrido en otro lugar”) and, was itself rooted in the religious origins of Americans. Of one of the protagonist, symptomatically named Ezra Winthrop²¹, Borges said that “como Carlyle, había perdido la fe puritana de sus mayores, pero no el sentimiento de la ética” (OC 2: 60, 57, 58).

Borges’ readings of North American and Argentine literature were framed by his understanding of the differences in the institutional and legal cultures between North and South. In his 1967 comments on the Western, in which he seems to have in mind *The Virginian* (although he only mentions Zane Grey’s novels), Borges said:

Aunque de otro linaje, el *cowboy* no habrá diferido mayormente del gaucho. Los dos fueron jinetes de la llanura (...). Pese a esta identidad fundamental, las literaturas que inspiraron son muy distintas. Para los escritores argentinos-recordemos el *Martín Fierro* y las novelas de Eduardo Gutiérrez- el *gaucho* encarna la rebeldía y no pocas veces el crimen; la preocupación ética de los norteamericanos, basada en el protestantismo, los llevó a representar en el *cowboy* el triunfo del bien sobre el mal. El *gaucho* de la tradición literaria suele ser un matrero; el *cowboy* puede ser un *sheriff* o un hacendado. (...). A diferencia de la poesía gauchesca, que nació poco después de la revolución de 1810, el *Western* norteamericano es un género subalterno y tardío. Fuerza es admitir, sin embargo, que es una forma de la épica y que ha legado un símbolo al mundo, el *cowboy* solitario, justo y valiente. (Introducción 60-61)

It is within this comparative mindset that Borges ultimately worked on Wister’s foundational novel. So, in “El Sur” he rewrites *The Virginian* from the tradition of the gauchesca, particularly José Hernández’s *Martín Fierro*, Eduardo Gutiérrez’s *Juan Moreira*, and William Henry Hudson’s *The Purple Land*. To try this interpretation, then, we have to leave the similarities of “El Sur” and *The Virginian* aside and to focus on their significant differences.

²¹ In reference to Ezra Pound, of whom Borges said that “solía presentarse en los círculos literarios vestido de *cowboy*, para acentuar su condición de norteamericano”; and John Winthrop, the leader of the Great Puritan Migration to New England in the XVII century and the author of *A Model of Christian Charity*, the lay sermon that articulated the Puritan ideals (Introducción 10, 41).

The axis along which Borges organizes his rewriting of Wister's classic is the different understanding and representation of violence, crime and the rule of law in the North American and South American traditions of frontier literature. When the narrator/Wister arrives in the West the first cowboy he meets is the Virginian, a hero who is the embodiment of the rule of law in the frontier. In one of the most significant episodes, the Virginian (only a citizen) executes one of his best friends for stealing cattle, who otherwise would have been acquitted by corrupt juries. One of the characters justifies the lynching in a language that must have resonated with Borges: far from being another evidence of barbarism in the frontier the execution is an attempt to gradually establish the rule of law and civilization in the Far West. The Virginian also "championed the feeble" and protected the Eastern visitor against his own ignorance of the nature and habits of the West (his "Eastern helplessness"). More important, in the foundational work of the Western genre not only criminals but also bullies seem to have a hard time. When cowboys mocked the narrator and offended him because of his Eastern and learned background, the Virginian protected the "tenderfoot" who was at a disadvantage in the West ("I am going to advise your folks... not to leave you travel so much alone -not till you have learned more life") and shielded him from frontier violence: "Talking of massacres (...) I have recently escaped one myself", later said the Eastern narrator (72, 134, 110-11, 243). In Wister's classic the main villain and outlaw in the novel challenges the Virginian to a final showdown, for which he needs to intoxicate himself with alcohol. The proprietor of the saloon proposes to take action: "I am acting mayor of this town (...) I will put him in the calaboose and keep him until you get married and away". The hero declines, for as in other frontier societies personal honor matters: "It had come to that point where there was no way out, save only the ancient, eternal way between man and man. It is only the Great Mediocrity that goes to law in these personal matters" commented the narrator (298). But in the world of the Western honor works on behalf of the public good: the hero finally kills the frontier bully (294-310). The quintessential villain's name is "Trampas" (in Spanish, "cheats"), a racially biased choice that summarized Wister's negative perception of

Mexican cowboys and that also suggested, by contrast, the different legal culture between the American and Hispanic tradition, which must have appealed to Borges²².

As the assertive attitude of the proprietor of the saloon suggested, the Virginian is only the most conspicuous of the many bully -and criminal- averse frontier characters who populated Wister's novel. In what, for the reading of "El Sur", is probably one of the most revealing passages, the just arrived Easterner learns from a card-dealer in the saloon that

it is not a brave man that's dangerous (...) it is the cowards that scare me (...) Fello' came in here las' Toosday (...). He got into some misunderstanding about the drinks. Well, sir, before we could put him out of business, he'd hurt two perfectly innocent onlookers. (...)

– Were they badly hurt? (...)

– One of 'em was. He's died since.

– What became of the man?

– Why, we put him out of business (...) He died that night. (22)

Dahlmann's trip to "El Sur" initially paralleled the tenderfoot's to the West. And in the two stories it is in the saloon/almacén that the civilized visitors have their first contact with the cowboys/ gauchos and where the frontier world will begin to reveal itself to the protagonists. But the revelation will be very different. Here, in a twist that will highlight some of the most potent meanings in Borges' story, the argument of "El Sur" will radically depart from Wister's novel: Dahlmann's "Western" trip will take a "Southern" path, written before for him by the gauchesca literary tradition. Thus, it was *Martín Fierro* that provided Borges with the overall argument for and the meaning of the last part of the story: the provocation by a drunk gaucho, the fight, and Dahlmann's death (or assassination). More specifically, the incident in the almacén is a rewriting of Fierro's fight and killing of the black man who he has first provoked. In his

²² In "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher", an essay in which Wister celebrated the American cowboy as the last manifestation of the expansion of the Saxon race, he referred to the Mexican cowboy as that "small deceitful alien", who was an "enemy" of the American cowboy and "who hated the new encroaching Northern race" (608, 614).

critical study of the poem, written about the same time he was preparing "El Sur", we find a comment that seems to be both, a blueprint of the last part of the story and an its interpretation. Borges says that "el destino" has decided that Martín Fierro will be an outlaw and that

La vida de frontera, los sufrimientos y la amargura han transformado su carácter. A ello se agrega la influencia del alcohol, vicio entonces común en nuestra campaña. *La bebida lo vuelve pendenciero*. En una pulpería, injuria a una mujer, obliga a su compañero, un negro, a pelear y brutalmente *lo asesina en un duelo a cuchillo*. Hemos escrito *que lo asesina y no que lo mata, porque el insultado que se deja arrastrar a una pelea que otro le impone, ya está dejándose vencer por ese otro*. Esta escena, no menos despiadada que *La Resbalosa*, de Hilario Ascasubi, es tal vez, *la más conocida del poema, y merece su fama*. Desgraciadamente para los argentinos, es leída con indulgencia o con admiración, y no con horror. (OCC 536)

The comment anticipates or echoes the language of the story: "se deja arrastrar a una pelea que otro le impone" / "se dejara arrastrar por desconocidos a una pelea". But, more important, the comment also parallels a crucial reflection contained in the story: the idea that both the black man's and Dahlmann's deaths at the hands of drunk bullies are, actually, assassinations. In numerous comments Borges highlighted time and again his admiration for Hernández's literary achievement in this passage, but he also lamented its disproportionate weight in the national literary tradition, for which he blamed Lugones' and Rojas' canonizing reading of the poem. As we have seen, in a muted and comparative dialogue with Brooks' *Makers and Finders*, in *El Hacedor* and in the prologue to *El Matrero*, Borges reflected on how *Martín Fierro* had erased other experiences and traditions from Argentine literature, precisely condensing the poem and this dominant reading (and almost the whole national literature) in the assassination of the black man.²³ Thus, in Borges view, this passage provided an almost necessary point of departure for the com-

²³ OC 4: 62, 63, 92; OC 1: 797. Borges had also compared this passage with American literature in his 1938 review of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, OC 4: 376.

parative rewriting of the foundational work of the Western genre. On the other hand, this use of *Martín Fierro* allows to interpret the story as a fable, since as Borges said, “a cada uno lo mata lo que quiere”²⁴. (The death of Dahlmann, the intellectual, at the hands of a gaucho, a barbarian, encouraged Rodríguez Monegal -and others- to make a political reading of “El Sur”: the story transpired the feelings of a Borges beleaguered by the antiintellectualism of the Peronist regimes and masses (Rodríguez Monegal 426-27). There is certainly room for this interpretation, although it is important to remember that Borges’s critical comments on the Argentine ethical and legal traditions go back to, at least, the 1930s, when the target was the Argentine nationalism. That is, Borges positions in this respect preceded Peronism and his experience with the regime²⁵).

To place “El Sur” as part of a larger creative moment in Borges’ fiction, I would like to suggest that the story is, to a certain extent, the mirror image of “El Fin”, where Borges seems, a few months later, to go precisely the other way and rewrites *Martín Fierro* from the standpoint of the Western genre. On the one hand, some passages of “El Fin” seem to echo Wister’s classic (after the Virginian executed his own friend for cattle rustling, and, thus, justice was made, the Eastern narrator observed that “his view was simple enough: you must die brave. Failure is a sort of treason to the brotherhood, and forfeits pity” (255) -an aspect of the frontier ethics that Brooks highlighted in his comments (*Confident*, 90); when Fierro is about to meet his destiny, the black man tells him “Una cosa quiero pedirle (...) Que en este encuentro ponga todo su coraje y toda su maña”(OC 1: 520-21)) and, on the other hand, some of the passages also contain an implicit comparative reflection (Fierro gives his children good advise and the black man approves “Hizo bien. Así no se parecerán a nosotros” (OC 1: 520), which suggests the possibility of adopting a different ethic, of changing the tradition of the gauchesca (Fierro says “no quise mostrarme como un hombre que anda a las

²⁴ Corbatta (113, 114) and García Morales (57) also read “El Sur” as a rewriting of Hernández’s poem.

²⁵ For a good distinction between Borges’ reflections against nationalism and peronism, see Contreras.

puñaladas" (520)). But more important, the different ending that Borges gives to Hernández's poem follows the tradition of the Western: like bullies in the Far West, Fierro is the victim of frontier justice and his killer is called a "justiciero" (although, perhaps with some pessimism about the possibility of breaking away from the tradition of the gauchesca, Borges also says that the black man now "era el otro"²⁶).

Now, back to "El Sur". To create the characters, the climate, and some of the circumstances of the incident in the almacén, Borges relied on other of his most beloved classics of the gauchesque tradition. Rodríguez Monegal argued that part of "El Sur", specially the atmosphere in the "almacén" and the incident are autobiographical. In a trip to the Uruguayan-Brazilian border Borges went to a bar where he witnessed a discussion and a fight in which a man was shot dead (262). Yet, although Borges witnessed the event he must have processed it through his literary repertoire (a realm firmer than life for him), not an uncommon operation in his creative process, as we have seen in the case of his accident. Actually, in "El Sur" he seems to have replaced his own Uruguayan experience with Richard Lamb's, the protagonist of William H. Hudson's "The Purple Land". In "Sobre 'The Purple Land'" (1941) Borges says that "Macaulay (...) se maravilla de que las imaginaciones de un hombre sean con el tiempo recuerdos personales de muchos otros. Las de Hudson perduran en la memoria" (OC 1: 734). For Borges, I believe, one of those moments was the fight in the *pulpería* when Richard shoots a gaucho dead. "After spilling his [victim's] blood" the Englishman reflected that the readers might think that his "sojourn in the Purple Land had quite brutalised me" (Hudson 247, 248), phrases echoed by Borges in his 1941 essay when he remembered "la brusca sangre derramada" and pointed out that one of Hudson's argument is Lamb's "conversión gradual a una moralidad cimarrona" (735, 736).

²⁶ Barcia has pointed out that the story is open ended and that, potentially, the cycle of violence could continue, 229-30. As I said before, critical comments on the rewriting of Hernández's poem seem to miss the importance of North American literature (in the case of "El Fin", the Western) as one of the points of departure of Borges' exercise, see Klinting 225-228.

Lamb, who had participated in the Uruguayan partisan struggles, arrives to a *pulpería* where he finds some “Colorado” gauchos, one of whom recognizes Richard as a “Blanco” rebel, confronts him at knife-point, and tries to apprehend and kill Lamb, while the people around looked unconcerned. But Richard manages to shoot him dead (Hudson, 239-248). Borges used this episode as one of the sources to create the climate in the almacén and to delineate the main traits of the aggressor. Richard enters the store, sits, and eats “sardines” and drinks wine, like Dahlmann. His reference to the people in the store is also echoed by Dahlmann’s observation (“they appeared to be all persons living in the immediate neighborhood” (241)/ “Dos parecían peones de chacra” (529)). But Lamb soon notices that one of them is different:

One of them (...) had on a slouch hat that just allowed his eyes to be seen under the rim. They were truculent (...) seemed to grow fiery and dim and fiery again by turns (...) his brutal mouth (...) his broad swarthy jowl (...) a slimy froth, most sickening to see, gathered at the corners of his mouth (...). (242)

Borges also sets one of them apart and in two short sentences condenses the main traits Hudson attributed to the trouble maker: “otro, de rasgos achinados y torpes, bebía con el chambergo puesto” (529). Richard Lamb’s aggressor cornered him and

Quick as lightning a long, broad knife flashed out from his concealment under his poncho (...) he raised the hilt of the weapon to his leaps to kiss the guard, which with the handle formed a cross. (...) [he] very quickly recovered the handle of his knife (...). (246)

In “El Sur” Dahlmann suddenly sees the knife that until that moment had not been part of the scene and that, in the hands of the aggressor, makes a movement in which its position is also inverted and that requires that the aggressor recover the handle: “Entre las malas palabras y obscenidades, tiró al aire un largo cuchillo, lo siguió con los ojos, lo barajó (...)” (529).

Other of Lamb’s reflection will also be echoed by Borges in the story. Outraged the Englishman reflected twice about the attitude of the other gauchos in the *pulpería*: “The other men all ceased talking

and looked on with some interest, but did not offer to interfere or make any remark", or "they stood unconcerned while their cut-throat comrade Gandara was threatening my life", which amounted to an appreciation of their values and their acceptance of aggressions and violence (243, 247). Similarly, Lamb commented on the purposeless violence of his aggressor: "(...) the fellow was evidently thirsty for my blood and only wanted an excuse to run me through" (245).

[Fast backwards, a digression on the power of literature and the question of literature within literature. In his essay on *The Purple Land* Borges says that Hudson, who was born and raised among gauchos in the province of Buenos Aires, had known first hand the semi barbarous life depicted in the novel. Yet, like in Borges, in the writing of *The Purple Land* literature seems to have been as reliable for Hudson as his own memory of rural life. For to write this (his first) novel Hudson resorted to another English classic on the Pampas: Lamb's wanderings are clearly molded after Francis Bond Head's very popular *Journey across the Pampas and among the Andes*, whose main purpose was, like Lamb's (and so many other Nineteenth-century English travelers that left their accounts), to seek business opportunities. Not only that: several of the most notable incidents in Lamb's journey (including some of those memorable moments pointed out by Borges), are molded after similar incidents recorded by Head. Richards' easy infatuation with Margarita ("that girl was a picture for one to gaze long upon and carry about his memory for a lifetime" (71)) can be found in Head's similar experience with a gaucho girl, which he considers unnecessary to write about in his memorandum book because "the scene I thought I should remember" (64). And like Richard, Head also found himself in a hut in a violent exchange with one gaucho (while other just looked), that resolved itself in his favor thanks to a gun, but without a killing:

In a moment, he was in a violent passion; he addressed himself sometimes to me, and sometimes to some gauchos who were drinking; and he was approaching me with menacing gestures, when I took my pistols (...), and before I placed them into my belt, I put the muzzle of one of them against his front tooth, and told him very qui-

etly that I would pay him what was proper, but that if he demanded more, I would only pay him with that pistol. (135)

An endless web of texts? In “Cuando la ficción vive en la ficción” Borges explores how the conception of the infinite is articulated in paintings within paintings, dreams within dreams, or in “verbal labyrinths”, like “la ramificación de un cuento central en cuentos adventicios” “hasta el vértigo”(OC 4: 433-35). That is, a (not quite endless but) long string of texts coming out of *Journey across The Pampas*, which includes *El Matadero*, *El Facundo*²⁷, *The Purple Land* and (at the other end) “El Sur”.]

Let’s return to “El Sur”. To recreate the provocation and fight in the “almacén” Borges also resorted to Eduardo Gutiérrez, other of his admired gauchesco authors. In “Eduardo Gutiérrez, Escritor Realista”, a 1937 essay that eventually meant Gutiérrez’s canonization, Borges said that “ciertas peleas de Gutiérrez son admirables” and that “hay capítulos que no olvidaré” to immediately retell one of those knife duels (OC 4: 277). In “El Sur”, then, Borges goes back to Gutiérrez’s best known classic *Juan Moreira* who, along with *Martín Fierro* incarnates as no other gauchesque figure the gaucho rebel and the outlaw. And Borges picks the politically most memorable fight: the one against Sardetti, the immigrant pulpero that has cheated the gaucho Moreira out of his money, a fraud committed with the complicity of the justice system. It will be the first of Moreira’s killings and the one that will turn him into an outlaw. The fight occurs inside Sardetti’s pulpería and when Moreira had already pulled out his knife and was ready to strike, he stops:

(...) había visto al *pulpero desarmado* y no se había atrevido a herir, porque no había ido allí a cometer un asesinato ni dar muerte a un hombre indefenso. (...)

-Qué haces que no te defiendes? (...)

-No tengo armas -respondió Sardetti-, y aunque las tuvieras esto será siempre un asesinato. Moreira arrebató a uno de los paisanos el puñal de la cintura y, arrojándolo a los pies del pulpero, se preparó a herir. (*Moreira* 30)

²⁷ On the influence of Head’s classic on the development of a Nineteenth-century Argentine Literature see Prieto.

Borges rewrote the passage and attributed the same actions to the "patrón", Dahlmann and the old gaucho seated against the counter, and displaced the idea that the fight will be an assassination from Sardetti to Dahlmann:

El patrón objetó con trémula voz que Dahlmann estaba desarmado. (...) Desde un rincón, el viejo gaucho extático (...) le tiró una daga desnuda que vino a caer a sus pies. (...) el arma, en su mano torpe, no serviría para defenderlo, sino para justificar que lo mataran. (529)

But Borges rewriting of Juan Moreira's initiation as an outlaw was also a vindication of Eduardo Gutiérrez's style that, as Borges noted in his 1937 essay, was harshly criticized by the Argentine literary arbiters of the early Twentieth-century, such as Ricardo Rojas and Leopoldo Lugones. Borges noted that for Rojas it was "la trivialidad del lenguaje", among other things, what prevented Gutiérrez to write "verdaderas novelas" and that Lugones, who had only devoted a marginal note to him, just lamented the "malgastado talento" of Gutiérrez and, condescendingly, blamed his career as a serial writer (OC 4: 276, 278). Borges agreed on the "incivilidad" of Gutiérrez's style, but he radically differed from the consequences that both Rojas and Lugones extracted from this criticism (277). Borges, who recommended to his readers "not to be discouraged" by Gutiérrez's style, however praised the realism of his novels. About *Hormiga Negra*, the one Borges liked the most, he said: "Su prosa es de una incomparable trivialidad. La salva un solo hecho, un hecho que la inmortalidad suele preferir: se parece a la vida" (278). Thus, in the rewriting of one of the most celebrated of Gutiérrez's gaucho fights Borges imitated his style: he employed "trémula" and "extático", two adjectives that Gutiérrez typically used in his most dramatic scenes in both *Juan Moreira* and *Hormiga Negra* and that Borges clearly perceived was a trade mark of Gutiérrez's rushed prose as a serial writer.²⁸

²⁸ Particularly revealing in this respect is "extático" (ecstatic), which could also be read as "estático" (static), since the old gaucho is immobilized. Yet, this is not a typo, as some students of Borges believe. Here Borges writes like Gutiérrez, who seems to have used them as interchangeable words. Symptomatically, Borges who was well known

As I said before, in the “almacén” the values of the gauchesque literary tradition reveal themselves to Dahlmann. To begin with, while the first cowboy that the Eastern narrator/Wister met in the West was the Virginian, who as the antithesis of Don Quijote and sargento Cruz, does not hesitate to execute his own friend to enforce the law (and who always “championed the feeble”), Dahlmann/Borges met Martín Fierro, a drunk bully and an assassin. Contrary to the assertive and institutionally inclined attitude of the proprietor of the saloon when Trampas threatens the Virginian, in “El Sur”, when the “compadrito” insults and challenges Dahlmann, the “patrón” barely objects with “trémula voz”. Similarly, the other gauchos in the almacén seem to be complicit with the bully or at least they do not disapprove of the provocation, a conduct that echoes Lambs’ observations and criticism in *The Purple Land* and Borges’s comments in the way modern Argentine culture reacts to *Martín Fierro*’s celebrated passage, and that is in the antipodes of the story told by the card-dealer in the saloon. Moreover, the old gaucho that comes alive out of a *Martín Fierro* illustration seems to be the incarnation of Juan Moreira. Like the famous outlaw did with Sardetti, he provides the knife that will make the killing and its justification possible.

Dahlmann/Borges will feel the full weight of the gauchesque literary tradition bearing on his fate: “Era como si el Sur hubiera resuelto que Dahlmann aceptara el duelo” (529). It is then that Borges engages in what (admittedly, only after a highly risky speculation), could be considered a comparative reflection: “no hubieran permitido en el sanatorio que me pasaran estas cosas” (529). The sentence lends itself to more than one reading and, thus, makes possible the multiple interpretations that Borges intended for the story. In one of the possible readings it suggests that Dahlmann is still ill in the “sanatorio” and his trip is only part of a hallucination. Yet, when read closely it does not make sense for Dahlmann to think that people in the “sanatorio” would not have allowed that to happen, simply because threats and aggressions by drunk bullies do not happen

for rewriting his own work and who had the opportunity to correct the spelling of this word in several editions, never did it, see Sorrentino.

in those places. Or in most of them. Actually, of all the words that Borges could have used ("clínica", "hospital", "nosocomio") "sanatorio" is the only one that can be applied to those places where patients go to receive "tratamiento climatológico", a meaning that implies a geographic location, like the American West. And, it is possible that "sanatorio" stands not just for that vast region where patients went for the benefit of the climate, but also for a more specific place whose name also gives room for that allusion: Medicine Bow, the small western town where most of the story told by Wister occurs. A town where, as we have seen, bullies were dealt with severely: in Medicine Bow or in the literary tradition of the Western "those things" would not have happened to Dahlmann. And, conversely, the Eastern narrator/Wister's Western journey would have been impossible in the landscape delineated by the gauchesque.

Now, we can go back to Van Wyck Brooks's comparison between *The Virginian* and *Martín Fierro* and *Don Segundo Sombra* that, I believe, triggered this creative moment in Borges's writing. As I suggested before, it was rather Brooks' comment on *Martín Fierro* than on *Don Segundo Sombra* that motivated Borges. On the one hand, Brooks praised the poem literary quality and implied the gauchesca superiority over the Western genre, a point on which Borges could not agree more, as his comments on this question make clear. Yet, Borges also radically disagreed with Brooks' likening of *Fierro* to an "Anglo-saxon". Here, Borges shifted from a purely literary to an ideological reading of both genres and could not help but see the ethical superiority of the Western. As he stated in his *Introducción* while for Argentine writers the gaucho symbolized rebelliousness and crime, the cowboy embodied the rule of law and the triumph of good over evil. In some respects Borges's silent dispute with Brooks mirrored the Lugones-Oyuela debate about Hernández's poem, with Brooks playing a "lugonian" role. In his critical study on *Martín Fierro*, also published in 1953, Borges said that for Lugones *Fierro* was a "Justiciero y libertador" while for Oyuela he was a Moreira-like "gaucho malo, agresivo, matón y peleador con la policía". How to solve the debate? Borges asked himself, and proposed a solution. In this controversy "se confunde la virtud estética del poema con la virtud moral del protagonista, y se quiere que aquella

dependa de ésta. Disipada esta confusión, el debate [and, we can say, the reading of "El Sur"], se aclara".²⁹

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²⁹ OCC, 562. In one of his several prologues to *Martín Fierro* Borges said: "Para Oyuela es un forajido, un Moreira con menos muertes; para Lugones y Ricardo Rojas, un héroe". And in a 1974 Posdata: "Lugones exaltó ese desventurado a paladín y lo propuso como arquetipo. Ahora padecemos las consecuencias" (OC 4: 92-93).

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