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CR: The New Centennial Review, Volume 14, Number 1, Spring 2014, pp.  
25-46 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press



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# Aesthetics, Politics and Event

Borges's "El fin," the Argentine Tradition and Death

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THIS ESSAY TAKES UP THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERARY AESTHETICS and the critique of nationalism in Jorge Luis Borges. I begin with a critical overview of Josefina Ludmer's genealogy of the gaucho genre and then turn to Borges's "El fin," which by my reading, poses a number of challenges, not only to the ideology of cultural nationalism, but also to Ludmer's attempts to distinguish between the popular and its aestheticization.

In *El género gauchesco* Josefina Ludmer identifies two tendencies at work in literary representations of the popular in the Argentine tradition. The first is what she calls "*literatura para el pueblo*" (literature for the people), or literature put to work as a pedagogical tool for shaping productive subjects for the modern State. Literature for the people speaks of—if not necessarily to—those who have not yet come to see themselves as citizens of the nation, but who nonetheless possess the potential for belonging, and who thus ought to be incorporated. Possible examples include the gaucho in Sarmiento's

*Facundo* (1845) or the Ranquel Indians in Lucio Mansilla's *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles* (1870). Literature, according to this model, is charged with the task of convincing and educating by exemplifying the virtues and benefits of citizenship while portraying the modern State as inevitable destiny of all history. In this task, literature is marked by an aporia. If its interpellative message is to be perceived as truly democratic, literature must address itself to the People in its totality and not just to an erudite subset of society. If it is to avoid charges of elitism and paternalism, it must appeal to both the sensibility and the reason of the plebe.<sup>1</sup> However, the popular subject, sensibility, or reason to which literature must appeal cannot in all rigor be said to exist before the successful transmission of the aesthetic message that literature is charged with disseminating. The People is itself an invention of literature, as Jacques Rancière would say (2004). Within the torsion of this aporia, it is precisely the delayed condition of a People that has yet to constitute itself as a social and political subject that confers on Argentine literature its social mandate during much of the nineteenth century and the first half the twentieth century. "Spiritual underdevelopment," or the delay in the emergence and constitution of a popular social subject until the early twentieth century, distinguishes Latin American experiences from the European contexts discussed by Rancière.

The other tendency is what Ludmer terms "*literatura del pueblo*." Literature *of or by* the people bears the traits of something the popular itself might have produced, even when it is, in fact, written by such sympathetic *letrados* as José Hernández. Literature of or by the people transcribes or recalls the existence of voices not yet captured by the State and its military, juridical, scientific, economic, and pedagogical institutions. Literature of the people bears witness to the bare life of the plebe and its dignity and resilience in confrontation with state power.

Inclusion of these subaltern traces in literary works is fraught with ambiguity. While popular styling of literary discourse seeks to vindicate forms of knowledge, aspirations, and demands that exist in uneasy relation to the lettered tradition and its institutions, the inclusion of popular voices within the literary institution necessarily opens these traces of the popular to the risks associated with repetition: embellishment, idealization, caricature, par-

ody, and so on. In the context of national culture and the social reorganization processes that accompany modernization during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, modern literature is defined by this paradox: on one hand it is always opening itself to voices, experiences, and forms of knowledge that have previously been denigrated as antithetical to progress and modernization; at the same time, literature, in its treatment of the popular, frequently serves as an instrument for neutralizing its alterity and rendering it fully legible and visible as both a recognizable object of aesthetic appreciation and as a countable member of the social whole. While many of the works associated with the *gauchesque* perform the gesture of giving voice to the popular for the first time (because previously the *gaucho* had only been spoken *of*), such restitutive gestures are not easily distinguished from competing gestures, such as that of speaking *for* the *gaucho*, either to assign it a proper place or to accrue aesthetic and moral credit from the performance of an inclusion within the sensible—the result of which may well be nothing more than consolidating and strengthening the prevailing order of the sensible.

The two literary tendencies outlined by Ludmer correspond with competing notions of justice. *Literature for the people* implicitly equates justice with law: the law of the written word, the codified law of the State and its juridical institutions, the law in its presumption of universal legibility and universal application irrespective of social rank. By the same token, it allows for the codification of anything falling outside the identity of law, writing, and justice as unjust and barbaric (see *Facundo*, for instance). By contrast, *literature of the people* identifies justice with voice: the voice of the plebe or the emergence of new voices that have yet to be accounted for by the prevailing social count. Voice is understood there as the living, animating sign of the proper, as opposed to both the repressive dead letter of abstract law and the improper, groundless letter of the immigrant. In this light, the People is nothing outside of its link with voice understood, as Derrida has shown, as the immediacy of transmission, immediacy of and to the logos or consciousness (Derrida 1981).

The difference between these competing determinations of justice and discourse amounts to a distinction between transcendence and immanence. The law understands justice according to the mandate that it make itself

legible to and applicable for all equally and without distinction. This means that the law must ground itself in a point located outside the actually existing legal order, such as in the concept of sovereignty, defined either as terrestrial representative of God or as exceptional decision. The linking of justice to voice, meanwhile, presupposes the immanent autonomy of a sovereign People. It thereby poses a challenge to the historical representation of the People as tutelary subject of the State, as well as to the State defined as authorized representative of the People. Whenever the popular subject opens its mouth in the *literature of the people* tradition, the overriding sense conveyed in such literary dramatizations of the speech act is that of a presumed immediacy, free from the mediations of erudite language, Liberal morality, and the representative function of the State. The immediacy of voice in the popular tradition is synonymous with the conventional fact that the popular speaks: here and now, without adornment or dissimulation, of and for itself, according to convention. The conventional saying that defines gaucho literary discourse does not stake its validity or significance on any transcendent relation between speech and meaning, idea, or being; its ground is the immanence of the speech act itself, which both opens and closes the site from which it speaks. In Ludmer's words:

todo está en el canto y *el canto es todo*. Cantar el canto es, como vivir la vida o contar el cuento, una figura etimológica autoengendrante y autosuficiente que no parece dejar restos, y por eso puede ser la representación del todo en la lengua: el hacer (cantar) coincide totalmente con lo que se hace (canto) y con lo que se es (cantor). (Ludmer 2000, 137–38)

[Everything is in the song *and the song is everything*. To sing the song is, like living life or telling a tale, a self-engendering and self-sufficient etymological figure that seems to leave no remains, and because of that it can be the representation of totality in language: the doing (singing) coincides completely with what it does (song) and who it is (singer).] (Ludmer 2002, 129)

Speech cannot be the predicate of a prediscursive subject in this case because, as a social category, the *cantor* has no being outside of the act

through which oral discourse opens up a new space of sensibility where previously unheard truths (forms of knowledge, denunciations, demands, etc.) come to register. Regardless of what is said, the mere fact that the cantor speaks as opposed to being spoken for and written about—is all the ground that is needed for the self-affirmation of social subjectivity in the *literature of the people* tradition. Its being is immanent to the singular immediacy of the act, which need not represent anything outside of itself. The speech act (*canto*) constitutes the essence or being of the gaucho cantor, just as the articulating power of speech (*logos*), in distinction from mere voice, constitutes the political freedom of the human for Aristotle.<sup>2</sup>

If Ludmer's assertion that the two tendencies I have been discussing—literature *for* and *of* the people—are co-constitutive of the genre proves convincing, this insight could be taken as evidence that the cultural and political distinctions she wants to draw in favor of the popular, in fact, turn out to pose little threat to the hegemony of the modern capitalist State. Ludmer focuses on the difference between the two tendencies, arguing that they support competing values as well as possibly irreconcilable understandings of the political. Taken together, however, could we not just as easily assert that these two tendencies—*para* and *del*, *of* and *for*—in fact constitute the *very idea of the State* as a projected unity linking origin and telos, immediacy and representation, immanence and transcendence? If it is to live up to its concept, the modern State must be true to the expression of an originary act of will—the will of the People, which is ontologically before the State and its institutions—while at the same time presenting itself as a tutor who instructs, guides, and safeguards the People's ever-developing essence. The truth of the modern State is, thus, neither the paternalistic logic of *literatura para el pueblo*, nor the popular logic of *literatura del pueblo*, but the representation of their absolute identity.

As Beatriz Sarlo has argued, "El fin" (1944) represents one of Borges's most explicit responses to the ideological structure of cultural nationalism in Argentina (Sarlo 2007, 63–66). In 1913, in a series of lectures, the Argentine poet Leopoldo Lugones famously declared that the one and only true reflection of Argentine "national spirit" is to be found in the gaucho genre as exemplified in a pair of nineteenth century works: Domingo Sarmiento's *Facundo* (1845) and

José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1872, 1879). Lugones nominated those two works as Argentina's *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, respectively, and asserted that all future writers would be evaluated in the light emanating from this cultural Pantheon. In fixing the truth of what it means to be an Argentine writer in the dual permanence of these two classics, Lugones and his nationalist followers sought to produce an antidote to what they saw as the corrosive forces of modernization, especially the transculturation and heterogeneity generated through immigration. If spoken and written Spanish in Argentina was always being contaminated and perverted by changing fashion and new immigrant waves, literary discourse—a language nobody speaks—might in turn provide a sanctuary from history in which the eternal, unchanging spirit of the patria can be kept in view. As Brett Levinson puts it, the mimetic operation deployed by Lugones aims to produce an “infinite and endless dictatorship with no Others anywhere, anytime” (2001, 64).

Borges responds to nationalism's ideological prescriptions by rewriting and strategically altering the conclusion of one of the works Lugones had held up as cultural paradigm for present and future generations of Argentine writers. His three-page prose narrative takes up where the second part of Hernández's poem *Martín Fierro* leaves off: Fierro has just defeated a dark-skinned gaucho (*gaucho moreno*) in a *payada*, a match of wits played out through verse accompanied by guitar. The verbal duel was initiated by the *moreno* in his efforts to avenge the death of his brother, murdered by Fierro in the first part of the poem.

According to the gaucho code of honor, the *moreno*, having been defeated at the craft of verse, would then be entitled to seek retribution for his brother's death through recourse to the knife. Although the first part of *Martín Fierro* (“La ida,” 1872) celebrated the popular image of the autonomous gaucho in his defiance of the legal, social, and cultural codes of modern bourgeois society, “La vuelta” (1879) enacts a full reversal of the earlier intransigent tonality, with Fierro returning from his lengthy exile in the south to counsel his own sons (as well as the orphaned son of his deceased friend Cruz) about the importance of adopting the work ethic and responsibilities required by modern capitalism, as well as the necessity of practicing fraternalism with one's fellow citizens. In the conclusion of “La vuelta,” verbal sparring substitutes for and banishes the

possibility of physical conflict. The substitution of the word for the knife advances a profound ideological shift that coincides with the consolidation of national unity in late nineteenth century Argentina.<sup>3</sup> At the end of Hernández's poem, the gaucho Martín Fierro emerges triumphant, not only in arms but in letters; however, in his triumph, he has already begun to speak the universal idiom of the State, extolling the virtues of hard work and finding one's place in society.

In Borges's version, meanwhile, the two antagonists meet for a second time. "El fin" is the repetition of a repetition; it both repeats and inverts the conclusion of "La vuelta," which was itself the repetition of an encounter with the *moreno*'s brother in "La ida." Borges's rewriting of the end of Hernández's poem announces the return of that primordial, pre-State violence by which the rival's older brother met his death. In simultaneously repeating and altering the canonical version of the story, Borges pushes back against the tonality of reconciliation, assimilation, and the suppression of all social antagonism that dominates "La vuelta." Borges's rewriting reopens the idea of the social as structured by an originary *polemos*. If Hernández's "La vuelta" performs a dialectical negation of negation (the word replacing the knife; reconciliation overcoming antagonism), then Borges's rewriting calls the reader's attention to what negation fails to negate.

Borges's story does not, in fact, reveal itself to be a rewriting of Martín Fierro until the penultimate paragraph, when Fierro is named for the first time. The account is narrated from the perspective of a certain Recabarren, the owner of a *pulpería* who bears a resemblance to a similar character from the first part of *Martín Fierro*. In Borges's version, Recabarren has just suffered an apparent stroke that paralyzes his right side and leaves him unable to speak. Like the cat in "El Sur," he now lives outside time, "in the eternity of the instant" (the same exact phrase is used to describe both beings). In Borges's writings from the 1940s, this phrase ("the eternity of the instant") alludes parodically to the fundamental fantasy of Argentine nationalism, structured by a pathological fear of the other (of outsiders, of change, and of death). Moreover, through contrast it brings into view the temporal facticity of human existence to which Dahlmann, Fierro, and the *moreno* are all subject, a facticity that marks every moment of existence both by the possibility or

threat of death and by the inescapability of the past and its crimes. The key distinction at stake here, then, is not between eternity understood as permanence and time understood as sequential progression, but between the eternity of the moment in its indivisibility and the heterogeneous nature of temporality, in which every present is traversed both by the past (transgression, responsibility, repetition) and by the future (hope for a better world, the unavoidable possibility of a death that we cannot master or experience as subjects).

As his name indicates, the timeless present embodied by Recabarren is empty and sterile. Reduced to a mute, immobile witness, he listens to the guitar playing of an unnamed gaucho *moreno* who lingers outside the *pulpería* for days, seemingly awaiting the arrival of someone. When another gaucho (who will turn out to be Fierro) finally appears on the scene, the *moreno* remarks that his arrival—which now, as the story is concluding, is seen for the first time as a return—confirms his willingness to make good on his blood debt. Fierro in turn explains that he could not allow himself to set a bad example in front of his sons. The *moreno* confirms his agreement with Fierro's thinking. In the solitude of the Pampa, the two gauchos then prepare for their mortal duel. Recabarren observes as Fierro strikes the first blow, marking his opponent in the face with the point of his knife; after nearly losing his footing, the *moreno* responds with a pair of deadly knife thrusts to Fierro's body. The action is narrated as if from the vantage point of the mute witness, Recabarren, who lies prone in his cot but all-observing—up until the second and decisive blow, which Recabarren is unable to see from where he lies.

In the context of Lugones's enshrinement of *Martín Fierro* as national epic, Borges's rewriting constitutes a form of iconoclasm. He overturns the mimetic mandate by killing off the immortal hero while subverting Hernández's codification of popular voice together with the end of antagonism and the necessity of assimilation. By the same token, Borges's rewriting of the conclusion signals a shift from the monological cultural tradition of nationalism to a heterogeneous archive that calls for transformation, not emulation. Whereas Lugones idealized the gaucho as an icon of independence and self-presence, once the *moreno* has slain Fierro, he is said to become the other, or what Fierro once was: a being without social category, beyond the law and beyond the

counting of the social, exposed without restraint to the cruelty of the sovereign ban. By the same token, whereas Hernández's poem belongs to a social regime in which *morenos* do not fully count, Borges introduces a thought of equality into the relation between Fierro and the *moreno*. "Cumplida su tarea de justiciero, ahora era nadie. Mejor dicho era el otro: no tenía destino sobre la tierra y había matado a un hombre" (His righteous task accomplished, he was nobody. More accurately, he became the stranger: he had no further mission on earth, but he had killed a man) (Borges 1995, 187; Borges 1962, 162). Borges's rewriting is not just a negation of Lugones's fetishization of tradition and emulation, however. "El fin" offers its own take on literary history, asserting that creation and innovation are inseparable from transformation, contamination, and betrayal. By implication, Lugones's idealized view of tradition would, if adopted by other writers, result in the worst kind of death: permanence devoid of any future, with no chance of encountering any other.

According to Sarlo, "El fin" brings what she calls the cycle to a close: not only the cycle of wrong and justice (or revenge) dramatized in *Martín Fierro* and similar sagas (Juan Moreira), but also the gauchesque tradition itself. By killing off the tradition's quintessential hero, and by subverting Lugones's vision of a unified, self-present origin, Borges effectively puts the genre itself to death, according to Sarlo. But is that really what "El fin" is about, the end of a genre and the putting to rest of its concerns and conventions? Or are things more ambiguous when it comes to determining the limits of the genre—and, therefore, also what is proper to it? Does the death of the hero and the model just announce the end of a certain tradition, or does it, on the contrary, indicate literature's only chance?

Borges teaches us that literature begins with death, and that without death (and alteration, contamination, betrayal) there could be no literature. How so? For one, literary language presupposes the death of the Father, the cutting of the filial link between paternal authority and son(s), logos and discourse. Literature, as Plato knew all too well, begins with the orphaning of the letter. As Borges reminds us, literature also exposes the death of the example, not because the example is a false one and must be corrected, but because when we appeal to something as exemplary—God for the ontotheological tradition, *Martín Fierro* for the Argentine tradition—we are, in fact,

declaring that it is singular and bears no analogy with anything else. What is exemplary in the example is never subject to phenomenization (no phenomenal presence can provide the example of it), nor can the exemplary provide an example of anything but itself. Of what could God be an example?

Having discussed Ludmer's genealogy of the gaucho genre and its constitutive tensions, as well as Sarlo's reading of Borges's rewriting of Argentina's "epic poem," I now turn to Jacques Derrida's reflections on the complexities that attend literary classification in his essay "The Law of Genre." I am interested in teasing out what Derrida thematizes as participation without belonging that conditions all discourse of and about literature. On one hand, there can be no literary text that does not refer to itself *as literature*—that is to say, refer to itself by pointing, beyond its own internal space, toward "literature" in general, or toward a network of texts that would together constitute something like a synecdoche of literature. Any text is by definition always already intertextual, marked by explicit or implicit mentions of other texts, and this structure of invagination provides one way of unpacking the statement "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (1976, 158): the movement away from itself, toward its outside and toward others (other texts), is constitutive of what we call the literary. The classification of literature according to genre and even subgenre is, thus, only erroneously understood as a secondary concern introduced to or imposed on literature by criticism. There can be no literature before the questions of belonging and classification, before the mechanisms and structures by which a given text inserts itself into such and such conversations, class(es), and tradition(s) through citation, allusion, naming, convention, emplotment, and so on. On the other hand, Derrida points out that what enables literary and critical classification according to genres and subgenres—the presence in the text of a recognizable trait that would signal the text's belonging to a certain class or tradition—also turns out to introduce the impossibility of classification. The trait itself constitutes a residue of the uncategorizable within every process of categorization:

The question of genre—literary genre, but also gender, genus, and taxonomy more generally—brings with it the question of law, since it implies an institutionalized classification, an enforceable principle of non-contamination and

non-contradiction. But genre always potentially exceeds the boundaries that bring it into being, for a member of a genre always signals its membership by an explicit or implicit mark; its relation to the generic field is, in the terminology of speech-act theory, a matter of mention as well as use. . . . [The] crucial feature of any such mention, or possibility-of-mention, is that it cannot be said to belong to the genre it mentions. (Derrida 1992, 221)

Derrida is not claiming that genre classifications do not happen. He is asserting that for there to be a classification of belonging (literary or otherwise), there must also be something that sticks out and does not belong. These two things, belonging and nonbelonging, appear at the same site: the trait. For a given literary work to be legible in its belonging to one or another genre or sub-genre, the work must display some specific trait that has by convention come to be associated with the genre: for example, the rehearsal of popular voice, conflict between the popular and the elite, and the typologies of the gaucho (the *rastreador*, *baqueano*, *cantor*, and *matrero* or *gaucho malo*) in gauchesque literature. But the mark through which a work signals its belonging to this genre cannot itself belong to the genre. Even if a certain trait were entirely unique to a specific genre, its function qua trait is to refer to or “mention” a certain class; this indexical function operates on a different register from the practical features of emplotment that the work might share with other works in a given classification. Any distinctive trait is, thus, divided between its practical function and its role as citation, as indicator of belonging. Without the mention of belonging, there can be no belonging as such, and yet the mention that links a particular to a given class of particulars cannot itself belong to that class. Something referring to “the set of all cats,” for instance, cannot itself be a cat. In the terminology of speech act theory, the trait of generic belonging is overdetermined by the presence of two irreconcilable rhetorical modalities, *use* and *mention*, and this inescapable double bind means that there can be no determination of belonging without a concurrent irruption of nonbelonging. The logical and juridical principles of noncontamination and noncontradiction are ruined by the very mark that would guarantee the authority of their law.

The re-mark of belonging does not belong. It belongs without belonging, and the “without” (or the suffix “-less”) which relates belonging to non-belonging appears only in the blink of an eye. The eyelid closes, but barely, an instant among instants, and what it closes is verily the eye, the view, the light of day. But without the respite or interval of a blink, nothing would come to light. (Derrida 1992, 230)

The blink of an eye, the *Augenblick* (blink or glance of the eye), is not a segment of sequential time but rather, for such disparate thinkers as Luther, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, a secularization of the Greek *kairos* (critical or opportune occasion). It names the threshold of the visible—the closing of the eye is also the prelude to its opening—and, thus, cannot itself become a possible object of vision. In Derrida’s engagement with Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), *Augenblick* introduces a critical visual supplement to Husserl’s focus on auditory self-affection that Husserl wants to understand as the confirmation of self-presence in and through perception. By shifting the terrain of Husserl’s argument from purely auditory self-relation to the visual, Derrida emphasizes the irreducible distance or spacing at work in any specular relation to self. In looking at oneself in a mirror, optical self-affection must suppress or blind itself to the distance that separates eye from tain, and without which there could be no communication between these points. This in-between space is the condition of possibility for any vision or disclosure, and yet, in seeing ourselves we already turn a blind eye to the internal difference that both constitutes and divides the “I.” The trait structure I have been discussing acts as a kind of *Augenblick* in the process of determining literary belonging. Like Fierro’s knife as it marks the other’s face, it opens up the possibility for seeing and recognition, differentiation and belonging. The cut it inscribes is the condition of possibility for all disclosure. And yet, as with the witness Recabarren, the closing or the mark also imposes a blind spot on vision—a point of nonseeing in all seeing and of nonbelonging in all belonging.

While Derrida’s focus in “Law of Genre” is on literary genre, his argument could just as well be extended to other forms of social and cultural classification.<sup>4</sup> It is this potential for transfer to other social spheres and contexts that makes Derrida’s reflections on literary genre particularly apropos for Borges’s

text, for which literary and literary critical questions concerning what is proper to a specific literary genre (the *gauchesque* and its limits or exhaustion) prove to be inseparable from concerns about the social tasks or purposes imputed to literature (emulation, instruction, production), not to mention questions about who counts as a full member in a rapidly transforming society, and who can do what and in which time and place.<sup>5</sup>

I now return once more to Ludmer, who makes two important points about Borges that I want to explore in greater depth. First, she notes the centrality of the question of justice in Borges's writing. Generally speaking, Borges's literary reflections on the problem of justice inhabit a disjunction between two alternative thoughts of wrong and restitution: *justice from below*, or the popular ethos of the *gaucho* tradition, and *justice from above*, or divine law. This doubling and splitting of the question provides thrust to Borges's efforts to sever the identification of justice with the modern State and its codified law.<sup>6</sup> In writing against the modern enclosure of justice within the State form and its juridical sphere, Borges is not content to designate some other register—the popular or the divine—as the proper site of justice. Instead, he proposes to think justice from an experience of undecidability between these two alternatives to the hegemonic discourse of the State. The Borgesian approach to justice as *aporia*—a justice that reveals itself as *aporia* once it is liberated from its modern enclosure—turns out to have the same structure as that of the Argentine tradition, which Borges understands as an originary encounter and perpetual cross-fertilization between forms of autochthony and universality (immigration, cosmopolitanism, cultural borrowing). In both cases, the status of the encounter or crossing is radical: the intersection, that brings with it the risk of contamination of the proper, is also constitutive of the proper domain in question and not secondary to it. "El fin," as we have just seen, locates the question of justice in the popular tradition. Yet, Borges's rewriting also sheds light on how that tradition interrupts itself and defers its own aim, both through the specific exclusions it reinforces (see footnote 7) and through its unexamined complicity with the modern State (the symbolic reintegration of the *gaucho matrero* in "La vuelta," who as father becomes indistinguishable from the paternal authority of the State). What emerges from Borges's reflection on literature, the popular, and the State is

both a repetition and an inversion of the Ur text. As we have seen, by slaying Fierro, the *moreno* becomes Fierro, an errant gaucho devoid of destiny on earth, left with no choice but to take flight, perhaps (like Fierro) into some uncharted domain beyond the political boundaries and social calculus of the national State. This abyssal inversion of self and other in “El fin” also breaks with the social coordinates of Hernández’s poem, which always saw to it that *criollo* and *moreno*, named and unnamed, were kept at a safe distance from one another. The structure of repetition in “El fin” uncouples one of the primary mechanisms of social differentiation in Hernández’s poem and the gauchesque tradition, and it thereby causes the nationalist distribution of the sensible to tremble momentarily.

The second point has to do with Ludmer’s critical assessment of what she sees as the elitist literary motivations behind Borges’s interest in the popular. Here I want to highlight a key point where I differ with Ludmer’s reading. She characterizes Borges’s engagements with the gauchesque as a form of parasitism that, in a double movement, evacuates the popular of whatever real social, political, or ethical content it might possess and then fills this gap up with literary language. With Borges, the popular becomes just another prop through which literature displays its own ability to say everything. Borges, she notes, typically accomplishes this by transposing the first-person narratives that are characteristic of the gauchesque into a monological, third-person narrative account, thereby cutting the link between voice and opposition (opposition to the lettered tradition) that is at the heart of the gauchesque. In her reading of “El fin,” Ludmer charges Borges with carrying out a similar procedure with respect to divine justice: “En el vacío de la lengua de la ley de dios [Borges] construyó esta vez su lengua literaria. Y a la vez su utopía, que es la lengua intraducible, la música sin código de la llanura” (Within the void of the language of God’s law [Borges] constructed his literary language. And he also constructed his utopia, which is untranslatable language, the plain’s music without a code) (Ludmer 2000, 199; Ludmer 2002, 196). In “El fin,” Borges voids the traces of alterity (God or the subaltern) to consolidate the sovereignty of literature, as exemplified in the Romantic image of an immediacy of self-presentation: the music of nature, of the Pampa, that represents nothing, but instead constitutes the presentation of presentation itself

(Borges 1995, 186–87). The immediacy of literary self-presentation both echoes and cancels what Ludmer describes as the immanence of popular voice in the gaucho genre.

Ludmer's critique may, in fact, be more relevant for Borges criticism than for Borges's text. Be that as it may, I want to propose that Borges is not left without a possible reply to the charge of aestheticism. I will sketch out the basis for such a response by looking at some of Borges's reflections on literature and aesthetics. For the sake of argument, I propose that we accept at least one of the charges leveled by Ludmer—that Borges is indeed guilty of something like a literary vampirization of the popular—but that the implications of this theft, for Borges and for how we think about aesthetics, are far less clear than Ludmer would have us believe.

If we are to take seriously the assertion that Borges engages in aestheticism, we must begin by going to where Ludmer never sets foot: to Borges's writing about aesthetic experience. In an essay entitled "La muralla y los libros" (Borges 1998), Borges speaks of *el hecho estético*—the aesthetic act or deed—through a paradoxical formulation as "la inminencia de una revelación que no se produce" (the imminence of a revelation that does not take place). He clarifies that the force of aesthetic presentation and experience resides in the contradictions that arise through the interplay of formal elements and in the torsion between what these elements place before our senses and what is left unsaid or seen. The context for this formulation in the "La muralla" essay is an account Borges read of Shi Huang Ti (or Qin Shi Huang), the First Emperor of China, who presided over the unification of the country in the third century BC, and thereby established the foundations for two millennia of imperial rule. Qin Shi Huang's legacy remains visible today in his greatest public work: the commencement of the construction of the Great Wall along the frontier as a barrier against invasion by nomadic peoples. One of his other notable imperial deeds, however, has long since fallen into oblivion: as a preventive measure against the threat of internal insurrection and disorder, Qin Shi Huang ordered the burning of a substantial number of books—all books that existed before him, according to the source Borges has read. It is the apparent contradiction between a monumental work of construction that defines the proper, and a project of almost infinite destruction threatens to

erase all memory, which triggers for Borges a thought of the aesthetic act. While Borges emphasizes the seeming contradiction between construction and destruction, it should be noted that the structure of this example invites us to think a series of juxtapositions in association with aesthetic experience: space and time, inside and outside, future and past, civilization and barbarism, materiality and ideality, and so on.

La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo: esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético. (Borges 1998, 12)

[Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon.] (Borges 1964, 188)

The aesthetic act is the experience of contradiction together with a lingering uncertainty concerning the unification of its elements. In Kantian terms, we could call it the experience of a flow of impressions (music, states of happiness, mythology, timeworn faces, certain twilights, and certain places) whose unity the imagination cannot produce. By the same token, Borges does not say whether or not this flow would provide a foothold for reason to reaffirm its own sovereignty in the failure of the imagination. To be sure, Borges's terminology—he speaks of *el hecho estético*—implies the possible unification of these contradictory elements, if only at an ideal level (and in that case, his notion of the aesthetic would have a very similar structure to the Kantian sublime). And yet, the aesthetic also leaves us in a state of incompleteness, of awaiting a disclosure that has not yet arrived or lamenting an encounter that was missed. In that light, it would seem that the reaffirmation of reason beyond the imagination can only be a matter for speculation; the proper concerns of literature and art lie elsewhere than reason (and perhaps unification).

Borges's attempt to shed light on the excess or remainder of revelation—the excess it leaves or engenders, but also the excess that revelation would destroy if it could ever complete its movement—vacillates between the past (*algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder*), the future (*están por decir algo*), and a strange temporality that does not fit easily into past, present, or future (*quieren decirnos algo*). This third term, *querer decir* (to mean or to try to say), is crucial for distinguishing Borges's understanding of the aesthetic from the two competing aesthetic ideologies I identified earlier in Ludmer's work. Taken literally, *querer decir* reiterates the earlier reference to "imminence" by insisting on the unrealized status of what it aims at: it says that what wants to be said has not been said (yet). This antithetical grammatical construction marks the internal difference of any time—past, present, or future—and any saying with respect to itself. The modality of *querer decir* has no proper time of its own; what is still "wanting to be said" can never see the light of day except at the price of relinquishing its drive or *querer*. To paraphrase Maurice Blanchot, and akin to the contradictory legacy of Qin Shi Huang, *querer decir* seeks to reveal what revelation itself destroys (Moreiras 1999, 125–32). And yet, *querer decir* also names what is fundamental to all modes of saying, whether literary or otherwise: it is *sense, desire, and meaning to say*. And thus this third term, which names what no revelation could ever grasp without pulverizing in the same instant, is also the condition of possibility for any revelation whatsoever.

The aesthetic, in Borges's account, is an event that takes us by surprise. Its revealing power, though, is haunted by a sense of indeterminacy or nonidentity that Borges calibrates ambiguously as *either* expectancy *or* loss. All art and literature is troubled by the sense that something remains to be revealed, that in the movement of revelation something has already been subtracted or slipped away. A work that contained and revealed everything, and from which nothing could escape, would, by contrast, constitute something entirely other than art and would very likely have nothing to say to us. The occurrence or arrival of an event—say, the disclosure of some fundamental truth claim or insight in a literary work—is structured by a double temporal bind that interrupts the supposed unity of the event, while also dislocating what we might want to call the proper experience of the event. On one hand, as readers,

we are already present before the event, awaiting it with our own perceptive and cognitive systems on full alert. In this sense the event always comes too late, if it comes at all, because its arrival is mediated by our expectations, preconceived notions, vocabulary, sensibility, and so on. On the other hand, an event is not an event unless it takes us by surprise, interrupting our accustomed ways of thinking and looking at the world. Any occurrence that does not in some way challenge and disrupt the fundamental coordinates for our thinking and acting would hardly be worthy of being called an event. In this sense, the event always arrives too early, or we too late, as the instant of its occurrence (*Augenblick*) already forewarns that we may have missed some aspect of its singular truth.<sup>7</sup>

In the Prologue to his *Obra poética*, Borges approaches the aesthetic from a somewhat different perspective, asserting that the *hecho estético* resides in the relation that is reading and not in some innate quality of the work. In that work, *hecho* is emphasized in its literality: as a reciprocal *doing* in which reader and language act upon and affect one another; a mutual affectation that works through image, figure, rhythm, and so on. The aesthetic registers as a “thrill,” Borges adds, emphasizing the manner in which reading affects us bodily:

El sabor de la manzana (declara Berkeley) está en el contacto de la fruta con el paladar, no en la fruta misma; analógicamente (diría yo) la poesía está en el comercio del poema con el lector, no en la serie de símbolos que registran las páginas de un libro. Lo esencial es el hecho estético, el thrill, la modificación física que suscita cada lectura. (Borges 1972, 11)

[The taste of the apple (state Berkeley) resides in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself. Analogously (I would say) poetry resides in the commerce of the poem with the reader, not in the series of symbols registered on the pages of a book. What is essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the physical modification that arises with each reading.] (translation mine)

The thrill—a tremor or a shudder associated with a sudden, unexpected pleasure—bears witness, within the repetition that is reading, to an encounter with something unexpected and perhaps unrepeatable. The aesthetic act is

again seen as irreducible to theoretical conceptualization. Borges here disassociates reading from intellectual activity and situates it as essentially an affective experience in which something is passed back and forth between reader and text, and where this “communication” (in the sense of contagion) causes each in its own way to tremble. The pleasure or enjoyment associated with the aesthetic also brings with it a kind of violence that can be heard in the etymology of the word *thrill*, which as Borges was likely well aware, is a metathetic variation on the Old English *thirl*, meaning “to pierce,” “to traverse,” or “to pass right through,” as with a sharp, pointed weapon or instrument.

Desde su catre, Recabarren vio el fin. Una embestida y el negro reculó, perdió pie, amagó un hachazo a la cara y se tendió en una puñalada profunda, que penetró el vientre. Después vino otra que no alcanzó a precisar y Fierro no se levantó. . . . Cumplida su tarea de justiciero, ahora era nadie. Mejor dicho era el otro: no tenía destino sobre la tierra y había matado a un hombre. (Borges 1995, 187)

[From his cot, Recabarren saw the end. A charge, and the Negro fell back; he lost his footing, feinted toward the other’s face, and reached out in a great stab, which penetrated the stranger’s chest. Then there was another stab, which the shopowner did not clearly see, and Fierro did not get up. . . . His righteous task accomplished, he was nobody. More accurately, he became the stranger: he had no further mission on earth, but he had killed a man.] (Borges 1962, 162)

By way of conclusion, I now turn once again to an account of what the witness Recabarren did and did not see—that is, the fatal *thirling* of Martín Fierro. This time I want to juxtapose the climactic moment of the duel with a peculiar aside that precedes it, a Romantic topos, in which the narrative voice attributes a poetic or aesthetic quality to the Pampa at this precise moment in the late afternoon. The aside, which can only strike a reader conditioned by the gaucho genre as inexplicably out of place, breaks away from the blow-by-blow account of the duel to describe how Recabarren was suddenly moved by the landscape. In this aside, seemingly so incongruous with the mortal strife that is coming to a head, we discover an echo of the formulation of the *hecho estético*: “Hay una hora de la tarde en que la llanura está por decir algo; nunca lo dice o tal vez lo dice infinitamente y

no lo entendemos, o lo entendemos pero es intraducible como una música . . .” (There is an hour of the afternoon when the plain is on the verge of saying something. It never says it, or perhaps it says it infinitely, or perhaps we do not understand it, or we understand it and it is as untranslatable as music) (Borges 1995, 187; Borges 1962, 162). This aesthetic introjection, I propose, punctuates Borges’s response to Lugones’s claims on the *gauchesque*. Whereas Lugones understands the tradition as structured by emulation of a pure, monological origin, Borges sees literary history as an archive of possibilities for deviation, transformation, and actualization of unrealized possibilities, in which every iteration re-marks the distribution of the sensible as not-all.

One of the most provocative aspects of Borges’s reflections on aesthetics and his engagements with the popular tradition and its ethical and political concerns is something that Borges criticism—with a few notable exceptions—has yet to address sufficiently. Read with and against one another, Borges’s meditations on the aesthetic and his engagements with Argentine literary, intellectual, and social histories leave no aesthetic ideology of literature unscathed. Borges’s writings on the aesthetic thematize the failure of “literature” as hegemonic or counter-hegemonic instrument or institution. Rather than reaffirming old notions of aesthetic value and “best self,” Borges invites us to think of the aesthetic as interruption of both revelation and the totalizing claims of the modern State in its various forms.



#### NOTES

1. One might conclude that this is where *Facundo* falls short according to the “for the people” code: it manifestly and unapologetically speaks *of* the gaucho but not *to* the gaucho; the offer of social belonging that it grudgingly extends to the popular sectors is premised on an absolute polarization of the sociocultural field, according to which any practices or outlooks that have not received Liberalism’s stamp of approval are automatically disqualified as barbarism. While such a conclusion about the *Facundo*’s pedagogical and ideological shortcomings would be consistent with the terms of Ludmer’s argument, this assessment would be unable to account for the important role played by Sarmiento’s text in the later generalized identification with gaucho culture that takes place, at least in urban spheres, during the twentieth century and continuing to this day.

2. "Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere sound is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pain and pleasure and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state" (Aristotle 2000, Book 1, 1253a, 10–12).
3. The shift in tonality between the first and second part corresponds more or less exactly to the final consolidation of national unity in Argentina, that began in the 1850s (the defeat of Rosas followed by the drafting of the 1853 Constitution) and concluded in 1879–80 (the conquest of indigenous territories by General Rosas; the Province of Buenos Aires joins the Argentine Republic while the city of Buenos Aires is finally federalized).
4. The generalizability of what Derrida has to say about (literary) classification is underscored by the fact that the French *genre* has a much wider set of customary applications than the English *genre*. In addition to "literary genre," the French term (akin to the Spanish *género*) can mean "type," "kind," "[human] race," "more or less," as well as (grammatical or sexual) "gender." It is, thus, the closest thing to a general term for classification as such.
5. The most obvious example of the thematization of social belonging and exclusion in "El fin" is found in the way the text remarks on race or skin color as a form of social categorization. While the *gaucho moreno* refers to Fierro deferentially as "*señor*," he is in turn addressed by Fierro as "*moreno*." And when Recabarren silently questions a young boy as to whether or not anyone might be lingering outside the store, the boy replies negatively, subtracting the *moreno* from the count of the present: "Recabarren le preguntó con los ojos si había algún parroquiano. El chico, taciturno, le dijo por señas que no; el negro no contaba" (184).
6. For an example of what this separation looks like see Borges's 1946 essay "Nuestro pobre individualismo" (1998).
7. I owe this formulation of the event's "double bind" to David Johnson (unpublished communication).

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