

The Gaucho Martin Fierro

Canto I

By José Hernández

Translated by Alan Steinle

José Hernández (1834-1886) became famous in his home country of Argentina for writing (in colloquial Spanish) *The Gaucho Martin Fierro* (first published in 1872) and its sequel, *The Return of Martin Fierro* (first published in 1879). The two epic-length poems are now published together as one poem. The poem is about the life of the *gauchos*, who lived in the countryside in Argentina. They made their living mostly by taking care of cattle on the plains (or *pampas*). They were misunderstood by the progressives in Buenos Aires and other cities, and they were conscripted to fight in battles against the Indians. The *gauchos'* way of life was disappearing at the time that Hernández wrote these poems.

Hernández used six-line stanzas in his poem. The stanzas rhyme xaabba (the first line is unrhymed) and have eight syllables per line (octasyllabic). I have translated here only the first canto, which contains 19 stanzas and 114 lines. The entire poem has 7,210 lines. I used iambic trimeter in my translation, which means that there are six syllables per line and the even-numbered syllables are stressed. I did not use rhyme.

I.1. (Line 1)

*Aquí me pongo a cantar
al compás de la vigüela,
que el hombre que lo desvela
una pena extraordinaria,
como la ave solitaria
con el cantar se consuela.*

So here I start to sing
in time with my guitar;
the sorrow that I feel
won't let me fall asleep;
I'm like a lonely bird
consoled by his own song.

I.2. (Line 7)

*Pido a los Santos del Cielo
que ayuden mi pensamiento,
les pido en este momento
que voy a cantar mi historia
me refresquen la memoria,
y aclaren mi entendimiento.*

I ask the saints above
to help me with my thoughts;
I ask them at this time,
for I will sing my tale;
I would remember all
with clarity of mind.

I.3. (Line 13)

*Vengan Santos milagrosos,
vengan todos en mi ayuda,
que la lengua se me añuda
y se me turba la vista;
pido a mi Dios que me asista
en esta ocasión tan ruda.*

O come, amazing saints,
come down to help me here;
my tongue is tied in knots;
my vision is disturbed;
I ask my God for help
at such a trying time.

I.4. (Line 19)

*Yo he visto muchos cantores,
con famas bien obtenidas,
y que después de alquiridas
no las quieren sustentar-:
parece que sin largar
se cansaron en partidas.*

Some singers have I seen
who earned a little fame;
but after it was reached,
they could not keep it well;
they had no stamina,
but wearied of the race.

I.5. (Line 25)

*Mas ande otro criollo pasa
Martín Fierro ha de pasar,
nada lo hace recular
ni las fantasmas lo espantan;
y dende que todos cantan
yo también quiero cantar.*

What Creoles like to do,
I also want to do;
I never will back down;
the ghosts don't frighten me;
since many like to sing,
I also want to sing.

I.6. (Line 31)

*Cantando me he de morir,
cantando me han de enterrar,
y cantando he de llegar
al pie del Eterno Padre-
dende el vientre de mi madre
vine a este mundo a cantar.*

While singing, I will die,
and then they'll bury me;
while singing, I'll arrive
before the throne of God;
yes, from my mother's womb,
I came to earth to sing.

I.7. (Line 37)

*Que no se trabe mi lengua
ni me falte la palabra
el cantar mi gloria labra
y poniéndome a cantar,
cantando me han de encontrar
aunque la tierra se abra.*

O, let my tongue be loose,
and let me find the words,
for glory comes from song;
and when I start to sing,
they'll find me singing though
the earth should open wide.

I.8. (Line 43)

*Me siento en el plan de un bajo
a cantar un argumento-
como si soplara el viento
hago tiritar los pastos-
con oros, copas y bastos,
juega allí mi pensamiento.*

I'll sit upon the ground
to sing my story's plot;
just like the wind that blows,
I'll make the grasses bend;
I'll play my thoughts out loud
just like I'm playing cards.

I.9. (Line 49)

*Yo no soy cantor letrao,
mas si me pongo a cantar
no tengo cuándo acabar
y me envejezco cantando;
las coplas me van brotando
como agua de manantial.*

I'm not too smart with books,
but when I start to sing,
I don't know when to stop—
I'll age with all my songs;
the verses flow from me
like water from a spring.

I.10. (Line 55)

*Con la guitarra en la mano
ni las moscas se me arriman,
naides me pone el pie encima,
y cuando el pecho se entona,
hago gemir a la prima
y llorar a la bordona.*

With my guitar in hand,
not even flies come near,
and no one steps on me;
and when I bare my heart,
I make the first string moan
and make the sixth string cry.

I.11. (Line 61)

*Yo soy toro en mi rodeo
y toraso en rodeo ageno,
siempre me tuve por güeno
y si me quieren probar,
salgan otros a cantar
y veremos quién es menos.*

I am the bull out here—
is there a better one?
I feel my talent's good,
so if you'd like a test,
let others come and try,
and let's see who will fall.

I.12. (Line 67)

*No me hago al lao de la güeya
aunque vengán degollando,
con los blandos yo soy blando
y soy duro con los duros,
y ninguno, en un apuro
me ha visto andar titubiando.*

I don't avoid a fight,
although some throats are slit;
with softies I am soft,
with tough guys I am tough;
and, in a bind, no one
has seen me hesitate.

I.13. (Line 73)

*En el peligro ¡qué Cristos!
el corazón se me enancha
pues toda la tierra es cancha,
y de esto naides se asombre,
el que se tiene por hombre
ande quiera hace pata ancha.*

When danger comes, oh man!
My heart just starts to pound;
the earth's a battlefield—
no one should be amazed;
if you think you're a man,
then stand up for yourself.

I.14. (Line 79)

*Soy gaucho, y entiendanlo
como mi lengua lo esplica,
para mí la tierra es chica
y pudiera ser mayor,
ni la víbora me pica
ni quema mi frente el Sol.*

I am a gaucho—heed
my explanation here:
to me the earth is small—
it could be bigger still;
the snake does not bite me,
nor does the sun burn me.

I.15. (Line 85)

*Nací como nace el peje
en el fondo de la mar,
naides me puede quitar
aquello que Dios me dio
lo que al mundo truje yo
del mundo lo he de llevar.*

I came into the world,
a fish within the sea;
no one can take away
what God has given me;
what I brought with me here
I will take from the world.

I.16. (Line 91)

*Mi gloria es vivir tan libre
como el pájaro del Cielo,
no hago nido en este suelo
ande hay tanto que sufrir;
y naides me ha de seguir
cuando yo remonto el vuelo.*

My glory is to live
as free as any bird;
I do not make my nest
upon the troubled ground;
and no one follows me
when I ascend and soar.

I.17. (Line 97)

*Yo no tengo en el amor
quien me venga con querellas,
como esas aves tan bellas
que saltan de rama en rama—
yo hago en el trébol mi cama,
y me cubren las estrellas.*

I do not have a love
to quarrel with me here;
just like those pretty birds,
I hop from branch to branch;
in clover is my bed;
I'm covered by the stars.

I.18. (Line 103)

*Y sepan cuantos me escuchan
de mis penas el relato
que nunca peleo ni mato
sino por necesidá;
y que a tanta alversidá
sólo me arrojó el mal trato.*

Tell those who listen to
my tale of pain and woe
that I don't fight or kill
unless there is a need;
and my adversity
was caused by much abuse.

I.19. (Line 109)

*Y atiendan la relación
que hace un gaucho perseguido
que fue buen padre y marido
empeñoso y diligente,
y sin embargo la gente
lo tiene por un bandido.*

And pay attention to
this gaucho who's harassed;
he was a spouse and dad,
hard-working and upright,
and yet the people think
that he's a common crook.