

THE ART OF PASTICHE: ARGENTINA IN *THE SATANIC VERSES*

En las *Rubaiyat* se lee que la historia universal es un espectáculo que Dios concibe, representa y contempla; esta especulación...nos dejaría pensar que el inglés pudo recrear al persa, porque ambos eran, esencialmente, Dios o caras momentáneas de Dios...

Toda colaboración es misteriosa. Ésta del inglés y del persa lo fue más que ninguna...
(Borges 690)

The purpose of this piece is to examine a brief segment of one of 1989's best known (but perhaps least read) novels, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. In the chapter "Elloven Delloven" (the name for London in a children's game mentioned in the novel), Rushdie narrates the events of Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha's strange journeys from the southern English coast near Hastings to London. The segment that interests me is less than fifteen pages (out of almost six hundred), and concerns the reminiscences of Rosa Diamond about her experiences in Argentina a half century earlier. What intrigues me is the image that Rushdie provides of Argentina in the 1930s, and how he got that idea. For, as will soon become apparent, the image provided is a pastiche of modern Argentina, and a curiously nostalgic and literary view of an Argentina that had vanished years before Doña Rosa arrived there in 1935.

But first, the brief history of Rosa Diamond's experiences in Argentina. A spinster of forty, she meets the Anglo-Argentine rancher Enrique Diamond in England and agrees to marry him. They sail to Buenos Aires in 1935 and settle on his ranch in the pampas. Don Enrique proves to be more interested in birds than in her, and she develops an infatuation for one of the ranchhands, Martín de la Cruz, who is engaged to a local girl with the improbable name of Aurora del Sol. Her husband decides to send her on a trip to visit the country (mention is made of the Andes, which would imply a long trip from the pampas of the province of Buenos Aires) accompanied by Martín. On their return a confused quarrel breaks out, perhaps instigated by Aurora, and ends when Don Enrique kills Martín. The local judge is content not to prosecute Don Enrique if he and his wife return to England. They do so, and Don Enrique dies soon thereafter, leaving Doña Rosa alone with her memories—and her (perhaps never declared or consummated) love for Martín.¹

¹ Like Hudson, she never returns to Argentina. Jason Wilson comments: "Hudson can only return to his

When Gibreel Farishta is left alone with Rosa (after the police arrest Chamcha), she confuses him with Martín, and indeed times becomes confused for him as well. For instance, when they go to the nearby village to buy groceries, Gibreel sees a cart full of gauchos and their girl friends singing in Spanish. Similarly, when he makes love to Rosa—or to his hallucination of a younger Rosa, or to the specter of Mrs. Rekha Merchant disguised as Rosa—he is unsure whether his experience is real or imaginary; if it is imaginary, he is not sure whether the imagination at work is his or someone else's.² (This continues to be the case throughout *The Satanic Verses*, and indeed the chapters that have aroused such fury around the world may well be Gibreel's hallucinations as well as a travesty of a prophet's or archangel's revelations.)

Now, in a note at the end of the book Rushdie claims that the material on Argentina is derived from the writings of William Henry Hudson, particularly from Hudson's 1918 autobiography *Far Away and Long Ago*. Indeed, many details from the segment of Rushdie's novel do derive from the Hudson autobiography, including the description of the ombú tree and that of the plague of thistles. Of the first, Hudson writes:

The ombú is a very singular tree indeed, and being the only representative of tree-vegetation, natural to the soil, on those great level plains, and having also many curious superstitions connected with it, it is a romance in itself. ...[I]ts leaves, which are large, glossy and deep green, like laurel leaves, are poisonous. (5)³

Rushdie has Enrique Diamond explain to his new wife about the strength of the pampero winds, only to add: "No trees is why: not an ombú, not a poplar, nada. And you have to watch out for ombú leaves, by the way. Deadly poison. The wind won't kill you but the leaf-juice can" (145). Rosa Diamond comments: "Honestly, Henry, silent winds, poisonous leaves. You make it sound like a fairy-story" (145). As for the plague of thistles, at one point Farishta looks out of Rosa Diamond's window, the house having been magically transported for a moment from Hastings to the pampas, and this is what meets his gaze: "In every direction, and as far as he could see, there were giant thistles waving in the breeze" (154). This description derives from the following passage in Hudson's autobiography:

The aspect of the plain was different in what was called a 'thistle year,' when the giant thistles, which usually occupied definite areas or grew in isolated patches, suddenly sprang up everywhere, and for a season covered most of the land. (68)

Similarly, when Rosa Diamond tells of the finding of Martín de la Cruz's body—

"broken" home through tantic memory's vivid images. He admits: 'I am glad that I shall never revisit [the lagoons of the pampas], that I shall finish my life thousands of miles removed from them, cherishing to the end in my heart the image of a beauty which has vanished from the earth.' ...To Morley Roberts he confessed: 'Perhaps I may say that my life ended when I left South America'" (59).

² The parallels to Borges' "El Sur" and Fuentes' *Aura* are obvious enough here.

³ The ombú is described again in similar terms in Hudson's story "The Ombú."

"The pampero came, the south-west wind, flattening the thistles. That's when they found him, or was it before?" (155)—the description again derives from Hudson: "the wind would strike and roar in the bent-down trees and shake the house. And in an hour or two it would perhaps be all over, the next morning the detested thistles would be gone, or at all events levelled to the ground" (70-71).

The odd thing about these textual "intrusiones, o hurtos," to use Borges' phrase (544), is that the Hudson book (as its title implies) is set in the province of Buenos Aires in the middle of the nineteenth century, whereas Doña Rosa's recollections of Argentina begin in 1935 and end with her departure, apparently before the Second World War. She says of her return to England: "Henry died the first winter home. Then nothing happened. The war. The end" (155).⁴ There had been very considerable changes in the life on the pampas in the time between Hudson's years on the Argentine plain (where he was born in 1841, spending his childhood in Quilmes and Chascomús)⁵ and Rosa Diamond's arrival in 1935, not the least of which were the elimination of the Indian population (in the genocidal "Conquest of the Desert" of 1879), the construction of railroads and freezer plants for the exportation of Argentine beef, the fencing of the range and improvement of the herds, the planting of wheat and other crops for export, and the transformation of the rural population from nomadic gauchos to sedentary farmhands and ranchhands.⁶ These changes, however, do not impinge on Rosa Diamond's nostalgic experience of an earlier Argentina; like Borges' character Juan Dahlmann in "El Sur," Rosa might perhaps suspect "que viajaba al pasado y no sólo al Sur" (528).

In his book on Sandinista Nicaragua, *The Jaguar Smile*, Rushdie reveals a considerable ignorance of Spanish, an ignorance confirmed here by a small detail. In his description of a knife fight, Rushdie has Rosa recall that Martín and his adversary "wrapped ponchas [sic] around their forearms, drew their knives, circled, fought" (149). Hudson wrote that "I at that time, at the age of nine, like my elder brothers had come to take a keen interest in the fighting gaucho. A duel between two men with knives, their ponchas [sic] wrapped round their left arms and used as shields, was a thrilling spectacle to us" (136-137). As Borges remarked in

⁴ A further reference to the Second World War confirms that Rosa Diamond spent the war years in England. When the policemen come to arrest Saladin Chamcha they turn her flashlights on her suddenly. Dazed and lost in time, she cries: "Put out that light, don't you know there's a blackout, you'll be having Jerry down on us if you carry on so" (138).

⁵ The Argentine background of Hudson's writings has been studied by Guillermo Ara, Alcides Degiuseppe and (most eloquently) by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada. See also the documents included in the Hispanic Institute volume on Hudson (47-85). For Anglo-American discussions of Hudson's writings on Argentina and the uses made of them by Argentine critics, see John Walker's rather longwinded essay "'Home Thoughts from Abroad': W.H. Hudson's Argentine Fiction" and the briefer and more insightful study of Hudson by Jason Wilson, "W.H. Hudson: The Colonial's Revenge."

⁶ On the transformation of the pampas to agricultural production see the works of James Scobie, particularly his book on wheat.

an article on *The Purple Land*, Hudson's spelling of Spanish was careless to an extreme,⁷ yet he provides the correct spelling of *poncho* on two other pages of this autobiography (169 and 254).

Despite the fact that the gauchos as described by Hudson and his contemporaries had largely disappeared from the Argentine plains by the 1930's, they were omnipresent in Argentine literature and culture, which forged a myth of origin around them.⁸ Lugones and Rojas considered Hernández's *Martín Fierro* the national epic, Güiraldes provided a nostalgic version of the myth in his 1926 novel *Don Segundo Sombra*, and Pedro Figari was but the most eminent of the painters who found a worthy subject in the lost culture of the gauchos. The reasons for this "criollismo" include anxiety over the increasingly urban nature of Argentine culture, a reaction against European immigration, and the rise of a native populism.⁹ In this climate, it is easy to understand Martínez Estrada's attempt to assimilate Hudson into the national mythology. Clearly, though, for Martínez Estrada, Hudson occupies just one place in a larger pantheon, and Rushdie's erasure of the relations between Hudson's version of the pampas and that offered by the gauchesque writers would no doubt have seemed odd to him.¹⁰

An even more curious feature is the presence of Peronists in Doña Rosa's recollections. She mentions them several times (147, 150, 155), and indeed the expulsion of her husband and herself from Argentina after the death of Martín seems partly to be attributed to xenophobia, particularly to anti-British feelings, whipped up by the Peronist nationalists. All of this is very interesting, especially because the rise of Perón begins several years after the Diamonds have gone to England. Perón first came to public attention in 1943 as minister of war in the government of General Pedro Ramírez, then rose to the post of vice president in the government of General Edelmiro Farrell in 1944. He became president after the elections of February 1946.¹¹ Since Rosa spent the war years in England, it is hard

⁷ Borges writes: "Quizá ninguna de las obras de la literatura gauchesca aventaje a *The Purple Land*. Sería deplorable que alguna distracción topográfica y tres o cuatro errores o erratas (*Camelones* por *Canelones*, *Aria* por *Arias*, *Gumesinda* por *Gumersinda*) nos escamotearan esa verdad. ...*The Purple Land* es fundamentalmente criolla. ...Martínez Estrada... no ha vacilado en preferir la obra de Hudson al más insigne de los libros canónicos de nuestra literatura gauchesca. Por lo pronto, el ámbito que abarca *The Purple Land* es incomparablemente mayor. El *Martín Fierro*... es menos la epopeya de nuestros orígenes—¡en 1872!— que la autobiografía de un cuchillero, falseada por bravatas y por quejumbres que casi profetizan el tango" (734). See also Walker 337n.

⁸ Despite the ironic tone of the reference to origin myths in the Borges quotation in the previous note, Borges uses this particular myth with great frequency in his work (see Balderston, "The Mark of the Knife" and "Dichos y hechos").

⁹ For the classic 1902 essay on "criollismo," see Quesada. Adolfo Prieto and Josefina Ludmer's books are but the most important of recent studies of the "gauchesque" and "criollista" traditions.

¹⁰ If Rushdie is dependent almost exclusively on Hudson for his images of Argentina, Thomas Pynchon is similarly reliant almost exclusively on Borges in his depiction of rural Argentine life in *Gravity's Rainbow* (see for instance 263-64 and 383-84, both pastiches based largely on various Borges texts).

¹¹ The best general history of Argentina in English is by David Rock. On the rise of Perón see pages 249-61.

to see how she could have known Peronists some years before there were any. There is, then, an odd foreshortening of historical time in the sharply etched images in Rosa's memory. In his book on Nicaragua, Rushdie writes:

'History,' in Veronica Wedgwood's phrase, 'is lived forward but it is written in retrospect.' To live in the real world was to act without knowing the end. The act of living a real life differed, I mused, from the act of making a fictional one, too, because you were stuck with your mistakes. No revisions, no second drafts. To visit Nicaragua was to be shown that the world was not television, or history, or fiction. The world was real, and this was its actual unmediated reality. (168)

Curiously, though, for Rushdie experience of reality seems to be vicarious: one "visits" reality rather than lives in it. It can only be "actual" and "unmediated" when it is not everyday experience.¹²

I take it that this foreshortening of time is related to one of Rushdie's main themes in the novel: the supposed obliteration of differences in the modern world. Thus, Farishta and Chamcha find themselves "strangers in a strange land" (to use one of Hudson's favorite Biblical phrases), yet they are no more strange there than where they came from.¹³ Indeed there is a blurring of the question of nationality that alarms Chamcha no end, since his heart's desire is to be a proper Englishman. Similarly, there is a good deal of contamination of the images of Mecca at the time of the Prophet by images of modern London—and vice versa. In *The Jaguar Smile*, Rushdie writes, "The twentieth century was a strange place" (118), a phrase interesting not only for its conflation of time and space but also for the implicit recognition that the twentieth century experience is not only the experience of modernity but of the simultaneous presence of other (theoretically previous) modern. Thus, the Argentina—or the Mecca—of *The Satanic Verses* are places where historical time has collapsed.

Fredric Jameson writes of the relation between the postmodern and the past that "pastiche eclipses parody,"¹⁴ that now "the producers of culture have nowhere

¹² Similarly, in *Shame*, Rushdie writes:

By now, if I had been writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally, not only about Pakistan. The book would have been banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned. All that effort for nothing. Realism can break a writer's heart.

Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale, so that's all right; nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either.

What a relief! (72)

The same sentiments are echoed on page 92 of *Shame*, this time with reference to Milan Kundera and the problem of the exiled writer. Rushdie's reflections on the relations between the writer and society have acquired an even more ominous tone because of subsequent developments known to all.

¹³ Hudson's strategy in *The Purple Land* is exactly the reverse, though the effect is similar. His protagonist Richard Lamb is an Englishman who wishes he had been born in South America (as Hudson himself was) because he becomes "conscious of the emptiness of his own culture" (Wilson 55).

¹⁴ Jameson writes: "parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead

to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (65). Furthermore, he says, past experience is itself derealized: "historicism," he says, "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (65-66) effaces history:

The past is thereby itself modified: what was once, in the historical novel as Lukács defined it, the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project ... has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum. ... In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as "referent" finds itself gradually bracketed, and the effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts. (66)¹⁵

As we have seen in regard to the pastiche of Argentina, Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* perfectly fits this description, though the novel has an exuberance and force exceeding what Professor Jameson may lead us to expect in his rather dour assessment of postmodernism. Indeed, the public outcry surrounding the novel suggests that it may have "hit home" in several of the worlds it makes reference to. The novel has only recently appeared in Spanish, so perhaps Rushdie's appropriation of Argentina's mythology has not yet aroused the fury of Argentine nationalists. When that day comes (as it surely will), the "purely textual" nature of Rushdie's novel will be quite thoroughly beside the point.¹⁶

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language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse. ...Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blank eyeballs" (65).

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon makes similar claims for what she terms "historiographic metafiction" (105-23), and includes Rushdie in her discussion of this tendency in the contemporary historical novel (120).

¹⁶ Though this article seems to end with an attack on nationalism itself as an idea, I would like to distinguish clearly between the nationalist ideologies that are used to unify the aspirations of a subject people (e.g. Puerto Rico) and those that are used jingoistically in powerful nation-states. My example of the latter phenomenon here is Argentina, a country in which nationalist ideologies were exploited to terrible effect during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, but they could equally have been the United Kingdom (Rushdie's adopted country), or my own sorry nation-state, the United States. Two profound studies of the fissures in the ideologies of nationalism are Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* The latter work in particular has obvious relevance to the case of Puerto Rico.

My own position on this question is the same as that of my late friend Ruth Reynolds, who would I am sure share my horror at the abuse of "nationalism" in attacks on Panama or Kuwait (or on the person of Salman Rushdie), but who never wavered in her support of the national aspirations of the people of Puerto Rico.

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