Arteletra

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Chapter Seven

¡Ay, EPOPEYA!; or Filloy’s Gauchos at the Origins

Epopeya is the Spanish word for both a heroic act and epic poetry. With this interjection, Filloy’s palindrome registers an exhaustion or frustration with heroism, in general, and the literary traditions responsible for creating monuments to it. In the case of Argentina, the gauchos and the gaucho genre occupy one of the spaces dedicated to the celebration of national heroes through literature. I have chosen Filloy’s interjection “¡Ay, EPOPEYA!” as my starting point for interpreting his interventions into the gaucho genre’s archives (Karcino 73). Here I analyze three short stories about gauchos from Los Ochoa (1972), the first of four books that comprise his “Saga de los 8A” or Ochoa Family Saga. The Saga continues with La potra (1973), SexAmor (1996), and Decio 8A (1997), and these narratives span the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in and around Río Cuarto, a city in Córdoba Province, near where many of the fictional plots take place.¹

Filloy’s narratives relate the lives of different gauchos whose untold stories become intertwined with the densely populated archives in which the so-called desert landscape of Córdoba Province has been imagined and documented. Rather than mythologize the so-called Interior as a repository of the national essence, Filloy’s writing can be described, to use the category developed by Laura Demaría, as “escritura en provincia”: “una escritura situada,’ marcada por el lugar de enunciación desde el que se narra la provincia pero que no refiere a un ser identitario sino a un archivo de historias en constante movimiento” (Buenos Aires 420–21). As Filloy interrogates and rewrites this national tradition, I argue that his protagonists are divested of the symbolic weight imposed upon them in order to write in plain sight the stories of their at times violent, at others banal, misadventures throughout the Argentine provinces. Avoiding essentialist constructs and
regionalisms, I analyze the type of narrative that can be written about the gauchos by starting from this exhaustion of the *epopeya*, by writing when no fixed origin at the center, no solid ground below, and no moral absolutes above will be permitted to orient the gaucho genre. Instead, Filloy’s Saga constructs original narratives that displace a number of the genre’s essentialist conventions, while proposing an open-ended relationship between the figure of the gaucho and the history of the nation through an exploration and transformation of nineteenth-century archives.

**The Gaucho Jodón**

“As de espadas” is the second story in Filloy’s *Los Ochoa*, and it is the first of two stories about the second gaucho of the family, Primo Ochoa. At a party to celebrate the Centennial of Argentine Independence on July 9, 1916, Primo joins three other men in a game of *truco*, a card game played by almost every gaucho in the genre that easily lends itself to national allegories. This narrative begins by recalling that possibility: “En la mesa de truco se tocan los cuatro puntos cardinales del país” (21). However, the game is guided by “un demonio jodón y sagaz” and requires players “matizar los caprichos del azar” (21). Deceit and chance are its only underlying principles. Once Primo realizes he and his partner are going to lose the game, he plucks a tick from a dog and sneaks it among his opponent’s snacks. About to win, Cuquejo bites into the tick, and its blood bursts into his mouth. In a rage, he tries to stab Primo but trips on a chair. Primo hits him on the head with a carbonated water bottle, and Cuquejo falls, cracks his neck on another chair, and dies. This narrative ends with Primo, the gaucho, in jail before eventually being pardoned for his crime. At Filloy’s Centennial truco match, a new national hero does not arise.

Situated within the archives of the gaucho genre, it may appear that Primo is simply another in a long line of *gauchos malos*. In Hilario Ascasubi’s *Santos Vega* (1851), for example, these bad gauchos are defined in sharp contrast to their counterpart, the good gauchos. Ascasubi’s narrator tells the story of two twins, Luis and Jacinto, the bad and the good gaucho, respectively. Consistent throughout this entire text is the binary that divides these two brothers from the moment they first appear:
¡Ay, epopeya!

Ansí, desde charabón, / el mellizo más flauchín / descubrió un alma tan ruin, / y perversa de tal modo, / que con buena crianza y todo / salió un saltiador al fin. // Este se llamaba Luis, / y el otro hermano Jacinto, / criatura de un istinto / humilde como perdiz. (338)

Jacinto’s story is brief, since it is relatively free of drama, whereas Luis reappears over and again to commit violent crimes. The bad gaucho never transforms into a good gaucho; the only solace is the happy ending achieved upon Luis’s death. In this sense, Ascasubi prescribes the forced disappearance of the bad gaucho, of the thieving, unrestrained gaucho type, that impedes Argentina’s modernization.2

Filloy’s gauchos do not fit within this moral binary; rather, they pry open this opposition and deactivate its ability to partition individuals into rigidly opposing moral categories. Primo, put bluntly, is an obnoxious drunk. He plays tricks on everyone in his youth, and as an old man in another story, “Carbunclo,” he gets thrown in jail for urinating on the veterinarian’s lawn and insulting his wife after proudly shouting: “¡Miren, carajo, apriendan! ¡Esto se llama mear!” (Ochoa 36). In response, Filloy’s narrator invents a new category for Primo called the gaucho jodón: “Don Primo, ya raspando la sesentena, mantenía fresca por doquiera su modalidad de gaucho jodón. De gaucho jodón, pero no malo” (38). Jodón can be translated as “damned irritating” or “tricky, sneaky.” The gaucho jodón is neither good nor bad; moral absolutes prove too extreme to register Primo’s disturbing irreverence, what in many cases are banal insults, jokes, or tricks unworthy of eternal condemnation. For this reason, his story cannot be elevated through nationalism as the ideal, patriotic citizen.3 This gaucho jodón is an irritating trickster and nothing more.

Filloy’s invention of the gaucho jodón represents a drastic departure from many of the classics of the genre and their critical reception around the turn of the twentieth century. Rama demonstrates that gauchesque poetry was not written by gauchos but rather by and for the lettered elite in pursuit of their own political and economic interests that often came into conflict with the gauchos: “El poeta no sirve a su público sino a las elites que él integra o que lo dirigen y financian” (Los gauchipolíticos rioplatenses 52). Furthermore, Josefina Ludmer analyzes how the figure of the gaucho is constructed and manipulated by this elite:
“The gaucho genre implemented this conjunction: it constituted a literary political language, politicized popular culture, and left its founding mark on Argentine culture” (69). Masking their place of enunciation under the guise of popular, oral culture, the genre’s canonical authors and critics use the voice of the gaucho to speak to the masses of the nation. They transform the very subjects who were disdained as outlaws and vagabonds during the nineteenth century into an essentialist symbol around the Centennial to root the modern nation within an imagined, rural tradition. Though Filloy is yet another lettered elite appropriating the gaucho genre, his intervention actively strips it of the empty, nationalist gestures of his predecessors in order to leave the gauchos in plain sight of all those who might celebrate these absent, irritating figures as heroic role models.

**Dismantling the Original Gaucho**

Leopoldo Lugones is one such critic who desperately works to create a national hero out of this literary tradition for his own political purposes. At the Teatro Odeón in Buenos Aires in 1913, he presented his treatise on the gaucho genre, casting it as Argentina’s epic poetry. He later expanded and published this work as *El payador* in 1916 to coincide with the Centennial. “It was a timely invention,” Sarlo explains, “for immigrants from Italy, as well as Germany and Central Europe, were arriving by the thousands in Buenos Aires, and the intellectuals were worrying about the future of their culture” (*Jorge Luis Borges* 37). Situated in this context, Sarlo demonstrates that Lugones’s appeal to the gauchos and the genre stems from an ideological desire to delimit and control official Argentine culture in the face of rapid immigration to Buenos Aires. From the capital, Lugones turns toward the provinces and claims to find the supposed repository of the national essence, a place considered by him to be uncontaminated by foreign influences.

Lugones understands the epic hero as righteously spreading Western civilization along his journey, and he seeks to prove that Argentina has such a hero—the now absent gaucho. He constructs a direct link between this national tradition and the origins of Western civilization, which for him is located in the songs of medieval troubadours and epic poetry. After an
impressive etymological exercise that traces the ancient roots of the word *payador* in Greek, Latin, and other Romance languages, Lugones declares in the prologue to *El payador* that the gaucho genre is the essential tradition of the Argentine nation: “Titulo este libro con el nombre de los antiguos cantores errantes que recorrían nuestras campañas trovando romances y endechas, porque fueron ellos los personajes más significativos en la formación de nuestra raza” (xvii). His etymologies intend to prove that all roads lead from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gaucho’s *payada*—a musical, rhetorical competition—to the dance and poetic composition of the medieval troubadours. Though he describes these singing gauchos as errant subjects, he locks their movements into a fixed, retrograde itinerary to monumentalize them as the Argentine equivalent of the precursors to European epic poetry. For Lugones, if the gauchos are Argentine troubadours, then the *Martín Fierro* (1872)—in his view, the best of the gaucho genre—is the Argentine epic poem. According to his positivist logic, after only one century of independence Argentina is poised to become one of the great Western nations, because Argentine literary traditions follow the same line of historical progress seen in Europe.

*El payador* is a complex text in which Lugones scours the Western archives—from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* to the *Divine Comedy* and the *Cantar de Mio Cid*—to prove the value of a local tradition by situating the gaucho genre alongside already consecrated texts. This strategy can be described, to use Derrida’s term, as “archive fever”: “a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepresible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement” (*Archive Fever* 91). On the one hand, Lugones raises an immobile monument to the gaucho as the originary, yet absent, figure whose essential moral qualities are said to persist in the modern Argentine man in contrast to the uprooted foreign immigrants. On the other, Lugones grasps for some unreachable link that might prove Argentina’s merit within Western civilization at the start of the twentieth century.

I like to imagine that Filloy exclaimed “¡Ay, EPOPEYAI!” after reading Lugones’s fiction of the original gaucho in *El payador*. In order to restore the complexity of the gaucho genre after Lugones reified it into self-serving monuments, both the genre at large and
the figure of the gaucho will have to be interrogated and transformed. In their prologue to *Poesía gauchesca*, Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares dismantle Lugones’s entire argument by demonstrating that the *Martín Fierro* is not even an epic poem:

> Ello es erróneo. Ni la compleja historia argentina cabe en las guerras de frontera de mediados de siglo, ni el protagonista [...] puede ser emblemático de un país. Lo cierto es que la epopeya argentina no ha sido escrita; está acaso esbozada en la heterogénea obra de Ascasubi. La novela, en su doble carácter de testimonio de una época y de plena declaración de un destino, está ilustremente dada en el *Martín Fierro*. (xxi–xxii)

By displacing the poetic genealogy to Ascasubi and enshrining Hernández as the forefather of the Argentine novel, Borges and Bioy Casares attempt to make Lugones’s painstaking etymologies and essentialist references to the archive irrelevant to any discussion of Argentine aesthetics and politics. Of course, these two authors are not impartial historians of the genre. Demaría argues that their prologue, selections, and notes throughout the anthology present an implicit political ideology: “Con la desmitificación de Hernández responden a la apología del nacionalismo; con la revalorización de Ascasubi y su uso de la gauchesca como arma política atacan al peronismo” (“Borges y Bioy Casares” 27). They contest the historical revisionism that constructed Rosas as a national hero while they decry Peronist politics as dictatorial. Nevertheless, central to their essay is the imperative to destroy and discard Lugones’s errors in analyzing the genre as well as his essentialist definitions of Argentine culture that close it to future interventions. In “El escritor argentino y la tradición,” Borges makes many of the same arguments as in the prologue with Bioy Casares; however, for Argentine culture to become worthy of the laurels Lugones would bestow upon it, Borges argues that it must be capable of exceeding the particular customs and traditions of local culture: “Quiero señalar otra contradicción: los nacionalistas simulan venerar las capacidades de la mente argentina pero quieren limitar el ejercicio poético de esa mente a algunos pobres temas locales, como si los argentinos sólo pudiéramos hablar de orillas y estancias y no del universo” (554). Rather, the only trait worthy of applying to his entire nation is “la
versatilidad argentina,” the ability to adapt, change, and be skilled at various endeavors (555).

Proto and the Ochoas
Whereas Borges and Bioy Casares uncover the underlying ideologies motivating writers like Lugones to appropriate the genre, Filloy’s narratives write in plain sight the lives of otherwise unnoticed gauchos, as in the case of Primo, none of whom can be elevated as universal heroes. Of course, the concept of the hero is far from a universal. An individual’s status as hero only exists within the closed confines of a group identity celebrating their triumph, often through violence and conquest, over another. Only a small change in perspective is necessary to lay bare the violent acts committed by individuals in their will to power and the absolute banality of such narcissists that get celebrated as epic heroes. For this reason, Ernesto Laclau calls for a new type of hero, one who can confront the tragedies of political violence “and admit the contingency of her own beliefs, instead of seeking refuge in religious or rationalistic myth” (Emancipation(s) 123). If there should be more heroic narratives—and I am not certain there should be—then Laclau argues for the need to represent those heroes as the particular, complex, and even contradictory human beings they are without ignoring the often violent context in which their heroic deeds took place. Filloy’s narratives represent the gauchos along the lines described by Laclau, but in the process the word “hero” will prove to be an unlikely description of the gauchos at the origins of the Ochoa Family Saga.

Born just after Argentine independence, Proto Ochoa is the family’s earliest recorded member. His story is also the first of the collection, titled “El juído (El patriarca),” but his status as the patriarch is secondary, literally placed in parenthesis, to that as “el juído.” The verb “juir” is used throughout the genre as the gaucho’s pronunciation of “huir,” meaning “to flee, to run away, to escape (from),” and “el juído” can be translated as “the fugitive.” In Canto II of La ida, the first half of the classic Martín Fierro, Fierro emphasizes this verb, “juir,” as he describes the life of the gaucho: “Estaba el gaucho en su pago / con toda siguridá; / pero aura… ¡barbaridá!, / la cosa anda tan fruncida, / que gasta el pobre la
vida / en juir de la autoridá. [...] // Ansí empezaron mis males, / lo mismo que los de tantos” (Hernández 120–21). Whereas Lugones would solidly ground Fierro as the national hero in an immobile monument, Filloy’s narrative restores the gaucho’s errancy as expressed in the classic through the verb juir.

Proto, this other founding father, is an outlaw on the run after assaulting and disfiguring an officer: “Güeno, lo golpié del lao zurdo rebanándole l’oreja” (“El juído” 12). To avoid punishment, he deserts his post in the army, flees to the unincorporated nineteenth-century countryside, and takes refuge among the Ranquel. Establishing an affinity with the most well-known gaucho, Proto slightly adapts the Martín Fierro, further underscoring his own errancy: “Lo mesmo le pasó a Martín Fierro: Anduvo siempre juyendo / Siempre pobre y perseguido / No tuvo cueva ni nido / Como si fuera un maldito; / Porque el ser gaucho, carajo / El ser gaucho es un delito” (10; italics in original).5 The classic text is written in the present tense, allowing a critic like Lugones to generalize Fierro’s story as representative of all gauchos; Proto’s translation into the past tense restores the particularity of Fierro’s experience, though he retains the same conclusions: to be a gaucho is a crime. From this beginning, the patriarch of the Ochoa family, one particular gaucho among thousands, appears in perpetual motion.6 His only connection to the nascent nation-state is as a fugitive and outlaw.

Before introducing this errant figure, the prologue to Los Ochoa grounds the entire Saga on quicksand from the first sentence: “Esta nativa ‘Saga de los 8A’ no es un engendro literario, sino una concreción de hechos y episodios de seres humanos, emergidos en la superficie de diferentes actualidades en una región de ‘tierra adentro,’ entre médanos y guadales de la ‘pampa seca’” (5). On the one hand, the scare quotes around “tierra adentro” and “pampa seca” showcase the irony with which these terms are employed; the clichéd description of the Pampa as a dry, lifeless, no man’s land is discarded. On the other, the narrator retains the words médanos and guadales to describe the province as being composed of dunes and sandy bogs. In this regard, Filloy’s narrative is consistent with other nineteenth-century descriptions of the Pampa. In Una excursión a los indios ranqueles (1890), Lucio V. Mansilla along the path from Calcumuleu to Leubucó describes the difficulty of riding through “los médanos de movediza arena” (119). Though
a challenge to be overcome by the expanding state in Mansilla’s narrative, Filloy’s Saga appropriates this shifting terrain as the only possible grounds for a national narrative in the provinces. Trying to remain immobile or erect permanent monuments on such terrain would be futile, but the Ochoas know how to traverse the surface of this landscape that constantly shifts under their feet. In Filloy’s stories, the only originary figures are those who resist reification as common folks in a slow-paced region imagined as the reservoir of a simpler past. The human beings who learn to make do in the changing realities of these provincial lands cannot be so easily co-opted by the nation-state for allegorical or institutional purposes.

Filloy’s prologue ends by making serious play with the linear logic of genealogy. The narrator lists the names of the Ochoas whose year of birth could be found in the public record:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>Proto Orosimba 8A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>Primo 8A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>Segunda 8A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>Novena 8A, La Nona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>Quintín, 8A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Octavo 8A, gemelo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Noveno 8A, gemelo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Tércer 8A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>Mil 8A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Decena 8A, melliza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Docena 8A, melliza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Once 8A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Sexto 8A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Décimo 8A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Crisanto Funes 8A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Ochoa Family is organized chronologically as a genealogy, not a branching family tree, that spans from Independence to the 1960s. They all write their last name “8A” as a shorthand, because the family name is a homophone for “eight a” in Spanish. Also, they use another shorthand when their first names are ordinal numbers; for example, Octavo Ochoa, a homophone for Eighth Eight A, writes his name as “8°8A” (90).

In observing this chronology of numerically named Ochoas, the strict ordering of a genealogy, traditionally conceived as a direct path from the present back to the pure origin, errs away from linear logic. The first Ochoa in the list is Proto Orosimba, the fugitive, whose name is also a suffix meaning “origin” or “beginning.” He is followed by Primo, Proto’s son and the second gaucho in the family. A possibly shortened form of “primero, first,” since he writes his name “1°8A,” “primo” also means “cousin,” suggesting at the same time a second origin for the Saga and a displacement of direct lineage. Proto and Primo are followed by the third person
in the list, the first woman, Segunda, whose name is a homophone for the feminine inflexion of “segundo, second.” Tércer, whose name shifts the stress and shortens the word “tercero, third” appears as the eighth person in the list, after Novena (feminine “ninth”), Quintín (diminutive “fifth”), and the twins, Octavo (masculine “eighth”) and Noveno (masculine “ninth”). These names perpetually displace any and all numerical order, and other family members not listed here appear throughout the Saga. This list ends with Crisanto Funes, whose name does not carry on the number game but takes a radical detour from this logic altogether. Crisanto is described as the great-great-grandson of La Nona, a common name for a grandmother among Argentine families of Italian heritage. This inclusion is perhaps anachronistic and out of place, since the great waves of Italian immigrants arrived in Buenos Aires roughly half a century after La Nona’s birth; however, her presence within the Ochoa family directly challenges Lugones’s desperate attempt to isolate Argentina’s national essence from those same immigrants by writing them into its origins.

The competing numerical logics between the dates and the ordinal numbers create a tension that moves back and forth along this genealogy. The dates order it along a linear path; the homophonic first names do not simply reverse this order, but rather they scatter it, al vesre and al verse, beyond recognition without abandoning the genealogical structure or removing the Ochoa family from Argentine territory. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971), published only the year before Filloy’s Los Ochoa appeared in print, Foucault analyzes Nietzsche’s use of genealogy as a method for calling into question the intrinsic worth of moral values by demonstrating how they were created and modified over time: “[Nietzsche] finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (142). A genealogical exploration for Nietzsche, Foucault, and by extension, Filloy, “disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (147). In this sense, the genealogy placed at the beginning of Filloy’s Ochoa Family Saga turns against the chronology of historical progress and opens a path through the Argentine archives where perfectly ordered obstacles
had previously blocked the way. The gaucho stories of Proto and Primo continually disrupt and reconstruct these archives with incredible detail.

While in Ranquel territory, Proto’s path crosses with Mansilla, and Filloy’s story expands *Una excursión* much in the way that Borges reopened the *Martín Fierro* in his fictions. Jens Andermann analyzes two main currents of Mansilla’s poetics, arguing that Mansilla focuses on “clasificación, taxonomía, topografía” and, at the same time, on “una crítica política y cultural de la mera expansión del poder central, que es acusado de ignorar la verdad del país” (108). Mansilla journeys across the provinces and bears witness to the supposed realities of the “Interior”; he expects his experience to grant him the authority to make policy recommendations, though they would be ignored. In *Una excursión*, the story of Rufino Pereira, a gaucho who tells Mansilla he deserted the army after being falsely accused of crimes, becomes paradigmatic. When Mansilla asks Pereira where he is from, who his parents are, and why he was enlisted in the army, Pereira’s only answer is “No sé” (228). His origins are perhaps the most imprecise of any gaucho in the entire genre, making him the perfect blank slate, a name that can stand for any other gaucho. Mansilla later narrates how he transformed this supposed criminal into an ideal soldier by appealing to his sense of honor, loyalty, and duty. In this particular instance, Mansilla quickly elevates Pereira’s story to that of a universal form: “Nuestros campos están llenos de Rufinos Pereiras. La raza de este ser desheredado que se llama gaucho, digan lo que quieran, es excelente, y como blanda cera, puede ser modelada para el bien” (231; italics in original). And Mansilla claims to have the magic touch, capable of transforming these Rufinos Pereiras, all the *gauchos malos*, not into *gauchos buenos*, but rather into loyal soldiers of the state. Though operating from different ideological positions, both Mansilla and Lugones generalize from the story of one particular gaucho in order to construct essentialist images of heroic individuals for the nation-state from these provincial bodies.

In “El juído (El patriarca),” Filloy’s Proto becomes another one of these “Rufinos Pereiras,” but the change in perspective dismantles Mansilla’s universalist logic. Filloy’s narrative does not trace the journey from Buenos Aires to the provinces; it begins from within that shifting terrain of Córdoba Province
above, and Proto is already in Leubucó well before Mansilla arrives. “Vení. ¡Vení rápido!” shouts someone in Leubucó, “¡Está por llegar el Coronel Lucio V. Mansilla!” (Ochoa 16). Perhaps hearing about Pereira’s luck in having his crimes absolved, Proto decides to try his hand when he learns that the sergeant whose ear he cut off was killed for becoming insolent with one of his superiors:

Lo trabajé al curita pa’qu’el coronel Mansilla me perdonase. Total, muerto el perro se acabó la rabia … Pero en el ejército nu’es así. El coronel alegó que lo mío er’una insubordinación muy grave; y la muerte del alférez una cosa justa “en defensa de la jerarquía militar.” ¡Mire la palabra qui’usan pa’joder a quien rebana un’oreja y no a quien quita una vida! (18)

Proto and the one-eared officer—he holds the rank of alférez, the lowest commissioned rank—committed similar offenses: they were both punished for insubordination. Proto fled to avoid punishment, but the alférez was killed in order to defend the military’s hierarchy. Proto’s clever critique points out that all he did was cut off someone’s ear, not kill anyone, yet he is still seen as having committed a greater crime than that superior officer in the military who killed the one-eared alférez. Though Proto will be forgiven for his crimes and goes on to serve under Mansilla for many years in Filloy’s narrative, thus confirming Mansilla’s generalized claims about reforming the gauchos malos in this particular case, Filloy allows the errant Proto to maintain a margin of difference. Just before the Conquest of the Desert that would exterminate the indigenous, Proto critiques the violent logic that values hierarchy—power derived from maintaining rigid order—over human life. Proto may not be a heroic individual, but he signals the hypocritical workings of power that lay in plain sight of even an uneducated criminal.

A Gaucho by Any Other Name
What still remains is the question of what type of national narratives can be written without heroes, consecrated grounds, and mythical origins. In my analysis, Filloy provides an example of this type of narrative in “Carbunclo.” This story is the sequel to Primo’s misadventures as the gaucho jodón. Now in his sixties
and in jail for urinating on the veterinarian’s lawn, as I described above, Primo’s cell mates vaguely recall some epic story from his youth—the story of Cuquejo and the tick from “As de espadas.” They beg him to retell the story, even though he warns it was “una trigedia” (49). Primo is perfectly positioned to tell any version or perversion of the story, to borrow Borges’s phrase. He could have invented the past as a glorious era full of epic heroes to guide his fellow countrymen through present insecurities toward the only future he personally deems acceptable. He could have masked a particular ideology under this nationalist narrative, but what he relates is completely consistent with the events narrated in “As de espadas.” His cellmates are disgusted by the story and shocked that he is “tan repugnante,” and they no longer recognize him or his deeds as heroic (52). When narrating his own history, Primo sidesteps the epopeya and writes his status as the gaucho jodón, neither righteous nor evil, right on the surface.

Primo sees no point in hiding unpleasant historical details. Transforming Shakespeare’s maxim, Primo leaves the following lesson: “Llámeme jazmín a la mierda y apestará lo mismo” (53). As I read it in this context, Primo decries the ultimate futility of erasing the violent origins of the nation and replacing them with regionalist myths and essentialist constructs. Whereas Borges thoroughly dismantles Lugones’s rigid arguments and demonstrates the future potential for reviving the gaucho genre as the fiction that it is, as a narrative of the past that can always be rewritten, Filloy’s gaucho stories return to the national archives to restore the complexity, and even at times the banality, of the gauchos and the provincial lands they continually traverse. These subjects and spaces certainly comprise an important place in Argentina’s past, but elevating them as the timeless source of a national essence only distracts from the machinations of sovereign power. Ultimately, Filloy’s narratives revive the gauchos and the genre from Lugones’s immobile monuments to demonstrate that such texts are simply a convention for ordering one’s perception of the past and that different, even more ethical, national narratives are possible without erasing that past or calling it by another, more pleasant, name. By writing this national past in plain sight, Filloy opens the way toward a politics not premised on the violent will to power that too often invents divisive categories as moral imperatives in the service of power and greed.