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# NATURE IN *DON SEGUNDO SOMBRA* AND *THE VIRGINIAN*

JOHN DONAHUE

Environment and culture shape human beings, both as individuals and as societies. In all the vast plains of the Americas where a cattle industry developed, a human type evolved a distinct way of life: the *gaucho* in Argentina, the *charro* in México, the *llanero* in Venezuela, the *guasó* in Chile, and the *cowboy* in the United States and Canada.<sup>1</sup> Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, an Argentine intellectual who was an avid reader of James Fenimore Cooper, was perhaps the first to state clearly in regard to the Americas that wherever a similar combination of geographical features occurs, parallel customs and occupations have evolved among otherwise unrelated peoples, but the observation has since become almost a commonplace.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, people with parallel customs have produced similar bodies of literature, but the mythic underpinnings of that literature are not necessarily the same, as

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a comparison of two outstanding novels shows.

*Don Segundo Sombra*, by Ricardo Güiraldes, is generally considered the masterpiece of literature dealing with the Argentine gaucho. Published in 1926, it represents the culmination of the gaucho theme. As Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) stands out in the tradition of the Western in North America, *Don Segundo Sombra* likewise towers above other creations in the genre. As Wister attempts to synthesize historical changes in the West, Güiraldes likewise attempts to reconcile the factions in Argentine culture that shaped the perspective on the gaucho. Thus the two novels are appropriate for comparison. In both novels geography exerts its influence on the characters. Both the gaucho and the cowboy owe their existence to a coincidence of historical and environmental factors, but although both novels highlight the physical environment, the interplay between man and environment is markedly different in the two novels. *The Virginian* is the heir of the romanticism of Wordsworth and Rousseau, touched by the Protestant work ethic and Jeffersonian democracy, and is finally the product of two central myths of identity in the United States, that of

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the frontier and that of the garden, both myths that celebrate nature. *Don Segundo Sombra*, on the other hand, is the product of a culture that glorified urban virtues and distrusted nature. The differences in culture and cultural myth account for the differences in the role the environment, or nature itself, plays in the two novels.

#### THE FRONTIER IN THE UNITED STATES AND ARGENTINA

When Frederick Jackson Turner elaborated his theory of the significance of the frontier in molding the institutions and character of democracy in the United States, he changed the focus of historical analysis. For Turner, the frontier was the edge between savagery and civilization, the force that stripped the pioneer of the baggage of European civilization and forced him to create a new civilization, transformed and distinctive. The development of American society, Turner argued, could be studied in terms of European ideologies. Turner was not the first to comment on the distinctive character of the American nation and its institutions—St. Jean de Crèvecoeur and Alexis de Tocqueville had dealt with these more than half a century before Turner—but Turner's attribution of the distinctiveness to the frontier gave form and force to a national myth, tapping a subconscious stream already captured in literature. Henry Nash Smith, Leslie Fiedler, and Richard Slotkin are among the most influential of the critics who have traced the frontier myth elaborated by Turner back to the earliest colonial narratives.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Edwin Fussell has shown that some of the works of Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman, major American authors not usually considered Western writers, are also inspired by this national myth.<sup>4</sup> While the role of the frontier can be seen clearly in the traditional Western novel descended from Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and the nineteenth century dime novels, it is possibly most evident in Western film, the genre that the whole world recognizes as undeniably and authenti-

cally American.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, such science fiction classics as the *Star Trek* series and *Star Wars* and its sequels are contemporary expressions of the frontier myth, illustrating its continuing centrality for a full appreciation of American history and culture.

Many similarities could be enumerated between the settlement of Anglo North America and the settlement of Latin America, but similarities and differences depend on the standard of comparison used and the method of analysis applied. In *The Frontier in Latin American History*, Alistar Hennessy explores the possibility of applying Turner's frontier hypothesis to the study of Latin American history.<sup>6</sup> The approach produces questions rather than answers but highlights a difference of paramount importance for the history of the two frontiers: the original settlement patterns of Latin America did not produce a clearly identifiable frontier line between savagery and civilization. In some areas the Spaniards found sedentary peoples onto whose cultures, institutions, and social structures they grafted their own. In other areas Spanish settlers did displace nomadic or seminomadic tribes. Furthermore, the colonial policies and the political and social structures of the Spanish and English colonizers were markedly different. Most Latin American nations are still in the frontier state of development, but unlike the United States, Hennessy writes, they are "frontier societies lacking a frontier myth." He explains that the persistence of cultural traits on the Latin American frontier means that we cannot really talk of the environment shaping a new man. "It is not easy to jettison cultural baggage in the Latin American environment. Monuments, whether pre-Columbian or colonial are ubiquitous, and the greater degree of racial intermixing has bequeathed a complex pattern of varied cultural traditions and contrasting ways of looking at the past." Latin Americans did not attribute to the frontier the significance that Anglo-Americans did because they had neither had the same experiences nor did they have the cultural necessity for constructing a frontier myth. For the United

States, the frontier provided "a legitimizing and fructifying nationalist ideology." But for the people of Latin American countries, "without democracy, there was no compulsion to elaborate a supportive ideology based on frontier experiences and their putative influence on national character and institutions."<sup>7</sup>

Interpretations of the European settlement frontier in Latin America must start from a set of suppositions different from Turner's. As John A. Crow points out, the civilization of Spain was urban rather than rural, and building cities was perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the Spanish colonizers. Interpreters of Latin American history and culture over the past 150 years, men such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (Argentina), José Enrique Rodó (Peru), Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (Argentina), Octavio Paz (México), and Hernán Arciniegas (Colombia), reflect in their thinking a preference for the urban and the intellectual over the rural and the materialistic. Crow points out that many social and economic problems of Latin America have stemmed from the lack of rural development.<sup>8</sup> Latin American thinkers have been steeped in the literature and philosophy of Europe and the United States—many even studied in England, France, or the United States. Sarmiento, for example, was an admirer not only of Cooper but also of Emerson, the philosopher of American individualism, and of Thoreau, the champion of rural over urban life. Yet, although Sarmiento wished Argentina could reproduce the material progress of the United States, American frontier ideology never took root in his thinking and he would have rejected the process by which Anglo North American progress had been achieved.<sup>9</sup>

The mid-nineteenth century in Argentina saw the emergence of two political and cultural factions, those who championed the native, Argentinian ways and those who favored the Europeanization of Argentina through industrialization and the wholesale importation of European styles and manners. Sarmiento belonged to the latter faction. His *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845), the biogra-

phy of the gaucho lieutenant to the dictator Rosas, was intended as a study of the barbarous influence of the Pampa on its inhabitants. Sarmiento grudgingly admires many qualities of the gaucho in his natural state, but he nevertheless indicates that the gaucho and the Pampa embody all that was backward and uncivilized in an Argentina determined to modernize itself. In his understanding of the role of the physical environment in the evolution of cultural personality, Sarmiento resembles Frederick Jackson Turner, but unlike Turner, who saw the frontier and the successive phases of barbarism and civilization as positive forces in the evolution of a uniquely American character, Sarmiento condemned the process as leading to the antithesis of the European character he desired for his homeland. Successive Argentine governments broke up the gaucho culture by conscripting the gauchos into military service and encouraging immigrant farmers to settle the Pampa.

#### LITERARY TRADITIONS

As Hennessy points out, the frontier myth and the garden myth go hand in hand, sustaining each other, and the lack of a garden myth in Latin America helps explain the lack of a frontier myth. Frontier communities in Latin America may have had democratic traits, but they were not strong enough to offset the image of the interior as dark and menacing in contrast to the civilization of the cities as that image was forcefully articulated by Sarmiento. Whatever democratic values existed on the frontier, it is unlikely that they "would have flowed back and influenced thinking in the cities, given the state of communications, lack of information, and absence of any agrarian myth comparable to Jeffersonianism which predisposed many in the U.S. to conjure up a 'garden image' of the newly opening West."<sup>10</sup> In the United States, however, the frontier myth and garden image are linked in the earliest colonial writings. The Puritans, Richard Slotkin argues, developed an elaborate concept of their mission in the New

World as a new Exodus of Israel from Egypt, a temporary exile for fugitives from an "idolatrous land, a period of trial which would make them worthy of entering into a new Promised Land, a New Jerusalem." The age of independence continued the marriage of frontier and garden myths. According to Norman Foerster, the distinguishing feature of the age in which the colonies were forged into the United States was a "new gospel of nature." The Transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Thoreau, praised the effects of nature on the spirit and stressed its role in the formation of the American character and its role as a healthy balance to the dead tameness of civilized life. Today Wallace Stegner speaks of the American wilderness as a "geography of hope." "We need wilderness preserved," he writes, "as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds—because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed."<sup>11</sup>

A survey of the relationship between man and nature in Latin American literature and history offers a very different picture. According to Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, "As the result of indiscernible influences [of the Pampa on the original Spanish settlers], the population returned to a lower state of development, and this backward step, the relapse into savagery, was much cruder than man in the natural state itself. These people had renounced civilization to return by countless paths to the depths of animality." Estrada echoes Sarmiento, who had written a century earlier, "Without education of any sort and not needing it, without means of subsistence as though he had no needs, [the gaucho] is happy in the midst of his poverty and deprivation. . . . In this dissolution of society, savagery takes deep roots." In *La Vordgine*, José Eustasio Rivera, a contemporary of Ricardo Güiraldes, writes of the Venezuelan plains, "It's a man-eating abyss . . . , a huge mouth that devours men whom hunger and despair have placed between its jaws." Carlos Fuentes, a Mexican novelist, calls nature "the enemy that devours men, destroys their will, strips them of their dignity, and leads them to annihilation." As

Edward Larocque Tinker comments, this negative attitude toward nature colors Latin American thinking.<sup>12</sup> In Latin American literature and culture, then, nature and the frontier are simply two factors among many that form human existence and affect the development of culture. They carry no mythic attributions of regeneration or purification. Hence, the Latin American attitude toward the physical environment is dispassionate or realistic rather than emotional and mythic.

The process through which the cowboy and the gaucho entered the literature of their respective homelands reflects the relative importance given them. Wister's cowboy took his place in a growing tradition. He is an extension of Cooper's Leatherstocking or of the heroes of the nineteenth century dime novel. Güiraldes's gaucho, on the other hand, entered literature as a result of nationalistic political and literary factors associated with the rise of the Argentinian Republic. Argentine poets used gaucho folklore as a source of inspiration for their works—José Hernández's two part *Martín Fierro* (1872 and 1879) was the most successful literary treatment of the gaucho before *Don Segundo Sombra*. Popular literature took up the theme of the persecuted gaucho who resorted to banditry to survive, thereby creating a plethora of folk heroes similar to those found in the dime novels. Yet by the time of *Don Segundo Sombra* the historic gaucho culture had perished, leaving behind no myth to grant the gaucho a continuing life in the imagination, and Güiraldes's novel is the last important work on the theme. Wister wrote in a tradition with a future as well as a past; Güiraldes had only a past. This circumstance, too, adds to the difference in tone between the two books.

#### PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL SETTINGS

The physical setting of *The Virginian* is Wyoming in the 1880s, the Wyoming Owen Wister visited when he first headed west. The scenery varies from the rolling plains surrounding Medicine Bow to the wooded moun-

tains separating Sunk Creek from Balaam's ranch to the majestic Tetons. The area is in transition; the Plains are being invaded by the railroad, although it is still 263 miles from Judge Henry's ranch. There are two towns in the area, Medicine Bow and the nameless town where the wedding and showdown take place. Most important, the entire area is changing from wilderness and free range to fences and civilization. The Virginian's friend James Westfall has married and committed the unforgivable sin of fencing off a patch of ground to grow potatoes. Even Judge Henry is experimenting with new methods of cattle raising, fenced pastures, an irrigation system, and the cultivation of crops such as alfalfa. The Virginian has purchased land with coal deposits for future development when the railroad expands.

As Enrique Williams Alzaga points out, the Pampa described in *Don Segundo Sombra* is not the Pampa of 1926 but that of an earlier generation, the Pampa Guiraldes knew as a child, before the final division of the open range into estancias devoted to the cultivation of crops as well as to ranching.<sup>13</sup> The Pampa in this novel lacks the variety of orographic relief found in *The Virginian*, extending for miles without a tree to break the horizon. Don Segundo and Fabio visit many small towns, some named, others nameless.<sup>14</sup> The relatively large towns have a church, a *comisaría* (police station), and, of course, a *pulpería* (saloon), but many are smaller. The two wanderers drift from mountain foothills through semidesert to swamplands and seacoast. The many references to fences and wire dividing off properties show that the division of the Pampa into estancias has begun and that this area, like Wister's Wyoming, is in a period of economic transition.

Both settings are cultural hinterlands. Wyoming's ties are to the east, to Vermont and New Hampshire, the home states of Molly's people, and to the hero's home state, Virginia. The eastern norms are duly modified to suit Wyoming taste. Argentina's hinterland, the Pampa, is culturally linked not only to

Buenos Aires but to Paris and London as well. Molly may read Shakespeare, but she has never been to Stratford. Raucho, Fabio's companion and teacher at the end of the novel, has traveled and studied abroad, particularly in Paris and London, and we may assume that this will be the destiny of Fabio as well. Argentinian landowners are Europe-oriented in their cultural preferences, and the concept that European norms should be modified to suit native taste is tantamount to heresy.

#### TREATMENT OF NATURE

The most striking similarities in the treatment of nature in the two books stem from the similarities in the physical environment, similarities that produced the similar figures of gaucho and cowboy. In both novels the dominant perception of the natural environment is of overwhelming size and grandeur. The narrator of *The Virginian* speaks of the unending gulf of space that swallows up the eastbound train and that later swallows up Medicine Bow as he makes his way to Judge Henry's ranch. Concepts of distance need adjustment to a larger scale—the Virginian has "dropped over" to pick him up, a journey of some 263 miles; the Judge casually speaks of the neighborhood, referring to a circle of some eighty miles. Fabio Cáceres, the narrator of *Don Segundo Sombra*, makes similar comments, comparing the Pampa to an ocean that swallows up a ship; a herd of several thousand cattle leaves no mark on an indifferent Pampa. The individual, face to face with the unending prairie, feels lonely and solitary, dwarfed by the immensity of the environment. For Fabio the loneliness is a palpable reality, a stream of water running down his spine. The Virginian observes that loneliness can drive some men mad or frighten others away from the Plains, but he, himself, cannot live without it. Being a gaucho or a cowboy means learning to be alone.

The majesty of nature inspires admiration and elation. The sense of grandeur elevates the

individual whom the immensity dwarfs. This grandeur brings with it a distaste for civilization and for the environment created by man. Fabio and Don Segundo refer to settlements as "pueblitos mezquinos," wretched villages.<sup>15</sup> According to the narrator of *The Virginian*, towns like Medicine Bow "lay stark, dotted over a planet of treeless dust, like soiled packs of cards . . . They seemed to have been strewn there by the wind and to be waiting till the wind should come again and blow them away."<sup>16</sup> Both the cowboy and the gaucho are led to contemplate the finite nature of man and his works and to glimpse, through the grandeur of nature, the reality of the infinite and the eternal.

In his ability to arrive at the transcendent, the Virginian fits nicely into the Cooper mold, but he lacks Leatherstocking's almost pantheistic outlook. Leatherstocking sees God in nature, whence he acquires his moral sense. The frontiersman seems to accept Emerson's dictum that nature is a moral teacher.<sup>17</sup> The Virginian points to nature and says it is proof that God exists, but he himself doesn't worry about God, other worlds, or religion. As David B. Davis writes, "The cowboy is the enunciation of the goodness of man and the glory he can achieve by himself . . . , a faith that man needs no formal religion once he finds a pure and natural environment."<sup>18</sup>

The Virginian resembles the gaucho in his unconcerned, if not indifferent, attitude toward the transcendent. Nature inspires in Fabio and in Don Segundo a sense of grandeur, an awe of something greater than man and his works, but this does not carry over into identification with a godhead or into reflections on morality. The Pampa is a force beyond finite man, but it does not reflect the generous spirit of a transcendent god nor does it produce a man who is morally upright, good, glorious, or imbued with a high sense of morality and justice. The Pampa produces a man who can take care of himself and survive on its terms, nothing more.

Love of solitude and self-reliance are the first changes produced by nature in the men of

the plains, but specific skills emerge as well. A man develops a keen sense of sight, an acuteness of vision, and an unerring sense of direction, what Fabio refers to as his "valor de baquiano."<sup>19</sup> The gaucho is like a sea captain who navigates over unmarked open sea, using his own instincts, and the stars, and a keen vision that surely and easily identifies distant objects. The image of the navigator also occurs several times in *The Virginian*. The narrator who at first would saunter out after breakfast with a gun and in thirty minutes cease to know north from south eventually learns to cross unmapped spaces without guidance. When five years later the narrator mistakes distant horses for cows, he is reminded that, in spite of his improvement over the years, he lacks the sure, keen vision of his Wyoming cowboy friends. Such knowledge and ability cannot be acquired in schools but only through experience, and only those who can acquire those abilities survive. The horsemen of the plains learn to read nature as others would a map.

While both the cowboy and the gaucho traditions stress the influence of nature in the formation of their heroes, *Don Segundo Sombra* traces the development of a neophyte gaucho through the full process, while *The Virginian* focuses on the adventures of an Easterner guided by a mature cowboy.<sup>20</sup> *The Virginian* is notoriously lacking in details of the cowboy's life, and this has led Davis to comment that *The Virginian* is the story of a cowboy without cows. The romantic frontier tradition inherited from Cooper discouraged emphasis on realistic detail; cattle drives, hard work, boredom, monotony, loneliness, and dull tasks must be subordinated to more exciting pastimes. Consequently, we see the Virginian only in those moments when the work is done, such as on the return trip from Chicago, for example, when he must manipulate his rebellious crew into coming back to the ranch. The Virginian's cowboy skills are second to his amorous and managerial skills. Davis points out that the "Western environment . . . sorts men into their true places, it does not determine men. It brings out the best in heroes and

the worst in villains, but it does not add qualities to the man who has none."<sup>21</sup> Wister's discussion of aristocracy and democracy in *The Virginian* illustrates his faith in the Western environment as a social separator that brings the cream to the top while the commonplace milk settles to the bottom. The physical environment is one force that, according to the frontier myth, allows true merit and natural nobility to prosper and eventually to lead society.

While Wister traces the large scale effects of nature on the cowboy, Guiraldes, in contrast, provides copious details of the practical role of nature in forming the working gaucho. The first stage is to *hacerse duro*, to toughen up. On his first cattle drive, Fabio learns what misery really is: the thick white dust rising from thousands of hooves, the throbbing head, the aching muscles and legs, the swollen feet, the unbreathable air, the rainstorms without shelter, the sleepless nights on duty. He becomes indifferent to suffering, to harsh weather, and to the strain of life in the open. He acquires the gaucho's characteristic stoical attitude, but his stoicism is not based on passivity and resignation so much as on the will to succeed, to survive. The physical environment provides the gaucho with the challenge to prove himself and to develop the stamina, the skills, and the self-reliance needed for life in such intimate contact with a harsh, demanding environment.

The Pampa is not romantic background; it is a force in the daily lives of Fabio and Don Segundo. The slightest changes of mood in nature leave their mark. The Pampa lives and breathes along with Fabio; even his moments of thoughtful, quiet reflection are born of the Pampa. This humanization of nature, however, lacks a symbolic dimension. According to Giovanni Previtali, the features of the Pampa parallel the attributes of its inhabitants.<sup>22</sup> Guiraldes ascribes an impassive exterior and stoicism to both the gaucho and to his environment. This intimate relationship between man and nature contrasts with the role of nature in the American Western novel,

where it serves as a social separator or as a backdrop to action, not as an equal partner in human drama.

Nature may be harsh, but the open plains furnish both gaucho and cowboy a freedom unknown in organized, civilized society. The struggle to survive pares away unnecessary preoccupations and worries; accountable to no one but themselves, the gaucho and cowboy are free to wander as the wind, boasting of their freedom. Don Segundo cannot abide the fixed ways and rigid codes of life in a settlement; Fabio says that the continual presence of other people produces in him a great weariness and uneasiness. The Virginian and his saddle pals in the pride of their freedom look upon all signs of civilization with suspicion and dread. The new school house, fenced-off land, and farm houses symbolize the dawn of a new era and the death of their world.

Both the gaucho and the cowboy see organized society as inimical to personal freedom. To the gaucho, the Pampa means freedom from the persecution of government and army, from the restraints of organized society. The gaucho rejects the city-oriented civilization that is spreading to the Pampa from the urban centers. Martín Fierro escapes from the army to the freedom and independence of the Pampa and the Indians, who, in spite of the risks and dangers they present, are more welcoming than the civilization the army seeks to foster and spread. Don Segundo, we are told, has had difficulties with the army and with the police; only the Pampa can satisfy his lust for freedom and independence. To the cowboy, the Western Plains means freedom to roam, to seek adventure, to live as one pleases. According to the Virginian, "If there was a headstone for every man that once pleased in his freedom here, you'd see one 'most every time yu' turned your head"(315).

Romanticism gave rise to both the gaucho and the Western novels; the Western, however, remains true to its romantic heritage while the gaucho novel more accurately fits into the later traditions of realism and naturalism. For Wordsworth, perhaps the most characteristic



spokesman for the romantic idea of nature, nature offered man physical and mental health as well as a refuge from the industrialized urban world. Civilized urban man had cut himself off from the vital springs of existence, leading to his spiritual poverty and alienation. The solution was a return to nature, that kind, generous, healing mother. Emerson likewise developed this theme of the healing power of nature, contrasting the healthiness of life in nature with urban life: "Cities give not the human senses room enough. We go out daily and nightly to feed the eyes on the horizon and require so much scope. Just as we need water for our bath. There are all degrees of natural influence from these quarantine powers of nature up to the dearest and gravest ministrations to the imagination and the soul."<sup>23</sup> Emerson saw in nature a form of life that was healthy and sane.

From the beginning, the Western novel has maintained a Wordsworthian Romantic attitude towards nature. We find copious examples in Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and throughout the entire tradition. Nature is primarily a generous mother endowed with curative powers for the body and soul and can even be the object of love, as we see in the description of the Virginian's favorite spot:

He had stopped at the island many times alone, and in all seasons; but at this special moment of the year he liked it best . . . He would ford to the sheltered circle of his camp-ground, throw off his clothes, and, shouting, spring upon the horse, bare, with a rope for bridle, cross with him to the promised pasture . . . While the animal rolled in the grass, often his master would roll also, and stretch, and take the grass in his two hands, and so draw his body along, limbering his muscles after a long ride. (250)

The Virginian confesses to the narrator that moments such as these, highly sensual, almost sexual in nature, restore peace and tranquility to his spirit.

Nature in *The Virginian* is frequently a

healing mother. Wister himself had first come to Wyoming to recuperate from an illness, and when the eastern narrator is sick, his cowboy friend writes him that the best cure is a hunting trip out West. Later the narrator comments on his journey alone through the wilderness:

To me, it was like living in ages gone . . . and to leave behind all noise and mechanisms and set out at ease . . . into the wilderness, made me feel that the ancient earth was indeed my mother and that I had found her again after being lost among houses, customs and restraints. (271)

Molly also enjoys robust health in the West. The Virginian and Molly spend their honeymoon on his island, where the emotional wounds inflicted by his duel with Trampas are healed. "The mountains brought them together" (359), Wister says.

The Western gives us not only Wordsworth's nature but also Rousseau's natural man. Cooper's description of Natty as a "man of native goodness," possessed of little of civilization but its highest principles, established the pattern for subsequent Westerns. The natural man preserves the best of civilized life without the accompanying evils of organized society. Emerson reiterates this view in his essay "Nature" declaring that "every natural process is a version of a moral sentence. The moral law lies at the center of nature and radiates to the circumference. It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation and every process."<sup>24</sup> Wordsworth's "One echo from a vernal wood/ may teach you more of man/ of moral evil and of good/ than all the sages can" echoes clearly.<sup>25</sup>

The Virginian is a later manifestation of the natural man. The external markings have changed from the time of Natty Bumppo but the essence remains unaltered as we see in Wister's first description of the cowboys:

Youth untamed sat here for an idle moment, spending easily its hard-earned

wages. City saloons rose into my vision, and I instantly preferred this Rocky Mountain place. More of death it undoubtedly saw, but less of vice, than did its New York equivalents. And death is a thing much cleaner than vice. Moreover, it was by no means vice that was written upon these wild and manly faces. Even where baseness was visible, baseness was not uppermost. Daring, laughter, endurance—these were what I saw upon the countenances of the cowboys. . . . In their flesh, our natural passions ran tumultuous; but in their spirit sat hidden a true nobility, and often beneath its unexpected shining, their figures took a heroic stature. (23-24)

Wilson Clough attributes the success of the cowboy theme to a nostalgic view of the past, an idealized view of man in nature, preserved from the corruptions of the big city centers of population. The cowboy is still "capable of living by a private code, free to move from job to job largely a law unto himself. He is the last symbol of a passing era, a combination of the knight in armour, Natty Bumppo and the West's own grandeur."<sup>26</sup>

Latin American romanticism necessitates a different treatment of nature in the gaucho tradition. Romanticism in Spain and in Latin America turned to nature for its pictorial value, for its distinctive regional qualities, for its local color. Nature remains primarily a pictorial element, as well as a necessary element to explain human character. The gaucho would not exist if nature were not constantly at work shaping and molding him. Nature was not seen as a transcendental power, although moments of harmony between man and nature, such as those in Guiraldes, are to be found. We do not find for nature the love and tender feelings of the Virginian. Guiraldes does not project onto nature a symbolic value but remains faithful to his realistic bias, never losing sight either of the hostile environment in which the gaucho lives or of the thin layer of varnish that separates the civilized man from the savage. Escaping

organized society is not a rush into the warm embrace of a wise and protective mother but into an environment that is ferocious, unforgiving, and implacable.

The vision of nature in the gaucho novel resembles that of Hobbes, Darwin, and the naturalists rather than that of Wordsworth and Rousseau. Nature is not a generous mother who cares for man but rather a conjunction of blind forces in which only the strongest survive. Fabio frequently feels the hostility of nature; there are traps to catch the unwitting and the unwary. Recalling an episode when he nearly lost his life in quicksand, Fabio concludes that the Pampa quickly eliminates the weak. In one of the most striking scenes of the novel, Fabio watches crabs eat one another. The beach is full of half-devoured carcasses and of survivors in various stages of mutilation. This savage scene, an example of Guiraldes's naturalistic perspective, makes Fabio think about his need for human companionship. The Pampa does not shelter or restore man—consolation is to be found within oneself or with other humans. Nature is, at best, indifferent. This view contrasts sharply with the perspective of the Western novel, where nature rather than society provides solace.

Nature engenders stoicism in the gaucho. In *Don Segundo Sombra*, in contrast to the sanguine *Virginian*, there is no expression of an outlook that could be labelled optimistic. I do not mean to suggest that the Western does not reveal examples of a naturalistic view; on the contrary. The *Virginian* thrives while the inept Shorty is destroyed. Trampas, unlike the *Virginian*, absorbs the worst influences of the environment and of society, and he is killed. The fittest survive and the weak perish. The fundamental distinction between the gaucho novel and the Western is that in the latter the individual is able to contribute to his destiny, to forge a future for himself and his country. The gaucho prefers to lament his situation and to dream of the past while he despairs of the future. Argentina's frontier myth lay in Sarmiento's assertion that the superior urban

civilization would eventually wipe out the gaucho as evolution had eliminated the dinosaur. The gaucho sees no future for himself in a world that views his way of life as the epitome of backwardness and savagery and his continued existence as a blight on the attractive modern image of the country.

In the Western, the land is given symbolic value and geography loses its realistic dimension. The first American colonists came to the new world seeking a new start for humanity.<sup>27</sup> The theme of the Promised Land, of Zion, runs throughout the Western tradition. In *Medicine Bow*, the narrator of *The Virginian* catches a glimpse of this Paradise:

serene above the foulness swam a pure and quiet light, such as the East never sees; they might be bathing in the air of creation's first morning. . . . Beneath sun and stars their days and nights were immaculate and wonderful. . . . at the door began a world of crystal light, a land without end, a space across which Noah and Adam might come straight out of Genesis. (9)

The West is the Promised Land which can become Paradise Regained through human effort, including the Biblical command to subdue nature. Echoes of the Protestant work ethic abound. The possession and exploitation of the land is almost a religious duty.

The Spaniards came to the New World seeking wealth, not Paradise, nor did they ever see the settlement and exploitation of the land in terms of a garden myth or a new Zion. The Conquistadores sought gold, El Dorado, cities whose streets were reportedly paved with gold and silver, but the true wealth of Latin America, as was recognized later, lay in its agriculture.<sup>28</sup> The early Spanish settlers did not share the Protestant work ethic. The gaucho loved work, Angeles Cardona de Gibert tells us, not because it could produce wealth but because it was necessary and enjoyable. Working to amass property and wealth was quite foreign to him.<sup>29</sup> Fabio's father takes him to see his ranch, fields, and herds of cattle, but Fabio

shows little interest in property and wealth. When Fabio inherits the estate, he laments his fate because becoming a property owner means ceasing to be a gaucho. For the Virginian, on the other hand, the acquisition of property and the rise to a position of prominence amply compensate for the loss of freedom of cowboy life. The two can be complementary rather than antithetical.

#### CONCLUSION

In both the cowboy novel and the gaucho novel, nature is the force that determines the specific type of the characters. The struggle to survive in a lonely, harsh environment develops man's stamina and special skills. The environment allows man the opportunity to glimpse the eternal and to recognize his own, finite nature, to put civilization and human accomplishments into perspective. In the gaucho novel, realistic interaction with nature focuses the gaucho's life. Bad weather, parching sun, and loneliness affect him directly. Nature can reduce him to the level of a brute, drive him mad, or even kill him, although it can also inspire in him a sense of the spiritual and the eternal. The land, however, never becomes the mythic landscape of the cowboy story. The similarities between the treatment of nature in the two regional literatures are environmental: humans do adapt to similar environments in similar ways. The differences are cultural.

The cowboy novel reveals a double romantic inheritance from Wordsworth and Rousseau. Nature is loved as a generous, kind mother, the consolation and refuge of man. Characters and writers have faith in the goodness of man and nature and consequently mistrust organized society and its institutions. From this inheritance spring the frontier and garden myths that value nature at the same time that they glorify the conquest of nature for the service of man as part of the settlement of the Promised Land. Nature is the source of wealth and prosperity as it is transformed by the Protestant work ethic operating in a

capitalistic free enterprise system. Western geography symbolizes the challenge to conquer, to subdue, and to build a better future. Realism in this tradition is stylistic, not the undergirding of a basic point of view. The gaucho novel treats nature differently partly because Latin American romanticism attributed to nature a passive, pictorial role and partly because the cultural bias, especially in Argentina, valued the urban and intellectual life. Nature and rural life were barbarous and backward, not healthy and sane. Despite the fact that some moments of splendid harmony develop between man and nature, for the most part a Hobbesian or Darwinian attitude takes the place of a Wordsworthian one. Nature is not a nurturing mother to the gaucho; at best it is indifferent and often is the setting for a brutal struggle. This lack of a central symbolic role for nature, a myth pointing to a brighter future, may explain why Guiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra* marks the end of the gaucho tradition in literature while Wister's *Virginian* marks the midpoint of a tradition that has continued to evolve through popular literature and film into a distinctive body of art.

#### NOTES

1. Alfredo H. Borcosque, *El gaucho en el panorama político argentino: su lenguaje y su folklore* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Crisol, 1974), p. 17.

2. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (1845; reprint Madrid: Alianza, 1970), p. 50. In *The Passing of the Frontier*, Emerson Hough sees two distinct phases in the development of a frontier, the phase when man is at the mercy of the environment and adapts himself to it, and the phase when man's technology permits him to exert control over his environment, shaping it to meet his needs: "Man changes an environment only by bringing into it a new or better transportation. Environment changes man." (London: Appleton, Century and Croft, 1920), p. 91. Joseph B. Frantz and Julian Choate write that "if the Western part of the United States had been as wooded and well-watered as the country East of the Mississippi, it is unlikely that such a person as the cowboy would have emerged." (*The American Cowboy, the Myth and the Reality*. [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955], p. 49). Ezequiel Martínez Estrada says of the Pampa's effects on the early

Spanish settler: "It absorbed and overwhelmed him [and] he submitted to its demands." (*Radiografía de la pampa*, [Buenos Aires: Losada, 1942], pp. 11, 24. My translation). In his discussion of regionalism in Latin American literature, Raimundo Lazo notes that geography helps establish cultural types. (*Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana, el siglo XIX* [México: Porrúa, 1976], p. 13).

3. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950, reprint Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Leslie Fiedler, *Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

4. Edwin Fussell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

5. George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western From Silents to the Seventies* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 16.

6. Alistar Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American Literature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978). The introductory chapter explores the problems involved in applying the Turner thesis to Latin American history.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 13.

8. John A. Crow, *The Epic of Latin America*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1946), p. 856.

9. Raimundo Lazo, Prologo y estudio crítico to D. F. Sarmiento, *Facundo: civilización y barbarie*, ed. Raimundo Lazo (México: Porrúa, 1977), pp. xxix-xxx. Lazo speaks of the influence of American writers and American institutions on Sarmiento's thinking.

10. Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American Literature*, pp. 13-14.

11. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, p. 38; Norman Foerster, *Nature in American Literature: Studies in the Modern View of Nature*. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1923), p. xi; Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 147.

12. Ezequiel Martínez-Estrada, *Radiografía de la pampa*, p. 19, translation mine; Sarmiento, *Facundo*, p. 47, translation mine; José Eustasio Rivera, *La Vorágine*, Prologo by Cristina Barros Stivalet (1923; reprint México: Porrúa, 1980), p. 110, translation mine; Fuentes quoted by Cristina Barros Stivalet in her prologue to Rivera's *La Vorágine*, p. xvii, translation mine; Edward Larocque Tinker, *The Horsemen of the Americas and the Literature They Inspired* (1950; reprint Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), note p. 19. Tinker comments that Sarmiento's negative attitude toward the environ-

ment that created the gaucho and toward gaucho culture itself is widespread and influential.

13. Enrique Williams Alzaga, *La pampa en la novela argentina* (Buenos Aires: Estrada, 1954), p. 27.

14. The narrator of the novel is not clearly named. He is at times referred to as the son of Fabio Cáceres and at other times as Fabio Cáceres. In this discussion, I shall refer to him as Fabio.

15. Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926; reprint Buenos Aires: Losada, 1968), p. 17. Future references to this edition are indicated parenthetically in the text, all translations are mine. The word *mezquino* has no exact equivalent in English; it implies a strong distaste for something which is seen as small, poor, petty, insignificant, and contemptible. The word aptly captures the gaucho's disdain for civilized life.

16. Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (1902; reprint Toronto: Pocket Books, 1971), p. 315. Future references to this edition are indicated parenthetically in the text.

17. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Everyman, 1950), p. 23.

18. David B. Davis, "Ten Gallon Hero," *The Western: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. James K. Folsom (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1979), pp. 25-26.

19. The *baquiano* was a guide who used the stars to find his way across the treeless pampa.

20. Andy Adams's *Log of a Cowboy* (1903; reprint Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964) provides the same kind of detail about the cowboy's life that Güiraldes provides about the gaucho.

21. Davis, "Ten Gallon Hero," pp. 18, 20.

22. Giovanni Previtali, *Ricardo Güiraldes: Biografía y crítica* (México: de Andrea, 1965), p. 127.

23. Emerson, "Nature," p. 407.

24. Emerson, "Nature," p. 23.

25. William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, ed. M. H. Abrams, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 94.

26. Wilson O. Clough, *The Necessary Earth: Nature and Solitude in American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), p. 71.

27. Irving Howe, "Literature of the Latecomers," *Saturday Review World* (10 August 1974), p. 34.

28. Tinker, *Horsemen of the Americas*, p. xxii.

29. Angeles Cardona de Gibert, "Estudio crítico," in José Hernández, *Martín Fierro* ed. Angeles Cardona de Gibert (México: Bruguera, 1973), pp. 20-21.