

Textual Polyphony and Skaz in *Seis problemas* by Bustos Domecq

Latin America's first collection of short detective fiction was published in Argentina by Honorio Bustos Domecq, a fictional author. *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* is a groundbreaking text for Latin American letters in many respects. In 1942 and under Bustos Domecq's name, Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares began a fruitful collaboration that would last until 1977.¹ *Seis problemas* not only marked the beginning of a life-long literary venture for Bioy and Borges, but was also a notable contribution to the detective genre in that it was a text conceived and composed as a parodic Latin American rendering of the classical, European tradition of the detective story. More importantly, the radical essence of the Parodi stories is to be found in the frontier of dialogue between Bioy and Borges, the two collaborating subjects who developed the characters and events of the stories as someone other than themselves. The first character that Borges invented for the purposes of creating *Seis problemas* was Bustos Domecq. In terms of Bakhtin's dialogics, Bustos Domecq is "a whole," that "while being one, accommodates in itself the accents of two voices" (224-5). Bustos' being is derived from a counterpoint of voices, and he is an authorial subject whose dialogic boundaries are the general guidelines of the highly codified tenets of the detective genre. But the dialogic counterpoint did not end with the creative consciousness of the fictional "author;" this essay intends to show that Borges' particular conception of the dialogic author sets off a further interaction of multiple voices within *Seis problemas*. The result of the originating authorial doubling is textual polyphony.

¹ *Seis problemas para Don Isidro Parodi* in 1942 would be followed by *Dos fantasías memorables* (1946), *Un modelo para la muerte* (1946), *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq* (1967) and *Nuevos cuentos de Bustos Domecq* (1977).

The exposition of *Seis problemas* is based on the sustained collision, interruption and conflict that takes place among the various characters' reports, accents and perspectives in the text. The counterpoint of the characters' perspectives is one aspect of textual polyphony in *Seis problemas*. The polyphonic counterpoint in the text also involves the polemic relation of the author with himself (his/selves), of the narrator with the characters (and viceversa), and ultimately, of the intertextual realms of fiction with the reader's sense of what constitutes an acceptable representation of textual reality. The desired engagement of the reader to the fiction was initially not successfully achieved by Bustos Domecq. Borges recalls the public's negative response to the Parodi stories:

When the readers discovered that Bustos Domecq did not exist, they believed all the stories to be jokes and that it was not necessary to read them; they thought that we were poking fun at the reader, which was not the case. I don't know why the idea of a pseudonym made them furious. They said: 'Those writers do not exist; there is a name but there isn't a writer.' Then a general rejection took place, but it was due to false reasoning. (Rodríguez Monegal 369)

The *imprimatur* of authorship was clearly missing for the readers of the time, and this created problems with the delicate issue of reader engagement. The hallmark of the reader's consciousness, and particularly in detective fiction, is the act of interpretation that allows the reader to validate aspects of the text and, by means of that act of validation, to appropriate the represented world. This act of appropriation is represented in Bustos' text by the conjectures of the detective, Don Isidro Parodi, who organizes the chaotic events narrated to him by applying the type of logic that will allow him to arrive at a hypothesis of the true nature of the crime. The invented nature of Bustos Domecq expressly dissolved the vital link to the author anticipated by the readers of his stories.

As detective stories, Parodi's "problems" are highly coherent and do not dissapoint, as they rely on the dialectics of sense required by the detective genre. Judging from Borges' report on the readers' rejection of the Bustos project, it would seem that in the eyes of its potential public, the main crime of *Seis problemas* may have been that the stories had no fixed point of origin. Bustos might have been taken to be a wild card.

In fact, Bustos has no independent reality apart from the fiction, a situation that highlights how discourse mediates every reference to a concrete and knowable "reality" in *Seis problemas*. For the reader who assumes that the authorial voice must be grounded in a reality outside

the represented world, the acceptance of Bustos' "existence" will be an impossible proposition; he is the author of *Seis problemas*, and a discursive voice that owes its being to the represented world. In 1942 and in Latin America, the invention of Bustos Domecq opened the gap that would be pointed out by Michel Foucault many years later:

It would be wrong to seek the author on the side of the real writer as on the side of the fictional speaker; the function of the author is realized in the split between the two. (152)

The readers of Bustos' fiction who took up the detective game of out-guessing the author of the fiction found themselves in a maze where narrative authority eluded them at every corner: the world of the Parodi stories was not an author's "lived" reality, but rather a linguistic one that ultimately fictionalized the reader as a discursive site of reception. Bustos Domecq's design makes clear that Foucault's proposition is applicable to the reader's position *vis à vis* the fictional text.

The "authors" of the Parodi stories had in fact subordinated their voices to Bustos Domecq's in a way that in time led to a few surprises. Borges writes:

In the long run, he ruled us with an iron fist and to our amusement, and later to our dismay, he became utterly unlike ourselves, with his own whims, his own puns, and his own very elaborate style of writing. ("Autobiographical" 246)

At the time when *Seis problemas* was written, however, Bustos was quite content with relinquishing in turn his authorial voice to the characters of the stories, further obliterating the notion of a narrating persona that is associated with the figure of an author. Generally speaking, *Seis problemas* is a work of fiction that relies on "mimetic voice," specifically *skaz*, as the method of composition.² As explained by Stephen M. Ross, mimetic voice is represented speech that "creates a scene, through mannerisms totally within a narrator's voice that imply an audience, a place, and even a time of telling," and which "prompts readers to regard a particular portion of the work's total discourse as the utterance of an imagined person (character, narrator, "author")" (304-5). Given the genre that served as the grounds for project, there is an

² The *Dictionary of Narratology* defines *skaz* as "a narrative fashioned to give the illusion of spontaneous speech...[Skaz] is firmly set in a communicative framework. The manner of telling (the distinctive features and peculiarities of the narrator's speech) is as important to the effect of the narrative as the situations and events recounted" (Prince 88).

added “ordering intelligence” at work in the collection. Isidro Parodi represents the creative, resolute aspect of the authorial voice in that he assigns meaning to the various narratives that are presented to him in the course of the investigation. In *Seis problemas*, the “final word” traditionally associated with the role of the author in fiction is ostensibly Parodi’s, not Bustos’.³

The critic John Frow proposes that the value of the concept of voice, which we find creatively elaborated by Bustos Domecq in the Parodi stories, is that “the narrative process can be theorized as a unified structure which knits together heterogeneous discourses; everything in the text is language” (261). This is the direction in which the interest of Biorges lies in relation to his (their) literary experiment. In terms of authorial discourse, we have seen how Biorges has taken every measure in weakening authorial control at the level of composition. The result has been a drastic rearrangement of the relation among author, narrator and character. It might be argued that relying on mimetic voices does not ensure the polyphony of a fictional text. Specifically, one could argue, as Bakhtin did on behalf of Dostoevsky, that the main characters’ self-consciousness is the key to a dialogic narrative. But self-consciousness is comically absent from the locutions of the characters of *Seis problemas*. They tell their tales in their own words, deaf to the way they sound and blind to the peculiar way in which they have perceived the events they tell. But again, each character has his or her own space in the creative design of the stories they help to narrate. Further, they are allowed to evaluate the comments and responses of the other characters, as well as the author’s. Ultimately, Bustos has subordinated his authority to the particular order dictated by the norms of detective fiction. In relation to these norms of concealment and revelation, all the characters have the freedom to represent themselves and their perceptions. They are falling, not so much out of the author’s design, “but ... out of a monological authorial field of vision” (Bakhtin 65). Even the

³ Even with this authorial capacity enacted by the detective, there is often a surplus left in the solution, that refers the case to the reader’s attention and forces the formulation of a more complete or accurate version of the events explained by Parodi. This is not to say that Parodi is ever wrong; on the contrary, his solutions are imaginative and creatively satisfying. The inconsistencies that are found in Parodi’s narration stand in contrast to an idealized text and seem to be deliberate. As Ann Banfield explains: “Where an inconsistency appears in an actual text, it is ascribed to the author as a mistake on his part, contaminating the text. Such an inconsistency is proper to a narrator only in *skaz*, where it is a deliberate part of the fiction” (219-20).

detective's conclusions are not final in the thoroughly dialogized construction of *Seis problemas*. As we have noted, the conclusions also invite further questioning on the part of the reader.

Before considering the particular interest that the Russian Formalist concept of *skaz* holds for the Parodi text, it will be necessary to dwell on a general appraisal of Biorges' project in *Seis problemas*. Initially, Bustos emerged as the creator of a collection of detective stories, "a drama of masks and not faces," according to Chesterton (2). Bustos' very existence serves to dispel the idea that language is a passive medium from which messages are elaborated in a unidirectional process. The personality, lexicon, and creative parameters of Bustos are derived wholly from a particular view of language and literary practice. Like the stories that comprise *Seis problemas*, Bustos is created from language ordered in a certain way and he is subject to a number of compositional rules designed to achieve a particular effect: "the moment of surprise." The phrase is Chesterton's, and the revelation implied by the surprise is applicable, in relation to Bustos, to the understanding of self as an internal collaboration. Subsequently, in *Seis problemas*, Bustos' self is found to be scripted by the codified generic tradition of detective fiction. Biorges makes it clear that authorship is not so much a source for texts as another willful construction in language.

In his writing, Bustos reveals his written nature. In a genre where "technique is nearly the whole of the trick" (Chesterton 2), Bustos in turn allows each character in the stories his or her own speech. The following description of Bustos appears in the volume's introduction:

He resorts to the heavy strokes of the caricaturist, although when drawn by his jovial pen the inevitable exaggerations typical of the [puppet theatre] genre have little to do with the physical traits of his puppets; instead, he breathes life into them by dwelling on their habits of speech. (*Six* 10-11)⁴

This pertinent appraisal of Bustos' work is written by one of his creations, who critiques his master's work in the prologue. The other characters also have their critical say, and they write their commentaries on the stories' margins, making their views about the other characters' tes-

⁴ "Recurre, en suma, a los gruesos trazos del caricaturista, si bien, bajo esta pluma regocijada, las inevitables deformaciones que de suyo comporta el género, rozan apenas el físico de los fantoches y se obstinan, con feliz encarnizamiento, en los modos de hablar" (*OCC* 17).

timonies known, and even appraising Bustos' handling of the elements of the story.

In the classic detective story, revelation is the moment of a peculiar kind of truth: the little old lady is shown to be a vile poisoner, the composed butler is a fiendish gambler with a propensity for murder. In other words, the true face of the culprit is yet another mask chosen from mystery's stockroom of criminal disguises. Bustos Domecq remains faithful to the convention of this brand of detective fiction. The possibilities of guilt, innocence, and complicity are suggested by the characters' presentation of the facts, which in turn leads to the pursuit of the truth that culminates in that fateful "moment of surprise." True to the form of the "armchair detective," the clues, false or otherwise, are given to the reader to ponder. In Parodi's stories, these clues are all verbal. Bustos' innovation in respect to the technique of hiding the truth in "plain view" relies precisely on the polemical environment in which the characters' versions are reported. Bustos allows the idiosyncratic speech of the characters to flow without restraint, correction or authorial mediation. They tell of the events they know with such exuberance that the reader loses perspective and is easily led astray.

The referential aspect of language — "that of which it is being spoken about" — is omnipresent and opaque at the same time in the characters' speech. The characters speak about the crime, the circumstances of the victim's life, their own circumstances, their suspicions, and their reasons for harboring them; they discuss motives and may even name the criminal, yet the reader is caught in this profusion of words and unable to sort out concisely that which is said. Perspective has been flattened out in the linguistic exchanges that take place in Parodi's cell and the reader shares the communicative plane with the characters. The reader is in fact made to share the space of Parodi's cell.

Given the importance of language represented by the characters' speech (and in Bustos' stories everything is representation), the fact that Bustos writes "the only kind of story to which the strict laws of logic are in some sense applicable" (Chesterton 3) becomes very significant. The reader is conscious of the fact that there is an order to the narrated world. The pattern of sense is present; the problem is that it is not readily apparent. If only the reader were keyed into the "proper facts" of the case and were able to read an allusion in the proper terms, then what is hidden would be revealed and the world of fiction he or she shares with the characters would be understood: that is the hope Bustos' detective fiction offers its readers. Parodi delivers on that hope.

Faced with mystery, he is able to interpret key metaphoric turns of phrase in ways that produce a revelation. His summations or concluding fictions are satisfying because of the promise inherent to the form. The Parodi detective stories foreground both the function of narrators who are suspect (anyone could be the guilty party), or at least not reliable (each character speaks from a point of view that is exclusive and idiosyncratic), and the function of the reader who, like Parodi, must interpret and order chaos wholly in and from language.

The main device with which Bustos elaborates the linguistic context of his detective stories is the mode of narrative *skaz*. The word is a derivation of *skazat'* or "to tell, relate." *Skaz* is a form of "mimetic voice" as described by Ross, and the term was originally used by the Formalist Boris Eichenbaun in his discussion of Gogol's fiction. Eichenbaun applied it to what he understood to be a general orientation toward orality, or an oral quality specifically preserved by Chichikov's first person narration in Gogol's "The Overcoat." Later, Bakhtin deemed the use of the term as an orientation toward the spoken word to be limiting, and further specified it as an orientation toward another speaker's speech (192). Bakhtin's specification is valid, though it is not difficult to conceive, in the light of the preceding discussion, that *skaz* cannot only be oriented toward the speech of others in the text, but to the "speech" of the reader as well.

The reader of Bustos' *skaz* oriented Parodi stories, though apparently "silent," is an active receptor of another's speech. All conjectures that the reader formulates are in fact efforts to produce a rejoinder to another's mode of address, and attempts to answer words that are ultimately directed at his or her anticipated presence. This implicit dialogue is an all important aspect of the use of *skaz* in Bustos' stories. The other aspect has already been mentioned. *Skaz* in the Parodi mysteries is often double-voiced, meaning that every utterance of the characters' testimonies anticipates the words of another in so far as the words of others can incriminate the speaker or contradict his version of the events. Hence, the character's speech is "mindful" of the rejoinder of others – particularly the detective's, – and represents a hidden polemic with other points of view, or other versions of things that have happened. The elaboration of mystery in the Parodi stories makes full use of these hidden polemics among the characters. In Bustos Domecq's scenarios, truth is a conflictive entity that must be identified from the multifaceted swirl of dialogue taking place under the rubric of detective fiction.

The sequence of stories shows a progressive shift from authorial discourse toward *skaz* narrative. The overall effect from the beginning to the final stories is the gradual abolition of a narrative source outside the fictional world toward nearly complete dependence on narrative agents found within the created verbal space of the stories. From the bold “imbedding” of a clue in his third person introduction to “The Twelve Figures of the World,” the first story of the series, Bustos will confine himself to mere stage directions in the later stories. On the way, Bustos finds ways to let the characters’ languages permeate and come into conflict with the flow of his narration. The following Bustos story will provide ample grounds to examine some of the linguistic phenomena discussed thus far, along with some literary effects that derive from the peculiar composition of the Parodi stories.

In Parodi’s second case, “The Nights of Goliadkin,” the narrator begins the story by describing a character who is on his way to visit the detective:

Tall, distinguished, bland, his brush mustache tinted, Gervasio Montenegro stepped with blasé elegance into the police van and let himself be chauffeured to the penitentiary. (37)⁵

The series of adjectives “alto, distinguido, borroso,” convey the stylized description of the character. In Bustos’ authorial discourse, Montenegro’s “elegancia” is qualified by a comic element—“fatigada.” The play of qualifiers suggests the character’s demeanor to be a fabricated pose (as also does blasé elegance, in Franco-English!). Montenegro, a South American actor with a tinted mustache, seems to be incongruously reenacting the manners of a late 1800’s French dandy.

Bustos reinforces the comic effect with the series of adjectives that contrast “distinguished” to “bland.” The adjective “borroso” (as in “not very clear”) is an antithesis of “distinguido,” which connotes “with precision,” “distinct,” or “clear.” The result of the tension in the series is the comic effect addressed to the reader of the story by Bustos Domecq. The play of appearances and fact is also evident in the character’s reported actions. Bustos reports that Montenegro allows himself to be chauffeured to the Penitentiary in the police van. The character’s

⁵ “Con una fatigada elegancia, Gervasio Montenegro—alto, distinguido, borroso, de perfil romántico y de bigote lacio y teñido—subió al coche celular y se dejó *voiturar* a la Penitenciaría” (OCC 35).

choice in this seemingly casual action is nonexistent. He has been detained by the police under suspicion of murder.

The introduction to the story makes evident an overlap between the author's discourse, that the reader could assume to be an objective report, and the character's perceptions of himself and his actions. In fact, Bustos is rendering Montenegro's consciousness in his narrative passage, which loses the objectivity expected of such expositions in favor of a comic, delusional effect.⁶ In this and other instances, Montenegro is particularly oblivious to the "reality" of his surroundings, and Bustos consistently exploits the character's foibles. Bustos' introductory description of the character and his circumstances presents two other instances of interest. The adjective "fatigada" and the verb "voiturer," respectively rendered in English as "blasé" and "chauffeuré" by the translator, are French linguistic peculiarities, or Gallicisms, that characterize Montenegro's speech. The verb and the adverb occur uncharacteristically in the author's exposition; both hail from the character's speech.⁷

The appropriation of another's words, or the placing of the words of others in new contexts, plays a key role in the composition of Bustos' mystery stories:

Mere puppets of curiosity —if not under direct pressure from the police— the characters gather in a colorful flock in the now legendary cell 273. On their first visit they put forward the mystery that troubles

⁶ This practice found in Bustos' art has been denominated "narrated perception" by the critic R. J. Lethcoe and explained by him as follows: "the report of a character's conscious perceptions...presented in such a manner that they resemble objective report, but on careful consideration can be shown to be transcriptions of consciousness rather than reality" (205).

⁷ The parodic intention of Bustos' practices is yet another dimension of the Parodi stories. Asked in an interview whether Dr. Mario Bonfanti, a character in *Seis problemas*, was a parodic rendering of the Argentine poet Arturo Capdevila (1889-1967), or Enrique Larreta (1875-1961), once Minister Plenipotentiary of Argentina to France and an admirer of Spain and the Hispanic tradition who won immediate fame for *La gloria de don Ramiro* (1908), a novel reconstructing Philip II's Spain, Borges answered: "Yo admiro a Capdevila y, en cuanto a Larreta, quizá esté reflejado parcialmente en otro personaje del libro, en Gervasio Montenegro. Y, en alguna página de *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* hay alguna frase de Larreta, salvo que ahí está usada burlescamente y Larreta la escribió con toda seriedad" (Sorrentino 154).

them; on their second they hear its solution, which astounds young and old alike. (9)⁸

Skaz adds to the interest of these stories with their detective setting. The critic Ann Banfield explains: "There is only one form open to the writer intent on creating a lying storyteller. Because *skaz* is like direct speech, it can be read as false. And in the 'frame' often accorded the *skaz* tale, the disavowing sentence has its place—'All that he (or she) told me (or them) was a lie'" (264). Truth, as was suggested earlier, is produced precisely in this transcoding movement of the speech of one character into the speech of another. Parodi listens patiently to one and all, as the characters contradict each other and sometimes, even themselves. The transposing of the characters' speech into his own is Don Isidro's final strategy, and the key by which he arrives at a solution to the baffling mysteries reported by his visitors. At the end, Parodi retells the stories that he has heard in his cell. In his retelling, he "accentuates" the disparate elements into a new discursive configuration aimed at demystifying the telling of the events. As is proper to the form, these summaries produce a culprit or elucidate an explanation to the mystery.

In a further development, appropriation is not limited to a unidirectional movement leading from the characters to the detective and the ultimate pronouncement of the truth. The characters appropriate Parodi's insightful "discoveries" in subsequent versions, and therefore it is the newspaper reporter Achilles Molinari, and not Parodi, who is popularly acclaimed as the person who resolved the mystery of "Las doce figuras del mundo." Though Molinari rightfully attributes his "success" in resolving his predicament to Parodi's talents, his public does not believe him; rather, his honesty is perceived as undue generosity on Molinari's part (31). Owing a less generous nature, Gervasio Montenegro will in turn brazenly appropriate for himself Parodi's solution to his woes. After smoking several of Parodi's cigarettes (an uninvited action), and having listened to Parodi's version of the facts, the character exclaims:

⁸ "Meros títeres de la curiosidad, cuando no presionados por la policía, los personajes acuden en pintoresco tropel a la celda 273, ya proverbial. En la primera consulta exponen el misterio que los abruma, en la segunda, oyen la solución que pasma por igual a niños y ancianos" (OCC 16).

It's the old, old story (...). Stragglng intellect once again confirms the artist's intuition. (...) Don't worry, my dear Parodi, I shan't be long in revealing my solution to the authorities. (55)⁹

Montenegro's statement comes at the end of Parodi's disclosure, a long discursive reelaboration of the character's preposterous testimony. Montenegro expresses agreement with Parodi's proposition by declaring it the product of "the artist's intuition." Montenegro's words of praise (for himself) are the confirmation that Parodi's exposition has hit the mark. Montenegro's agreement with Parodi's solution is intimately linked with an immediate and parallel act of appropriation of Parodi's words.

Agreement and appropriation are one in the reaction of the addressee. Parodi, the origin of the demystified pronouncement, is relegated by the exultant character to being "the stragglng intellect" that verifies what Montenegro already knew: "I shan't be long in revealing *my solution*." In his agreement, Montenegro has become the "genial artist" and superseded Parodi's discourse with his own, which will become the official story of the case.

In the introduction to the collection, a task with which he has been entrusted, Montenegro establishes a polemic with Bustos Domecq, suggesting that he has been slighted by the author:

The author, whose skill is as compact as it is artistic, reduces elementary reality and heaps all the laurels of the case on the brow of Parodi alone. The less perceptive reader will smile, suspecting the deliberate omission of some tedious inquiry and the unintentional omission of more than one inspired insight made by a gentleman on whose identity it would be inappropriate to dwell (9-10).¹⁰

False modesty aside, Montenegro's speech also represents the parodic stylization of the ornate language of Latin American Modernism. The rhetorical excesses of Modernism reach their apotheosis in Montenegro's discourse:

⁹ "Es la vieja historia (...). La rezagada inteligencia confirma la intuición genial del artista. (...) Pierda cuidado, mi querido Parodi: no tardaré en comunicar mi solución a las autoridades" (OCC 47).

¹⁰ "El autor, mediante un artificio no menos condensado que artístico, simplifica la prismática realidad y agolpa todos los laureles del caso en la única frente de Parodi. El lector menos avisado sonrío: adivina la omisión oportuna de algún tedioso interrogatorio y la omisión involuntaria de más de un atisbo genial, expedido por un caballero sobre cuyas señas particulares resultaría indelicado insistir..." (OCC 16-17).

I've sought light in the Balearics, color in Brindisi, and sophisticated sin in Paris. Also, like Renan, I've said a prayer on the Acropolis. I have squeezed the juice from life's bountiful bunch of grapes the world over. (35)¹¹

The classical allusion, the Gallicisms, the metaphorical turn of phrase, all work to create a level of difficulty in the understanding of Montenegro's case. The character's speech brings into play another aspect of Borges' parodic project. He targets the literary rhetoric of Modernism within the narrative frame of a story that requires the reader to elicit facts from discourse in order to arrive at the clarification of mysterious circumstances. The vices of Modernist literary practice, coupled with the Montenegro's self-centered conceit, obfuscate rather than reveal the facts of the case. There is a consistency to Montenegro's character that permits the reader to discount a "margin of error" in all statements made by the actor-poet: he is unable to conceive the true consequences of his actions and considers himself to be deserving of every deferential act on the part of others. As a result, Montenegro's gives comical, unilateral renderings of the many transgressions and misunderstands that lead to his predicament in the story.

Characteristically, Montenegro assumes that Parodi's interpretation of "Las noches de Goliadkin," "a story about a very brave, though star-crossed man —a man for whom I have enormous respect" (53), is an indirect reference to his person. Actually, Parodi's reference is to Goliadkin, the true victim of the story. Montenegro has been accused of Goliadkin's murder in a plot that acknowledges one of Agatha Christie's more inventive yarns. Bustos deliberately incorporates the situation depicted by Christie in *Murder on the Orient Express* in his story, and adds a twist by naming the victim "Goliadkin." The name recalls the protagonist of *The Double*, in parodic homage to the father of the "psycho-thriller" novel, Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Montenegro's account of the imbroglio that takes place aboard the nonstop Pan-American Flyer from Bolivia to Buenos Aires is amusing and unique. For Parodi's benefit, Montenegro concocts a romantic farce of which he is the star. The intrigue, according to Montenegro, involves himself, and an assortment of men who vie for a fascinating baroness' favors:

¹¹ "He buscado la luz en las Baleares, el color en Brindisi, el pecado elegante en París. También, como Renan, he dicho mi plegaria en la Acrópolis. En todas partes he estrujado el jugoso racimo de la vida..." (OCC 37).

The *baronne*, using as a pretext the midsummer heat, kept lowering her neckline and pressing herself against Goliadkin—just to excite me. (44)¹²

In this atmosphere of frivolous and gallant competition, Montenegro wins a diamond from his compartment companion, Mr. Goliadkin. After Goliadkin's disappearance, Montenegro is inexplicably charged with larceny and murder. It is evident that Montenegro has failed to understand the nature of the murderous plot unleashed about him. Among other things, Montenegro fails to take into account the inconsistencies of his fellow passengers: a baroness who is a Communist sympathizer, an aged Texas colonel with the strength and agility of a much younger man, a regional poet born and raised in a region different from the one he writes about, and a blustery, ill-tempered Father Brown.

As in *Murder on the Orient Express*, the bizarre aggregation of characters found aboard the Pan-American Flyer are all involved in a plot against Goliadkin. Their purpose is to obtain a priceless diamond, and Montenegro, in his blind pursuit of amorous adventure, manages to foil their plans on more than one occasion. The note of duplicity struck by Goliadkin's name is thoroughly developed by Bustos Domecq. Montenegro buys his ticket and boards the express "soberly attired" as a Bolivian Indian in an attempt to elude some pursuers who are extraneous to the plot. The characters that Montenegro consequently meets are also disguised and masking their true selves, particularly the unbelievable Father Brown, who is a malevolent *doppelgänger* of Chesterton's benevolent character. The double motif is further associated with the character of Goliadkin by the fact that he has two diamonds in his possession, a real and a fake one, kept in identical cases.

The allusion to Dostoevsky's *The Double* is particularly interesting to the present discussion of mimetic voice because of the narrative complications it introduces and the parallels it offers to *Seis problemas*. The critic Roger B. Anderson provides the following summary of Dostoevsky's novel:

¹² "La baronne, pretextando el rigor de la canícula, dilataba incesantemente su escote y se apretaba contra Goliadkin -todo para provocarme-" (OCC 39). The title of nobility suggests the name of Baroness Emmuska Orczy. The author of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* also wrote a number of stories featuring "the old man in the corner," an important character conceived in line with the sedentary reasoners collectively known as "armchair detectives." Borges made reference to her book *Unravelling Knots* while he was working for *El Hogar* in 1937.

It chronicles the accelerating madness of a minor bureaucrat, Golyadkin [sic]. Starting with a persistent vacillation between two personality tendencies, he falls prey to hallucinations of a double, Golyadkin "Jr." We become progressively lost in his fantasies until it is hard to tell which characters in the story are real and whether any of them are distinct from the protagonist's exaggerated subjectivity. To add to the problem, there is no objective narrative voice on which to rely for information. Rather, Dostoevsky chose to use a first-person narrator who identifies himself with the values and person of his confused protagonist. (12)

The Double is precisely the book that Bakhtin uses in his discussion of "the orientation of one person to another person's discourse and consciousness" in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

In *The Double*, a parodic stylization of the 'high style' from *Dead Souls* is refracted through the narrator's voice; in general, *The Double* is sprinkled with parodic and semiparodic allusions to various works of Gogol. It should be noted that these parodic tones in the narrative are directly interwoven with a mimicry of Golyadkin. (226)

As in *Seis problemas* and the literary parody of Modernism evident in Montenegro's speech, Dostoevsky's early work presents a general parodic orientation realized through the narrator's voice. Further, in terms of narrative voice, the character-narrator Golyadkin presents some notable parallels with Montenegro, and may indeed function as a Slavic double of the vain itinerant Argentine actor, since "what [Golyadkin] wants to see becomes the sole criterion of what is real to him" (Anderson 20). Thus, as in the Parodi stories, the central problem in *The Double* is cognition:

As he filters out much of factual life, [Golyadkin's] personality becomes both more intriguing and misshapen. In the end, it is the order of "Sr.'"s special wants, so different from those of his alter-ego double, that determines his actions and constitutes the novel's essential organization. The competition between cognitive models in Golyadkin is not open to compromise or synthesis; each threatens the other in a most fundamental way... Each important fact, deed, or motive simultaneously refers to an opposed order of value. As a result, events in *The Double* are at the same time coherent and incoherent. (16)

In light of this discussion, it is easier to understand the motivation behind Montenegro's appropriation of Parodi's rejoinder. Parodi's solution to the mystery posed by Montenegro represents the "opposed order of value" that negates Montenegro's point of view, and hence devalues his worth as a narrating entity. In contrast to the way in which *The Double* is organized, Bustos "externalizes" dialogue in *Seis problemas* by populating the fictional world, and allowing for the "finalizing

artistic summation" customary to the detective genre to take place. True to the form, Bustos posits the detective's speech as the "authoritative and stabilized medium of refraction" for all of the characters' discourses. In this, Parodi represents the author-monologist, whose "intentions and evaluations must dominate over all the others and must form a compact and unambiguous whole" (Bakhtin 203). However, by means of the characters' acts of appropriation (be they willful or unintended) of the "authorial interpretations" that take place in the privacy of Cell 273, Bustos endeavors to diffuse the monological association of a single speech center and a single consciousness as the source of truth in the stories.

As we have indicated, judgement of the relative coherence of the characters' accounts is not limited to the detective alone. Other characters "listen in" on the testimonies presented to Parodi. They evaluate the speech of others from their points of view and express their opinions on the margins of the stories. For example, in "Tai An's Long Search," Montenegro returns before Parodi after his "success" with the Golyadkin case to describe the scene of another crime:

The ground floor is dedicated to the salesroom and the *atelier*.^{*} The upper floor—I mean, *cela va sans dire*, before the fire—served as the hearth and home, the inviolable *chez lui* of Fang She, that particle of the Far East transplanted to the Argentine capital complete with all his native character and failings. (143)¹³

The footnote, "written in the hand of Carlos Anglada," confronts Montenegro's idiosyncrasies with the following words:

Not at all. We—the contemporaries of the machine gun and biceps—repudiate this delicate rhetoric. I should say, with the finality of a bullet, 'I put salesroom and *atelier* on the ground floor. I lock the Chinamen upstairs.'¹⁴

Anglada's rebuff is itself a parodic stylization of the rhetoric and imagery of Italian Futurism, one of the early twentieth century *avant garde* movements that superseded Modernism in younger poetic circles of

¹³ "El piso bajo está consagrado al salón de ventas y al *atelier*; el piso alto —me refiero, *cela va sans dire*, a épocas anteriores al incendio— constituía la casa de familia, el intocable *at home* de esa partícula del Extremo Oriente transplantada con todas sus peculiaridades y riesgos a la Capital Federal" (OCC 110).

¹⁴ "De ningún modo. Nosotros —contemporáneos de la ametralladora y del bíceps— repudiamos esta molición retórica. Yo diría, inapelable como el estampido: 'En el piso bajo instalo el salón de ventas y el *atelier*, en el superior encierro a los chinos'" (OCC 110).

Latin America. Bustos adapts and heightens the style of Futurism, but parodies it by using it for purposes that are incongruous with the intentions of the style.¹⁵ Both styles enter into open polemics on the margins of Bustos' stories as the characters react critically to the other's discourse. Discourse in the Parodi stories, "like the word in living conversation," is consistently aware of its listener; in the words of Bakhtin, "[discourse] provokes an answer, anticipates it, and structures itself in the answer's direction" (280).

The appropriation of another's way of speaking or idiosyncratic expressions play a role in the detection process of *Seis problemas*. Parodi shares with Bustos an interest for "the sum total of devices associated with the other's speech precisely as an expression of a particular point of view" (Bakhtin 189). For example, in "El dios de los toros," the detective is able to infer an adulterous relation—and a shared criminal motive to murder the husband—between the socialite Mariana Ruiz Villalba and the poet José Formento by detecting in her speech expressions peculiar to the poet, that Ruiz Villalba uses in her version of the events. Later, the reader is allowed to assume the existence of a new amorous liaison in the life of Villalba, who has married Anglada, when she uses the expressions of yet another man, Mario Bonfanti, in another story, "Free Will and the Commendatore." The inference of this new attachment in Villalba's life is inconsequential to the criminal plot, but the reader has been keyed into the hidden polemic and is able to recognize the farcical truth that it reveals.

When suspicion becomes part of the reader's conscious intellectual project in relation to the text, Borges' program is complete. As Borges reminded his interviewer in *Conversaciones*:

(...) leemos un texto del género policial sospechando todo de antemano, pero ese tipo de lectura ha sido creado por el mismo cuento policial. (Alifano 18)

The issue remains to be answered whether the Parodi stories are parodic as *detective* stories. Caution should be exercised in answering this apparently obvious critical inquiry. Don Isidro Parodi solves crimes in

¹⁵ The movement spearheaded by Tommaso Marinetti sought to celebrate industry, technical advance understood as progress, and the qualities of immediacy and dynamism. Marinetti dedicated poems to racecars, scaffolds, and to the machine gun alluded to by Anglada: "Tap-tap-tap-tap.../Nuestra linda y loca ametralladora/sacude su pacifismo/por encima de todo;/los flautines de las balas/la talo-nean.../tzin-tzin...//tzin, tzin, zi tzin zi/ y/ zuuuu;/buuum!" (Rodríguez 167).

crimes in jail, but that in itself does not make the detective stories parodical. The Argentine detective is one in a line of detectives who thrives on the restrictions imposed on their investigations. As Montenegro reminds the reader in the prologue, Parodi is an heir to Max Carrados, who “carried with him everywhere the portable jail of his blindness” (12). The sedentary sleuths that came into prominence in the years after the First World War are themselves parodic reminders of Dupin and Holmes’ performances. Parodi imitates, but in terms of detection the end result is evidently not very different from that of his forerunners. In this lineage, Don Isidro would be one more parodic expression of a parodic tradition. The creative parody in these stories should be sought in the way the characters let a familiar language ring out with new accents, allowing it to enter modern consciousness and transform both language and consciousness in the process.¹⁶

This study, finally, represents an attempt to elaborate an aspect of *Seis problemas* that is central to the composition of the stories: the illusion of orality and its textual effects. Thus far, the critical community has focused predominantly on the parodic and satirical aspects of Bustos’ text.¹⁷ The fact that the detective is in jail and has “the honor of being the first detective to be a jailbird,” points to another intention, distinct from parody, found in the collection of *Seis problemas*. Social and political satire is also on Bustos Domecq’s agenda: “Parodi’s appearance, his *trouvaillie*, is an Argentine achievement, produced—it should be noted—during the presidency of Dr. Castillo” (12).¹⁸

The only place where truth is efficiently produced in 1942, according to the Parodi stories, is the state penitentiary. The reference to the brief conservative presidency of Ramón S. Castillo, who ended the Concordancia agreement that had united conservative, liberal, and socialist interests since 1931, suggests the deteriorating national circumstance

¹⁶ Parody, in *Seis problemas*, is also to be found in relation to other specific literary exponents in Argentina. Along with characters that represent in their speech the movements of Italian Futurism and Latin American Modernism, the critic Mireya Camurati identifies in the speech of Gervasio Montenegro prosopopeias in the manner of Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938) and a direct quote from Ricardo Güiraldes (1886-1927) (89).

¹⁷ Cf. the articles by Cossío, Avellaneda, and the chapter in Simpson’s dissertation on H. Bustos Domecq for discussions on the issues of parody and satire in relation to *Seis problemas*.

¹⁸ “ (...) cuya *trouvaillie* es una proeza argentina, realizada, conviene proclamarlo, bajo la presidencia del doctor Castillo” (OCC 19).

that ended with the military coup of 1943. The Group of United Officers that commanded the coup were “strongly influenced by Italian fascism and profoundly nationalist in orientation,” according to the historian Donald C. Hodges:

Because of the pronounced Axis sympathies of the new military regime, its indefinite prolongation of the state of siege decreed in 1941, its dissolution of congress, and its legal ban of all political parties, it evoked extensive civilian opposition. (7-8)

Along with a sympathetic reference on the part of Parodi to the militarily deposed Radical president Hipólito Yrigoyen, who had represented “a broad coalition including the new industrial bourgeoisie and a petty bourgeois popular base” (8), the only other reference to the political reality of the times makes clear the Allied sympathies and individualist outlook of the detective:

“People nowadays expect the government to do everything for them. If you’re poor the government has to find you a job. If you fall ill the government has to pay your hospital bill. Kill someone and instead of paying for it yourself you ask the government to punish you. You may say that I’m a fine one to talk like this, since the state is keeping me. But I still believe, sir, that a man has to shift for himself.” “I too believe that, Mr. Parodi,” [the suspect] Fang She said deliberately. “Many men are dying in the world today in defense of that belief.” (158)¹⁹

In 1942, Parodi’s endorsement was a strong polemical commentary in the face of institutional and even popular sympathy for the tenets of Italian and German fascist ideology in its broadest terms.²⁰ In the context of national events, the coincidental presence of the agent of truth in the jailhouse comprises a satirical view of Argentina. The prison serves as a model of Argentine society from the particular point of view of the liberal discourse that defines the space occupied by *Biorges*. The

¹⁹ “-La gente de ahora no hace más que pedir que el gobierno le arregle todo. Ande usted pobre, y el gobierno tiene que darle un empleo; sufra un atraso en la salud, y el gobierno tiene que atenderlo en el hospital; deba una muerte, y en vez de expiarla por su cuenta, pida al gobierno que lo castigue. Usted dirá que yo no soy quien para hablar así porque el Estado me mantiene. Pero sigo creyendo, señor, que el hombre tiene que bastarse.

- Yo también lo creo, señor Parodi -dijo pausadamente Fang She-. Muchos hombres están muriendo ahora en el mundo para defender esa creencia” (OCC 120-121).

²⁰ In the book *Argentina, 1943-1976*, Hodges indicates that “Argentina was the only nation in the Western Hemisphere that did not declare war against the Axis powers until the outcome of World War II was already decided, and then only to avoid becoming isolated and the subject of recriminations by the United States” (7).

prison is a model for a stratified world that organizes and contains the characters in a series of social and ideologically determined enclosures. The prison is also a living structure whose linguistic boundaries can be heard in the various accents of Parodi's visitors. In the spirit of Bustos Domecq's enterprise, it would not be unfounded to affirm that the living structure that contains Parodi and separates him from his visitors represents "the prison-house of language," discussed by Nietzsche in these terms:

We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit. (522)

And this interpretation of Parodi's predicament brings the reader again into the realm of parody.

In his *Memorias*, Bioy recalls a time in 1938 when Borges, Silvina Ocampo and he dreamed up a story (never written) in which the protagonist, searching among the papers of a dead author, found a list of prohibitions. Under the heading of "En literatura hay que evitar," the list included the recommendation to disregard "la censura o el elogio en las críticas" (83). Given the wan reception given to Bustos Domecq and his works, and the tenacity with which Borges continued to produce Bustos' art, it is evident that the precept was one held close to his double heart. Knowing that the following appraisal of his work would have been of little or no interest to Honorio Bustos Domecq, we must conclude by noting that *Seis problemas* represents the fruition of an encounter that took place over fifty years ago, when two individuals subsumed their personalities under one name to produce one of the most interesting and pleasurable works in collaboration of our literary heritage.

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