

A PROJECTED STEVENSON ANTHOLOGY (BUENOS AIRES, 1968-70)¹

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Recently in Buenos Aires I was allowed access to the Adolfo Bioy Casares/Silvina Ocampo papers, which are currently being organized under the supervision of a judge and a notary pending resolution of a complex inheritance case. One sheet of paper I saw there struck me as of immediate importance for what it tells us about the interest that Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares shared in Stevenson, and what the two writers found particularly attractive in Stevenson's work.

Borges and Bioy began collaborating around 1936,² with the first major fruit of their collaboration being the *Antología de la literatura fantástica* they edited with Silvina Ocampo in 1940. In 1942 they published their first book together (under the pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq), a book of crime stories called *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi*. In 1943 they published an anthology of crime fiction, *Los mejores cuentos policiales*, with a then small and fairly new publishing house in Buenos Aires, Emecé Editores. Emecé then commissioned them to edit a series of crime novels, *Séptimo Círculo*, named for the seventh circle of Dante's hell; this series,

¹ This paper was presented at a conference on Robert Louis Stevenson in Edinburgh in July 2005.

² For their first collaboration, a brochure on the virtues of La Martona yogurt, see *Museo* (24-37).

which eventually published more than a hundred titles, was a tremendous success for the publisher and led to further proposals for editing projects. One of these, which did not come to fruition, was for a series of *Sumas*, anthologies of writers that Bioy and Borges found of interest; among the Bioy papers are the plans for a number of volumes in this series, including Sir Thomas Browne, Robert Louis Stevenson and (rather surprisingly) Colette. (In the recent compilation of Bioy's diary entries about Borges—a book of almost 1700 pages—there are numerous references to these *Sumas*.)³

The plans for the *Suma de R. L. Stevenson* are found on a single sheet of paper, which reads as follows:

Suma de R. L. Stevenson

Traducción de Raimundo Lida

Contenido

Nonfiction Ensayos

Lay morals

On morality

The ethics of crime

Pulvis et umbra

On the choice of a profession

Gentlemen

Some gentlemen in fiction

On the morality of the profession of letters

A note on realism

³ See for instance pages 12, 109, 1208, 1504, 1505, 1510. Other references to Stevenson are found on pages 51, 79, 120-21, 136-37, 154 etc. See also Bioy's note that is included in *Museo* (13, 20). From the references in the diary it is clear that most of the work on this anthology happened in 1968 (1208) and 1970 (1504-10), and that the plan was for Jacobo Timerman to publish the book.

A gossip on romance

A humble remonstrance

A chapter on dreams

Fiction

The Suicide Club

The Bottle Imp

The four black brothers⁴

The sinking ship

The yellow paint

Faith, half faith and no faith at all

The house of Eld

The touchstone

The poor thing

The song of the morn⁵

Extensión del volumen (con prólogo) 350 págs. Aprox.

And below the list of stories, with an arrow from "The four black brothers," is a list of three novels: *The Ebb Tide*, *The Master of Ballantrae* and *Weir of Hermiston*.

As I argued twenty years ago in a book on Borges and Stevenson (published only in Spanish as *El precursor velado: R. L. Stevenson en la obra de Borges*), the rereading of Stevenson's essays and fiction was crucial to Borges's ideas on narrative in a series of essays in the 1930s (most of which predate his association with Bioy Casares). Stevenson is invoked as a model in one of the prefaces to *Historia universal de la infamia*, Borges's first book of short stories (1935), and his influence can be felt in such stories as "Las ruinas circulares" (1940) and some of the Bustos Domecq stories

⁴ This is crossed out.

⁵ This should be "The Song of the Morrow."

from 1942. The total number of references to Stevenson in Borges's published works number at least a hundred, with many being reflections on quotations from Stevenson, often from the literary essays. We also know from an essay that Bioy Casares published years later that Stevenson was one of the frequent topics of his conversations with Borges, as if now clear with the publication of almost 1700 pages of Bioy's diaries that focus on Borges (a figure to whom Bioy played a kind of Boswell).⁶

Before I get to the contents of the projected anthology, I should say a word about Raimundo Lida. Lida was later an eminent Hispanist who taught for many years at Harvard. It is not clear from the sheet I consulted whether Borges and Bioy asked Lida to translate the Stevenson volume, or indeed if he accepted, but the choice is a sign of the confidence they had in his abilities as a translator from English to Spanish.

The list of essays is pretty much what I would have expected from my earlier work on Borges's references to Stevenson.

He frequently referred to "Lay Morals" and the other essays on ethics, being particularly taken with a notion of an ethics that was not religiously based. There is a reference to *Ethical Studies* (the title under which some of these essays were grouped in the Tusitala Edition of Stevenson's works) in the 1941 review of the Spencer Tracy version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and there are several references to "Lay Morals," though more to the concept than to the actual text, in the third volume of Borges's uncollected pieces, *Textos recobrados*, which covers the period from 1956 to 1984.

"The Morality of the Profession of Letters" does not seem to be mentioned in Borges's work, but it is easy to understand why he and Bioy would have included it in this anthology. The essay concerns the writer's obligation to be exact, vivid, intellectual and

⁶ This relation is explicit in Bioy's diary. He begins writing down Borges's conversations after he and Borges edit a selection of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and a collection of English essayists, and the detail with which he records Borges's conversations becomes much greater after Borges's blindness grows more acute in 1955-56. On 26 September 1956, for instance, he notes down the following remark of Borges's: "Hay que hacer como Boswell: anotar para que las cosas no se pierdan" (213), which in its curious way is an imperative directed toward Bioy, who obeyed.

truthful, and includes a reflection on the impact that a writer's work can have on a nation's memory and conception of itself. "Truth to the fact and a good spirit in the treatment" (22: 279), "In all works of art, widely speaking, it is first of all the author's attitude that is narrated" (22: 282), "Nothing should be done in a hurry that can be done slowly" (22: 283), "to read a novel that was conceived with any force is to multiply experience and to exercise the sympathies" (22: 286)—these maxims would have had a strong appeal to Borges, and Bioy shared these ethical and literary concerns.

"Gentlemen" and "Some Gentlemen in Fiction" are mentioned a number of times (particularly the latter) in discussions of fictional character; Borges frequently comments on and argues with Stevenson's assertion in the latter essay that characters are "only strings of words and parts of books." This sentence in what is a fairly obscure essay of Stevenson's is mentioned at least five times in Borges's work, beginning as early as 1938 and continuing through at least 1967 (when it is cited in Borges's conversations in French with George Charbonnier). Interestingly, though, Borges never discusses the main thesis of that essay, which concerns whether a writer of one social class can create characters of a different social class; his interest is piqued, instead, by Stevenson's provocative statement that characters don't exist except as strings of words, though he reflects on several occasions that a reader's experience contradicts this idea of characters' merely verbal existence.⁷ In a debate on "Moral y literatura" in *Sur* in 1945, for instance, he writes:

Stevenson . . . observa que un personaje de novela es apenas una sucesión de palabras y pondera la extraña independencia que parecen lograr, sin embargo, esos homúnculos verbales. El hecho es que una vez lograda esa independencia, una vez convencidos los lectores de que tal personaje no es menos vario que los que habitan la "realidad" (quienes, por lo demás, tampoco son, o somos, otra cosa que una serie de signos), el juicio moral del autor importa poco. Además, todo juicio es una generalización, una mera vague-

⁷ See Molloy, *Las letras de Borges*, 120-25, and Balderston, *El precursor velado*, 63-94.

dad aproximativa. Para el novelista, como tal, no hay personajes malos o buenos; todo personaje es inevitable. (*Borges en Sur*, 298)⁸

He cites the same passage from "Some Gentlemen in Fiction" in a 1947 essay on *Don Quijote* and in a 1948 essay on Dante, and refers to it decades later in one of his conversations with Georges Charbonnier. "Gentlemen," however, is not a text that he seems to have ever referred to, and its inclusion here is a bit of a puzzle. It does connect with the essays on narrative that were written around the same time at moments such as this:

More and more, as our knowledge widens, we have to reply to those who ask for a definition: "I can't give you that, but I will tell you a story." We cannot say what a thing will be, nor what it ought to be; but we can say what it has been, and how it came to be what it is: History instead of Definition. (14: 358)

The essay's main concern, about what distinguishes a gentleman, is also connected with the essays on morality, since Stevenson argues that a gentleman is one who by inspiration (not by race or by birth) does the right thing at the necessary instant: much of life comes up for the first time, unrehearsed, and must be acted on upon the instant (14: 359). This concern with the moment in a person's life that defines his or her character is a touchstone of Borges's writing in the 1940s, notably in such stories as "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz" and in the essays on Dante (collected as *Nueve ensayos dantescos*), and later, in an ironic sense, in "El Sur."

The essays on realism and romance (particularly "A Gossip on Romance" and "A Humble Remonstrance," which grew out of Stevenson's discussions of fiction with Henry James) are not mentioned by name, but are cited in a number of key Borges essays. (The second chapter of *El precursor velado* devoted to this topic, pages 42-62.) There is a passing reference to "A Note on Realism" (though without mentioning the title of the essay) in Borges's dialogues with Ernesto Sábato in 1975, in which Borges recalls Stevenson criticizing Walter Scott for his excessive attention to period detail; this is the same point that Borges makes in numerous

⁸ See also *Textos recobrados 1956-1986* (219).

essays, notably in "El escritor argentino y la tradición," in which he argues that an excessive attention to local color smothers narrative. "A Gossip on Romance" is alluded to (again obliquely) in the preface that Borges wrote to Bioy Casares's novel *La invención de Morel* in 1940, in which Borges argues for the primacy of the imagination in narrative; this point is taken up by Bioy in his prefaces to the *Antología de la literatura fantástica* and to *Cuentos breves y memorables*. In that famous preface, Borges writes: "Stevenson, hacia 1882, anotó que los lectores británicos desdaban un poco las peripecias y opinaban que era muy hábil redactar una novela sin argumento, o de argumento infinitesimal, atrofiado" (*Prólogos* 22); this refers to Stevenson's statement in "A Gossip on Romance" that "English people of the present day are apt, I know not why, to look somewhat down on incident, and reserve their admiration for the clink of teaspoons and the accent of the curate. It is thought clever to write a novel with no story at all, or at least with a very dull one" (13: 333). Another reference to this essay comes in 1951 in an article in homage to Alberto Gerchunoff, in which Borges writes: "Stevenson opinaba que carecer de encanto, para un libro, es carecer de todo" ("El estilo de su fama"), which refers to the beginning of the essay on romance: "In anything fit to be called by the name of reading, the process itself should be absorbing and voluptuous" (13: 327). Another more oblique reference to the essay on romance appears in the conversations with Charbonnier, which evoke the idea of what Stevenson calls "vistas of secondary stories" (13: 338), which Borges refers to when he says that the reader "tiene la impresión de que entre ambas escenas conocidas hay otras que no se conocen" (51-52). References to "A Gossip on Romance," then, are found several places in Borges's works, most notably in the preface to Bioy's novel of 1940, a text which has the character of a literary manifesto, especially since it came out in the same year as the anthology of fantastic literature.

"A Humble Remonstrance," Stevenson's reply to Henry James's response to "A Gossip on Romance," is also an important text for Borges. He refers particularly to Stevenson's idea that in a well-written novel no word should look "another way" (13:348). This idea is cited in interviews with Ronald Christ, Jean Milleret

and Rita Guibert, all from the period from 1967 to 1972.

Another text that Borges frequently cites, and that appears in the table of contents for the projected anthology, is "A Chapter on Dreams." Borges often cites its discussion of the origin of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It is invoked, for instance, in the brilliant essay on Beckford's *Vathek* in *Otras inquisiciones*, where Borges recalls an abominable "certain hue of brown" (15: 252) which haunted Stevenson's dreams. In "El sueño de Coleridge" (642-43) he recalls the role that dreams played in the creation of *Dr. Jekyll*; this same idea is cited in the paragraph on Stevenson in the *Introducción a la literatura inglesa*, in *Literaturas germánicas medievales* and (apropos of the "Brownies") in the *Libro de los seres imaginarios*.

In sum, then, almost all of the essays listed in the projected anthology are ones that Borges referred to at least once. (Bioy, who was less important as an essayist, mentions that Stevenson's essays were frequent topics of conversation, but is less specific.) The choice of short stories is also significant. Most are drawn from the *Fables*, which Borges translated near the end of his life, some two decades after the planning of the Stevenson anthology. In my third conversation with Borges in 1978 he asked me to read "The Song of the Morrow" to him, and he often anticipated words that were about to appear in the text, confirming that it was a story he knew very well. In addition, Bioy and Borges included (and translated) "Faith, Half-Faith and No Faith At All" in *Cuentos breves y extraordinarios* in 1953.⁹

The story that is listed first in the table of contents is "The Suicide Club," which is a text that Borges refers to frequently: see, for instance, the review of a J. B. Priestley novel in *El Hogar* in 1938, the review of Manuel Peyrou's *La espada dormida* in 1945, and the note on Stevenson in the *Introducción a la literatura inglesa* in 1965. I haven't found explicit references to "The Bottle Imp," though that story would have appealed to Borges and Bioy due to their interest in the fantastic.

It is not clear what excerpts Borges and Bioy intended to draw

⁹ References to the preparation of this anthology are numerous in Bioy's diary. See for instance pages 72-84.

from *The Ebb Tide*, *The Master of Ballantrae* and *Weir of Hermiston*. In any case, all three are novels that Borges referred to on occasion. Of the Stevenson-Osbourne collaborations, Borges refers more frequently to *The Wrecker*. Borges and Bioy included an excerpt from *The Master of Ballantrae* in *Los mejores cuentos policiales*, and Borges frequently recalled a few details from *Weir of Hermiston*.

The sheet that lists the contents of a Stevenson anthology is yet another signal of Borges and Bioy's engagement with Stevenson's works, and confirms the patterns of allusions to those works that I noted some twenty years ago in *El precursor velado*. When Bioy sums up his conversations with Borges over the many years of their friendship in a 1968 essay "Libros y amistad," Stevenson is the third writer mentioned (after Dr. Johnson and De Quincey); this list is repeated a few pages later (see *Museo* 13 and 20). This unpublished anthology confirms Borges and Bioy shared a passion and a profound knowledge of Stevenson's work in Buenos Aires, particularly in the period from 1968 to 1970, at a time when few writers of similar stature were paying serious attention to Stevenson's work. As I suggested twenty years ago in *El precursor velado* (at a time when I could not have known of the existence of this sheet of paper), Stevenson's reflections on narrative theory, and his practice of the novel and of short fiction, were essential to the radical turn in Borges's work. If the stories in *Historia universal de la infamia* were based on earlier texts, but were refashioned according to Borges under the influence of Stevenson, Chesterton and Sternberg, so too the presence of Stevenson is certainly felt in the famous stories of *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, and in Bioy Casares's writings of the same period, the novels *La invención de Morel*, *Plan de evasión* and *El sueño de los héroes*,¹⁰ and in the short stories of *La trama celeste*. *Suma de R. L. Stevenson*, though never published, is coherent evidence of Borges and Bioy's prolonged engagement with, and deep respect for, the works of Robert Louis Stevenson.

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¹⁰ On this, see my article "Murder by Suggestion."

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