

Dialogism and Parody in the Detective Story: Honorio Bustos Domecq's *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi*

La parodia de lenguajes sociales que Bustos Domecq desarrolla en relación al género policial, que a su vez se basa en la necesidad imperativa de crear sentido a partir de circunstancias misteriosas, hace de Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi una instancia clave de la narrativa latinoamericana. En primer lugar, la parodia pone de relieve la multiplicidad de lenguajes que coexisten en relación conflictiva entre sí y en marcado contraste con un lenguaje normativo y supra-nacional, asociado a las instituciones del estado y medios de comunicación masivos. En segundo lugar, la dinámica del cuento policial hace evidente la precaria inteligibilidad de estos lenguajes sociales. Los cuentos de Seis problemas retan al lector, quien debe interpretar correctamente diferentes lenguajes cargados de metáforas y alusiones culturales que responden a circunstancias locales y a tradiciones lingüísticas que pueden o no ser compartidas plenamente por el lector, pero que demandan su acto de interpretación. La relativa opacidad de lo factible, diluido en los flujos discursivos y en conflicto de una sociedad, se demuestra en esta representación plena del dialogismo acuñado por Bajtín, donde se hace evidente que la determinación de la verdad es un acto social.

Although detective fiction was born in the United States, the detective story invented by Edgar Allan Poe was subsequently taken up in the England and developed by writers such as Collins, Doyle, Christie, Dickson Carr, Innes, Chesterton, and Sayers well into the twentieth century. What became known as the "English" mystery would later be reterritorialized by the likes of Hammett, Chandler, and MacDonald in the 30s and 40s, and the new modality of "hard-boiled" detective fiction has been championed by many other American writers since then. However, it was the "English" detective story that created a readership for the form in Latin America. In a personal interview, Paco Ignacio Taibo II, a prolific representative of the new Mexican detective novel, referred to the work of Borges and the generation of the 40s in Latin America as the "pre-history" of the genre, if not a prehistoric expression of the form. He was

indirectly indicating that the tradition advocated by Borges, who was largely responsible for introducing the genre in Argentina, was a puzzle-type of detective story, the kind that depended on the reasoning detective and the clever piece of deduction.

Given the social conditions of Latin America then and now, to expect the kind of stability that would allow a detective to arrive at a solution through a rational method was and is, Taibo argued, unrealistic, even ludicrous. In fact, the current practitioners of the genre in Latin America favour variations of the “hard-boiled” or *noir* tradition of Hammett, Chandler, and MacDonald, which feature renegade detectives at odds with the cultural mainstream, fighting administrative corruption and often in direct and painful confrontation with the agents of the law. But the development of this line of detective stories in Latin America is, as Borges would point out, one fork of the garden path; what Borges admires in the work of Collins, Chesterton, and Poe is the work of the intellect in resolving a mystery, which is analogous to the act of reading, where interpretive inference has no access to truth other than further interpretation. Borges thus deplored in the “hard line” the charge of violence, the sinister characters, the emphasis on what pretended to be a realistic setting over the problem of reasoning, because it forgot “el origen intelectual del relato policial” (*Oral* 79).¹

The lesson Borges derived from traditional detective fiction was the practice of reading critically, sceptically, as if the truth were not being revealed at any one time by the text in question. In the process of discovery, the operative instability in the detective’s act of interpretation is the instability of language. The subversive value of this insight is worth several novels with no other charm than the social content of their pages: in the hedonistic pursuit of the “whodunit,” Borges saw a training ground for a type of critical thinking that recognizes the role of codes in the fabrication of truth. Another insight he derived from his relation with detective fiction is that the colonized inherits the literary tradition (e.g., the detective genre) of the colonizer, but is not limited to one tradition: as the product of a nation made up by peoples from all points of the globe, a post-colonial literature can claim the universe as its cultural heritage. Consequently, Borges proposes that writing on all available themes should be attempted, in whatever combination suits the creative will of the post-colonial writer: “Creo” – he wrote in 1932 – “que los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general ... podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas” (*Obras* 1 273). His advocacy of the American re-writing of the European tradition, stands in direct relation to his compositional project for “La muerte y la brújula.” In that story, he shows a keen sense for the codification of the form (as established practice), but is not restricted by the tradition of the genre. In fact, he “shows” the assumptions underlying the form – as a reading practice – by

subverting the “path-to-truth” characteristic of these stories. In so doing, Borges also modified the “established practice” of the genre; he showed the possibilities available for creative renewal in the appropriation of “foreign” models.

Blas Matamoro has interpreted Borges’s proposition as the product of the ideology of a particular class which, lacking profound ties with social realities, opts for the mimetic assimilation of foreign models (58). In his critique of the group of writers associated with the magazine *Sur* – “la más prolongada alternativa burguesa a la muerte de Lugones” (Viñas 62) – Matamoro asserts: “Quizá la traducción sea la actitud fundamental de estos intelectuales, así como la misión de *Sur* es definida, tácitamente, como la actualización de las letras ultramarinas, vivida como parte de una empresa civilizadora” (59). However, the type of “translation” that Borges practices is transgressive and parodic; the best-known example of the detective story in his writing, “La muerte y la brújula,” constitutes one of the most radical questionings of the principle of certainty espoused by the genre. Nevertheless, when two of the writers associated with *Sur* – Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares – decided to write as Honorio Bustos Domecq, David Viñas interpreted “la condensación de un seudónimo para dos” as another means of defense against a social reality encroaching on middle-class privilege (89). It follows that Bustos Domecq’s depiction of the “lower classes” (especially immigrants) has been considered an act of aggression motivated by fear that uses satire as a means to mock sectors of Argentine society from the distance afforded by hegemonic cultural power (Avellaneda 361–62; Simpson 186).²

As individuals, Borges and Bioy are indeed cultivated representatives of official Argentine letters whose writing is a model of a type of literary language “desprendido de lo vulgar,” as Matamoro notes (64); even as “Biorges,” one can still identify a class-motivated interest in discrediting sectors of the Argentine world by means of the themes and characters they choose to write about in their stories. However, with the creation of Honorio Bustos Domecq and especially *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi*, the problem of ideological motive becomes ambiguous because the distance between author and text collapses. If Leopoldo Lugones had conceived the role of the writer as a defender of the purity of language against “la mezcla, la disgregación y el entrevero producido por los inmigrantes” (Piglia 30–31), Bustos Domecq is a product and compiler of “la hibridez, la mezcla, el cruce de los restos desorganizados de distintas jergas y dialectos ... del lenguaje popular” (31). David Viñas has noted that in his narratives, Roberto Arlt consciously distanced himself from the world of “the ones below” who appeared in his fiction (67), but there is no similar distancing available for the narrator in the world depicted by Bustos Domecq.

If the world described in *Seis problemas* is intended to be a “fallen” one, Bustos Domecq is part of that world and his language “exerts a counterforce against the author[s]’ intentions” (Bakhtin *Problems* 198). Parodied language is

the spectacle presented in this collection of stories and the characters' voices are relatively independent of the authors, who have chosen to mediate their relation to the text by means of a third, "utterly unlike [them]selves" (Borges "Essay" 246).³ The result is that the discourses parodied in *Seis problemas* resist being a passive tool in the hands of the parodists; they are double-voiced and polemic: "To the extent that the objectification of another's discourse is decreased ... there tends to occur a merging of the author's and the other person's voice. The distance between the two is lost; stylization becomes style; the narrator is transformed into a mere compositional convention" (Bakhtin *Problems* 198). In this dialogic context, if Borges and Bioy attempted to gaze from "above" at the state of national language(s), their own literary language "asimilado al desconcierto snob" became a decentred instance of Argentine linguistic reality.

According to Borges, Bustos Domecq gained over time an independence unforeseen by either of the collaborators: "In the long run, he ruled us with a rod of iron 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 ("Essay" 246). One explanation for this course of events is that Bustos Domecq accommodates the accents of two voices that collide and interrupt each other in *dialogized* heteroglossia. Bakhtin explains: "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention." What results, according to Bakhtin, "is not a single language but a dialogue of languages" (*Dialogic* 93). One can "hear" the quotation marks around the social languages appropriated by Bustos Domecq; these languages resist the act of appropriation, and tend to deform his own already deformed literary language.⁴ In fact, the social dialects "reported" by Bustos Domecq eventually displace him from the text, until he is reduced to enunciating the stage directions of entrances, pauses, and character descriptions in the stories of the collection: "dialects, in this new context lose, of course, the quality of closed socio-linguistic systems; they are deformed and in fact cease to be that which they had been simply as dialects." As for literary language, "it, too, ceases to be that which it had been, a closed socio-linguistic system" (*Dialogic* 294).⁵ In *Seis problemas*, the narrator's voice appears most noticeably as vestigial stage directions for the dominant voices of the various witnesses, victims, and defendants that sit before Don Isidro Parodi in Cell 273 of the Argentine National Penitentiary.

In addition to the parodic imitation of the languages of an American nation, another significant aspect of the collaboration between the two authors of *Los problemas* is that the collection represents the parodic "translation" of a genre created in the First World, a fact noted by Severo Sarduy:

La cantera de donde los *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* extrae[n] sus *topoi*, sus situaciones codificadas – la novela policíaca – permanece siempre como un espacio alógeno, como un sitio precedente y exterior al relato. Antes y fuera de Parodi, de su encierro – también físico – se extiende el ámbito de lo detectivesco, convertido aquí en teatro macarrónico. (555)⁶

The use of a highly codified form is of special importance for both the (displaced) collaborators and the readers of the collection. The codes of the parodied genre provide a principle of stability for the collaboration, which must progress toward the resolution demanded by the form within the restricted bounds defined by “means, motives, and opportunity.” For the reading public, the rigors of the composition are attenuated by the point-driven attention required of the detective story reader: “Como Cervantes, Borges supone un corpus conocido, asimilado por el pensamiento común del momento – situaciones caballerescas o policíacas – del cual la novela es la reiteración elogiosa y burlesca” (Sarduy 555). Parodi’s problems, then, foreground the characters’ discourse, which becomes the subject under scrutiny. In these detective stories, the reader searches for the explanation of the mystery, pieces together the correct scenario for the crime, solely in and from the words of another. Every pronouncement made by the characters of *Seis problemas* raises the question of the reliability of the speakers and the truthfulness of their testimony, and every obscure turn of phrase and affectation in the characters’ speech is an assault on the stability inherent in the concept of a unitary, shared national language. The voices that reverberate in the cell occupied by Parodi, and the variants of word usage and the difficulty posed by some of the characters’ testimony are evidence that through Bustos Domecq, Borges and Bioy recognized the flux of social conflict in the Argentina of their time and sought to represent this conflict of diversity in language. The result was a kind of “testimonio social” based on the friction between class and multicultural forces.

Parody – particularly the parody of social languages – is the ground on which the Parodi stories will develop. In the problem-solving context of the detective story, it is important to note that the situations clarified by Parodi are often preposterous, but never so fantastic that they invalidate the process of resolution. The stories should be understood as parodic in the sense that Severo Sarduy has elucidated:

Parodia, en el sentido preciso que en 1929 definía Bactine [sic]: derivada del género “serio-cómico” antiguo, el cual se relacionaba con el folklore carnavalesco – de allí su mezcla de desenfado y tradición – la parodia utiliza el habla contemporánea con seriedad, pero también inventa libremente, juega con una pluralidad de tonos, es decir, habla del habla. Substrato y fundamento de este género – cuyos grandes momentos han

sido el diálogo socrático y la sátira menipea – el carnaval, espectáculo simbólico y sincrético en que reina lo “anormal,” en que se multiplican las confusiones y profanaciones, la excentricidad y la ambivalencia, y cuya acción central es una coronación paródica, es decir, *una apoteosis que es a la vez una irrisión*. (556–57)

The parodic crowning that takes place at the end of the Parodi stories is, of course, the crowning of truth, but the stories do not make mockery of truth in the sense that the word is understood today of *laughing at* or devaluing the object of mockery; rather, the Parodi stories preserve the multidirectional quality of parodic laughter that Bakhtin observes in relation to early parody “which was free of any nihilistic denial” (*Dialogic* 55). One can laugh at the verbose renditions of some characters, who seem to be saying things that could be said in simpler and more direct ways; one can laugh at the bizarre predicaments and at the irrational fear expressed by the accused who come to Parodi; one can laugh at the simple way in which Parodi reveals the key to the mystery and at oneself for missing it, when the key to the solution was there all along in a character’s speech, if one had known how to interpret it correctly. Thus, truth is made richer and more complex by Domecq’s parody, which represents “a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word” (*Dialogic* 55).

One particular story of the collection, “La víctima de Tadeo Limardo,” presents an interesting view of social organization in urban Buenos Aires. In that story Borges and Bioy set the action in a traditional *conventillo*. The world of the *conventillo* reflects a rigorous social hierarchy: “El señor Vicente Renovales y [Claudio] Zarlenga integran el binomio que dirige el establecimiento” (86). Juana Musante, Zarlenga’s wife, is the establishment’s *patrona*. There is a cook, and the boarders range in ascending order of importance from transients who stay in “la sala larga,” and those who pay .60 pesos for a bed or .95 for a room. At one point in the story, the boarders gather to witness a confrontation between Limardo and Zarlenga: “Esa columna viva era un muestrario de las napas sociales: el misántropo se codeaba con el bufón, el 0,95 con el 0,60, el vivillo con Paja Brava, el mendigo con el pedigüño, el punguista liviano, sin carpeta, con el gran scrushante. El viejo espíritu del hotel revivió una hora de franca expansión” (96). The characters who live at the Nuevo Imparcial – “un rincón porteño que aporta su acento propio al cuadro de la metrópoli” (85) – are as close as Bustos comes to representing members of an “antisociety” sharing a space, a dialect, and its own codified order of business (“Cualquier disgusto, cualquier contestación de mal modo, está formalmente prohibida por la dirección” [95]).

Michael Halliday defines an “antisociety” as a social organization that mirrors the hierarchy of social structure with its own order – prison society is an example; one is also reminded of Monipodio’s criminal gang in Cervantes’s *Rinconete y Cortadillo*.⁷ An antisociety is an extension of society that exists

within the social system; in the terms of Claude Lévi-Strauss's distinction between metaphor and metonymy, the antisociety is metonymic to society, "while its realizations are (predictably) metaphoric, and this applies both to its realization in social structure and to its realization in language" (Halliday *Language* 175). In *Seis problemas*, the relation between the marginal society represented by the boarders of the *Nuevo Imparcial* and the mainstream is conceived in terms of parody; one mirrors and mocks the other in unrelieved tension. For example, one of the comments made by Parodi's informants regarding a conflict between the hotel's *patrones* has ironic connotations in relation to Argentina's national government: "Si las esferas dirigentes son pasto del desquicio, qué nos queda a nosotros, a la masa compacta de pensionistas" (95). The antisociety represented in *Seis problemas* is carnivalized; Tulio Savastano introduces his tale of the events at the *Nuevo Imparcial* by mentioning that "la atmósfera del [hotel] tiene su interés para el estudioso. Es un verdadero muestrario que es de reírse" (86).⁸

The speech of Savastano appears to be a parody of the discursive norm of the society at large; unfettered by the narratorial control that Bustos Domecq relinquishes, the unmediated exchange between Parodi and Tulio Savastano allows the reader to experience an "antilanguage." Sociolinguists, most notably Halliday, treat the "antilanguage" phenomenon as an ongoing and motivated production in society of "languages" that are contrary to the linguistic norm. Halliday explains the specific social implications of this process :

Popular usage opposes *dialect*, as "anti-," to (*standard*) *language*, as the established norm ... Social dialects are not necessarily associated with caste or class; they may be religious, generational, sexual, economic (urban/rural) and perhaps other things too. What distinguishes them is their hierarchical character. The social function of dialect variation is to express, symbolize and maintain the social order; and the social order is an essentially hierarchic one. (*Language* 178-79)⁹

Along with Halliday, sociolinguists such as Mallik and Dixon associate the production of an antilanguage proper with an antisociety; however, an antilanguage is an extreme case in the production of social dialects. There is continuity between the official language and the antilanguage, and the social dialects parodied in *Seis problemas* fall somewhere in this spectrum that is marked by tension. By including parodies of social dialects in the characterization of the speakers, the stories exploit what Halliday defines as the "ideational" aspect of language (whereby Savastano is giving information about mysterious circumstances), as well as the "interpersonal," which delimits membership to social groups and reinforces individual identification. It is important for our discussion of the reader's (detective's) role in making sense of the character's report that the most obvious product of social dialects is the

partial relexicalization of the language, that is, "new words for old": "same grammar, different vocabulary" (Halliday "Language Structure" 165).¹⁰

In the context of the detective stories that comprise *Seis Problemas*, the interpretation of social dialects or parodied discourses is the main task imposed on the detective (and the reader), because the reported facts are the medium that the detective has at his disposal for resolving the mysteries that are posed in his jail cell. We might recall that in the Parodi stories truth becomes apparent in the set of relations that the detective establishes between the metaphorical turns of language in the visitors' testimonies and the proper object of the story. The detective has to be moved primarily by this question: What kind of connection must be established – here and now – to achieve the desired explanatory effect from the confusion of the narrated text? This type of active understanding, characteristically associated with the game of detective fiction, is shared by the reader of the Parodi stories, whose interpretive reading parallels the detective's. The reader shares the same limitations for the verification of the facts that are imposed on the detective, but in the text, Parodi is the figure of consciousness who must creatively formulate the logical connections for the narrative according to some guiding, elucidating sense.

An example from "La víctima de Tadeo Limardo" should make evident the type of difficulty in question. Here, Tulio Savastano describes the arrival of Tadeo Limardo at the place where he would eventually meet his end:

Como dice Antejito en su columnita de *Última Hora*, la llegada misma de Tadeo Limardo al Nuevo Imparcial está signada por el misterio. Llegó con Momo, entre pomos y bombitas de mal olor, pero Momo no lo verá en otro carnaval. Le pusieron el sobretodo de madera y se radicó en la Quinta del Ñato: los infantes de Aragón, ¿qué se fizieron? (87)

The obliqueness with which the events are told makes the passage inherently comic. The message is that Tadeo Limardo died or was killed; death is the reality conveyed to Parodi, yet the solemn word is carnivalized by metaphor and the "lofty direct word" (death) thus shows another aspect of its reality, as experienced by its speaker. The language of the press appears quoted in the character's speech, while the columnist is caricatured by means of a reference to his appearance (Antejito: spectacles/writer, etc.; one might find similar characterization in the nicknames "the pen," "fingers" – also used for thieves – or even "spider," which represents the watchful attention of the chronicler of daily events). The locution "signado," appropriated by Tulio Savastano, is the typical journalese with which Latin American newspaper chroniclers, who occupy the middle ground between the "man of letters" and the "madding crowd," often distinguish their language from the language of the latter. The appeal to "high culture" that attempts to legitimize social chronicles with the

“language of the learned” makes evident class stratification in the field of culture.

The reference to “Momo” also proves to be an interesting one. Momo is the king of the carnival, as in “King Momo”; he represents the highest degree of happiness in the system of images of the event. Bakhtin recalls that in the “feasts of fools” the king and queen were chosen by a roll of the dice and the winners were then called *basiliscus*, or “royal” (*Rabelais* 234). Savastano refers to the whole event by his reference to its King, in a manner that reveals the ritualistic character of the carnival. The crowned king of this year’s carnival will not be the king of the next, so it follows that this year’s king will not see Limardo in the next, since there is an element of substitution involved in the repetition of the festivity. But in the witness’s version of the events – synecdochal king for the event itself – the part is incorporated and merged with the whole, so that the king is the king is the king. The mask is what matters, not the individuality that might occupy, let us say, the space behind the image.

Metaphor is to be found in the alternation of “el sobretodo de madera” that names the casket of the deceased. “Casket” and “overcoat” are terms that stand in apparent contrast with each other. The metaphoric operation for resolving the opposition takes place in relation to the corpse. Thus, disregarding qualities such as fit, use, and material – a quality that is bridged by the addition of the adjective “wooden” [“de madera”] – the overcoat is restricted to a function, to cover the body, or perhaps to encase it; likewise with the second term “casket,” so that there will be a parallel relationship posited: “as the overcoat is to the body, the casket is to the body.” Both terms are now in a metaphorical relationship with each other and are, in fact, complementary. Perhaps another way to consider the operation, which actually imposes a relational similarity, would be to propose it as an instance of “homologization,” a term derived from from “homologous,” which the *Random House Dictionary* defines as: “having the same or a similar relation; corresponding, as in a relative position, structure, etc.” The reference to “la Quinta del Nato,” the place where the deceased “took root” [“se radicó”], is darkly amusing: it alludes to the cemetery as a farm where the dead are planted. “Pugnose” [“ñato”] – one might think of Yorick, “chapless, and knocked about the mazzard with a sexton’s spade” – is a reference to a *memento mori*, a skull, used metonymically to represent the event of death.

The end of the quotation exemplifies the internally dialogized nature of the characters’ speech in Bustos Domecq’s stories. The rhetorical question asked by Savastano could be read in relation to the carnival king, because it calls to mind images of burial of the powerful and the transitory quality of riches, a commonplace of medieval literature, enacted in the “feast of fools.” But Savastano’s rhetorical question is, in fact, a quotation from Jorge Manrique’s (1440?–1479) elegy, *Coplas por la muerte de su padre el maestro Don Rodrigo*, dialogized in the

character's speech (see Manrique 218–19). The lyrical *topos* is, of course, an instance of *ubi sunt?* – where are they now? – referring to the sons of don Fernando el de Antequera, Castilian king of Aragon; this interrogative form was a literary commonplace of Manrique's times. Just as his verses have inspired many glosses and imitations in Spanish, many quotes from erudite sources have entered popular culture from the culture brokers of the media.¹¹

The languages that appear in the stories comprising *Seis problemas* are an exaggerated, parodic representation of coexisting variants of speech in Argentina at a particular moment in the nation's history. In their heterodoxy, the linguistic variants used by the different characters to communicate their predicaments parody the "system of linguistic systems," such as the Spanish language, and its association with concepts of nationality or language community. They highlight differences rather than similarities among language users included under the national label of Bustos Domecq's "Argentina." Linguistic variation, we have noted, also poses problems for the reader intent on making sense of the mystery. Making sense is, of course, the role foregrounded by detective fiction in relation to the reader, and it is precisely this role that is made difficult by the language of the Parodi stories.

For Borges, the reader's decoding role is the essence of what he denominated "el hecho estético." This process requires readers who will impose their intonation on the written word and thereby limit its potentially multiple meanings. The active participation of the reader is a crucial component of the Parodi stories, which rely on allusion and seemingly casual references with important consequences for their effect. Part of the problem for a reader is, for example, the lexicon – the number of unrecognizable words that appear in the stories. Along with word choices and usage, cultural references are made in *Seis problemas* that test even the most patient readers' powers of association. One could call these linguistic peculiarities "Argentinisms," but an "Argentine reader" is not a necessity postulated by Domecq's text. The degree of difficulty posed by the parodic detective stories of *Seis problemas* is not restricted to "Argentinisms."¹² Even if the stories that appear in the volume were limited to the particularities of regional expressions, which they are not, the reader is encouraged by the seemingly-impenetrable speech of the many characters who visit Parodi's cell to treat their slang and turns of phrase as metaphoric language and to interpret their testimony in terms of *poesis*.

Like other stories in the collection, "La víctima de Tadeo Limardo" is divided into two parts or acts; in the first, Tulio Savastano, who is suspected of wrongdoing by the police, visits Parodi with the story of a mysterious death. Savastano narrates the facts to the detective in his own words and from his point of view (the reported facts are tainted by the character's unwitting involvement in the crime). In the second, shorter part, Parodi interprets the events he has heard for an interested party (Claudio Zarlenga) and explains away the

circumlocutions and prevarications of his initial visitor to the amazement of his interlocutor (and Domecq's reader). It is not coincidental that Tadeo Limardo should arrive at the hotel during carnival time, because the crime is paradoxical and parodic: the victim alluded to in the title is Limardo himself. This particular story chronicles the premeditated and public debasement of Limardo, who wants to bring about his own death at the hands of Zarlenga. From the point of view of class-based analysis, the contempt that Limardo feels toward his person (at one point, he calls himself a dog [98]) is a reflection of the collaborators' scornful view of the masses. The ethical or moral degradation of the character is validated by the social reality he inhabits. On the other hand, as parodic detective fiction, the resolution is surprising and comical, in spite of the absurd and painful condition shared by the boarders of the *Nuevo Imparcial*.

"La víctima de Tadeo Limardo" is a key instance in the collection in which the ambiguous nature of Borges and Bioy's enterprise comes to the fore because, even in this story, laughter is directed at things that are traditionally treated in a serious, solemn, and dignified manner. In this story, parody negates piety. Similarly, in other stories of *Seis problemas* parodic laughter invalidates the formulation of an answer to a social reality that is morally (or ethically) flawed, even as it reveals that flaw in the context of the characters' lives. From a moral perspective, this effect could be considered to be a *failure* of parody. In its extensive and inclusive parodic imitation of literary sources, popular genres, colloquial speech and social realities, *Seis problemas* makes evident Linda Hutcheon's assertion that parody has ideological or even social implications (98). However, it is not a universal fact that the parodist discredits the models used for parody: detective fiction is not discredited in *Seis problemas*.¹³ On the contrary, Parodi's solutions affirm the comprehensibility of the social world, which is apprehended by means of its social languages. But the stories that comprise *Seis problemas* do not escape the paradoxical legitimacy of parodic discourse. In one instance, as Roland Barthes indicates, parody suggests a "complicity with high culture . . . which is merely a deceptively off-hand way of showing a profound respect for classical-national values" (quoted by Hutcheon 101); in another, Domecq's stories represent an anarchic force, "one that puts into question the legitimacy of other texts" (100), including the ones written by Borges and Bioy as individuals.

More importantly, by "allow[ing] the target [voices] to assert [their] rights, to aspire to and ultimately reach equality with the parodist[s]" (Morson and Emerson 154), Borges and Bioy have relinquished control of the parody. Dialogic equality makes each utterance in *Seis problemas* an "arena of battle" where the authors' intentions are neutralized: "In such discourse, the author's thought no longer oppressively dominates the other's thought, discourse loses its composure and confidence, becomes agitated, internally undecided and two-faced" (Bakhtin in Morson and Emerson 154). Bustos Domecq's choice of genre also

emphasizes an aspect of parody which has been pointed out by Gary S. Morson, who considers parody "not simply as an interaction of two speech acts [the model's and the parodist's], but as an interaction designed to be heard and interpreted by a third person ... whose own process of active participation is anticipated and directed" (65). In Domecq's *Seis problemas*, the parodic language of the detective story text anticipates this "third person" who must postulate an explanatory code, an organizing account of the facts of the case. But concealment of the meaning of facts characterizes the detective story. In the Parodi stories, the act of concealment happens "in plain view": as they narrate the particulars of a crime, the rhetorical excesses of the characters' speeches hide stories of complicity and guilt.

An interesting problem posed again and again by the detective genre is that only the detective seems to know what to look for in the mass of evidence; he represents a degree of proficiency in relation to the process of investigation. In order to arrive at the right solution, a number of connections must already exist as probabilities in the consciousness of the detective (e.g. what constitutes motive?). In the context of the "lived-in word" of the Bustos stories, the way Parodi's visitors speak represents a "knitting-together" of differences that nevertheless are the product of contingent social and historical forces; in turn, Parodi searches for the guiding *principle* of his visitors' metaphorical turns of phrase. Since he (like the reader) cannot "physically" investigate the case, all the evidence – the materials with which to construct a case – is contained in the narratives of the characters visiting his cell. In Parodi's cell, understanding and invention are synonymous. The statement's "guiding principle" should be understood in two ways: given the genre, it refers to the fact that subterfuge might be at work in the speaker's testimonial narrative, and, in relation to the metaphoric process evident in the speech of the character, it indicates that there is a knowable originating object (e.g. a crime has taken place in the social world) that is not alien to the listener.

As we have noted, since Isidro Parodi is in prison, he is unable to visit the scene of the crime. He is forced to get his information through less direct sources, but a coherent explanation for the mystery is consistently arrived at in the Parodi stories. This consistency is evidence that Domecq, in the footsteps of Poe, has created these ingenious plots for the purpose of unravelling them. Partly, it is the Domecq-given virtue of infallibility that explains why Parodi is able to elucidate the mysteries. Parodi presides over the carnivalized proceedings and pronounces the final word that gives closure to the mysterious episode; but as we have seen, the truth crowned at the end of each story is a laughing, carnivalized truth that begs for debunking or the spectator's mockery, and the re-establishment of relative distances between truth and its naming.

If this anticipated act of derision does not happen readily in relation to Parodi's version of the events (and it very well can, since there are often

equivocations in Parodi's explanation of things), it is because the detective's familiarity with the world of his interlocutors makes him a proficient interpreter of the facts. Given the difficulties posed by "La víctima de Tadeo Limardo," the reader willingly accepts Parodi's version of the truth, while it is the sense of a shared language that allows Parodi to see through Savastano's account of Limardo's murder: "Parodi no sospechaba que veinte años atrás, antes de ascender a criollo viejo, él se expresaba del mismo modo, arrastrando las eses y prodigando los ademanes" (85). Parodi's understanding is contextualized by his relation to the lived-in world created in *Seis problemas*, which makes it easier to accept that the object of his investigation and Parodi's naming of that object are indistinguishable. Parodi's explanation is presented as the best of all possible explanations, given the facts of the case. The result is closure, the neat end characteristic of the genre.

The route taken by Bustos Domecq to represent social dialogue has been parody. The vehicle has been the detective genre, which is also transformed in the process. The authors' interest for the detective story has wedded the instability of social communications with the formulation of meaning through suspicion. This "reading with suspicion" characterizes the genre, since the detective story requires that it be read as though the text were hiding or not telling the whole truth. The heteroglossia represented in the Parodi stories by the speech of the characters, even in the clearest cases of social marginality – the character of Tulio Savastano in "La víctima de Tadeo Limardo," for example – is, again, internally dialogized. The speaker's testimony stands in dialogic relation to the words of others (Savastano appropriates and transforms the words of others living at the *Nuevo Imparcial*); and it also stands in a parodic relation to "the linguistic centre of the verbal-ideological life of the nation and the epoch" (Bakhtin *Problems* 202–03). This centre should be understood in terms of the accepted literary language of the nation and the times: the forces of disunification (Bakhtin's "centrifugal forces") are also an element of national consciousness.

In relation to national consciousness, the antilanguage is a vehicle for resocialization, which requires its speakers to "establish a strongly affective identification" with each other (Berger and Luckmann quoted by Halliday *Language* 170). Bakhtin writes: "Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward" (*Dialogic* 272). The Parodi stories foreground two aspects of this social phenomenon; one aspect of the stories is related to the creation of a national consciousness, bound to a commonly understood "language" and its variants, while another, related to the

genre of detective fiction, addresses the problem of making sense of polyphony, or of the world conceived as discourses in contention.

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NOTES

- 1 For a discussion of Borges's interest in the detective genre, the role of detective fiction in his collaboration with Bioy, and the "reasoning detective" line of the mystery story's relation to semiotics, see Hernández Martín, *Readers and Labyrinths*.
- 2 In relation to the vicious representation of Perón's working-class supporters in "La fiesta del monstruo," Nicolás Shumway notes the contradictory relation to democratic ideals in Bustos Domecq – and the Argentine liberal tradition – : "while theoretically pro-democracy [Bioy and Borges] are profoundly antipopular and in no sense egalitarian" (144).
- 3 The "Autobiographical Essay" was originally published in English as a *New Yorker* profile.
- 4 Borges has described Bustos Domecq's literary style as "a literary journalese, abounding in neologisms, a Latinate vocabulary, clichés, mixed metaphors, *non sequiturs*, and bombast" ("Essay" 247). In *Seis problemas*, the speech of the many witnesses that appear before Parodi leaves little room for the development of Bustos Domecq's writing style; the characteristics of Bustos's craft become evident in *Dos fantasías memorables*, *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq* and *Nuevos cuentos de Bustos Domecq*, included in Borges's *Obras completas en colaboración*.
- 5 When Bakhtin refers to "social dialects," many of which appear in the pages of *Seis problemas*, he means languages in the distinct sense that is commonly attributed to world languages, because for him the term "language" implies a particular world view inherent in each instance of use, a world view that, "even as a concrete opinion," comes to form part of and permeate the ideological life of a community in its diversity.
- 6 Sarduy's reference to the theatre suggests the parodic relation of some of the Bustos Domecq stories to the Argentine "teatro breve popular" of the 1920s. Certain characters, settings, situations and linguistic features that appear in *Seis problemas* warrant the comparison.
- 7 Tulio Savastano, the character who reports the events that have taken place in the hotel to Isidro Parodi, is of the opinion that "como todo lo humano, el Nuevo Imparcial tiene sus lunares, pero hay que proclamar a los cuatro vientos que en materia de disciplina el establecimiento se parece más a una cárcel que a otra cosa" (89).
- 8 In this statement, the reader can hear the distanced fascination that "Biorges" feels in relation to the urban lower classes: it is an invitation to descend to a parodic lower-class hell. Cortázar's "Las puertas del cielo" shares some similarities with this aspect of the Parodi stories; for example, "el manejo de la lengua hablada que es una de las grandes virtudes del relato, representa en el estilo un tipo muy particular de tratamiento del mundo popular" (Piglia 41). However, in the fictional world represented by Bustos Domecq's story, the hero (Parodi) makes sense of that world and is at one with it.
- 9 Halliday identifies three functions of language: "Language serves for the expression of 'content': that is, of the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness. We may call this the *ideational* function ... Language serves to establish and maintain social relations: for the expression of social roles, which include

the communication roles created by language itself ... and also for getting things done, by means of the interaction between one person and another. Through this function, which we may refer to as *interpersonal*, social groups are delimited, and the individual identified and reinforced." The third, which Halliday calls the *textual* function, "enables the listener or reader to distinguish a text from a random set of sentences" ("Language Structure" 143). The way in which Parodi connects passages from the unfocused mass of information given by Savastano into a situationally relevant text exemplifies this function of language.

- 10 Halliday's insight into the regeneration of language in society, which Borges and Bioy anticipated, runs counter to Leopoldo Lugones's important cultural project in Argentina during the period that preceded the founding of *Sur*: "Me opongo a la demagógica pretensión que atribuye al uso de la plebe una importancia capital en la formación del idioma. Porque no hay tal. Todo idioma es obra de cultura realizada por los cultos" (cited in Piglia 31). For Borges and Bioy, the fact that "new" words are metaphorical variants of society's language norm, and that the metaphorical mode is the norm of slang had already been pointed out by G.K. Chesterton in 1928:

I do not imagine that it is necessary to demonstrate that [poetic] allusiveness is the characteristic of true slang ... An American said that after the Chinese War the Japanese wanted "to put on their hats with a shoe horn." This a monument to the true nature of slang, which consists in getting further and further away from the original conception [swelled head as a description of self-approval], in treating it more and more as an assumption. (*The Defendant* 110)

Borges and Bioy were assiduous readers of Chesterton, the creator of the popular Father Brown detective series. The British author might have been the source of the idea for using slang in detective fiction developed in *Seis problemas* and especially in "La víctima de Tadeo Limardo": "The lower classes are at a state of war, a war of words ... The essential point is that somebody must be at work adding new symbols and new circumlocutions to a language" (110).

- 11 A clue for the source of the erudite quotation is found in Adelma Badoglio's profile of Bustos Domecq, where the reader finds that in 1915, the author had read his *Oda a la "Elegía a la muerte de su padre," de Jorge Manrique*, at el Centro Balear, "proeza, que le valiera una notoriedad ruidosa pero efímera" (14).
- 12 Indeed, the difficulties encountered in "La víctima de Tadeo Limardo" derive from the fact that Parodi's informer is a marginal member of Argentine society who speaks a modality of Spanish that he shares with other members of the *lumpen* proletariat. Another example, "La prolongada busca de Tai An," features an aphoristic version of Chinese rendered in Spanish, which is a parody of an earlier parody performed by Ernest Bramah, the creator of the blind detective Max Carrados, who pretended to translate the Chinese language in his Kai Lung series (Borges *Textos* 206–07).
- 13 M.E. Cossío enumerates the various models that he sees parodied in Domecq's stories: the norms of the detective genre, various literary and popular discourses, the world of the detective story, where each problem finds its smoothly fitting key, history, the role of the reader, and the role of the critic (151–53). These models parodied in the Domecq stories were life-long subjects of investigation and creative commentary for Borges.

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