

Borges and Melville; or, The Ambiguities

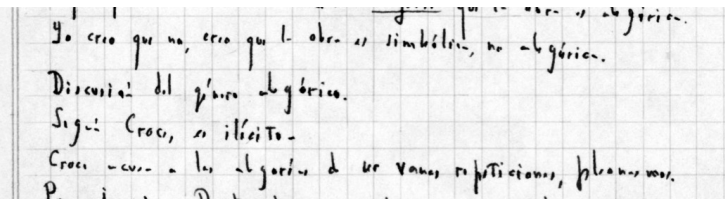
Daniel Balderston

Like some of the other articles in this issue of *Variaciones Borges*, this one will concentrate on newly available manuscript materials in Special Collections at Michigan State University, putting Borges's notes in dialogue with his other writings from the same period. As happened with several of his other favorite writers (Stevenson is the case I have studied most closely, but Yeats is another important case), Borges never devoted a whole text to Melville, despite the fact that there are numerous references to Melville's work scattered through his work. The notebooks, which are preparatory material for a talk in 1949 and a series of three talks in 1951, are crucial, then, to get a firmer idea of Borges's readings of Melville and of Melville criticism: to know what he paid particular attention to, what he emphasized in the talks, and what he made use of in his own writings. In particular, I will focus here on Borges's ideas on the relations between the novel and the genre of allegory, since that is a particular focus of the notes in two notebooks at Michigan State.

The 1949 talk is outlined in a Cuaderno Avon: MSS 678-04. In six pages Borges sums up a few important details of Melville's life (running away to sea, his first trip to Liverpool with its strange "discovery" of England through the curtains of a cheap hotel, the letter to Hawthorne where he complains that he has been reduced to someone who recorded the customs of cannibals), and then focuses largely on *Moby Dick*, and on the power of symbolic thinking there and in Melville in general. The notes come right after some notes on Anglo Saxon materials, and right before some notes on Whitman.

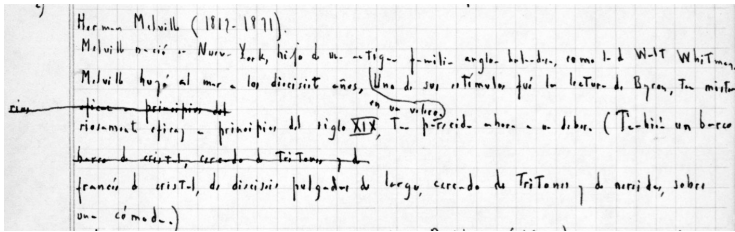
In these notes on Melville there is a false start, with a few scattered notes on two pages (one of which is intriguingly numbered "4", though this seems to be because the pages on Emerson and Poe, studied elsewhere in this issue by Jerónimo Pizarro and Emron Esplin, are numbered 1, 2 and 3); on the verso of the preceding page there are insertions (with triangles and a pound sign) to details of Melville's life (his trip to Liverpool, his life among the cannibals). Then comes a page of translated quotations from *Moby Dick*, with the title "El estilo de Moby Dick," and then a fresh start, a sequence of pages numbered 1, 2 and 3, with various subsections on the first of those three pages.

What I am calling the "false start," though, is very interesting, as it marks the beginnings of Borges's reflections on Melville. There are general references to Lewis Mumford's *Melville* and to John Freeman's biographical study, but little specificity. Borges does note that cannibalism in Melville is an "operación pedagógica," an "aparición mágica para asimilar las virtudes del muerto." With regard to the question of symbolism and allegory, Borges reviews Benedetto Croce's negative assessment of allegory (something he refers to a number of times elsewhere), but argues that *Moby Dick* is not so much allegory as symbol: "la obra es simbólica."



To discuss the ways in which the novel approaches the question of evil, Borges refers to D. H. Lawrence (for whom the whale is the intuitive, while Ahab is merely a rational being), to Percy Boynton (for whom the whale symbolizes property and injustice), to Van Wyck Brooks (for whom the whale symbolizes the elements of the natural world that human beings must control or tame).

Much of the 1949 notes are quotations from Melville translated into Spanish to aid oral delivery. He translates a description of Queequeg, parts of the sermon in New Bedford in the whale church, and an aphorism by Melville: “Humanidad, cosa fuerte, te venero, no en el laureado vencedor, sino en el vencido.”¹ He titles the pages with the translated quotations “El estilo de Moby Dick,” but what he has to say through the quotations must be inferred, as it is not stated.

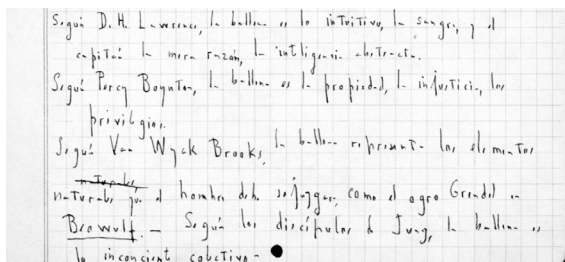


After the section on *Moby Dick* there are a few notes on some of the other novels: “Mardi, novela inextricable y aún ilegible, . . . cuyo argumento esencial anticipa las obsesiones y el mecanismo de El castillo, de El proceso y de América; se trata de una infinita perseverancia, por un mar inquieto.” This is fascinating because it makes Melville yet another “precursor” of Kafka, like his friend Hawthorne (the subject of the talk in 1949 in which Borges gives his first formulation of the idea developed in 1951 in “Kafka y sus precursores”). There is a very brief mention here of *Pierre; or the Ambiguities*, a reference to Melville’s death in obscurity at the end of the nineteenth century and to his fame in the twentieth, and a brief but tantalizing reference to *Benito Cereno*: “el procedimiento de narración oblicua, la aventura marítima”: “narración oblicua” is an important characteristic of Borges’s

1 “This may be a paraphrase of the following: “Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity, nothing exceeds most of the criticisms made on the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well- warmed, and well-fed”: *Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs* (1854).

own writing of this period, so it is interesting to see him comment on it with regard to *Benito Cereno*. The brief remarks on the end of Melville's life note that his last publication was a poem, in 1876 (this is the only reference to Melville's poetry in this talk or, apparently, the other one). In this manuscript he refers only to the title of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, which is surprising because he had translated it not long before (in 1943).² There is no mention of *Israel Potter*, *The Confidence Man* or the poetry, except for the brief information that Melville's final publication was a poem in 1876.

About half of the 1949 manuscript is concerned with the question of the symbolic in *Moby Dick*. He quotes from a letter from Melville to Hawthorne's wife, in which Melville says that *Moby Dick* "es susceptible de una interpretación alegórica." This takes him to a few notes on allegory, with references to Croce and Dante, and to Dante's use of allegory (reason and philosophy are represented by Virgil, theology by Beatrice), concluding this brief section with the words: "La alegoría, según esa interpretación desdeñosa, vendría a ser una adivinanza, más extensa, más lenta y mucho más incómoda que las otras." He then adds, after a small horizontal line, the following, about the meanings that have been ascribed to Melville's novel:



He is translating from the end of the chapter on *Moby Dick* in Lewis Mumford's *Melville* (1929):

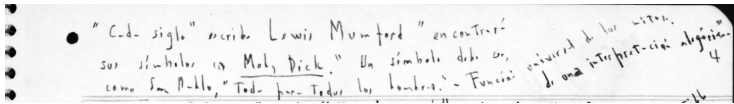
I have dwelt for a little on some of the meanings of *Moby-Dick*; but this does not exhaust the matter. Each man [sic] will read into *Moby-Dick* the drama of his own experience with that of his contemporaries: Mr. D. H.

2 See Nora Benedict's *Borges and the Literary Marketplace* for comments on the Cuadernos de la Quimera series, published by Emecé, which included Borges's translation of *Bartleby* (105-09, 211). On the translation itself, see Leah Leone.

Lawrence sees in the conflict a battle between the blood-consciousness of the white race and its own abstract intellect, which attempts to hunt and slay it; Mr. Percy Boynton sees in the whale all property and vested privilege, laming the spirit of man; Mr. Van Wyck Brooks has found in the white whale an image like that of Grendel in *Beowulf*, expressing the Northern consciousness of the hard fight against the elements; while for the disciple of Jung, the white whale is the symbol of the Unconscious, which torments man, and yet is the source of all his proudest efforts.

Each age, one may predict, will find its own symbols in *Moby-Dick*. (194)

The black circle in the image I just copied marks an insertion at the top of the sheet with an explicit reference to Mumford:



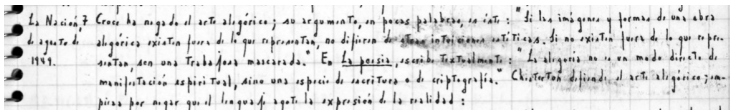
This first talk on Melville, then, part of a series in 1949 on US literature (the others included are Poe, Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau) is a fairly cursory examination of critical ideas about Melville, deriving almost completely from Mumford. This is a strategy that Borges often follows in his first approach to a subject, as various other essays in this issue show.³ It shows already that he sees as the central problem of *Moby Dick* the relation between novel and allegory, a topic he would discuss a few months later (without reference to Melville) in the essay “De las alegorías a las novelas,” published first in *La Nación* on 7 August 1949 and included in *Otras inquisiciones* in 1952.

The other notebook with material on Melville is a Cuaderno Mérito, MSS383, that contains what seems to be a draft of an poem, then a few notes on Kipling, then a couple of pages on Kafka, then some notes on Faulkner, then some pages on medieval Germanic materials, then some bits on Poe (discussed by Emron Esplin in his essay here), then seven dense pages on Melville, then a first draft of the essay “Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw,” then the first draft of “Kafka y sus precursores” (there

3 A parallel case is the poem “Página para recordar al coronel Suárez, vencedor en Junín,” which I have studied recently: the first draft relies for its historical information solely on Carlos Urien’s *La batalla de Junín*, while the second draft brings in a variety of other sources including Juan José Biedma, Carlos Domínguez, Luis Melián Lafinur and others, some of them quoted in Biedma.

is a second draft of which there are images in Miguel de Torre Borges's two books on photographs and manuscripts). All of these writings are from 1951: "Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw" was published shortly after Shaw's death (which had occurred in November 1950), in *Sur* in June 1951, and "Kafka y sus precursores" in *La Nación* on 19 August 1951. The bits on Faulkner and Melville, however, were never developed into full essays, and the dense notes provide an important window into Borges's projects in the months before he worked with Bianco in the selection of the essays for *Otras inquisiciones*, published by Editorial Sur in 1952. (As mentioned in the introduction to this issue, a tentative table of contents of that book is in Borges's hand, with additions by Bianco, in another of the Michigan State notebooks.)

The pages on Melville follow the same general sequence as the briefer notes from 1949: an initial reflection on the seafarer and the trope of running away to sea in English-language literature, a life of Melville, a discussion of the South Sea novels (particularly *Typee* and *Mardi*, a brief discussion of the novels after *Moby Dick* (including significant attention to *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* and *The Confidence Man*, as well as brief references to the *Piazza Tales* and *Billy Budd*), and then a longer piece on *Moby Dick*. Unlike the 1949 notes, however, these show considerable research: numerous quotations from Melville's novels,⁴ abundant references to sources such as the brief *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry on Melville from 1911 (18: 102-03),⁵ notes on John Freeman's *Herman Melville* (1926), from the English Men of Letters series that Borges refers to quite frequently (as is seen in various other essays in this issue), and a reference to his own 1949 essay on allegory and the novel:

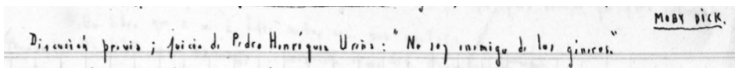


4 The page numbers of the references to *White-Jacket* are to the 1923 edition of Melville's "famous sea stories," published by the St. Botolph Society, at the moment of the rediscovery of Melville.

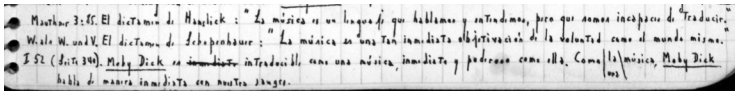
5 The encyclopedia article famously focuses on the South Sea novels, considering Melville's fiction to be of "irregular execution" and his later work "turgid, eccentric, opinionative and loosely written" (18: 103).

There are also numerous references to Mumford (this time very precise references with page numbers, thirteen in all), as well as mentions in passing on Dante, Schopenhauer, the *Volsunga Saga*, Burton's *1001 Nights*, Asín Palacios and so forth. It is abundantly clear here, as in the similar notes on Flaubert from the following year (see Mariana Di Cío and my critical edition of these notes for six classes in Balderston and Martín, *Ensayos*), that Borges took the job of preparing his classes (and this series was three talks on Melville, on 3 April 1951, 10 April 1951 and 17 April 1951) very seriously, doing a careful rereading of many of Melville's works and compiling extensive notes on what his critics had said. His focus, as in "De las alegorías a las novelas," is on the ways in which "realism" is a term that includes aspects of allegory and symbol, not unlike what Rocío Colman Serra studies in the essay on realism and the fantastic in this issue. Borges is fascinated by the ways in which Melville pushes up against the realist tradition, making use of a variety of modes of representation.

The pages on *Moby Dick* intriguingly begin: "Discusión previa; juicio de Pedro Henríquez Ureña: 'No soy enemigo de los géneros.'"⁶



The discussion here of the relations between allegory and the novel include the same quotations from Croce and Chesterton that are in "De las alegorías a las novelas" from two years before. There are numerous quotations from Mumford, and a wonderful quotation from E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*: "Nothing can be stated about *Moby Dick* except that it is a contest' escribe Forster. 'The rest is song.'" (Forster 181).⁷ This leads, intriguingly, to quotations from Mauthner and Schopenhauer on the ways in which music is a language that we speak but that we are incapable of translating (Mauthner), with a similar judgment by Schopenhauer:

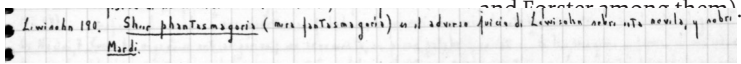


6 Page 4 of the typescript, to be discussed later, clarifies that this was what Pedro Henríquez Ureña said in a conversation about allegory that he had with Borges years before.

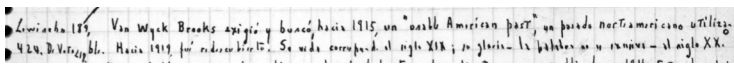
7 I don't have the first (1927) edition of the Forster book, but rather the 1949 pocket edition, in which this quotation appears on page 130. Forster devotes four pages to *Moby Dick* and three to *Billy Budd*, which had just been published before he wrote *Aspects of the Novel*.

Borges summarizes this part as: “Moby Dick es inmediato intraducible como una música, inmediata y poderoso como ella. Como la ^{una} música, Moby Dick habla de manera inmediata con nuestra sangre.”

Borges devotes considerable space in the notes to the reception of Melville’s work. He quotes from the famously dismissive (unsigned) article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911), which praises the early South Sea novels but adds that these were followed by “other tales so turgid, eccentric, opinionative, and loosely written as to seem the work of another author” (18: 103). He also quotes Lewis Lewisohn’s negative judgment of Melville’s work as “sheer phantasmagoria (mera fantasmagoria) es el adverso juicio de Lewisohn” (198), who is commenting on this page on *Mardi* and *Pierre* but whose adverse judgment extends to *Moby Dick* as well: Lewisohn’s several pages on Melville in *The Story of American Literature* (1932), written at the peak of the rediscovery and reevaluation of Melville, were very negative, arguing that Melville was being overrated by his contemporaries (Freeman, Mumford, Lawrence



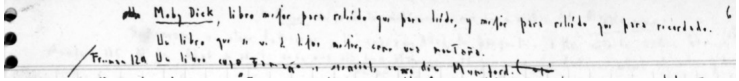
Borges carefully notes the negative judgments on Melville as well as the great enthusiasm among many readers and critics in the decades preceding his own two interventions in this debate; obviously his decision already in 1943 to translate *Bartleby*, and to devote these talks to Melville, shows that he partook in the Melville boom that began around 1920. Lewisohn argues on another page that Borges refers to that Van Wyck Brooks and others of a “younger generation, in search of a that ‘usable’ American past, . . . has fastened its flag to his mast. Has not that generation been both deceived and self-deceived? Has it not submitted its desire and ideal for the reality” (189).



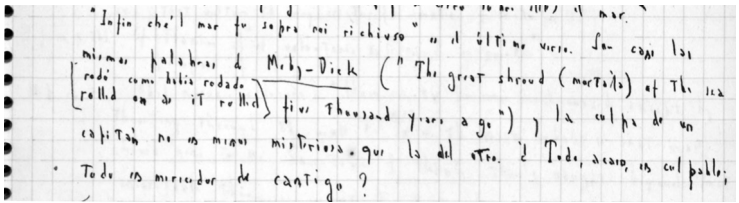
His attention to the ways in which “the younger generation” was interested in reshaping the national literary tradition in the United States ties in with his concern elsewhere with the Argentine tradition. In addition, Borges in this period is fascinated with the instability of judgments about literary canons: “Nathaniel Hawthorne” (1949) and “Kafka y sus

precursores” (1951) are famous statements, exactly contemporaneous with the talks on Melville, of this preoccupation.

On another page, Borges makes an interesting insertion in the top margin: “Moby Dick, libro mejor para releído que para leído, y mejor para releído que para recordado. Un libro que se ve de lejos mejor, como una montaña. Un libro cuyo tamaño es esencial, como dice Mumford.”



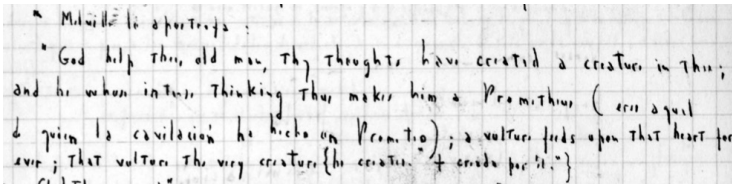
On this page he translates an extensive passage on the death of Queequeg, a shorter excerpt from the sermon in the whale church in New Bedford, and notes on other works from the same year (*David Copperfield* and Longfellow’s *Golden Legend*). He then makes extensive notes on “el canto 26 del Infierno, el misterioso canto 26,” the canto that tells of Ulysses’ journey to the southern hemisphere, which end “Infin che’l mar fu sopra noi richi- uso,” which Borges then compares to the end of the Melville novel:



Son casi las mismas palabras de Moby-Dick (“The great shroud (mortaja) of the sea [rodó como había rodado] [rolled on as it rolled] five thousand years ago”) y la culpa de un capitán no es menos misteriosa que la del otro. ¿Todo, acaso, es culpable; todo es merecedor de castigo?

The final (seventh) page of these notes is a series of quotations from *Moby Dick*: from the prefigurations on shore (the minister in the whale church and the harpooner with el tatuaje de un laberinto en el brazo). Here Borges quotes Melville’s later description of Queequeg’s arm: “This arm of his tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure.” He then quotes from the description of Daggoo “with a lion-like tread,” and then various early descriptions of Ahab, including the famous “crucifixion on his face” (also quoted by Mumford: 165) and Ahab’s blasphemous description of his own madness: “That inscrutable thing is what I chiefly hate, . . . be it agent or principal. . . ‘I’d strike the sun|Yo

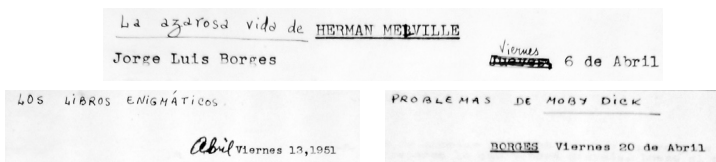
golpearía al sol| if he insulted me” (from chapter 35). Of particular interest is another passage where Borges quotes and translates at the same time:



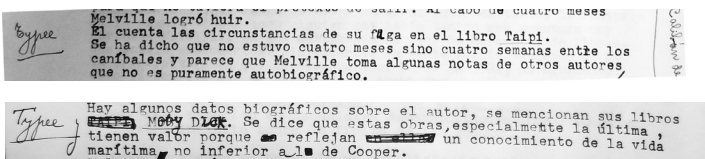
“God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus (eres aquel de quien la cavilación ha hecho un Prometeo); a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature {he creates. + creada por él.”}

The notes on *Moby Dick* end with an enigmatic reference to chapter 41, to a colt in Vermont and “the black bisons of Oregon.” The next page is the beginning of the draft of the essay on Shaw.

The third document on Melville in the Michigan State papers is a typescript taken down by a stenographer with notes on the three classes on Melville from April 1951. The precise dates (April 6th, 13th and 20th) of the three classes are noted in the typescript:



The stenographer did not know anything about Melville, and left blank such important words in the talks as the titles of some of the novels and the name of the narrator of *Moby Dick*, as well as that of Hawthorne; someone else then filled these in by pen in the margins or in the text itself (where the stenographer had left something blank).



Quando se despierta Ysmael, que ha tenido que compartir el lecho del arponero, la primera impresión que tiene es también profética de toda la obra. El arponero está tatuado; un tatuaje le cubre todo el cuerpo y tiene la forma de un laberinto, un dibujo repetido infinitamente. Como la noche es fría se ha cubierto con una frazada, y ésta también tiene un dibujo complicado. La primera impresión que recibe Ysmael al despertarse es la impresión del brazo del arponero y ese dibujo, laberíntico que no se sabe muy bien dónde concluye el brazo y dónde empieza la frazada que tiene un dibujo parecido.

Tenemos otro testimonio de Melville que son las cartas a su amigo Hawthorne. En estas cartas, enredado mientras escribía Moby Dick, dice que Está cocinándose la enorme ballena y el fuego que la cocina es el fuego del infierno.

continuamente solicitada por otras. Y así llegamos al segundo libro enigmático de Melville, WHAAAA Pierre, o Las ambigüedades. A Melville le había molestado que lo llamaran novelista del mar.

para que ellos no hicieran eso con él, se porta mal con ellos llegamos al último cuento que escribió Melville: Billi... muy elocido, pero creo que los gloriosos son injustos. El argumento reducido a lo esencial es éste: Hay un barco, Torloban un marinerito muy querido por la tripulación, que es, además, muy hermoso físicamente. Una persona muy simple mentalmente, pero hermoso porque se ve una persona muy simple mentalmente, pero hermoso

Since the three classes were given at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, which often published transcriptions of talks in its magazine *Cursos y Conferencias* (as happened with Borges's talks on Hawthorne, the Argentine writer and tradition, and German literature in the time of Bach), we can presume that these are notes for an eventual publication in that magazine, which did not happen because (as Mariela Blanco notes in her essay in this issue) the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores was forced to close in 1952 when its license to operate was not renewed. The typescript follows the script in the seven pages of the Mérito notebook from 1951, but without the marginalia (so useful for mapping out Borges's reading precisely) and, as already noted, without much notion of who Melville was or what he wrote.⁸ As I have commented elsewhere (*How Borges Wrote* 126-27), the stenographers at the Colegio Libre did not necessarily catch the nuance of Borges's talks, and he does not seem to have corrected their transcriptions prior to the publications in *Cursos y Conferencias*. I have no idea how this typescript ended up in Donald Yates's collection (along with the roughly twenty notebooks that entered the Michigan State collections in 2019); their presence in his collections implies that Leonor Acevedo de Borges, who kept the notebooks in a locked cabinet in her bedroom in the shared apartment, must have held on to the typescript in hopes of an eventual publication that never happened.

8 Page 4 of the typescript also contains what is one of the only references by Borges to Tolstoy, to *War and Peace*.

To sum up, then: in this brief piece I have explored three sets of documents on Melville, notes for the 1949 talk, notes for the three-class course in 1951, and a typescript that was corrected at some subsequent moment but that was never published. What I suspect the process that was followed with the other talks that were published in *Cursos y Conferencias* is as follows: 1) Borges made rough notes for the oral presentation (in the case of “El escritor argentino y la tradición” these survive, and I have written about them); 2) on the basis of the oral presentation a stenographer made a shorthand transcription, that was subsequently corrected, perhaps without Borges’s participation; and then 3) the talk was published from a corrected typescript. In the case of the 1951 course on Melville, we have the first two stages but not the third.⁹

The materials show that Borges was profoundly engaged with Melville’s work, and particularly taken by his jagged and colorful descriptions, and by the ways in which the symbolic and the allegorical are suggested in them as alternatives to a dryer kind of realism. In many ways these notes focus on visual scenes and the evocation of gesture similar to what Borges found attractive in Stevenson, while also having an allegorical dimension that he celebrated in Chesterton. The 1951 notes include an explicit reference to the 1949 “De las alegorías a las novelas,” but suggest that in the case of Melville we have not a one-way street FROM allegory TO novel but a back and forth motion from allegory to the novel to allegory. “No soy enemigo de los géneros,” Borges remembers his friend Pedro Henríquez Ureña telling him: these notes show his intense involvement with novels that resist or complicate realism.

About the time that Borges was engaged in a radical rethinking of realism, Erich Auerbach, from his exile in Istanbul, was engaged in a similar enterprise. As Edward Said notes in the 2014 fiftieth anniversary edition, Auerbach responded to Curtius’s harsh criticism of his faulty scholarship by saying that the book was possible thanks in part to his being forced to write it without the benefit of the German academic libraries: his peripheral position made his extended meditation on various kinds of realism possible. In “Romanticism and Realism” (1933) he had already noted that even at the moment of the greatest triumph of a certain realism (“the most

9 I should add that the brief section of the 1967 *Introducción a la literatura norteamericana* (26-27) does not add anything new to what is in the two notebooks.

characteristic literary achievement of the nineteenth century . . . the first age to attempt to represent human beings in the full range of their everyday reality” (144), there were other currents at play, including what he calls “tragic realism,” the main focus on that essay. Although to my knowledge Borges never refers to Auerbach, his own ideas about the representation of reality are similarly ductile. At the presentation of *¿Fuera de contexto?* in 1996, Noé Jitrik noted that my book owed a lot to Auerbach (which is clear from its subtitle). Reflecting back, I think that my earlier attention to the “visual scene” and “circumstantial details” (already in *El precursor velado*, 1985), influenced of course by the radical rethinking of the category of verisimilitude that is expressed, for instance, in *Communications* 11 (“Le vraisemblable,” 1968) had already led me to see Borges’s ideas on narrative theory to include a radical rethinking of the representation of the real. Of course, in 1996 I did not have access to Borges’s notes on Melville, but I would argue now that Melville’s “eccentric” and “oblique” approach to narrative was precisely what made him of such interest for Borges (in company, of course, with others such as Stevenson, Kafka, Conrad and Chesterton, as different as they are among themselves). Borges’s notes on Melville, I would argue now, focus precisely on piercing visual details (“detalles” or “rasgos circunstanciales”) and on a preference for suggestion (an interest in allegory and symbol, for instance) that made his novels so heterodox at the time, and so attractive for later readers.

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