

Román SETTON,
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 narrativa policial en la
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 y transformación de
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The Origins of Detective Fiction in Argentina is the PhD thesis of the Argentine scholar Román Setton. This work has come to set the Argentine literary history straight. There has been a general understanding that detective fiction began, in Argentina, in the 1940's with the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Jerónimo del Rey and Manuel Peyrou, a group of writers related to the magazine *Sur* (p. 15). This theory, presented by Rodolfo Walsh in a famous compilation of detective stories by these authors, declared the genre had started with them. But this unfaithful assertion was the result of an elaborated plot developed mainly by Borges, who in several texts established the preeminence of the plot over the psychological novel, defended the English detective tradition that present a logical, rational and sometimes abstract, even mathematical problem, over the French one, and exalted the figures of Poe and Chesterton as models. The production of the *Sur* group adhered to and continued this borgean view and produced texts along these guidelines as well. After Walsh, several critics repeated his reading (Donald Alfred Yates, Jorge Lafforgue and Jorge Rivera, Elena Braceras and Cristina Leytour) and sometimes also named a few previous authors that could be considered

predecessors and antecedents of the detective fiction in Argentina.

However, this is not so. Throughout the years some voices have pointed out that there are detective works previous to those renowned by the canon. These critics have mainly analyzed only one text or else the works of only one of those preexistent authors and so the 1940's version has persisted. The systematization of those authors and texts has never been faced partly because of the difficulty in finding those texts and also because of the lack of information that surrounds them. The general agreement regarding the origin as well as the excellence and uniformity of the texts produced in the 1940's has kept researchers from taking a deeper look into the matter.

Setton undertook that task and went through magazines, newspapers and cultural supplements since the 1870's in order to trace the early presence of detective fiction in early authors and to organize those authors and texts into a corpus. The result was surprising: not only were there clear signs of proto-detective traces, but head to toe detective fiction as well. So the 1940's version was proven unfaithful and a new and genuine historization of Argentine detective fiction took place, one that considered the beginning of the genre with the 1880's generation, a group of intellectuals that wrote fiction and non-fiction and worked in public. Setton also argues this early detective fiction is a varied, prolific and high quality one, and that it takes model not only from the English tradition, but from the French and German traditions as well. This early detective fiction presents a mixture of popular and high culture, includes a parodist elaboration of classic elements of the genre and presents different points of view on a key discussion of Argentine literature, i.e.: the opposition between civilization and barbarism. Setton dedicates the second part of his thesis to analyzing authors and texts: each chapter is dedicated to one author, starting with Raul Waleis/Luis Varela. This author is considered the first detective fiction writer in Argentina, with his 1872 play, *Capital por capital*, and

his 1877 novels, *La huella del crimen* and *Clemencia*, both the first and second part of a trilogy that was never finished. Setton has recently worked on the new edition of these two novels that have therefore received quite a lot of attention, but not yet a full, detailed analysis. Waleis/Varela's work stands out mainly for the social view he has on crime: he regards the criminal as a product of society that has to be reinserted into it. This author also wrote pieces in which he analyzed and criticized the legal system, the way in which people were unlawfully judged and sentenced, the oppression and injustice sheltered by marital law, among others. Varela/Waleis included a "Letter to the Editor" in *La huella del crimen* in which he stated his intentions, to please and educate, as well as the literary tradition these works were endowed to, i.e.: the nineteenth century French serials and novels, specially Gaboriau.

The next chapter is dedicated to two writers, Carlos Olivera and Carlos Monsalve, both of whom wrote several stories that included detective fiction elements but only a couple of stories that may be considered detective. Olivera's "Fantasmas" (1883) and "El hombre de la levita gris" (1880), both portray the invention of a detective story and its outcome and exhibit a parodic view that will become a common stand in the Argentine tradition. "Historia de un paraguas" (1880) is Monsalve's one head to toe detective story. All three of these present a critical view on the current laws, worries regarding female fidelity and a relation between crime and illness.

The French-born writer Paul Groussac, also director of the Biblioteca Nacional, published in 1884 in the newspaper *Sud-América* "El candado de oro", and later republished it in the library's magazine under the name "La pesquisa" (1897). This inclusion of the story in an institutional publication can be seen as the entry of detective fiction into high culture. Even if many elements of this story are those of the classic detective fiction, Setton also notices several masked objections: to the lack of reality of the genre, to positivist philosophy and to the cold, rational, analytic thought.

Groussac also exhibits a consideration of luck and intuition as important elements in the investigation of a crime, a questioning of the narrator's reliability and the use of this type of fictions as entertainment, along with the offer of a new type of detective fiction, a different way of reading it and a happy ending similar to those of the French serials or the fairy tales.

The longest and more detailed analysis is that of Holmberg. His detective works include "La casa endiablada", "La bolsa de huesos" and "Nelly" (1896) as well as "Don José de la Pamplina" and "Más allá de la autopsia" (1906). Setton insists on the defining influence of E. T. A. Hoffmann, commonly unobserved, as well as the one of Poe, Conan Doyle and Gaboriau. He also considers Holmberg's view on the founding opposition of Argentina literature, civilization and barbarism, and the difficulty of defining where the criminal and the representatives of the law stand along that line; the way in which he continues Waleis' criticism on the legal institution; the close link between social determinism and crime, especially regarding women; the importance of chance in the investigation of a crime; the narration of the construction of a novel or the artist's novel; positivism as the main philosophy the writer adheres to; a certain shift from the rational, scientific to the spiritual paradigm, and finally Holmberg's aspiration towards an inclusive and multicultural state illustrated by his compassionate detectives

The fifth chapter analyses "El triple robo de Bellamore" (1903), the one plainly detective story by Horacio Quiroga, who, however, wrote many stories using elements from that genre. This two-page narration portrays the first radical and abstract thinker in Argentine detective fiction, clearly indebted to Poe's Dupin: Zaninsky deduces Bellamore's guilt in the thefts without ever getting close to the scene of the crime. More precisely Zaninsky's theory is based solely in the denial of the material proofs and Bellamore is convicted on this amateur detective's accusation. Hence, the legal system is questioned and, moreover, the whole cast of detectives that ignore human nature and force empiric data to match their own hypothesis.

For not only the narrator but Zaninsky himself asserted Bellamore's innocence by the end of the story, hence questioning the whole genre's tradition of setting the definite solution at the end of the piece.

Then Setton analyses the short detective stories by FAZ -allegedly Félix Alberto de Zabalía-, also known as the adventures of Mr. Le Blond. These eight episodes were published subsequently in the magazine *Papel y Tinta* in 1908, a time when detective fiction had become quite popular in Argentina. In those stories the police force is repeatedly criticized and not always its' procedures are duly followed, in close likeness to the hard-boiled tradition. This detective stands out as a skillful man in disguising himself and in speaking several languages fluently, who has the ability of following traces as a ranger as well as the rational, deductive mind of the abstract thinker, and appears to be a hybrid between the romantic tradition and the local customs. Once again the opposition between civilization and barbarism is presented and the influence of the English, French and German traditions is pointed out.

The last -and probably less interesting- chapter is dedicated to Vicente Rossi, whose detective stories have not been studied up to now. Rossi published at least ten of these type of fictions in which he followed the English tradition, namely Poe and Conan Doyle, as well as incorporated elements from the French serials. His detective, William Wilson, is a reporter who seeks only to please his curiosity and consequently does not feel compelled to inform the police: he rather empathizes with the criminal and considers the victim as partly guilty of the crime he has suffered. Rossi has a sort of anti-semitic and xenophobe stance, he considers immigrants as criminals. He disagrees with the positive law that he regards as full of flaws and present the police corps as a group of useless and ignorant individuals.

The book as a whole is unquestionably sound. The number of proofs Setton provides to base his hypothesis leaves no place for doubt. It has become clear by now and after this work, that the detective genre in Argentina began as early as the late 1870's and had a sustained production of works up to the 1940's, when the 'official' version sets the beginning of the genre.

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