

A vintage-style photograph of a woman with a dark bob haircut, wearing a white, short-sleeved dress, sitting on a bed. She is looking down and to the right, with her left hand resting on her head. The bed has a white sheet and a dark patterned blanket. Several books are scattered on the floor around the bed. The background is a light-colored wall with horizontal lines.

**THE INVENTION
OF MOREL**
ADOLFO BIOY
CASARES

PROLOGUE BY
JORGE LUIS BORGES

THE INVENTION OF MOREL

ADOLFO BIOY CASARES (1914–1999) was born in Buenos Aires, the child of wealthy parents. He began to write in the early Thirties, and his stories appeared in the influential magazine *Sur*, through which he met his wife, the painter and writer Silvina Ocampo, as well Jorge Luis Borges, who was to become his mentor, friend, and collaborator. In 1940, after writing several novice works, Bioy published the novella *The Invention of Morel*, the first of his books to satisfy him, and the first in which he hit his characteristic note of uncanny and unexpectedly harrowing humor. Later publications include stories and novels, among them *A Plan for Escape*, *A Dream of Heroes*, and *Asleep in the Sun* (forthcoming from NYRB Classics). Bioy also collaborated with Borges on an *Anthology of Fantastic Literature* and a series of satirical sketches written under the pseudonym of H. Bustos Domecq.

JORGE LUIS BORGES (1899–1986) was born in Buenos Aires. He learned to read English from his English grandmother before he mastered Spanish, and at an early age developed a deep attachment to the works of Robert Louis Stevenson, G. K. Chesterton, and Lewis Carroll. Borges studied in Geneva during the First World War and then traveled in Europe, returning in 1921 to Argentina, where he quickly became a central figure in the local literary world, writing criticism of all sorts, along with the poems, novels, and stories for which he is famous. For a time Borges was director of the National Library of Argentina, but he was dismissed from the position after he publicly criticized the government of Juan Perón. In his later years, Borges went blind. At the time of his death, he was recognized around the world as one of the masters of twentieth-century literature.

SUZANNE JILL LEVINE is the author of numerous studies in Latin American literature and the translator of works by Adolfo Bioy Casares, Jorge Luis Borges, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and Manuel Puig, among other distinguished writers. Levine's most recent book is *Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman: His Life and Fictions*. She is a professor in the Spanish Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

THE INVENTION OF MOREL

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INTRODUCTION

THE ARGENTINE Adolfo Bioy Casares (1914–1999) inspired generations of Latin American readers and writers with his stories and novels rich with “reasoned imagination,” prophetic fantasies, elegant humor, and stoic ironies about romantic love. Bioy, as he was called by friends and peers, began writing within the cosmopolitan sphere of *Sur* magazine—founded by the influential Victoria Ocampo—in Buenos Aires in the early 1930s. In this stimulating environment, surrounded not only by Argentine but by international cultural figures from Europe (including Spanish poets and intellectuals who were fleeing the Civil War), North America, and Asia, it was the friendship of Jorge Luis Borges that led the young Bioy to develop into the consummate literary stylist he became. Indeed Borges prefaced the first edition, in 1940, of *The Invention of Morel*—Bioy Casares’s most famous book and undoubtedly a twentieth-century classic—with an impassioned defense of fantastic literature. For Borges and Bioy, the fantastic was a far richer medium compared to what they then considered the impoverished artifices of nineteenth-century realism. Citing *Morel* as a “perfect” contemporary model of the genre, Borges placed the twenty-six-year-old writer’s first successful fiction in the company of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*.

What was the fantastic in Borgesian terms? The fantastic or “magic” emanates from pre-modern modes of thought; hence fantastic narrative involved the irruption of a “lucid”

magical system of causation upon what we know to be “natural” causation, making the reader question the normal boundaries between fantasy and reality. Borges concludes in his 1940 preface: “In Spanish, works of reasoned imagination are infrequent and even very rare. . . . *The Invention of Morel* . . . brings a new genre to our land and our language.” Octavio Paz, years later, preferred not to pigeonhole Bioy Casares as a fantasist, however. The Nobel Prize-winning Mexican poet and essayist described this intriguing novella and many of Bioy’s fictions’ principal themes as not cosmic but rather metaphysical:

The body is imaginary, and we bow to the tyranny of a phantom. Love is a privileged perception, the most total and lucid not only of the unreality of the world but of our own unreality: not only do we traverse a realm of shadows; we ourselves are shadows.

From *The Invention of Morel* to later stories and novels such as *The Adventure of a Photographer in La Plata* (1985), the perception of desire in Bioy’s fictions serves to make both protagonist and reader painfully aware of solitude, of the pathetic, tragic, and yet comic ways in which lovers lose one another, of the impossibility of being the heroic master of one’s destiny.

Adolfo Bioy Casares was born in Buenos Aires on September 15, 1914, the only child of wealthy parents. Adolfo Bioy, descendant of a French family from Béarn, the southwestern region of France often in the background of his son’s stories, was the author of two volumes of memoirs; Marta Casares, considered a great beauty in her day, came from a well-established family, owners of La Martona, the largest dairy chain in the country. It was through Marta Casares’s friendship with the Ocampos that her seventeen-year-old son would meet in 1931 his literary mentor Borges, then thirty,

and also his wife-to-be, Victoria's sister, the writer and painter Silvina Ocampo. Rincon Viejo, the family ranch in Pardo in the province of Buenos Aires, was to give Bioy and Borges their first pretext to write in collaboration, a pamphlet on the virtues of yogurt!

The familiar image of Bioy Casares as disciple and collaborator of Borges placed him, in the Latin American canon, under the shadow of the maestro. Even though Borges once called Bioy the "secret master" who led him out of his experimentation with baroque metaphors into classical prose, Borges's message was, as always, double: "master" in the sense that children teach their parents. But more than mentor and disciple Borges and Bioy were lifelong friends whose ingenious and passionate discussions of literature and their favorite writers (like Stevenson, Poe, Chesterton, and, of course, Kafka) were mutually nourishing. In poetry, Borges favored the epic, such as Whitman, whereas Bioy favored the lyrical, as in Verlaine.

Love was always to be an endangered and endangering obsession in Bioy: the sweet revelations in the laurel bower can bring down catastrophe, whether that evil be banal stupidity or some divine (or diabolical) wrath. Stories his mother told him as a child provided the blueprint for many of his own fictions:

My mother tells me stories about animals who stray from the nest, are exposed to danger, and in the end, after many adventures, return to the security of the nest. The theme of the safe, or apparently safe, haven and of the dangers that lurk outside still appeals to me.

Bioy's life was a gentler version of these fables. A shy yet witty, melancholy, and handsome man, he traveled often, mainly to France—a second home and, as for many Latin American intellectuals, a cultural mecca. Despite or because

of his timidity, he was a “hero of women” (the apropos title of a later volume of stories).

Bioy’s writing obsessively reenacted his early fascination with the ominous adventure. Time and again his hesitant protagonists are thrust headlong—out of some unspelled yet inevitable necessity—into situations they cannot comprehend and whose consequences may be disastrous. H. G. Wells’s scientific romance *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, in which a mad scientist turns beasts into men, becomes a kind of leitmotif throughout Bioy’s novels, from *Morel* (the name an obvious allusion) and *A Plan for Escape* (1945) to *Asleep in the Sun* (1973). In the latter, the animal metaphor for the human condition becomes literal when good-natured Lucio Bordenave suspects that a sinister doctor has transformed his wife (literally) into a bitch. Lucio’s life is completely dissolved when his soul too is transferred into a dog’s body.

Friends “explained” the supernatural to Bioy, according to him, at an early age. Bioy described these revelations thus:

Through cracks that might open at any moment in the earth’s crust, a devil might grab you by the foot and drag you down to hell. The supernatural as something terrifying and sad. While we play at throwing a ball against the wall in back of the house, my friend Drago Mitre explains that heaven and hell are the lies of religion. I feel relieved. I would like to go inside a three-way mirror, where the images would repeat themselves clearly. The supernatural as something attractive.

So, for example, what is obviously hell in Edgar Allan Poe’s classic story “The Pit and the Pendulum,” in which a prisoner of the Inquisition is exposed to the torture of burning, shining walls closing in on him, became in *The Invention of Morel* an allusion to an ambiguous heaven. The mirror which reflects (but also threatens to supplant us) can be sinister or

good, fearful or beautiful, depending upon how it is perceived. In Bioy's paradoxical universe the symbol turns upon itself: his texts are filled with tantalizing allusions and symbols which are no longer keys but rather enigmatic ciphers. As the narrator quotes Mallarmé in *A Plan for Escape*, the novella Bioy wrote immediately after *Morel*, "anything is a symbol of anything." His reader experiences an effect of referentiality but there is no reality outside the terrifying or beautiful mirror, outside the text—or the perception.

Bioy wrote and published six books between 1929 and 1940, but he considered (and his critics followed suit) that his real literary production began with *The Invention of Morel*. To entertain friends in later years he would often trot out one of the earlier attempts. He would claim it was written by some young writer, read a section that would be sure to produce mocking laughter, and then reveal that he was the author; of these earlier publications he said: "I publish, my friends look sad and don't know what to say to me." But finally, he had a breakthrough, as he described in a chronology of his life and works:

At Pardo I glimpse what will be the plot of *The Invention of Morel*. I understand that something is wrong with my way of writing and I tell myself it's time to do something about it. For reasons of caution, in writing the new novel, I don't strive to make a big hit, just to avoid errors.

Bioy's early writings "suffered" from the chaotic influence of Surrealism's "automatic writing" and Joyce's stream-of-consciousness. In Bioy's first conversation with el maestro Borges, the mature writer responded to the young man's enthusiasm for Joyce, emblem of the "modern" and of "total freedom," by suggesting—against the grain—that *Ulysses* was more a promise than an achieved masterpiece. Borges

may have brought Bioy to the classical at this early stage, citing Horace and promoting the virtues of narrative rigor, such as to be found in the “superior” plots of G. K. Chesterton. Bioy embraced Borges’s poetics of condensation and concision, which favored the speculative and the artificial over the novelist’s expansive representation of human experience. By the mere fact of writing novels, however, Bioy would always appear (at least) to be more concerned than Borges with re-creating the “lived and the seen.”

Although Bioy had still not discovered his mode in the volume of stories that preceded *Morel*, titled *Luis Greve, Dead* (1937), Borges found in this book the seed of the writer-to-be, as he wrote in his review in *Sur*:

Our literature is poor in fantastic narratives, preferring the formless *tranche de vie* or the episodic. Which makes Bioy Casares’s work unusual. In *Chaos* (1934) and *The New Storm* (1935) imagination predominates; in this book—in the best pages of this book—that imagination obeys an order. “Nothing is so rare as order in the operations of the spirit,” said Fenelon. In *Luis Greve* he has begun to master games with time and space which attempt to impose another order—a literary one—upon an absurd universe.

One of the stories in this early volume, “The Postcard Lovers,” about a young man who interpolates his image into the photograph of a girl he loves, anticipates *The Invention of Morel*, in which *l’amour fou* is carried to its ultimate consequences. When the girl in the postcard discovers the photograph and the love, her life changes. . . . *The Invention of Morel* transports this scheme into the realm of science fiction, and away from Argentina to an unknown and supposedly deserted island: Bioy needed to “decontaminate” himself from the subjectivity of his immediate Argentine reality to

gain aesthetic distance. But I won't ruin the fun for the reader by revealing the plot, which, as Borges observed, is a magnificent invention, inspired by science fiction ranging from H. G. Wells to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *The Future Eve*. I will remark, however, that Bioy's "invention," like all good science fiction, was prophetic, and intuitively predicted future scientific realities.

This meticulously wrought novella of just over one hundred pages was received with acclaim, and brought Bioy recognition beyond the borders of the *Sur* group; he was awarded the first municipal Buenos Aires prize for literature. When translated into French in 1953, its narrative device of two lovers coexisting spatially in two different temporal dimensions would inspire Alain Robbe-Grillet's script for Resnais's film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). He would continue to receive literary prizes at home and abroad, and films in Argentina and Europe have been based on his many seductive plots: *The Invention of Morel* has actually been filmed several times, but none of these films seem to capture the elusive charm of this novella about characters who are filmed. Aside from several movie and TV versions made in France, Italy, and Argentina, *Morel* has become a cult reference, as for example in the Argentine Hector Subiella's metaphysical film *Man Facing Southeast* (1985). At the same time, among Argentine proponents of realism, *Morel* gained for Bioy the reputation of "clockmaker," of an intellectual enamored of his own mental constructions or "bachelor machines." Lucio Bordenave, the bungling clockmaker in the later *Asleep in the Sun*, was perhaps a burlesque response to this misreading—but even Bioy himself felt that it wasn't until the story "The Idol" in *The Celestial Plot* (1948) that he had "loosened up" and found his style.

Bioy's style is terse and understated: the translation of *The Invention of Morel* by Ruth L.C. Simms, first published in 1964 by the University of Texas Press, tends at times—a

common tendency in many translations, even the best—to paraphrase, to create smoother transitions where the original might seem excessively spare. But in general the translation is accurate and faithful to his elegance. Bioy's sentences reflect his tendency in general toward shorter, concise narrative forms; his narrators say less rather than more, inviting one to read between the lines. Their elliptical, matter-of-fact manner of communicating bewilderment makes the reader both laugh at and sympathize with bungling antiheroes who don't quite have a grip on reality but are doing their best. Beneath this mild surface, Bioy's elegant textual machines, like the "invention" of the mad scientist Morel, are works of passion, expressing a desire for eternal love and a poignant failure to counter the dissolution wrought by mortality. The young Bioy, in this unforgettable work, had already mastered a lucid irony that maintains distance between the passion with which he would always denounce and the curiosity with which he would invariably register the evils of the world, and especially the fatal limitations of humankind.

—SUZANNE JILL LEVINE
Santa Barbara, California
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