

Foreign books and writers

“La Preuve”, by N. Bourbaki

Jorge Luis Borges¹

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

Juvenal, “Satires”

Mystery novels have, by now, democratically visited many of the places where men and women live, and where they can die, and one may expect that, in little time, every real and imaginary place, except for some desert island, will be the stage of one of these ingenious stories. Nevertheless, this clever novel, whose author I did not know before, offers (I believe) a setting that was unexplored until now.

A scientific meeting takes place in a prestigious university, probably in Paris. In the corridors, rumor – based on a title, a jaunty figure, a mocking smile – holds that, on the second day, the famous Professor X will announce some ineluctable progress towards the solution of the celebrated Hypothesis of the mathematician Riemann.

Come the next morning, professor X is found dead in his hotel room. His papers have disappeared, or been burnt. It is of course murder. Suspicion immediately falls on the young ambitious Dr. W, who visited X for a long time during the evening. He is also known to have

¹This note was scheduled to appear in the journal *El Hogar* in January 1937, but was replaced at the last moment by a short review of *Absalom, Absalom*. For unknown reasons (maybe the revelation of the final twist in the story was considered to be reprehensible?), it has remained unpublished until now.

been long obsessed by Riemann's problem. In the hotel room, his fingerprints are the only ones that the efficient Inspector B has revealed.

I do not remember a more accomplished alibi than the one that W offers: what motive would be his to commit this crime, since he has already solved the Riemann problem? To support it, he presents a full-length typed manuscript containing the complete proof; a copy has remained in his apartment during the last few weeks.

The remainder of the tale investigates the other participants of the conference, and the jealous wife of X. This part is, maybe, only routinely written, although with some amount of humour reflecting the unusual habits of research mathematicians. Inspector B points finally to Y, a former collaborator of X. The day before his execution, Inspector B reaffirms to his wife his conviction that the logical perpetrator was W. She answers: "But his alibi is only one if his proof is right."

The novel ends at this point. When I read it once more, I noticed the clues (for instance, that there no other specialist of the Riemann Hypothesis than X and W) which reveal the true story.

Translated, from the Spanish, by J.F.