The Detective Fiction Of Poe and Borges

PASCAL offers a classic articulation of the dilemma created by the triumphs of modern science:

"Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie. / Combiens de royaumes nous ignorent!" 1 Since Pascal, artists and intellectuals have battled the alienation he voices with variations of two major reactions: the near obsessive search for an inherent order, some secret principle that would reveal the universe as "home," after all, or the valorization of human schemes as the only possible bulwarks against the apparent incoherence of the cosmos. "I want, I desire, quite simply, a structure," writes Roland Barthes. "Of course there is not a happiness of structure; but every structure is habitable, indeed that may be its best definition." 2 Edgar Allan Poe and Jorge Luis Borges share this desire for a "habitable" space, for a recovery of the lost anthropomorphic face of the universe. 3 Although their reactions to man's existential isolation represent distinct poles, their differences may be attributed largely to the Romantic faith in cosmic unity and the post-Romantic, modern sense of fragmentation—a difference less of temperament than of historical moment. In any case, they both exhibit Pascal's preoccupation with an apparently overwhelming universe and resort to similar literary forms as expressions of their vision.

The relationship between Poe and Borges, however, transcends mere similarities in metaphysical and artistic interests. Critics have noted in passing that Borges is the single most prominent perpetrator of literary forms pioneered by Poe. 4 The detective story and the short tale that turns narrative action into philosophical speculation rank among the notable literary exercises of both writers. Poe is also the author to whom Borges returns most often in praise, criticism, and explicit imitation. 5 Thus, inspired by Emerson's observation that "the condition of participation in any man's thought is entering the gate of that life... You must be committed, before you shall be entrusted with the secrets of any party," 6 my interest here lies in those affinities that have led the Argentine to admire and emulate his North American predecessor, and that allow a reading of his detective fiction—particularly the favorite "Death and the Compass"—as both comedic parodies and serious re-writings of Poe's tales of the reified mind. 7


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3 The longing for a humanized universe is directly presented in Borges' A Personal Anthology, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York, 1967), where he writes: "Through the years, a man peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, tools, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face." (p. 203). And in the peroration that concludes Eureka, Poe's atomic theory of the universe is revealed as a stratagem for identifying man with God, thereby reducing the universe to a function of the human will. See The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. James A. Harrison (New York, 1902), XVI, 313-15; hereafter cited in the text by volume and page numbers from this edition.
tive story. In his An Introduction to American Literature, he writes that Poe's tales of intellect "inaugurate a new genre, the detective story, which has conquered the world," and in his discussion of the form's history in American literature, he adds:

In 1840 Edgar Allan Poe enriched literature with a new genre. This genre is above all ingenious and artificial; real crimes are not commonly discovered by abstract reasoning but by chance, investigation, or confession. Poe invented the first detective in literature, M. Charles Auguste Dupin of Paris. He invented at the same time the convention, later classical, that the exploits of the hero should be told by an admiring and mediocre friend... Poe has had many imitators; let it suffice to mention for the moment his contemporary, Dickens, and Stevenson and Chesterton.8

Borges' most extensive commentary on Poe and the genre, however, is contained in a published lecture delivered at the University of Belgrano.9 It is primarily a meditation on the emphases and techniques that Poe bequeathed to subsequent practitioners, and Borges here enrolls himself among the North American's conscious imitators. The elements he addresses, while perhaps illuminating Poe, point directly to his own concerns: the detective as an outsider existing spiritually and intellectually beyond the conventions of ordinary humanity; the detective story as an anti-realist genre, a kind of intellectual fantasy; and Poe's creation of his readers through the kind of narrative he invented.

Borges has written that "each writer creates his precursors" (OI, p. 108; Pce, II, 228), and one of the signal features of his own work is its conscious engagement with sources and predecessors.10 Thus, when the reader encounters the poet and mathematician narrators of "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in his Labyrinth," he is reminded of the original mathematician-poets, "Auguste Dupin and the Minister D., in "The Purloined Letter." Borges' naming one of these narrators "Dunraven" evokes Poe's famous dark bird, while the reference to Poe's work becomes explicit when the other narrator, Unwin, recalls Poe's advocacy of the principle of simplicity in the construction of narratives.

A more extensive instance of the conscious evocation of his North American mentor occurs in "Death and the Compass" itself, which, Borges claims, "takes place in his native Buenos Aires. However, the fictional city, if not quite Paris, is certainly gallicized: the murder takes place in the Hôtel du Nord, whose literal reference is the Plaza Hotel; the Rue de Toulon is the Paseo Colón; and the villa where the tale climaxizes, Triste-le-Roy, was the former Hotel las Delicias.11 These details resemble the geographic displacements of the Dupin stories, a stratagem Borges attributes to Poe's desire to preempt any question of realism and one he admits imitating for similar reasons. But they also serve as a form of literary allusion, establishing literary precedent for the present tale and requesting that the reader not only confront the narrative before him but also engage the subtext from which it explicitly derives.

For both Poe and Borges, the detective story stands as a formal antithesis to the chaos of human experience. Poe makes the ratiocinative tale the prose equivalent of the poem, which, as the realm of the poetic sentiment, becomes the "one circle of thought distinctly and palpably marked out from amid the jarring and tumultuous chaos of human intelligence," the "evergreen and radiant Paradise which the true poet knows, and knows alone, as the limited realm of his authority" (VIII, 281). Poe attributes his sense of disorder directly to the triumph of science and industrialism. "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" presents the deformation of nature by "huge smoking cities" and the repression of imagination and taste as the causes of man's separation from "Beauty," "Nature," "Life" (IV, 203-04). The restrictive, empirical vision of the early nineteenth century contributed to the "indignity mist" that surrounded man's temporal existence and that only the lynx eye of the philosopher could penetrate.

Borges' sense of disorder transcends Poe's historical specificity; chaos is often presented as the informing principle of a universe whose "most notorious attribute is complexity."12 Borges suspects that "there is no universe in the organic, unifying sense inherent in that ambiguous word" and that "it is doubtful that the world has a meaning; it is more doubtful still, the incredulous will observe, that it has a double and triple meaning" (OI, p. 104, 128; Pce, II, 224, 241). For him, the particular historical change that Poe laments is subsumed in a monistic metarelity: "The tumultuous general catastrophes—fires, wars, epidemics—are but a single sorrow, illusorily multiplied in many mirrors" (OI, p. 178; Pce, II, 292). And, finally, in the Belgrano lecture, he

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8 An Introduction to American Literature, trans. and ed. L. Clark Kesting and Robert O. Evans (New York, 1973), pp. 23, 80-81. In this essay I am less concerned with the historical accuracy of Borges' literary opinions than with his identification of Poe as a major precursor. For a brief, intelligent history of the genre up to Poe, his innovations, and some contemporary developments, see Marianne Kesting: "Auguste Dupin, der Wahrheitsfinder, und sein Leser: Inwiefern Edgar Allan Poe nicht der Initiator der Detektivgeschichte war," Poetica, 10 (1966), 53-65.


11 See Borges' notes to the tale in The Aleph, p. 268.

12 In the prologue to El informe de Brodie (Buenos Aires, 1974) Borges writes of his collected stories: "I do not dare claim that they are simple; there is no such thing in the world as a single page, a single word that is [simple], since they all postulate the universe, whose most notorious attribute is complexity" (p. 10). English translations are my own unless noted otherwise.


The left side has more scientific-looking typographical elements compared to the right side. The right side has a larger font, and the text is less dense. Both sides seem to be discussing a complex scientific topic, possibly related to quantum mechanics or theoretical physics, given the use of terms like "wave function," "interference," and "displacement." The left side also has a paragraph discussing an equation, which suggests a mathematical or theoretical explanation. The right side includes a diagram, which could be a quantum mechanical model or a representation of a physical experiment.

*Note: The description is based on the visible text and layout of the image.*
The two views read the same poem—William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." The images on the pages are part of a larger text, but the specific content of the poem is not visible in the image. The text is discussing the themes and ideas of the poem, focusing on the imagery and language used by Wordsworth.
plete with underlined passages—one in order to compose, the other in order to decipher, the present text. The narrative becomes an intersection of texts created and made intelligible by the mutual efforts of an analogously informed writer-reader team, an immediate illustration of Borges’ assertion that “a book is not an isolated entity; it is a narration, an axis of innumerable narrations” (OI, p. 164; PC, II, 272). On one level, the two men become one in precisely the same way that author and reader conflate in any text, which they mutually construct. In this sense, the murder—or suicide—that climaxes the tale becomes a symbolic rendering of that dying into the text proposed by Romantic and post-Romantic theories of authorship, and an example of the reader’s necessary relinquishing of separate, private reality—his identity—to the aesthetic experience.25

Borges proposes that “every cultivated man is a theologian” (OI, p. 76; PC, II, 199) and that metaphysics is “the only justification and finality of any theme” (OI, p. xiv). The metaphysical and philosophical tendency Poe embeds in the ratiocinative tale by making “Truth” rather than “Beauty” its defining goal (XI, 109) becomes an explicit constituent of the Borgesian narrative. For both writers the detective story becomes a vehicle for the expression of significant epistemological and philosophical tenets. Poe’s idea that genius incorporates all orders of intelligence is directly illustrated in Dupin, the bipartite soul, the creative and resolute mind. His belief that truth resides in the surface relationships among things is illustrated in D.’s tactics for concealing the letter and in the explicit rejection of the police instinct to search in depth. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” justifies the exaltation of the poetic mind, with an implicit justification of the universe that Poe defines as the thought of God. “The Purloined Letter” accomplishes those purposes while dramatizing Poe’s aesthetic conception of the universe.

The absence of a private religion like that which underlies a Poe tale renders “Death and the Compass” less the reflection of a metaphysic than the exploration of philosophical positions that Borges finds haunting or attractive. The oriental idea of the identity of the seeker and the sought, subject and object, surfaces in the identity shared by the apparent antagonists. To observe Borges’ writing returning repeatedly to Schopenhauer’s notion that all men share complicity in their own fate is to view Lönrot’s death as a self-willed act and to make the narrative itself that objectification of will and desire that is the literary text, in which both writer and reader lose themselves.

The general stylistic, structural, and thematic tendencies of “Death and the Compass” must be read as an intimate engagement with the body of Poe’s detective fiction, but especially with “The Purloined Letter.” Almost all of its major features may be traced directly or indirectly to the pioneering effort of the nineteenth-century North American, and, although it constitutes a signal instance, it is but one of many occasions on which we sense that Borges is imitating or writing under Poe’s direct inspiration. However, the literary relationship between the two transcends the issue of mere influence; rather, Borges presents the inevitable confrontation of a late writer not only with a major precursor but with the originator of those very forms that are the necessary vehicles and expressions of his vision. For Borges, that confrontation is conscious and desired as he makes Poe’s fiction into an aesthetic resource, part of the material of composition. It is also an aesthetic consequence of his temperament and philosophy. “Fate takes pleasure in repetitions, variants, symmetries,” he writes;26 “Death and the Compass” is a conscious exercise in literary vision and critical revision.

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