

Borges, Milton, and the Game of the Name

In the prologue to the first part of *Ficciones*, Jorge Luis Borges states the kernel of his aesthetics:

The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a résumé, a commentary.¹

"Death and the Compass" is such a Borgesian commentary. The story of a brilliant detective, Erik Lönnrot, who meets his death at the hands of an equally brilliant criminal, Red Scharlach; it is a classic working out of the French proverb, *à trompeur, trompeur et demi*, for Scharlach counts on the detective's keen analytic mind to bring him within his grasp. But Borges is not simply out to establish the commonplace that one can be too intelligent for one's own good. Rather, he has dreamed up, in very short compass indeed, a heterodox version of *Paradise Lost* in which Satan emerges victorious.

The plot is ingenious and tight. Scharlach, whose brother Lönnrot had three years previously sent to prison, has devised a tempting labyrinth to trap the hated detective. Azevedo, one of Scharlach's men, murders the Jewish theologian Doctor Marcel Yarmolinsky after accidentally stumbling into his hotel room (he had meant to rob the Tetrarch of Galilee in a nearby suite). Scharlach, realizing that Lönnrot will be put on the case, arranges for a second murder exactly a month later, on the evening of January 3. The victim is Azevedo, who had tried to betray Scharlach by undertaking the robbery on his own behalf a day earlier than planned. Scharlach, through a newspaper article on Yarmolinsky's murder, learns that he was the author of a monograph on the Tetragrammaton, and that the sentence "The first letter of the Name has been uttered" (78)² was found on a piece of paper in his typewriter. Lönnrot refuses to accept the explanation of the crime (which, however, is correct) offered by Inspector Treviranus. An Auguste Dupin type, Lönnrot insists, "Here we have a dead rabbi; I would prefer a purely rabbinical explanation . . ." (77). To this end he studies Yarmolinsky's writings, especially his monograph and *History of the Hasidic Sect*, which the scholar had

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York, 1962), p. 15.

² References to "Death and the Compass" are to the translation by Donald A. Yates in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York, 1964).

in his hotel room. Scharlach also reads the books. As he explains to the captured Lönnrot,

. . . I learned through the *Yidische Zeitung* that you were seeking in Yarmolinsky's writings the key to his death. I read the *History of the Hasidic Sect*; I learned that the reverent fear of uttering the Name of God had given rise to the doctrine that the Name is all powerful and recondite. I discovered that some Hasidim, in search of that secret Name, had gone so far as to perform human sacrifices . . . I knew that you would make the conjecture that the Hasidim had sacrificed the rabbi; I set myself the task of justifying that conjecture (85).

Scharlach accomplishes his purpose by chalking, across some colored diamonds on a wall near Azevedo's corpse, "The second letter of the Name has been uttered" (79). The third "murder" takes place on February 3, with "The last of the letters of the Name has been uttered" (81) scrawled on the pier from which the victim was ostensibly tossed into the river. In fact, this murder is a hoax. It is designed to seem to complete a series that Lönnrot will discover to be incomplete: three murders, occurring on the third day of three consecutive and symmetrical months; three letters of the Name—NO, four, the Tetragrammaton, JHVH. Scharlach has also counted on Lönnrot's discovering that "The Hebrew day begins at sundown and lasts until the following sundown" (81), so that the three night-murders actually took place on the fourth days of their respective months. There must, Scharlach pre-reasons for Lönnrot, occur a fourth murder, on the Jewish fourth of March. Where will it happen? On March 1 Scharlach sends a letter to Treviranus (signed "Baruch Spinoza"!) explaining that there will *not* be a fourth murder since, as Treviranus can see from an enclosed map of the city, the sites of the three are "the perfect vertices of a mystic equilateral triangle" (82). With caliper and compass Lönnrot deduces the exact location of the necessary fourth murder, which will occur after sundown on the third of March, proceeds to that spot, and meets Scharlach and death.

Now, what has all this to do with *Paradise Lost*? The clues that identify Scharlach as a Satan figure are in the conversation he has with Lönnrot just after the latter has been captured and handcuffed by two henchmen:

"Scharlach, are you looking for the Secret Name?"

Scharlach remained standing, indifferent. He had not participated in the brief struggle, and he scarcely extended his hand to receive Lönnrot's revolver. He spoke; Lönnrot noted in his voice a fatigued triumph, *a hatred the size of the universe, a sadness not less than that hatred.*

"No," said Scharlach. "I am seeking something more ephemeral and perishable, I am seeking Erik Lönnrot. Three years ago, in a gambling house on the rue de Toulon, you arrested my brother and had him

sent to jail. My men slipped me away in a coupé from the gun battle with a policeman's bullet in my stomach. *Nine days and nine nights I lay in agony in this desolate, symmetrical villa; fever was demolishing me, and the odious two-faced Janus who watches the twilights and the dawns lent horror to my dreams and to my waking. I came to abominate my body, I came to sense that two eyes, two hands, two lungs are as monstrous as two faces . . .* (84-85; italics mine).

The first and last of the segments emphasized above are applicable to Milton's Satan in a general, pervasive way. His hatred of God is apparent in almost everything he says; his sadness he conceals well when among his comrades, but utters magnificently in the soliloquy near the beginning of Book IV; in Hell all senses deliver torment. But it is the second passage that demonstrates a specific borrowing, and accounts for the others as well:

Nine times the Space that measures Day and Night
To mortal men, hee with his horrid crew
Lay vanquisht, rolling in the fiery Gulf
Confounded though immortal: But his doom
Reserv'd him to more wrath; for now the thought
Both of lost happiness and lasting pain
Torments him; round he throws his baleful eyes
That witness'd huge affliction and dismay
Mixt with obdurate pride and steadfast hate.³

Suddenly the criminal's name makes perfect sense. *Scharlach* is German for scarlet; Red Scharlach is thus a redundancy, and fitting for the King of Hell. Names in this story ought, since the action depends on the Tetragrammaton, to be significant, and they are. Treviranus, the competent but unimaginative Inspector and Lönnrot's nominal superior, is Borges' God the Father. G. R. Treviranus (1776-1837) was the German scientist who coined the word "biology" in his book, *Biologie oder die Philosophie der lebenden Natur* (1802-22). Since all being, all life (*βίος*) proceeds from the Father, Treviranus' name is appropriate. Like Milton's Almighty the Inspector has little concern with the direct action of the story; both delegate authority. Lönnrot, then, is Borges' version of the Son, again appropriate, since the historical Lönnrot (not Erik but Elias, 1802-84) was a Finnish philologist (who compiled the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*). The superb metaphor of Christ as *Λόγος*, the Word, is especially applicable to Lönnrot in his preoccupation with sacred nomenclature.⁴

³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I, 50-58, in Merritt Y. Hughes, ed., *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose* (New York, 1957). All Milton references are to this edition.

⁴ Milton's insistence that Father and Son are co-eternal is beautifully echoed

The stage, then, is set, and the characters identified. But what is Borges doing with this analogy so elaborately *recherché*? As always, he is engaged in a game of ideas, turning a "What if?" into an imaginative "Is." What if one develops Milton's incipiently Manichaean treatment of God and Satan into an actual confrontation of independent essences? Borges could easily have gotten the germ of such an idea from Milton's poem. Satan, having lost the initial battle, concedes to the Almighty no intellectual, but only a physical victory:

Whom reason hath equall'd, force hath made supreme
Above his equals, (I, 248-49)

and

Henceforth his might we know, and know our own
So as not either to provoke, or dread
New War, provok't; our better part remains
To work in close design, by fraud or guile
What force effected not: that he no less
At length from us may find, who overcomes
By force, hath overcome but half his foe. (I, 643-49)

In "Death and the Compass" Borges lets Scharlach-Satan make good that claim, create that "close design." The first three murders (rather, two murders and a sham) take place in the north, east, and west, leaving Lönnrot's for the south, in an intricate Hell which is the house of the villa "Triste-le-Roy."⁵ "Viewed from anear, the house . . . abounded in pointless symmetries and in maniacal repetitions: to one Diana in a murky niche corresponded a second Diana in another niche; double stairways led to double balustrades. A two-faced Hermes projected a monstrous shadow. Lönnrot circled the house as he had the villa . . ." (83).

The complex house of doubles is a paradigm of Borges' Manichaean fable, in which Lönnrot and Scharlach are equal and opposed. Its symmetries are far from meaningless, as Lönnrot soon learns, and the mirrored busts of Diana, goddess of the hunt, exactly capture the situation of pursuers pursued. The house is also Borges' vehicle for insinuating Man into the picture and thus completing the analogy with Milton. Inside

by this complex pun on "biology." Lönnrot's initials, E. L., may reveal Borges playing on a Hebrew word for God, Eloah. Aluizio Azevedo (1857-1913) was a Spanish forerunner of the twentieth-century American novel of social protest, and the attempted robbery of the rich Tetrarch may explain why Borges used his name. Yarmolinsky, the scholar, may get his name from contemporary scholar Avrahm Yarmolinsky (1890-), translator and critic of Dostoyevsky, Chekov, and Pushkin. In addition to its translated meaning, Scharlach is probably a play on "Sherlock."

⁵The name ("Sad-the-King") is ambiguous. Which king? Of Light or Darkness? Apparently both, for the Manichaean conflict allots lasting satisfaction to neither side.

the house Lönnrot finds a "melancholy garden" (83), a "dusty" (86) parodic Eden, in which "two silent fountains" (83) mock the trees of Life and Knowledge. Man does not figure in the plot of the story, because he has no paradise to lose. He is created pre-fallen, the presumed creature of a Darkness that is an essence and not, as in orthodox tradition, merely privative.

Borges' story presents the first of an inferably infinite series of intellectual skirmishes. Lönnrot's final words to Scharlach are an invitation to a return match:

"In your labyrinth there are three lines too many," he said at last. "I know of one Greek labyrinth which is a single straight line. Along that line so many philosophers have lost themselves that a mere detective might well do so, too. Scharlach, when in some other incarnation you hunt me, pretend to commit (or do commit) a crime at A, then a second crime at B, eight kilometers from A, then a third crime at C, four kilometers from A and B, half-way [*sic*] between the two. Wait for me afterwards at D, two kilometers from A and C, again halfway between both. Kill me at D, as you are now going to kill me at Triste-le-Roy" (86-87).

Scharlach promises to do so, then fires. Next time, however, he will lose, for Lönnrot will have trapped him in one of Zeno's labyrinths: Scharlach can never reach D.

But it doesn't matter; the alternation will continue indefinitely, with neither Scharlach nor Lönnrot achieving ultimate victory. Borges is again demonstrating that fundamentally there is no such thing as orthodoxy, no single right way of looking at the world. He understands, like Emerson, that every thought is also a prison, the prison from which his fictions attempt to rescue us.

Harrisburg Area Community College

LOUIS I. MIDDLEMAN

At the Intersection of Freud and Ionesco

Freud maintains that the joke originates in playful self-expression, as observed in children, who conceive the world without the critical and logical constructs of adults. By this reasoning the techniques of jokes—condensation and multiple use of words (verbal jokes), and displacement, faulty reasoning, nonsense, indirect representation (conceptual jokes)—are simply methods of unraveling the rational element in ideation and of re-experiencing under a bi-valent veil of sense the pleasure of play.