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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. / Combien de royaumes nous ignorent!"¹ Since Pascal, artists and intellectuals have combatted 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

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* II, Vol. XIII of *Œuvres*, nouvelle édition, ed. Léon Brunschvicg (1904; rpt. Vaduz, 1965), Sec. III, Nos. 206, 207, p. 127.

² *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1978), p. 46.

³ The longing for a humanized universe is directly presented in Borges' *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.

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 perpetuator 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 rewritings of Poe's tales of the reified mind.⁷

Borges has recognized Poe as, effectively, the originator of the detec-

⁴ No extended study of Borges can avoid the spectre of Poe, so that his name repeatedly appears in critical studies of the Argentine's work. But for specific notations of identities in form and content, see Gérard Genette, "La Littérature selon Borges," in *Jorge Luis Borges, L'Herne* (Paris, 1964), p. 324; Robert E. Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin, *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (New York, 1977), p. 8; and Barton Levi St. Armand, "'Seemingly Intuitive Leaps': Belief and Unbelief in *Eureka*," in *Poe as Literary Cosmologist: Studies on *Eureka*, A Symposium*, ed. Richard P. Benton (Hartford, Conn., 1975), p. 14, n. 13.

⁵ Borges' most extensive tributes to Poe are contained in "El arte narrativo y la magia," in *Discusión* (Buenos Aires, 1957), pp. 86-91, and "Edgar Allan Poe," *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), Oct. 2, 1949, Sec. 2, p. 1. A few of the briefer notations of his awareness of, debt to, and appreciation of Poe occur in *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York, 1970), pp. 237, 273; *The Book of Sand*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York, 1977), pp. 7-8; *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (New York, 1964), p. 86 (hereafter cited in the text as *OI*); and with Adolfo Bioy Casares, *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York, 1980), p. 12. References to Borges' *Prosa completa* (Barcelona, 1980) will appear parenthetically in the text as *Pc*, followed by volume and page numbers.

⁶ *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Merton M. Sealts, Jr., X (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 374.

⁷ The present discussion is essentially limited to the relationship between "Death and the Compass" and Poe's Dupin tales, although its assertions are applicable to Poe's other two mysteries and to such Borges stories as "The Garden of Forking Paths." Beyond its scope are the problematic issues raised by Borges' and Bioy Casares' *Six Problems*, where the detective genre is reduced to the absurd (parodied, as the detective's name suggests). Here, my interest is in Borges' innovations that enrich rather than exhaust the form; for a discussion of the serious generic and aesthetic implications of *Six Problems*, see John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 36-39.

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; *Pc*, 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, C. 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

⁸ *An Introduction to American Literature*, trans. and ed. L. Clark Keating 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 Detectivgeschichte war," *Poetica*, 10 (1978), 53-65.

⁹ "El cuento policial," in *Borges oral* (Buenos Aires, 1979), pp. 65-80; hereafter cited in the text as *Bo*.

¹⁰ See Ronald J. Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York, 1969), pp. 33-40, and Gérard Genette, "L'Utopie littéraire," in *Figures 1* (Paris, 1966), pp. 123-24.

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 climaxes, 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 ambitious 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*, pp. 104, 128; *Pc*, II, 224, 241). For him, the particular historical change that Poe laments is subsumed in a monistic metareality: "The tumultuous general catastrophes—fires, wars, epidemics—are but a single sorrow, illusorily multiplied in many mirrors" (*OI*, p. 178; *Pc*, II, 292). And, finally, in the Belgrano lecture, he

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.

offers this apology for the police tale: "In this our so chaotic epoch, there is something that, very humbly, has maintained the classic virtues: the police story. Since a police story without a beginning, a middle, and an ending is incomprehensible. . . . I would say, in defense of the police novel, that it needs no defense; read now with a certain disdain, it is saving order in an epoch of disorder" (*Bo*, p. 80).

There begins to emerge, then, an essential difference between the conception and the role of the order that these men attribute to the tale, a difference originating in the idea of meaning as objectively inherent in the universe, hence, discoverable, or as deriving solely from the activity of the human intelligence, as constructed. For Poe, the detective story reflects a preexistent divine order from which man is excluded by erroneous methods of investigation and inadequate habits of perception. Order depends on a certain aesthetic distance from the observed object and a certain obliqueness of observation: to close inspection, the brush strokes of a painting are "'confusion worse confounded,'" and "a star may be seen more distinctly in a sidelong survey than in any direct gaze" (VIII, 215).

Poe repeatedly employs the metaphor of stargazing for the kinds of vision to which reality may be subjected: to look directly deprives the object of its enchantment; instead, it must be beheld indirectly.¹³ Such obliqueness is central to Poe's aesthetics and epistemology, for the basic opposition is between the direct procedures of science and the rational mind and the indirect processes of poetry and the imagination. To perceptual organs blinded by the fragmentary details salvaged by empiricism, existence may appear as a confusion, but order, proportion, harmony—summed up by the Platonic *μονωρμή*—are the attributes that ultimately define Poe's universe (IV, 204). It is an immense concatenation of reciprocally implicated cause and effect, which, becoming indistinguishable, also become mutual reflections that can only be approached analogically—that is, through metaphor (IV, 202; XVI, 9-10). Science's only positive function is to extend "the range of analogy" through which man comprehends God's nature and, ultimately, his own (XIV, 192). *Eureka* is Poe's definitive explanation of the universe as the "plot" of God, his ultimate confession of faith in cosmic order.

On its deepest level, then, Poe's detective fiction is profoundly mimetic, mirroring the formal proportion and echoing the harmony of the universe. Borges' skepticism denies his tales an equivalent metaphysical

¹³ See Poe, *Works*, IV, 166; VII, xxxiv; XIV, 189-90; XVI, 164. For an informative discussion of the epistemological implications of Poe's aesthetic of the oblique and the Arabesque, see David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature* (Garden City, N.Y., 1974), pp. 55, 57-58.

endorsement. In the end, they are self-justifying, for "the impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe" places a value on human structures (*OI*, p. 104; *Pc*, II, 224). He advances his characteristic image, the labyrinth, as an existential consolation: the labyrinth is designed to bewilder man, but however frightening or repulsive such a goal may be, it constitutes a purpose—meaning. The labyrinth is thus Borges' response to Barthes's desire for a "habitable" structure; it represents a "hidden cosmos" in which there is a "center, a plan, [and] everything is foreseen," and he concludes that the "vision of the concrete and ordering human intelligence is really magnificent."¹⁴

The universe itself incites man to constructive projects. Despite his skepticism as to the existence of cosmic order, the doctrine to which Borges returns most often is the pantheistic notion of the universe as an emanation of God. He retrieves from the Vedic scriptures and from Schopenhauer the idea that the world is a dream of consciousness, so that all things ultimately find their meaning in the sleep of an original Dreamer. Each encountered fact presupposes the "inconceivable universe," and, conversely, "the universe needs the least of facts."¹⁵ The mere possibility of this order imposes certain obligations on humanity: "We must conjecture its purpose; we must conjecture the words, the definitions, the etymologies, the synonyms of God's secret dictionary" (*OI*, p. 104; *Pc*, II, 224). This ancient notion of the universe as a sacred text and Poe's version of the same idea—the cosmos as a divine plot that must be read analogically—point to the world's final intelligibility. For both writers, man is launched on a ceaseless quest to identify the plot, to decipher the text, to discover the center of the cosmos—or, if he must, to invent them. The identifying human trait thus becomes metaphysical speculation—"conjecture."¹⁶

Poe and Borges turn to the ratiocinative tale as the literary form that most effectively includes both the quest for meaning and the final deciphering of uncovered symbols; to both men, it represents a victory for the ordering mind. The man who creates order out of the heterogeneity of casual fact duplicates the divine act of creation; similarly, the individual who reads order into the same heterogeneity indulges in an

¹⁴ "Jorge-Luis Borges," *Magazine Littéraire* [Paris], 148 (May 1979), 22, and *Discusión*, p. 42.

¹⁵ From "La poesía gauchesca," where Borges writes: "It is well known that when asked how long it had taken him to paint one of his *Nocturnes*, Whistler replied: All my life. With equal rigor he could have said that it had taken all the centuries that preceded the moment in which he painted it. From this correct application of the law of causality it follows that the least of facts presupposes the inconceivable universe and, inversely, that the universe needs the least of facts" (*Discusión*, p. 11).

¹⁶ For Poe passages on the intuitive "guess" as superior to reason, see *Works*, VI, 205-06; XVI, 197-98; XIV, 187.

exegetical exercise that confounds him with the creator. The protagonists of their detective fiction are drawn from this dual conception of the nature of meaning: as constructed or discovered. The portraits differ according to Poe's and Borges' conceptions of man's existential relationship to the universe.

Poe, for instance, could assert with confidence that the man of genius, the artist, is impelled to creation (discovery) by the consonance between his own intellectual and spiritual composition and the universe itself: "In lauding Beauty, Genius merely evinces a filial affection" (XIV, 183). The absolute proportion inherent in the universe finds an analogue in the mind of the poet, who, in turn, suffers a susceptibility to and longing for that order, harmony, *μοναρχία* (XIV, 175; XVI, 121). However, Borges' "consecutive and ordering human intelligence" is isolated in its attempt to create order; in fact, that very effort becomes an aspect of its alienation. He finds a symbol of the heroic isolation of the artist-intellectual in Paul Valéry, of whom he writes: "The meritorious mission that Valéry performed (and continues to perform) is that he proposed lucidity to men in a basely romantic age, in the melancholy age of Nazism and dialectical materialism, the age of the augurs of Freud's doctrine and the traffickers in *swirralisme*" (OI, p. 74; P_c, II, 196). He points directly to the central theme here when he adds that Valéry himself is "a derivation of Edgar Allan Poe's Chevalier Dupin and the inconceivable God of the theologians." Homage to the Frenchman points directly to the American poet who, also in a romantic age when art meant inspiration and affective indulgence, had the temerity to assert that literature results from intelligent choice and conscious technique. This international trio comes together in its mutual predilection for the "lucid pleasures of thought and the secret adventures of order" amid the general chaos of human experience.

Borges observes, however, that Poe never combined his tales of horror with those of the bizarre, that he never set C. Auguste Dupin "the task of solving the ancient crime of the Man of the Crowd or of explaining the image that terrified the masked Prince Prospero in the chamber of black and scarlet" (OI, p. 82; P_c, II, 205). The artist-reasoner's task is the ceaseless penetration into the labyrinth of the world, the continual perusal of the infinite text of the universe. His Dupin must be sent into the final darkness even if he is ultimately lost. "Death and the Compass" thus attempts the conflation of horror and bizarreness that Borges finds absent in Poe. Chief Detective Erik Lönnrot attempts to solve the murder of the prominent Hebraist, Doctor Marcel Yarmolinsky, during a meeting of the Third Talmudic Congress. Lönnrot is an intellectual who is more attracted by the esoterica of the rabbi's traveling library and the *outré* details surrounding his death and subsequent crimes than he is to

any mundane criminal motivations. There is an unimaginative Inspector Treviranus who despises what he considers Lönnrot's intellectual absurdities, just as Poe's original Prefect G. affected contempt for Dupin's similar predilections. The irony is that the Inspector's practical guess as to the motive and nature of the crime is correct—thus indirectly avenging Poe's maligned policeman and suggesting the distance this tale occupies from the mere whodunit or its more philosophically motivated Poe original.

Lönnrot's intellectuality and his distance from the Poe character is indicated in the tale's opening paragraph, where Borges writes that he "believed himself a pure reasoner, an Auguste Dupin, but there was something of the adventurer in him, even a little of the gambler."¹⁷ In Lönnrot, Poe's Frenchman becomes Germanic, a race prominent in metaphysics and philosophy. This specific tendency of his thought surfaces immediately as he rejects the Inspector's common-sensical hypothesis as "possible, but not very interesting" (L, p. 77; P_c, I, 402). He dismisses objective "reality" in favor of a "rabbinical explanation" and thereby inverts Dupin's celebrated method. In "The Purloined Letter" Poe's detective admits the "interesting" character of the Prefect's methods but remarks their inappropriateness for the particular criminal involved. Lönnrot's obsession with the cabalistic and Talmudic trappings that surround the crimes ultimately parodies Dupin's similar predilection for the esoteric. In Poe, such tendencies precede the detective's involvement in the solution of the crime and exist primarily as symbols of his intellectual distance from common humanity. Here, they are posterior to the crime and are artificially introduced into the process of its solution; they are Lönnrot's *response* to the disorder represented by the crime and, ultimately, prove to be his undoing.

The tale concludes with the notorious hoodlum, Red Scharlach, whose name echoes Lönnrot's own (Red Lion), explaining that, although the original murder was accidental and proceeded from the simple motive of robbing the Tetrarch of Galilee, he had himself specifically designed other incidents in order to even an old score against Lönnrot. "I have premeditated everything," he exults, having sworn "by all the gods of fever and of the mirrors" that he would "weave a labyrinth" around the detective (L, pp. 85-86; P_c, I, 409). He succeeds, and Lönnrot is killed, thus presenting the reader of Poe with a series of significant inversions. In Poe, Dupin always reveals the ratiocinative sequence through which he solves the crime; here, the criminal both perpetrates the atrocity and solves the mystery. In "The Purloined

¹⁷ *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald Yates and Frank Irby (New York, 1962), p. 76, hereafter cited in the text as L, and P_c, I, 401.

Letter" Dupin delights in his revenge against the Minister D., leaving him a taunting note; one hundred years later, the reincarnations of the original antagonists find the tables reversed, and the master criminal evens the score against the supreme detective.

The death of the detective and the triumph of evil are, perhaps, the most important and suggestive of Borges' permutations of his predecessor's material, for they controvert the implicit assumptions upon which a Poe tale is built. The moral thrust of a Poe detective story is the establishment of conventional order. This derives from his notion of a harmonious universe, and the narrative reenacts the original divine creation of order from chaos and its maintenance against the forces of disruption. The three Parisian tales and "Thou Art the Man" end with the solution of a crime that frees the innocent, condemns the guilty, and sets the social universe right again. Dupin's triumph over D. is a symbolic expression of faith in God's triumph over His antagonist; chaos is defeated and cosmos is guaranteed. The suppositions informing this fiction are prerequisites for a work like *Eureka*.

The moral implications of "Death and the Compass" are much more sinister. Instead of Poe's consolatory discovery—or recovery—of order, there is the implication that any possible cosmic scheme may be specifically framed not for man's salvation but for his annihilation. An early version of this idea appears in Borges' essay commemorating the fourth centenary of Buenos Aires, where he writes of the gradual absorption and extinction of the present's racial variety by an imminent "New Man" in whom all would be confounded.¹⁸ In "The Immortal" the queuing protagonist finally reaches the city of the gods only to discover a suprahuman reality whose conceptual impenetrability fills him with an "incomprehensible reprobation which was almost remorse, with more intellectual horror than palpable fear" (*L*, p. 110; *Pc*, II, 14)—a city "so horrible that its mere existence and perdurance, though in the midst of a secret desert, contaminates the past and the future and in some way even jeopardizes the stars" (*L*, p. 111; *Pc*, II, 15). As long as it exists, even as a possibility, mankind is enfeebled and life impotent. Finally and most explicitly, he writes in "Three Versions of Judas" of the heresiarch Nils Runeberg who, having "discovered" that Jesus and Judas were one, also discovers that "God did not want His terrible secret divulged on earth" (*L*, p. 99; *Pc*, I, 425). His punishment is madness and death.

The latter tale also offers a more specifically illuminating theological framework for Lönnrot's behavior. In one of his customary catalogues of precedents and analogies, Borges lists:

¹⁸ See "Tareas y destino de Buenos Aires," in *Homensaje a Buenos Aires en el centenario de su fundación* (Buenos Aires, 1936), pp. 530-31.

Elijah and Moses, who on the mountain top covered their faces in order not to see God; Isaiah, who was terrified when he saw the One whose glory fills the earth; Saul, whose eyes were struck blind on the road to Damascus; the rabbi Simeon ben Azai, who saw Paradise and died; the famous sorcerer John of Viterbo, who became mad when he saw the Trinity; the Midrashim, who abhor the impious who utter the *Shem Hamphorash*, the Secret Name of God. (*L*, p. 99; *Pc*, I, 425)

Lönnrot provides a secular reenactment of the ancient blasphemy against God's divine inaccessibility. He duplicates the Gnostic sin *Tolma*, the sacrilegious rashness of curiosity concerning divine things—the first line of the tale identifies his "reckless discernment."¹⁹ Once he has begun reading Yarmolinsky's library of books on God's unmentionable name, he is no longer interested in solving the crime *per se*; he ignores the official police investigation to indulge in a private theological search. On the way to his final encounter with Scharlach, "he had very nearly deciphered the problem; mere circumstances, reality (names, prison records, faces, judicial and penal proceedings) hardly interested him now" (*L*, p. 82; *Pc*, I, 407).

Lönnrot's rejection of circumstantial reality finds its source in Borges' distinction, cited earlier, between an apparently incoherent universe and the heroic magnificence of provisional human structures. Lönnrot informs Treviranus that while reality may avoid being interesting no hypothesis may negate that obligation, and in an interview Borges justifies that form of extended hypothesis, philosophy, as an aid to living: "I think that philosophy may give the world a kind of haziness, but that haziness is all to the good. If you're a materialist, if you believe in hard and fast things, then you're tied down by reality . . . So that, in a sense, philosophy dissolves reality, but as reality is not always too pleasant, you will be helped by that dissolution."²⁰ However, as with Nils Runeberg in "Judas," the price of Lönnrot's metaphysical curiosity is annihilation. As usual, Borges makes the literary and philosophical background of the tale quite explicit. Scharlach seduces Lönnrot to his destruction with the idea of the Tetragrammaton—"the unutterable name of God." Arriving at the scene of the tale's climax, Lönnrot considers that only a single day "separated him from the moment long desired by the seekers of the Name," and when he encounters his nemesis, he asks, "Scharlach, are you looking for the Secret Name?" (*L*, pp. 83, 84; *Pc*, I, 407, 409). Further, Borges writes that "tradition numbers ninety-nine names of God; the Hebraists attribute that imperfect number to magical fear of even numbers; the Hasidim reason

¹⁹ See André-Marie Jean Festugière, *Les Doctrines de Panée*, Vol. III of *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* (Paris, 1953), pp. 63-103.

²⁰ Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York, 1968), pp. 142-43.

that that hiatus indicates a hundredth name—the Absolute Name" (*L*, p. 78; *Pc*, I, 403). It is on the hundredth day of the investigation that Lönnrot solves the crime and is killed. The police investigation—the search for the identity of an unknown criminal—is thus conflated with the metaphysical search for God. In both cases, there is a name to be revealed; in both, the revelation of the secret name ends in the quester's annihilation.

Lönnrot's death, however, points to a larger issue in Borges' work. He consistently denies the ontological validity of the discrete historical personality and posits a meta-identity beyond space and time and synonymous with the very idea of being. As a consequence, he is attracted to epistemologies that conflate subject and object.²¹ Lönnrot and Scharlach become an instance of the obliteration of circumstantial distinctions: the notes to the tale assert that the two men are really a single character and that the story is the account of a suicide.²² Borges once again makes explicit what Poe only suggests or leaves to critical interpretation: the poetic and mathematical interests shared by Dupin and D., their similar initials, and Dupin's theory that to understand anyone one must essentially become that person—all point to their shared identity. If D. is an example of "that *monstrum horrendum*, an unprincipled man of genius" (*VI*, 52), then Dupin, who outsmarts him but who is no less a moral and intellectual anomaly, is a *monstrum bonum*, a principled man of genius. Both writers offer a vision of supreme mind in its disparate and complementary functions: the creator of an order that can be benevolent or malevolent, good or evil. As noted earlier, Dupin's victory expresses a faith in an ultimately beneficent universe; Lönnrot's death calls that universe into question.

Inherent in the identification of the detective and the criminal is the conflation of creation and exegesis.²³ To solve the crime is to reconstruct it, to duplicate the original series. But Poe's detective fiction concentrates primarily on reading the problematic text of experience. The murder of the L'Espanaye women in "The Murders in the Rue

Morgue" is surrounded by diverse interpretations of the supposed language of the criminal, which leaves Dupin with the critical task of penetrating a specifically linguistic ambiguity that is not the result of the creative intelligence but inherent in the disorder to be resolved. "Marie Roget," however, is devoted primarily to the critical reading of the conflicting hypotheses that appear in the Parisian press, and "The Purloined Letter" focuses on the oblique vision (symbolized by his green glasses) that allows Dupin to "read" the interior of D.'s study and retrieve the letter.

"Death and the Compass" is a more conscious and balanced exploration of the reciprocal nature of reading and writing, criticism and creation. According to contemporary theories of the literary experience, every text encodes a specific reader.²⁴ Borges makes precisely this point when he claims that today's readers of detective fiction are, in some sense, creatures of Poe, that his fiction had to create readers capable of understanding it (*Bo*, pp. 66-68). Similarly, Scharlach tells Lönnrot that although newspaper accounts led the public to believe that the murders were triple, "I, nevertheless, interspersed repeated signs that would allow you, Erik Lönnrot, the reasoner, to understand that the series was quadruple" (*L*, p. 86; *Pc*, I, 411). Lönnrot's achievement, then, is an act of reading and construction; he neither solves the crime nor prevents his own death, "but he did succeed in divining the secret morphology behind the fiendish series as well as the participation of Red Scharlach" (*L*, p. 76; *Pc*, I, 401).

Scharlach and Lönnrot mutually compose the mini-text of the crime and its solution embedded in the encompassing narrative. The series of events that comprise this text is designed for Lönnrot alone; he is the encoded reader. As these events are meaningless without his particular intellectual passions and eccentricities, his reading of meaning into them duplicates Scharlach's act of creation.

The two men even read the same books—Yarnolinsky's *History of the Hasidic Sect* and Leusden's *Philologus Hebraeco-Graecus*, com-

²¹ In "El tiempo circular," Borges writes that "if the destinies of Edgar Allan Poe, the Vikings, Judas Iscariot, and my reader are secretly the same destiny—the only possible destiny—universal history is the history of a single man" (*Historia de la eternidad*, Buenos Aires, 1979, p. 102). And in "The Immortal," he adds, "No one is anyone, one single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am philosopher, I am demon and I am world, which is a tedious way of saying that I do not exist . . . I have been Homer; shortly, I shall be No One, like Ulysses; shortly, I shall be all men; I shall be dead" (*L*, pp. 114-15, 118; *Pc*, II, 19, 22).

²² *The Alpha*, p. 269.

²³ For the analogy (author : reader :: criminal : detective) inherent in the detective story genre, see Tzvetan Todorov's summary of S. S. Van Dine's original twenty rules for the form in "The Typology of Detective Fiction," collected in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971), p. 49.

²⁴ See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Md., 1974), and Frank Kermode, *How We Read Novels*, Fourth Gwilym James Memorial Lecture (Southampton, Eng., 1975). In *For a New Novel* Alain Robbe-Grillet writes: "For, far from neglecting him, the author today proclaims his absolute need of the reader's cooperation, an active, conscious, creative assistance. What he asks of him is no longer to receive ready-made a world completed, full, closed upon itself, but on the contrary to participate in a creation, to invent in his turn the work—and the world—and thus to learn to invent his own life" (trans. Richard Howard, New York, 1966, p. 156). And Borges himself observes, "One literature differs from another, either before or after it, not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read. If I were able to read any contemporary page—this one, for example—as it would be read in the year 2000, I would know what literature would be like in the year 2000" (*OT*, p. 164; *Pc*, II, 272).

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 confide 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 metaphysics 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 Lönnrot's death as a self-willed act and to

²⁵ For contemporary expressions of this idea, see Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow, 1977), pp. 142-48, and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), pp. 116-18.

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 initiating 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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²⁶ *A Personal Anthology*, p. 15; *Autobiografía personal* (Buenos Aires, 1961), p. 21.