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CONFLICTING INTERPRETATION OF LANGUAGE AND REALITY IN BORGES'S NARRATIVE

In Borges's work the comparison of the critic to the detective leads to a merging of the problems of the interpretation of words and of reality. In 'La muerte y la brújula' the process of misinterpreting reality also entails the misinterpretation of certain words: for instance, 'la primera letra del nombre ha sido articulada' and 'el día hebreo empieza al anochecer y dura hasta el siguiente anochecer'.¹ However, 'La muerte y la brújula' is more concerned with the interpretation of words in a broader sense: that is, with the interpretation that the reader makes of the words of the story.

In this narrative Erik Lönnrot is compared to Edgar Allan Poe's character, Auguste Dupin: 'Lönnrot se creía un puro razonador, un Auguste Dupin' (p. 148), and Borges implicitly acknowledges Poe's influence on the story in the section of *Borges oral* entitled 'El cuento policial'. He writes: 'Hablar del relato policial es hablar de Edgar Allan Poe, que inventó el género.'² Later in the section he adds: 'He intentado el género policial alguna vez, no estoy demasiado orgulloso de lo que he hecho. Lo he llevado a un terreno simbólico que no sé si cuadra. He escrito "La muerte y la brújula"' (*Borges oral*, p. 87). Hence, the following words written in a prologue to María Ester Vázquez's *Los nombres de la muerte* (1964) are relevant to an understanding of the story: 'Edgar Allan Poe sostenía que todo cuento debe escribirse para el último párrafo o acaso para la última línea . . . Ya que el lector de nuestro tiempo es también un crítico, un hombre que conoce, y prevé los artificios literarios, el cuento deberá constar de dos argumentos, uno, falso, que vagamente se indica, y otro, auténtico, que se mantendrá secreto hasta el fin.'³ These words come near to describing 'La muerte y la brújula', where the penultimate paragraph, and more specifically the words 'ese laberinto, que consta de una sola línea recta y que es invisible, incesante', are of fundamental importance to the rest of the story (p. 163).

The work contains two plots: one false, that Lönnrot believes, and which Scharlach constructs; one true, in which he promises Lönnrot the labyrinth of one line. (The relevance of this will be seen later.) However, it is the idea that 'el lector de nuestro tiempo es también un crítico' and its relation to 'La muerte y la brújula' that I shall now examine.

Lönnrot interprets reality so that it fits in with a system of fours, whereas he could equally well have interpreted it so that it fitted in with a system of threes. The system of fours corresponds to the false plot, and the system of threes to the true plot. However, some of the clues pointing to these two plots are not aimed at Lönnrot or the characters in the story but at the reader. For instance, the clue pointing to the number four, 'el Tetrarca de Galilea' (p. 48) is aimed primarily at the reader. There are more clues that point to the number three: 'Tercer Congreso Talmúdico' (p. 148), 'tres años de guerra en los Carpatos y tres mil años de opresión' (p. 148), 'Treviranus' (p. 149), and 'No hay que buscarle tres pies al gato' (p. 149). These can

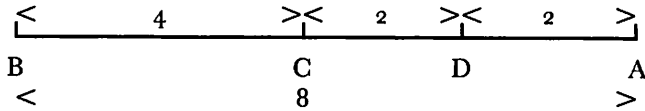
¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, sixth edition (Madrid, 1978), pp. 150, 154. All further textual references to 'La muerte y la brújula' are to this edition.

² *Borges oral* (Barcelona, 1980), p. 71.

³ *Prólogos* (Buenos Aires, 1975), p. 167.

in retrospect be taken as clues that the number three is the clue to the true solution, or the true plot.

However, there is another series of clues directed at the reader who is also the critic (that is, the reader who must self-consciously interpret the words of the story). These clues also point in the direction of the true plot, but this time they are related to the important words of the penultimate paragraph of the story, 'ese laberinto, que consta de una sola línea recta y que es invisible, incesante' (p. 163). This labyrinth of one line is described in the preceding paragraph. Lönnrot says 'Scharlach, cuando en otro avatar usted me dé caza, finja o cometa un crimen en A, luego un segundo crimen en B, a 8 kilómetros de A, luego un tercer crimen en C, a 4 kilómetros de A y de B, a mitad de camino entre los dos. Aguárdeme después en D, a 2 kilómetros de A y de C, de nuevo a mitad de camino. Máteme en D, como ahora va a matarme en Triste-le-Roy' (pp. 162-63). It can be represented by a diagram:



It can also be represented by a series: $8 + 4 + 2$, which if continued would be $8 + 4 + 2 + 1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8} + \frac{1}{16} \dots$. This is formed by dividing each successive number by two, and the total approaches sixteen. The numbers that Borges has chosen for this series are not arbitrary. He is aware that this is not the most usual form in which the problem he is representing, that of Achilles and the tortoise, is known. In 'Avatares de la tortuga' he writes: 'A esos competidores mágicos [Achilles and the tortoise] y la serie $10 + 1 + \frac{1}{10} + \frac{1}{100} + \frac{1}{1000} + \frac{1}{10,000} \dots$ debe el argumento su difusión'.⁴ Both this series and the one used in 'La muerte y la brújula' involve an infinite progression. However, this series is not as symmetrical as the other because it is formed by dividing each number by ten, and the total approaches $11\frac{1}{9}$. The series used in the story is more symmetrical because the total, sixteen, is twice the size of the initial number, eight. In this series it is $1\frac{1}{9}$ times the initial number, ten. Lönnrot's series is more symmetrical. In other words, the numbers in 'La muerte y la brújula' may have been chosen partially for the symmetry created, the relevance of which will be seen later.

Hence, the labyrinth which Scharlach promises to Lönnrot the next time he kills him is very similar to the one in the problem of Achilles and the tortoise, which has preoccupied philosophers for centuries. That labyrinth is 'incesante', first because Achilles never reaches the tortoise, but secondly, because the problem continually is given new versions and new refutations. In 'La perpetua carrera de Aquiles y la tortuga' Borges refers to it as 'la paradoja inmortal' (*Obras completas*, p. 244). It is a labyrinth in which man has constructed an elaborate system that fits in with his logic but not with his common sense. In this way it is similar to that in which Scharlach traps Lönnrot in 'La muerte y la brújula'. But as Lönnrot and Scharlach are doubles (they are both red) Lönnrot can be thought of having been trapped by his own intellect, in a similar way to that in which man is trapped by his intellect when he believes that Achilles can never catch up with the tortoise.

We can now see the relationship of the words 'ese laberinto, que consta de una sola línea recta y que es invisible, incesante' (p. 163) to Lönnrot's position. They

⁴ *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires, 1974), pp. 254-55.

compare his position of having trapped himself in his own intellect to that of mankind in general when by his reason he is led to construct a system of belief, which blatantly contradicts common sense, with which to interpret the world. They also point to the fact that one of the reasons why man constructs these systems is that he loves symmetry. Borges is interested in the idea that one of the things that makes a system pleasing is its symmetry, and as has been seen, the series which Lönnrot suggests is even more symmetrical than the traditional series. The tendency to see systems and symmetries in everything is the basis of Lönnrot's problem, and by implication is the basis of the problem of the intellect of man.

However, this tendency is also, by implication (because of the allusions to Poe) the basis of the intuitive, artistic impulse in man. Lönnrot has been compared to Dupin. Dupin, too, rejects common sense and follows reason. For instance, in 'The Purloined Letter' he says: 'Perhaps it is the simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault', and continues, 'perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain'.⁵ In 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' the narrator says of Dupin: 'I could not help remarking and admiring . . . a peculiar analytic ability in Dupin' (p. 176). Dupin expects one thing to follow another in a strictly logical fashion, as do the two reasoners, Lönnrot and Scharlach. Scharlach is in fact absolutely correct in predicting Lönnrot's train of thought. The idea that they are truly doubles and that Lönnrot is to be trapped by his own intellect is reinforced by the fact that Scharlach's action alludes to the action of Dupin, Lönnrot's double, in predicting the train of thought of the narrator of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'. After fifteen minutes of silence Dupin knows what the narrator is thinking and every step of the reasoning by which he reached that point. He also, as does Scharlach to Lönnrot, describes the manner in which he worked out the other's thought processes (pp. 178-79).

Hence, like Lönnrot, Dupin has an analytical mind, but one which is, however, linked to an imaginative, intuitive mind by Poe. In 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' we are told that the analyst's results, 'brought about by the very soul and essence of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intuition' (pp. 172-73), and 'the truly imaginative' people are 'never otherwise than analytic' (p. 175). Also, the narrator says of Dupin: 'I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervour, and the vivid freshness of his imagination' (p. 175).

In both Lönnrot and Dupin the analytic is linked to the imaginative. Just as Lönnrot could not countenance a solution that was not interesting, Dupin says: 'But it is by these deviations from the plane of the ordinary, that reason feels its way, if at all, in its search for the true' (p. 188). And just as Lönnrot decides that the crime must be a Rabbinical one, which is an unusual type of crime, Dupin says that if reason is to feel her way 'in her search for the true' the question 'is not so much "what has occurred?"' as "what has occurred that has never occurred before?"' (p. 216). In 'The Mystery of Marie Roget' we are told that Dupin's 'analytical abilities acquired for him the credit of intuition' (p. 206).

Poe also links the analytic mind to the imaginative, intuitive mind when writing about literary composition. For instance, in 'The Philosophy of Composition' he writes:

Most writers — poets in especial — prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy — an ecstatic intuition — and would positively shudder at letting the

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Works* (London, 1872), p. 250. Further textual references to Poe's works are to this edition (hereafter *Works*).

public peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought — . . . at the cautious selections and rejections — at the painful erasures and interpolations — in a word, at the wheels and pinions — the tackle for scene shifting — the step-ladders, and demon-traps — the cock's feathers — the red point and the black patches, which in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrío*. (p. 661)

This is what Borges refers to when he writes that Poe 'razonó, o fingió razonar, que la escritura de un poema es una operación de la inteligencia', and when he refers to 'la doctrina "clásica" del romántico Poe, que hace de la labor del poeta un ejercicio intelectual' (*Obras completas*, pp. 1021, 263).

Poe goes even further than linking the imaginative to the analytic. He links it also to the mathematical. In 'The Philosophy of Composition' he writes of his poem 'The Raven': 'It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition — that the whole work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem' (*Works*, p. 661). These words could easily be applied to the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. That that paradox, in spite of its mathematical rigour, is seen as poetic by Borges is testified to by the fact that he wrote of it: 'Me gustaría conocer el nombre del poeta que lo dotó de un héroe y de una tortuga' (*Obras completas*, p. 254). Hence, the labyrinth of Achilles and the tortoise, and consequently the labyrinth of one line at the end of 'La muerte y la brújula', represent not merely the difference between logic and common sense but also the difference between imagination and common sense. Lönnrot, as has been seen, is not just logical but, like Dupin, also imaginative. The systems and symmetries that he sees in everything are not just the problem of his intellect, and that of mankind's, but also the basis of his and hence mankind's imagination.

The fact that Lönnrot's form of analytical reason is not pure reason is also further reinforced by the allusions to Dupin, who also is not infallible. Like Lönnrot, he was led by his reason into error. The line at the end of the story that symbolizes Lönnrot's belief that by reason and symmetry he can reach truth, and his error in so believing, represents an infinite series. In using it Borges alludes to the last lines of 'The Mystery of Marie Roget'. There Dupin explains that the error of thinking that if two sixes have already been thrown at dice a third six is no more likely than at any ordinary time 'forms one of an infinite series of mistakes which arise in the path of Reason through her propensity for seeking truth in detail' (*Works*, p. 245). Ironically, Dupin himself is wrong. A third six, according to probability theory, that 'Calculus of Probabilities' (p. 248) to which he refers, would be no more likely than before. Like Lönnrot, he was not aware that his own form of reasoning might consist of a series of mistakes.

The line at the end of the story represents, therefore, not just the symmetries of the imagination and of reason but also the impurity of that reason as a means of reaching the truth. There is no doubt that 'La muerte y la brújula' is constructed around the labyrinth of one line. As has been said, Borges refers to Poe's insistence that a story must be written for the last paragraph or last line. The words referring to 'the infinite series of mistakes', to which the labyrinth of one line alludes, form part of the last sentence of 'The Mystery of Marie Roget'. There is no doubt that these words were important to Poe also. He writes in 'The Philosophy of Composition': 'Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before any thing be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly

in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention' (p. 660). In his interview with Frank Delaney on BBC television on 26 October 1983 Borges said that he always knew what the end of the story would be before he wrote it. The labyrinth of one line that is so central to 'La muerte y la brújula' comes towards the end of that story. In so doing and in being so important it is alluding further to Poe's work, and the connexions between Lönnrot and Dupin are strengthened.

The labyrinth of one line at the end of 'La muerte y la brújula' is related to the true story rather than to the false one, because as has been seen it is relevant to the fact that Lönnrot was wrong. There are many clues that are directed at the reader who is also the critic, that relate to this line, and prepare the reader for the end of the story. They are, for instance, 'la periódica serie de hechos de sangre', 'la secreta morfología de la malvada serie', 'la numerada divisibilidad de una cárcel', 'en inútiles simetrías y en repeticiones maniáticas', and 'los árboles y el cielo subdivididos en rombos' (pp. 147, 148, 157, 162). Two clues, words spoken by Scharlach, are available both to Lönnrot and to the reader: 'el primer término de la serie' (p. 160), and 'la serie de crímenes' (p. 161). Another such clue, that points to the series of the line at the end, is the presence of a series of numbers, four, three, two, which end in the final one of 'una sola línea' (p. 163). The presence of many instances of threes and of fours has already been referred to. Two is also well represented in the quinta of Triste-le-Roy. For instance, we read of 'Un Hermes de dos caras' (p. 157) and 'el odioso Jano bifronte' (p. 159).

So, there are a series of clues that the reader and critic could interpret that would lead him to the correct solution, and some of these are available to Lönnrot also. This second fact may lead us to compare the critic with the detective. The story of *The god of the labyrinth* in 'Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain' also has an ending that is different from the ending that it at first seemed to have. The reader rereads the relevant words and discovers a second solution: 'El lector, inquieto, revisa los capítulos pertinentes y descubre otra solución, que es la verdadera' (p. 83). This is what the reader of 'La muerte y la brújula' does if he is also a critic. Then he discovers that a whole series of clues point to the end of the story. It comes as no surprise that the reader of *The god of the labyrinth* is compared to the detective: 'El lector de ese libro singular es más perspicaz que el detective' (p. 83).

The readers or critics of 'La muerte y la brújula' are compared to Lönnrot; the story is as much about the interpretations that we the readers make of the words as about Lönnrot's interpretation of the reality it describes. In this story, Borges's interests in the interpretation of reality on the one hand and of words on the other are seen to merge. The implication is also that to interpret Borges's stories at all, we, like Lönnrot, by using the imaginative powers of the reader and the analytical powers of the critic, must also produce a system of some symmetry, which may appear to be correct, but may actually be wrong.

The allusions to Poe in 'La muerte y la brújula' also point to the allusions to Sir Thomas Browne in that story. At the beginning of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' Poe quotes the following from *Hydriotaphia*: 'What song the *Syrens* sang, or what name *Achilles* assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture.'⁶ The relevance of this to Poe's story would seem to be the

⁶ Poe, *Works*, p. 172; Sir Thomas Browne, *The Major Works*, edited by C. A. Patrides (London, 1977), p. 307 (hereafter *Major Works*).

idea that man can and does apply reason to all questions no matter how strange they may be. In *The Garden of Cyrus* Browne applied his reason to 'The Quincunciall, Lozenge, or Network Plantations of the Ancients', and produced, in the spirit of Lönnrot and Dupin, a work of imagination which sees systems and symmetries in everything (*Major Works*, p. 137).

Ronald Christ is the only critic who has made any reference to the great relevance of Sir Thomas Browne's work, in particular *The Garden of Cyrus*, to 'La muerte y la brújula'. Christ offers a passage from *The Garden of Cyrus, or, The Quincunciall, Lozenge, or Network Plantations of the Ancients, Artificially, Naturally, Mystically Considered* (its full title) as a literary precedent for the lozenge pattern in 'La muerte y la brújula': 'And, beside this kinde of work in Retiarie and hanging textures, in embroideries, and eminent needle-works; the like is obvious unto every eye in glass windows. Nor only in Glassie contrivancies, but also in Lattice and Stone-work, conceived in the Temple of *Solomon*; wherein the windows are termed *fenestrae reticulatae* or lights framed like nets.'⁷ He says that 'the obvious advantage of tracing the windows to this source is that Browne makes a labyrinth (net) of the lozenges', and that 'the whole essay as well as the whole of Browne is pertinent to Borges' (p. 132), even though his study makes relatively few comparisons.

The passage Christ cites is indeed an important literary precedent for the lozenge pattern, although its relevance to 'Abenjacán el bojarí, muerto en el laberinto' is just as important. But, as Christ suggests, this is just one of many passages in *The Garden of Cyrus* that are significant as precedents for 'La muerte y la brújula'. In that story Borges is alluding to *The Garden of Cyrus* as a whole. The framework of the narrative (that is, the reader who is compared to the detective) reflects the meaning of the story. Similarly, in *The Garden of Cyrus*, the symmetrical structure of the framework reflects the theme of the piece. This is the view expressed by Frank Livingstone Huntley.⁸ As Lawrence Stapleton says, Professor Huntley sees in the five chapters of *The Garden of Cyrus* 'an outward conformation of the quincuncial theme'.⁹ The central idea of decussation, that is the 'crossing (of lines, rays, fibres etc.) so as to form a figure like the letter X' (*OED*), is seen by Huntley as reflected in the structure of the piece. He writes of the central chapter: 'The long chapter on nature is the center or decussation' (p. 207).

The main theme of 'La muerte y la brújula', that the intellect of man is attracted to symmetrical systems, also reflects the main theme of *The Garden of Cyrus*, which is that the symmetrical form of the quincunx is to be found everywhere in the universe. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge puts it in the oft-quoted description, there are 'quincunxes in the mind of man; quincunxes in tones, in optic nerves, in roots of trees, in leaves, in everything!'.¹⁰ Leslie Stephen expresses it similarly: 'From the garden of Cyrus, where the trees were arranged in this order [the form of an X], he rambles through the universe, stumbling over quincunxes at every step.'¹¹ Furthermore, Dr Johnson writes that Browne 'considers every production of art and nature, in which he could find any decussation or approaches to the form of a Quincunx; and

⁷ Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges's Art of Allusion* (New York, 1969), pp. 131-32.

⁸ Frank Livingstone Huntley, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1962), pp. 206-07.

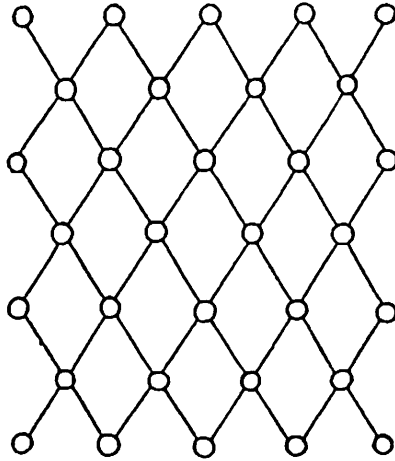
⁹ Lawrence Stapleton, *The Elected Circle: Studies in the Art of Prose* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1973), p. 60.

¹⁰ S. T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, quoted in Basil Anderton, *Sketches from a Library Window* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 170-71.

¹¹ Leslie Stephen, *Hours in a Library* (London, 1876), p. 17.

as a man once resolved upon ideal discoveries, seldom searches long in vain, he finds his favourite figure in almost every thing, whether natural or invented, ancient and modern, rude or artificial, sacred and civil; so that a reader, not watchful against the power of his infusions, would imagine that decussation was the great business of the world, and that nature and art had no other purpose than to exemplify and imitate a Quincunx' (*Major Works*, p. 494).

Jeremiah S. Finch tells us that the term quincunx 'was used by the Romans to denote an arrangement of five trees in the form of a rectangle, four occupying the corners, one the center, like the cinque-point on a die, so that a massing of quincunxes produces long rows of trees with the effect of lattice work'.¹² In fact, in Browne's use of the term the form produced is usually a rhomb rather than a rectangle. It can be clearly visualized from the diagram published with *The Garden of Cyrus* (*Major Works*, pp. 323, 328-29).



*Quid Quincunxe Speciosius, qui, in
quam cunq; partem Spectaueris,
rectus est: Quintilian:¶*

Obviously, the symmetrical form of the quincunx that Browne finds everywhere in the universe is in fact a lozenge. This is exactly the form that symbolized Lönnrot's attraction to symmetrical systems. Browne mentions the lozenge many times in his piece and he often uses it interchangeably with rhombus, as in 'the Rhombus or lozenge figure' (*Major Works*, p. 340). As Ronald Christ implicitly acknowledges, it also forms part of the complete title. The lozenge not only symbolizes Lönnrot's attraction to symmetrical systems; it also leads him to his death, and to the realization that the number four, which it represents for him, is the central point of a series and a line. That it should lead him to a straight line is not surprising in a story that alludes to *The Garden of Cyrus*. The words from Quintilian under the diagram of

¹² Jeremiah S. Finch, 'Sir Thomas Browne and the Quincunx', *Studies in Philology*, 37 (1940), 274-82 (p. 274).

the quincunx mean: 'What is more beautiful than the well known quincunx which, in whatever direction you view it, presents straight lines?' This series and line symbolize the cyclical process in which man is trapped by his intellect, a process which for 'el puro razonador' is equivalent to death.

The same procedure of making the reader imagine a geometrical figure that is used in 'La muerte y la brújula', both in the visualization of the four places of the murders, in the consequent triangle and rhomb formed, and in the visualization of the line at the end of the story, is used in *The Garden of Cyrus* where the reader is made to imagine the way that the signs, X, O, and O interrelate when two circles intersect each other at right angles (*Major Works*, p. 378). As Peter Green puts it, 'seen from one angle . . . the intersecting circles appear as a cross, thus. If they are then rotated through 90° on a vertical axis they will be changed into the Greek Θ, Theta, standing for *Thanatos* or Death'.¹³

The letter X was the sign that gave rise to this visual connexion. We are told: 'Of this figure *Plato* made choice to illustrate the motion of the soul, both of the world and man' (*Major Works*, p. 378). And the letter X enters the argument only because it is the form seen at the junction of two rhombs. In 'La muerte y la brújula' the number four that represents the rhomb is the centre of the line that represents death. That line can be thought of as reflecting the line of the Θ while the cyclical nature of this death reflects its circle.

The passage concerning the letter X has a further significance. It states that the soul of man 'hath a double aspect, one right, whereby it beholdeth the body, and objects without; another circular and reciprocal, whereby it beholdeth itself' (*Major Works*, p. 378). The first aspect corresponds to the line of the Θ, and the second to the circle. Lönnrot was led to the straight line by an obsession with 'objects without' and with the ordering of them by the intellect. His inner life was empty. Of the house at Triste-le-Roy he thinks: '*La agrandan la penumbra, la simetría, los espejos, los muchos años, mi desconocimiento, la soledad*' (p. 158). These words are in italics, a clear indication that they are important. Lönnrot has arrived at the house, sure that he has succeeded in correctly interpreting the 'objects without'. However, he has not, and his realization of the cyclical nature of his error corresponds to a new inner awareness of the fallibility of the intellect which echoes the soul of man as it 'beholdeth itself'.

Elsewhere in *The Garden of Cyrus* Browne makes use of the same elements of the sign O. He writes: 'Right lines and circles make out the bulk of plants' (*Major Works*, p. 361). This seemingly simple statement about the geometry of plants brings with it the idea of death because it so exactly echoes the words from *Urn Burial*: 'Circles and right lines limit and close all bodies, and the mortal right-lined circle, must conclude and shut up all' (*Major Works*, p. 309).

A further reason for alluding to *The Garden of Cyrus* in 'La muerte y la brújula' may be that Browne is guilty elsewhere of falling into Lönnrot's trap of believing what he finds attractive. As Melville says, in the oft-quoted words, Browne, 'while exploding "Vulgar Errors", heartily hugged all the mysteries of the Pentateuch'.¹⁴ These words could apply very well to Lönnrot, who rejects Treviranus's commonsense approach in favour of 'una explicación rabínica' and it is possible that Borges had them in mind (p. 149). However, like Lönnrot, Browne should have been aware of

¹³ Peter Green, *Sir Thomas Browne, Writers and their Work*, 108 (London, 1959), p. 24.

¹⁴ See Merrell R. Davis, *Melville's 'Mardi': A Chartless Voyage* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1952), p. 65.

his error. He was also interested in reason; moreover, he was interested in precisely the pitfalls to reason that Lönnrot falls prey to and which he dramatizes, possibly unawares, in *The Garden of Cyrus* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. As Edmund Gosse says: He has been very much impressed, in the course of his medical experience, by the fact that most persons, when brought face to face with the truth, are unable to appreciate it. They look at a badger, and simply because they have formed a preconceived impression that its legs are shorter on one side than on the other, they think that what they see before them confirms them in their belief. They are 'bad discoverers of verity', because they do not allow their senses to have full sway, but are drawn aside, as by a set of malignant magnets, by the 'perverted apprehensions and conceptions of the world'.¹⁵

There are other particular aspects of the story that echo parts of Browne's work. In *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* he writes: 'But more widely must we walk, if we follow the doctrine of the Cabalists, who in each of the four banners inscribe a letter of the Tetragrammaton or quadriliteral name of God . . . the Tetrarchicall or generall banners, of Judah, Ruben, Ephraim and Dan, unto the signes of Aries, Cancer, Libra and Capricornus; that is the four cardinall parts of the Zodiack, and seasons of the year' (*Major Works*, pp. 394-95). The Tetragrammaton and the Tetrarch are linked to the number four and to north, south, east, and west, as in 'La muerte y la brújula'. Browne's general interest in number leads him, unsurprisingly, to an interest in the numbers three and four, that are so central to Borges's story. He writes: 'For the number of one and three have not been only admired by the heathens, but from adorable grounds, the unity of God, and the mystery of the Trinity admired by many Christians. The number of foure stands much admired not only in the quaternity of the Elements, which are the principles of bodies, but in the letters of the name of God, which in Greeke, Persian, Hebrew, and Ægyptian, consisteth of that number; and was so venerable among the Pythagoreans, that they swore by the number foure.'¹⁶ As in 'La muerte y la brújula' Browne associates the number three with the Trinity and the number four with the name of God.

In 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', the comparison of the detective and the critic also leads to a merging of the problem of the interpretation of words and the interpretation of reality. Borges starts by telling the reader that the plot has been imagined 'bajo el notorio influjo de Chesterton' (*Ficciones*, p. 141). In 'Sobre Chesterton' he wrote: 'Cada una de las piezas de la Saga del Padre Brown presenta un misterio, propone explicaciones de tipo demoníaco o mágico y las reemplaza, al fin, con otras que son de este mundo' (*Obras completas*, p. 694). As 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' does just this, this may well be the principal reason for Borges citing Chesterton as an influence on the story. However, as Ronald Christ points out, Chesterton also wrote, in 'The Blue Cross': 'The criminal is the creative artist; the detective only the critic' (Christ, p. 119). It may well be this idea as much as the former that Borges is referring to.

'Tema del traidor y del héroe' has a series of criminals/creative artists and detectives/critics. The first criminal/creative artist is Kilpatrick; he is a traitor and he can be thought of as asking Nolan to read his story: 'Fergus Kilpatrick había encomendado a James Nolan el descubrimiento de ese traidor' (*Ficciones*, p. 144). Then Nolan, as the detective/critic, discovers that the traitor was Kilpatrick, and as a criminal arranges the murder of Kilpatrick, while at the same time, as an author,

¹⁵ Sir Edmund Gosse, *Sir Thomas Browne* (London, 1905), p. 95.

¹⁶ *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, edited by Robin Robbins, 2 vols (Oxford, 1981), 1, 335.

he creates the plot of the play in which the climactic moment is Kilpatrick's death. Ryan as the detective/critic deciphers Nolan's plot and discovers that Kilpatrick was a traitor. He then, as a criminal/creative artist, 'resuelve silenciar el descubrimiento' and he publishes a book 'dedicado a la gloria del héroe' (p. 146). In other words, he writes an account of his great-grandfather that he knows to be false. The series ends with the man who is blatantly the creative artist ('el narrador se llama Ryan' (p. 142)), just as it had begun with the man who was blatantly the criminal, the 'traidor' Kilpatrick. We are told that Ryan is the narrator of the story and also that he decides to 'silenciar su descubrimiento' (p. 146). If he had silenced it he could not have narrated it, which only serves to draw our attention to the first paragraph of 'Tema del traidor y del héroe', where we are told that the story we will hear is a fiction. In reading the story the reader must be the final detective/critic.

As the final detective/critic the reader is really the pure critic, as he has to interpret only words. However, in the other detective/critics in this story the role of detective is fully merged with that of critic. The story and play that Nolan and Ryan interpret are also reality. In 'Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain' we read of two of the stories of *April March*: 'Dos relatos — el x 7, el x 8 — carecen de valor individual; la juxtaposición les presta eficacia' (*Ficciones*, p. 85). Similarly, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' and 'La muerte y la brújula' are juxtaposed in *Ficciones*, and this fact leads them to reinforce the idea of the comparison of the detective and the critic in each other. The fact that Nolan and Ryan are as much critics of reality as of words only serves to merge even further the problem of the interpretation of words and the interpretation of reality in both these stories.

In 'Abenjacán . . .' Borges's interest in the interpretation of words and of reality also merges. Just as 'La muerte y la brújula' alludes to *The Garden of Cyrus* as a whole, so does 'Abenjacán . ..'. The passage Ronald Christ cites as a literary precedent for 'La muerte y la brújula' is also very relevant to 'Abenjacán . ..'. The mention of nets is relevant to both stories: Lönnrot is trapped in Scharlach's net, and Abenjacán is trapped in Zaid's. In both stories, also, the net is associated with a labyrinth which in its turn takes on metaphysical proportions. In 'Abenjacán . . .' Unwin says: 'Nada me asombraría que la telaraña (la forma universal de la telaraña, entendamos bien, la telaraña de Platón) hubiera sugerido al asesino . . . su crimen. Recordarás que el Bojarí, en una tumba, soñó con una red de serpientes y que al despertar descubrió que una telaraña le había sugerido aquel sueño' (*Ficciones*, p. 134).

'La red' and 'la telaraña' are closely linked. In fact what Unwin is suggesting is that the labyrinthine house, 'la red', reflects the spider's web, in that both were designed to trap their prey. Just as Borges uses the image of the spider weaving in 'Abenjacán . . .' so does Browne in *The Garden of Cyrus* and throughout his work. In *The Garden of Cyrus* he writes: 'But there is no law unto the woof of the neat *Retiarie* Spider, which seems to weave without transversion, and by the union of right lines to make out a continued surface, which is beyond the common art of Textury, and may still nettle *Minerva* the Goddess of that mystery' (*Major Works*, p. 337). The spider is, moreover, often referred to as 'Retiarie', a word that has been seen to be associated, as is the spider in Borges's story, with 'la red'. Again, Browne writes: 'And no mean observation hereof there is in the Mathematics of the neatest Retiary Spider, which concluding in forty four circles, from five Semidiameters beginneth that elegant texture' (*Major Works*, p. 354). The spider is here described as having Mathematics, and in *Religio Medici* it is seen as possessing great reason. Browne writes: 'Indeed

what reason may not go to School to the wisdom of Bees, Aunts, and Spiders? What wise hand teacheth them to do what reason cannot teach us?' (*Major Works*, pp. 77-78). This is reflected in 'Abenjacán . . .', where it is Unwin, the mathematician, as opposed to Dunraven, the poet, who draws attention to the importance of the spider's web.¹⁷ So Browne associates the spider, and hence weaving, with reason. He also associates weaving with literature, a fact that is recognized by Gosse's description of *Urn Burial* in terms of weaving. This association is sometimes based on the similarity of the words 'textury' and 'textuary' (*OED*).

In 'Abenjacán . . .' weaving is clearly associated with literature: after they have reached the centre of the house, 'Unwin pensó que tendrían que dormir en el laberinto, en la "cámara central" del relato' (*El Aleph*, pp. 131-32). The words are ambiguous, so 'laberinto' could refer equally well to the house and to the story. This is similar to the double use of the word in 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan', where Albert says: 'Ts'ui Pên diría una vez: *Me retiro a escribir un libro*. Y otra: *Me retiro a construir un laberinto*. Todos imaginaron dos obras; nadie pensó que libro y laberinto eran un solo objeto' (*Ficciones*, p. 110). And I have said that the labyrinth in 'Abenjacán . . .' is referred to as 'la red', which is associated with 'la telaraña' and hence with weaving (*El Aleph*, pp. 127, 134). Consequently, the labyrinth which is the story and hence part of literature is also associated with weaving.

Browne, then, associates reason with weaving, and Borges reflects this by having Unwin draw attention to the spider's web. However, in 'La muerte y la brújula' reason is more strongly linked to weaving and the labyrinth. Scharlach tells Lönnrot that he swore to 'tejer un laberinto en torno del hombre que había matado a mi hermano' and continues: 'Lo he tejido y es firme' (p. 160). This, of course, makes the links between Borges's story and *The Garden of Cyrus* even greater because both Borges and Browne associated weaving with literature and with reason. Furthermore, in both writers weaving is also associated with reality.

The quotation from the Koran at the beginning of 'Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto' gives us the key to the story, as these quotations so often do in Borges's work. It reads '. . . son comparables a la araña, que edifica una casa' (*El Aleph*, p. 125). And the passage from the Koran that it refers to reads: 'The likeness for those who take to themselves guardians instead of God is the likeness of the SPIDER who buildeth her a house: But verily, frailest of all houses surely is the house of the spider. Did they but know this!'¹⁸ This is a warning to man not to try to imitate God by building his own universe; Borges associates the labyrinth with the world, describing it as having 'la forma de un círculo, pero tan dilatado era su área que no se percibía la curvatura' (*El Aleph*, p. 126). This could describe the way the world looks at us. Also we read: 'No es preciso erigir un laberinto, cuando el universo ya lo es' (*El Aleph*, p. 133). In other words, the quotation from the Koran refers to the vast labyrinthine house that is associated with a spider's web, built by Abenjacán/Zaid and this house, as has been seen, is compared to the universe. However, man also tries to imitate God and create his own universe by being the reasoner or by being the author. Borges is interested in the idea of the reasoner as God in 'La muerte y la brújula', and in the idea of the author as God as shown by, for instance, 'Everything and Nothing' (*Obras completas*, pp. 803-04).

¹⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *El Aleph*, sixth edition (Madrid, 1977), p. 134. All references to 'Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto' are to this edition.

¹⁸ *The Koran*, translated by J. M. Rodwell (London, 1926), pp. 264-65.

The quotation warns man not to imitate God in reality, in reason, or in literature. In the story *Abenjacán/Zaid* tries to do so in constructing reality, Unwin, the mathematician, by reason, and Dunraven, the poet, by literature. After sleeping in the 'cámara central' of Dunraven's story, Unwin emerges as does his fellow reasoner, Lönnrot, as the critic. He is quite dispassionate about his activity, 'durmió con tranquilidad' (*El Aleph*, p. 132), unlike his friend the poet. Hence the weaver of criticism and reason interprets the story told by the weaver of literature, which in its turn interprets the labyrinth of reality. The major themes that are emphasized in 'Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto' are here brought together. Unwin meets Dunraven in London and tells him: '—En Cornwall dije que era mentira la historia que te oí. Los hechos eran ciertos, o podían serlo, pero contados como tú los contaste, eran, de un modo manifiesto, mentira' (*El Aleph*, p. 133). Unwin has heard Dunraven's story and has interpreted the words. His explanation of the words leads him to believe that Dunraven falsely construed reality; Dunraven did not get any of the facts wrong, but he interpreted them wrongly. In other words, the interpreter of words elucidates the actions of the interpreter of reality. In 'Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto', as in the other stories examined in this article, Borges's interest in the interpretation of words and the interpretation of reality merges.

In his excellent essay on Borges in *Modern Latin American Literature* (Oxford, 1963) D. P. Gallagher says that 'La muerte y la brújula' 'can be read as a cautionary tale about the vanity of the intellect' (p. 98). He also writes: 'We are left with an unsurmountable paradox, central to Borges's work and to Lönnrot's dilemma. In order to think properly, it is necessary to marshall *all* the evidence, for only then will it be certain that a clue is not missing which will throw light on or even contradict the rest. Yet to marshall all the evidence is to become imprisoned by it, and to end up seeing nothing but clues' (p. 100). This problem, and the way in which man overcomes it, is central to 'La muerte y la brújula'. Gallagher also astutely calls it 'an amused critique of pure reason' (p. 101). What Borges shows in this story is the impossibility of pure reason. He shows Lönnrot imposing his structure of thought upon reality. However, because of the ways in which the interpretation of words and reality merge, in that story and in others, he also implies that we as the readers/critics of Borges's stories may also impose our own structures of thought on the labyrinth of words of which they consist, as does the detective Lönnrot on the labyrinth of the world.¹⁹

CAMBRIDGE

CYNTHIA STEPHENS

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