ENSEMBLES AND MAGMAS:
A CASTORIADIAN READING OF THE DETECTIVE TALES
OF EDGAR ALLAN POE
AND JORGE LUIS BORGES

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Abstract

My dissertation attempts a re-reading of the detective tale, in its prototypical, post-Romantic form, as created by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s, as well as in its metaphysical, postmodern restaging in Jorge Luis Borges’s work, in the 1940s, through the prism of the logic of ensembles and magmas, as defined by the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. More specifically, drawing on Castoriadis’s twentieth-century critical reassessment of the philosophical and scientific delineations of Western modernity, my thesis investigates the ontological weight of the reasoner’s attempt to rationally explain the world, by turning its components into elements of a set (ensemble), that is, by identifying the properties that define a class, through the principles of identity, of non-contradiction, of the excluded term, etc., as well as the aporia triggered by the failure of the decoder to classify aspects of being governed by a non-determinable, magmatic logic.

Through an interdisciplinary reading and focusing on the Castoriadian opposition of determination/ non-determination, my dissertation investigates the philosophical delineations of a fiction that deals with reading the world. My aim here has not been to provide a comprehensive survey of the detective tale, or a re-evaluation of the well-known psychoanalytic delineations of Poe’s tales and the philosophical affinities of Borges’s idiosyncratic fictions. Rather, I have explored detection in terms of an ensemblistic logic that searches for the determinate and a magmatic logic that creates the determinate. By relocating these tales within the ongoing rupture brought about by the rationalization of nature, I have attempted a reconsideration of the Dupin trilogy and of Borges’s metaphysical detections as readings that would enable us to critically question the higher order of determinacy proffered by our sciences. These stories could work as catalysts to make us understand that while human knowledge is expanding at an almost terrifying rate, it nonetheless remains unable to penetrate and resolve the fundamental riddles of human existence. In demonstrating that our detections are less a proof of a science which progresses in its reading of the universe than a product of a science that proclaims the readability of the world, these detective tales can help us see that now, more than ever, we need to bridge the gap between science and philosophy, in an attempt to elucidate our need for explanation.
ABBREVIATIONS AND SHORT TITLES

Borges, Jorge Luis:

L


TL


A


Castoriadis, Cornelius:

“Logic of Magmas”


“Ontological Import”


Coleridge, Samuel Taylor:

BL


Eco, Umberto.

Limits


Overinterpretation


Poe, Edgar Allan.

E & R


P & T

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INTRODUCTION

or

Why I Care About Who Killed Roger Ackroyd

One might wonder why we need to re-study detective tales at this moment in cultural history. I would begin answering this question by postulating that detective tales are to a certain extent only a pretext, a pretext for a subtle problematization of the human attempt to know the world. The detective genre is paradigmatic of the human tendency to look for meaning and, eventually, to create meaning, to ask whether knowing reality and the world around us is possible or not. It reflects, thus, questions that human thought has striven to answer from the Enlightenment to this day, and — what is more — it reflects a crisis which began with the scientific revolution and which was articulated in the form of a head-on confrontation between science and philosophy. In particular, I would argue that the detective tale, in its prototypical, post-Romantic form, as created by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s, as well as in its subversive, postmodern restaging by Jorge Luis Borges in the twentieth century, presents us with prominent scientific and philosophical problematizations, concerning the ability of the mind to prevail over matter, as well as the human anxiety to overcome the dualistic regulation brought on by this very attempt to rationalize nature. Perhaps Edmund Wilson was right to feel disappointed by the rather conventional turn the genre had taken in the 1940s, when in his polemical “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?” (1945) he dismissed detective stories as more or less “rubbish” and a “squandering” of paper (264-65). But he was surely wrong to show no interest in the proto-modern problematizations of the original Poesque tale, a form of detective writing that actually anticipated its own subversion by Jorge Luis
Borges, whose refutation of the genre was to highlight the repercussions of a crisis that is now being felt more deeply than ever before.

During the last two centuries the above-mentioned confrontation between science and philosophy has continued to plague philosophical and scientific enquiry. Poetry does not rhyme with mathematics, scientific explanation is far removed from philosophical elucidation. As Alexandra Deligiorgi puts it in her recent work on modernism in philosophy, the dualistic regulation of the world is still reproduced and painfully experienced today, despite the attempt of the postmoderns, in the late twentieth century, to get round the problem by condemning modernity’s unfinished attempt to bridge the gap (44). Therefore, although detective fiction has always had a rather marginal status in relation to the literary canon, I have been challenged by its radical exploration of ontological delineations at this time when a reconciliation between science and philosophy seems more necessary than ever.

The detective tales of Poe and Borges renegotiate the human attempt both to explain the world rationally and to overcome the dualism brought on by a disenchantment with the rationally explained world. As I will show later on, Poe does this through an eccentric Chevalier who manages to combine mathematics with poetry through a backward construction and intention of effect. Borges, on the other hand, focuses his attention on restaging the tantalizing aporia of the subject getting to know the object or, rather, of the subject trying to be reunited with the object, through detections that actually create the mystery while trying to solve it.

The process of explanation in detective tales is usually founded on the belief that the mystery of the world can be decoded simply by turning its components into elements of a set, that is, by identifying the properties that define a class, through principles like those of identity, of non-contradiction and of the excluded third. This
notion of explaining the world harbours both scientific and philosophical presuppositions that touch upon an ontological position at the core of modern Western science and Greco-Roman thought: the view that everything which exists is completely determined. My reading of the detective tale, therefore, has involved coming to terms with this seminal problematic of the determinate/indeterminate opposition in the tale itself, as well as with the philosophical and scientific contextualization of the issues this opposition raises.

My peregrinations have demanded an interdisciplinary study, as well as the use of a schema that would accommodate my reading in terms of the relevant opposition. In the process, I have found myself gravitating towards ideas wonderfully encapsulated in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, which has provided me with the difference between what he calls the logic of ensembles and the logic of magmas. This ensemble/magma model offered me a means of treating the philosophical and scientific delineations of the detective tale as part of the ages-long negotiation of questions concerning the decoding, as well as the encoding of the cosmic mystery. To explain this theoretical shift, I need first to outline why the detective tale and, more especially, why Poe’s ratiocination tale and Borges’s metaphysical detective tale offer a paradigmatic ground for an investigation into the feasibility of the human attempt to find an objective meaning hidden inside the cosmic labyrinth, as well as the ontological implications of such an attempt.

The detective tale emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, when Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue” was first published in *Graham's Magazine* in 1841. Poe’s ratiocination tale was therefore invented in the wake of Romanticism, but also within the socio-historical frame of modernity. As processes of knowing the world were being thrown into question during the post-Enlightenment period, the
detective formula already contained at the time of its birth the seed of its own subversion. However, it inevitably bore the properties of the Cartesian legacy, if only to turn against it.

The scientific cloak of Poe’s detective tale was thus woven from the threads of empiricism, of rationalism and of mathematization. First of all, the empirical tradition developed by the sixteenth century had imposed a belief in the objectivity of observation and the significance of the sensory experience of facts, as well as a trust in systematic experimentation and inductive or a posteriori reasoning. On the other hand, rationalism, most famously supported by Descartes, proposed a different perception of knowledge wherein humans were also able to know things a priori, that is through deductive reasoning. While this view which appealed to reason as a source of knowledge is often contrasted with empiricism, it is well known that both schools were conducive to the formulation of a mechanistic view of the cosmos, and that they both bequeathed their principles to modern science. Finally, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries scientists were increasingly applying mathematical methods to several fields, including natural sciences, medicine and physiology. This mathematization entailed a vivisectionist logic, according to which the method of study should involve a close scrutiny of the parts as a means of explaining the whole. Isaac Newton’s analysis of light in its constituent colours, for example, during the second half of the seventeenth century (1670-72), reflected the scientific logic of the time. Evidently, for modern science, everything could be analyzed and, by analogy, everything formed an aggregation, that is, a set of clearly-defined, determinate elements. Everything which exists, therefore, was considered determined; through the process of objective observation and analysis of facts, a scientist should be able to decode the mysteries of the world.
As the literary formula of ratiocination emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, a detective’s theory was required, likewise, to depend on reason and a correct interpretation of the facts observed. Not surprisingly, the method of Poe’s proto-detective was closely associated with questions of knowing. Auguste Dupin is presented as an acute analyst, who knows the rules of observation and deduction alike. A few traces of grey hair, a corpse found, head downwards, in the chimney, a second found decapitated, dark bruises and deep indentations on the neck of one of the deceased, and, finally, a room locked from the inside, all these details should form a sufficient number of observed facts, which — if read correctly — would undoubtedly lead to the notorious primate murderer of the first Dupin tale, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”. While there was more to Poe’s analyst than meets the eye, as we shall see shortly, the thread of scientific observation was eagerly picked up by Dupin’s offspring, who — almost forty years later — would cement the scientific guise of the tale by exclaiming such Sherlockisms as “You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive”, simply by observing the appearance of a man otherwise unknown to him.¹

This trademark ability of Dupin’s successors to arrive at accurate conclusions through proper observation and successful reasoning evidently belongs to the Cartesian legacy. Mind over matter, however, had a bitter cost for detectives, scientists, philosophers and artists alike. Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* established the doctrine of dualism, the idea that in this world the mind is separated from the body. This doctrine which prevailed over modern science was predominant in the seventeenth century, as John Searle explains in *Mind: A Brief Introduction*, “for a number of reasons, not the least of which being that it seemed to divide up the

¹ As is well known, the famous quotation is from Arthur Conan Doyle’s “A Study in Scarlet” (1887), the first story in the Sherlock series. With this preposterous exclamation Holmes addresses Dr Watson for the very first time, when they meet each other, most appropriately, inside a laboratory.
territory between science and religion” (14). Since then, however, dualism has created more problems than solutions, and has raised an enormous number of debates, from the modernist preoccupation with the subject to the postmodern renegotiation of the object. Thus, while, the detective tale, as a form of literature based on the analytical power of the human mind, is often read as a demonstration of reason and acute sensory perception, we should take into consideration the fact that the ratiocination tale in its original form was not only influenced by but also critical towards the crisis brought on by the dualistic regulation of the Cartesian view of the world.

Poe’s Chevalier gives every sign of belonging to the scientific school which trusts the objectivity of the human senses and of analytical logic. He is a keen reasoner and observer, a character that embodies the ability of the human mind to read the world as text. However, if we dig under the scientific strata of those first ratiocination stories written by Poe, we may discover that detectives are less a proof of a science which progresses in its reading of the universe than a product of a modern science that proclaims the readability of the world. What their methods of detection unavoidably reveal are the (often ignored) ontological and philosophical implications of science: detections attest to the fearful suspicion that science may impose a cosmology.

Auguste Dupin is an acutely knowing proponent of this suspicion. He certainly seems to be aware of eighteenth-century questions concerning the acquisition of knowledge and the relationship between the mind and the external world (which had led Berkeley to suggest that \textit{esse est percipi}), as he seems to be aware of Kant’s proposal about the interaction between the two. Poe’s proto-detective was a post-Romantic invention, and as such he proudly possessed the unifying power of imagination. There is in him a certain echo of Keats’s lament for Newton’s
“unweaving of the rainbow”, as well as Blake’s criticism of the scientific and empirical “single vision”. In this respect, he was a true follower of Coleridge’s (and, correspondingly, of the German Idealists’) view of the significance of imagination in the interactive process between the mind and the external world. Dupin’s synthesis of poetry and mathematics (or imagination and reason respectively) remains famous to this day, along with his method of identifying his intellect with that of his opponent. His detections are paradigmatic instances of the interactive relation between subject and object. On the other hand, Dupin owed his success to Poe’s notorious backward construction of the tale. The Chevalier would never have attained the object of his detection if it weren’t for the theory-laden subject operating behind the Aristotelian method of his fictional composition.

The potent argument of the Romantic period concerning the creation of the object by the subjective mind, hinted at by Poe, was dutifully forgotten during the years of the genre’s flourishing, beginning, in the 1880s, with Sherlock Holmes, the model world-reader and lasting well into the first years of the twentieth century and throughout the decades of the Golden Age period (1920s-30s)\(^2\) of the genre, until the appearance of Borges, who unearthed Dupin’s Romantic anti-realism to restage a detection that actually created a world in the process of trying to read it. Through the labyrinths of Borges’s metaphysical tales, the world as text regresses into the abysses of the mystical text as world, to reflect the crisis in a science long separated from philosophy.

A full century after the publication of Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue”, Borges tried his hand at two detective stories, “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941)

\(^2\) This term was coined by Howard Haycraft, who places the Golden Age period after the First World War, almost until 1930. S. S. Van Dine, Agatha Christie, Rex Stout, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, Michael Innes and John Dickson Carr are some of the best-known writers of the period, which, as already mentioned, was notoriously criticized as formulaic and unrealistic by Edmund Wilson, in the 1940s.
and “Death and the Compass” (1942), thus inaugurating what would later be called the “anti-detective” or “metaphysical”\(^3\) tale. “Poe’s ratiocinative process to address unfathomable epistemological and ontological questions”, to quote Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney, is re-used by Borges, in the wake of the Modern era: “What, if anything, can we know? What, if anything, is real? How, if at all, can we rely on anything besides our own constructions of reality?” (4)

Borges’s metaphysical tale reflects a loss of certainty typical of the period that followed Einstein’s formulation of the theory of relativity and the advent of quantum physics. His notorious detections abound in regresses and forking paths that warn of the ungrounded nature of knowledge, a fact which has subsequently caused his metaphysical tale to be read as the post-modern anti-detective story \textit{par excellence}. In any case, the debate about knowledge and the knowing mind had long since begun for the modernist writers who, as Allen Thiher puts it, “were obliged to take quite seriously an epistemological dichotomy between, on the one hand, the view that the knowing mind is a measurer of quantitative facts and, on the other hand, the belief that the mind is a locus for the elaboration of kinds of knowledge that cannot be measured” (21). This dichotomy, which is, I believe, central in Poe’s post-Romantic ratiocination tale as well, is taken up by Borges in his oscillations between dualism and monism, realism and idealism, subject and object.

It is in the reading of Poe’s and Borges’s detective tales in terms of this debate and its philosophical and scientific delineations that the ensemble/ magma axis as defined by Cornelius Castoriadis has proved particularly useful. Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997) is a thinker or, rather, an encyclopaedist (in the original Greek sense of the word), whose work has brought together strands of the arts and science previously

\(^3\) Michael Holquist notes in “Whodunit and Other Questions” (1971) that, as far as can be determined, the term “metaphysical detective tale” was coined by Howard Haycraft “to describe Chesterton’s unique contribution to the genre” (155, footnote 38).
held separate in Western thought. Castoriadis lived and worked mainly in Paris, where he moved to continue his studies in 1945, after earning degrees in Political Science, Economics and Law from the University of Athens. In 1948 he joined Claude Lefort and others in founding the famous socialist group and journal *Socialism or Barbarism* (*Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 1949-1966). During this period and beyond (until 1970), he worked as an economist at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In seeking to understand the relationship of the human individual to social formations, he was led towards more philosophical and psychoanalytic understandings of human social and political life, and he trained as a psychoanalyst and began to practice in 1974. In his most famous works, namely, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (*L’institution imaginaire de la société*, 1975) and *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (*Les carrefours du labyrinthe*, 1978), Castoriadis began to develop his distinctive understanding of historical change as the emergence of irrecoverable otherness that must always be socially instituted and named to be recognized.

His readers are as diverse as his writings. He is mostly known for his political and psychoanalytic writings, as well as for his work on imagination and the social institution, but he has also written essays on biology, physics, economics, linguistics, and art, among others. When it comes to questions concerning the possibility of knowing the world around us, Castoriadis has always urged the need for reconciliation between science and philosophy, as explanation can never answer our questions satisfactorily without elucidation.

Given the focus of my study on the ontological issues addressed in the works of Poe and Borges, I have found in Castoriadis’s work an interdisciplinary approach that has served my attempt to explore the scientific and philosophical delineations that go beyond the strictly literary concerns of the detective tale. More particularly, his
essays “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation”, from *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (1978), and “The Ontological Import of the History of Science” from *World in Fragments* (1986), which deal with the social and ontological implications of modern Western science, as well as “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy”, from *Domaines de l’Homme* (1983), have provided me with the ensemble/magma schema which forms the underlying structure of this thesis.

This schema, as I use it, provides us with a tool for reading the ontological implications of science in an exciting way. According to Castoriadis, the logic of ensembles (or ensemblistic-identitarian) emanates from the living being, the organization of which “presupposes and entails the organizability of (at least) certain parts of the world” (“Ontological Import” 349). For Castoriadis, “the living being cannot function without ‘classifying,’ without ‘categorizing,’ therefore also without ‘distinguishing’, ‘separating,’ and even ‘enumerating,’ but also without bringing into relation the elements it distinguishes — and, finally, it must also be able to form and ‘inform’ a part of the world.” (349). This, he admits, would of course be impossible “if there were no formable and ‘informable’ parts of the world — in other words, separable, enumerable, classifiable, categorizable — and if their ‘elements’ and their ‘classes’ could not, in certain respects, be brought into relation” (349).

This essential dimension of the living being and its world is what Castoriadis calls “ensemblistic–identitarian”, or “ensidic” for short. Castoriadis’s neologism comes from Cantor’s mathematical theory of sets or ensembles, according to which, “a set is a collection into a whole of definite and distinct objects of our intuition or of our thought. These objects are called the elements of the set” (“Logic of Magmas” 292). Its logic is furnished by a group of axioms, like the principles of non-contradiction, of the excluded third and of identity, hence the word “identitarian”.
Thus, while mathematics, for example, functions on the basis of this ensidic logic, philosophy or ontology or poetry or anything that is not uniform and determinate, is, according to Castoriadis, only partially amenable to the aforementioned logic, since its object transcends ensembles, and since it deals with what the philosopher calls “magnas”.

As already mentioned, a set or ensemble is comprised of definite and marked (that is, distinguishable one from another) elements, a fact which allows them to be conditioned by an ensemblistic-identitary logic. However, our mental representations of a dream or of our mother, for example, can only be described by a magmatic logic that goes beyond the logic of a finite and uniform set. “A magma”, as explained by the philosopher “is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations” (“Logic of Magnas” 297). To go back to the previous example, Castoriadis explains the way in which it would be impossible to define in a strictly ensidic way our representation of our mother. We would have to include, say, an incident from her childhood, all of our thoughts about her or about her whole family, or even something that she had once told us about her grandfather, and so on and so forth, to infinity.

This example brings to mind the famous taxonomy of “animals” embedded by Borges in his essay of 1942 called “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language” (and famously incorporated in Foucault’s The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences [1966]), where the impossible set comprises stray dogs, mermaids, animals that belong to the emperor, those drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush, and those that have just broken the flower vase, or even, more vertiginously, those that are included in this classification. This famous Borgesian enumeration of animals
could stand as a sharp comment on the determinativeness of ensemblistic Western thought. The history of our science, of Greco-Western science, as Castoriadis puts it in “The Ontological Import of the History of Science”, would force the Western observer to view such a taxonomy as “savage thought” — a bricolage — due to “the lack of unity and systematicality of this thought according to the observer’s own, Western criteria” (358). This is because, he explains, savages “are not possessed by the folly of extending rationalization indefinitely” (358).

Borges’s detectives seem to be possessed by this folly of the need to extend rationalization indefinitely, and so are we, as readers of ratiocination stories, who often forget that detection (or science, for that matter) endows reality with a gloss of certainty that is nothing but a mirage, since it is based on two presuppositions: that the human mind is capable of decoding every cosmic mystery, and that the cosmic mystery itself has a pattern that can be decoded. We forget, in other words, the cardinal argument of the modernist heritage in which we were educated, and which we still strive to come to terms with, in our post-modern culture — the fact, that is, that objective reality is only relative. As Castoriadis explains it in “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy”,

> for the “near-perfect” observer, the question of knowing, in an ultimate sense, what comes from the observer and what from the observed is undecidable. (Nothing absolutely chaotic is observable. No absolutely unorganized observer can exist. The observation is a not fully decomposable coproduct.) (308)

Perhaps the reason why detective stories reputedly lose their charm once the mystery is explained lies in the fact that they are often based on the faulty assumption that observation can or should be a fully decomposable coproduct. Poe’s and Borges’s
stories, however, could never be accused of discouraging a second reading, exactly because they foreground what Castoriadis calls the undecidability of the origin of our theories.  

My intention has therefore been to explore the ensemblistic and magmatic aspects of detection as a not-fully-decomposable co-product, rather than to provide a comprehensive survey of the detective tale or a re-evaluation of the well-known psychoanalytic delineations of Poe’s tales and the philosophical affinities of Borges’s idiosyncratic *ficciones*.

This thesis will begin by arguing that Poe’s ratiocination tale can be read as reflecting the attempt of a subject to bridge the gap with the object through a synthesis of reason and imagination, while at the same time the success of the detection is due to the ensemblistic logic of the fictional construction. It will move, in the second part, to the assumption that Borges’s anti-detective tale is an attempt to elucidate this human need for explanation by means of a determinate logic, and to relocate the investigating subject in a world of indeterminacy and mere probability rather than certainty. His work, I will be arguing, can be read as an attempt to demonstrate the magmatic nature of our reality and the creative power of an imagination that can impose meaning on any aspect of this groundless reality.

My reading will thus attempt a relocation of these tales within the ongoing rupture brought about by the rationalization of thought. Castoriadis provides a new and fascinating way of exploring the detective and anti-detective tale, since his work on the ensemblistic/magmatic distinction is less a philosophical theory than a critical assessment of the years that followed the disenchantment of the world and led,

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4 As we shall see later on, “the principle of the undecidability of origins” is expounded by Castoriadis in *World in Fragments*, where he explains that knowledge “is a co-production”, and therefore “in nontrivial cases, we cannot truly separate out what ‘comes from’ the subject and what ‘comes from’ the object” (345).
through the mechanistic reconstruction of reality, to the commodification of reality. Castoriadis’s thought, therefore, could be read as part of the undertaking of modernity to elucidate a world experienced through fragments.
Part 1: Poe

EXPLANATION

Light

The inviolable order of Poe’s original detective formula makes it such a self-contained system that it could be read as a descendant of the mathematico-mechanical model of the post-Enlightenment world. As the liminal point of the crime contains the course of action that precedes it, the detective should be able to reconstruct the past and foresee the future by reading the present, just as the scientist in the Age of Reason was expected to lead humanity from darkness to light by turning ignorance into knowledge.

If we were to describe in a few words the post-Enlightenment belief in the power of science to explain the cosmic enigma, we could refer to P. S. Laplace’s deterministic view of the universe, which holds that the present state of the world is the result of its previous state and the cause of the state that is to follow. If, therefore, one were able to read the signs of the present, one would succeed in reading the past, as well as the future. This concept entailed the certainty of an inviolable causality, and, consequently, the fixity of a linear progress, already prescribed, that left no room for contingent surprises or unanticipated developments.

The above-mentioned concept was based on a belief in the objectivity of observation, systematic experimentation and inductive reasoning. Although the process of formulating general laws or reaching a cause through the empirical investigation of the present state could be traced back to Aristotle, empirical scientists and philosophers like Francis Bacon did not fit the Aristotelian method of deduction. Bacon’s philosophy, for example, abandoned the Aristotelian deductive assumption
and urged for observation with an open mind. On the other hand, rationalism, which expounded reason as a source of knowledge, privileged the intellectual and deductive method of knowing the truth over the sensory. As proponents of rationalism, Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza believed in the power of the human mind to reach scientific knowledge through reason alone. While empiricism and rationalism are often contrasted, we should bear in mind that this kind of distinction was not drawn until a later period and that both schools were conducive to the mechanistic — and therefore deterministic — view of the cosmos. They were also conducive to the mathematization of science, due to the application of quantitative measurements to the examination of natural phenomena. This mathematization entailed a vivisectionist logic in the method of scientific study that considered all phenomena as bearing the properties of a set.

Poe’s detective, Auguste Dupin, embodies the afore-mentioned rationalistic faith in causality, the mathematical precision of empirical observation, as well as deductive and inductive reasoning that enables him to reconstruct what is not present (say, an orangutan, whose presence is deduced from the bruises on the neck of a dead woman), but also to re-trace a past cause from the present result (the escape of an orangutan and the murderous visit in an apartment on the Rue Morgue deduced from the atrocious facts of a crime and several testimonies). We should, of course, bear in mind the fact that Dupin is a post-Romantic invention, and that, therefore, imagination plays an important role in his method — this is something that will be dealt with later on. The first presupposition on which his inductive and deductive ability is based is that there is some kind of causality, a logic according to which the universe works. Secondly, Dupin’s ability presupposes that human intuition is capable

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1 Bacon’s important book on the empirical method was not accidentally entitled *Novum Organum*, in contradistinction to the Aristotelian logic as expanded in the scholastic *Organum*. 
of unraveling — regressively — this causality or any causality, for that matter. The ontological aspect notwithstanding, a trained reader of Poe begins to wonder about his true intentions. The question, then, that needs to be posed here is whether we should assume that Poe created this character out of a faith in the power of the human mind to acquire all possible knowledge or in an attempt to use him as a devious vehicle of irony.

For most people, Edgar Allan Poe’s name is connected with his tales of horror and paranoia: Gothic reflections of an unstable reality that oscillates between fragile sanity and appalling madness, and sometimes even verges on the grotesque. These fantastic narratives (that were often read as figments of a diseased imagination) are usually confronted by readers with a mixture of fascination and suspicion, since the authorial intention of these stories is as obscure as the voice of their insane narrators is unreliable. And yet, while Poe has always been famous for his deliberate hoaxes and deceptions, his jokes and his plagiarisms, we are all ready to believe one of his characters, the Chevalier Auguste Dupin, whom even those critics who question the validity of his ratiocinative technique find convincing.\(^2\) And it is indeed true that Dupin has always epitomized the analytical power of human perception, the triumph of science over the mysteries of the world. This light brought to us by Dupin, that has the enchanting power of the pre-Enlightenment miracle — only without the metaphysical delineations — while being extremely ambivalent, still proves, at least, the author’s close preoccupation with the scientific progress of his time.

The ratiocination tales seem actually to be a by-product of Poe’s fascination with science and of his inventing an original way to thrill readers by incorporating scientific elements in his stories. Magnetism, mesmerism, phrenology, induction,

\(^2\) Loisa Nygaard, for example, admits as much in “Winning the Game: Inductive Reasoning in Poe’s ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’” (1994).
space voyages, cosmology, future visions of the world, associationism and proto-androids\(^3\) — to name but a few — worked as a novel kind of explained magic, the exact opposite of unexplained phenomena that belonged to the Gothic tradition. This blending of science with fiction reflects, of course, a widespread trend of the century. Scientific works quoted from literature and adopted the narrative style of personal testimony in order to acquire credibility, while writers of literature borrowed from the rapidly emerging scientific knowledge of the period, usually depicting, at the same time, their opposition to the certitude of its inferences, as Laura Ottis demonstrates in her introduction of *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (xvii). By the 1840s (when Poe is writing the Dupin trilogy), Mary Shelley had published *Frankenstein* (1818), Thomas de Quincey his *Confessions of an Opium Eater* (1822), George Combe his *Elements of Phrenology* (1824) and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim his *Phrenology in Connection with the Study of Physiognomy* (1826). Poe’s stories seem to emerge from this turbulent nineteenth-century sea of science and literature.

It is known that he read widely from works of such varied authors as John Stuart Mill and Alexander Von Humboldt to John Caspar Lavater and Franz Joseph Gall, and one should not forget that *Eureka* (1848), the crowning prose-poem of his work, was an attempt at a cosmological explanation of the world. All in all, it seems to me that science provided Poe with a light he craved for: the clarity of explanation. Perhaps, in the scientific advances of his age — however ambivalent those were — he saw the liberating possibility of knowledge and decipherment of the cosmic alphabet. His articles on cryptography and stories like “The Gold Bug” (1843) — considered by many to be part of Poe’s detective tales — also reflect a fascination shared with

\(^{3}\) See stories like “Mesmeric Revelation”, “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall”, “Mellonta Tauta”, “The Baloon-Hoax”, “Von Kempelen and his Discovery” or “The facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”. When this last one, in particular, was reprinted as a pamphlet entitled *Mesmerism, In Articulo Mortis*, it was accepted as a scientific account of a real incident.
scientists of the period (like the geologist Charles Lyell and the neurobiologist Santiago Ramón y Cajal), who considered their work similar to Jean Francois Champolion’s, the linguist who deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphics on the Rosetta Stone. Auguste Dupin embodies in this light the prophetic clairvoyance of a scientist who can see more than the ordinary person can see, as he has the power to turn the intangible and oblique fabric of reality into a readable text.

As Harold Bloom demonstrates in *Classic Science Fiction Writers*, the scientific elements of Poe’s fiction were noticed by many: Hugo Gernsback, in his first editorial for *Amazing Stories* (April 1926), called Edgar Allan Poe “the father of ‘scientifiction’”, for it was he “who really originated the romance, cleverly weaving into and around the story, a scientific thread” (qtd. in Bloom 134). For Harold Beaver, all of Poe’s “imaginary trips — by ship, balloon, laudanum, hypnosis — were aimed at setting the soul free from the demands of the body and so from the restraints of normal perception” (qtd. in Bloom 130). Charles Baudelaire, finally, called him a prophet, who claimed for himself “a monopoly of rational explanation”, and saw in him “a compelling yearning for unity”, as he strove to combine “the spiritual with the physical” and “to apply to literature the processes of philosophy, and to philosophy the methods of algebra” (qtd. in Bloom 124-25).

For Thomas Narcejac, Poe’s crime tale could be considered as a hybrid of art and science, or, to use his simile from *Une Machine A Lire: Le Roman Policier* (1975), as a genre breaking away from the traditional canon in an attempt to enrich literature with science, by controlling inspiration, by domesticating it, for the purpose of its working according to our request, just like our taming of electricity (21). For Harry Levin, science (though condemned in the famous “Sonnet — to Science”

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4 See Otis’s anthology *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, p. xxi.
[1829] as demystifying everything) proves, in Poe’s prose, “to be a source of virtually poetic inspiration” (137).

Whether or not Poe invented the ratiocination tale as a devious means of attacking reason is a question that will probably never be answered with certainty. Still, Poe’s fixation with science is, in my opinion, essential to the invention of the detective formula as well as to the formulation of the Sherlockian model and its progeny, that came to constitute the canon. It also remains a fact that Dupin owes his fame and validity to the scientific armor constructed for him by Poe. It would, therefore, be interesting at this point to trace the signs of his positivism.

**Physiognomic reading**

“The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) begins with a labyrinthine exposition of the “faculty of analysis”, a key element of our investigation. The faculty in question reflects the Cartesian method of study, which was based on the close scrutiny of the pieces as a means of explaining the whole. As already mentioned, this analytical method was considered to be essential for post-Enlightenment scientific thought and research. Analysis works in two ways: a real whole is broken down into pieces (say, the anatomy of an animal or a human) so that it can be better examined and understood, or single phenomena, facts or things are studied so that causal relations are discovered and more general conclusions or laws are formulated (say, a mathematician proves a new premise by reducing it to simpler and more general premises already proved or a physicist studies natural phenomena in order to formulate a general law). In other words, analysis is based on an ensemblistic presupposition, that is, the presupposition that something (anything) constitutes an
aggregation, a total that can be broken down into pieces and then reassembled again (synthesis).

This brings us to what Cornelius Castoriadis calls “ensemblistic-identitary logic”, a term (as I have already mentioned) borrowed by the science of mathematics and Cantor’s theory of sets (ensembles). In “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy” (1983), Castoriadis borrows Cantor’s own definition: “A set is a collection into a whole of definite and distinct objects of our intuition or of our thought. These objects are called the elements of the set” (292). For Castoriadis, what is important in the theory of sets is “the logico-ontological operators that are necessarily put to work” by the ensemblistic logic emanating from the theory, whether this logic “functions in the activity of a mathematician or in that of a savage who classifies birds, fish, and the clans of his society” (293). The principal operators are the principles of identity, non-contradiction and the excluded third, the property ≡ class equivalence and, of course, determinacy (293). “In the entire history of philosophy (and of logic)”, writes Castoriadis, “determinacy has functioned as a supreme, but more or less implicit or hidden, requirement” (295). From the ancient Greeks to Hegel, he continues, limit/ determination (peras) and the indeterminate (apeiron) are encountered on every page, but what remains the dominant current of philosophy’s fixation with the two notions is this:

that while it recognizes a place for the indeterminate, for the apeiron, the latter is posited hierarchically “inferior”: what truly is is what is determined, and what is not determined is not, or is less, or has an inferior quality of being. (295)
For Castoriadis in all this there is more than a simple logic; there is also “an ontological decision” as well as “a constitution/creation”:

By means of the categories or operators mentioned, a region of being is constituted — and, at the same time, it is decided either that it exhausts being (full-scale rationalism, absolute idealism, or mechanistic-materialistic reductionism are merely some of its forms) or that it represents the paradigm of truly being (ontos on), the rest being accident, illusion and error, or deficient imitation, or amorphous and essentially “passive” “matter”. (295-96)

This ontological decision that Castoriadis discerns in the logic of ensembles, as well as in the whole course of Western philosophy, is also present in the case of the detective tale as we know it, where the crime is an anomalous occurrence of indeterminacy, that has to be classified and determined in order to be solved. However, as we shall see later on, the Poesque detective tale challenges this ontological decision by not always keeping the dichotomy intact — a trespassing that Borges did not fail to exploit.

The ensemblistic logic is different from what Castoriadis calls magmatic logic, which governs philosophy or ontology or poetry or anything that is not uniform but, as the philosopher calls it, stratified and layered. The “definition” (as Castoriadis himself chooses to place it within inverted commas) of a magma is the following:

A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblistic organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations. (“Logic of Magmas” 297)

In Φιλοσοφία και Επιστήμη (2003), Castoriadis explains that some things, like, for example, our mental representations of a dream or of our mother do not comprise
an ensemble in the mathematical sense of the word (75). Our representations do not consist of definite and distinct objects that can be separated (76). According to Castoriadis, the aforementioned representation of our mother, for example, would be impossible to be defined in terms of a set, since one object (let’s say, a scene from our childhood) would lead to another (our memories of our mother) and then to another (something that she once told us about her grandfather) and so on and so forth, until this attempt would finally lead us to the *apeiron*, the indeterminate (76).

The mechanistic presupposition of analysis, to which Poe alludes in his first ratiocination story, seems to be based on such a determinate/indeterminate opposition, an ontological decision like the one described by Castoriadis, which ignores the magmatic nature of every whole. Could the fragments of a sectioned body tell us how the organism works? Or, can the human soul be explained by analysis? While these questions will have to be dealt with in the process of our examination, we should first focus on the implications of the ensemblistic-identitary logic reflected in the Poesque detective tale.

To go back to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, the true analyst is described as a man who relies on observation, who knows what to observe, and who can judge by physiognomic traits and changes in facial expression “the true state of affairs” (*Poetry & Tales* 399). Phrenology is mentioned in passing and a narrative, which will work as the example for the aforementioned theory of the true analyst, begins. Dupin is introduced by the narrator as a man who reads extensively and boasts about his ability to read the minds of other people just by observing them. While his “faculty of analysis” is a key trait of the detective-figure, we should first investigate his faculty of physiognomic reading.
The games of draughts, chess and finally whist are used in the introduction of
“The Murders in the Rue Morgue” as illuminating examples of the way the “superior
acumen” of the analyst works:

Deprived of ordinary resources, the analyst throws himself into the spirit of his
opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not unfrequently sees thus, at a
glance, the sole methods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he
may seduce into error or hurry into miscalculation. (398)

This method of physiognomic replication (which will be examined later on in
reference to Dupin’s duplicity) is accomplished by the analyst’s painstaking
observation of the opponent’s reactions, “casual or inadvertent” words, movements
and “differences in the expression of certainty, of surprise, of triumph, or chagrin”
(399). In this way, the true analyst is able to read the mind of the opponent, but also to
see through their eyes and play a game of cards “as if the rest of the party had turned
outward the faces of their own [cards]” (399).

This striking exposition of the analytical powers of the detective, based on
physiognomic reading, along with the (almost too casual) reference to phrenology a
few lines later in the story, is perhaps Poe’s subtle allusion to the nineteenth-century
materialist science of the self which rejected the dualistic division between mind and
body. Throughout the nineteenth century, the philosophy of the mind aimed to find
empirical criteria that would dissociate the workings of consciousness and cognition
from metaphysics. Phrenology, for example, was such an attempt to trace the ways in
which the mind is expressed through physical signs. Mental disorders, personality
traits or low or high intelligence were thought to be safely deduced from the
physiognomic traits of the face and the formulation of the cranium. Phrenology, then,
was based on an earlier science that flourished mainly in the eighteenth century, physiognomics, that is, the interpretation of the soul by means of external appearance.

As Patricia Magli suggests in her article “The Face and the Soul” (1989), physiognomics could probably be traced back to Aristotle, who talked in De anima about interdependence between matter and spirit (88). The soul, according to Aristotle, is an inner substance in potentiality; it is an entelechy that determines the matter. This reciprocal relationship between mind and matter stood as the core argument for physiognomics (of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) and phrenology (of the nineteenth century) alike. However, the former had more metaphysical delineations than the latter, that was basically materialistic. John Caspar Lavater’s (a Swiss pastor) famous work on physiognomy combined, according to Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth, German Romanticism with theology (3). Lavater’s writings (that drew from organic philosophy and stressed the unity of body and mind) became extremely popular in England during the first decade of nineteenth century (Bourne Taylor & Shuttleworth 4). Phrenology, on the other hand, was more materialistic, although it was based on the reading of external signs, like physiognomics. Franz Joseph Gall, who is considered the father of phrenology, aimed at creating a physiology of the brain, in order to determine its size by examining the contour of the cranium. Gall’s theory was diffused in England first by his student and collaborator Johann G. Spurzheim and then by George Combe, in the first part of the nineteenth century. Edgar Allan Poe must have been very familiar with both theories, although, as we shall see, his attitude towards them was often proved ambivalent. For one thing, Poe most likely endowed consciously the character of his sleuth with the qualities of the physiognomist. If one reads the beginning of “The Murders in the Rue
Morgue” more attentively, surprising affinities between the science of physiognomical observation and the method of the detective emerge.

“To observe attentively is to remember distinctly”, stresses Poe’s narrator (P & T 398). The true analyst (and by analogy, the detective) “makes, in silence a host of observations and inferences”, while the validity of inference lies in the “quality of observation” as the “necessary knowledge is that of what to observe” (399). Furthermore, Dupin’s analytic ability is combined with imagination, as “the ingenious are always fanciful, and the truly imaginative never otherwise than analytic” (400).

Now, this is how Lavater describes the qualities of the physiognomist in his treatise “On Physiognomy”, published in 1789:

His first of requisites […] should be a body well proportioned, and finely organized: accuracy of sensation, capable of receiving the most minute outward impressions, and easily transmitting them faithfully to memory; or, as I ought rather to say, impressing them upon the imagination, and the fibres of the brain. His eye, in particular, must be excellent, clear acute, rapid and firm. Precision in observation is the very soul of physiognomy. The physiognomist must possess a most delicate, swift, certain, most extensive spirit of observation. To observe is to be attentive, so as to fix the mind on a particular object, which it selects, or must select, for consideration, from a number of surrounding objects. To be attentive is to consider some one particular object, exclusively of all others, and to analyze, consequently, to distinguish its peculiarities. To observe, to be attentive, to distinguish what is similar, what dissimilar, to discover proportion and disproportion, is the office of understanding.
Without an accurate, superior and extended understanding, the physiognomist will neither be able rightly to observe nor to compare and class his observations; much less to draw the necessary conclusions. Physiognomy is the highest exercise of the understanding, the logic of corporeal varieties.

The true physiognomist unites to the clearest and profoundest understanding the most lively, strong, comprehensive imagination, and a fine and rapid wit.

(10) The similarity between Lavater’s physiognomist and Poe’s detective is indeed worth noticing. Like a true disciple of physiognomics, Poe sketches Dupin as the true analyst, who knows exactly what to observe and uses his imagination to deduce, from bodily signs, the train of thoughts not only of his opponents but also of his companion. In the famous incident in the streets of Paris, in which Dupin manages to anticipate the thoughts of his companion and then explains his method, the detective’s analytic mind is demonstrated in full scale.

Associationism

Dupin’s method of reading the mind of his companion is based on “retracing the steps by which particular conclusions […] have been attained” \((P \& T 403)\). Thus, he is capable of anticipating his friend’s thinking about the diminutive figure of an actor called Chantilly, by following a train of thought that was triggered by a fruiterer. This method of analyzing (breaking down) a succession of thoughts into the separate links of the chain is Dupin’s version of associationism, a theory of the eighteenth century that aspired to apply mechanical principles to the workings of the brain. While this theory had also supplied the Romantics with the basis for the formation of the creative imagination theory, it nevertheless belonged to the empirical methodology.
As is well known, the theory of associationism examined the way in which ideas combine in the mind, in particular as developed by David Hartley in his *Observations on Man* (1749), whose description of the interconnection of mind and body was propounded, and advanced by James Mill (the father of John Stuart Mill), in his *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829). It can be traced to John Locke’s perception of the human mind as passive, a *tabula rasa*, in which representations were triggered by external stimuli or experiences, and to David Hume’s concept of the mind as a mirror reflecting representations of the world. As Peter Thorslev remarks in his *Romantic Contraries* (1984), the associationist attempt “to explain the contents of mind in terms of the fortuitous collisions and adhesions of bits of sensation or ideas, in this case in the locus of the passive mind of man” was analogous to the mechanist attempt to explain the working of the universe, “in terms of the collisions of passive particles in certain specified locations” (61). Hartley’s treatise on physiological psychology referred to Newton’s wish to apply the mechanical principles explaining natural phenomena to mental events, and introduced the metaphor of the tuned string (that would provide the famous metaphor of the eolian harp). Hume’s treatise was also, as M H. Abrams puts it in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), an attempt to emulate Newton, and to found a science of the human mind (159). According to Abrams, empirical psychology was based on the “element” or “part” and all the workings of the mind were “assumed to be analyzable into a very limited number of simple components”, while the role of the theorist was “to explain complex psychological states or products as various combinations of these atoms” of mind” (160).

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5 In other words, these elements were assumed to be “ideas” or mainly the mirror-images of sensations (a metaphor coined by Hume, as mentioned above), which led S. T. Coleridge to speak of the “despotism of the eye” (*BL* I 107).
However, what we should keep in mind, in terms of Dupin’s positivist guise, is the frame of world-perception this theory belongs to. It represents yet again a form of analysis, a process by which everything is reducible into smaller pieces. This assumption alludes, of course, to the Cartesian method of analysis and, therefore, unavoidably places Dupin’s analytic faculty within the empirical tradition. Furthermore, it alludes, as shown by Thorslev’s above remark, to the empirical version of cosmogony. Not surprisingly, a nebular hypothesis is hidden within one of the links of Dupin’s associative chain, namely the link of Epicurus.

The Nebular Hypothesis, Stereotomy, Cuvier

“The larger links of the chain”, explains Dupin, “run thus — Chantilly, Orion, Dr Nichols, Epicurus, Stereotomy, the street stones, the fruiterer” (P & T 403). The reference to Epicurus, “that noble Greek” whose “vague guesses […] had met with confirmation in the late nebular cosmogony” (404), suggests “the affinity of Dupin’s thought to both empiricism and atomism”, according to Terry Martin’s “Detection, Imagination, and the Introduction to ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’” (1989) (37). As Martin remarks, Epicurus may be considered to have been the first empiricist, since he believed in the reliability of empirical observation and hard facts:

Epicurus’ atomism was […] based on a mechanistic conception of causality: atoms falling through space would eventually coalesce and form the natural configurations of this world, as well as, indeed, the gods themselves, who were not the source, but only the product of this creation. Even man’s soul was supposed to be composed of atoms. Atomic theory was thus a set of natural laws and it described a universe whose principle of order lay solely on the sequence of changes in the combination of its atoms. (37)
Furthermore, Epicurus’ name mentioned in reference to “nebular cosmogony” proves Poe’s familiarity with the nebular hypothesis, a theory popular in Victorian England. Dupin’s reference to “Dr Nichols” in relation to “the great nebula in Orion” is apparently also not accidental. It is possible that Poe is referring to J. P. Nichol, a Glaswegian professor of astronomy, who published *Views of the Architecture of the Heavens* in 1837, one of the books that made the nebular hypothesis famous. This theory of nebular cosmology was based on William Whewell’s combination of Laplace’s theory of the origins of the solar system and J. William Herschel’s hypothesis that the newly-observed nebulae could be nascent solar systems. According to this theory, the nebulae were composed of gas or dust condensing into a star. Debris on the outer edges of the nebula would become planets. This theory, which reflects Laplace’s view of the universe, goes back again to Descartes who, in the seventeenth century, in his *Principles of Philosophy*, had proposed the nebular hypothesis as a possible origin of the world, marking, thus, in actuality, the commencement of the human attempt to base cosmology on the observation of natural phenomena and not on metaphysical assumptions.

Stereotomy, the link following Epicurus, refers to the science or art of cutting stones (or solids in general) into certain accurate sizes, so that the parts fit together tightly. In other words, the science of stonecutting is used for a construction in which a whole must be made of various parts — in this case a Parisian street paved experimentally by the stereotomy method.⁶ According to Martin, this link is also an indirect allusion to Dupin’s analytic mind, since it is a science which “reduces things to fragments and particles”, and is founded “upon the assumption that the nature of

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the whole can be discovered by dividing it into its component parts and studying each part by itself” (37).

Finally, Dupin’s empirical scientific method is attested by his reading of the hand-marks on the throat of the victim, which is based on a “passage from Cuvier” (P & T 424). George Cuvier was one of the most influential scientists of the early nineteenth century and his work is considered to be the foundation of vertebrate paleontology. His text is most appropriately found in the hands of Dupin, as the French naturalist lived and worked for the most part of his life in Paris, where he published his *Essay on the Theory of the Earth*, in 1813. It was there that he proposed his theory (that would later engage in the evolution debate that was to follow) that new species were created after periodic catastrophic floods. Reputedly, he could reconstruct an entire skeleton based on a single bone, a power akin to that of regressive reconstruction of the chain of events by the detective and in direct allusion to the analytic logic of the Cartesian tradition.7

The figure then that emerges from this first ratiocination story is that of a detective who knows how to analyze a problem, that is, divide it into pieces, examine them and thus understand the nature of the mystery in its totality; correspondingly, the detective can reconstruct the whole picture by examining any available piece. In other words, Dupin shares the same abilities with the scientists of his time, as well as the belief that human reason can decode the mechanics of an underlying pattern. He is

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7 Cuvier’s method of conjecture brings into mind Zadig, Voltaire’s eighteenth-century character, whose famous power of reconstructing the appearance of an animal by interpreting a series of tracks is considered to be the model for the fictional detective, from Poe’s Dupin and Conan Doyle’s Holmes, to Eco’s anti-detective, William of Buskerville. As Carlo Ginzburg explains in “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method”, Voltaire’s Zadig inspired “Poe and Gaboriau directly, and perhaps indirectly Conan Doyle” (266). It is this — very ancient according to Ginsburg — cognitive model, which Cuvier himself praises in 1834, when saying that a single print can tell so much to the observer about the animal which left it, that “it is more certain evidence than all Zadig’s clues” (qtd. in Ginzburg 267).
well-versed in contemporary theories of nebular cosmogony and evolution, associationism, physiognomy, stereotomy and even mathematics.

Mathematics is actually mentioned throughout the story and evidence of the crime is evaluated in terms of “the theory of probabilities” — “that theory to which the most glorious objects of human research are indebted for the most glorious of illustration” (P & T 421-22) — and not as mere coincidences to be ignored. Again, an ensemblistic-identitary logic lies at the basis of Mathematics, at least in functional terms, since it conditions its work — although, as Castoriadis points out in Φιλοσοφία και Επιστήμη, the choice of its axioms is made in a purely poetic, that is, creative way (74), a point which will be very illuminating later on, when we will be discussing the mathematician/poet axis in “The Purloined Letter”, where the analytical methodology is treated in a highly ambivalent way. As is well known, in this third ratiocination story, Dupin manages to acquire the infamous stolen letter by applying a method of simplicity, in contradistinction to the painstaking method of the Parisian police, who fail to recover the item in question, even though they scrutinize the premises of the thief “to the fiftieth part of a line” (P & T 685) — resulting thus in what seems to be Poe’s ironic reference to the aforementioned Cartesian analysis.

However, the detective figure, as introduced by Poe in the inaugurating story of the genre, is successful within the boundaries and conditions of a purely mechanistic universe, a clear rationalistic allusion that would work as the foundation for the formulation of the Sherlockian model. Arthur Conan Doyle’s character would become the hero to redeem science from early Victorian aversion, which was based on a fear regarding the religious and moral implications of meddling with the origin of the species, the human soul or the universe — an anxiety powerfully captured in early works like Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), as well as in later ones like Stevenson’s Dr
And while we should keep in mind the question of whether Poe endowed Dupin with a scientific guise for a particular reason, we must now make a small detour through Baker Street.

**Holmes**

Sherlock Holmes is the first detective in history in that he is the first to claim the profession and to explain his method as that of “detection”: “I am the only one in the world”, he says in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), “I am a consulting detective, if you can understand what that is” (Doyle 16). On the other hand, his figure is much more unequivocal and widely accepted as the new form of hero emerging from the turbulent waters of Victorian literature. While Dupin exhibits an unwillingness to cut the umbilical cord from the Gothic tradition that bore him (and this will become evident in the following part), he still remains the progenitor of the “modern” hero, as described by Loisa Nygaard:

> [I]n the modern world, when the days of hand-to-hand combat, of monsters and dragons have passed, and when, after Hume and Kant, the problems confronting human beings are increasingly those of knowledge and cognition, the appropriate hero would seem to be the analyst, the detective, the individual who is able to penetrate deceptive appearances and to cut through reams of contradictory evidence and conflicting testimony to arrive at the truth. (226)

Whether this is “indeed the function of the detective as portrayed by Poe” (226), as Nygaard wonders, it certainly is the function of Sherlock Holmes, who embodies the basic aim of detective fiction as Franco Moretti defines it, that is, “to keep the relationship between science and society unproblematic” (248). We first meet Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*, in the laboratory of St Bartholomew’s Hospital, surrounded by
“retorts, test-tubes, and little Bunsen lamps” (Doyle 7). Doyle’s detective is explicitly described to the reader (even before the actual acquaintance with Dr Watson) as “a little too scientific” or sometimes approaching “to cold-bloodedness” or even capable of “giving a friend a little pinch of the latest vegetable alkaloid, not out of malevolence, […] but simply out of a spirit of inquiry in order to have an accurate idea of the effects”, since he has “a passion for definite and exact knowledge” (5).

Holmes is often found spending hours in the laboratory or the dissecting-rooms, where he beats the dead bodies with a stick, “to verify how far bruises may be produced after death” (Doyle 5). Even though he’s not a medical student, he exhibits a surprising enthusiasm for “some branches of science” (4): “he is well up in anatomy” and “a first-class chemist”, while his studies “are very desultory and eccentric” to the extent that his “out-of-the-way knowledge […] would astonish his professors” (5).

The first words that come out of the famous detective, when Watson finally meets him amongst the chemical paraphernalia of the laboratory, are about a breakthrough discovery (“a re-agent which is precipitated by haemoglobin, and by nothing else” [Doyle 7]) that would revolutionize the newly-emergent science of criminology, as an infallible test for blood-stains. His triumphal cry is followed by the first in a series of matter-of-fact Sherlockisms that were to follow, the famous remark: “You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive” (9). This statement, which echoes Dupin’s already-discussed retort concerning the height of Chantilly, provides the introduction for the subsequent demonstration of his method of deduction. But, in suspension of this demonstration, Doyle provides the reader with some additional proof of Holmes’s scientific nature. Amidst bodkins, chemical pipettes, white crystals, transparent fluids, gaiacum tests, blood corpuscles and microscopic examinations, a scientific figure of the detective emerges, well read in chemistry and medico-legal
processes, who would not hesitate to handle poisons and to engage in experiments with his own hands.

As predicted, the second chapter of this first detective book is entirely devoted to Holmes’s method of deduction. It abounds in details that reinforce the scientific character of the protagonist, in spite of his being a character of rare eccentricity (otherwise, he wouldn’t have been a true descendant of the Chevalier). He is not a student of medicine and he has no recognizable degree in science; his method of observation and experiment is meticulous, systematic and exhaustive but he ignores the Copernican system of heliocentricity — the cornerstone of nineteenth-century cosmology. He has no knowledge whatsoever of contemporary literature, philosophy and politics, and all this for a good reason: he is the quintessence of the analytic mind, not only because he has a tendency to analyse, categorize and experiment on the data, but also because his mind is filed and categorized in a very austere way, like the tidy attic of a workman. This is how he famously describes it:

I consider that a man’s brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skilful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order. It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent. Depend upon it there comes a time when for every addition of knowledge you forget
something that you knew before. It is of the highest importance, therefore, not
to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones. (Doyle 11)

Holmes’s very appearance suggests his sharp ability of observation, in a way that
echoes both Dupin and his connection with physiognomy: his eyes are “sharp and
piercing” (Doyle 10); “his thin, hawk-like nose” gives “an air of alertness and
decision” to his expression, while his chin has “the prominence and squareness which
mark the man of determination” (10). His hands are almost always “blotted with ink
and stained with chemicals”, but with an “extraordinary delicacy of touch”, when
manipulating his instruments (10). In total, he is a mass of information, a palimpsest
of his character, habits and history that can be read by an observant eye, down to the
last detail. Thus, as Doyle draws the lines of the detective figure, the method of the
latter cunningly emerges, in this double play of narrative construction. As is to be
expected, Dr Watson soon stumbles upon an anonymous article (which proves to be
written by Holmes, of course), entitled — most appropriately — “The Book of Life”,
which attempts “to show how much an observant man might learn by an accurate and
systematic examination of all that came in his way” (Doyle 15):

The writer claimed by a momentary expression, a twitch of a muscle or a
glance of an eye, to fathom a man’s inmost thoughts. Deceit, according to him,
was an impossibility in the case of one trained to observation and analysis. His
conclusions were as infallible as so many propositions of Euclid. So startling
would his results appear to the uninitiated that until they learned the processes
by which he had arrived at them they might well consider him as a
necromancer. (15)

What is the claim of this article, other than the same claim made by Dupin in
“The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, almost 40 years earlier, when he insisted that he
could read men “as if they wore windows in their bosoms” (*P & T* 401), only, this
time, tinged with Euclidian authority? And, as if that similarity were not enough, here
comes the Cartesian analyst, Cuvier’s reconstructed skeleton and Laplace’s
deterministic view of the universe in two explicit periods:

> From a drop of water, [...] a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic
or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a
great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link
of it. (Doyle 15)

Then, how does this “Science of Deduction and Analysis” (15) work for
Holmes? “[O]n meeting a fellow-mortal” he can learn “at a glance to distinguish the
history of the man and the trade or profession to which he belongs” (15). Because he
is observant and because he knows “where to look and what to look for”, he will be
able to find a man’s calling, by his “fingernails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boots, by
his Trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by
his shirt-cuffs” (15). Evidently, this is how he infers Watson’s service in Afghanistan.
And this time, in a schema almost inversely reflecting the one we encounter in the
streets of Paris, Holmes breaks down the chain of his thought into the links that
comprise it:

> “Here is a gentleman of a medical type, but with the air of a military man.
Clearly an army doctor then. He has just come from the tropics, for his face is
dark, and that is not the natural tint of his skin, for the wrists are fair. He has
undergone hardship and sickness, as his haggard face says clearly. His left arm
has been injured. He holds it in a stiff and unnatural manner. Where in the
tropics could an English army doctor have seen much hardship and got his arm
wounded? Clearly in Afghanistan.” (Doyle 16)
“Clearly”? Well, perhaps not very clearly, but certainly convincing, and with a tone of teasing coming from Doyle. Upon hearing the explanation, Watson remarks: “It is simple enough as you explain it. You remind me of Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin. I had no idea that such individuals did exist outside of stories” (Doyle 17).

Sherlock Holmes rose and lit his pipe. “No doubt you think that you are complimenting me in comparing me to Dupin,” he observed. “Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friend’s thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour’s silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine.” (17)

Perhaps this criticism of his predecessor is only Holmes’s anticipation of his own subsequent accusation of showiness and superficiality, by critics and readers alike. For, although he does appear to handle crimes scientifically, he too, like Dupin, fails to escape from his association with the Gothic and his solutions often subvert the empirical, scientific project of rationally explaining crime, as Nils Clausson observes (77). In any case, Dupin was never the phenomenon he appeared to be, and Poe indeed only appeared to imagine him as such.

**Darkness**

Poe’s ratiocination stories have been proved by legions of critics to contain discrepancies in Dupin’s method of “analysis”, as well as an almost supernatural power of intuition that goes beyond the rules of mechanistic rationality. In fact, they seem to be so saturated by Romantic irrationality that, while they wear a guise of reason on the surface, they collapse in the end to reveal the abysmal horror of the
human soul. His famous poems similarly borrow from the symbols of English Romanticism and reflect an opposition to the mechanistic world-perception of the scientific age.

His early “Sonnet — To Science” (1829), on the other hand, reveals more than his simple opposition to the scientific progress of the age; it rather depicts in vivid colours the lure of science for him. In this sonnet, so full of tearing questions, science is presented as “a true daughter of Old Time” who alters all things with her “peering eyes” (P & T 38). “Why preyest thou thus upon the poet’s heart, / Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?” (38), asks the tormented poetic persona, and one can hear Poe’s own confession of his being unable to be indifferent to science, no matter how hard he tries. He cannot love science or “deem” it “wise” and yet, on the other hand, science won’t let him soar with the wings of imagination to find the treasure that he needs:

How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise,
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
To seek for treasure in the jeweled skies,
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing? (P & T 38)

This violent representation of science as a vulture with “peering eyes”, which “drags” Diana “from her car”, “drives” the Hamadryad away from the wood and “tears” the Naiad “from her flood”, the Elfin “from the grass” and from the poet the “summer dream beneath the tamarind tree” (38) brings into our ears a strong echo of the Romantic lament at the disenchantment of nature. Nature’s “dedivinization” by scientific materialism was encompassed in Friedrich Schiller’s “Entgotterung” a century earlier than Weber’s “Entzauberung” (taking the magic out), since for Descartes and Newton deity was not immanent in the world (Griffin 666). This
vulture with “peering eyes” and “dull realities” for wings is reminiscent of Keats’ famous unweaving of the rainbow in *Lamia* (1819) that alluded to Newton’s analysis of the rainbow spectrum in his *Opticks* (*Lamia* 2.37) or Wordsworth’s “we murder to dissect” (“The Tables Turned” l. 28) in *Lyrical Ballads*. But in Poe’s case, one can discern a wavering hesitation, an inability to resist the lure of science “preying” on his heart.

Poe’s sonnet reflects thus the eighteenth-century debate concerning the disparity between scientific and imaginative perception. According to T. J. Diffey, identifying knowledge with the sciences gave rise to a problem “which first became acute for the Romantic poets, in whose time it assumed a recognizably modern form: how to account for poetry or, more broadly, how to account for the life of the imagination in a universe which, it seems, can be known only by the methods of science” (170). As Abrams points out in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, “the prevalence of philosophic positivism […] which claimed the method of the natural sources to be the sole access to truth” tended to turn the aforementioned debate into “a combative opposition” (299). “It is important to recognize, however”, claims Abrams, that the greater number of romantic theorists “refused to admit that there is any inherent and inescapable conflict between science and poetry, or that scientific progress necessarily entails poetic decline” (308). In general, they tended to regard poetry and science as complementary ways of seeing the world: sometimes, scientific perception is not capable of yielding the whole truth, “and cannot, in vigorous and flexible minds, unweave the poet’s rainbow” (Abrams, 309). Coleridge, for instance, writes Abrams, being an amateur biologist himself, did not propose “the disjunctive, ‘Either poetry or science,’ but the conjunctive, ‘Both poetry and science’” (310). This conjunction is indeed evident in Poe’s proto-science fiction stories, as well as in his tales of
ratiocination. While the former toy with the scientific advances of his time, thus revealing, at best, his acute awareness of them, the latter foreground the power of observation and reason, establishing, in this way, the analytical faculty of the mind as the core ingredient of the detective story formula that was to follow. But the superhuman, detached genius of Dupin, as well as his dubious motives — which will be discussed later on — eschew all possibilities of didactic intention, while the literary essays of his late work (such as “The Philosophy of Composition”, published in 1846, and “The Poetic Principle”, published posthumously in 1850) show, as we shall see, a clear affinity with the classical doctrines of literary construction and Aristotelian poetics.

For some critics Poe’s ideal has been the synthesis of realism and idealism, an attempt “to blend the Coleridgean aesthetic with a concept of mind as the formalistic and controlling force in composition” (Galloway 16-17). Daniel Hoffman, for example, sees two sides in Poe: the one “is devoted to the Enlightenment’s faith in reason, while the doppelgänger of this rationalist is incessantly undermining that faith” (322). But, as Hoffman puts it, these doubles “aren’t always engaged in mutually exclusive enterprises” (322); they often collaborate, which proves Poe’s desire to reconcile the two opposing faculties in his soul. Romantic irony and a belief in the illusiveness of truth was borrowed by Poe from the German Romantics (via Coleridge), according to Garry R. Thompson, in an attempt “to blend two kinds of Gothic Romance: the shocking Supernatural, Teutonic tale; and the insinuated, explained, English tale” (77). David Ketterer has also pinpointed this synthetic undercurrent in the Dupin tale, while Janice McDonald uses it as the spring-board for reading Poe’s tale as a parodic reorganization of the old horror elements, which proved that “a reasonable explanation could be just as terrifying and far more
believable than an unexplained phenomenon” (65). In much the same way, the split in his early career between the idealism of the poems and the crude irony of the criticism of his literary contemporaries is put down to the competitiveness of Poe’s publishing environment. As Leon Howard suggests, Poe was influenced by English Romanticism and borrowed extensively, both from its themes and from “the personalities of the Romantic poets themselves” (107). However, the circumstances of his personal life and the hard environment of commercial journalism demanded an empirical attitude. Thus, Poe had to play both roles, as is evident from the split in his early work, between fiction and literary criticism. But when later in his career, he writes “calculated” tales of ratiocination, he adopts, according to Howard, a more conscious anti-Romantic role, which is crowned by the publication of “The Philosophy of Composition”, where he explains the crude (rational rather than emotional) mechanism of the construction of “The Raven”, in an attempt to claim such an empirical quality of mind for himself (111). Even though this author who explains in detail how he calculated and preconceived the composition of a poem is the complete opposite of the Byronic hero lamenting in “The Raven” for the loss of a beautiful woman, Howard concludes that Poe seems to have tried to reconcile both roles and adopt one in the middle. Auguste Dupin could be regarded as this middle ground of intellectuality which Poe sought for: both calculating and intuitive, a poet as well as a mathematician (112).

His horror tales are indeed more horrific because of their scientific tinge; his scientific tales are enchanting because they are contaminated with fantasy. Shadow often wins over light, and, in cases where illumination of a mystery is the primary object, darkness remains the disturbing undercurrent, as Harry Levin demonstrates in his famous book *The Power of Blackness* (1976). Thus, Poe’s detective tale —
although it appears to reflect the rationalism of a mechanistic universe — does not cease to foster the dubious uncanniness of the fantastic tale.

At first glance, the Dupin trilogy seems to crystallize the deterministic lack of contingency characteristic of the aforementioned mechanistic world-perception into an absolute correspondence between signifier and signified, as all signs appear to have one, necessary (and therefore readable) meaning. In this almost Platonic locus of the Poesque detective tale Dupin is able to read the book of the world with the disarming conviction of an Adam that identifies each signifier with its signified for the first time. All elements of contingency are eliminated from the causality of its plot (as even incidents that appear to be accidents or coincidences are finally embedded in a larger causal string through the final denouement of the mystery), while the backward conception of the story does not allow for any unplanned turn in the narrative construction of its form. Lack of contingency is the key factor for both its form and its content, and it is what makes the detective story so self-assured and reassuring at the same time.

This lack of contingency, however, which turned Dupin into a metaphor of positivist reason, probably emanates less from Poe’s mechanist perception of the world than from his theory of literary construction. When the cunning persuasiveness of Auguste Dupin is set aside, dubious discrepancies are revealed (the exploration of which has raised an equally famous bulk of research and readings) in the method of his analysis, which betray its scientific ambivalence. And although it was this lack of contingency that set all the famous clichés of a genre that worked as a reassuring means of restoring order for the rest of Poe’s century and for the first half of the century to follow, the (almost impossibly artificial) construction of these first crime stories often veils an undercurrent of unreason and contingency, that would also serve
as the seed for the metaphysical, anti-detective stories written by Jorge Luis Borges in the 1940’s.

The discrepancies in Dupin’s method are, in my opinion proof that the ratiocination tale is indeed a laboratorial (to use Baudelaire’s word) or ensemblistic (to use Castoriadis’s) construction. In several instances they may be proof of the parodic⁸ refinement of Gothic and sensational horror. But, what I find more important in that conscious turning-inside-out of older elements is the means by which this is accomplished: the cunning re-appropriation of an older canon — that of Aristotelian poetics — and its application to Romantic imagination, with the intention of staging an ultra-rational determinism, for the rehearsal of a scientific and philosophic *aporia*.

It is, therefore, possible that Poe invented his post-modern successors⁹ by subjecting the construction of his tale to the mathematical rules of science and to Aristotelian poetics, to prove that rationalism is a necessary generalization of the human mind. Thus, the laboratorial construction of his detective tale is not “referrible either to accident or intuition”, but, like all of his tales, as Poe famously explains in “The Philosophy of Composition”, proceeds, “step by step […] with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (*Essays & Reviews* 14-15). This hard shell of narrative frame has all the traits of a water-tight formula, but conceals a multitude of logical discrepancies that betray Poe’s possible disbelief in the arrogance of the mechanistic world-approach. As mentioned above, Dupin is the forefather of all detectives, not because he was the best or because he was the quintessence of reason, but because he rehearsed convincingly Poe’s preconceived enigma, by employing a

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⁸ “Parodic” as MacDonald reads it, in the sense of Russian Formalists’ de-familiarization, a positive force, an evolution of literature (62).

⁹ Much like the way in which every writer creates his precursors, as demonstrated by Borges in “Kafka and his Precursors”.
number of sophistries that served as the bedrock for the setting of the rules of the tale during the subsequent development of the genre.

**The Making of a Formula**

This *a posteriori* attribution of the rules to the Poeque detective tale is in itself a contradiction. The detective writers that followed Poe turned his logical discrepancies into *clichés*; they molded their rules out of a method of pseudo-analysis which they were trying to overcome. However, although these first mechanistic solutions were pinpointed (as already mentioned) as early as in Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories, the crime tales of the Golden Age did not manage to escape the fixed centeredness of a world “at once orderly, stable, resistant to change, and relatively free of contingency” (Malmgren 116), one that had nothing to do with the chaotic depths of Dupin’s world.

Far from preserving the fantastic nuances of Poe’s tales that always left a number of questions unanswered (the double character of the detective, the dubious motives, the Gothic allusions, and other traits to which I will return later), the genre evolved into a predictable form of narrative that sought to answer all of the reader’s desires for order and symmetry. S. S. Van Dine’s famous twenty rules, by which every writer of detective stories must abide, presented by his detective Philo Vance, in *The Green Murder Case* (1928), is a typical example of the genre’s confusion and disorientation in its effort to become respectable, convincing and ever more original. However, the more rules were established the more conventional the tale became, as far away from Poe’s loose ends as is imaginable. Agatha Christie’s quiet English topographies, for example, had all the formulaic elements of a detached world, impervious to reality, a construction which Raymond Chandler criticized, in *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950), as unrealistic, as opposed to the narrative world of the
Noir genre (115). Raymond Chandler was, in his turn, also criticized — although perhaps not as severely as Rex Stout, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, Michael Innes and John Dickson Carr — by Edmund Wilson, in his famous vitriolic articles attacking detective stories, referred to at the opening of this thesis. In “Why Do People Read Detective Stories?” (1944), Wilson accused the Golden Age writers of unimaginative imitation of the Sherlockian model and a dead reiteration of formulaic elements (232). For Wilson, the Golden Age detectives never managed to evolve into something more than two-dimensional replicas of Holmes, and their solutions were not the least fanciful or entertaining, to the extent that reading their stories made him feel like having “to unpack large crates by swallowing the excelsior in order to find at the bottom a few bent and rusty nails” (233). In this same article Agatha Christie’s writing is accused of “mawkishness” and “banality” (234), while, a few years later, in “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd” (1945), Wilson urged his readers not to bore themselves with “rubbish” like detective novels, and “with the paper shortage pressing on all publication and many first-rate writers forced out of print”, he claimed it would be better if “the squandering of this paper that might be put to better use” were discouraged (265). Finally, in “Mr. Holmes, They Were the Footprints of a Gigantic Hound!” (1945), Wilson exposes Doyle’s inconsistencies and surreal Hollow-Tree-story world-constructions — in which all loose ends “are tidily picked up and tucked in”, Holmes is cured of his cocaine addiction, and “one can count on the client to arrive at the very moment when his case has just been explained” (273) — only to come to the conclusion that they are far better than the mystery fiction of his day.

In other words, critics like Wilson and Chandler exposed as mechanistic construction the subjection of realistic verisimilitude to narrative intention, as
employed by Poe in his Dupin tales (for reasons that will be later discussed), a
subjection that the genre mistook for formula. David Van Leer has also pinpointed the
incongruous attribution of the genre’s rules to Poe. In “Detecting Truth: The World of
the Dupin Tales” (1998), Leer finds Poe’s “detective devices more common than his
‘invention’ of the genre might imply”, since “emphasis on his legacy to the detective
tradition obscures the idiosyncrasies of the Dupin stories, those characteristics that
Poe did not bequeath to his progeny” (66). Peter Thoms’s “Poe’s Dupin and the
Power of Detection” (2002), on the other hand, examines the ways in which Poe
manages to undercut the ritual of reassurance offered by the solution of a mystery, at
the same time he actually constructs it (133), by fashioning a detective tale that resists
closure (145).

The followers of Poe were thus accused of non-realism because of their
attempt to satisfy what one might call the need for order.10 The ability of the detective
to read the signs correctly and attach them to their corresponding signified obviously
satisfied the readerly need to see order coming out of a series of chaotic and random
events. And although Poe was the first to invent the figure of the detective/ decoder, it
was Sherlock Holmes (as Edmund Wilson would perhaps agree) who first turned the
world into a text that could be deciphered. Dupin’s superhuman intuition rather
astounds the reader as a conjurer’s trick would, instead of being convincing for its
scientific and logical plausibility. Compared to Holmes’s method of deduction,
Dupin’s ratiocination — by means of identifying his intellect with that of his
opponent — is revealed as a dubious power to read minds. Dupin’s detection had
something unnatural and disturbing that Poe’s successors noticed and tried to amend.

10 Although, as Thoms would have it, as readers we may actually “intellectually approve of
irresolution, of the avoidance of the facile conclusion, and emotionally relish the narrative unrest that
sustains the possibility of both order and disorder. For just as we identify with the detective in his effort
to eradicate mystery, we also, paradoxically, identify with the fiction’s victims” (145).
Their works attempted to present the reader with worlds that were readable, stable, predictable and orderly. Poe’s detective tale raised too many unnerving questions; it opened up too many holes in the solid surface of our world. And it was for this reason that his followers had to construct the readable world he only staged. Auguste Dupin’s method of ratiocination, I would argue, is less a successful reading of the signs than a means of defense that keeps chaos at bay. The world/ text revealed through Dupin’s reading is not stable and reassuring. The role of Poe’s detective is not to clear up the noise and uncover the orderly pattern lying underneath; it is rather to cover over the underlying chaos and disorderly pathos with a veil of staged reason, sanity and order.

As Borges himself remarked in a lecture he gave in 1978 entitled “The Detective Story”, Poe never meant his Dupin tales to be realistic (TL 495). He did not consciously create a genre, but he rather meant them to be fantastic tales (like the rest of his tales), only this time he wanted to combine imagination with intellect (495). This is the reason, continues Borges, that the stories had to be situated as far away as possible, in a place where things happen differently (Faubourg St Germain, Paris), and the detective had to be a foreigner, with different ways and customs (a French nobleman, Charles Auguste Dupin), so that the reader would never wonder whether or not the terrible and mysterious incidents of the Rue Morgue could happen in real life (495-96). Poe didn’t have, therefore, to be consistent with the rules of logical analysis, induction and deduction; he needed ensemblistic-identitary logic simply for its functional use.

If we swallow a few grams of arsenic, as Castoriadis notes in Φιλοσοφία καὶ Επιστήμη, we will certainly start feeling an intense stomachache and then die. We cannot deny the fact that causal relations do exist; it is part of our reality (78). There
exist immanent sequences within the ensemblistic-identitary space that are stable and inviolable. And this ensemblistic-identitary dimension is necessary for our existence, as well as for our thought (84). This, claims Castoriadis, was established by Aristotle in his discussion of living being: a male goat and a female goat will bear kids and only kids; they cannot bear a crocodile or a steam engine or a poem, for that matter (84). This, writes Castoriadis, is what Aristotle meant when he said that “man begets man”, since for a human to be born, a human is needed, and if a human bears someone else, then this someone will have to be a human (84). Therefore, concludes Castoriadis, there is an ensemblistic-identitary dimension in all living beings, at least to a certain extent (84), but the assumption that everything could be measured in ensidic terms (or any terms, for that matter) does not equally hold true. According to Castoriadis, the nature of ensemblistic-identitary logic is basically functional; it is a tool that helps us survive or do things (85). For instance, notes, tones and even mathematics are necessary for the transcription of music, but that does not mean that the essence of music is limited to its ensemblistic-identitary dimension (85). And if we were to remain in the domain of mathematics, Castoriadis would offer another example. It is true, he says, that our mind is prescribed to conceive our material and physical reality through mathematical concepts and constructions, which correspond to the ensemblistic-identitary logic of what he calls “πρώτη φυσική στιβάδα”, the first natural stratum,¹¹ that is, the stratum of directly given nature, including the biological constitution of the human being (91). In this sense, he explains, space would have to

¹¹ In “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary” (1994), Castoriadis explains that the institutions and social imaginary significations of each society “are free creations of the anonymous collective concerned”, but they are creations “under constraints” (333). These external constraints are mainly imposed by “the first natural stratum, including the biological constitution of the human being” (333). “In so far”, he continues, “as the first natural stratum exhibits, to a decisive degree, an ensemblistic-identitary dimension — two stones and two stones make four stones, a bull and a cow will always produce calves and not chickens, etc. — the social institution has to recreate this dimension in its ‘representation’ of the world, and of itself, that is, in the creation of its Eigenwelt” (333).
be locally Euclidian (even though, in its essence, it is not) for reasons of functional necessity or, as Aristotle would have it, as “ικανός κατά την χρείαν” (sufficient as to need/ usage) (92). While all living beings are functional in accordance with necessity, humans in their essence are not. Most of the things we do, writes Castoriadis in Φιλοσοφία και Επιστήμη, like music or poetry or even mathematics, are far from functional; cosmology has no functional use, for that matter, but is part of the emergence from within the human being of the radical imaginary, both in its individual aspect, that is, as the source of a person’s imagination, as well as in its social aspect, that is, as a source of social creation (93). Clearly, for Castoriadis human imagination is creation, and to the extent that the study of mathematics is creating ideals, not in the Platonic sense of hyper-realities, but in the sense of concepts that are de jure rather than de facto valid, out of time in a sense, then, mathematics is also not limited to its ensemblistic-identitary dimension (93). Vast branches of the study of mathematics do not correspond to the natural world; questions concerning infinity or Cantor’s sequence are of no functional use in our reality. Even real numbers, in their majority, have no natural meaning, do not actually correspond to our physical reality; they are conventions, human constructions, an imaginary institution.

This creative dimension of imagination and its relation with mathematics within the Poesque tale will have to be dealt with in more detail, but at present it would be interesting to focus on the concept of necessity mentioned above.

**The Poetics of Necessity**

John Cawelti in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976), defines formula as “a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more
universal story form or archetype” (6). According to Cawelti, the difference between mimetic and formulaic literature lies in the fact that the former confronts us with the world as we know it, while the latter “reflects the construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the limitations of the world of our experience”(3). Of course, Cawelti does note the fact that (as mentioned above) the detective story was not conceived as a genre until after Arthur Conan Doyle. However, he argues that it was Poe who “created the formula […] in the 1840s”, and speaks of a pattern used by many stories and novels throughout the later nineteenth century (8). We need, therefore, to consider the analytic detective tale as a formulaic construct.

Furthermore, in “The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Culture” (1969), Cawelti comments on another function of the formula, that of game participation (121). Apart from its recreational aspect, the game dimension of formula endows it with the therapeutic quality of play “as ego-enhancement through the temporary resolution of inescapable frustrations and tensions through fantasy” (122). Here Cawelti refers to Piaget’s view of play as a topos without conflicts; through solution, the subject dominates the universe of the play (122). This formulaic pattern, with its elements of universality and ideality, and with its imaginary dimension as Cawelti describes them, is essential to the mechanistic development of the genre, but also illuminating in our investigation of what Poe borrows from a classical poetics of composition.

It is possible that Poe tried to apply the scientific model of analysis to his ratiocination stories in an effort to limit the discontinuity of the world and turn it into a topos without conflicts, much as the scientists of the Age of Reason tried to impose a mechanistic model on the universe in order to explain it. But it is also possible that
Dupin’s readable world is only staged: an ironic rehearsal of the way our reality would function if there actually were a rationally-explained pattern, as well as a conscious realization of the arbitrariness of narrative discourse that is unavoidably based on causal relations alien to the universe. In this case, Poe’s choice of an ensemblistic model of composition would prove far from accidental. Firstly, the regressive process of his writing the ratiocinative stories reflects the same analytic principle discussed above, and, secondly, it suggests an almost ultra-deterministic logic that does not actually correspond to an external causality, but which rather obeys internal rules of necessity.

In fact, this model of poetic composition adopted by Poe — as defined in “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), as well as in his earlier essays and reviews — strongly alludes to the Aristotelian theory of composition, as described in the Poetics. However, critics who place Poe mainly within the Romantic and Gothic tradition believe that “The Philosophy of Composition” should be read as an intentional hoax, while others claim that it should be taken literally. The almost impossible analysis (the regressive breaking down of the narrative chain into its separate links) of “The Raven” is what leads the former (justifiably) to question it. On the other hand, the influence on Poe of classical poetics, especially Aristotle (perhaps through Coleridge) is a fact that cannot be ignored. What is more, Eureka, where Poe talks about the impossibility of a perfect plot, makes all assumptions even more unattainable. As we begin to examine the teleological dimension of the Poesque tale, therefore, we should keep this question in suspension.

The mechanism working from within Poe’s detective tale (which generated the genre’s formula as well as the harsh criticism mentioned above) is based on his famous unity of effect, which strongly echoes the Aristotelian teleological schema. In
other words, there is an inherent telos that governs the process of entanglement and
disentanglement of the tale, to the extent that the actual result is a regressive
construct. Thus, the construction of the tale is triggered by the conception of the
enigma’s denouement, and it is this denouement that determines the causal and
temporal mechanisms of its construction. The logical discrepancies that Poe’s
successors tried to resolve were, therefore, determined by an Aristotelian necessity of
intention (not entirely incompatible with Romantic organicity, as we shall see later
on).

Poe’s alliance with the classical canon and especially with the well-calculated
and almost mathematical — in its analysis — Aristotelian method of poetic
construction is evident throughout his work. Darlene Harbour Unrue discusses Poe’s
classical tendency in her article “Edgar Allan Poe: The Romantic as Classicist”
(1995), where she insists on his considering the Romantic stance, “detrimentally
against the objectivity and rationality of the classical”, as well as on his intention “to
inform his own works with a classical worldview he sought in both life and art” (112).
According to Unrue, only a few of Poe’s critics consider his classical alliance and
mentions Evert Duyckinck’s characterization of Poe’s genius as “mathematical, rather
than pictorial or poetic”, W. H. Auden’s remark on Poe’s adherence to logic and
unity, George Bernard Shaw’s calling him “the most legitimate, the most classical of
modern writers”, and even Edmund Wilson’s description of his critical essays as
“sharp and precise: our only first-rate classical prose of this period” (qtd. in Unrue
113).

Unrue describes Poe’s classical education, and by gleaning his use of classical
allusions in his poems and stories she stresses the difference between his use of
Romantic themes and their use by other Gothic or Transcendental writers, especially
in terms of his attack on didacticism and moralistic aesthetics. The ratiocination
tories and his critical essays “The Philosophy of Composition” and “The Poetic
Principle” are considered by Unrue to be further proof of Poe’s fidelity to the classical
canon, which, along with what she calls his most “philosophical” works, “The
Colloquy of Monos and Una” (1841) and *Eureka*, indicate an effort “to explain the
laws that govern the universe and humankind within it, not altogether different from
what ancient mythmakers and classical thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle
attempted” (119). For Unrue, Poe was not only a man of the Romantic Age, but also a
man “who looked backwards to the previous Age of Reason, the Enlightenment, and
to the distant past of Rome and Athens”, to search them for “order and reason that
would prevail against the chaos and nothingness of life as he was experiencing it”
(119). As for his critical essays mentioned above, Unrue has no doubt:

Some scholars who have had trouble fitting Poe’s critical essays into his
romanticism have concluded that “The Philosophy of Composition” and “The
Poetic Principle”, in particular, are elaborate put-ons, satires. If taken
seriously, however (and I believe they must be), “The Philosophy of
Composition” and “The Poetic Principle” point unmistakably to Poe’s classical
method of creating art and to classical elements in his aesthetic theory. Poe
reveals himself to be a crafter, a careful shaper of art, working backwards from
an a priori effect, making all technical and thematic decisions in conformation
to it. He also argues in both pieces for variations of Aristotle’s unities, insisting
on a unity of Effect and a unity of Time. Just as some of Aristotle’s
interpreters, such as Corneille, whom Poe had read, perceived a time limit on
the action of a drama, Poe declared that a poem is a poem only if it can be read
in one sitting. (115)
If then we assume that Poe’s literary essays were not intended as hoaxes and that, on the contrary, they reveal his attempt to give shape to the chaos of the world or his realization that narrative causality is an idealized or imaginary version of the cosmic mystery, we should pursue a more thorough investigation of the Aristotelian influence on his poetics — something which Unrue does not go into.

Aristotle

In Aristotelian poetics it is the end product that weighs the most, especially the attainment of purification, through pity and fear. This desirable outcome can only be achieved through an organization of plot as strict and economic as the elegant structure of something alive. Evidently, “mythos” or plot is considered in the Poetics as “the most important” of the formative parts of a tragedy (1450a15). “Plot”, according to the philosopher, is “the combination of the events” (Poetics 1450a4-5) and not the events themselves. The actual events cannot serve the intended purpose, unless they are organized into a probable or necessary sequence. This, according to Aristotle, is exactly the difference between history and poetry: [T]he poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary (Poetics 1451a37-39).

Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of the universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do. (1451b4-7)

One could say that Aristotle gives here the definition of the term mimesis, thus bringing us back to Cawelti’s formulaic and mimetic compositions. Aristotle’s mimesis would rather correspond to a formulaic construction, since it is not just a
simple copying of reality, a poor imitation, but a kind of re-construction, a re-
presentation of events, in a necessary or probable sequence. And this reconstruction
should have a strict unity of an organic nature. The organization of the events should
constitute a whole, with a well-defined length, unity and consistency, just like the
organization of parts that constitute a living organism. Accordingly, the parts should
be united in such a way that they become indispensable to the final result:

[Just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in
poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a
complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected, that the
transposition or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the
whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or
absence is no real part of the whole. (Poetics 1451a30-36)

Likewise, Poe mentions several times in his work the importance of such a
determinate structure. In his “Chapter of Suggestions”, published in The Opal, in
1845, Poe includes an original version of his thoughts on plot in relation to intended
effect, which later on appears in revised form, in “The Philosophy of Composition”
(1846). In a quite long piece on the progressive steps of poetic composition, he
discusses the importance of the preconcept of the denouement, before writing the
first word. Since “no word should be written which does not tend […] to the
development of the denouement” (E & R 1293), Poe concludes that plot is something
which has often been misunderstood:

Plot is very imperfectly understood, and has never been rightly defined. Many
persons regard it as mere complexity of incident. In its most rigorous
acceptation, it is that from which no component atom can be removed, and in
which none of the component atoms can be displaced, without ruin to the
whole; and although a sufficiently good plot may be constructed, without attention to the whole rigor of this definition, still it is the definition which the true artist should always keep in view, and always endeavor to consummate in his works. (1293-94)

Poe clearly alludes to Aristotle’s determinate structure here, in a way surprisingly echoing the analytical aspect of his detective tale (note the word *atom*). While he argues that plot has nothing to do with complexity of incidents, he at the same time defines it as an aggregation of pieces (atoms), each one of which is so indispensable that any removal would ruin the whole.

J. P. Pritchard quotes, in “Aristotle’s Influence upon American Criticism” (1936) — an article which validates the *Poetics* as “an informing spirit in the development of American literary criticism”, from Bryant to Emerson (341) — another instance of Poe’s allusion to the Aristotelian canon, where this concept of organic (or, should we say, analytic?) inseparability is repeated:

A mere succession of events, even the most spirited, will no more constitute a plot than a multiplication of zeros, even the most infinite, will result in the production of a unit… A plot, properly understood, is perfect only in as much as we shall find ourselves unable to detach from it or disarrange any single incident involved, without destruction to the mass. This we say is the point of perfection — a point never yet attained, but not on that account unattainable. Practically, we may consider a plot as of high excellence, when no one of its component parts shall be susceptible of removal without detriment to the whole. Here, indeed, is a vast lowering of the demand, and with less than this no writer of refined taste should content himself. (qtd. in Pritchard 345)
This conception of plot as aggregation of necessary and indispensable elements also entails a proper magnitude. For Aristotle,

[to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of certain definite magnitude. Beauty is a matter of size and order. (1450b34-37)

Since mythos/plot is not just an amorphous chunk, but a synthesis of parts — of proper magnitude and order — it should be neither very short nor very long; “as a beautiful whole made of parts, or a beautiful living creature” (1451a2-3), it should rather be “of a length to be taken in by the memory” (1451a5-6). Plot then is paralleled with a “beautiful whole made of parts”, and thus beauty becomes the correlative of organic form.

Pritchard notes a small discrepancy between Poe and Aristotle, in terms of magnitude, in that the Greek philosopher regards the epic as an artistic unity, whereas Poe does not. In “The Philosophy of Composition”, Poe insists on a quite short length. Beauty, which is “the sole legitimate province of the poem” (E & R 16), is attained through proper magnitude and unity. The extent of a work, according to Poe, should enable the reader to finish it at one sitting, “for if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed” (15). If the benefit of totality is lost, the author will not be able to carry out the impression intended. The limit as regards length should bear, according to Poe, a mathematical relation to the effect induced by the poetic work:

for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect: — this, with one proviso — that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all. (15)
Here again, plot organization is treated as a (mathematical) problem that could be solved through the rationalistic process of analysis, and like all mathematical problems it should also abide by rules of consistency and order or ensemblistic-identitary determinates. Aristotle himself is very explicit here:

the longer the story, consistently with its being comprehensible as a whole, the finer it is by reason of its magnitude. As a rough general formula, a length which allows of the hero passing by a series of probable or necessary stages from bad fortune to good, or from good to bad, may suffice as a limit for the magnitude of the story. (*Poetics* 1451a10-15)

The proper magnitude, then, is the one which allows sufficient time and space for the *necessary* or *probable* changes to the better or to the worse. For Aristotle this important element of consistency can be achieved only when *none* of the events happen by accident or because of a mechanical causality. Unlike history that records facts as they have happened, one after another, it is a logical consistency that dictates the synthesis of the parts of the plot, in accordance with probability or necessity. Plot is, therefore, not an episodic synthesis of the parts, that is, one after another, “when there is neither probability nor necessity in the sequence of its episodes” (*Poetics* 1451b35), but a causal synthesis that links the parts “in consequence of one another” (1452a5). Evidently, only a whole unified in the aforementioned way can effect its *proper pleasure*, and, secondly, it is exactly this sequential unification that makes the work a whole, like a living creature:

[plots] should be based on a single action, one that is a complete whole in itself, with a beginning, middle and end, so as to enable the work to produce its proper pleasure with the organic unity of a living creature. (1459a18-21)
This characteristic pleasure of plot, which is achieved through a necessity of intention that presupposes an utter lack of contingency or accident, lies at the heart of Poe’s unity of effect. Poe explains in “The Philosophy of Composition” that a fictitious plot will serve its purpose only when “no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition — that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (E & R 15-16).

First of all, then, everything in Poe’s fictional world — and especially the world of his detective tale — happens according to a strict causal mechanism, similar to the “precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (16). Unlike the Wordsworthian spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, Poe’s philosophy of composition requires the surgical precision of the Aristotelian determinate structure, as well as the lack of coincidence or stroke of chance that may alter the course of action. Here, again, an allusion to Aristotle is evident: every event in the plot should emanate from the preconceived effect, which, in the case of tragedy, is the evocation of pity and fear. Astonishment, explains Aristotle in *Poetics*, is more successful when unexpected events occur, but these events should still happen because of an internal causality, that is, when things “occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another” (1452a4-5). Likewise, the suspense of the detective tale and the satisfaction derived from its final disclosure are based on the carefully planted, astonishing events within the plot, through a regressive process of construction. It is the end, that is, its denouement, that prescribes the development of the plot — or, to put it in Poe’s words, “the consideration of the effect” (E & R 13):

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything 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. (13)

In other words, it is the necessity of intention that shapes the structure of the detective plot. Only thus can the work acquire its “indispensable air of consequence or causation” that gives the impression of a single effect. In “Nathaniel Hawthorne”, published in *Graham’s Magazine*, in 1842, Poe defines the reverse construction of the plot as an accommodation of the incidents to the preconceived effect:

A skilful artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having deliberately conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect […] In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. (E & R 572)

It is the pre-established design that matters for Poe the most, and determines the regressive construction of the plot. The composition of a detective tale is far from being spontaneous, but has a plant-like inner power that molds its structure. The conception of its denouement works as the seed that determines the development of the plant-structure. But, in this case, the process of growth is reversed. This is what he writes about “The Gold Bug” in his review of his own *Tales* (1845):

In this he endeavoured to carry out his idea of the perfection of the plot, which he defines as — that, in which nothing can be disarranged, or from which

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12 The same view is repeated, almost verbatim, in another article on Hawthorne, published in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, in 1847 (E & R 588).
13 G. R Thompson (editor of *Essays and Reviews*) notes that even though this review is anonymous, Poe has almost certainly written it himself. This is indeed evident, at least from the use of the Aristotelian definition of determinate structure (repeated word for word in “Chapter of Suggestions”).
nothing can be removed, without ruin to the mass — as that, in which we are
never able to determine whether any one point depends upon or sustains any
one other. (E & R 869)

In this tongue-in-cheek self-review Poe explains once more his backward
process of organizing the events as “the mode of grouping them around the main idea,
and their absolute necessity of each to the whole” (870). As for his detective tales, he
does admit, in the same review, that they constitute “a class peculiar to Mr. POE” and
that they are all “written backwards” (872). “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” and “The
Murders in the Rue Morgue” are praised for their consistency to the definition of plot,
although, in the case of the former, the events were not invented, but already there.
Still, they both reveal the process of the author, who “begins by imagining a deed
committed by such a creature, or in such a manner, as would most effectually mislead
inquiry. Then he applies analysis to the investigation” (872). “The Purloined Letter”,
however, is regarded as overestimated. “We like it less than the others, of the same
class”, claims the writing persona, as it “has not their continuous and absorbing
interest” (872). And he continues:

The style of Mr. POE is clear and forcible. There is often a minuteness of
detail; but on examination it will always be found that this minuteness was
necessary to the development of the plot, the effect, or the incidents. His style
may be called, strictly, an earnest one. And this earnestness is one of its
greatest charms. A writer must have the fullest belief in his statements, or must
simulate that belief perfectly, to produce an absorbing interest in the mind of
his reader. That power of simulation can only be possessed by a man of high
genius. It is the result of a peculiar combination of the mental faculties. It
produces earnestness, minute, not profuse detail, and fidelity of description. It is possessed by Mr POE, in its full perfection. (873)

What Poe admits in this fascinating piece of self-criticism is an organization of events in accordance with probability or necessity. At the same time, he reveals that writers must be earnest in their belief in the statements they make. However, if this is not the case, then this belief must be simulated perfectly. Should we then assume that his analytic detective is so disarmingly believable because Poe believes in him and his method or because the simulation of this belief is so perfect?

Still, the impossibility of Dupin’s reasoning has been pinpointed innumerable times, a fact which obliges us to consider the possibility of simulation more seriously. And how is it that the simulation is so perfect? The answer is due to the organization of events, “as shall best aid [Poe] in the construction of the effect” (Poe, E & R 14). While several discrepancies in the events of the story or in the ratiocinative method of Chevalier Dupin become visible after the first reading, faults in the organization of the plot itself have never been mentioned.

As already explained, David Van Leer explores in “Detecting Truth: The World of the Dupin Tales” these discrepancies in Poe’s deductive process and reads the problem as narratological rather than epistemological (72). Exactly because the construction of the Dupin tale is regressive, truth is always predictable since narratological necessity shapes what Van Leer calls “historical necessity” (73):

However variously they may be interpreted, the empirical facts of the past are determinate and immutable. This historical necessity — the pastness of the past — tends in the Dupin tales to be reformulated as what might be called “teleological necessity”, the idea that reasons can always be discovered to explain why something happened. (73)
The conflation of the two necessities eschews contingency and equates the cause with the precedent — *post hoc ergo propter hoc* — a narratological lapse which Van Leer reads as marking not simply Poe’s personal ego, but also “his philosophical confusion about what makes truth true” (74). In my opinion, Poe’s conflation of the two necessities is not a simple philosophical confusion regarding truth. On the contrary, it seems obvious to me, that Poe had no intention of adhering to truth (if such a truth exists for the world out there), but that he had every intention of creating a truth sufficient as to need/usage. As in the example of Euclidian space that Castoriadis uses, mentioned above, one should never look for true causes (causes that correspond to an external world-causality) within the analytic detective tale, only for sufficient ones.

*Quod Erit Demonstradum*

Thus, the effect does not follow the cause, as would be the case in a purely deterministic sequence of events; causal relations are invented from the final effect backwards, as in the case of the actor Chantilly (or, maybe, as in the case of Laplacian analysis), where the links of the narratological chain are invented in regress. The perfect example illustrating this regressive causality of functional necessity is none other than Poe’s analysis of “The Raven”, explained in “The Philosophy of Composition”. The poem’s construction, as Poe explains it, begins from the consideration of the effect intended: “a poem that should suit at once the popular and critical taste” (*E & R* 15). Therefore, he decides that the poem should be rather brief (for reasons of elegant magnitude, mentioned above); then he chooses the “impression” he wishes to make and designates “Beauty” as the proper “province” of the poem (16); tone comes next and thus he chooses one of “sadness” (17). And what
about the proper “key-note” (17)? Nothing would be more melancholic and monotonous than a “refrain”, a repetition of sound that remains unvaried (17): “Nevermore” is thus chosen, both for its melancholic connotations, but also for the effective sound of the letters o and r (18). The next step, he admits, was to find “a pretext for the continuous use” of this special word (18). The whole poem then appears simply as “a pretext”, a collateral by-product of his desire to use a word that sounded melancholic and would generate the proper effect. This is how the raven is inserted in the poem, and then comes the death of a beautiful woman, and then the lover who must question the bird, and then the chamber, and then the storm, etc, etc, and then the poem begins “upon a midnight dreary”. But, in this case, where does the meaning of the poem lie? And, what is more, isn’t this absence of meaning visible to the reader? This is indeed a problem that Poe is aware of:

But in subjects so handled, however skillfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness, which repels the artistic eye. Two things are invariably required — first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness — some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning. It is this latter, in especial, which imparts to a work of art so much of that richness (to borrow from the colloquy a forcible term) which we are too fond of confounding with the ideal. It is the excess of the suggested meaning — it is the rendering this the upper instead of the under current of the theme — which turns into prose (and that of the very flattest kind) the so called poetry of the so called transcendentalists. (24)

This excerpt is, I believe, the only place in “The Philosophy of Composition” where we could discern any ironic intention on the part of Poe. Because this essay
should probably not be read as an outward hoax, but rather as a humorous attack on the desired “richness” of the colloquy that “we are too fond of confounding with the ideal”, towards this excess of meaning that turns “the so called poetry” of “the so called transcendentalists” into a prose “of the flattest kind”! And while he admits that some meaning should be inserted in the theme, so that all “hardness or nakedness”, that may repel “the artistic eye”, is eliminated, he is always aware that this meaning can only be “suggested”, “indefinite”, restricted to an “under-current”, even as conceived \textit{a posteriori}, but never really there. Thus he ends his poem by making the raven “emblematical of \textit{Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance}” because he knows that the mind is disposed “to seek for a moral in all that has been previously narrated” (25).

This extraordinary (conscious) method of imposing meaning on an array of incidents is, of course, also used in “The Murders of the Rue Morgue”. Take for example the famous cliché of the locked room mystery. Madame L’ Espanaye and her daughter are found brutally murdered, in a room locked with the key inside (a device that would better effectuate the intention Poe had in mind), on the fourth storey of a house in the Rue Morgue. When faced with the mystery of their murder Dupin flatly declares that, since neither he nor his companion believe in “praeternatural events”, they \textit{should} conclude that the two women “were not destroyed by spirits” (\textit{P & T} 417), and that “all apparent ‘impossibilities’ \textit{must} be proved to be not such in reality” (418). “I proceeded to think thus”, says Dupin, “— \textit{à posteriori}” (418). If the room is locked from the inside, then the only possible means of escape for the murderer should be through one of the windows, even though the sashes appear to be fastened. In other words, Dupin is forced to find a solution that seems logically unacceptable but is the only internally acceptable one if the method of analysis is applied
regressively to the strange facts of a past that has to be revisited in order to be resolved:

A concealed spring must, I now knew, exist; and this corroboration of my idea convinced me that my premises, at least, were correct, however mysterious still appeared the circumstances attending the nails. (418)

A broken nail, that would enable the spring of the window to close by itself, is thus found, and the means of escape is confirmed against all odds. Thereafter, the riddle of the murderer’s descent from the fourth floor of the house is solved in a similar, unexpected, fashion. The locked room mystery, an impossibility in itself which must be explained (quod erit demonstrandum), is solved through the fabrication of a new impossibility, the choice of the windows as a means of entrance and escape, since it must, in its turn, be solved with the impossible fabrication of a murderer that has an agility of an “extraordinary” and “almost supernatural character” (420). While the disturbing evidence is multiplied, the mechanism of a rational solution is put into motion by the very supernatural nuances that become more inviting than ever. The murderer must have been extraordinarily agile; the “very peculiar” shrieks and the “unequal” voices heard by the witnesses do not belong to any known nationality nor do they contain a recognizable syllabification (420-1). “The butchery” itself, as Dupin calls it, is of a character “excessively outré”, since no motive can be detected, but, above all, since it betrays a hair-raising, superhuman ferocity, that ordinary assassins do not employ (422): the daughter’s body is thrust up the chimney and Madame L’Espanaye is first decapitated by a razor and then thrown out of the window, onto the stone pavement. The horrified reader and Dupin’s puzzled companion must now reflect upon the case and try to combine
the ideas of an agility astounding, a strength superhuman, a ferocity brutal, a butchery without motive, a grotesquerie in horror absolutely alien from humanity, and a voice foreign in tone to the ears of men of many nations, and devoid of all distinct or intelligible syllabification. (423)

On top of it all, a tuft of “no human hair” is found clutched in the fingers of Madame L’ Espanaye, while the bruises on the throat of the daughter bear “the mark of no human hand” (423-24). “What impression have I made upon your fancy?” Dupin asks his companion (423), inviting, at the same time, the reader ineluctably to accept the only possible solution, that of the supernatural order. What is, therefore, the only rational way out of this gory gothic presented by a butchery that screams of an agent alien to humanity? The most unlikely murderer — and for this reason the only acceptable one — is, of course, the infamous orangutan.

The point I wish to make through this long analysis of Dupin’s impossible deductions is that, while the solution appears incompatible with the causal relations we have come to accept as valid in our reality, it does however obey the internal rules of regressive composition, that are sufficient to need/ usage.¹⁴ As in the case of Aristotle’s construction of the poetic work, the purely fortuitous element should be excluded. Let us remember Aristotle’s definition of astonishment in the *Poetics*. Astonishment, according to Aristotle, is more successful when unexpected events occur, but these events should still happen because of an internal causality; that is, when things “occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another” (1452a4-5), and there is then “more of the marvelous in them than if they

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¹⁴ As Els Wouters rightly observes in “The Detective’s Method: Abduction or Just Fiction?”, “a rule such as to have a large head means to be intelligent can function as a general law within the fictional world; in reality, the value of such a law would be rather poor” (105). The syllogism of the detective, concludes Wouters, has only the rhetorical purpose of convincing the reader (105). “The semantic content of the argumentation can appear completely unlikely; the form guarantees that the conclusion is correct” (105).
happened of themselves or by mere chance” (1452a5-6). Things happening “unexpectedly” or — to use the Greek words — “παρά την δόξαν”, that is, paradoxical incidents, produce astonishment all the more when they are not accidental or fortuitous, but triggered by the rest of the incidents comprising the structure of the plot. Likewise, the astonishment produced by the detective tale is due to unexpected twists in the plot that run contrary to the reader’s expectation, but are the necessary products of the regressive relation of the incidents of the plot and not (purely) accidental occurrences.

If, then, paradoxical twists are anticipated by the teleological structure of the actual detective story, we are unavoidably led to an interesting conclusion: even though the text proves to have a life of its own, Dupin is framed within a labyrinth of predestination. Contrary to what the detective has appeared to be in the eyes of the reader — the man of the Age of Reason, and, thus, capable of solving the cosmic mystery, the quintessence of the active mind and proof of man’s free will — he is now revealed as an enactor of a predestined mind game. Poe’s readable universe, contained within the rigid, Aristotelian vessel, incarcerates the Chevalier in a world where there is no contingency; everything is there for a purpose and the purpose of the detective himself is to re-enact faithfully a drama visualized beforehand by his author-God. Dupin is condemned to repeat the disentanglement of already-staged crimes, as if he is there to prove that coincidences do not exist. The irony of it all is, of course, uncanny. Poe, the fabricator of a legion of characters that oscillate between reason and insanity, chooses, at some point, to construct a shrewd detective, not — as it first appears — in an attempt to vindicate the spirit of the Enlightenment, but probably in order to rehearse the philosophic *aporia* of his age. Auguste Dupin is not only rehearsing the prescribed drama of the detective tale, but he will also be obliged
to literally repeat the crime itself in “The Purloined Letter”, where he will become the double of his opponent. This inescapable repetition transforms the cosmic mystery into a true “mathematical problem”, figured in every detail and governed by strict causal relationships that do not allow for any accident. Dupin is thus passing through the narrative days of detection as if re-visiting the scene of crime in a Freudian \textit{déjà vu} of an “always already” solved crime. Freud’s famous reading of repetition\textsuperscript{15} as an occurrence producing the feeling of an inescapable fate (leading to superstition) works inversely in the case of Dupin, who is never taken aback (and does not believe in superstition) by the seemingly \textit{outré} coincidences of a mystery, since he already expects the unexpected.

Exactly because meaning is \textit{imposed}, indeterminacy turns into determinacy and discontinuity into continuity. Likewise, a universe without meaningful pattern is groundless, but when meaning is imposed (where, in fact, there is no meaning to be discovered) determinism eliminates the element of human soul and free will. Thus, the paradigm of a universe that can be deciphered from any drop of its ocean turns into an asphyxiating fishbowl of finite limits and of a pre-determined history and future.

\textsuperscript{15} In his essay on “The Uncanny” (1919) Freud gives the example of his personal experience of “involuntary return” to the same place, while wandering in the infamous parts of a town in Italy. This “involuntary repetition”, according to Freud, “forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable where otherwise we should have spoken of ‘chance’ only” (84).
IMAGINATION

Putting Together the Fragments of the World

When Poe’s first detective story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, was published in 1841 in *Graham’s Magazine*, the validity of the rationalistic and the empirical model of interpretation had already been put into question by the Romantics. Determinism had fatefuly expelled the element of human soul from the clockwork universe: freedom of will, desire, imagination, hope were nothing but illusions, brought on by our ignorance of the infinite causes that govern the Cosmic Clock. Human life was the result of a blind, eternal and fateful arrangement of particles that entailed an always already prescribed telos. The Romantic attack against the inhuman determinacy of Reason and the Cartesian myth, that world and world-makers could be sharply distinguished and analyzed separately and systematically, placed its main emphasis on Imagination, as a force of creation and reconciliation. For the Romantics, imagination was the force that could offer a closure to the oppositions between subject and object, conscious and unconscious, nature and intelligence, brought by the sciences of reason that had turned natural antitheses into irremediable divisions. It was this power of imagination that would bring together the fragments of the world.

Besides, we should not forget that this creative power was first reclaimed by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), in the form of “transcendental imagination”, as a means of appropriating reality. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* challenged the aforementioned scholastic principle and attacked the dogmatic emphasis on empirical facts as the sole and exclusive means of knowledge. As is well known, Kant’s critique had reinstated the emphasis on human perception, by observing that the study of empirical or *a posteriori* facts (without which our
knowledge of the exterior world is unattainable) is processed through a priori or pre-empirical and immanent operations (categories) of human perception. Therefore, one could not claim that empirical observation can reveal the actual thing in itself (Ding an sich), only the phenomenon of the thing as filtered through the observer’s perception. As Kearney puts it in The Wake of Imagination (1988), it was “only with Kant and the German Idealists in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, that the productive imagination became, as it were, officially recognized by mainstream Western thought” (156). Imagination was indeed able to break its fetters from “its long philosophical imprisonment”, Kearny writes, because of Kant, Fichte and Schelling, who “provided the theoretical impetus for its rise to undisputed supremacy in the romantic and existentialist movements” (156).

In this sense, Poe seems to be strongly influenced by the German theorists. As Megan Marshall points out, “Poe’s own refusal, or inability, to evoke his region or even his nation, sets him apart from any other American writer of similar stature” and “in artistic sensibility he comes closest to the German Romantics” (19). Poe’s detective story is characterized by a romantic conflation of reason and imagination. For the Romantic half of Dupin, imagination is a power responsible for the discovery of truths greater than those discovered through reason. This defining quality of Poe’s detective is an almost supernatural force that disturbs the analytic reasoning Dupin seems, at first, to employ. His infamous fusion of mathematics and poetry is what makes his vision so clear, especially in “The Purloined Letter”, the third ratiocination tale, where blind adherence to the rules of the book (and, by analogy, analytic logic) is criticized.
Aristotle, Romanticism and Coleridge

This imagination proffered by the proto-detective takes dubious forms in several instances in the ratiocination tale and almost always remains as far as possible from any kind of moral or higher truth such as those sought by the Romantics. While Poe is undoubtedly indebted to English Romanticism (especially to Coleridge as evident by the way Poe’s essays often plagiarize or oppose to the theories of the British poet) his (at times ironic) blending of poetry and mathematics requires a differently-orientated examination that would take into consideration his allegiance to the classical canon, in relation to Romantic aspirations.

If the Age of Reason was characterized by the apodictic certainty of analysis, one might say that Romanticism (or, at least, Coleridge’s version of it) struggled towards an ideal synthesis. As is well known, a renunciation of the Cartesian dualism that divided antithetical but interdependent notions (such as subject/object or inner/outer) was central to Romanticism. Coleridge, in particular, insisted that the unity of such polar distinctions should be respected, hence his concept of unity in diversity, and his notion of “secondary imagination” as a force that “recreates” or “struggles to idealize and unify” (BL I 304). To this kind of synthesis another form of synthetic approach could be added, prompted by the Romantic tendency to blend, in poetry, Platonic truth with Aristotelian composition.

Aristotle’s focus on the end product, achieved through a necessity of intention (adopted by Poe as a means of finding his way around this wish for fictional or moral meaning), emanates from his concept of entelechy, of an internal assiduity. The concept of a pre-existing telos within living organisms and works, however, is not

16 See for example Christopher Kearns’ “Rehearsing Dupin: Poe’s Duplicitous Confrontation with Coleridge” (2002), where it is argued that “Poe’s detective fiction displaces and disguises a complex polemic which he opened with Coleridge’s views of the imagination at the outset of Poe’s career as a critically minded poet” (3).
exclusively Aristotle’s. Plato talks about it in *Phaedrus*, where he criticizes the mechanical construction of works as instructed by rhetoric. In addition, Plato was also responsible for the concept of an *anima mundi*, a soul of the world, which, according to M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, “was incorporated into the Nature-Philosophy of the German romantics” (185). However, it was Aristotle’s concept of entelechy, of a telos within, that contributed to the organic philosophy of composition, forwarded by the Romantics, but, as Abrams remarks, “only after [it] had been taken out of a philosophical context that was in many ways alien to organic thinking”, since Aristotle’s interest lay mainly “not in the process but in the end result of growth” (185).

As is well known, Coleridge’s theory of the mind contributed to the replacement of the neoclassic philosophy of composition, after 1800, with the concept of an organic process of composition. The already-mentioned assumption of empirical psychology, that the workings of the mind could be explained through an analyzable chain of combining (associating) sensations (ideas), had reduced poetic creation to a mechanical process. Images were thought to comprise “memory”, when repeated in the same spatial and temporal order, while their re-combination into a different whole was considered to be “imagination”. But, as Abrams points out in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, the aforementioned theory, which alluded to the mechanistic view of the universe, failed to explain the order and design of the literary work (163). He adds:

If the process of imagination is conceived as images moved by purely mechanical, or efficient causes of attraction — each present image pulling in the next automatically, according to the accident of its inherent similarity or of its contiguity in past experience — how are we to explain that the result is a cosmos instead of a chaos? And how are we to account for the difference
between the incoherent associations of delirium and the orderly, productive
associations of a Shakespeare? (164)

Thus, it was not until the publication of Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* that
imagination was truly addressed and emphasis was placed on the active role of the
mind, since choice and will were inserted in the theory of literary creation, and
organic imagination replaced the mechanical literary process. As it appears, however,
this replacement was not rendered through a renunciation of the actual Aristotelian
theory of composition, but, rather, through its re-appropriation.

Despite Coleridge’s known influence by Plato — evident in his endeavour to
blend Platonism with Christianity\(^\text{17}\) in his writings — one should not, I would argue,
ignore the Aristotelian influence. As mentioned above, Pritchard considers him to be
one of Poe’s indirect sources in the use of Aristotle, and Howard H. Creed’s
“Coleridge and Metacriticism” (1954) stresses his attempt to reconcile the two
opposing critical modes (the Aristotelian and the Platonic) that is, to bring together
the organic construction of poetry with its symbolic truth, although he mainly placed
“his critical emphasis on the source of poetry in the poet’s creative imagination”
(1161).

Coleridge’s concept of the organic quality of the poetic work, in particular, as
well as his understanding of imitation, could be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics.*
George Whalley wrote in 1973 an article called “The Aristotle-Coleridge Axis”, a title
that he admitted as being “mildly scandalous”, in that “Aristotle and Coleridge are
commonly thought to represent opposite poles in criticism” (93). Whalley justified
however the axis between Coleridge and Aristotle, by claiming that Aristotle’s

\(^{17}\) For E. Douka-Kabitoglou this lifelong endeavour remains futile, since Coleridge never quite
managed to free himself “from the conditioning of Christian dogma (whose other aspect may be called
’scientific exploitation’), treating sensory objects or natural forms in their ‘usefulness’ to human
perfectibility and progress — in this case spiritual union with God” (206).
amazing insight in the *Poetics* was re-discovered by Coleridge, to such an extent that, despite the Platonic tinge of his poetry and philosophy, he “provides a complement to Aristotle through his immensely more sensitive and profound understanding of the poetic way of mind” (95).

One of the similarities that Whalley detects between Aristotle and Coleridge is their shared perception of poetry as *making*. Coleridge’s dynamic imagination is revealed in *Biographia Literaria* as a power which partakes of the reality it imitates; it produces not a lifeless copy but a living organism, a true Aristotelian *mimesis*. In this sense, there are two aspects of the Coleridgean imagination that re-appropriate, to my mind, the organic mimesis of Aristotle. First of all, the imagination in question is a power intrinsic and “vital” (*BL I* 304), that is, it works from within, *ab intra*, as the lifeblood of something alive, a force of entelechy that first sets the guide lines and then becomes the thing itself. Secondly, it is a force that both “idealizes” and “unifies” (*BL I* 304). As far as idealization is concerned, the comparison is easy to make. It is a force that idealizes, rather than copies, in the same way as Aristotle’s poetic work is shaped in accordance with probability and necessity. On the other hand, it unifies, and this is one of the most enchanting insights of Coleridge, in that his imagination is a reconciling grinder, or, rather, a loom that weaves opposites into a unified whole, made of diverse parts.

In Chapter 17 of *Biographia Literaria*, titled “Poetry Essentially Ideal”, Coleridge fully accepts the Aristotelian theory:

I adopt with full faith the principle of Aristotle, that poetry is essentially ideal, that it avoids and excludes all accident; that its apparent individualities of rank, character, or occupation must be representative of a class; not such as one
gifted individual might possibly posses, but such as from his situation it is most probable before-hand, that he would possess. \((BL \ II \ 45-46)\)

His direct reference to Aristotle’s definition of poetry — as radically different from history — and his universals is later repeated in Chapter 18, where the element of synthesis is added to the concept of idealization. The composition of a poem, he says, “is among the imitative arts”, and “imitation, as opposed to copying, consists either in the interfusion of the SAME throughout the radically DIFFERENT, or of the different throughout a base radically the same” \((BL \ II \ 72)\).

This synthetic aspect of Coleridge’s imagination, on the other hand, attests to the Romantic assertion of an interaction between the observer and the observed world. It is worth noticing the striking adjective that Coleridge uses in the famous Chapter 13 of \textit{Biographia Literaria}, where he calls imagination an “esemplastic power” \((BL \ I \ 304)\). Earlier, in Chapter 10 of \textit{Biographia Literaria}, Coleridge explains that the word esemplastic was invented by him, “from the Greek words, \textit{εις εν πλάττειν} i.e. to shape into one” \((BL \ I \ 168)\). Coleridge’s insightful focus on this power of shaping exercised — by imagination and, consequently, by art — on the world anticipates the imaginary aspect of our reality (as defined by Castoriadis), as well as the pervasive nature of our subjective projections onto the world, as depicted in the twentieth-century writings of authors like Borges.

Imagination, then, was for Coleridge a means of transcending the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and matter, one that would reconcile the objective with the subjective, through a primary union of the individual, finite mind, with “the infinite I AM”, and a secondary act of fusion, “that dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create” \((BL \ I \ 304)\). Evidently, Coleridge’s concept of transcendence was not devoid of metaphysical delineations, and the immediate object of such a transcendental act of
understanding would always be the attainment of truth. As Creed points out in his article, for Coleridge pleasure derived from the beauty of the internal structure of a poem “brings contemplation and a reason for more permanent pleasure: an insight into the harmonious structure of the universe” (1169-70).

**Aristotle, Coleridge & Poe**

As Pritchard informs us, Poe became acquainted with the *Poetics* through indirect sources, but still, “several of his principles of criticism have the Aristotelian tinge” (344). More particularly, Poe’s theory of composition deals mainly with the structure of the plot, in terms of unity and effect, similarly to Aristotle’s, except for the fact that, according to Pritchard, his main emphasis lies on organicity:

> Poe’s great interest in unity and organization of material […] appears in his employment of the *Poetics*; although he takes issue with Aristotle over his giving plot the primacy over characters, he insists upon organic unity, with a necessary or probable sequence of events. (344-5)

Pritchard’s pointing out of Poe’s insistence on organic unity seems to be unnecessary, considering the fact that Aristotle mentions the necessity of the organic quality of the work several times in his *Poetics*, as already mentioned. However, it wasn’t until the advent of Romanticism that this quality acquired its literary significance, and Pritchard’s evaluation of the Aristotelian influence is pointing, therefore, towards the fact that Poe’s perception of the *Poetics* was filtered through the prism of Romantic principles of composition, and, more particularly, Coleridge’s work.

However, Poe’s theory of composition remained close to Aristotle’s mimesis (not attempting to present reality but rather to reconstruct it), and far away from the Platonic insistence on moral instruction. His detective tale is formulated “ideally”, and reflects a world without disorder, but, at the same time, it lacks the ethics of
didactic instruction. His idealism is of a different texture, even though he probably owes his synthetic mode of composition to Coleridge’s influence. Pritchard claims that, even if Poe had read the *Poetics* in translation, “most of his acquaintance with Aristotle came through critics like Goethe and Coleridge”, and he uses the incident of a misquotation as evidence of this influence (347).

Poe misquotes the above-mentioned excerpt from the *Poetics*, where Aristotle claims that poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history, on three different occasions: In “Letter to B—” (1836), and in his reviews of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *The Drama of Exile, and other Poems* (1845) and Henry Cockton’s *Stanley Thorn* (1842). The following quotation comes from the latter review:

> Aristotle, with singular assurance, has declared poetry the most philosophical of all writing, (spoudiotaton kai philosophikotaton genos) defending it principally upon that score. He seems to think, — and many following him, have thought — that the end of all literature should be instruction — a favorite dogma of the school of Wordsworth. But it is a truism that the end of our existence is happiness. Therefore, the end of instruction should be happiness — and happiness, what is it but the extent or duration of pleasure? — therefore, the end of instruction should be pleasure. (*E & R* 178)

Pritchard points out that, although Poe thinks that he is thus criticizing Aristotle, in reality he is agreeing with him in terms of the poetic end. And indeed, it seems to me, since Poe’s understanding of Aristotle was filtered through indirect sources, his criticism is due to the Romantic opposition to Neoclassicism. After all, it wasn’t Aristotle who put emphasis on instruction, but rather his followers. Moral instruction is mainly a corollary of Plato’s symbolic truth; Aristotle insisted on unity
of form in terms of beauty and organicity. His universals aided a pleasurable effect, brought through pity and fear, rather than moral instruction per se.

Besides, the really intriguing part of the above extract is the misquotation of Aristotle’s comparison between poetry and history. The line cited by Poe is not a comparison, but rather a superlative maximization of poetry — “a favorite dogma of the school of Wordsworth” (*E & R* 178) — which first appears in the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” (1800). Wordsworth was perhaps the first to misquote Aristotle, in the section called “What Is a Poet?” of the Preface, where he indicates truth as the sole object of poetry. According to Pritchard, however, the line is borrowed from *Biographia Literaria*, where Coleridge quotes Aristotle, in Chapter 22, probably from memory, when talking about accidentality, to which he objects,

as contravening the essence of poetry, which Aristotle pronounces to be

ϕιλοσοφώτατον και σπουδαιότατον γένος, the most intense, weighty, and philosophical product of human art; adding, as the reason, that it is the most catholic and abstract […] (*BL II* 126)

Since Coleridge is the one who quotes the line in Greek, we can safely assume that he is Poe’s source, and that the latter’s perception of the *Poetics* was diffused through the Platonic prism of Coleridge. And although Coleridge insisted on the attainment of Platonic truth through poetry, Poe’s critical stance tends rather towards the Aristotelian emphasis on the poetic work itself. In his “Letter to B—”, actually, he criticizes Coleridge for his extreme profundity:

He goes wrong by reason of his very profundity, and of his error we have a natural type in the contemplation of a star. He who regards it directly and intensely sees, it is true, the star, but it is the star without a ray — while he
who surveys it less inquisitively is conscious of all for which the star is useful to us below — its brilliancy and its beauty. (E & R 8)

The metaphor of the star appears in a different version in Poe’s detective stories, where he explains, through the mouth of Dupin, his theory of simplicity, according to which truth should not be sought for in a well, or when he uses the example of large prints on maps that become visible only when looked at from a distance. However, his criticism in “Letter to B—” is probably referring to moral instruction as poetic end rather than to Coleridge’s notion of poetry in general, since he plagiarizes Coleridge’s words from Biographia Literaria almost verbatim, when he claims that a poem “is opposed to a work of science by having, for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth” (11). Or, as Christopher Kearns would have it, in “Rehearsing Dupin: Poe’s Duplicitous Confrontation with Coleridge” (2002), “Poe’s own sectarianism, driven by an impulse to appear original, leads him to misrepresent the relationship of his own thought to that of his fellow romantics” (14).

In any case, Poe is adamant about the significance of pleasure, throughout his work, and goes as far as to call, in “The Poetic Principle” (1850), the adherents to moral instruction “the heresy of The Didactic” (E & R 75). Pleasure, for Poe, is the only object of poetry, and it is a pleasure derived not only from reading it, but from constructing it as well. “He must be”, he insists in “The Poetic Principle”, “theory-mad beyond redemption who […] shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth” (76), a claim that alludes to his remarks, in “The Philosophy of Composition”, concerning the “excess of the suggested meaning” (E & R 24).

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18 “The Poetic Principle” was written as a lecture during the last years of Poe’s life, but it was published posthumously in the Home Journal (August 1850) and in Sartain’s Union Magazine (October 1850).
A Synthesis of Poetry and Mathematics

To go back to the productive and unifying power of imagination, Dupin could be read as a true locus of an aporia brought by the actual modern aspiration to free knowledge, art and existence from all metaphysical delineations of the scholastic tradition. One could see in him not only Aristotle’s productive power of mimesis, Kant’s transcendental imagination and Coleridge’s essemplastic synthesis, but also the failure of Cartesianism to escape the traditional bias against imagination — by giving priority to the *cogito* — as well as the contradictory results of the empiricist attempt to divest knowledge of all transcendental appeals.

According to Kearney, “Kant avows that it was Hume who awoke him from his ‘dogmatic slumbers’ and compelled him to rethink the whole basis of Western metaphysics” (163). In trying to dissociate reason from its metaphysical appeals and to found it on a purely empirical basis, writes Kearney, David Hume realized that “the very edifice of rationalism” collapsed “in an arbitrary fictionalism” (164). As Kearney rightly observes, given the scientific character of British empiricism as established by Locke, Hume’s radical skepticism was all the more alarming (164). For Kearney, it was Hume who accelerated “the shift from the received notion of ‘substance’ (the priority of reality over consciousness) to the modern notion of ‘subjectivity’ (the priority of consciousness over reality)”, as well as the one who asserted the power of imagination to make us reason from causes to effects and to convince us of the continuity of the external world (165). Hume insisted, of course, that even if reality is fictional we should continue living by believing that this fiction is real. Still, the distance covered by modern thinkers, from scholasticism to rationalism and empiricism, and from the German idealists and Kant’s reclamation of imagination to Romanticism, is visible in Dupin’s synthesis of poetry and mathematics. The inherited
skepticism remains as an undercurrent to be later rediscovered by Borges’s *mise-en-scène* detections that fearfully attest to the fictionality of our world and to the Castoriadian imaginary institution of our society.

Poe’s synthesis of reason with imagination is directed towards a reconciliation of mind with matter, not, however, in an attempt to find the ultimate truth that would invest the world with meaning, but with the purpose of acquiring a more detached and objective view of the matter. Thus, it may become evident that there is no point in looking for meaning or that the only meaning to be found would always be contaminated with the projections of the psychic amalgam, or, finally, that meaning is only a pretext, the desire that motivates creative imagination. It is possibly for this reason that Dupin’s method is hard to describe; his solutions are disturbing, because, even though they obviously are solutions, they reveal a truth that cannot fall within any paradigm, either metaphysical or rationalistic. His deciphered text is based on, what David Van Leer calls, “incompatible vocabularies for describing the truth — induction or deduction, algebra or intuition, logic or luck” (74).

And, indeed, no matter how hard we try, we would never be able to describe Dupin with any of the above vocabularies or decisively place him within any tradition, whether that may be the Romantic or the Empirical. Chevalier Dupin is presented in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” as an analyst who glories “in that moral activity that disentangles” (*P & T* 397), and with such a clairvoyant perception (“acumen”) that he appears almost superhuman:

He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension preternatural. (397)
From the very first lines of the tale the reader is informed that Dupin owes his results no less to an “air of intuition” (397) than to plain method. His intuitive perception is a fusion of imagination and analytic ability, a living proof that “the ingenious are always fanciful, and the truly imaginative never otherwise than analytic” (400). When Dupin contemplates a puzzle he sinks into a state similar to dreamy meditation or torpor: his manner is “frigid and abstract”, his eyes “vacant in expression”, his voice a petulant tremble (401). However, his clarity of mind is so acute that the narrator often dwells “meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul”, and amuses himself “with the fancy of a double Dupin — the creative and the resolvent” (402). This “double Dupin” uses the signs of the external world as a primary source, and, by fusing them into a secondary act of intuition, he is led to the solution of the mystery. This is how Vincent Buranelli describes Dupin’s method, in Edgar Allan Poe:

Intuition, acting amid a welter of clues, sets aside the trivia and fastens on a structure that emerges from putting the essential facts together. Then the intelligence may go to work in a more ordinary way, proving by deduction and induction that the solution thus arrived at is the true one — that the man apprehended is indeed the criminal in the case. (84)

Intuition is as important as thought, for having the one without the other may impair the reasoner’s vision. In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1845), Voltaire’s Vidocq, for example, is criticized for his partiality, even though he is Dupin’s forefather: he was “a good guesser, and a persevering man” (P & T 412).

But, without educated thought, he erred continually by the very intensity of his investigations. He impaired his vision by holding the object too close. He
might see, perhaps, one or two points with unusual clearness, but in so doing
he, necessarily, lost sight of the matter as a whole. (412)
Vidocq errs because he is being “too profound”, like the overweening scientists or the
“so-called transcendentalists” Poe is critical of. “Truth is not always found in a well”,
says Dupin (412):
In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is
invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek her, and not
upon the mountain-tops where she is found. The modes and sources of this
kind of error are well typified in the contemplation of the heavenly bodies. To
look at a star by glances — to view it in a side-long way, by turning toward it
the exterior portions of the retina (more susceptible of feeble impressions of
light than the interior), is to behold the star distinctly — is to have the best
appreciation of its luster — a luster which grows dim just in proportion as we
turn our vision fully upon it. A greater number of rays actually fall upon the
eye in the latter case, but, in the former, there is the more refined capacity of
comprehension. By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought; and it
is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a
scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct. (412)
According to Dupin’s theory, if we look at the star full-face, the star will disappear,
because we will be blinded; whereas a more indirect glance will release our vision
from the narrowness of the limited, detailed observation. A blind adherence to
mathematics or analysis results often in overlooking the obvious. Sometimes, it takes
the deviation of imagination and poetry to see the matter in its true proportions.
Likewise, it is because of lack of “variation of principle in their
investigations” that the Police fail to obtain the purloined letter in Poe’s third
ratiocination story (*P & T* 690). When examining the house of the infamous Minister, they divide “its entire surface into compartments”, which are then “numbered, so that none might be missed”; then they scrutinize “each individual square inch throughout the premises, including the two houses immediately adjoining, with the microscope, as before” (685). Just like the one referring to Venus and truth, this ironic piece is clearly directed to the analytic scientists who confuse “mathematical axioms” with “axioms of general truth” (692). “And this error”, says Dupin, “is so egregious, that I am confounded with the universality with which it has been received” (692). Because in several areas of investigation, as, for example, “morals”, “it is very usually untrue that the aggregated parts are equal to the whole” (692). What Poe admits in this statement is that the apprehension of the thief would require something more complex than an ensemblistic logic, since we are not dealing with a matter of straightforwardly analyzable causality but rather with motives, desires, intentions and modes of behavior that emanate from an irreducible amalgam. In such cases it is almost always untrue that the aggregated parts are equal to the whole.

Minister D—, the thief of the letter, is presented by the Prefect of the Police as a poet. Dupin, on the other hand, admits being himself also “guilty of certain doggerel” (*P & T* 684), offering, thus, to the reader the clue that he considers poetry a sign of creative imagination, and therefore indispensable. This Minister manages to escape detection, because he is *both* a poet and a mathematician: “As poet *and* mathematician”, explains Dupin, “he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect” (691). While describing the double nature of his opponent Dupin is also commending upon the nature of his own acumen (a much-criticized replication which will be investigated later on). His mode is often described by critics as a reciprocal binary
system: “inner/ outer, dream/ observation, deduction/ induction, *a priori/ a posteriori*, creative/ resolvent” (Halliburton 238). But it is quite probable that Dupin’s success lies in something quite beyond the interchangeability of the two contrasting modes.

A possible answer may be found in *Eureka*, Poe’s “prose poem” which blends science with imagination. Dedicated “to those who feel rather than those who think” (*P & T* 1259, emphasis mine), *Eureka* rejects the two dominant modes of reasoning (deduction and induction) to urge the importance of “intuitive leaps” such as those displayed by Champollion or Kepler who had admitted having guessed his laws. This intuitive leap, however, seems not to be for Poe a simple act of imagination, but an assurance or an assumption emanating from an area quite beyond that of the brain:

Had [Kepler] been asked to point out either the *deductive* or the *inductive* route by which he attained them, his reply might have been — “I know nothing about *routes* — but I *do* know the machinery of the Universe. Here it is. I grasped it with *my soul* — I reached it through mere dint of *intuition*.”

(1270)

Within the context of this “grasping with one’s soul”, it is perhaps not accidental that Poe dedicates his work to those who *feel*. This is the key concept of *Eureka*: the Universe will only be grasped in its oneness through imagination and not through its analyzed parts or through axioms. On the other hand, Poe’s emphasis on the universe’s unity in diversity is quite probably influenced by Alexander von Humboldt’s critical stance towards the compartmentalization of science in the nineteenth century. According to James V. Werner’s “‘Ground-Moles’ and Cosmic Flaneurs: Poe, Humboldt, and Nineteenth-Century Science” (2002), Poe was probably familiar with the scientist’s worldview, since many of Humboldt’s theories — from the synthesis of reason and imagination as necessary for the acute perception of the
world’s unity in diversity, to the rejection of the scientists’ over-reliance on scientific specialization — are applied in the Dupin tales, as well as in *Eureka*, which was dedicated to Humboldt himself (55-56).

Abstraction was another method of the Humboldtian scientist, and this *intuition*, mentioned above by Poe, would of course require a distanciation from the object in question, so that *diversity* is not misinterpreted into aggregation but apprehended “in the sublimity of its *oneness*”, as explained in *Eureka* (*P & T* 1261). As with the example of Venus, that would “vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct” (*P & T* 412), so is “a mental gyration on the heel” (*P & T* 1262) necessary for the panoramic grasping of the world in its essence.

But while *Eureka* is a deeply metaphysical work that approaches the Coleridgean transcendentalism of subject transformation through an act of knowing what is assimilable in the object, the ratiocinative tale lacks this element of epiphany. Dupin’s power of imagination is a means to its own end; it does not allow the reader to participate and it certainly does not educate the Chevalier. It is creative in a self-reflexive way, in that it seems to be the actual source of the mystery it is trying to solve, while, at the same time, it allows Dupin to perform transformations that are far from a process of self-realization.

Dupin’s method is described by Gerald Kennedy, in “The Limits of Reason: Poe’s Deluded Detectives” (1975), as a balance of “imaginative involvement with analytical detachment” (194). It is a unique act of perception that requires a panoramic analysis, which will ensure that he is not blinded by detail, coupled with an imaginative involvement that will allow him to transcend the limits of his materiality.

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19 See Creed’s “Coleridge’s Metacriticism”, 1172.
and “throw himself” (*P & T* 398) into the mind of his opponent. But while this
synthesis of opposites seems to spring from Poe’s intention to validate the power of
imagination, the act of imaginative involvement deludes (as Kennedy would put it)
both the detective and the reader. As Martin remarks in “Detection, Imagination, and
the Introduction to ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’” (1989), Dupin’s knowledge
“seems to be essentially empathetic and irrational” (32).

If read in the light of the universe’s oneness, Dupin’s ability to identify his
intellect with that of his opponent shatters the dividing line between self and other or
between mind and matter, through an imaginative act of fusion — as well as of
creation — of everything: mystery, crime, solution, other, and the world in general.
The famous method of identification not only inaugurated a genre convention but also
*materialized* the other/foil, as the subject blends into the oneness of the world in
order to acquire its existence. “The material world”, says Dupin in “The Purloined
Letter”, “abounds with very strict analogies to the immaterial” (*P & T* 694), voicing
thus Poe’s major concern — the reciprocal relationship between the self and the world
beyond the self.

As early as in the opening pages of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, Poe
explains through the mouth of his narrator that the analyst/player “throws himself
into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith” and succeeds thus in
anticipating his method (*P & T* 398). This “throwing” of the self into the spirit of the
other is described in more detail in “The Purloined Letter”, where the infamous
schoolboy guesses correctly the (even or odd) number of marbles hidden in the palm
of his opponent. When he wishes to penetrate someone’s mind, he simply “fashions
the expression” in his face, “as accurately as possible, in accordance with the
expression” of the other, and waits “to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in [his]
mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression” (*P & T* 609). Similarly, Dupin is able to enter, at will, the mind of his enemy, breaking thus the limits of perception and knowledge, in general, or, as Kennedy puts it in “The Limits of Reason: Poe’s Deluded Detectives”, “the ambiguities which frustrate our efforts to penetrate the veil of appearances” (190). But in doing so, he actually creates an even greater ambiguity, a paradox which has led several critics to question this imaginative involvement and read the ratiocination tales as hoaxes that conceal rather than reveal doubts about the contradistinction between subject/ object, self/ other, internal/ external.20

**Replications**

John Bryant in “Poe’s Ape of UnReason: Humor, Ritual and Culture” (1996), remarks that Poe’s great difference from the Romantic Ironists of his time is that his irony is effected “at the expense of readers” (20). He “may aim at transcendent detachment, but invariably his self abnegation builds off of audience annihilation” (20). While this destabilization of readers is obviously one of the intentions of Romantic irony, a creative condition which helps us realize the chaotic nature of the world and, thus, transform ourselves (while decomposing them), Bryant feels that, in Poe’s case, irony does not work in a positive way. On the contrary, he sees it as “a pathological working-out of a self-doubt that becomes a kind of unacknowledged shock therapy projected onto the reader”, who is thus “made to be the fool” (21). However, it seems to me that Poe’s irony could offer the reader a much broader revelation; the question is not who is made to be the fool, but about understanding the joke itself. It is not just about realizing that the nature of our world is chaotic, but about realizing that seeing

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20 See Loisa Nygaard’s “Winning the Game: Inductive Reasoning in Poe’s ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’”. 
the world through the chaotic/ordered dichotomy is an arbitrary — and yet perhaps absolutely necessary — reduction of the human mind.

The detective tale itself is all about clearly-marked dichotomies: victim/culprit, innocent/guilty, right/wrong, good/evil, and so on. And, in its turn, the Dupin tale is swarming (perhaps more than any other tale, since it is the prototype) with such clearly-marked dichotomies: simplicity/complexity, profundity/superficiality, synthesis/analysis, imaginative/resolvent, poetry/mathematics, the meticulously hidden/the excessively obvious, natural/supernatural, material/immaterial, even/odd; the list could go on for ever. As Scott Peeples would put it, Poe encourages us to think in terms not of multiplicity but of dichotomy: the self we know versus the self we don’t know; everyday experience versus the reality of dreams and arts” (174). And yet, these blatant dichotomies are crossed by Dupin with an impossible ease. It is as if they were embedded in the tale by Poe only for the sake of their absolute confusion. For, the Chevalier is never consistent in keeping with either side of them; he can turn from poet to mathematician, from analytic to synthetic, from ratiocinative to intuitive and, most shockingly, he can turn from detective to thief.

His duplicity is such an impossible escape from the limits of human materiality that the ratiocination tale is justifiably often read as a hoax or simply as an example through failure that our materially-defined mind will never be able to grasp the essence of the universe. “We know nothing about the nature or true essence of God”, says Poe in Eureka (P & T 1276). “[I]n order to comprehend what he is, we should have to be God ourselves” (1276). This statement (emanating from Poe’s metaphysical view of the universe) entails the impossibility of such a digression as well as the assumption that the world was not designed in order to be solved. God is “Spirit”, and therefore the human soul, inextricably bound with Matter, is
“everlastingly condemned” never to be able to perceive of this deity (P & T 1267). Likewise, the perfect detective would be the one who could become what the opponent is. Matter is what we are made of, this is something we must learn to live with, but it is also what limits and clouds our spirit. In the case of Dupin, however, materiality is not a constraint. He is the first “reasoner” in the history of the genre who knows how to break the fetters of flesh. And while there is no direct undermining of Dupin’s method, the implications crowding the tales of Poe are hard to ignore.

First of all, the method of identification is based on physiognomic reading, the allusion of which to nineteenth-century materialist psychology has already been mentioned above. Dupin may be the first to have succeeded in using external signs as a means of reading the soul and mind, but he is also the immediate descendant of the protagonist of “The Man of the Crowd”, a tale written in 1840, one year before the publication of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”. This character is of course a version of the flaneur, the strolling urban observer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. One of the flaneur’s basic characteristics, as emphasized by Werner, is the “interpretation of people’s facial features, mannerisms and gestures through the ‘science’ of physiognomy” (46), and it is for this reason that the urban observer is often thought of as the predecessor of the detective.21 Poe’s flaneur finds amusement in observing the crowds in the streets, thinking of himself capable of deducing from their clothing, posture and facial expression, their social status and occupation — “the history of long years” (P & T 392) — a technique which will be later perfected by Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, as already demonstrated. But, in the case of “The Man of the Crowd”, this supposed ability of the narrator to read a mystery is undermined even in the very first line of the story, where reference is made to a

21 Dana Brand makes the connection between Poe’s detective and the flaneur in “From the Flâneur to the Detective: Interpreting the City of Poe” (1990).
German book that “er lasst sich nicht lesen — it does not permit itself to be read” (388). The protagonist of the story picks out from the crowd a particular man, whose countenance betrays “a wild history […] written within [his] bosom” (392), and decides to pursue him throughout the city, in order to examine him more thoroughly. By the end of the story, when the narrator fails to prove that the object of his observation is a criminal and his pursuit proves fruitless, the reader (aided by the subtly ironic narrative interventions of Poe) understands the failure of the “detective”, unlike the latter who does not reach such a level of realization. Neither does he acknowledge his inadequacy in detection nor his getting carried away by the overestimation of his assumed sharpness of observation. He rather insists, until the end, on attributing his failure to the deeply corrupted character of the stranger and the dark nature of some secrets that refuse to be revealed. “The worst heart of the world”, he says, “is a grosser book than the ‘Hortulus Animae’, and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that er lasst sich nicht lessen” (396). According to Andrew Smith, this man of the crowd “poses a problem of interpretation because the narrator cannot inscribe him within his exacting class observations” (114). Because the man of the crowd “does not appear to belong to any class” he remains “outside a rationalistic order”, a fact which for Smith echoes “a suggested evil that can be found in earlier Gothic texts” (114). Unlike Wordsworth’s view of the city as failing “to impress as sublime”, writes Smith, Poe’s tale offers “an inverted form of sublimity” (115). Since for Wordsworth “‘realism’ is equated with a ‘truth’ present in sublimity”, the city can potentially threaten “this moralistic way of seeing, as it questions its boundaries” (115). “In doing so”, continues Smith, “the sublime is strengthened by appearing as an absent presence; it becomes defined and strengthened in relation to what it is not” (115):
This is because the sublime offers safety; it enables the poet to escape from the threatening mass and retire to a moralising solitude. In contrast, the structure of class hierarchy in Poe’s tale is challenged by the presence of an anomalous element which undermines the narrator’s totalising claims to understand the “real”. This, however, becomes an inverted form of sublimity. The rationale of the narrator is questioned and this opens up the possibility of mystery appearing within what seemed to be a closed, or full, reality. (115-16)

What is interesting in Smith’s reading of the urban sublime in Poe’s tale is that he sees the narrator’s failure to place the man of the crowd within a rationalistic order as an opening in the closure of the city’s ‘real’. “The man of the crowd”, writes Smith, “represents a gap in interpretation” (116), and it is indeed worth noticing, in my opinion, the way in which this failure to interpret may reveal a direct comment by Poe on the materialist science of the mind. If this assumption is correct, then it should also be taken into consideration for the case of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, mentioned above. The presentation of the Chevalier as being able to read people as if “they wore windows in their bosoms” (P & T 401), as well as the direct reference to the science of phrenology in relation to the analytical power, now seem to be Poe’s clear allusions to Dupin’s immediate predecessor from “The Man of the Crowd”, and a crucial link between the two stories.

Edward Hungerford, in an article published in 1930 entitled “Poe and Phrenology”, has pinpointed an impressive number of instances, in which Poe alludes to phrenology (from literary criticism to stories like “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” or “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”), and traces his interest in this long-forgotten science from 1836 onwards. As Hungerford’s article suggests, Poe must have been quite familiar with the science of phrenology, as well as with
Lavater’s writings on physiognomy. And although he often employed his knowledge in his stories, it was not unlike him “to turn his scorn upon the very foibles in which he himself indulged” (Hungerford 218). But according to Hungerford, Poe never attacked phrenology explicitly, as that “would have spoiled his effect in the story” (224). His intention was not “to suggest that the phrenologists are not shrewd, but that his own mind, or that of his narrator, is still shrewder” (Hungerford 224). Whatever the case, Poe must have used his knowledge of phrenology and physiognomy while creating Dupin$^{22}$ and perhaps the almost imperceptible irony lying beneath the apparent inscrutable method of his detection should not be taken lightly.

This ability of the Chevalier demands an amount of involvement: Dupin manages to identify his intellect with that of his opponent by actually becoming his opponent. A loss may be required in order to recover a glimpse of the other’s mind, through an act of transcendence that lies on a plane far beyond rationalism and empirical materialism. What in the beginning appears as a perfectly harmless and morally acceptable method of intuition now becomes an uncanny replication of frightening cost. The game of even and odd presented by Poe in the last detective tale functions as a device that both convinces the reader and forewarns of an almost monstrous transformation. The detective’s method of “throwing” himself into the spirit of the other receives now its true meaning. Dupin will have literally to throw himself into the body of his opponent, both by imitating the latter’s facial expression and by repeating the illicit action.

As has often been remarked, when, in “The Purloined Letter”, Dupin eventually steals the letter from the premises of the Minister, he reenacts, in a way,

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$^{22}$ Hungerford mentions an instance from “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” where the narrator admires the analytical power of Dupin, but considers it predictable from “his rich ideality” (Poe, P & T 401). “Ideality” in this case alludes to Gall’s and Spurzheim’s phrenological coinage of an organ in the forehead that betrayed an inclination towards poetry (Hungerford 212).
the original theft, by becoming a thief to catch a thief. His identity is proved to be fluid or, even worse, acquired through his mirroring other. He is an empty vessel, ready to be filled with the personality traits of others, each time he is required to solve a mystery. As the Chevalier needs to double in order to deduce, his Gothic background is revealed in this necessary reciprocity of sanity and insanity, good and evil. The “double” Chevalier Dupin, an incarnation of the “Bi-Part Soul” (P & T 402), bears strong resemblance to his opponent, the unnamable Minister D—, whose initial conspicuously alludes to the name of the detective. Although he is Poe’s only sane protagonist, a figure seemingly impervious to perverseness, Dupin is gradually revealed as the mirror-image of his opponent. He too is both a poet and a mathematician, he manages to read the mind of his enemy by throwing himself into the personality of Minister D— and when he finally recovers the purloined letter, a lowly motive is revealed, the desire for revenge. Although he assures his companion that he acted “as a partisan of the lady concerned” (P & T 697), Dupin substitutes the letter with another one, in order that the Minister meets his downfall, should he wish to use it. This is what he says to his companion:

In the present instance I have no sympathy — at least no pity — for him who descends. He is that monstrum horrendum, an unprincipled man of genius. I confess, however, that I should like very well to know the precise character of his thoughts, when, being defied by her whom the Prefect terms “a certain personage”, he is reduced to opening the letter which I left for him in the card-rack. (697-98)

Dupin reveals that Minister D— had done him “an evil turn” in Vienna once, which the detective had promised, “quite good-humoredly”, that he would remember (698). The letter left in the card-rack is a clue that will help the Minister know the
identity of the person who defeated him. In this sense, although it appears to be a gesture of supposed sportsmanship to a rival “man of genius” (697) (“as I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clue” [698] says the Chevalier), its content rather proves it to be a cruel and vindictive joke on the part of Dupin. Two lines from Crébillon’s Atrée are written inside the letter: “Un dessein si funeste,/ S’il n’est digne d’Atrée, est digne de Thyeste” (698). The lines translate “A design so deadly / If not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes” and allude to the revenge of King Atreus against his brother Thyestes. Since the deadly design refers to the outrageous crime of Atreus, who served Thyestes his sons, to eat at a banquet, as a revenge for seducing his wife, Dupin is revealed capable of acting in the same vindictive way as the Minister. The figure of the detective that he incarnates is a synthesis of both good and evil, logic and passion, like a mask of Janus. “This revelation” pinpoint Kennedy, in his article “The Violence of Melancholy: Poe against Himself” (1996), “looks back to ‘William Wilson’ and ahead to ‘The Cask of Amontillado’ in its unfolding of a deadly struggle between adversaries with identical or synonymous names” (547). According to Kennedy, as the quotation from Crébillon “evokes a blood feud between fraternal adversaries”, Poe represents the two characters “not simply as counterparts, but as opposing sides of the same self” (547). Since Kennedy reads Poe’s stories as a proof of his subconscious self-infliction, the invention of the detective becomes nothing but another version of the split character, but also a projection of the author’s tormented self.

In the same line of thought, Liahna Klenman Babener’s “The Shadow’s Shadow”, an essay included in The Purloined Poe (1988), also considers the replication of the figures as rendering “inapplicable the conventional moral separation
between detective and culprit” (327). Dupin’s method and duplication of the letter, as well as his motive, do not prove his moral superiority; on the contrary, as far as ethical differentiation is concerned, Dupin is identified with his enemy, and becomes, himself, the *monstrum horrendum*. The affinity between the two figures raises suspicions about whether they actually are the one and the same person. Babener pursues the argument further by investigating the possibility of a fraternal relationship between the antagonists or indeed their being a single person. If, furthermore, one takes into account the fact that the Minister is never actually seen in the story and all the information we get as to the recovery of the letter comes through the mouth of Dupin himself, one could easily come to the same conclusion as Babener, namely that the two figures are interfused into one character and that the tale is, “in its deepest implications, a study in the oneness of pursuer and pursued” (333). It is indeed worth noticing the way in which Poe’s detective tale is radically different from the later versions of the genre, in that it never actually renounces the duplicity inherent in the Gothic tradition. Apart from the fact that a rational explanation is supplied at the end of each tale, the relationship between detective and criminal remains problematic in its affinity with the uncanny hunter-hunted relationship, as both Babener and Kennedy perceive it. Perhaps, as Andrea Goulet observes, this replication “may actually provide a critique of reason itself, by exposing the libidinal — even savage — energies that subtend it” (50).

Dupin’s impeccable and frightfully subtle doubling foreshadows indeed the behaviour of Montressor, who walls up Fortunato alive, driven by an insane logic of revenge, in “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846). The motto of Montressor’s family, reading “*nemo me impune lacessit*” (no one dare attack me with impunity), is not far from the ending of “The Purloined Letter”. Dupin’s concealed paranoia seems to be
even more frightening than the evident madness of his preceding and subsequent brethren, as his sanity is never questioned. The success of his mode of detection and the respectful front of his companion’s narration render his case watertight and his actions unquestionable. This inconspicuous doubling, pinpointed by critics, is to my mind disturbing not really because of its paranoid half, but because of its unquestionable sane half. Dupin’s constituent opposites are not competitive, but complementary or, rather, we should say necessarily complementary. Dupin cannot exist without his criminal alter ego. One is the necessary cause and effect of the other.

The Gothic doubt generated by Enlightenment reason is a background to the Poesque detective tale that cannot be ignored, and it is perhaps the figure of Dupin as a new guise of William Wilson that should worry us the most, as a reverse corollary of the human fear of chaos and groundlessness.

“William Wilson”, a tale published in 1839, provides Dupin with the good/bad dichotomy that he will digress in a way that goes, in my opinion, beyond doubling. While William Wilson remains forever separate from his mirror image that hunts him down, Dupin avoids such a crude separation. Undoubtedly, “William Wilson” is a story with obvious autobiographical references and the final scene of killing — mediated, most appropriately, by a mirror — leads inexorably to psychoanalytic readings like Kennedy’s and Babener’s mentioned above, focusing mainly on the deathly polarity of the Doppelgänger figure.

This famous scene takes place during a carnival masquerade in Rome (notice again the echoes of Montressor), where Wilson traps his surrogate in a small room and stabs him repeatedly with his sword. A brief interruption makes him turn away from his victim for a moment and when he returns, something is changed:

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23 See for example Daniel Hoffman’s Poe Poe Poe or Gerald Kennedy’s “The Violence of Melancholy: Poe against Himself.”
A large mirror, — so at first it seemed to me in my confusion — now stood where none had been perceptible before; and, as I stepped up to it in extremity of terror, mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood, advanced to meet me with a feeble and tottering gait. (P & T 356)

Poe’s ingenious contrivance of the mirror reflects the scene of the murder vertiginously, turning it into a mirage which erases the line between dream and reality, self and other. The stabbed victim reflects to Wilson a hair-raising image: “Not a thread in all his raiment — not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face which was not, even in the most absolute identity” Wilson’s own (356). The lines are transgressed, the limits shattered, the names and identities confused. What is it that Wilson has before his eyes? Is it the dying double of his school years or the reflection of his own self, committing suicide? The final paragraph of the story is more confusing than illuminating:

It was Wilson; but he spoke no longer in a whisper, and I could have fancied that I myself was speaking while he said:

“You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead — dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope! In me didst thou exist — and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.” (P & T 356)

The prophetic tinge of the language turns these final words into a curse cast by the dying double, and the reader is left with more doubts than before. Did Wilson kill an imaginary double that incarnated his conscience or did the corrupt part kill the original, benign self? Did we, after all, read a story filtered through the prism of a subconscious anomaly?
A Freudian reading of the story would of course point towards the feeling of *Unheimliche* generated by the double, as explained in the 1919 essay “On the Uncanny”, where two tales by E.T.A. Hoffmann\(^{24}\) are used as examples. Thus, Wilson’s double could be read as a familiar sight/ memory/ object of the past that returns as something unfamiliar, and becomes a vision of terror. The double’s uncanniness also alludes to Otto Rank’s work on the Doppelgänger concerning the primordial, collective superstitions of humanity about mirror-reflections, shadows, twins, etc., which are originally thought of as conquerors of death. But, as Freud points out, such aspects “have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which holds sway in the mind of the child as in that of primitive man”, and, therefore, when this stage is left behind, the double turns from “an assurance of immortality” into “the ghastly harbinger of death” (82).

This fatal aspect of replication is also echoed in Lacan’s famous theory of mirror-stage identification in the aggressivity that it entails. The subject’s identification through the beholding of the Other vertiginously reflects the doubling of Wilson, but also Dupin’s fluid identity that is acquired through his identification with his opponent. It is interesting to note that Lacan conceives of the mirror stage as “as an experience that leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the *Cogito*” (*Écrits* 1). In other words, the identification of the subject is not established, according to the French psychoanalyst, through the Cartesian *cogito*. This assumption, which brings into mind Poe’s privileging of imagination over thinking, turns Dupin (the absolute thinker) into a man of primordial instincts rather than into a man of reason; at the same time, it unveils the aggressivity lying beneath his ambivalent

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\(^{24}\) A very appropriate example in our case, since Hoffmann’s deranged characters are considered to be one of Poe’s major influences. George B. Von Der Lippe’s article, “The Figure of E.T.A. Hoffmann as *Doppelgänger* to Poe’s Frederick Usher” (1977), in particular, proves that Hoffmann himself had probably provided the prototype for the most infamous protagonist of Poe, Frederick Usher.
mode of doubling as it drives him to become the other each time he identifies with his opponent — or, to use Lacan’s words, each time “the slave (identifies) with the despot, the actor with the spectator, the seduced with the seducer” (Écrits 19).

In the case of William Wilson, the double is certainly proved to be fatal, since the feud between the two men is resolved only through death. The final paragraph of the story, in which the double acknowledges his defeat, at the same time dragging Wilson along with him to death, inaugurates a battle that is to be repeated in most detective tales. Whereas in Wilson’s case the defeat of the mirror-opponent inevitably entails the destruction of the protagonist, in the detective tale only the double must perish. Unlike the fantastic tale, where doubt is left unresolved, the detective story must be completed with a restoration of order that demands the defeat of the criminal. When we deal, later on, with Borges’s inverted detective stories, we will encounter again the same battle between the twin figures, but, this time, to witness the defeat of the arrogant detective.

The Dupin tales, being proto-detective, could thus be read in terms of the fatal confrontation between the sleuth and its alter ego. The end of “The Purloined Letter” is often seen as the final act of the battle left unfinished in “William Wilson”. The psychoanalytic delineations of the doubling motif in the story have been famously analyzed by Lacan and Derrida. Lacan’s reading of the story in terms of language and truth and Derrida’s response to it have triggered an ongoing debate, thoroughly presented in the anthology of essays entitled The Purloined Poe (1988). Since however, my interest lies mainly in the philosophic delineations of the two-sided detective, I will not, at present, deal with the motif of the double in terms of castration, blindness and vision or in terms of the gap between signifier and signified.
Instead, I would like to further pursue the argument of the magmatic logic of the human soul, in relation to Dupin’s duplicity.

The splitting of the detective is obviously yet another dichotomy raised, which brings us back to the contradistinctions between internal/external, subject/object, self/other, and the questions concerning agency. But, at this point, our interest in this conscious/unconscious distinction — the philosophical and scientific prehistory of which is extremely rich — should go beyond empirical determinations or pleasure principles and reality principles. It should rather focus on imagination as the source of everything.

**The Blurring of Dichotomies**

Dupin’s unencumbered digression through the aforementioned dichotomies should perhaps lead us beyond Cartesian dichotomies, to what psychoanalysis, according to Castoriadis’s “Psychoanalysis and Philosophy” (1996), has shown us over the years: “the plurality of the subjects contained within the same envelope — and the fact that it is very much a question of an agency or instance (*Instanz*) that possesses the essential attributes of a subject” (350). Elucidation of the soul would therefore be of capital philosophical importance, claims Castoriadis, and one of the things psychoanalysis obliges us to see would be that “the human being is not a *zoon logon ekhon* [an animal possessing ‘reason’] but essentially an imagining being, one endowed with radical, unmotivated, defunctionalized imagination” (351).

The Castoriadian privileging of imagination over reason, as a defining attribute of the human soul, offers a new way in to Dupin’s contrasting vocabularies: unreason should not necessarily be seen as the result of excessive reason; splitting/replicating should not be seen as a deviation from the rational, ensemblistic and whole
self; the two seemingly opposing states could rather be seen as two instances of the plurality of subjects, one functional and one anti-functional, but both emanating from imagination. Auguste Dupin may thus not be the original self who doubles into a hateful other, in the guise of Minister D—; he may quite as well be a functional self, cathected from the human soul. And it would be interesting to look at the enigmatic diversity in Poe’s work not simply in the light of a synthesis of contraries, but in the light of a playful realization that logic is as inexplicable a drive as the “imp of the perverse”. In other words, imagination may be responsible for both the functional and the defunctionalized relationship of human beings with their environment.

According to Castoriadis’s “Psychoanalysis and Philosophy”, human imagination is essentially “generic”, and its products are “stable and infinitely repetitive”, because of “functional enslavement” (356). However, it is “radical” imagination, the power breaking the closure of functionality, that decisively determines our humanity. In other words, it is the “autonomization of the imagination” that releases us “from the requirements of biological finality” and determines the essence of human psychical processes (356).

“Every living being” says Castoriadis”, “is a being for itself”, which means that “it creates its own world”, and which, in its turn, implies “that it ‘has’ or that it is [...] a soul” (356). The fundamental determination of the soul is imagination.

Imagination is the capacity to make be what is not in the simply physical world and, first and foremost, to represent to oneself and in one’s own way — that is, to present for oneself — that which surrounds the living being and matters for it and, undoubtedly also, its own being. In the case of “external” representation — of perception — this presentation is conditioned, but not caused, by the being-thus of the environment and of the “objects” it encounters
there. At the same time, the living being makes be the equivalent of what we call affect (pleasure/displeasure) and intention (search/avoidance). The living being aims at something, relative to its “self” and relative to what it creates as its “environment”. The affect is, to begin with, a decisive “signal” of its relationship with the environment. (356)

This relationship is essentially, for obvious reasons, functional, since as Castoriadis puts it in “Psychoanalysis and Philosophy”, the “imagination of the living being is, in the main, enslaved to its instrumental functions: conservation and reproduction”, an enslavement which entails the “closure of the proper world” the living being creates (356). The emergence of the human from within the living being is expressed by a “rupture”, an “alteration” of imagination, “which becomes, henceforth, radical, constantly creative imagination, the uninterrupted surging forth, in the (unconscious as well as in conscious) psychical world, of a spontaneous and unmasterable flux of representations, affects and desires” (356).

The Dupin tale is different from any other detective tale because, in actuality, it does not bring forth a rupture between self and other. It rather constitutes a rupture from the closure of the proper world, in that it contains two seemingly opposing figures, which are, nevertheless, both creations of the radical imagination of the human being, and which both destabilize meaning at the same time they are generating it. The ontological aspect of the Poesque ratiocination tale is based exactly on its lack of properly dividing lines; the dichotomies that formulate the detective formula following Poe are based on an ensemblistic logic that Dupin undermines rather than relies on. In other words the dichotomies of Sherlock Holmes and of his descendants are based on the logic of the principle of identity, of contradistinction and of the excluded third. This ensemblistic logic, found at the base of mathematics
(theory of sets or ensembles), is essential in everything we say and do; it is a logic of determinacy. But, while it is part of the human soul, it does not exhaust it. Dupin’s method has been notorious for its discrepancies and for its violation of the ensemblistic logic mentioned above, due to the fact that it does not keep the dichotomies properly dichotomized. Likewise, his identity has been ellusive because of his magmatic encompassing of all other identities. He is known to have been identified by critics both with Minister D—and with the orangutan, because he incarnates both the application of meaning and the realization that this meaning is groundless.

The paradox of the Dupin tale lies therefore in its generating a formula of determinacy, while not being generic itself. That is, it worked as a prototype for the “construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the limitations of the world of our experience”, to use John Cawelti’s definition of formula from “The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Culture” (13), while it essentially pointed at the mask. The construct of the poet/mathematician reasoner as perceived by Poe is not actually based on resolution (of mysteries or of conflicts) but on investment of meaning. Rather than being a matter of something that has to be disentangled, the process of the reasoner is first and foremost a matter of entangling, of binding together. Slavoj Žižek would call the detective a “guarantor of meaning” in the circular structure of the detective story (59). At the beginning, explains Žižek, we have only “a void, a blank of the unexplained, more properly, of the unnarrated (‘How did it happen? What happened on the night of the murder?’)” (59). The detective’s attempt to “reconstruct the missing narrative by interpreting the clues” helps the reader reach the beginning at the very end of the story as its structure encircles the original void (59).
Perhaps the reasoner’s attempt to create meaning by telling the story in its proper order, only reflects a desire that lies deep inside our consciousness: to encircle the void of our cosmos by constructing a narration of the unnarrated. It is imagination, as a power of the human soul, that creates the riddle it is then called for to solve. This realization, which lies at the foundation of the Borgesian tale is already present in Poe, who refuses to keep dichotomies intact and who uses them in an ironic way, especially in the ratiocination tale that is usually regarded as the one more clearly dichotomized. Thus, the protagonists of “The Imp of the Perverse” or of “The Tell-Tale Heart”, who succumb to inner drives of self-aggression or self-punishment, properly assigned to rupture or splitting, have never posed a riddle as considerable as the one posed by Dupin, who succumbs to a desire to form a dichotomy before trying to resolve it. It is the fault of reading Dupin as a canonical figure that makes his replications look disturbing. On the contrary, the Chevalier should be read as the incarnation of a desire/ drive to impose meaning and order onto chaos as powerful and perhaps as dangerous — but, nevertheless, as distinctly human — as the desire/ drive to break the order of meaning.

For Castoriadis, this power to create meaning or a Cosmos is as essential to the human being as its groundlessness. In “Culture in a Democratic Society” (1994) he describes Being both as “Chaos, Abyss, Groundlessness” and “Creation” (342). It is, he says, “a vis formandi (a power of formation) which is not predetermined and which superimposes on the Chaos a Cosmos, a World that is organized and ordered somehow or other” (342). And he continues:

In the same way, the human, too, is Abyss, Chaos, Groundlessness — not only in as much as it participates in being in general (for example, qua matter and qua living matter) but also in as much as we are beings of imagination and of
the imaginary. The emergence of these determinations itself manifests the creation and the *vis formandi* that appertain to being as such, but these determinations also concretely realize the mode of being of the creation and *vis formandi* specific to the properly human. Here we can do no more than note the fact that this *vis formandi* is accompanied, in the human sphere, by a *libido formandi*: to the potential for creation found in being in general, the human sphere adds a desire for formation. I call this potential and this desire ‘poietic’ element of humanity. Reason itself, in its specifically human form (which is not the same as the rationality intrinsic to animals, for example), is but an offspring thereof. (342)

Creation, according to Castoriadis, is the essence of our being, and to this potential of creation, the human sphere adds “a desire for formation”. And it is to this potential and desire for formation that Castoriadis assigns the poetic element of humanity (besides, we should not forget that poiesis in Greek \(\piοίησις\) is synonymous to creation). Likewise, Reason in its human form emanates also from this potential and desire for formation. The human soul is both a poet and a mathematician. In “Culture in a Democratic Society” Castoriadis writes:

The “meaning” with which human beings wish to, and must, always invest the world, their society, their own persons and life is nothing other than this formation, this *Bildung*, this setting into order. Perpetual and perpetually endangered, this effort is that of a gathering together of all that presents itself, and of all that it itself gives rise to, into an order, an organization, a Cosmos. When man organizes rationally — “ensidically” [in an enslemblistic-identitary manner] — he does nothing but reproduce, repeat, or prolong already existing forms. But when he organizes poetically, he gives form to the Chaos. This
giving-of-form to the Chaos (to the Chaos of what is and that within man himself) — which is, perhaps, the best definition of culture — manifests itself with striking clarity in the case of art. This form is meaning or signification. Signification here is not a simple matter of ideas or representations, for it must gather together — bind in a form — representation, desire, and affect. (342-43)

To give form to the Chaos, this is what poetic creation is. It is, in other words, “meaning and signification” produced by binding together “representation, desire and affect”, emanating from the “social instituting imaginary”. For Castoriadis, therefore, “radical” (as he calls it) imagination is the source of everything, and its role is double: it invents or, rather, it creates, but it also binds together.

The seat of this vis formandi as radical imagination is the singular human being, more specifically its psyche. The seat of this vis as instituting social imaginary is the anonymous collective, and more generally, the social-historical field. (322)

It is what makes it possible for any human to create a world in which they can place themselves, by formulating, organizing, filtering all external “shocks” through their sensory and logical dimension, but also it is what makes it possible for all of us to create an “inside” world, which is “a perpetual, truly Heraclitean, flux of representations cum affects cum intentions” (327).

It is this “inside” which conditions and makes possible, first, a “distanciation” relative to the world considered as simply “given”, and, second, an active and acting Einstellung, position and disposition, towards the world. (327)

This imagination which Castoriadis talks about is not only responsible for the creation and reproduction of the conventions we live by. In other words, it does not only allow us to position ourselves within a world, but it is also responsible for
inventing/creating our dis-position in this world, our stance towards it, our questioning; and art is a form of this dis-position. But what happens within this world and society we have created and positioned ourselves in? According to what Castoriadis says in “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary”, society, as “a quasi-totality held together by institutions (language, norms, family forms, tools and production modes, etc.) and by the significations these institutions embody (totem, taboos, gods, God, \textit{polis}, commodities, wealth, fatherland, etc.)” (332), provides us with meaning (the aforementioned “representation, desire and affect”). This meaning, remarks Castoriadis in “Culture in a Democratic Society”, has been given to us, through the centuries, by Religion,\footnote{Castoriadis adds here the meaning of the Latin word \textit{religere}: “to bind [\textit{lier}] not only the members of a collectivity but everything […] that presents itself, and to bind the former with the latter” (343).} and it has been coupled both “with a transcendental guarantee” and with “a closure”, “by denying to living humanity the possibility of creating meaning: all meaning [sens], and all nonsense, has been created once and for all” (343). “The \textit{vis formandi} is thus reduced and strictly channeled, and the \textit{libido formandi} is limited to an enjoyment of its past products, without knowing that they are its own doing” (343).

However, within a democratic society, all (democratic) creation should be “the creation of unlimited interrogation in all domains” (343), what will eventually break the closure of signification. But this also presupposes that we accept as fact “that there is not, as a treasure that has been hidden or that is to be found, any ‘signification’ in being, the world, history, or our own lives”, since all signification is created by us, upon groundlessness and baselessness (343-44). We are alone in being, but we are not solipsists, “since our creation […] leans on being”:

\[\text{S}\]ince our creation is constantly relaunched by our confrontation with being and kept into motion by the effort to give form to that which lends itself
thereto only partially and fleetingly — whether it be the visible or the audible world, our being in common or our innermost life — and since our creation is thus generally ephemeral, sometimes durable, always risky, and, in the very end, caught within the horizon of destruction — which in being is the flipside of creation. (344)

Recapitulating — and to explain why this digression was necessary — I would like to draw attention to the fact that radical imagination, as defined by Castoriadis, seems to me both the attempt to question meaning/ signification, but also the source/ creation of this meaning/ signification. To put it in other (proper detective) words, it is both the attempt to solve the mystery as well as the creation of the mystery itself. The delicate realization, as explained by Castoriadis, that “there is not, as a treasure that has been hidden or that is to be found” (343) any meaning/ signification is what perhaps gave rise to the Poesque ratiocinative tale, and what, consequently, gave rise to the metaphysical tale invented by Borges, who chose this narrative vehicle, consciously, as the paradigm of humanity’s (ontological) search for meaning, outside the transcendental closure of religious signification. The Borgesian tale could thus be read as part of what Castoriadis calls in “Culture in a Democratic Society” “the properly modern phase of the Western world, from the great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, which were democratic and in fact de-Christianizing, until around 1950” (345). As such, as we shall now see, it poses questions similar to those posed by Poe in the first half of the nineteenth century.


Part II: Borges

FICTIONAL PARADOXES

The Turn of the Century

At the turn of the twentieth century the Galilean faith in a totalizing determinism is lost, and along with this loss comes a loss of faith in self-contained systems. The formulation of thermodynamics (by Helmholtz in the first half of nineteenth century and by Clausius and Boltzmann in the second half) had already wounded the systemic, rational model of Newtonian machinery, by inserting the factor of time (or rather, the historical factor) within the cosmic picture. By 1905 the uniform, axiomatized world was forced to succumb to the successive explosions of quanta, of relativity, of uncertainty and undecidability. The process of knowing the object was no longer seen as independent from the subject; the cosmological question was revived; science was forced to reconsider its ineffable bond to well-defined, determinate, closed sets. The, once powerful, ensidic (enssemblistic-identitarian) logic that bred the figure of the observant ratiocinator, who was capable of reconstructing Trichinopolis cigars from their ashes, should, at the dawn of modern science, have been abandoned or reconsidered at the least.

It seems, therefore, quite surprising the fervour with which ensidic detectives, that could analyze a twelve-times stabbed body into twelve separate motives, kept appearing for the better part of the first half of the new century. Perhaps, the impetus of a rationalism that was too stubbornly fighting against the quantum paradoxes unleashed by Einstein’s relativity kept them going, for proof against all odds. The Golden Age notwithstanding, the figure of the detective was contaminated by the

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1 For more details see Thiher’s Science Refracts Fiction, 34-37.
oncoming angst of the century — Chesterton’s idiosyncratic detective stories should perhaps be read in the light of this crisis in the positivist model, but this is an assumption that cannot be dealt with at this point — as the doyens of the genre strove to make it respectable, convincing and always more original. S. S. Van Dine’s famous twenty rules, to which every writer of detective stories must abide, presented by his detective Philo Vance, in The Green Murder Case (1928), is a typical example, already mentioned. However, the more rules were set the more conventional the tale was becoming, unable to escape the fixed centeredness of a world “at once orderly, stable, resistant to change, and relatively free of contingency” (Malmgren 116). In the 1940’s, one can even hear famous cries of indignation, such as Raymond Chandler’s “The Simple Art of Murder” (1944 & 1950),² or Edmund Wilson’s severe accusations of unimaginative copying of the Sherlockian model and a dead, mechanistic reiteration of formulaic elements, as already mentioned.

Borges’s first rehearsal of a detective tale appears in 1941 with “The Garden of Forking Paths”, followed in 1942 by “Death and the Compass”. However, he — not surprisingly — singles out Chesterton, in his essays published in Sur magazine, as early as 1932 (“Narrative Art and Magic”) and again in 1935, when he deals with the tale in more detail, in “The Labyrinths of the Detective Story and Chesterton”. Besides, Borges was always eager to acknowledge his debt to Father Brown’s tale, most notably in the almost-detective story “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” (1944), where he attempts a re-writing of Chesterton’s “The Sign of the Broken Sword” (1911). As Borges is a writer who, like the Modernists, had to encounter the discontinuity brought by the overturning of Galilean science, one could perhaps see in his praise of Chesterton’s “phantasmagorias” and “premonitions” (Total Labyrinth

² Raymond Chandler used the same title, “The Simple Art of Murder”, for two different articles: one published in The Atlantic Monthly 174, on December 1944, and the other in The Saturday Review 33, on April 1950.
an appreciation of contingent events, that are not effects of particular, antecedent causes. But, while Father Brown confronts indeterminacy armed with a religious faith in the miracle, Borges’s detectives must find their way through the labyrinths of different epistemic models, constructed by narrators, who keep an ironic distance. “The Garden of Forking Paths” and “Death and the Compass” are excellent rehearsals of such epistemic models — that first appear as contemplations in many of Borges’s famous stories and essays — haunted by the infinity that steals its way in the well-defined sets of ensidic logic.

Borges’s metaphysical detective tale reflects the malaise of a modern science that cannot reconcile the infinitely small with the infinitely large, and cannot ignore the entropic drive of a world that is expanding. His geometrized crimes carry the undoing of well-defined sets and classifications, the contamination of the principles of identity and non-contradiction by disturbing excluded middles, as well as the painful confrontation of the ratiocinator with the magma of theory-laden observations. His systems — whether they are libraries or lotteries or forking paths — are nauseating, because they reveal the hollow boundaries scientific systematization has managed to impose on the infinity of our world.

If therefore Borges’s metaphysical tales are read — to quote Thiher’s words — as “demonstrations of the contradictions of systemic thought” (23), it would be interesting to reconsider the paradoxes that persistently reappear in his stories, starting with a historical digression.

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3 “Avatars of the Tortoise” and “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” (Trans. James E. Irby), as well as “Death and the Compass” and “The Garden of Forking Paths” (Trans. Donald A. Yeats) are here quoted from Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings. “Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari Dead in his Labyrinth” (trans. Norman T. di Giovanni) is quoted from The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969. All other essays and stories by Borges cited in this dissertation are quoted from The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986.
Russell’s Paradox, the Cretans who Lie, and Zeno of Elea

According to Castoriadis’s “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1978), the first indication of a crisis in modern science should be localized in 1903, when set theory in mathematics is contaminated by the publication (as a post-scriptum to Gottlob Frege’s work on naïve set theory) of Bertrand Russell’s paradox (188). It is not positively known exactly when Russell came up with the paradox. Most probably it is the result of his work on Georg Cantor’s theory of sets and it may have been published as early as 1901. However, it famously appears for the first time in Frege’s second volume of Grundgesetze der Arithmetik (The Basic Laws of Arithmetic), in 1903.

The paradox, as A. D. Irvine explains it in “Russell’s Paradox”, arises within Frege’s naive set theory “by considering the set of all sets that are not members of themselves. Such a set appears to be a member of itself if and only if it is not a member of itself, hence the paradox” (Stanford Encyclopedia). In other words, if one considers a set that includes other sets, then such a set would also be the set that includes all sets. By definition, all sets, including the aforementioned set, are members of the set of all sets. Correspondingly, one could also conceive of the set of all sets that do not include themselves. In this case, if one pondered if this set includes itself, they would realize that it does if it does not and it does not if it does.4 The significance of Russell’s paradox can be seen when using classical logic, writes

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4 The nauseating impossibility of Russell’s paradoxical set brings into mind Michel Foucault’s “language to infinity” and the paradox of the book:

If we make a book that tells of all the others, would it or would it not be a book itself? Must it tell its own story as if it were a book among others? And if it does not tell its story, what could it possibly be, since its objective was to be a book? Why should it omit its own story, since it is required to speak of every book? (100)

For Foucault literature begins when “the book is no longer the space where speech adopts a form (forms of style, forms of rhetoric, forms of language) but the site where books are all recaptured and consumed: a site that is nowhere, since it gathers all the books of the past in this impossible ‘volume’ whose murmuring will be shelved among so many others — after all the others, before all the others” (100-101).
Irvine, once we realize that all sentences follow from a contradiction (Stanford Encyclopedia). Because of this reason, he explains, and also because set theory is fundamental — since it underlies all branches of mathematics — people started worrying that, if set theory could no longer be trusted, then mathematical proof could not be trusted either (Stanford Encyclopedia).

Russell’s paradox appears at a time when Western thought, and especially mathematics, is dominant and thought of as infallible. Nothing could foreshadow the corrosive advent of the infamous paradox in 1900, when David Hilbert urged towards the solution of twenty-three mathematical problems in an attempt to establish the authority of twentieth-century science. One of Hilbert’s problems was the famous proof of non-contradiction in mathematics. More specifically, his intention was to formalize all of mathematics in axiomatic form, together with a proof that this axiomatization of mathematics is consistent. As Richard Zach explains it in “Hilbert’s Program”, “Hilbert thus realized that a direct consistency proof of analysis, i.e., one not based on reduction to another theory, was needed. He proposed the problem of finding such a proof as the second of his 23 mathematical problems in his address to the International Congress of Mathematicians in 1900” (Stanford Encyclopedia).

Castoriadis points out in his “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” that, in the crisis that followed, mathematicians were forced to reconsider fundamental notions of their science such as the object of mathematics, the notion of proof as well as the notion of mathematical truth (188). Russell himself developed his theory of types in an attempt to limit the bad infinity of the paradox. According to Irvine’s “Russell’s Paradox”, two famous responses to the paradox were those of Hilbert and the formalists, and of Luitzen Brouwer and the intuitionists, respectively, while, finally, Ernst Zermelo’s axiomatization of set theory in 1908 was
the fourth attempt to resolve the paradox (Stanford Encyclopedia). All four responses turned, more or less to kinds of meta-logical and meta-mathematical results (Hilbert himself suggested a way out by introducing meta-mathematics), and perhaps, as Castoriadis rightly observes in his essay, one begins to wonder about whether the creation of yet another, larger set, in this case meta-mathematics, would offer any more help when it comes to the problems of proof and axiomatization (189). However, continues Castoriadis, it was because of Hilbert’s monumental work that science was led to Kurt Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, in 1931, according to which, in the context of a sufficiently strong system of arithmetic there may exist not-provable statements, that is, undecidable statements, in which case, the system is incomplete (189). Evidently, non-contradiction could not be proved within such an incomplete system. Gödel proved his theorem by formalizing Russell’s paradox, and brought the notion of undecidability to the foreground. While Gödel’s theorems have no real, objective significance, Castoriadis rightly underlines the fact that their consequence is extremely disturbing, since they actually imply that the consistency of a system is nothing but a very probable conjecture, whereas a future occurrence of a contradiction remains always logically possible (189).

Russell’s paradox and Gödel’s theorems triggered a problematic that pervades the truth of mathematics until today. The construction of meta-languages and meta-systems that followed Russell and Gödel did not resolve the situation any further since it only multiplied the problematic in infinity.

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5 Castoriadis mentions, in the same essay, Alfred Tarski’s famous solution which suggested that we can turn all the statements of a given system into decidable statements by placing the system within another, richer one. Needless to say, the latter would unavoidably include undecidable statements, and in this case, we would have to place this new system within another, richer meta-system, which would also include undecidable statements, etc. This regressus ad infinitum does nothing but suspend the resolution of the case in hand, namely, that in natural thought and language every attribute defines a class (every property is aggregational). If we try to turn the statement “the set of all sets” into a statement without meaning, so that its object does not exist, so that the relationship is not aggregational, then, unavoidably, the theory of sets becomes void (190-91).
Physics was also shaken and weakened by the crisis that followed 1900, and, what is more, the reconsideration of its object, thought and subject could not be resolved through the construction of a meta-language. Actually, Castoriadis mentions in his essay Heisenberg’s ironic remark concerning the ardent supporters of logical positivism who readily accept meta-mathematics, but hesitate to accept the prefix “meta” in front of the word physics (195). The twentieth century brought about a new order in physics which, on the one hand, was dictated by the realization of the fact that the traditional notion of there existing well-defined natural systems — the properties of which could remain unaffected by any possible observer — should be abandoned, and, on the other hand, by the paradoxical behaviour of interacting quantum systems.

While the disturbing consequences of quantum physics require a more thorough exploration in relation to Borges’s stories, we should first of all focus on the actual implications of paradoxes that trigger bad infinity, in the work of the Argentinean writer. The aforementioned paradox of Bertrand Russell belongs to the category of logical paradoxes that lead to a contradiction. A famous example of such a paradox is the one of Epimenides or the liar paradox. Epimenides, a sixth-century BC philosopher and poet, reportedly\(^6\) formulated the infamous statement “All Cretans are liars”. Himself being a Cretan, Epimenides poses a riddle concerning the truth value of his statement: if the statement is true, then Epimenides is lying, and in this case all Cretans are not liars, a fact which, in its turn changes the truth value of the statement, and so on, in infinity. Russell’s paradox is a different version of the liar paradox, in terms of set theory.

\(^6\) The original writings of Epimenides have been lost and the only confirmed record of the statement is St. Paul quoting it in his Epistle to Titus.
Another type of paradox would be the one in which logic refutes experience. Needless to say, the most famous example of this type would be Zeno’s four arguments concerning motion. These famous Eleatic sophistries are mentioned and refuted by Aristotle in his *Physics*. Of the four of them, we shall focus on the three first, since they appear in several, intermingled forms in Borges’s stories. The first one, which Aristotle calls “the dichotomy” denies motion, “on the ground that that which is in locomotion must arrive at the half-way stage before it arrives at the goal” (*Physics* 239b11-13) The second one, the so-called “Achilles”, claims “that in the race the quickest runner can never overtake the slowest, since the pursuer must first reach the point whence the pursued started, so that the slower must always have a lead” (239b14-16) The third is the one which claims that “that which is in locomotion is always in a now, the flying arrow is therefore motionless.” (239b6-7) The arguments of the dichotomy and the Achilles give rise to the problem of an infinite series of half-way points that have to be passed before the goal is reached, so it seems that they both refute space. The arrow-argument is based on the premise (which Aristotle deems false) that time is made up of successive nows, and it, therefore, refutes time.

The impossibility of reaching the end of an infinite series or, to put it in other words, the infinite divisibility of time and space as proved by the paradoxes, represent for Borges the deconstruction of humanity’s closed systems by the infinite, a “worrisome” or “treacherous” word, as he describes it in “The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise” (1929) (a first version of his most famous “Avatars of the Tortoise” from 1939), which, “once it besets our thinking, explodes and annihilates it” (*TL* 47). This upsetting concept is a contradiction arising from our attempts to avoid contradiction, to exhaust the infinite or, as Borges puts it in “Avatars of the Tortoise”, it is one of the “tenuous and eternal crevices of unreason” we, ourselves, have
“allowed” in the architecture of a world we have “dreamt”, “as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time” (Labyrinths 243). While the adjectives “firm”, “visible”, “ubiquitous in space” and “durable in time” clearly refer to the Newtonian vision of the world that had to be reassessed after Einstein, the word “mysterious” strikes as the odd one out in the series. Rather than a playful insertion of a lexical “crevice of unreason”, the word probably alludes to the significance of riddles: in contemplation of the cosmos we see a mystery, a riddle. Thus, we project onto it the properties of a mathematical problem, that cannot be solved in any other way than the positivist way. Similarly, Borges’s detective exercises are non-existent riddles that materialize from the detective’s tendency to manufacture relationships and create sets, more geometrico. All of them, including “Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in his Labyrinth” (1949), a tale which Borges describes as his detective “swan song”, “a cross between a permissible detective story and a caricature of one” (Aleph 178), include labyrinths in one form or another. These labyrinths allude to the aforementioned paradoxes or, rather, to the detective’s/ scientist’s failure to exhaust the infinite. The higher the walls of the labyrinth, the easier for the infinite to steal its way in the set; the more the rules and principles of definitiveness, the greater the disorder.

**Explaining the Murder by Turning it into an Element of a Series**

The plot of “Death and the Compass” takes the shape of the above-mentioned paradoxical labyrinth: the detective must solve the riddle to be able to realize that there was never a riddle to be solved; or worse, the detective will fail if s/he solves the riddle (because s/he will then die) and succeed if s/he fails to solve it (because then

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7 Latin for “according to the methods of geometry”. Borges uses the famous term in “Death and the Compass” For more details see: Fishburn & Hughes, 165.
s/he will live). The story could, actually, be regarded as a first example of “metaphysical detection”, a term used by P. Merivale and S. E. Sweeney to describe the way in which “late modernist (sometimes proto-postmodernist) and postmodernist writers […] have used Poe’s ratiocinative process to address unfathomable epistemological and ontological questions: What, if anything, can we know? What, if anything, is real? How, if at all, can we rely on anything besides our own constructions of reality?” (4) Thus, in the fictional construction of “Death and the Compass”, the detective (the reader’s surrogate, actually) must learn the hard way that reality is mostly a human construction and that any attempt to exhaust the infinite, by eliminating chance, will most probably result in a situation of greater disorder.

In “Death and the Compass”, Lönnrot, the detective, is faced with the murder of a rabbi, Doctor Yarmolinski, and a piece of paper found in the rabbi’s typewriter, on which the following unfinished sentence is written: “The first letter of the Name has been uttered” (L. 108). His ensemblistic logic of approaching the crime (and reality, for that matter) obliges him to place the corpse and the sentence within a context, an aggregation of other, similar elements that hold the same properties, share a relationship and obey the same rules. In principle, if Lönnrot succeeds in placing the murder within a set, then he will succeed in turning it into something familiar, therefore in explaining it. He, thus, devises a Cabalistic pattern of murders, due to which the original (in fact, accidental) murder of the rabbi is multiplied, until finally, upon solving the mystery, Lönnrot becomes the victim to end the series. What condemns the detective to death is, of course, his eagerness to turn an incident, in this case a murder, into an element of a set.

Borges’s detective must, therefore, disagree — as Dupin had also disagreed a century before him — with the Police Inspector, Treviranus, who considers
murder accidental, a consequence of an attempted robbery of the sapphires owned by 
the Tetrarch of Galilee, who occupied the room opposite Yarmolisnki’s, in the Hôtel 
du Nord. Lönnrot finds the conjecture “possible, but not interesting” (L106):

“You’ll reply that reality hasn’t the least obligation to be interesting. And I’ll 
answer you that reality may avoid that obligation but that hypotheses may not. 
In the hypothesis that you propose, chance intervenes copiously. Here we have 
a dead rabbi; I would prefer a purely rabbinical explanation, not the imaginary 
mischances of an imaginary robber.” (107)

What Lönnrot admits is that in his hypothesis there should be no room for chance. 
Contingency “intervenes copiously”, that is, it allows for bifurcations, the bad infinity 
of which contaminates the impermeability of a conjecture. A hypothesis proposing the 
solution to a crime should, therefore, have the exactness of a mathematical problem; it 
should also bear its classificatory trait: a dead rabbi calls for a “rabbinical” 
explanation.

Lönnrot is introduced, by the imperceptibly ironic narrator, in the beginning of 
the story, as someone who believed himself “a pure reasoner, an Auguste Dupin” 
(106). This allusion to the forefather of the ratiocination tale, works in several ways. 
On the one hand, it foreshadows the tragic end of an arrogant detective that must pay 
for his hubris, and, on the other hand, it reveals Lönnrot’s ensemblistic logic of 
approaching reality as a closed system of relations, similar to fictional constructions 
that do not allow for any “mischances”. Finally, it alludes specifically to Poe’s theory 
of backward construction, described in “The Philosophy of Composition” as a strict 
causal mechanism, akin to the “precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical
It is not surprising, therefore, the fact that Lönnrot will, later in the story, use a pair of dividers and a compass to solve the mystery more geometrico. But what he forgets, in the self-reflexive construct of his fictional world, is that “a rigorous scheme of attentions, echoes and affinities” is proper only to the world of the novel and not to the “overwhelming disorder” of our world or the natural, “incessant result of endless, uncontrollable causes and effects” (TL 81-2). Only in the end will Lönnrot realize that his attempt to explain things by placing them within a set, as if they were elements of a fictional causal chain, was part of another construction, a mystery-plot staged by his opponent, Red Scharlach, which, in its turn, was yet another plot, a fictional mise-en-scène, set by Borges. Lönnrot’s chanceless “rabbinical explanation” — which he realizes he should never have wished for — has been famously called by Umberto Eco, in The Limits of Interpretation, “a mechanism of conjecture in a sick Spinozist universe” (161):

To be sure that the mind of the detective has reconstructed the sequence of the facts and of the rules as they had to be, one must believe a profound Spinozist notion that “ordo et connexio rerum est ac ordo et connexio idearum.” The movements of our mind that investigates follows the same rules of the real. If we think “well,” we are obligated to think according to the same rules that connect things among themselves. (160)

For instance, if Dupin is able to identify his intellect with that of his opponent, he will succeed in recovering the letter. In fact, the detective of Eco’s Spinozist universe, as described in The Limits of Interpretation, “will also know what the killer will do tomorrow”, and decide to wait for him/her in the next scene of the crime (160). However, there is always the danger of the killer reasoning as well as the

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8 As Ernesto Sabato puts it in “Les Deux Borges”, in “Death and the Compass” no crimes are committed; on the contrary, a theorem is demonstrated (175).
detective. In this case, writes Eco, “he will be able to act in such a way that the
detective will go and wait for him at the scene of the next crime, but the victim of the
killer’s next crime will be the detective himself” (160).

As the unfinished sentence found in Yarmolinski’s typewriter alludes to the
secret name of God according to Judaism, Lönnrot tries to relate it with the corpse of
the rabbi. He gets immersed into texts of Hebraic tradition, and starts studying the
mysteries of the diverse names of God. A mechanism is thus set into motion: Red
Scharlach (sworn on his honor to kill Lönnrot) is motivated to commit the two
following murders, so that the original crime is turned into a term that would fit the
detective’s system. A pattern is gradually formulated as the *locus delicti* is dispersed
from the Hôtel du Nord, to the western suburbs of Buenos Aires and then to the east
in Rue de Toulon. The murders staged by Scharlach occur on the third of each month.
Everything suggests a “triple mystery” and then the inspector receives an envelope,
containing a letter signed “Baruch Spinoza” (notice the echo of the Spinozist
universe), and a map of the Argentinean capital, on which a red triangle connecting
the places of the murders is drawn (*L* 111). Lönnrot studies the symmetries in space
and time and comes up with his solution: the rabbinical connection suggests a fourth
murder, one for each letter of the Hebrew name of God (JHVH, the
Tetragrammaton).⁹ Since the Hebrew day begins at sunset, the murders were
committed on the fourth and not on the third day of each month. Painted rhombs and
harlequins with diamonds on their costumes permeate the settings of the murders.
With a pair of dividers and a compass Lönnrot draws a rhombus on the map, and

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⁹ According to Fishburn’s and Hughes’ dictionary, the term comes from “the Greek word *tettara*, ‘four’
and *gramma*, ‘letter’: the technical name in Judaism for the four Hebrew letters J H V H denoting the
pre-eminent name of God: that which is separate from, and which exceeds, all other appellations” (237-38).
manages to predict the place of the final murder, with the Laplacean certainty of a scientist who foresees an already determined future.

But, as Eco points out in *The Limits of Interpretation*, the rules in the universe constructed by Borges “are not those of neopositivistic science; they are paradoxical rules” (161). It is a world governed by “an iron illogic” that follows the rules “of the *mise-en-scène* or of fiction” (161). Driven by the force of a fictional necessity, Lönnrot arrives at the abandoned, rectangular villa of Triste-le-Roy, somewhere to the south of the city, where, he thinks, he has anticipated the final meeting with the murderer. The building itself is, most fittingly, another series of terms. It abounds in “pointless symmetries and in maniacal repetitions” (*L* 113). Double statues of Diana mirror one another; double stairways lead to double balustrades; a two-faced Hermes casts its ominous shadow; two fountains lie silent in the garden; duplicate patios disorientate the detective and lead him to the same place again and again; as he reaches the second floor he feels the house “infinite and expanding” (114). The symmetrical (and, one would dare say, theatrical) architecture of the villa echoes the absurdity of a system that harbors the infinity, much like Russel’s paradox, which reveals the inherent contradiction of all closed systems.

Finally, Lönnrot arrives at a top oriel, where Red Scharlach awaits for him. The villain explains to the stupefied detective the premeditation of all murders to attract his hateful adversary, Lönnrot. He recounts the delirious nights he had spent in the villa, three years before, when he lay hidden with a bullet in the stomach, after an encounter with Lönnrot and the police. He describes a nightmare of a labyrinth that tormented him in his sleepless nights, as he pondered upon a phrase of Jesus: All roads lead to Rome. During those nights he felt that the world was also a labyrinth, “from which it was impossible to flee, for all roads, though they pretend to lead to the
north or south, actually lead to Rome” (115). In Scharlach’s words Lönnrot must
discern the infinite lurking in his systems; he must realize that those ensidic
hypotheses which appear to be leading to a certain direction, to the north or south,
actually only lead to Rome. The terms of the sequence he traced were a firm labyrinth
woven around him by his opponent. Scharlach explains to Lönnrot that the death of
the rabbi was accidental and that the article in the *Yidische Zaitung* claiming that the
detective was trying to relate Yarmolinski’s death with his writings gave him the idea
of a plot: “I knew that you would make the conjecture that the Hasidim had sacrificed
the rabbi; I set myself the task of justifying that conjecture” (115). The whole set of
murders is thus revealed as being staged. In fact, the third term of the series was not
even a real murder, but “a mock rehearsal”, just as Treviranus had all along suspected
(111). This is, actually, what Eco means by the “mechanism of conjecture in a sick
Spinozist universe”: in Borges’s universe “one is never confronted by chance, or by
Fate; one is always inside a plot (cosmic or situational) developed by some other
Mind according to a fantastic logic” (161).

Long before Lönnrot, Dupin had also matched his mind with that of his
opponent and he had become the thief who would catch a thief. This repetition, an
almost Freudian occurrence producing the feeling of an inescapable fate, turned the
world of “The Purloined Letter” into a true “mathematical problem”, governed by
strict causal relationships that did not allow for any accident. Dupin was thus
rehearsing the narrative days of detection as if re-visiting the scene of crime in a *déjà
vu* of an “always already” solved riddle. But while Dupin is successful in an orthodox
way (he solves the mystery and stays alive) and is never taken aback by the seemingly
*outré* coincidences of a mystery, since he already expects the unexpected, Lönnrot is
trapped into a Kafkaesque labyrinth of a play, from which he will never be able to
escape. His ensemblistic aggregation of cabalistic deaths is mirrored by another series in Scharlach’s plot/labyrinth: “a dead heresiologist, a compass, an eighteenth-century sect, a Greek word, a dagger, the diamonds of a paint shop” (L 116). Lönnrot’s classificatory cut in the world of “Death and the Compass” triggers Scharlach’s labyrinth, a mock rehearsal of aggregating things that cannot be aggregated into the same system.

The *Mise-en-scène* Mystery and a King Dead in his Labyrinth

A mystery functioning according to the laws of a *mise-en-scène* is repeated in almost all of Borges’s metaphysical tales. The instigator of those heinous staged-crimes is perhaps none other than Chesterton, whose “The Sign of the Broken Sword” (1911) is a story about the staging of an entire battle for the sole purpose of hiding a murdered man within a series of explained dead bodies (the best place to hide a pebble, as Father Brown would put it, is on a beach). We can therefore safely assume that it is this story that serves as a model for Borges’s “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” (1944),\(^{10}\) where the heroic death of Fergus Kilpatrick is proved a staged execution of a traitor. Likewise, “Death and the Compass” is a story about a criminal who stages the replication of a murder for the purpose of luring his detective/opponent into a death trap. Yu Tsun, the spy from “The Garden of Forking Paths” is also obliged to stage a crime, this time to succeed in communicating his secret to the Nazis. Finally, Zaid, the vizier from “Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in his Labyrinth” (1949) must, in a similar way, pretend being a king hunted down by his vizier, in order to mask the future murder of the real king, in his labyrinth.

\(^{10}\) Borges actually admits having been influenced by Chesterton (among others) at the very beginning of “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” (L 102).
In this last story, the mystery is also based on the formulation of a set. The two frame-characters contemplating upon it are, not surprisingly, a poet, and a mathematician. Dunraven, the poet, recounts the story of the remnants of a labyrinth, built on a Cornish coast, where king Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari found his death at the hands of his cousin and vizier, Zaid. The mystery, explains the poet, remains complex and unsolved for several reasons, which he enumerates, one after another. The mathematician gets impatient: “Don’t go on multiplying the mysteries”, he says (A 74). “They should be kept simple. Bear in mind Poe’s purloined letter, bear in mind Zangwill’s locked room” (74). “Or made complex” replies Dunraven. “Bear in mind the universe” (74).

Multiplication of mysteries, simplicity, complexity, the poet and the mathematician finally separated, are all elements of a set alluding to Poe, but also to Lönnrot, who insisted in complicating (and, for this reason, multiplying) the crime, just like our universe is made complex, because of our proliferation of scientific conjectures. The crime of this story is, of course, another aggregation of elements: a brave king, a faint-hearted vizier, a treasure, a labyrinth, a slave and a lion. According to the old tale-within-the-tale, the king and the vizier amass a great treasure, through reign of plunder; the king kills the vizier and flees with the treasure; haunted by the dead vizier, he ends up on the far reaches of Cornwall, where — accompanied by his slave and a lion — he builds a labyrinth and hides inside it. He is finally found murdered, with his face obliterated (just like he had also obliterated the vizier’s face); the slave and the lion are also found dead, their faces also bashed in. Unwin, the mathematician, feels there is something wrong with the old-time crime and decides to re-solve it. In the customary (for detective tales) final scene, where the reasoner/detective explains the solution of the crime, Unwin re-counts a story of staging: it was
the vizier who had stolen the treasure, but cowardly as he was, he hadn’t found the courage to kill the king. On the shores of Cornwall, he assumed the identity of his enemy and built a labyrinth that would lure the king, just like the spider who builds a web and waits for its victim. When years later, Ibn Hakkan arrives at the labyrinth, looking for his treacherous cousin and the treasure, he is murdered by the vizier, who then goes on to kill the slave and the lion, and finishes off the crime by crashing all three faces with a rock. “He had to do it that way”, explains Unwin (80). “One dead man with his face bashed in would have suggested a problem of identity, but the beast, the black man, and the king formed a series, and, given the first two terms, the last one would seem natural”(80).

Thus, Zaid “pretended to be Ibn Hakkan, he killed Ibn Hakkan, and in the end he became Ibn Hakkan” (81). It is true, of course, that “such metamorphoses are classic rules of the game” and “accepted conventions demanded by the reader”, as Borges, through Dunraven claims (80). On the other hand, fictional characters being involved in duplicitous situations of pretence/ disguise is a frequent devise in metafictional constructs like those of Borges. Still, we should underline the author’s double play as he employs a formulaic set, like the detective tale, to tell the story of a poet and a mathematician who try to de-construct a series, to solve the mystery of the killer who constructed a series by pretending to be the victim.

In all the above-mentioned cases a labyrinth is present. The forking paths of the homonymous tale are by far the most intricate and, therefore, the most beautiful of all. But before looking at this crystalline labyrinth in time, Zeno’s spatial labyrinth, placed as a disguised treasure at the end of Lönnrot’s tale, is worth revisiting.
Zeno’s labyrinth

When Lönnrot realizes he must become the fourth victim in order for his set to take form and for his riddle to be solved, he makes a final attempt to have the last word as he criticizes Scharlach’s maze: “In your labyrinth there are three lines too many,” he says, and reminds Lönnrot of “one Greek labyrinth which is a single straight line” (L 116).

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 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.’ (L 116)

The labyrinth of which Lönnrot is talking about is none other than the famous race of Achilles with the Tortoise. Placing an ancient paradox in the mouth of a soon-to-die detective is perhaps not without significance, in the tale of a proto-postmodernist writer. The Eleatic race of Achilles, which disturbs the boundaries of finite sets by suggesting infinite divisibility serves as a reminder of the disorder always lurking into the maze of order. It also serves as a direct allusion to the vertiginous effects of infinite regress. In “Avatars of the Tortoise” Borges lists a whole series of the same paradoxical regress: Aristotle’s refutation of the paradoxes and the argument of the third man, the Chinese sophist Hui Tzu and a staff that remains interminable although cut in two every day, Agrippa and the impossibility of proof, Thomas Aquinas and the non-contingent first cause of the Divinity, Hermann Lotze and his Spinozist monism, F. H. Bradley who uses the paradox to deny all
relations, William James and his fourteen minutes, Bertrand Russell using it to prove that the one is really many (L 237-242). Monism against pluralism; Aristotle versus Plato. And what is the conclusion with which Borges ends his enumeration of the avatars of the tortoise? That infinite regress is a proof of the fictionality of our world, of course. First of all, he emphasizes the fictionality of any philosophical (or scientific, for that matter) conjecture, accepting, at the same time, the significance of a plurality of conjectures:

   It is venturesome to think that a co-ordination of words (philosophies are nothing more than that) can resemble the universe very much. It is also venturesome to think that of all these illustrious co-ordinations, one of them — at least in an infinitesimal way — does not resemble the universe a bit more than the others. (243)

But of all those “co-ordinations of words”, Borges singles out one as being the only bearing some trait of the universe: Schopenhauer’s doctrine, according to which “the world is a fabrication of the will” (243).

Art — always — requires visible unrealities. Let it suffice for me to mention one: the metaphorical or numerous or carefully accidental diction of the interlocutors in a drama… Let us admit what all idealists admit: the hallucinatory nature of the world. Let us do what no idealist has done: seek unrealities which confirm that nature. (243)

Any conjecture that betrays the fictionality of our world is important, therefore, because it attests to our failure to exhaust the infinite, no matter how concrete the walls of our ensidic constructions:

   We (the undivided divinity operating within us) have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in
time; but in this architecture we have allowed tenuous and eternal crevices of uneven reason which tell us it is false. (243)

Thus, I would agree with Thiher’s remark that, for Borges, contradiction is “the inevitable result of any attempt at order and representation” (240). For Borges, claims Thiher, the universe is logically the collection, or set, of all the texts that would represent and explain it, including all the texts that one can imagine to explain all the texts that explain all the texts that explain all the texts, etc. Infinite regress, the logician’s horror, is the natural condition of knowledge generated by the infinite, quite simply because by definition the infinite maintains an infinite number of possible relations with everything else. (241)

As Thiher would put it, knowledge of the universe is made out of the claims of knowledge and the contradictions these claims engender; reality is made out of the infinite series of models and their contradictions (241).

Infinite regress is clearly an incongruity that invades our bastions of truth. Achilles’ regression is placed at the end of the story to remind us that as soon as Lönnrot steps out the (triangular) structure of the case to acquire a more objective view, he becomes the fourth term of another (quadrangular) structure, drawn by Scharlach, who, in his turn, is inscribed in yet another (pentagonal) structure, concocted by a fifth man, Borges, etc.

Retrogression offers Lönnrot no solution — at least, no conventional solution, like the one a reader of detective stories is trained to expect. His regressive labyrinth disturbs the usual progress of plot, even if by usual progress one means the infamous backward construction invented by Poe, when it comes to detective stories. Pierre
Macherey’s delineation of the labyrinth as a symbol is one of the most insightful readings of Borges’s narrative:

The labyrinth, rather than the enigma, the unfolding of the narrative, this is the inverted image which the story reflects from its end, in which is crystallized the idea of an inexhaustible division: the labyrinth of the narrative is traversed backwards, with a derisory exit in sight, an exit which leads to nothing, neither a center nor a content, since one might just as well retreat as advance. (251)

This is what Lönnrot actually does by projecting his rabbinical explanation: he retreats as advance, and what he must find at the end of the journey is not an exit but the mind-blogging inconsequence of his solution, what Macherey calls “a meta-problem” (251): “the solving of the mystery was in fact one of the terms of the mystery itself” (251). For Macherey, Borges’s cul-de-sac bears an affinity with Poe’s backward construction, “but this time in the form of a radical art” (251):

The story is begun at the end in such a way that we no longer know which is the end and which is the beginning, the story having wound around itself to produce the illusory coherence of an infinite perspective. (251)

In my opinion, what Macherey calls a “radical art”, the uraboros of a “story having wound around itself to produce the illusory coherence of an infinite perspective”, should be considered in terms of its contaminating effect on the determinate structure of an ensemble.

**Magmas and Heavenly Emporia**

“Death and the Compass”, a story with no visible end or beginning, is the magma of a narrative, from which, to use Castoriadis’s words again, “one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organizations but which can
never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations” (“Logic of Magmas” 297). For Borges, the tendency of Western thought to rationalize, by means of turning something into an element of a set, is as arbitrary as the heterogeneous taxonomy of animals embedded in his essay on “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language” (1942), (and famously incorporated in Foucault’s The Order of Things), where the impossible set of animals comprises stray dogs, mermaids, animals that belong to the emperor, those drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush, those that have just broken the flower vase or even, more vertiginously, those that are included in this classification, to name but a few (TL 231).

In “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language” the ironic narrator reminds us of Descartes’ letter, dated November 1619, where the philosopher notes that the decimal system of numeration could give someone the possibility of learning, in one single day, “all quantities to infinity” and writing them “in a new language, the language of numbers” (230). According to the narrator, Descartes proposes in the same letter the creation of a similar language that would systematize the entirety of human thought. Between the lines of this allusion to the Cartesian mathematization of the world one could read the skepticism of Borges, who takes a critical stand towards Wilkins’ linguistic system that “divided the universe into forty categories or classes, which were then subdivided into differences, and subdivided in turn into species” (230). Besides, he notes, Wilkins’ “ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies” are as obvious as those a Western thinker would attribute to the Chinese taxonomy of animals (231). Since we don’t know what the universe is, one attempt to classify it is as arbitrary and speculative as any other.

This is perhaps why Thiher calls Borges “an ironic successor of Cantor, Frege, Hilbert, Russell, and Gödel”, in his celebrating “the destruction of the systems that the
mathematical logicians have tried to shore up against the contradictions that every attempt at totally consistent thought seems to generate.” (243) For Thihier, Borges’s rehearsals of the paradoxes demonstrate “the ultimate vanity of any epistemic quest in a world ruled by utter chance”(242); “all that fosters the illusion of order is a target for Borges’s experiments”(243). I would propose taking this insight one step further, to argue that Borges’s experiments aim at the ensidic logic of the orders of Western thought, whether these are the orders of modern science or the orders of fictive narrative. His metaphysical tales are not just a re-reading of Poe’s prototype, but a kind of *bricolage*, a breaking down of the original set and a re-assembling of its constituent pieces into a fictional magma of no visible end or beginning. Poe’s strict causality of fictional necessity is thus turned into a nauseous, magmatic labyrinth of (what Eco would call) overinterpretation. Through Lönnrot’s regressive detection one realizes that the intellect observing this cosmos and trying to explain it is mainly creative and imaginative, that is, magmatic. It, therefore, projects its desires to the object of investigation; it creates while trying to explain; it imposes meaning to aspects of the cosmos that have no meaning, other than the one we create; it fabricates order in as much as it defines disorder; and, finally, it constructs ensemblistic organizations out of the magma of the world, which can never be reconstituted by an ensemblist composition of these organizations.

In Borges’s stories the order of “a frenzied, clear-cut causality” is turned into another order, “the primeval clarity of magic” (*TL* 80). Every episode of Lönnrot’s peregrination is “a premonition”, part of “a rigorous scheme of attentions, echoes, and affinities”, as in the case of Chesterton’s “phantasmagorias” (81). His death is deciphered through the omens of the story’s recurring themes: the colour red, the diamonds on the wall, on the harlequin costumes, and on the windows of Triste-le-
Roy. This law of affinity, which Borges appreciates in “Joyce’s preordained Ulysses”, where Leopold Bloom rehearses “an autonomous orb of omens, confirmations, and monuments” (81), reveals Lönnrot — or Red Scharlach, for that matter — as a modern man, suggesting the unknowability of great truths, the lack of a final order in the world. Triste-le-Roy as a locus of both regress and progress (the Rome to which all roads lead) heralds the destruction of any order as well as the proliferation of order. The pattern traced on the map of this fictional Buenos Aires offers a constellation of possible plots: Scharlach’s construction of a regressive rhombus of murders, Lönnrot’s construction of a progressive triangle and then quadrangle of detection or, even, the detective’s blasphemous search for the unutterable name of God. Lönnrot is driven to the abandoned villa because of all the above-mentioned mechanisms. His rabbinical pattern makes him “indifferent to the police investigation” (L 108). He dedicates himself to studying “the virtues and terrors of the Tetragrammaton”, while Scharlach sets himself “the task of justifying that conjecture” (116). Lönnrot advances or retreats¹¹ to the villa in the belief that “scarcely one dawning and one nightfall (an ancient splendour in the east and another in the west) separated him from the moment long desired by the seekers of the Name” (113). When he meets his opponent he has but one question: “Scharlach, are you looking for the Secret Name?” (114). Scharlach’s quest is, however, “something more ephemeral and perishable” (115). He is looking for Erik Lönnrot, who must pay for his sin of curiosity concerning the divine name, in which eternity is epitomized, “that is to say, the immediate knowledge of all things that will be, which are and which have been in the universe” (108).

¹¹ Both the reader and the detective are obliged to do what Theseus must do in the Cretan maze, as Angus Fletcher describes it in “The Image of Lost Direction”: if they want to go forward, they must reverse their direction and move backwards (336). The fictional labyrinth as well as the labyrinth of Lönnrot’s pattern reflecting thus Northrop Frye’s famous image of lost direction.
“Death and the Compass” is thus a magmatic narrative, in which one can trace several ensidic organizations/plots/riddles, but which cannot be reconstituted by an ensidic composition of these organizations. It is a magma of no visible beginning or end, in which the detective (and the reader as well) discovers that, in search of the solution, the only possible progress is an infinite regress. But, most of all, it is a magmatic detective tale because, firstly, it questions the long-established objectivity of the detective’s investigation, by making Lönnrot responsible for the formulation of a fatal pattern that did not exist in the first place, and, secondly, because it manages to transform the (otherwise ensidic) figure of a duplicitous detective into a true magma of an excluded middle, since Scharlach is the first criminal who shifts his position in such a story, by outwitting the detective. These last two reasons, Lönnrot’s theory-laden conjecture, and the figure of the excluded middle acquire an even more interesting significance if read within the frame of two quantum paradoxes.
QUANTUM PARADOXES

Superpositions and the Double
The measurement problem is probably one of the most basic questions an interpretation of quantum mechanics must answer. It is a problem which deals with a fundamental notion of quantum physics, an amplitude of probabilities called superposition.

For a particle of classical physics things are quite straightforward: the solving of an equation can determine its exact position and velocity at a given time in the future (and the same could be said for the position of a criminal, something which Lönnrot attempts to do, for that matter). In quantum physics, however, the solving of an equation, such as Schrödinger’s equation, determines a rich, mathematical quantity, known as wavefunction (Al-Khalili 62). A wavefunction does not determine the exact position of an electron, for example, at a given time, but the probability of this electron being somewhere if we are to look for it there (64). As long as we’re not looking for it, the electron exists only as a wavefunction and not as a particle. That is, it evolves into a linear superposition of different states. It exists in a state of probabilities that may seem contradictory for classical science. But as soon as we observe it, the wavefunction collapses and the electron turns into a localized particle (67). Our measurement will, in other words, always find the system in a definite state. But, what is more important, any future evolution of the system will be based on the value the system had at the moment of measurement, which means that the actual process of measurement affects the system.

In our case, the system of deaths is likewise determined by Lönnrot’s intervention, as his measurement/ investigation realizes its definite state and affects its
future evolution. At the same time, the duplicitous figure of the detective/ criminal is a quantum monster of superposition in itself that brings into mind a cat both dead and alive, the *tertium* that in this case is valid, Schrödinger’s cat.

The best-known example of the above-mentioned paradoxical condition is none other than the cat of Erwin Schrödinger. In a 1935 article Schrödinger postulated a sealed box in which a cat is placed along with a device containing a radioactive nucleus and a canister of gas. Schrödinger’s experiment is set on a 50% chance of the supposed nucleus decaying in one hour. In the case that the nucleus does indeed decay, it will emit a poisonous gas that will kill the cat. However, throughout that one hour, the unobserved nucleus lies in or is, what quantum mechanics call, a superposition, i.e. it is, at the same time, both a decayed and an undecayed nucleus. But upon opening the box the observer can only witness either a decayed nucleus and a dead cat or an undecayed nucleus and a cat safe and sound.

The impossible monster of Schrödinger’s cat is an amplitude of probabilities that exists beyond the classical principle of the excluded middle, according to which something is or is not, and a third possibility is not feasible. In the case of “Death and the Compass”, however, the excluded middle is feasible, since there is no clear line between decoder and encoder, failure and success, justice and revenge. Lönnrot and Scharlach are not clearly dichotomized either, as one cannot tell which of the two stands at the end or at the beginning of the labyrinth.

In this sense, Lönnrot is a true child of Dupin — or rather Poe, through Lönnrot, is made into a true precursor of Borges. The Chevalier had to become a thief to catch a thief, as he identified his intellect with that of his opponent. Because of this extraordinary ability to transgress the line between the self and the Other, Dupin remains a disturbing figure until today. Still, the fact remains, that Poe invented the
figure of the detective as an excluded middle, a magmatic entity that did not comply with the ensidic formula of the genre that was to follow. By killing Lönnrot in the symmetrical villa of Triste-le-Roy, Borges recovers the long-forgotten “monstrum horrendum” (Poe, P & T 697-98) and constructs a fictional superposition.

In The Book of Imaginary Beings (1967), among banshees, centaurs, Cheshire cats, Minotaurs, unicorns, Valkyries, and sirens — to name but a few — Borges includes the Double. In his long citation of examples drawn from literature, poetry and cultural myths, a Talmudic legend is recorded, according to which, a man, in search of God, meets himself (53). Needless to say, a detective, whose quest is the true and unutterable name of God, and who, finally, meets a criminal that outwits him, could also be read as an avatar of the disturbing notion of the double.

Lönnrot’s encounter with the harbinger of his death is, almost unequivocally, announced from the very beginning of the story, when he is presented as a detective who believes himself “a pure reasoner, an Auguste Dupin” (L 106). By choosing the Chevalier as his predecessor, Lönnrot appropriates at once Dupin’s infamous duplicity, and his method of detection, namely, the ability to identify his intellect with that of his opponent. However, as Scharlach manages to outwit Lönnrot, by performing exactly the same trick of mind-identification, the figures of the criminal and the detective become interchangeable and order is lost: one cannot say for sure which of the two figures stands at the end or at the beginning of the causal chain. This identification is of course what lies at the heart of Borges’s tale, which has often been considered as the inaugural moment of metaphysical detection.

Borges himself was the first to make the connection between the detective with the colour red in his name and the two-times-red killer, offering the possibility of Lönnrot’s conscious walking to his death:
The killer and the slain, whose minds work in the same way, may be the same man. Lönnrot is not an unbelievable fool walking into his own death trap but, in a symbolic way, a man committing suicide. This is hinted at by the similarity of their names. The end syllable of “Lönnrot” means “red” in German, and “Red Scharlach” is also translatable in German, as “Red Scarlet”.

(A 174)

The allusion to Poe’s doubles, from William Wilson, to Dupin himself, is obvious. As already mentioned, the proto-detective owes his notoriety to his imponderable duplicity, and his success in “The Purloined Letter” is based on the fact that he becomes a thief to catch a thief. At the end of the story, when Dupin is forced to double in order to recover the letter, he substitutes it with a note to ensure the defeat of the “monstrum horrendum” (Poe, P & T 697-98). The two lines from Crébillon’s Atrée signify Dupin’s re-payment of an “evil turn” done to him by Minister D—, in Vienna once, an act, which, as Kennedy describes it in “The Limits of Reason: Poe’s Deluded Detectives”, “evokes a blood feud between fraternal adversaries” (547). Since the oneness of pursuer and pursued has since been a cardinal trait of the detective story, it is of no surprise that “Death and the Compass” rehearses the motif of replication, only, in this case, it is the Minister’s turn to have the last word. The defeated thief from Poe’s story comes back with vengeance in the fictional Buenos Aires, where he turns an accidental murder into a cipher, for the detective to solve. Red Scharlach and Lönnrot form, thus, the “monstrum horrendum” par excellence, less because their names are permeated by the same colour than because they are both the end and the beginning of a nauseating Moebius strip.

Borges’s rehearsal of Dupin’s replications is wonderfully pinpointed in John T. Irwin’s trenchant “Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges, and
the Analytic Detective Story” (1999). Irwin sees “Death and the Compass” as “a reading that Borges gives of “The Purloined Letter” when he rewrites its numerical/geometrical structure in his own detective story” (41). The replications of pursuer/pursued are delineated in Irwin’s article through the famous series of reading Poe’s tale in Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” (1957), Derrida’s “The Purveyor of Truth” (1975), and Johnson’s “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida” (1978). As is well known, Lacan’s seminar breaks the story down in two scenes (one taking place in the royal boudoir, the second — a repetition of the first — in the Minister’s office), each having a structure based on three glances (the first glance seeing nothing, the second which sees that the first sees nothing, and the third that sees the two first glances seeing nothing). Derrida’s essay, on the other hand, is a response less to Poe’s story than to Lacan’s seminar. Derrida sees instead two scenes of narration: both take place in Dupin’s apartment, where, in the first, the Prefect recounts the events in the royal boudoir, whereas in the second, it is Dupin who recounts to the Prefect the events in the Minister’s office. Irwin article reminds us that, according to Derrida, Lacan’s psychoanalytic reading projects a triangular structure, which ignores a fourth angle, that of the narrator’s (since the narrators of the two narrated scenes are the Prefect and Dupin, whereas the overall narrator of the two scenes of narration is Dupin’s companion (30-31). Derrida attempts “to be one up on Lacan by playing the number four to Lacan’s three”, writes Irwin, while “Johnson assimilates their opposed readings of the numerical structure of the tale to the game of even and odd” used by Dupin as an illustration of his method (31). Irwin sets forth from this play of triangular and quadrangular structures to delineate the numerical structure of “The Purloined Letter” and then to apply it on “Death and the Compass”, where Lönnrot and Scharlach are seen as doubles, as Borges
has Scharlach create a situation in which Lönnrot’s apparent solution to the crimes constitutes that second glance whose observation of blindness in the first glance (Treviranus’s apparent misreading of the clues) becomes itself a blind spot in the observer by convincing him that he sees everything. In the meantime Scharlach occupies the position of the third glance (hidden at the fourth point of the compass), seeing the blindness of the first glance, the blind spot in the second, and the fact that the object he seeks — Lönnrot’s life — is his for the taking. (41-42)

For Irwin, there is more to Lönnrot’s name than the clue that Borges has already divulged. What the author neglects to tell us, according to Irwin, is that in Swedish “the word lönn is a prefix meaning ‘secret’, ‘hidden,’ or ‘illicit.’ Thus Lönnrot, the secret red, pursues and is pursued by his double, Red Scharlach (Red Scarlet), the doubly red (42). Scharlach’s motive, is revenge for his brother and of his own injury and confinement in Triste-le-Roy. Irwin sees this act of retaliation as an allusion to Minister D—’s brother, and wonders whether we should “see Scharlach’s revenge on Lönnrot as an attempt to even the score for that earlier revenge on a brother criminal” (42). This remark is one I would concur with outright. Borges had certainly Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” in mind when writing his version of the tale, and Irwin’s article offers a startling number of clues that prove the remarkable (numerical or otherwise) affinity. However, I would like to focus on the magmatic significance of the detective/criminal duplicity in Borges’s story.

The monster of pursuer/pursued represents a disturbing blurring of dichotomies, since it rejects the law of the excluded middle, on which the ensidic logic of science, as well as that of the detective tale, is based. As already mentioned, the ensidic logic of determinate systems is conditioned by the principles of identity (A
= A), non-contradiction (it is not possible for something to be A and not A at the same time), and the excluded middle (either A is true or A is false and tertium non datur). Likewise, the method of the detective works according to those principles, which support the process of empirical observation and allow for the discovery of relations, that turn the events into an explained series. A detective who projects a pattern, however, or a criminal who stages a pattern for the detective to enact is not amenable to an ensidic logic. Together they form an “unnatural whole”, to use Lois Parkinson Zamora’s term (59). They are a monster of “combinatory capacity” and “infinite possibility”, a fact, which makes them “volatile, unpredictable, and fortuitous” (59). They are made out of commonplace, systemic parts, but their duplicitous disjunction has transformed them into an uncanny magma that goes beyond a simple composition of their constituent parts. In this sense, the afore-mentioned quantum double is perhaps the most post-modern aspect of metaphysical detection, as it echoes the crisis in modern science, brought on by the return of the excluded middles.

Additionally, the narrative itself is yet another case of quantum superposition, since it doubles the usual (backward) construction of detective fiction into a coil, that retains the amplitude of possibilities, admitting, at the same time, the impossibility of an objective investigation, as the “wavefunction” of the system of deaths is bound to “collapse” as soon as the detective attempts “a measurement”. Thus, when Lönnrot chooses the rabbinical explanation over the fortuitous one, he does something to the future development of the system, by making its state definite through measurement. The actual narrative implications of such a superposition could of course be traced in the most refined fictional example of the impossibility to preserve all narrative bifurcations, namely “The Garden of Forking Paths”. Before, however, going into it,
we should continue examining the problem of measurement, as depicted in “Death and the Compass”.

**Experiment of the Two Slots and The Principle of Undecidability**

Whether or not Lönnrot commits suicide, Borges’s misreading of the Dupin prototype is based on a magmatic duplicity that contaminates the deterministic order of the cause preceding its effect. Poe’s method of regressive narrative construction is thus pushed by Borges to a disordering of the causal chain, which puts the objectivity of reality into question, by hinting at the influence of the observed by the observer: it is because of the detective’s investigation that murders are committed and a pattern is realized. This influence — which was later famously re-written by Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose* (1980), where a blind monk named Jorge da Burgos commits murders that follow the apocalyptic pattern conjectured by William of Baskerville, the empiricist monk/ detective from Britain — alludes to the fundamental crisis in modern science, brought on by the measurement problem. The disturbing consequences of yet another quantum paradox could perhaps prove illuminating for our case.

In general, a natural body is considered to be a localized object, whereas a wave is something not localized. In quantum physics, however, the two above-mentioned notions (which are apparently contradictory) could be attributed to the same object. This paradoxical behaviour is famously demonstrated by the double-slot experiment: we shoot a beam of atoms through a screen with two slots, of which only one is open at the first stage of the experiment; behind this first screen we have placed a second one, coated with a substance that allows us to see a bright spot at the place where the atoms hit the screen (Al-Khalili 14). This bright spot on the second screen
shows us that atoms behave as localized objects, in the same way that grains of sand would fall through the slot in a specific place on the second screen (14). When, however, we shoot the atoms through both slots, we realize that their distribution on the second screen reveals an interference pattern similar to that of a wave and not of a localized object (15). In other words, while each atom hits the first screen as a localized object, it is then divided into two components, which, after passing through the two slots, interact with each other to produce, on the second screen, the interference pattern of a wave (16). This is not the most disturbing consequence of the experiment, though. Scientists tried to explain this paradoxical behaviour of atoms passing through both slots, by placing a detector between the two screens, to determine the course followed by each atom. However, when observed, the atoms do not behave as a wave, and the bright spots on the second screen reveal the behaviour of a localized object, as in the case of the single-slot screen (18). In other words, it is as if atoms know when they are being observed and decide to behave as localized particles. The process of observation affects the object of observation and, to use the previously mentioned quantum term, the wavefunction collapses.

The paradox explained above marked the measurement problem in quantum physics, since it demonstrated that any attempt to measure something happening in the microscopic world entails its influence by the macroscopic world. The probabilistic nature of every quantum entity is lost at the moment when measurement realizes one of those probabilities.

In Newton’s deterministic world, measurement is possible and its results are objective. According to the classical view of the cosmos, if one knows the present state of the particles of a system, then the deduction of their future state can be both certain and accurate. If, in other words, Lönnrot knows the exact location of the three
murders and the exact time of their perpetration, he will be able to predict the exact location of a future, fourth murder. However, as soon as he starts investigating the first murder, he changes the state of the object of his observation. “Death and the Compass” appears as a common detective story, which attests to the predictability of a deterministic world that can be read by “a pure reasoner”. Its unexpected ending, though, reveals a world inherently unpredictable; it reveals that in several cases Newtonian equations must be replaced by other, richer equations.

However, the more important part of Lönnrot’s theory-laden conjecture is the actual realization that, in the process of knowledge, subject and object are indissoluble. Poe’s protodetective had the privilege of formulating his conjectures in a Paris of absolute certainty, where the objectivity of observation was not questioned, and where he could read the signs in a deterministic universe, which lacked the foam of quantum superpositions and wave functions that collapse once observed. Borges’s anti-detector, however, is forced to learn that his observation does something to the object that determines its future development. Or, to put it in Castoriadis’s words, he is forced to learn that it is the living being who “forms” and “informs” a part of the world, and organizes it “after its own fashion” (“Ontological Import” 349).

This takes us back to “The Ontological Import of the History of Science”, where Castoriadis expounds his view of science as being profoundly historical. To explain Castoriadis’s view of the term “historical”, we should first clarify his notion of knowledge as being a process “essentially social-historical” (343). For Castoriadis, the word “social” here signifies the fact that “the human individual […] exists only as the product of a perpetual process of socialization; it is first and foremost a walking fragment of the institution of society in general and of its particular society” (343). On
the other hand, the adjective “historical” refers to his notion of the institution of society as self-creation:

Every society (therefore also every individual) is essentially historical […] in the sense that it itself alters itself, that it is not only self-creation once and for all but continued self-creation, manifested both as incessant imperceptible self-alteration and as possibility, and actuality, of ruptures that posit new forms of society. And in this last case, the case of rupture, this mode is eminently historical; without analogy to anything else we know of in nature or in life, this mode of alteration alters what it maintains at the very moment that it alters it. (343-44)

In other words, according to Castoriadis, society (and, by analogy, knowledge and science) is self-created at the very moment that it creates ruptures with previous paradigms. For Castoriadis, this history (alteration) of scientific knowledge is obviously not cumulative (344). In this sense, his notion of the history of science bears an affinity with Thomas Kuhn’s scientific revolutions and paradigm shifts, a theory which proved that scientific knowledge is depended on social and cultural factors rather than on a specific method. However, for Castoriadis, paradigm shifts do not occur in a Feyerabendian anything-goes way. First of all, as Castoriadis explains in Φιλοσοφία και Επιστήμη, he sees what Kuhn calls revolutions or new paradigms as creations of new imaginary schemata (123). Castoriadis uses the example of the divergence between the Newtonian and the Einsteinian paradigms: the first scheme imposes a cosmic image of infinite space, where everything can

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12 In his famous The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962) Kuhn explains the way in which fundamental scientific novelties emerge only after a period triggered by the awareness of an anomaly, during which “conceptual categories are adjusted until the initially anomalous has become the anticipated” (64). Kuhn insists that we recognize this process, so that “we can at last begin to see why normal science, a pursuit not directed to novelties and tending at first to suppress them, should nevertheless be so effective in causing them to arise” (64).
communicate with everything else instantly, and where there is also instant interaction, that is gravity, and where particles are subject to forces of attraction, etc (123); on the other hand, the Einsteinian general theory of relativity — which has actually also influenced the art of twentieth-century, notes Castoriadis — imposes a cosmic image of local distortions of space-time, which correspond to matter, and where, at the same time, matter itself causes distortions in space-time, while signals, even gravitational signals at that, are diffused in a finite speed, etc (123). For Castoriadis, these dissimilar cosmic models are two purely imaginary creations, two schemata, which, however, are different from the creations of a poet, because they are subject to the strict control of natural reality (123-24).

Secondly, Castoriadis argues that Kuhn’s notion of scientific paradigms being incommensurable is not absolutely correct in the case of Greco-western science, where an idiosyncratic commensurability is observed (124). Modern mathematics may be different from Archimedean or Euclidian mathematics, but still they both are mathematics (124). This, claims Castoriadis, is due to a Greek Hyper-Paradigm or Meta-Paradigm which continues to determine science. The unity to the theoretical project between ancient Greece and Western Europe is expressed first by the exigency of logon didonai, secondly by what is acceptable as proof, and thirdly by the metaphysical position of an existent (even though partial), practical possibility to explain and rationalize the world (124-25).

However, explains Castoriadis in “The Ontological Import of the History of Science”, the most important aspect of the deployment of Western science is the fact that it “reveals an enormous irregularity in depth, the absence of ‘systematic unity’ — at least, such as we can or even could conceive it — fractures, canyons, or cosmic crevices, which nevertheless — another subject of unending astonishment — do not
signify any positive ‘incoherency’” (364). In physics, for instance, there are “three mutually irreducible strata at the theoretical level”: “ordinary macrophysics, quantum physics, and supermacrophysics” (365). “Between these three strata”, argues Castoriadis, “the passageways are ‘negotiable’: there is a world. They are not, however, rigorous; they are simply ‘numerical,’ not theoretically constructible: this world is not a ‘system’ or a system of systems” (365).

Once again, for Castoriadis, the history of science has two aspects: “the deployment, the elaboration of ensidic logic”, which has “nourished the illusions associated with ideas of progress”, and its dependence on “the magma of imaginary significations of the society being considered” (369). A history of science can therefore lead us to an important realization about the subject of science: that it is “capable of knowing this world as it itself alters itself. The two aspects — the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’ — are absolutely indissociable” (344). Thus, since knowledge, as we know it, “is knowledge of (by) a subject” (344), and its organization is affected by the organization of the subject, one cannot ignore the philosophical and ontological implications of the physicist’s realization that, in some cases, phenomena may have properties only for us and not in themselves.

Of course, one should also never forget that there are parts of the world which are clearly “ensidizable” (to use Castoriadis’s neologism), that is, that can be explained in terms of an ensidic logic, and that can be objectively known and measured, as, for example, “no experimental set-up could make a lamb give birth to a cow” (345). Besides, the organizability of certain parts of the world is testified and entailed by the actual organization of the living being (349).

Indeed, the living being cannot function (that is to say, it simply cannot live, cannot be what it is) without “classifying,” without “categorizing,” therefore
also without “distinguishing,” “separating,” and even “enumerating,” but also without bringing into relation the elements it distinguishes — and, finally, it must also be able to form and “inform” a part of the world. This would be impossible if there were no formable, “informable” parts of the world — in other words, separable, enumerable, classifiable, categorizable — and if their “elements” and their “classes” could not, in certain respects be brought into relation. (349)

Still, the fact remains that the “subjective” and the “objective” are perpetually intertwined (Castoriadis, “Ontological Import” 345). This is what Castoriadis calls “the principle of the undecidability of origins”: since all knowledge “is a coproduction”, “in nontrivial cases, we cannot truly separate out what ‘comes from’ the subject and what ‘comes from’ the object” (345). Thus, for “the near-perfect observer, the question of knowing, in an ultimate sense, what comes from the observer and what comes from the observed is undecidable” (345).

It is for this reason that Castoriadis criticizes Kant’s philosophy, for its attempt to supply the conditions for an objective experience, by looking solely at the subject. Critique of Pure Reason presents the paradox, according to Castoriadis, of having always been a source of ceaseless inspiration, while relying on the absurd claim that what the subject says “would and does have validity in any world whatsoever” (345). For Castoriadis, Kant’s work ignores the object, but also, “the history (the alterations) of experience”, as well as “the enormous charge of indetermination affecting the term (and the idea) of experience (or knowledge)” (346):

To say, for example, there is Erfahrung [experience], therefore the subject connects phenomena according to the category of causality; or, the subject can think phenomena only by connecting them in causal terms, therefore
Erfahrung is, among other things, the causal connection of phenomena, is not simply circular or tautological. (346)

Kant’s reasoning is, according to Castoriadis, tautological, because of the way it relates with the notion of knowledge, as, what he intends by knowledge (or experience) “is deterministic knowledge, knowledge of a certain style, of certain phenomena (“physical” or “psychical”)” (346). But, continues Castoriadis, at “the end of the eighteenth century, a European philosopher could reasonably think that” (346), and, I guess, that for a detective of the nineteenth century, assuming that the subject can connect phenomena in causal terms, is also legitimate. This notion of knowledge — which goes beyond Kant’s era, of course — is not enough for the science of today or for a detective like Lönnrot, and especially for physics and mathematics, since it addresses only “an ingredient of science — not science itself” (Castoriadis, “Ontological Import” 347). It is clear, says Castoriadis, that I have to have “a rule for causality”, “in order to discover noncausality at a quantum level” (347); I must have “a sort of Euclidean geometry in order to discover and ‘prove’ the non-Euclidean character of space-time” (347). However, causality or Euclidean geometry are not enough to explain “what, in the object, renders possible the nonempty, inhaltsvoll, application of categories” (347), and this is what Kant’s critique remains silent about, according to Castoriadis. He just calls it (in the Critique of Judgment) “a ‘happy accident’, glücklicher Zufall” (347).

The world is not absolutely ensidizable, therefore, but — as already mentioned — that doesn’t mean, according to Castoriadis, that it can be read in an anything-goes way. This is why Lönnrot’s story is often read as postmodern, as, in the course of his apparently rationalistic projection, he lapses into the Hermetic vortex of overinterpretation, in which everything goes.
Interpretation and Overinterpretation

The Talmudic background of “Death and the Compass” provides us with the clue — already mentioned above — of Yarmolinski’s and later of Lönnrot’s search for the unutterable name of God. The Cabbalistic trace\(^\text{13}\) in Borges’s story points towards the Hebraic undertaking to decode the first five books of the Bible, also known as the Pentateuch. According to Cabbalistic methods of interpretation (Gematria), the divine nomenclature found in the Scriptures could be deciphered through numerical calculations and combinations of the Hebrew alphabet, so that the actual mysteries of God and creation would be unveiled (Fishburn 44-45). A common belief in speculative Cabbalistic literature is the esoteric idea that any permutation of the 22 Hebrew letters could form a name of God, so that the Pentateuch in its entirety could be reduced into names of God (Fishburn 185). This belief underlines the primordial function of language, since “according to the Jewish account of creation, language preceded the act of creation (‘And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light’), a fact which proved “the magical properties of Hebrew, the language employed by God” (Fishburn 45).

Lönnrot leaves the first scene of crime with Yarmolinski’s works: “a Vindication of the Cabbala; An Examination of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd; a literal translation of the Sepher Yezirah; a Biography of the Baal Shem; a History of the Hasidic Sect; a monograph (in German) on the Tetragrammaton; another on the divine nomenclature of the Pentateuch” (L 107).

We know that Borges was extremely interested in any idea that attested to the unreality of our world. The combinatorial method of Cabbalistic interpretation was one that fascinated him. For the record, in the previous list of Yarmolinski’s works,

\(^{13}\) For more details on the Cabbalistic allusions in Borges’s stories see Jaime Alazraki’s Borges and the Kabbalah and Other Essays on his Fiction and Poetry (1988).
among monographs on the Pentateuch and the Tetragrammaton, one finds several interesting clues such as: a book that uncannily echoes Borges’s own essay\textsuperscript{14} on “A Defense of the Kabbalah” (1932); another dealing with the philosophy of Robert Fludd, a seventeenth-century British physician and mystical philosopher, who was involved with the society of the Rosicrucians (Fishburn 91); a translation of the Hebrew book of creation, Sepher Yesirah (from the Hebrew sepher, “book” and yezirah “creation”), “a speculative text dating from between the third and the sixth centuries which seeks to explain the act of creation as a process involving the transition of the universe from its infinite state to its finite manifestation” (Fishburn 219); an unlikely (since he is known to have left no writings) biography of Israel ben Eliezer, also known as Baal Shem, a “‘master of the Name’ (c.1700-1760)”, who “originated from Podolsk and was the founder of eighteenth-century Polish Hasidism” (Fishburn 26); a history of the sect of the pious (Hasidim being the plural of ‘Hasid’, Hebrew for pious), the Hasidic movement, “which arose among Polish Jews in the eighteenth century as a reaction to rabbinical and ritual formalism”, under the leadership of the afore mentioned Baal Shem Tov (Fishburn 105). The animosity between Hasidims and orthodox Jews is echoed in Lönnrot’s rabbinical conjecture about Yarmolinski being murdered by a member of the Sect.

All in all, the clues left by Borges in the wall-cupboard of the dead rabbi point towards a Hermetic philosophy. According to Bondanella’s “Interpretation, Overinterpretation, Paranoid Interpretation” (1997), Hermeticism (a word deriving from the name of the Greek god Hermes) emanated from philosophical traditions produced by the Greek world in the first centuries of Christianity, that were less

\textsuperscript{14} As Alazraki rightly points out, the allusion to Borges’s own essay echoes Cervantes device in \textit{Don Quixote}, where the author’s earlier \textit{La Galatea} finds its way into the fictional library of Quixote (15).
rational than the ones belonging to the Classical tradition, which were determined by the principles of identity, non contradiction and the excluded middle (287).

Second-century Hermeticism, in particular, rejects the law of the excluded middle and asserts that many things may be true at the same time even if they stand in contradiction to one another. To hold this position, books must be transformed into complex allegories — they say one thing but mean something quite different, often something secret and “hermetically” sealed from the non-initiated. (287)

It is interesting to note that the Rosicrusians, mentioned above, were a secret society described in two anonymous seventeenth-century books, published in Germany, which “aroused the curiosity of many eminent men, such as Spinoza and Descartes, who tried to meet members of the society” (Fishburn 207). As Fishburn notes, the Rosicrucian society provides a perfect example of “a Tlönian hrön — an idea which, when believed, materializes”, as, “in time societies were actually founded and Rosicrucianism spread to London and later to Vienna, Russia and Poland” (207).

As the envelope sent to Treviranus, containing the map of Buenos Aires, was signed by a Baruch Spinoza, one begins to wonder whether the triangular (and later quadrangular) pattern of deaths had materialized as a Tlönian hrön would have, out of the sheer belief in an idea.

The whole net of clues, thus, points towards the possibility of being led to the fallacy of overinterpretation, by projecting a theory on the object of investigation. As is well known, the notion of overinterpretation is outlined by Umberto Eco in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992) and famously applied in his novel *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988), where the three employees of Garamond Press undertake a parody of the various conspiracy theories and devise “The Plan”, which,
however, later materializes, as followers of the Templars and the Rosicrusians take it for real. Needless to say, the realization of “The Plan” proves fatal for one of the main characters. As Bondanella notes, “[t]extual interpretation and learning in general have some characteristics in common with the detective novel, the whodunit invented by Edgar Allan Poe (whose tale ‘The Purloined Letter’, is Eco’s obvious point of reference)” (289). For Bondanella, what Eco expounds in relation to overinterpretation is the common-sense point that “the most sensible interpretation of a text, like the purloined letter, may be found directly under our noses” (289). As Eco explains it, “a criterion of economy” should determine my conjecture upon the clues found in the scene of a crime” (Overinterpretation 49):

The overestimation of the importance of clues is often born of a propensity to consider the most immediately apparent elements as significant, whereas the very fact that they are apparent should allow us to recognize that they are explicable in much more economical terms. (49)

It so happens, according to Eco, that Hermetic semiosis overinterprets clues due to “an excess of wonder” which “leads to overestimating the importance of coincidences which are explainable in other ways”, and secondly because its conjectures are based on the principle of the “post hoc, ergo ante hoc: a consequence is assumed and interpreted as the cause of its own cause” (Overinterpretation 50-51). Thus, the Corpus Hermeticum, created in the second century after Christ, was considered by Neo-Platonists as an ancient text, dating back before Moses, because it contained ideas that reflected Christian thought. In their Hermetic reasoning the Corpus was not influenced by Christianity; on the contrary, it was the Corpus that
served as an inspiration for Christian thought. In Borges’s story, Lönnrot comes up with a theory that is not the most economical one. He then tries to turn this theory into “the cause of its own cause”, crossing thus a boundary, set by the principles of inherited rationalism.

The crossing of a boundary in spatial terms is significant in relation to Hermeticism. In “Interpretation and History” Eco traces the relation of the notion of reason with the concept of “being moderate”, “being within the modus — that is, within limits and within measure” (Overinterpretation 26). According to Eco, for Greek rationalism, in particular, “from Plato to Aristotle and others, knowledge meant understanding causes” (27). This entailed the definition of the world in terms of “a unilinear chain” of causality, which, in its turn, presupposed the assumption of the three, already mentioned, principles of identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded middle. These principles, explains Eco, provided a social contract, adopted by the Latin world and further enriched in “a legal and contractual sense” of the modus, the limits, the boundaries (27). The Latin civitas is characteristically based on this notion of spatial boundaries, from Romulus who killed his brother for not respecting the boundary line, to Horatius who was celebrated as a hero for managing to keep the enemy from crossing the borders of the Roman ground, and to Julius Caesar who would have to pay for the irreversible sacrilege of crossing the Rubicon (27-28).

The principles that govern classical science are these same principles of the Greek legacy, a legacy which, however, is also responsible for Hermes, in whose myth the modus is negated, since the god knows no linear temporality, “no spatial limits and may, in different shapes, be in different places at the same time” (Eco, Overinterpretation 29). As already mentioned, in Hermeticism the principle of the

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15 See Eco’s “Interpretation and History” and “Overinterpreting Texts” in Interpretation and Overinterpretation.
excluded middle is displaced, as it is possible “for many things to be true at the same
time, even if they contradict one another” (30). In this case, however, “a coincidence
of opposites occurs” (32). “But”, Eco explains, “where the coincidence of opposites
triumphs, the principle of identity collapses. Tout se tient” (32). The consequence is,
of course, catastrophic: “interpretation is indefinite” (32). Thus, when Lönnrot ignores
Treviranus’s economical solution of coincidence, he crosses the Rubicon that
shouldn’t have been crossed. Alea jacta est. And since “Death and the Compass” is
mainly a spatial mystery, the allusion to the crossing of spatial borders, as Eco
explains it, is indeed worth noticing. From then on, Lönnrot will definitely find the
signs to prove his rabbinical interpretation, just like Diotallevi, the albino from
Foucault’s Pendulum, who is also obsessed with Cabbalistic numerical
combinations,16 and William of Baskerville from The Name of the Rose, who projects
an apocalyptic pattern on the murders in the monastery.

Borges’s “Death and the Compass”, the story of a detective who finds the
symbols he is looking for, could thus be regarded as the inaugural moment of
detective overinterpretation, which sets the rules of the anti-detective genre as we
know it, and serves as an inspiration for Eco’s novels, where unlimited semiosis is put
into blockbuster application. Eco himself, in The Limits of Interpretation (1990),
explains the ambivalence of the symbol, which in its Greek etymology signifies “a
token, the present half of a broken table or coin or medal, that performed its social and
semiotic function by recalling the absent half to which it potentially could be
reconnected” (9). This fact, according to Eco, encouraged other senses of the word
“symbol”, since it alluded to the Greek verb symballein, that meant “to meet, to try an
interpretation, to make a conjecture, to solve a riddle, to infer from something

16 We should also bear in mind that the novel itself is divided into ten chapters, that represent the ten
Sefirots of the Cabbalah, the complex images of God.
imprecise, because incomplete, something else that suggested, evoked, revealed, but did not conventionally say” (9). Symbols were thus connected with ambiguity from their very roots and, as such, they were considered as being endowed with a meaning that had to be discovered. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that from classical antiquity onwards, symbolism was thought of as a means of uttering the unknowable.

Lönnrot’s search, therefore, for the letters that form the unutterable name of God, through clues in murders dispersed throughout the map of Buenos Aires, seems to me an ironic replication of the original detective tale. Firstly, because it is the replication of a tale that had always stood as the proof of a rationale that could successfully connect symbols with their signifiers, while, secondly, it is a story of a detective who, in search of a murderer, gets carried away by the Hermetic philosophy of the Cabbala, and generates his death through the decipherment of divine nomenclature.17

The crisis in modern science is not without a cost for the world of Lönnrot, who must regress to a hermetic tradition, where symbols are used to speak of something unknowable, like God (or like the Trinity, a monstrous entity for Borges, who describes its unnatural essence — where else? — in “A Defense of the Cabbala”). Unlike his predecessors, Lönnrot turns to the irrationality of the world before its disenchantment, to numerical combinations and computations, which, if seen regressively, appear as mock replications of the systems of modern science. He turns to the power of sacred names and to a religious faith in the existence of a final reality behind our world of appearances, as if in response to the malaise brought on by the end of certainty in the profane world of the twentieth century.

17 The cabbalistic model exiles Lönnrot still further away from his text or any reader from any text, as Harold Bloom writes in *Kabbalah and Criticism* (117). This detective’s enigma has no real meaning except for the one he assigns to it. To put it in Bloom’s words, Lönnrot’s enigma can only be solved by Lönnrot himself, since, like the Sphinx before him, he has generated his own riddle (107).
On the other hand, if we consider the delineations of his crossing a spatial boundary, Lönnrot dies exactly because he commits the sacrilege of negating the *modus* and indulging to overinterpretation. His alliance with Dupin places him in the company of nineteenth- (and perhaps — why not? — twentieth-) century scientists trying to interpret the world in deterministic (or probabilistic) terms. As such, he is one of those modern quantitative scientists who wanted to explain and, subsequently, control and change the course of the world. Paradoxically, as Eco notes in his “Interpretation and History”, the Hermetic model could be responsible for the rebirth of knowledge in modern times: “today, historiography has shown us that it is impossible to separate this Hermetic thread from the scientific one and Paracelsus from Galileo. Hermetic knowledge influences Francis Bacon, Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton, and modern quantitative science is born, *inter alia*, in a dialogue with the qualitative knowledge of Hermeticism” (*Overinterpretation* 34).18 As Hermeticism suggested that the cosmic order described by the rationalism of the Greek legacy could be subverted, and, also, that new readings of the world were possible, “such as would have permitted man to act on nature and change its course”, its qualitative logic merged with the quantitative logic of the Age of Reason and, paradoxically, contributed to “the birth of its new adversary, modern scientific rationalism” (34). For Eco, [n]ew Hermetic irrationalism oscillates between, on the one hand, mystics and alchemists, and on the other, poets and philosophers, from Goethe to Gérard de Nerval and Yeats, from Schelling to Franz von Baader, from Heidegger to Jung” (34).

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18 Eco actually mentions at this point Gilbert Durand’s *Science de l’homme et tradition*, where the author sees “the whole of contemporary thought, in opposition to the positivist mechanistic paradigm, run through the vivifying breath of Hermes, and the list of relationships he identifies invites reflection: Spengler, Dilthey, Scheler, Nietzsche, Husserl, Kerényi, Planck, Pauli, Oppenheimer, Einstein, Bachelard, Sorokin, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Todorov, Chomsky, Greimas, Deleuze” (*Overinterpretation* 35)
In fact, the idea of “the continuous slippage of meaning” found in many postmodern readings is, according to Eco, a Hermetic one.

This continuous slippage of meaning is, of course, the basic reason why Borges’s stories were read as postmodern. The epistemological crisis at the turn of the century triggered, according to Mark Frisch, “a philosophical and cultural shift away from utopian models and monistic visions and toward philosophical and cultural pluralism” (49). Borges’s slippage of meaning points towards a pluralism that challenges “the boundlessness of and the sources of our knowledge”, a fact that illustrates the author’s importance “to the evolution of postmodern literature in challenging singular, totalistic, monistic visions” (Frisch 49).

Lönnrot’s rhomboid course on the map of Buenos Aires condenses Borges’s contemplations of the world as a text or the text as a world. The detective of “Death and the Compass” flirts, just like Borges, both with scientific rationalism and with Hermeticism, while meaning itself proliferates in infinite bifurcations or remains always in suspension, just like Alice’s jam can never be eaten today, but will always remain a promise for tomorrow. As Didier T. Jaén insightfully notes, in “Death and the Compass” Borges adds a metaphysical undercurrent into the detective plot, in order to undermine both systems (31). Thus, “[t]he mystical reading reveals the limitations and simplifications (the artificiality) of the rational reading, whereas the rational plot uncovers the vacuity of the ‘mystical’ discovery or revelation” (31). 19

On the other hand, Lönnrot will need more than a pair of dividers and a compass or the divine nomenclature of the Pentateuch if he would walk through the paths of a

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19 Didier T. Jaén, in *Borges’s Esoteric Library*, focuses on the parodic element of Borges’s turn-of-the-century metafiction, which attempts to debunk contradictory literary tendencies of the period, such as positivistic literatures (the realistic story, the detective story and the critical essay) and the popular mythical, metaphysical and mystical literatures. According to Jaén, Borges’s metafiction “counters the conventions of positivistic literatures with the literary conventions and convictions of metaphysical writing”, which “leads him directly to a parody and irony that undermines both” (31).
world in which signs are separated from their meaning, and faith in the last remaining symbols, those of scientific quantities and measurements, is gradually lost in the maelstrom of indeterminacy, undecidability, non-objectivity and superpositions.

Perhaps, what is revealed by Borges’s dialectics between the compass and Gematria is the notion of contradictoriness being inherent in reality. From Hermeticism and pansemiotic metaphysics of the first era of Christianity, to Medieval and Renaissance Neoplatonism, and from the ambiguity of the Romantic symbol to the spatial labyrinths of Modernism, Borges’s regresses oscillate between secret unattainable meaning and plain coincidences; between ideal objects and prosaic everyday life; refutations of time and crude realizations of the passing of time; a garden of forking paths and the plain, almost unbearable mission of a Chinese spy.
TEMPORAL LABYRINTHS

The Magma of Time

In “Death and the Compass”, Lönnrot’s insertion of the rhomboid map, in the narrative Buenos Aires is more than a sacrilegious crossing of the Rubicon; his interpretative crossing of the boundaries interferes with the facts and re-moulds space into the inescapable *locus delicti* of the final lines of the story. In the “Garden of Forking Paths” Yu Tsun’s visit in the Sinologist’s house puts an end to the innumerable temporal bifurcations of his ancestor labyrinthine book, as his bullet realizes the only possible future development of the story. It is Lönnrot’s spatial labyrinth that turns his world into a text, and it is Yu Tsun’s mission that disentangles the temporal labyrinth hidden inside a book made world.

The “Garden of Forking Paths” (1942) is a story about the magma of time, firstly because it renegotiates the inseparable entanglement of the subjective with the objective component of this world, and, secondly, because it introduces yet another excluded middle, the magmatic superposition of branching time.

There is no question that time has always been a mind-blogging conundrum, and that the reconciliation between subjective and objective time still remains impossible. Lönnrot’s spatial labyrinth, therefore, seems almost child’s play compared to Yu Tsun’s temporal labyrinth. In 1941, when “The Garden of Forking Paths” was published, time had already lost its Newtonian incorruptibility. The universe had become a four-dimensional manifold, with time as its fourth dimension. As Castoriadis puts it in “Time and Creation” (1990), “the specter of the spatialization of time haunts the whole of physics since at least the times of Lagrange”, while Einstein himself considered time to be a subjective illusion (390). But the aporia of time goes
beyond this. The distinction between objective and subjective time is, according to Castoriadis, not only “old-fashioned and platitudinous”, but also not enough, since this inherited distinction ignores the social-historical aspect of time (375). When it comes to the social aspect of time — which is of fundamental interest to us at this point — Castoriadis argues for the need to distinguish between ensemblistic/identitary and imaginary time.

There is and always has to be identitary (ensidic) time, the backbone of which is calendar time, establishing common, public benchmarks and durations, roughly measurable and characterized essentially by repetition, recurrence, equivalence. But social time is and always has to be also, and more importantly, imaginary time. Time is never instituted as a purely neutral medium of or receptacle for external coordination of activities. Time is always endowed with meaning. (386)

Imaginary time is thus, according to Castoriadis, both “significant time and the time of signification” (“Time and Creation” 386). It is this time that signifies feasts and rituals, he writes, Fall, Trial and Salvation, and eternal recurrence (386), and which is linked not only with social representations, but also “with the fundamental drives of a society and its fundamental affects” (387). There is of course (and Castoriadis always insists in repeating it) an ensidic dimension to cosmic time on which imaginary significations are erected. There are, as he explains, undeniably fundamental characteristics of time, like local irreversibility or intransportability (388). But imaginary time often overrules these characteristics, explains Castoriadis: “There is for instance no simple and absolute irreversibility for many, if not most, beliefs and religions (which posit a cyclical time); neither is there, necessarily, intransportability of the segments of time (or of time-bound processes) for many of
them (shamanism, magic, etc.)” (388). Surely, he continues, we are in no position to
distinguish between the identitary dimension of time and the imaginary, that is, the
“poietic” dimension (387). Social time is a construction, and as such it cannot be
divided into that which “originates in the constructing subject — in this case, society
— and that which appertains to the world in itself, to what there is” (387). In Borges’s
fictions there is hard evidence of such an effort, that is, to separate the subject from
the object, an effort which, to borrow Castoriadis’s words, while not necessarily
erase or meaningless, always remains interminable (387).

Although imaginary constructions of time abound in the work of Borges, “The
Garden of Forking Paths” presents us with the most intriguing temporal construction.
For instance, “The Doctrine of Cycles” (1936), examines the concept of an eternal
return, while, at the same time, it mirrors his earlier “The Perpetual Race of Achilles”
(1929), where Borges deals with the notion of infinity and the Zenonian paradoxes
mentioned above.20 “The History of Eternity” (1936), where both the idealist and the
realist notions of time are presented, ends with one of his favourite temporal
speculations, his note from 1928 entitled “A Feeling in Death”. In “Circular Time”
(1941) eternal return is redefined. Finally, all his contemplations, as well as his
“feeling in death”, reappear in the famous essay “A New Refutation of Time” (1944-
47), where Borges joins two separate articles under the paradoxical title “that restores
the very notion the subject intends to destroy” (TL 318). All the above are essays, in
which Borges tests his obsession with the riddle of time21 without wearing a fictional
mask. As a detective tale, “The Garden of Forking Paths” presents not only an

20 Besides, “The Perpetual Race of Achilles” is an early version of his more superior “Avatars of the
Tortoise”, where infinite regress is meticulously examined.
21 W. H. Bossart’s Borges and Philosophy is particularly illuminating in regards to Borges’s allusion to
the riddle of time. In fact, the third chapter of the aforementioned work is entirely devoted to the
concepts of time and eternity.
exemplary (for postmodern fiction) exercise in the process of writing a story, but, most importantly, a comment on the philosophical and scientific conception of time.

The Story of the Spy and the Sinologist

There is, as always, a frame story. “Liddell Hart’s History of World War I” (Borges, L 44) offers the pseudo-historical setting that redirects the narrative to the fictional spy story,22 that is, the written statement of Dr Yu Tsun, “former professor of English at the Hochschule at Tsingtao” (44). The statement, in its turn, contains a mysterious bundle of manuscripts, the temporal labyrinth of Ts’ui Pên. This is how the story goes: Yu Tsun, a spy of the German Reich, must communicate, through the newspapers, a message (the location of the British artillery park) to Berlin, and is pressed for time, as Captain Richard Madden, an “Irishman at the service of England” (44) is pursuing him. The telephone book provides Yu Tsun with the name “of the only person capable of transmitting the message” (46), and he harries to the house of Dr Stephen Albert, a Sinologist (although the reader will not discover, until the end of the story, the way in which Albert is connected with the transmission of the message). On his way to Albert’s house, he decides to view his mission as already predetermined. He believes that his success will be secured if he acts according to the following, fatalistic, maxim: “The author of an atrocious undertaking ought to imagine that he has already accomplished it, ought to impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past” (47). Thus, he arrives at the Sinologist’s house as “a man already dead” (47).

22 For the World War I historical references in “The Garden of Forking Paths” see Daniel Balderston’s Out of Context (chapter three), whereas, for an interesting reading of Borges’s narrative strategy combining the metaphysical notion of the world as labyrinth with the form of the detective story, see Donald Shaw’s Borges’ Narrative Strategy (61-65).
There, he discovers that, uncannily, Dr Albert has in his possession the novel of Ts’ui Pên, Yu Tsun’s great grandfather, who, at some point, had “renounced worldly power in order to write a novel […] and to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost” (48). Out of curiosity, Yu Tsun decides to postpone his “irrevocable determination” (49) for a while, so that he gets the chance of finding out the truth about Ts’ui Pên’s contradictory drafts, which appear to reject the laws of causality, as in their third chapter the hero dies, whereas in the fourth he is alive again. Albert patiently explains that Ts’ui Pên’s undertaking did not involve two separate things, that is, the writing of a book and the construction of a labyrinth, but, rather, the construction of a fictional labyrinth, “a labyrinth of symbols”, as the Sinologist calls it, “an invisible labyrinth in time” (50). The riddle within the riddle is thus resolved: Albert holds in his possession a piece of paper in which Ts’ui Pên had written that he left “to the various futures (not to all) [his] garden of forking paths” (50). This manuscript has led Albert to the conclusion that “the garden of forking paths’ was the chaotic novel”, and that “the phrase ‘the various futures (not to all)’ suggested […] the forking in time, not in space” (51). In other words, while in “all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others”, “in the fiction of Ts’ui Pên, he chooses — simultaneously — all of them” (51). The hero, explains Albert, “creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork” (51).

Ts’ui Pên’s riddle of time is a revolutionary version of the universe, which has nothing to do with the clockwork machine of Newton, but which emerges from the Einsteinian manifold of four dimensions. This is how the Sinologist famously describes it to Yu Tsun:
“The Garden of Forking Paths is an incomplete, but not false image of the universe as Ts’ui Pên conceived it. In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of time, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us. In the present one, which a favourable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost.” (53)

As time “forks perpetually towards innumerable futures”, Albert will inevitably be Yu Tsun’s enemy in one of them (53). As the “irrevocable determination” can no longer be prolonged, Yu Tsun must fulfill his already determined future. “The future already exists” he replies and kills the Sinologist, knowing that “the city called Albert” (the location of the British artillery park) could only be communicated to Berlin, “through the uproar of war” by no other means than the news of the murder of “a man of that name” (54).

“The Garden of Forking Paths” thus poses the problem of the unbridgeable gap between Yu Tsun’s preordained future and his ancestor’s philosophical labyrinth of the possibilities of the future, as well as the problem of future contingency.

**Teleological Contingencies, a Parisian Grisette and a Hero Turned Traitor**

Ts’ui Pên’s labyrinth, which “embraces all possibilities of time” (L 53), offers a version of the future, that alludes to the already-mentioned paradoxical state of a
superposition of either/or. Just like Schrödinger’s cat, a future event is presented in Borges’s story as an excluded middle *par excellence*: as far as we can talk about it today, it is both possible and impossible. Actually, it is more than that, as each present moment is conceived as a nodal point of innumerable forking towards other nodal points, which, in their turn, also fork and proliferate to infinity. In other words, Borges’s fictional garden is an audacious proposal, a solution, like many others before it, to the problem of future’s contingents.

This problem goes as far back as fourth century B.C., when Diodorus Cronus, a philosopher (and formulator of paradoxes) from the Megarian School, came up with an argument that seemed originally designed to prove determinism, and was based on the relation between time, truth and possibility. According to Peter Øhrstrøm and Per F. V. Hasle’s *Temporal Logic* (1995), the argument began as a trilemma, that is, with three premises concerning the truth, possibility and necessity of propositions as such, that couldn’t all be true (15).

By negating at least one of them, Diodorus went on to define the possible and the necessary as follows: “The possible is that which either is or will be true”, and “The necessary is that which, being true, will not be false” (16). In simple words, explain Øhrstrøm and Hasle, “the argument is that an event which never will happen and is not happening now cannot be possible, and hence everything happening now or in the future is necessary” (28). The reason, they continue, that Diodorus’s argument is of great importance, even today, is the fact that if the fatalism of the argument were to be avoided, one would have to deny our “tacit assumption

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23 As Øhrstrøm and Hasle point out, only the premises and the conclusion are known from Diodorus’s argument, and, therefore, we cannot safely assume the way in which he reached his conclusion. However, there have been several attempts of reconstructing the argument, during the second half of twentieth century, by various philosophers and logicians (15). The premises of the argument are the following:
(D1) Every proposition true about the past is necessary.
(D2) An impossible proposition cannot follow from (or after) a possible one.
(D3) There is a proposition which is possible, but which neither is nor will be true. (15-16)
that time is a linear structure” (29). As it appears, what actually lies beneath the dark waters of this fourth-century argument is the fundamental question of determinism versus indeterminism, as well as the question concerning the arrow of time. Speaking of waters, I want now to stay with this argument by using Aristotle’s famous example of the sea-fight tomorrow.

In *De Interpretatione* (On Interpretation), Aristotle offers a solution to the problem of fatalism by reinstating the importance of contingency. Let us suppose, like Aristotle, the following two statements:

“Tomorrow there will be a sea-fight”

“Tomorrow there will not be a sea-fight” (qtd. in Øhrstrøm and Hasle 10).

The question that arises concerns the truth-value of the two statements today. Are they true or false already today? If both statements are possible today, then the principle of bivalence, according to which something concerning reality is either true or false, is overruled. Thus, in the case of the sea-fight, non-contradiction should be suspended until the time when the event has (or hasn’t) already happened. As far as we can talk about it today, the morrow holds both possibilities, no matter how incommensurable. However, in this case, explain Øhrstrøm and Hasle, if we assume that the first statement is true today, “is the statement then not also necessary today?” (11). And, on the other hand, “if it turns out that there is no sea-fight tomorrow”, can such a statement be possible today? (11). According to Øhrstrøm and Hasle, Aristotle found his way out of the problem by claiming that “neither statement could be necessary today” (11). Today they are neither true or false; the future realization or not of the fight will determine the truth of one of the two statements. While Diodorus saw future events as either impossible or necessary, Aristotle proved indeterminacy by inserting

[24] It is necessary for one of the contradictories to be true or false – not, however, this one or that one, but as chance has it; or for one to be true rather than the other, yet not already true or false (Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* 19a36-39).
contingency: it is not necessary that a sea-fight will happen tomorrow; neither is it necessary that a sea-fight will not happen tomorrow. However, it is necessary that a sea-fight will or will not happen tomorrow.

The dispute arising from the argument of the sea-fight was, for the years following the advent of Christianity, significant. Aristotle’s indeterminism not only favoured freedom of will, but it also presented a fundamental problem, since it conflicted with God’s foreknowledge. Besides, interpretation problems concerning *De Interpretatione* were also complex (Øhrstrøm and Hasle 13). Medieval interpreters, therefore, had to find a way of reconciling the science of logic with theology: if God already knows what is going to happen tomorrow, then I have no freedom of will. On the other hand, if future events are contingent (something may or may not happen tomorrow), then God does not know everything. In general, solutions tended towards the idea of a true future among possible futures (Øhrstrøm and Hasle 88). If we were to recount a few of the most famous solutions (and the ones more relevant to our Borgesian case), we should mention that of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), who proposed God’s eternity as “timelessly simultaneous with all parts of time” (qtd. in Øhrstrøm and Hasle 95), that of William of Ockham (d. 1349), who argued that humans could choose between future contingents, all of which are known by God (97), and finally Leibniz’s (1646-1711) concept of possible worlds (qtd. in Øhrstrøm and Hasle 102-107).

In all the above cases, however, determinism remains more or less intact. Humans are able to choose, but they can do so only from a multitude of already preconceived futures. Christian linearity seems also to remain intact, although there is in some of these solutions, especially Leibniz’s, a suggestion of time branching. Borges himself seems to entertain in his essays all possible conceptions of time, from
Plato’s circular time, to Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence and from infinite regresses that negate both movement and time, to time travels that violate the rules of causality as the reason for the journey becomes the consequence of the journey.\textsuperscript{25} At the same time, he never fails to emphasize the unbearable, corruptive passage of time, no matter how hard humans have tried to refute it or prove it to be an illusion. “The Garden of Forking Paths” stands among all his speculations on time as the most intricate and the most inspired one, an elegant contribution to the long-continued dispute concerning determinism and freedom of will. At the same time, the tale of Yu Tsun is an offspring of modern times and as such, its background of scientific turbulence (the determinism of Einstein’s Relativity theory versus the contradictoriness of Quantum physics) cannot be ignored. It is indeed remarkable that Borges’s tale introduces branching time long before science starts talking about it (Frisch 41). Above all, however, it seems to me, that the most intriguing aspect of “The Garden of Forking Paths” is its audacious bifurcation of either/or, its magmatic compound of all future contingents, its insistence on the necessity of all future contingents. Borges’s sea-fights or no sea-fights of the morrow are possible and necessary today. In this labyrinth of overruled principles of bivalence, of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle, Yu Tsun’s inescapable compulsion to kill Albert will become the ultimate free choice.

In this struggle between freedom of choice and determination, Poe’s and Borges’s detective tales have a curious role to play. As already explained, Auguste Dupin performs his astounding solutions in an always already predetermined universe of backward construction. Borges’s anti-detective tales, on the other hand, are infamously disturbing exactly because their logic reflects the rules of a mise-en-scène.\textsuperscript{25} See, for example, “Coleridge’s Flower” (1945).
“The Garden of Forking Paths”, in particular, curiously echoes two tales, one by Poe and another by Borges, which allude to the Leibnizian solution to the problem of future contingents, mentioned above. Leibniz’s fabrication of the doctrine of possible worlds argues for the pre-contemplation of a series of possible worlds by God, before the actual moment of creation. In this world that God finally creates, good co-exists with evil, since it would be impossible for God “to bestow free will and at the same time decree that there should be no sin” (Russell 570). Thus, Leibniz proved the necessity of all possible futures and the possibility of at least one of those futures. In other words, while there is an ideal series of things, men are allowed to choose any possible action from those offered. Consequently, Leibniz’s solution could be read as a kind of teleological contingency: Humans are allowed to choose from a finite number of possible courses of action.

In the case of the detective tale, the fictional universe appears to entail the possibility of contingency, but it does so only within the strict limits of a Leibnizean teleology. As far as Poe is concerned, the regressive determinism in “The Purloined Letter” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” has already been mentioned, but it is worth examining the second of his Dupin tales in terms of the possible-worlds solution.

“The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842) is generally thought to be the weakest of the Dupin trilogy. Less sensational than “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, the second detective tale (intended as a sequel to Dupin’s first tale) is Poe’s fictional reconstruction of a real, unsolved mystery, concerning the death of a beautiful young American girl, Mary Cecilia Rogers, whose body was found floating in the Hudson River, in the summer of 1841. In fact, it is Poe’s attempt to solve the mystery of her death “with no other means of investigation than the newspapers afforded” (P & T
506). After relocating the mystery to France, and turning Mary Rogers into Marie Rogêt, “a Parisian grisette” (506), Poe constructs an “arm-chair” detective tale, by having Dupin (supposedly)\(^\text{26}\) solve the crime through the newspaper articles concerning her death. While the actual plot of the story is of no immediate interest to us at this point, we should focus on some significant details.

The tale begins with a quotation from *Morale Ansichten*, by Novalis, the pseudonym of Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772-1801), an author and philosopher of early German Romanticism:

> There are ideal series of events which run parallel with the real ones. They rarely coincide. Men and circumstances generally modify the ideal train of events, so that it seems imperfect, and its consequences are equally imperfect.  

(*P & T* 506)

While the quotation is indicative of Novalis’s philosophy, a combination of religious faith with the Platonic ideal,\(^\text{27}\) it is interesting the way in which it alludes to the problem of future contingents, mentioned above. Novalis’s “ideal series” of events seems to reflect the medieval reconciliation of God’s omniscience with human freedom of choice, by means of accepting the necessity of all future contingents, but the possibility of only one. At the same time, Novalis’s quotation provides the key to reading Poe’s tale as a parallel, fictional version of the actual murder. If there are several future contingents, then there could also be several realities, different chains of events that run parallel to one another. As in the case of Borges’s forking paths,

\(^{26}\) “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” was published in three installments. Poe had to delay the final installment in order to make some changes so that Dupin’s ratiocination would be consistent with new evidence concerning Roger’s death. The whole story was actually reprinted in 1845, after Poe had concluded all the necessary changes, to suggest that he knew the actual solution from the beginning.

\(^{27}\) Novalis combined a mystical world-view, a high standard of education, and a deep faith in God, while he attempted to reach a new concept of Christianity. According to his transcendental philosophy, often referred to as “magic idealism”, the limitless power of Imagination combines all the elements of the senses and scientific principles invented by reason.
Marie Rogêt’s line of time is one of the infinite series of times that form the “dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times” (L 53). On the other hand, Poe’s narrator claims to have written the tale of the Parisian alter ego of Mary Rogers, in the faith that God has created nature according to laws, that, in their origin, they “were fashioned to embrace all contingencies that could lie in the future” (P & T 553). Apart from alluding to the possible-worlds solution, this statement uncannily foreshadows Borges’s network of times, which “embraces all possibilities” (L 53).

But, “with God all is Now”, declares Poe in “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (P & T 553), and perhaps, it is with this thought in his mind that, almost a century after Dupin, Dr Yu Tsun will be contemplating the day of his death:

Then I reflected that everything happens to a man precisely, precisely now.

Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen; countless men in the air, on the face of the earth and the sea, and all that really is happening is happening to me… (Borges, L 45).

It is precisely this present/chain of events that becomes a true and necessary reality for Yu Tsun. Even though time embraces all possible contingents, and countless Yu Tsuns remain suspended until the next forking of time, this particular present is happening to this particular Yu Tsun. Likewise, when Dr Albert explains the way in which time, in Ts’ui Pên’s novel, “forks perpetually towards innumerable futures” (L 53), Yu Tsun feels “the swarming sensation” of the countless versions of future (and present) surrounding him:

It seemed to me that the humid garden that surrounded the house was infinitely saturated with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and I, secret, busy and multiform in other dimensions of time. (54)
In Poe’s tale we get to read the story of one of the Marie Rogêts that lie, as Yu Tsun would put it, “multiform in other dimensions of time” (Borges, L 54). In Borges’s tale the forking of time, that embraces all contingencies, turns Yu Tsun from friend to foe, while in the narrative contingent he “utter[s] these same words, but [he is] a mistake, a ghost” (53). As Thiher puts it in Fiction Refracts Science, “[l]ike modern cosmology [...] Borges’s fiction does not hesitate to postulate that an infinite number of alternative events coexist, as in so many multiple universes or so many infinite sets” (239).

All versions of Yu Tsun exist, thus, in a reality of multidimensional time, as in the case of Leibniz’s concept of possible worlds. As Østrøm and Hasle explain in Temporal Logic, “in terms of [a] branching time model a necessary event must be true in all future branches” (105). Thus, Leibniz’s possible-worlds theory represents “the way in which the entire history might have been different from what it is” and that it would, therefore, be reasonable “to identify a possible world with a possible history” (105). Poe’s Marie Rogêt could therefore be read as a possible world that identifies with a possible history, and likewise, a possible world/ history, different from the one recorded in Liddell Hart’s History of World War I, is offered in “The Garden of Forking Paths”. Yu Tsun’s statement, which “throws an unsuspected light” (Borges, L 44) on the affairs of recorded history is, of course, a refined echo of another Borgesian contemplation on Leibniz’s theory, the possible world/ history revealed in “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” (1944), where the heroic (as recorded in history books) death of Fergus Kilpatrick is proved a staged execution of a traitor.

In the case of this story, however, there is no net of convergent and divergent times, only the rigid temporality of a predetermined mise-en-scène. As Ryan, the protagonist of the story, investigates the murder of his great grandfather Fergus
Kilpatrick, he discovers many similarities between the death of the latter and Julius Caesar’s murder. Disturbed by the frightful repetitions of similarities, “he thinks that, before having been Fergus Kilpatrick, Fergus Kilpatrick was Julius Caesar” (Borges, L 103). Finally, he discovers that his ancestor was a traitor, and that his death was staged by his fellow-rebels — on the basis of a play, namely, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* — so that Ireland’s revolt wouldn’t be jeopardized. However, what for Ryan is more frightening than discovering that our official history is a fake, is the realization that his investigation was perhaps anticipated. As he understands that he also forms part of the plot, “he resolves to keep his discovery silent” and “publishes a book dedicated to the hero’s glory” (105). But, concludes the narrator, “this too, perhaps, was foreseen” (105).

In Ryan’s case — as in Yu Tsun’s — a decision must be made at the end of the story. In the face of a horribly prefigured future, Ryan chooses to conform to it, realizing at the same time that his decision has also been prefigured. Yu Tsun, in his turn, begins his journey imagining that his “atrocious undertaking […] has already been accomplished” and imposes upon himself “a future as irrevocable as the past” (*L* 47). In the end, after meeting Dr Albert and getting to know the secret of his ancestor, he decides to perform the already prefigured atrocious act anyway. Both men have their ancestors’ past revealed. Both men are holding a secret. Ryan complies with the predetermined future that dictates him to keep the secret hidden, while Yu Tsun complies with his fatalistic future and gives it away. Both are presented with a choice and both of them decide to do what they would have done anyway. Ryan’s investigation reveals the possibility of a different history: if Killpatrick’s fellow-rebels had not staged the execution/ *Festspiele*, Ireland’s revolt might not have happened. Their choice has kept history intact, and so does Ryan’s choice. But Yu Tsun is not
given one simple choice; he is given the possibility of all choices at the same time. He takes a glimpse of the fabric history is made of and he tastes “the innumerable contrition and weariness” (L 54) of everything happening exactly now. And yet, he chooses to act as if he has no choice at all. Is the decision of the two men an act of free will, or is it part of a larger plot, a prefigured chain of events?

Perhaps Leibniz holds the answer. When dealing with the question of human freedom of choice, in terms of his possible-worlds theory, he uses the figure of Julius Caesar28 as an example. As Østrøm and Hasle explain, according to Leibniz, the concept of Caesar (always) already involves his crossing of the Rubicon, as well as his becoming a dictator: “Nevertheless, the assumption that the person who was crossing the Rubicon on a certain day in 52 B.C., and who has also done exactly everything Caesar did before the crossing, will choose not to be a dictator, does not imply a contradiction” (107). This is how Leibniz himself explains it:

Since the individual concept of every person includes once and for all everything which can ever happen to him, one sees in it a priori proofs or reasons for the truths of each event and why one has happened rather than another, but these truths, however certain, are nevertheless contingent, being based on the free will of God and of creatures. It is true that their choice always has its reasons, but these recline without necessitating. (qtd. in Østrøm and Hasle 106-107)

In other words, “Caesar’s becoming a dictator is not necessary, but merely certain as foreseen by God” (107). His actions may seem like free choices, but they are actually already foreseen by God. Thus, one begins to wonder whether Albert and Yu Tsun’s meeting is accidental or not. If Ryan’s discovery and subsequent concealment of his

28 Should we now begin to wonder about the inviting insertion of Caesars’ figure in “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero”, since Borges’s has already warned us that “the palace councilor Leibniz (inventor of the pre-established harmony)” had worked as an important influence for his story (L 102)?
ancestor’s secret was predetermined, then Albert and Yu Tsun’s meeting was perhaps also foreseen, if not by the God of a Leibnizian pre-established harmony, then certainly by the author-God of the Borgesian universe. Even though “The Garden of Forking Paths” appears to be offering all possible choices, its protagonists are bound to move forward, towards a very definite future. I would argue, therefore, that temporal linearity and succession seems to be for Borges synonymous with destiny. The irreversibility of the arrow of time determines our already-prescribed future, choices or no choices, sea-fights or no sea-fights.

This tension between determinism and indeterminism is what “The Garden of Forking Paths” is built on. As Lönnrot oscillates between scientific rationalism and Hermetic overinterpretation, Yu Tsun’s journey in the garden of temporal labyrinths reveals a dialectics between innumerable possibilities and a single, linear causality. T'sui Pên’s book/ theory of branching time and infinite possibility is juxtaposed with the unbearable linearity of his grandson’s predetermined trajectory, as well as with the linearity of the story’s actual plot. “The Garden of Forking Paths” recreates, therefore, the insoluble magma of the ensidic and the imaginary aspect of time. As Castoriadis has argued, time, social time in particular, is made up of “two intertwined threads” (“Time and Creation” 386): identitary time, that is calendar time, and imaginary time, that is, the time of signification. “Time”, he says, “is never instituted as a purely neutral medium of or receptacle for external coordination of activities. Time is always endowed with meaning” (386). Time is therefore, according to Castoriadis, a construction, but we are in no position to separate what, in this construction, originates from the subject, and what appertains to the constructible part of the world (387).
T’sui Pên’s forking time is a construction, but so is Yu Tsun’s. The arrow of time may be based on the identitary aspect of our world, but it still remains imaginary time, laden with social significations. In the labyrinthine garden of T’sui Pên’s indeterminacy, Yu Tsun must carry out his linear mission. The “dizzying net of divergent, convergent, and parallel times” (Borges, L 53) collides with the linear causality of an atrocious murder and the prosaic, linear plot of a narrative. Just as T’sui Pên’s imaginary time is endowed with a post-Einsteinian meaning, so is his grandson’s unbearable forward movement towards a single possible future. Yu Tsun’s time, however, bears more than the social significations of irreversibility as we experience it, since his task is literally to inform his temporal journey with one very particular meaning, the name of the city called Albert.

Refutation

While informing his temporal journey with meaning, Yu Tsun also creates his own time. His temporal construction is beset with opposing attempts to negate his destiny by re-inventing his present or to fulfill his destiny by carrying out his already-foreseen present. Perhaps the writing of “The Garden of Forking Paths” reveals yet another attempt to negate time and its destiny or even another consciously-failed attempt to negate time. Knowing that the passage of ensidic time is inescapable, the author can do nothing but rehearse its imaginary constructions.

A few years after the publication of “The Garden of Forking Paths”, Borges returned to his speculations on temporal constructions with “A New Refutation of Time” (1944-47), where he attempts to refute succession and simultaneity. The essay consists of two parts: part A, an article written in 1944 and published in number 115 of Sur, and part B, from 1946, a revision of the first. Borges uses in both parts the
idealistic views of George Berkeley and David Hume: “Berkeley denied that there was an object behind sense impressions, David Hume denied that there was a subject behind the perception of changes. Berkeley denied matter; Hume denied the spirit” (Borges, *TL* 328). As far as time is concerned, for Berkeley it is “the succession of ideas in my mind, which flows uniformly and is participated by all beings”, whereas “for Hume, it is ‘a succession of indivisible moments’” (329). Evidently, claims Borges, in part B, if one accepts the idealist argument, it is easy to go one step further.

If matter and spirit are denied, and space is denied, then there is no reason why we should “retain that continuity which is time” (329). Time, he claims, must not exist “outside each present moment” (329). Therefore, he continues, if we deny time then we must also deny “the succession of the terms in the series”, as well as “the synchronism of terms in two series” (330). In other words, if one denies anything “outside each present moment” (329), then s/he must also deny the human tendency to explain everything by turning it into a set, a series which consists of terms that are categorized according to the principles of identity and non-contradiction. Time, as we know it, is such an ensidic construction, a set made of yesterdays, todays and tomorrows; weeks, months and years; hours, minutes and seconds. Poe’s “all is Now” (*P & T* 553) echoes a hundred years later in the garden of a Sinologist and in Borges’s refutation of time’s arrow. For Borges, the philosophical dialectics of Berkeley and Hume deny the parts (past, present, future) “in order to deny the whole” (331). “I reject the whole”, he says, “in order to exalt each one of the parts” (331).

But what is the point of rejecting the whole in order to exalt the part? Perhaps, this is the only way of escaping an always already prescribed time. If the whole is rejected, then all that remains is now. The now which disrupts and confounds our temporal constructions, history and, of course, destiny. In the words of Yu Tsun:
“everything happens to a man precisely, precisely now. Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen” (Borges, L 45). The present moment is liberating only if it is taken out of its ensidic context. It is this now that can help us escape from our destiny.

Still, Yu Tsun must kill the Sinologist, fulfilling thus his destiny. Refutations or no refutations, we are bound to move onwards and so is Borges. “A New Refutation of Time” concludes with a famous, unconditional surrender to the iron-clad movement of time:

And yet, and yet… To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, appear to be acts of desperation and are secret consolations. Our destiny (unlike the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not terrifying because it is unreal; it is terrifying because it is irreversible and iron-bound. Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.

The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges. (TL 332)

In this heartbreaking paragraph Borges admits the insoluble magma of ensidic and imaginary time. “Time is the substance of which I am made” is a phrase that condenses the inseparability of the world’s objective and subjective components.29 “Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am that river” are the words of a person who laments the double meaning of the Heraclitian dictum. Earlier in the same essay, Borges explains the dialectic of the river:

each time I recall fragment 91 of Heraclitus, “You cannot step into the same river twice,” I admire his dialectical skill, for the facility with which we accept

29 Again, for an interesting reading of Borges’s obsession with the debate concerning the passage of time and whether time is objective or subjective see Bossart 97-107.
the first meaning (“The river is another”) covertly imposes upon us the second meaning (“I am another”) and gives us the illusion of having invented it. (323)

The river is never the same, nor is Borges, for the reason that he is the river/time. Time is, therefore, perceived through change. Let us recall Aristotle’s famous definition of time, in *Physics*: time is “a number of motion in respect of ‘before’ and ‘after’” (219b1). According to Aristotle, therefore, if we perceive no change, then we cannot perceive the passage of time. The now, if perceived as single, cannot give us the impression of change. It appears therefore quite comprehensible that Borges should strive to escape time by exalting the now. If Western thought has based its temporal constructions on the continuity necessary for the perception of now “as one, and neither as before and after in a motion nor as the same element but in relation to a ‘before’ and ‘after’” (Aristotle, *Physics* 219a30-31), then negating time would certainly involve negating the whole (the continuity) to exalt the part (the present moment). In *Physics*, Aristotle begins his exposition of what time is by declaring that there would be no time if we only perceived of a single now:

> just as, if the “now” were not different but one and the same, there would not have been time, so too when its difference escapes our notice the interval does not seem to be time. If, then, the non-realization of the existence of time happens to us when we do not distinguish any change, but the mind seems to stay in one indivisible state, and when we perceive and distinguish we say time has elapsed, evidently time is not independent of movement and change. (218b27-32)

It is obvious from this extract that time is inextricably connected with the mind. When the mind perceives no movement or change, then there is no passage of time. Aristotle acknowledges this connection towards the end of his speculation: “Whether if soul did
not exist time would not exist or not is a question that may fairly be asked; for if there
cannot be some one to count there cannot be anything that can be counted either, so
that evidently there cannot be a number” (223a22-24). This is a point also made by
Castoriadis in his “Time and Creation”, where he discusses Aristotle’s views: “So, the
soul cannot perceive time unless there is for it a change; but also it can produce itself
the change (the ‘movement’) through which time is given to it” (384). This is the
important detail in the insoluble magma of subjective and objective time: the subject
that perceives and produces the change necessary for the perception of time. It is the
subject that informs time with meaning, and it is the nature of the object that allows
for such an informing.

Time is, therefore, perceived by Borges as a magma of subject/ object. “Via
the dialectic of Berkeley and Hume, I have arrived at Schopenhauer’s dictum”, says
Borges, and he quotes:

We might compare time to an infinitely revolving circle: the half that is always
sinking would be the past, that which is always rising would be the future; but
the indivisible point at the top which the tangent touches, would be the present.
Motionless like the tangent, that extensionless present marks the point of
contact of the object, whose form is time, with the subject, which has no form
because it does not belong to the knowable but is the precondition of all
knowledge. (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I, 54) (TL 331)

This, then, is time for Borges: “it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a
fire that consumes me, but I am the fire” (332). Time is real and inescapable because
it is amalgamated out of the object/ subject tangent. All essays by Borges concerning
time (all of his “secret consolations”) seem to be confuted by this realization. In “A
History of Eternity” (1936), for example, he reaches the following conclusion:
life is too impoverished not to be immortal. But we lack even the certainty of our own poverty, given that time, which is easily refutable by the senses, is not so easily refuted by the intellect, from whose essence the concept of succession appears inseparable” (TL 138).

This succession, inseparable from the intellect’s essence, haunts Borges’s work, in my opinion, because it signifies determinism, as well as the impossible magma of time. In this light, one could read Borges’s exercises on regressive, forking and circular time as vain attempts to escape fate by elucidating the magmatic complexity of our subjective/ objective time. His collections abound in essays on time; his stories are full of intricate temporal constructions. We have already examined “The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise” (1929) and “Avatars of the Tortoise” (1932), where time is lost in the labyrinths of infinite regress. In “Time and J. W. Dunne” (1940) he examines Dunne’s infinite regresses of the subject perceiving time and his theory of a pre-existent future. In “The Doctrine of Cycles” (1936), and in “Circular Time” (1942) he speculates on the notion of Eternal Return. In “A History of Eternity” (1936) he attempts an elucidation of time through its archetypal model, eternity. In “An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain” (1941) he presents Quain’s regressive and forking novel, called April March, which seems to allude to Dunne’s theories of infinite numbers of time and F. H. Bradley’s (1846-1924) inverted world, where death precedes birth and the scar precedes the wound. In a footnote commenting on Bradley’s regressive time, Borges mentions a similar world, presented in Plato’s Statesman (Politicos), the myth of Cronus’s age. This is the Golden Age Romantics often referred to nostalgically, and is worth examining, in relation to time’s arrow.

30 As April March is divided into chapters that fork back in time, J. T. Irwin rightly observes in The Mystery to a Solution that its structure “mirrors in a reverse direction the endlessly branching, parallel times in Ts’ui Pên’s imaginary book The Garden of Forking Paths” (79).
What is interesting about the myth is the fact that during the age of Cronus (Saturn) humans sprang out of the ground (γηγενείς), already grown up, and, as time went by, got younger and younger, until they reached the end of their lives as infants. The age of Cronus, therefore, is an age of regressive time, which stops when Zeus gets angry with Thyestes (for the second time) and decides to reverse the cosmic route. During the reign of Cronus God looks after the world and humans live in happiness, whereas during Zeus’s reign, we are left to our own devices, straggling to survive. The myth of Cronus refers to a different reality, in which the notions of before and after do not correspond to our notions of past and future.

Castoriadis himself examined Plato’s Statesman in seven seminars, one of which focuses on the myth of Cronus and its significance in relation to the construction of time. For Castoriadis, Plato’s work attempts an elucidation of questions concerning knowledge, truth and the limits of rationalism, that is, questions which still afflict our post-Kantian reality, in which notions about the world are thought of as determined by the nature of our intellect (Ο Πολιτικός του Πλάτωνα 44). Timaeus and Statesman, in particular, are according to Castoriadis’s O Πολιτικός του Πλάτωνα the first philosophical texts that deal with the notion of time and pose the question of whether we can perceive time as empty of content (211). The myth of Cronus presents a world with a non-conventional flow of time that makes us wonder about time’s arrow, that is, about one of the greatest problems in science and philosophy, since it is closely connected with irreversible processes. For science, whether this is classical or post-Einsteinian mechanics, the direction of time is merely a convention, explains Castoriadis (210). In real-life sequences, however, most

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31 The seminars took place in École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), from February 19, to April 30, 1986.
processes are irreversible, and the arrow of time is more than certain. If, argues Castoriadis, we cannot conceive of a time without content — since we can only conceive of it through the sequence of life’s events — then time’s arrow is dictated by a continuity inherent in the events (211-12). Causes will always precede the effect, and all the King’s horses and men won’t be able to put Humpty Dumpty together again. According to Castoriadis, this notion of an inherent continuity in the unfolding of time is condemned in modern times, because of the Kantian belief that subjectivity creates the notion of time (212).

To go back to Borges, his fictions can now be read in relation to the philosophical and scientific delineations of the notion of time from the pre-Socratics onwards. As already mentioned, his fictional constructions of time oscillate between Aristotelian linearity and Platonic circularity; between the Romantic desire for a regress to the Golden Age and the Modern thermodynamics of an increasing entropy, that dictates an irreversible progress towards the inevitable death of the planet, and, unavoidably, of mankind. In other words, Borges’s fictions reflect the oscillation of science and philosophy from the Platonic notion of a perception of the world distorted by the limitations of the intellect and the senses, to the Newtonian, empiricist belief that what we perceive with our senses is real, and, back again, to the post-Kantian/ post-Einsteinian notion of a world determined by and perceived through the limits of the observer’s intellect. Borges’s rehearsal of the detective tale, in particular, becomes thus a ground of opposing tensions, between the notion that the world is an illusion of our senses, and the inescapable reality of the sequence of events and time. The regressive, forking and circular courses of his characters, however, do not take sides. Our perception of space and time is a riddle that cannot be solved like the riddles of detective tales. It must remain inextricable, like the magma of our perception,
amalgamated both by the constructing nature of the subject and the constructible nature of the object. Thus, what Poe began in his blurring of the lines between the seeking subject and the object sought, in his post-Romantic invention of the ratiocination tale, is re-staged by Borges, a century later, in the magmatic labyrinths of the post-Einsteinian metaphysical detective tale.
POSTSCRIPT

The mission of science has always been to search the hidden truth of this universe behind superficial appearances. For Hinduism or Buddhism, this true reality would be inexpressible and unknowable, but Western science has always sought a true and implacable order of things, behind the veil of these illusory appearances, that can and should be found. Classical scientific reductionism, however, has led to a separation between disciplines and until today, as the first decade of the new millennium draws to its end, scientific and philosophical enquiry has been unable to re-assemble the fragments of our world. The theory that would end all theories — by uniting all of them together — is still to be found. Humans, long ostracized from the centre of this universe, are now trying harder than ever to find their way back to the Eden of their former privileged position.

In this search for a theory that would unite everything, some scientists have reasoned that there are several constraints or strange coincidences in our universe that seem to privilege carbon-based life forms. Since 1973, when the theoretical astrophysicist Brandon Carter reacted against the Copernican Principle (according to which we do not occupy a special position in the Universe), the argument claiming that even if our position is not necessarily central, it is certainly privileged (the so-called Anthropic Principle) has continued to lure the scientific world. This theory has caused much controversy since it is used to explain why certain conditions (such as the gravitational constant, the mass of electrons and protons, the age of the universe, etc.) support the existence of intelligent life, by invoking multiple universes, tautologies or even a higher designer.

In my opinion, this Anthropic Principle is a good example of the way humans move in circles in their attempt to explain and rationalize their world: from the
cosmologies of ancient times, to the metaphysical grand narratives of Christianity, and, then, from the ambitious undertaking of the scientific revolution to emancipate the world from its religious fetters, to the scientific proof of the existence of a Higher Designer.

As Giorgos Grammatikakis has argued recently, the rationale behind the Anthropic Principle seems to be to reintroduce humans back into a distant and indifferent universe and to impose meaning on the laws that govern it (47). But in solving the cosmic riddle by repositioning the human individual at the heart of the universe, the followers of this theory come very close to presupposing an intelligent design, vaulting as it does between science and theology (Grammatikakis 47). While the world had to be emancipated from the holistic contemplations of metaphysical doctrines, the vivisectionist logic of ensembles, which prevailed after the revolution of the sciences, brought about a radical and irremediable separation. Our hermetically-compartmentalized disciplines cannot offer us the long-awaited meaning behind appearances as they develop to the point where their limits become more important than their elucidations.

In this cosmic whodunit, humans have always yearned for meaning, and have often neglected the fact that disorder is as essential and as necessary as order. The appeal of the detective story itself has supposedly been the pattern of reassurance provided, alluding as it does to an ordered cosmos. The Chevalier is the first true decoder in the history of the genre since, as Michael Holquist has claimed in his famous “Whodunit and Other Questions” (1971), he “holds to the Scholastic principle of adequatio rei et intellectus, the adequation of mind to things, the belief that the mind, given enough time, can understand everything. There are no mysteries, there is only incorrect reasoning” (141). Today, it seems to me, the time has come to
reevaluate the appeal of the Dupin trilogy, as well as of Borges’s metaphysical detections, to embark on new readings that will enable us critically to question this higher order proffered by our sciences. Poe’s and Borges’s detectives could function as catalysts to make us, the readers of ratiocination tales, understand that while human knowledge is expanding at an almost terrifying rate, it nonetheless remains unable to penetrate and resolve the fundamental riddles of human existence. In demonstrating that our detections are not fully-decomposable products, these detective tales of the past could help us see that now, more than ever, we need to bridge the gap between science and philosophy, in an attempt to elucidate our need for explanation.
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