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Some Thoughts on Borges, Detective Fiction and the Literature Classroom

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Abstract

This brief paper was written for and presented as a contribution to a roundtable discussion of Jorge Luis Borges on the occasion of his 120th anniversary at Texas A&M International University in Laredo, Texas (November 12, 2019). Taking Borges' own essay, "The Detective Story" (1978) as a starting point, the paper explores how Borges offers a useful perspective on approaching the genre as a whole, expanding the contemporary reader's understanding the development of the genre from the Golden Age of Detective Fiction into postmodernity and today. Borges reacts against the increased realism the form has taken in the twentieth century, but whether we agree with him on certain points or not, he nevertheless draws our attentions to important questions of genre. In this way, Borges offers perspective on our own tendencies and expectation as readers and the nature of readership in general.

Keywords: *Borges, Jorge Luis; Poe, Edgar Allan; detective fiction; genre fiction; literary criticism*

Algunas reflexiones sobre Borges, la ficción detectivesca y el aula de literatura

Resumen

Este breve documento fue escrito y presentado como una contribución a una mesa redonda sobre Jorge Luis Borges con motivo de su 120 aniversario en Texas A&M International University, en Laredo, Texas (el 12 de noviembre del 2019). Tomando el propio ensayo de Borges, "El cuento policial" (1978) como punto de partida, este artículo explora cómo el autor ofrece una perspectiva útil para abordar el género en su conjunto, ampliando la comprensión del lector contemporáneo sobre el desarrollo del género desde la Edad de Oro de la ficción policial hasta la posmodernidad y la actualidad. Borges reacciona contra el mayor realismo que ha tomado la forma en el siglo XX, pero, aunque estamos o no de acuerdo con él en ciertos puntos, atrae nuestra atención a cuestiones importantes de género. De esta manera, Borges ofrece una perspectiva sobre nuestras propias tendencias y expectativas como lectores y la naturaleza de los lectores en general.

Palabras Clave: *Borges, Jorge Luis; Poe, Edgar Allan; literatura policiaca; géneros novelísticos; crítica literaria*

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When I was asked to participate in this roundtable appreciation of Jorge Luis Borges,[i] the first thing that came to mind was how, when I first taught a course on detective fiction, Borges became a centering point for many of my students in their work that semester. I had taught Borges previously and wanted to include him as an interesting voice in the genre from midcentury, but his pivotal role in the course had not been planned. Such courses as the one I taught are part of a larger trend that incorporates studies of genre fiction-- and particularly detective fiction-- into the curricula of literature departments across the United States. They point to the continued popularity of the genre in our current era as well as an increased attention to how literature might be more richly contextualized. We can better consider modernism, for example, when we also consider these popular works alongside the traditional canon of writers from that era. Upon doing so, our perspectives as readers change, our relationship with the period shifts and our scholarly assumptions will gain nuance. A new appreciation can be formed and many "middlebrow" works will be reconsidered in new terms.[ii] Borges was himself preoccupied by some of these same questions long before our current era and its academic trends, although he would perhaps take a different view than the one I have alluded to just now.

While my course on detective fiction only assigned two short works by Borges, he nevertheless became a central voice in the course due to the attention he pays to genre. After reading "Death and the Compass" (1942) students were asked to read his essay, "The Detective Story" (1978), in which he outlines the genre's history and qualities while also meditating on its larger cultural significance. Toward the end of his essay, Borges remarks directly on his own work in the genre, specifically mentioning "Death and the Compass," writing: "I have on occasion attempted the detective genre, and I'm not very proud of what I have done. I have taken it to the symbolic level, which I am not sure is appropriate" (p.134). Most Borges critics would tend to disagree-- and my students shared in a more charitable assessment of the story, finding it an intriguing twist on works from the Golden Age of Detective Fiction of the 1920s and 30s, we had read in the weeks before. Working through the essay during our class discussion, we could clearly see the ways in which Borges was both working in and breaking with established genre conventions. Whatever his own assessment of his works may be, Borges occupies an important space-- and helps to mark a line-- between the detective story as an intellectual puzzle-game and the detective story as a genre with metaphysical preoccupations.

These are not my terms-- academics and intellectuals have debated the nature of the genre for generations-- and these are two categories used in its classification. I borrow the first term from "The Detective Novel as Game" (1983), by Roger Caillois, the second section of a three-part essay on detective fiction published more than two decades before Borges' own essays on the topic.[iii] There, Caillois observes that "the whole history of the genre … proclaim[s] its relation to the mathematical puzzle and the chess problem" (p. 9). Yet, he continues, whatever inclination it has toward being an intellectual puzzle, "in spite of everything, it is necessary to speak of death, of murder, of violence. The detective novel must have a hero and it must recount a drama. It is a strange ambiguity that a genre with such strictly abstract ambitions ends up interesting its readers by such obvious emotional attractions" (p.12). For this reason, Caillois makes an important distinction between the novel and the detective novel. The first "takes human nature as its basis and its subject," whereas the latter "only reluctantly admits human nature because it must. The detective novel would abolish human nature altogether if it could" (p.11).

Michael Holquist reiterates this in his essay, "Whodunnit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Postwar Fiction" (1983). He remarks that detective fiction relies upon familiar conventions throughout its history in order to capture the reader's imagination, relying upon "the power of reason, *mind* if you will. It is not, as is so often said, the character of great detectives which accounts for their popularity. If character *means* anything, we must admit that most of them have very little of it" (p.158). He brings the reader's attention to the example of Sherlock Holmes who, according to Holquist, "does not really *exist* when he is not on a case. The violin, the drugs merely keep him in a state of suspended animation until the inevitable knock on the door comes, announcing a new problem. He does not solve crimes, he solves puzzles. There is no death in his world-- only the statement of riddles" (p.158). Yet, Caillois and Holquist are writing during-- and about-- different eras on the history of the genre. Caillois writes toward the end of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction and Holquist writes during the postmodernist turn of the 1970s.

"Death and the Compass" (1942), as one of Borges' most frequently discussed stories, deserves some specific mention here. To avoid a lengthy summary of the story, suffice it to say that the detective figure, Erik Lönnrot, is a literary person and an overly literal detective, one whose literariness causes him to misinterpret the crime entirely. Jeanne F. Bedell

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(1985) draws a direct comparison between Lönnrot and a reader the genre, remarking, "as a detective [he] ignores or misinterprets the evidence … as a critic, he neglects the text and imposes on it his own imaginative construct" (p.109). The criminal, Red Scharlach, manipulates Lönnrot and writes a "story" through deliberately laid clues to confuse the detective, who is predisposed to rely upon his esoteric knowledge in order to solve the crime. In this sense, both Lönnrot and Scharlach become "writers" of their own versions of the story being told. Yet, Bedell reminds us, the reader should not forget Borges and his own role as writer of the story in which these two characters write their own versions of the crime and its solution.

While using these methods Borges simultaneously undermines them and any deference one might pay to the genre. It is, in the words of Nadya Aisenberg (1979), "A detective story, a parody of a detective story, and a 'meditation upon its implications'" (p.233). This "meditation upon its implications," seems to target the uncritical reader of classic detective stories. Lönnrot's elaborate solution to a simple problem is, "logical only in one accepts the premises of the conventions used" (Bedell, 1985, p. 115). Yet, it seems that Borges is not only playing with the reader, but also inventing-- or perhaps imagining-- his own type of reader of detective stories. This reader is one more interested in metaphysical questions concerning the interrelatedness between the figures of criminal and detective, between writer and reader-- and furthermore, within the author's own self, embodying "both puzzle maker and puzzle solver" (Bedell, 1985, p. 118). So, although Borges has some fun with the reader, using the same conventions that he will discuss in his later essay on the genre. As Bedell writes: "He has played fairly with the reader, but he has played" (p. 118). Borges would seem to be interested in provoking the reader to be dissatisfied with the simple question of "whodunnit?".

In this manner, the reader finds many playful references made to the Golden Age of Detective Fiction and the rules established by writers during that era. Beyond defining the genre through their fiction, they also composed lists of formal rules of engagement by which the author was to engage with the reading audience. The first to do so was S. S. Van Dine in his "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" (1928), but shortly thereafter Ronald A. Knox composed his own list, "Nine Rules for Detective Stories" (1929). Furthermore, Knox was part of a group of British crime and mystery writers known as The Detection Club which included such figures as G. K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers (and it was Sayers who wrote their oath of membership). The approach these authors take to the genre can no longer hold in the postmodern era. As Holquist (1983) writes, "postmodernists use as a foil the assumption of detective fiction that the mind can solve all" and, citing Borges as an example,[iv] concludes that the metaphysical detective story, does not offer familiarity, but "a strangeness which more often than not is the result of jumbling the well-known patterns of classical detective stories. Instead of reassuring, they disturb. They are not an escape, but an attack" (p.173). For this reason, Holquist cites Borges as one of the midcentury writers who exemplify a new, postmodern, metaphysical detective story.

Not long after Holquist writes his essay, Borges expresses his own dissatisfaction when looking back on "Death and the Compass." The metaphysical preoccupations of the genre that Holquist describes are what Borges seems to mean when he writes that his own detective stories inappropriately operate on "the symbolic level." This would seem also to mark the source of discomfort Borges has with the modern shifts within the genre that he articulates in "The Detective Story." In that essay, he spends a great deal of time helping to situate the reader amid the genre's development and he does so in order to contemplate the role of literary genres more generally-- and to consider the perennial question of the relationship between author and reader. Although he begins his essay by introducing Edgar Allan Poe as the creator of the genre, Borges (2010) pauses to consider "a small prior question that should be discussed: Do literary genres exist?" (p. 125). It would seem to be a digression, as Borges quickly affirms that they do and that they must. Nevertheless, it does get at his primary concern, which is that "literary genres may depend less on texts than on the way texts are read" (p. 125) and that the "aesthetic phenomenon" of literature can only come into being when the reader opens the book (p. 126). The relationship between author and reader in terms of the detective story originates with Poe who both invented the genre and its reader, neither of whom would had ever before existed.

For this reason, Borges (2010) traces the history and the key components of the detective story back to Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), writing that, "if Poe created the detective story, he subsequently created the reader of detective fiction" (p. 126). What Poe establishes there, writes Borges, is a catalog of the many interconnected conventions that remain recognizable today. Primary among these are "the fact of a mystery that is solved by the intellect, by an intellectual operation" and that "this feat is

carried out by a very intelligent man" (p. 129). These are now familiar to us, but Borges elaborates, writing that ideally the detective should be a foreigner, or at least noticeably different from the reader in habit and practice. So too should these characters be placed in a foreign setting (p. 130). Each one of these attributes are critical to "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and it is also there that Poe offers the original "locked room" mystery. That the story begins with a "disquisition on analysis" -- in this case the merits of checkers over chess-- is Poe's way of making his readers aware of the intellectual puzzle that will unfold in the subsequent pages (p. 132).

Yet, all these characteristics outlined by Borges (2010) refer to the idea of the detective story as a primarily intellectual genre. Borges is less concerned with setting rules for telling a detective story than he is with the central issue of genre and the relationship between reader and the text being read. These are the methods by which Poe worked to invent the readers and their reasonably expectations for the story at hand. Borges stresses the importance of intellect in solving any given crime or mystery, writing: "Poe did not want the detective genre to be a realist genre; he wanted it to be an intellectual genre, a fantastic genre, if you wish, but a fantastic genre of the intellect and not only of the imagination" (p. 130). For Borges, this points to the necessity for foreign settings and the eccentricity of character in the detective figure. The distance created allows for abstraction-- it allows for the detective figure and the world in which he operates to remain apart from the reader who cannot therefore be tempted to wonder "whether the events really took place in that way" (p. 130) and makes few demands for verisimilitude. For Borges, then, it is Poe who creates "a certain species" and "a special type" of reader-- a reader created by the genre of detective fiction itself and who accepts the genre as an intellectual, "fantastic" and apart from the nineteenth century trends toward literary realism that still often guide readerly expectations today.

The reader of detective fiction now exists around the world. Yet, although this reader was invented by Poe, so too has this reader been reinvented in the past century. In *An Introduction to American Literature* (1967), Borges includes a short chapter titled "The Detective Story, Science Fiction, and the Far West." There, he provides a brief list of important authors who wrote in these three categories and, in considering the detective story, Borges (1971) writes that "this genre is above all ingenious and artificial; real crimes are not commonly discovered by abstract reasoning but by chance, investigation, or confession" (p. 80). The artificiality of the genre-- its "fantastic" quality-- is its essential characteristic. For this reason, Borges' later essay ends with a consideration of the genre in the contemporary world. Borges (2010) laments that "the detective genre has greatly declined in the United States, where it has become realistic and about violence-- sexual violence, as well. In any event, it has disappeared. The intellectual origins of the detective story have been forgotten" (p. 134). Whatever one may think of this assessment, it is difficult to argue with the larger point-- and even more so today than when Borges was originally writing. The aspect of realism which dominates the detective story today can be seen in its historical development as suggested by Caillois and Holquist.

So too within the academy. One of the popular textbooks compiled for and used in classes like these is the *Longman Anthology of Detective Fiction* (2005).[v] Collecting works from Poe to the present day, it divides them into three sections based on the types of detectives the reader encounters. These are: The Amateur Detective, the Private Investigator and the Police. While a strict chronology cannot be traced from one to the next and there is room for overlap among these different types, one can nevertheless discern an increase in popularity from the original amateur detective found in Poe through the private eye and into the police procedural. Today, one need only turn on a television set at any given time of day to find a police procedural, new or old-- and one need only turn to classic cinema to find the hard-boiled detectives who now belong alongside the cowboy and other distinctly American character types. It is Raymond Chandler, creator of Philip Marlowe, who first appeared in the novel *The Big Sleep* (1939), who wrote his own essay on the genre titled "The Simple Art of Murder" (1944) which includes the famous lines:

> But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor-- by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. (p. 59)

While Borges does not mention Chandler in his own essays, he does cite Dashiell Hammett, author of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), writing: "Hammett acquaints us with the reality of the criminal world and of police work. His detectives are no less violent than the outlaws whom they pursue" and Borges (1967) concludes his thoughts: "The atmosphere of his works is disa-

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greeable" (p. 82). What Borges critiques here, then, is the realism on which Hammett's and Chandler's stories rely. While an "unusual man," to use Chandler's phrasing, the detective is also a "common man" and it is implied that by walking down the "mean streets" he becomes too much involved in the world from which he should remain apart. While certainly intelligent, he is not an intellectual gazing from a critical distance. While heroic, he does not allow us to escape nor to look away from the reality of the world. The development of such realistic qualities makes it all the more difficult to "abolish human nature," from its pages in favor of an ideal.

So, the reader invented by Poe through his detective stories is not and cannot be the same reader whom Hammett, Chandler and others reinvented through their hard-boiled fiction, nor the reader-- or viewer-- reinvented again through contemporary police procedurals such as those by Ed McBain or John Creasey (or by any number of contemporary procedurals from *Law & Order* to more high-brow, critically-acclaimed television such as *The Wire*). Too much a part of their worlds and not reliant upon intellect alone, these detectives and the genre they inhabit have changed-- and, for Borges at least, these changes reveal a deviation in both form and purpose.

No discussion of Borges and detective stories can ignore G. K. Chesterton-- and it is Chesterton whom Borges sees as Poe's rightful heir. Long before any of the other essays mentioned here were written, Chesterton penned "A Defence of Detective Stories" (1901). In that essay, he writes of what he calls "the poetry of modern life" (p. 119) and he writes that it is the writer's task to find the meaning in the seeming chaos of the modern city, to reveal that "there is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol" (p. 120) and that "anything that tends, even under the fantastic form of the minutiae of Sherlock Holmes, to assert this romance of detail in civilization, to emphasize the unfathomably human character in flints and tiles, is a good thing" (p. 121). Chesterton (1901) sees the detective novel as playing a critical role in modern society and, later in the same essay, he writes that,

> "…by dealing with the unsleeping sentinels who guard the outposts of society, it tends to remind us that we live in an armed camp, making war with a chaotic world, and that the criminals, the children of chaos, are nothing but the traitors within our gates" (p.p. 122-123).

This is a serious task to assign literature and Borges (2010) would seem to echo this toward the conclusion of his essay "The Detective Story" when he remarks:

> "One thing is quite obvious and certain: our literature tends toward the chaotic. … In this chaotic era of ours, one thing has humbly maintained the classic virtues: the detective story. For a detective story cannot be understood without a beginning, middle, and end" (p. 134).

Although Borges might sound somewhat curmudgeonly in his earlier assessment of the "disagreeable" atmosphere in Hammett's novels-- and that both of the essays mentioned here might point to a more general conservatism in his character-- Borges' later essay nonetheless provides an important meditation on literary genre and on literature more generally. The final lines of "The Detective Story" (2010) read as follows: "I would say in defense of the detective novel that it needs no defense; though now read with a certain disdain, it is safeguarding order in an era of disorder. That is a feat for which we should be grateful" (p. 134).

Despite the turn toward realistic violence, despite that many works may be of dubious intellectual merit, we can see in our own time something of Chesterton's "unsleeping sentinels." The detective figure, in whatever guise he or she may appear, remains an instrument for order in an era of disorder. Beyond the detectives themselves, hard-boiled or otherwise, Borges points us to the work of detective fiction itself and who we are as readers. If he plays a genre-based game with us in "Death and the Compass," he is drawing our attentions to the act of reading and asking us to be conscious of the ways in which we read. In "The Detective Story," however, he is asking us to think about the ways we write. The writer's responsibility in a detective story is to provide an explanation of something that was seemingly inexplicable at the beginning of the story. It is a question of genre-- if a detective story does not speak to the genre's conventions, perhaps it is a different kind of story. Maybe this is why Borges insists upon the importance of genre. Possibly the realistic developments in the genre have created a new type of reader too distant from the one first imagined by Poe. In this sense, Borges might help us to think about our own tendencies. These questions-- and the many others we considered here this evening-- are still alive in current literary debates and Borges remains one of the more intriguing men of letters to whom we will probably still refer another 120 years from now.

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[i] "Borges, the first 120 years," organized by The Spanish Club "Siglo XXI," Texas A&M International University in Laredo, Texas (November 12, 2019).

[ii] Consider, for example, the essay by Nichiolas Birns and Margaret Boe Birns, "Agatha Christie: Modern and Modernist" (1990).

[iii] The terminology of games that Caillois uses points to his later sociological work and his influential study, *Men, Play and Games* (1958). Also, worth noting are Caillois' early translations of Borges, which made him largely responsible for introducing him to the French reading public.

[iv] He refers to both "Death and the Compass" and "The Garden of the Forking Paths" (1941).

[v] I used this textbook of short fiction to supplement the selections of primarily book-length works around which my own course was based.

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