

*BORGES'S POE. THE INFLUENCE AND
REINVENTION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE IN
SPANISH AMERICA.*

EMRON ESPLIN

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A cursory glance at Borges's essays shows an impressive range of authors, most of whom came from outside of literature in Spanish. Borges always expressed his admiration for English and American authors, among them S.T. Coleridge, William Shakespeare or Robert Louis Stevenson. In the essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición," published in *Discusión* in 1932 (1957), he discusses the notion of national literature and the extent to which it may be used in a literature such as the Argentinean, which does not date back to the ninth century, as is the case of English literature. Borges thought that Argentinean writers were much freer than Europeans due to this lack of literary tradition and that they could find precursors not only in Argentinean writing but in world literature. Thus it makes sense that he appreciated authors from around the world and attached a value to their works that surpassed literary appreciation.

Emron Esplin explores in *Borges's Poe* the ways in which Borges created the figure of Poe as a short-story writer via literary criticism, translations and creation. Esplin has co-edited the magnificently comprehensive collection of essays on the translations of Poe from around the world *Translated Poe* (2014). He himself has written some essays on Borges and Poe and Borges and Hawthorne while writing extensively on the topic of the reception of Poe in America. Esplin's research focuses on the inter-American dialogue of cultures by analyzing the material reception such as the anthologizing of Poe's writings.

In *Borges's Poe* Esplin analyzes three aspects of Poe's work. First he explores the way in which Borges changed the

idea that South American readers had of Poe, who was already known to the readership thanks to Rubén Darío's essay in *Los raros*. For this *modernista* author, Poe was a genius and a poet-prophet in a romantic vein, whose work was poetical for the most part. Borges challenged Darío's appreciation of Poe and managed to change the figure of the poet-prophet to that of the writer of short fiction. For that purpose he wrote some influential essays among which stand "La genesis de 'El cuervo' de Poe" (1935), "El cuento policial" [1978] (2017) and his prologues to Poe's anthologies (1985, [1986] 2007). Borges discusses "The Philosophy of Composition" to finally conclude that Poe did not tell the truth about "The Raven" and preferred to emphasize a method that was highly ratiocinative and which excludes any hint of magic and, therefore, rules any possibility of being a poet-prophet.

The second step in the creation of Poe as a short-story writer was the translation of Poe's works, a task that Esplin discusses in great detail in the second part of the book. He uses John Holmes's theory of translation and Itamar Even-Zohar's theory of the polysystems. By translating Poe Borges would domesticate him and would find him a place in Argentinean literature. Esplin discusses Borges's essays on translation, to conclude that Borges thought of translation as a part of literary creation, and then examines "the Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" and "The Purloined Letter" that Borges translated with Adolfo Bioy Casares, and the fragments of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* that Borges also translated. Not uncoincidentally Borges prefers a style that resembles his own and that is close to Charles Baudelaire's translations of Poe. While Poe used a highly wrought style, both Borges and Baudelaire preferred to make it plainer in their translations. By domesticating Poe, Borges streamlined Poe's source text and added emphasis to some of the arguments. These translations were also instrumental in challenging *Modernismo* and favoring Borges's poetics.

Finally Esplin compares Poe's and Borges's fiction. He acknowledges that most scholars, notably John Irwin, have studied the detective fiction of both writers. Esplin manages to convey new insights in the comparison by reading "Loss of Breath" against "Funes el memorioso" and "El Aleph." What is remarkable is Esplin's conclusion that Borges not only knew "Loss of Breath" and used it as a hypotext for his fiction but that Borges's stories create a new Poe. He had already explored the topic precursors in "Kafka y sus precusores" ([1951] 2007). Esplin also deals with Borges's theory on the fantastic, a notion

about which, though the writer wrote about it extensively, he never reached a satisfactory conclusion, as Esplin demonstrates. This was no obstacle to his writing some of the most fascinating fantastic stories of the twentieth century. Esplin's reading of "Metzengerstein" and "The Black Cat" alongside "El Aleph" focuses on the plot of revenge that the three stories share and is put at the forefront by the reading of the fiction of the Argentinean.

Esplin convincingly argues for Borges's refashioning of Poe from poet-prophet to fiction writer in ways that sometimes may seem intricate. It is his accomplishment to show these ways that scholarship had written off until now, and to show the inter-American literary connections. Besides, the epilogue, focused on Julio Cortázar's translations and essays on Poe, no doubt encouraged by Borges's interest in Poe, hints towards new explorations of Poe's life in America. It was not only Cortázar who was fascinated by Poe in the 1950s. Ramón Gómez de la Serna, a Spanish writer by then exiled in Argentina, also published a biography of Poe in 1953. To him the writings of Felisberto Hernández and Santiago Dabove, two writers from the Río de la Plata region, should be added. A more detailed exploration of their fantastic stories and the process of composition of their works may shed new light on Poe's afterlife in America.

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