

Borges's Poe.
The Influence and Reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe
in Spanish America
Emron Esplin
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Daniela HĂISAN
Ștefan cel Mare University, Suceava, Romania

Borges's Poe. The Influence and Reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America is a terrific example of not only looking for but actually finding needles in a haystack. Setting two of the Americas' most complex authors side by side naturally entails an equally complex, integrative approach, inherent to as intricate a field as comparative literature. This, at least, is retrievable from the title, which also somewhat misleadingly places more weight on Poe (by reiterating his name) than it does on Borges. The book's contents, though, and the highly informative Introduction, promptly dispel this first impression, and any avid reader can see that, far from being a mere application of Jaussian reception theory, this is an influence / influential study which makes clever use of genetic critique and translation studies as well in its attempt to uncover some carefully hidden truths. Close readings of each of the two author's works, analyses of translations, personal notes, manuscripts, graphoanalysis (Borges's marginal notes and the size of his

¹ Kindle edition.

handwriting), all combine to form an exquisite assortment of (deductively proven) microscopic, macroscopic and kaleidoscopic facts.

Given that many of Borges's texts are, much like Poe's, generically hybrid, and that delving into comparative studies and translation studies is another surefire way to heterogeneity, any research on such texts and from such perspectives will be irreversibly touched by hybridity, too. Fortunately, Emron Esplin's impeccable writing keeps the reader safe and afloat in the sea of information provided. The structure of the book is likewise helpful, with its incredible precision and symmetry. The three sections (with two continuously numbered chapters each), fittingly bordered by an Introduction and an Epilogue, are dedicated to one of three main ways in which Borges influenced Poe's reception in Spanish America: through his criticism, his translations, his fiction.

The conjecture of Esplin's *Borges' Poe* is that of a two-way literary influence: Poe's work shaped Borges as a writer and thinker, while Borges's works (fiction, criticism, translations of some of Poe's works, commentaries and allusions to Poe's work in general) had a tremendous bearing on Poe's reputation, not only among *modernistas*, in Spanish America, as the title intimates, but well beyond. By constantly emphasizing Poe's stories at the expense of other genres he practised and was perhaps better-known for, Borges caused a shift in Poe's long-established image from a tragic, haunted poet-prophet into the creator of detective fiction and a major author of fantastic tales and intellectual fiction. It is this tenet that the book adequately, ingeniously, repeatedly proves beyond doubt.

For Esplin, Borges is less "an author of purely archetypal literary texts; [...] a bookish and almost unreal individual; [...] a harbinger of major trends in structuralist, poststructuralist and

post-modern thought; [...] a cosmopolitan, universal writer” (Boldy, 2009: 3), as he is oftentimes described, and more a dynamic literary agent, able to constantly reinvent not only himself but other writers also, particularly those who inspired him. With Poe, in particular, Borges engendered a kind of delayed symbiosis, and this is very much in keeping with the very *Borgesian conundrum*².

Borges was surely not unique in his endeavour to change Poe’s reputation and thus rewrite literary history; besides Charles Baudelaire (the European example very much at hand), Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga and Argentine Julio Cortázar are also mentioned, but Borges served as the primary catalyst for the Hispanosphere, “the earliest, most insistent, and most successful catalyst for this change” (p. 23). This said, to our mind, this book is more about Borges than it is about Poe (and so it should be), despite positing that literary influence runs both ways.

The book’s Introduction (also called *Reciprocal Influence*) lays a firm foundation for the debate on reciprocity and the inescapable precursor-successor-precursor circle while also justifying the choice of methodological tools. *Borges’s Poe* utterly dismisses paternalistic, imperialistic, Bloomian³ approaches preferred by previous Poe studies, in both English and Spanish, and chooses instead Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s “genetic” method (described in the latter’s introduction to *Do the Americas Have a*

² The ontological question of whether the writer writes the story, or the story writes him, a concept put forward by Borges in *Kafka and His Precursors*: “The fact is that **every writer creates his own precursors**. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.” (Borges, 1988: 201; emphasis mine)

³ Harold Bloom’s 1973 *Anxiety of Influence*, which contends that poets are hindered in their creative process by the psychological pressure they feel from their literary precursors.

Common Literature? (1990)). In order to emphasize that literary influence is both multifaceted and contextual, Esplin also locates his work within the New(fangled) Southern Studies by dwelling on the contested southern identities of both Borges and Poe.

The first part of the book, *Renaming Poe. Jorge Luis Borges's Literary Criticism on Edgar Allan Poe*, centers around Poe and Borges as critics; better yet, around Borges as a Poe critic as well as a critic of Poe's criticism. Chapter 1, "Borges's Philosophy of Poe's *Composition*," reveals how Borges, convinced that it was fiction that made Poe timeless, deliberately downplays Poe's role as a poet when he interprets Poe's most famous analytic essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," as detective fiction rather than literary theory. Borges cannot fully accept Poe's description of how he wrote "The Raven" because such poetic calculus totally denies inspiration, a driving force he happens to believe in. "Reading and Rereading", the book's second chapter, enlarges upon Borges's lifelong interest in Poe by exploring Borges's "secondary Poe criticism" – references to Poe in Borges's reviews, prologues for other writers' books, articles on authors other than Poe – but in which Borges consistently mentions Poe. Of course, as expected, here too, whenever Poe is mentioned, he is described as either the inventor of the detective genre or as the creator of *Pym*, but not as a poet.

This first section also refers to Borges's penchant for Poe's only finished novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (in short, *Pym*), which is praised notably for its final chapters. Borges's insistence on the fear of whiteness obnubilates the novel's primary theme and manipulates the reading of the text to his (well-known) ends. At the same time, he foreshadows the theory of influence that he will later elaborate in his famous 1951 essay "Kafka y sus precursores", in which he posits that Kafka's

works create Kafka's predecessors and also approaches Poe in relation to Mallarmé.

The monograph's second part, *Translating Poe. Jorge Luis Borges's Edgar Allan Poe Translations*, discusses Borges's translations of some of Poe's works and is intended as a bridge between Borges's literary criticism and his fiction. Behind the apparent simplicity of the title there is something highly evocative: on the one hand, *Translating Poe* echoes Emron Esplin's other important work on Poe, namely *Translated Poe* (which he co-edited with Margarida Vale de Gato in 2014); on the other, using the three-part names for the two authors in an interesting instance of premodification (*Jorge Luis Borges's Edgar Allan Poe Translations*) matches the overall architecture of the book, which also successfully revolves around a three and a two.

Here, Emron Esplin resumes his argument from the perspective of Translation Studies, drawing upon translation scholars such as James S. Holmes and Itamar Even-Zohar in order to fill a gap both in Borges / Poe scholarship and in current inter-American literary criticism.

Borges, a bilingual in Spanish and English, with some English blood in his veins, could read Shakespeare by the age of 12. Translating Poe into Spanish could not have been a challenge to him; the challenge was having to translate in such a way so as to fit his "mission", that of reframing Poe. Moreover, his own theory of translation, which openly discredits "fidelity", is based on a dichotomy, which meant that he often vacillated between the two poles of the binary ("I think there are two legitimate ways of translating. One way is to attempt a literal translation, the other is to try a re-creation.", q. in di Giovanni *et al.*, 1973: 104). Borges viewed translation as a complex cultural phenomenon; for him, translations are never imports, says Esplin, nor are they

homegrown; they are “hybrids that both reveal and create influence from / in both literary systems” (p. 52).

Chapter 3, the first of Part 2, “Theory, Practice, and *Pym*,” analyzes Borges’s theory of translation, but also offers a side-by-side analysis of Poe’s *Pym* and Borges’s partial translation of the novel. Esplin’s conclusion is that Borges often practises a radical form of domestication. The fact that his translator’s pattern often included either removing words and passages that seem redundant (e.g. from 338 words to 182), or adding a major or minor nuance not in the original (i.e. changing a title), is indicative of a translator determined to make the text his own, to impose his own voice at the expense of the “original” writer. By “highjacking” Poe’s text, Borges produces what translation scholar Lance Hewson calls (2011: 172) *ontological translations* (a combination of deformation on the one hand, and accretion and / or reduction on the other hand).

Chapter 4, the second in Part 2, “Facts and an Envelope”, offers a comparative analysis of two of Poe’s famous short stories: “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” and “The Purloined Letter” – translated by Borges along with Adolfo Bioy Casares. These versions, overwhelmingly influential on the reading public of Argentina and Spanish-speaking America, were instrumental in consolidating the position of Poe’s fiction in the literary system of Borges’s target language / culture.

This absorbing chapter reveals how liberally Borges translates Poe’s works, streamlining the prose and altering significant plot details at will. His translation of “The Purloined Letter”, for example, is characterised by syntactical changes and decreased verbosity but above all by the overt addition of an envelope to the story. Encasing the letter fundamentally changes the story, says Esplin (p. 76), which is otherwise famous for creating the conundrum of the object hidden in plain sight. This

contradicts Borges's theory that what is "most important in a short story is the plot or situation, while in a novel [...] are the characters." (di Giovanni *et al.*, 1973: 46), but does not come as a surprise at all from an author who, like Poe, was notorious for literary forgeries⁴.

Finally, the third section of the book, *Rewriting Poe. Jorge Luis Borges's Poe-Influenced and Poe-Influencing Short Fiction*, which contains chapters 5 ("Buried Connections") and 6 ("Supernatural Revenge"), reiterates the multifaceted nature of the literary influence between Borges and Poe based on an in-depth analysis of three Poe tales ("Loss of Breath," "Metzengerstein" and "The Black Cat") and two Borges stories ("Funes el memorioso" and "El Aleph") that have not been juxtaposed in previous Borges / Poe criticism. Borges's "El Aleph", in particular, read alongside Poe's early narrative "Metzengerstein" and his famous short story "The Black Cat", is yet another proof of the complex relationship of dual influence between the two writers. The conclusion, founded on a meticulous comparative and archival approach, is that Borges's fiction, like his literary criticism and his translations, demonstrates how he "responds to, interprets, and modifies Poe for his own purposes." (p. 81)

The book's epilogue, entitled *Commemorative Reframing*, is no longer about details, for the "needles" (*i.e.* the necessary evidence) have already been found in literature, in criticism, in philosophy etc. with their respective stacks of books. On the contrary, here, the magnifying glass is left aside for the bird's-eye

⁴ As a young translator and critic with a regular column in the Argentine magazine *El Hogar*, Borges produced numerous legitimate translations, but also original works that passed as translations. At times he wrote reviews of nonexistent writings by some other person (*e.g.* "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*").

view to pitch in. We are shown accordingly that Borges's literary criticism on Poe, his Poe translations, and his own fiction opened up the Argentine literary market for more Poe fiction (among which the most significant collection of translations of Poe's prose into the Spanish language, namely Julio Cortázar's 1956 two-volume set, *Obras en prosa*).

All in all, *Borges's Poe* does exactly what it promises (and more): it reframes the concept of literary influence as a multidimensional dialogue rather than a genetic discourse or a parricidal conflict and offers a fresh take on intertextuality and reciprocity. By the same token, the huge amount of information behind it, handled so gracefully and with such dexterity, makes it unbelievably readable.

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