

“La muerte y la brújula” and the Death of the Detective

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As Jorge Hernández Martín notes in his introduction to *Readers and Labyrinths*, the notions of discovery, mystery, and decipherment are not only part of the literary consciousness, but also they also parallel science’s quest to discover hidden truths. Contemporary adaptations of detective fiction, from Jasper Fforde’s Nursery Crime novels, to popular shows such as *Law and Order* (now in its 18th season), *CSI*, *Bones*, and even *Scooby Doo*, attest to the popularity of discovery stories and of finding the hidden. Yet each account of “discovering the hidden” is itself made up of sides, words, graphemes, and phonemes that keep us from truly discovering their meaning. Jorge Luis Borges’s “La muerte y la brújula” and “El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan” explore the problems of deciphering and of making known the unknown; both stories unite a detective story with a theory of semiotics/hermeneutics.

Slavov Žižek offers an explanation as to why the “quest for knowledge” must be associated with death. Like much of post-structuralist thought, Lacanians also base much of their work on semiotics: the study of signs and sign systems. The entire world is a symbolic order: a system of signs without end in which we live. It is only an encounter with *the real*—often an encounter with a dead body or death—that we begin to see beyond this world of symbols. In a Lacanian model, we never can escape the signs but attempt to, through trauma or death, to encounter the real.

The idea that one can “see beyond” is not new: Plato’s allegory of the cave, as well as prophets in the Hebrew tradition, are examples of those who have seen beyond the semiotic markers and the structure of the world. All these traditions hold in high regard those who can decipher, decode, and make known that which cannot be seen, or cannot be known, by the masses. However, Lacan argues not as a sort of prophet who can make known the unknown, one who can decipher the code; for him, there is no end to signs and signifiers, and our encounter beyond the symbolic is momentary and fleeting. Žižek argues that on those rare occasions when we do encounter *the real*, it becomes symbolized moments after we have encountered it. We can read the association of death and knowledge in “La muerte y la brújula” and “El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan” as examples of an encounter with *the real*, and an attempt to escape the confines of a symbolic order. Many scholars have commented on the status of the “La muerte y la brújula” as a detective story and on its relationship with Poe’s “The Purloined Letter.” The text

itself mentions that “Lönnrot se creía un puro razonador, un Auguste Dupin” (*Ficciones* 128). The genius of Poe’s story, in contrast with most detective fiction, lies in the way that Dupin solves the crime, not by finding the hidden letter, but by finding the letter despite the fact that it is in plain sight. Irwin offers a brilliant analysis of the debates between Lacan and Derrida concerning this tale: Poe’s story can be given a Lacanian interpretation through the number three (three searches for the letter by the policeman), or a more Derridean interpretation by a focus on the number two, and by doubling two, four (Irwin 4). Thus, it is important to note how Borges parodies the “The Purloined Letter,” and how he plays between the numbers of a series. The number three suggests the medieval tradition of the Trinity, and suggests desire, as in Girard’s “Triangular Desire,” or desire as in Freud, Lacan, or Jung.

The change from a series of three terms to a series of four is particularly important. The original number of crimes is three, but the fourth is against Lönnrot himself. The crimes occur at equidistant points in a triangle, but Lönnrot reasons that there are actually three points of a compass and missing a fourth. The number three occurs in the name Treviranus (in latin *tres vir* meaning three men), and four occurs in The Tetrarch and in the use of the tetragramaton (Irwin 31). Lönnrot predicts the final murder (his own) by positing a Kabbalistic interpretation instead of a simple explanation, reasoning that the number of crimes must not be three but four. By moving from a psychoanalytic to a Kabbalistic interpretation, Lönnrot finds both the truth of who committed the crimes and his own death. By doing so, Borges throws a wrench into a simple Lacanian interpretation since it is not the number three that is important, suggesting Oedipus, a triangular desire, and a trinity god, but the number four from the tetragramaton. Four, the number of the Hebraic tradition is also problematic; though Lönnrot solves the murders by going to the fourth place, to the fourth point of the compass, on the fourth day, the revelation is that he is himself the victim.¹ The number three associates the tale with psychoanalysis and *Thanatos*, and the number four relates to Hebraic tradition and the notion of returning to God.² But the numbers don’t stop there. As Borges states in his tale, “The Tetragramaton contains the whole of the Pentateuch [number 5].” The murder of Lönnrot, which happens in a “quinta” in Triste-le-Roy, continues the series of numbers. Is Borges one-upping Lacan and Derrida by continuing the series?

¹ (remember that a note was given stating that though the crimes were committed on the third the Jewish day begins at sundown making it the fourth, if given a Jewish interpretation

² One reading of the story suggests that the protagonist chooses his death and thus is moved by a “death drive” or *Thanatos* to solve the murders. Thus, by encountering Scharlach and solving the crimes, it is as if in some way he already knew the end result.

A further complication of signs arises from an analysis of the names. As a comment to the English translation of *The Aleph* Borges writes:

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 Aleph* 267)

The *rot* in Lönnrot means red in German, and Scharlach means “Scarlet.”³ This suggests a doubling, or even that Lönnrot and Scharlach are the same person. But, if the name were Scandinavian, *rot* would instead mean “root” (Dryson 144). The names that Borges uses then are polysemous, suggesting not a fixed representation of words and things, but a problematic relationship.

If we accept Žižek’s argument in *Enjoy! Your Symptom* that “there is no metalanguage,” we realize we are caught in a symbolic order (Žižek 15). We can never escape the symbols to find an absolute meaning. To what end then does Borges employ such a variety of metafictional references and polysemous meanings? While the text cannot escape symbolization to an objective point, there is a point where we can clearly see everything as in Borges’s “El aleph”, the text can reveal its nature as text by highlighting the possibility of multiple meanings and acknowledging its place in a chain of signifiers. Unlike the policeman in Dupin’s story, we are not forced to search for the hidden letter and to find the hidden meaning of a text: the death chosen by Lönnrot is a death chosen to escape these symbolizations. The only escape from this system of signs, from the symbolic order, from the confusion of identities, is death. This death is a moment of *anagnórisis*; “Erik Lönnrot no logró impedir el último crimen, pero es indiscutible que lo previó.” His death is not solely a choice, but rather, like Oedipus killing his father, a result of fate.

Another possibility exists; if Scharlach is Lönnrot, and if these names represent many things, couldn’t they also then represent all mankind’s path to death? The color scarlet also suggests Isaiah 1:18: “though your sins be as scarlet, yet they shall be white as snow.” With the association with this verse, Lönnrot then could be associated also as a Messiah, one who stands in the place of others and shows them the way. In Lönnrot’s death, Borges shows us the path that we must all face.

Borges wrote “La muerte y la brújula” in 1942 as a second in a series of three detective stories: the third story, “Ibn-Hakam al Bokhari-Muerto en su laberinto,” published in 1951, and the first story, “El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan,” published in 1941. Torres notes that though “La muerte y la brújula”

³ I have provided a synthesis of Irwin’s arguments on the importance of the numbers three and four and also the color red. Though it is a brilliant analysis, I have chosen to not comment on Irwin’s analysis of the color red and its relationship to Jung’s book, *Psychology and Alchemy*! See Irwin *Mystery* Ch. 6

was first published in a collection of detective fiction *Diez cuentos Argentinos* de Rodolfo J. Walsh, it is probably mislabeled as a detective story, but should instead be labeled as an “ejercicio intelectual” (Torres 154). Borges sought to create a series of three stories, just as Poe had written his three Dupin Stories “Mysteries of Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” and “The Purloined Letter.” By the time Borges wrote the third “detective” story in 1951, it was “a cross between a permissible detective story and a caricature of one. The more [he] worked on it, the more hopeless the plot seemed and the stronger [his] need to parody” (*The Aleph* 274). Irwin states that it is important that Borges’s first two detective stories were written one-hundred years after Poe’s, further strengthening the connection between Poe’s and Borges’s detective stories.⁴ By seeing the connection with Poe, we can further understand the connections that might exist among Borges’s tales themselves. These connections exist not only between plots, but between names and signs as well; these signs also create an intertextuality among Borges stories that also highlights them as a system of signs. The name **Richard Madden** has the same initials as “**Rue Morgue**” or its reverse “**Marie Rogêt**.” The name Runeberg, Yu Tsun’s superior, connects with Lönnrot. *Rune*, as Stabb notes, is in Nordic mythology “a secret, a mystery” (Stabb 157-158). The name Runeberg also appears in another short story as the scholar in “Tres versiones de Judas,” a story dealing with Christ, the number three, and a traitor. The named *Rune* also connects to the name *Lönn* which means “hidden, secret” (Dryson 144). The city name Triste-le-Roy from “La muerte y la brujula” means something like “the sad king” This use of the word *king* reminds of us the “red haired king” in “Ibn-Hakam al Bokhari-Muerto en su laberinto.” The name of the detective, Dunraven, reminds us of Poe’s *Raven*, connecting again Borges to Poe (Irwin 38).

In this story we also see doubles: the vizier killing the king and then in effect “becoming” the king, much like Lönnrot/Sharlach the detective and the criminal are doubles. In “El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan,” rather than telling a traditional detective story, we are told the story from the spy’s perspective. Yu Tsun must relay his message to the Germans, so he can accomplish his mission. Yu Tsun’s motivation is to prove to the Germans his loyalty. He says, “Yo quería probarle que un Amarillo podía salvar a su⁵ ejercito.” Likewise Madden, “obligado a ser implacable” because of his Irish heritage, must prove his loyalty to England by finding the spy Yu Tsun. “El jardin de los senderos que se bifurcan” is in many ways the reversal of “La muerte y la brújula.” Both Madden and Yu Tsun must pay a debt to the symbolic order; symbolized as outsiders, they have to prove they belong in the system. Yu Tsun in a way is much like the figure of Stella Dallas that

⁴ “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” 1841, “Mysteries of Rue Morgue” 1842.

⁵ i.e. the german’s

Žižek describes in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*. Stella Dallas, whose goal is to marry off her daughter, casts herself out of society so that her daughter will sever her ties and agree to be married. She is willing to accomplish her mission at all costs, she is willing to be cast out by community, to “die symbolically” (Žižek 197).

Žižek connects “The Purloined Letter” to the argument between Lacan/Derrida of whether the “letter arrives at its destination,” a debate played out by Yu Tsun in “El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan.” The first connection might be seen “una carta que resolví destruir inmediatamente (y que no destruí)” or the letter Tsu‘i Pên wrote, on red paper which says “*Dejo a los varios porvenires (no a todos) mi jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*” [Italics Original] (*Ficciones* 91).⁶ The letter, argues Žižek, always arrives at its destination; its destination is the person sending it. Yu Tsun first symbolically dies, leaving for a train set for one destination and yet getting off at another-Ashgrove. He does not arrive at the destination stated, but at the place where the train “se detuvo, casi en medio del campo. Nadie gritó el nombre de la estación” (*Ficciones* 85). Messages also are not transmitted directly by text. They don’t arrive at their destination. Likewise, Yu Tsun is unable to “gritar ese nombre de modo que lo oyeran en Alemania,” but transmits it through the method of communication available in this symbolic order: the newspaper. By shooting Albert “el nombre de la única persona capaz de transmitir la noticia,” Yu Tsun reveals to the Germans the place they should strike the English artillery. Here we might see the power of text, to convey messages, to bring about action, yet within the context of the story we are told at the beginning that the attack from the English was merely delayed, not stopped. We see the inefficacy of this message, and Yu Tsun’s failed sacrifice. This sacrifice, however, is not simply a failure, for although death is the price, there is a revelation. Thus, the “letter always arrives at its destination” in the sense Žižek states: it’s intended recipient is the sender (19). Yu Tsun, learns from Albert the key to understand the mysterious novel written by his ancestor.

When Yu Tsun steps off the train he enters a garden, whose paths form a labyrinth. The path to this labyrinth is described as “el camino [que] bajaba y se bifurcaba, entre las ya confusas praderas” (*Ficciones* 87). The garden is a rich image, and most directly connects to the archetypal Chinese garden; but the garden also fits within a Hebrew tradition of creation: the Garden of Eden. Albert reveals to Yu Tsun the secrets of his ancestor Ts‘ui Pên, yet a price has to be paid for this knowledge. After all, in the Garden of Eden, sin, together with death, has to be introduced to the world in order for there to be knowledge. The shooting of Stephen Albert then is a sort of fall, the price to be paid for the knowledge of his lost ancestors. Žižek describes it in this way, “The letter which arrives at its

⁶ Irwin discusses this relation to the purloined letter further in *Mystery to a Solution* p. 81

destination is also a letter of request for outstanding debts” (19). The letter from Ts'ui Pên, whose message arrives but does not arrive, has to be paid for. The revelation received by Yu Tsun by Albert can only be paid by a price: Albert's death as well as his own.

But what of the compossibility of outcomes described by Albert? Are there not multiply exclusive outcomes that could have happened? The labyrinth is *el jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, but also the name of the his ancestor's novel (as well as the original name of *Ficciones* was *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*). The text is self-reflexive; it is a labyrinth with bifurcating paths (Irwin 78). This novel written by Ts'ui Pên does not follow a traditional time narrative. Concerning this novel we read, “Naturalmente hay varios desenlaces posibles: Fang puede matar al intruso, el intruso puede matar a Fang, ambos pueden salvarse, ambos pueden morir, etc.” The compossibility of texts demonstrates the inefficacy of language to transmit a clear message (a more Derridean interpretation of the text), and its power to create multiple meanings and interpretations.¹¹ This contradicts a Lacanian reading, yet a Lacanian reading helps us understand symbolic death, sacrifice, and the death drive present in the text. Thus both “El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan” and “La muerte y la brujula” play between the possibilities of a determined psychoanalytic Lacanian reading and a more open Derridean one.

Martin Stabb, when discussing the critical reception of the story “El Aleph,” warns us that:

The fantastic elements in the piece are presented in an awkward or inept manner... Taken as serious exposition of the mystical notion of the identity between the macrocosm and the microcosm... the piece falls flat. Taken as half-philosophical, basically playful composition- generously sprinkled with Borgesian irony and satir-“El Aleph” comes off rather well. (*Jorge Luis Borges* 110)

When reading Borges, a pitfall is to fall into one mode of interpretation; if text is to be read on many levels we should interpret it on a variety of levels. Like Erik Lönnrot and the policeman in “The Purloined Letter,” we may be so caught up in the hidden messages and codes, that we miss the story. Like Funes from *Funes el memorioso*, we also run the risk of being able to see the details and mark each with a sign, but unable to construct meaning from them. Language itself presents this dilemma to us. Words are symbols, conveying meaning within context. Yet, if we analyze the meanings too closely, we might contradict or reverse the assertions from context. Perhaps it is for this reason that the metaphors of a chess game, a labyrinth, and a garden of bifurcating paths represent our encounter with fiction,

and in general, represent our encounter with language and the symbolic order. Perhaps like Lönnrot and Yu Tsun, we are doomed to live in a symbolic order, never encountering *the real* until the moment of death, or perhaps we are creating this order through overanalysis and endless discussion of signs and semiotics.

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