

Emron Esplin. *Borges's Poe: The Influence and Reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America*. The New Southern Studies, University of Georgia Press, 2016. Pp. xi, 239. \$44.95. ISBN: 9780820349053.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.39.2018.307-311>

Jorge Luis Borges famously wrote, speaking of Franz Kafka, that writers are the creators of their precursors, and certainly it is all but impossible today for anyone who has read Borges to read Edgar Allan Poe without the looming shadow of the great Argentinian. Poe's presence in Borges is at the same time but a part of a wider phenomenon of the US author's influence in Spanish America, extending to other celebrated writers such as Rubén Darío, Julio Cortázar and Carlos Fuentes. Equally, the Borges-Poe link is of a strength and solidity sufficient to justify the appearance, in the shape of the volume under review, of a book-length study.

The relationship between the two writers has been the subject of critical attention over time, the academic state of play as at the end of last century being summarised in a contribution by Graciela E. Tissera to the multi-author work *Poe Abroad*, edited by Lois Davis Vines and published in 1999. The extension and detail of Emron Esplin's study reflect the multidirectionality of existing and potential Poe-Borges scholarship, in the light of the ceaseless revisits to Poe made by Borges across his writing career. The author is more than qualified for such a task, as coeditor of the collective volume of 2014, *Translated Poe*, which, as its title suggests, takes the internationalisation of Poe as its watchword.

There are multiple obvious similarities between the respective literary productions of Poe and Borges. Shared characteristics that might come to mind include: a cerebral and rational fascination with the bizarre and the fantastic; an emphasis on the literary work as made object or construct; and a career-long preference for brevity, for the short poem, the short story, the short nonfictional text (essay, prologue, review). At the same time, Borges's comments on and use of Poe exhibit a marked selectivity. His interest in the American writer focuses primarily on three aspects: Poe's detective fiction; his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*; and his texts of literary theory, notably "The Philosophy of Composition." It is perhaps

surprising to note that Borges paid scant attention to Poe's production in the fantastic genre, never foregrounding a masterpiece such as "The Fall of the House of Usher," while paradoxically highlighting Poe's only completed novel despite his oft-repeated generic preference for short story over novel. Esplin's study explores the above dimensions and more, breaking new ground in particular in the field of translation: that versions cotranslated by Borges exist of Poe's tales "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" and "The Purloined Letter" may come as a complete surprise to some. The author further stresses throughout that Borges's readings coincide with a shift in the Spanish-American perception of Poe, away from emphasis on Poe as poet and towards a new stress on Poe as fiction writer.

Methodologically, the book is carefully organised, with copious notes and a full bibliography. All quotations from Borges appear in Spanish, followed by an English translation in square brackets. Translations of Borges into English are from the extant published versions where they exist, and where not, are supplied by the author. Other material in Spanish is mostly translated authorially.

The significance of Poe for Borges may be gauged from the statistics: Esplin states that Borges's literary criticism contains at least 130 references to Poe ranging from 1923 to 1986 (14); and that figure does not include mentions in interviews and dialogues or Poe-derived elements in Borges's stories. Esplin also makes some important points regarding language and translation, aspects that are often damagingly neglected by literary critics. He reminds the reader that, on the one hand, Borges first read Poe's writings in English, while on the other he offered his interpretations of Poe almost always in Spanish, notably via such major Argentinian press organs as *La Nación* and *La Prensa* and the literary magazine *Sur*, which offered a gateway to a "broader Spanish American audience" (5). Regarding the translation of Borges, Esplin further points out that while "the vast majority of Borges's fiction and poetry has been translated into English . . . only a fraction of his literary criticism has been published in English translation" (xi).

The study is divided into three sections. The first traces the vicissitudes of Borges's criticism of Poe, and especially his recurring comments on "The Philosophy of Composition," as well as examining his readings of Poe's detective stories and his "unlikely fascination" (15) with *Arthur Gordon Pym*; the second puts the spotlight on Borges's little-known (co)translations of Poe; and the third considers the influence of Poe on Borges's short fiction

and the ways in which reading Borges has created a reverse current by altering how Poe is read today.

In the first section, the author retraces Borges's diverse responses to "The Philosophy of Composition," stressing that "for Borges, Poe's poetic theory, not his poetry, gives birth to the French symbolists" (43). It is shown how in an article of 1935 Borges transforms Poe's essay into a blueprint for the writing of (detective) *fiction*, claiming that, as Esplin puts it, "Poe's Dupin trilogy enacts his theory far better than the theoretical essay itself" (24). The analytic/creative mind of Dupin is seen as running parallel to the creative/analytic dialectic of "The Raven" and its companion essay. Poe is thus viewed by Borges not as the *poète maudit* celebrated by Baudelaire—and in the Hispanic world by Rubén Darío—but as a rationalist creator, a constructor. Indeed, Borges's opinion of Poe's poems as such is in general not high. By contrast, he has nothing but praise for the detective stories, repeatedly elevating Poe as inventor of a genre that, in his own hands and those of his successors, would attain worldwide recognition and success. It is also shown how, in an article of 1933, Borges "used Poe to frame his own rules for detective fiction" (55), thus viewing the genre's inventor as also its arbiter and prime mover.

Regarding *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Esplin's comments make it clear that Borges's interest in this text is intense but selective: Borges's analysis, contained in three essays, ignores most of the 200 or so pages of Poe's adventure novel, to concentrate on its closing chapters, those in which Poe develops the notion of the colour white as taboo and as generating fear, above all in the book's celebrated final vision of an overwhelming white apparition. Esplin argues that Borges's fascination with these aspects of Poe's novel may be explained by the element of mystery that surrounds them, affirming that Borges is "reading the last pages of *Pym* as detective fiction" (61).

The second section finds the author tackling the two translations of Poe tales cosigned by Borges and undertaken in collaboration with fellow Argentinian writer Adolfo Bioy Casares. The translation of "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" appeared in *Antología de literatura fantástica*, a volume coedited by Borges, Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo and published in 1940; that of "The Purloined Letter" appeared in a detective story anthology, *Los mejores cuentos policiales* [The best detective stories], edited by Borges and Bioy Casares and published in 1943. In addition, a translation of a fragment of *Pym* appeared under the title "Un animal soñado por Poe" [An animal dreamed by Poe] in *El libro de los seres imaginarios*

[The book of imaginary beings], cowritten by Borges and Margarita Guerrero and published in 1967; and another fragment of Poe's novel, the passage from chapter 18 on the "singular character" of the water on the island of Tsalal, is included in "El arte narrativa y la magia" [Narrative art and magic], an essay published in 1964. Esplin's analysis of the various translations relates them both to Borges's own views on translation and to contemporary translation theory. What is most likely to strike the reader is the revelation that, for better or worse, Borges's versions of "Valdemar" and "The Purloined Letter" are, to put it mildly, extremely free and notable for multiple compressions and omissions. Esplin demonstrates this phenomenon in detail, placing the stress on "Borges's decision to offer domesticated and streamlined translations," thus inventing "a more succinct Poe" (99). Indeed, such versions might be considered by some less as translations than as out-and-out rewritings (on this point, it may be added that Poe's later and fuller translator, Julio Cortázar, in no way followed this Borgesian line).

In the third, more speculative section, the author examines what he calls Borges's "Poe-influenced and Poe-influencing short fiction," showing both how certain of Borges's stories are impregnated with Poe and how, in turn, works by Borges today affect the contemporary reader's experience of Poe ("making certain Poe texts 'feel' Borgesian" [103]). Esplin thus variously juxtaposes Borges's celebrated "Funes el memorioso" with the rather more obscure Poe tale "Loss of Breath," "El Aleph" with both that tale and the Poeian theme of revenge as in "Metzengerstein" and "The Black Cat," and "Emma Zunz" with "The Cask of Amontillado." These parallels, examined in depth, are clearly exemplary and could pave the way for more.

Esplin's study, at least in the first two sections, comes over as remarkably exhaustive and indeed little short of definitive. Nonetheless, a pointer for future research is suggested when the author invokes the concept of Inter-American Studies, a domain into which this volume clearly fits. The author believes his study supports "one of the primary tenets of inter-American literary studies, the idea that various literary traditions in the Americas should be read alongside one another regardless of the linguistic, political, or geographical borders that might divide them" (19). Within this framework, similarly rigorous and detailed studies could be produced of Poe as read by other major Latin American writers (one might imagine, for instance, the project of a comprehensive literary and translational analysis of the Cortázar translations in their entirety). Meanwhile, the "Borges's Poe" identified by Emron Esplin marks a powerful contribution to an emerging,

more inclusive reading of Poe, the product of a literary metempsychosis that is both inter-American and global.

CHRISTOPHER ROLLASON  
Independent scholar  
rollason54@gmail.com