

THE CHARACTER OF PHANTASM:
EDGAR ALLAN POE'S 'THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER' AND
JORGE LUIS BORGES' 'TLÖN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS'

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The traces of Edgar Allan Poe in the work of Jorge Luis Borges have long been recognised, but both in the Argentinian writer's own hands and others', comment has tended to concentrate on three areas of the American author's work, namely: the detective fiction; the novel *Arthur Gordon Pym*; and Poe's literary theory. This paper will explore another facet, i.e. the possible intertextual relations and parallels between Poe's tales of terror and Borges' admired metaphysical fictions. The side-by-side examination of 'The Fall of the House of Usher', Poe's most celebrated Gothic tale, and 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', Borges' fable of the intellectual attraction of an imaginary planet, reveals significant links, both overt and covert, between Borges' tale and Poe's, highlighting the seductively similar yet also strikingly divergent forms in which both writers privilege the textual and intertextual in exploring and developing the concept of a parallel reality.

Keywords: Borges; Gothic; influence; intertextuality; parallel; Poe

EL "CHARACTER OF PHANTASM":
'THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER' DE EDGAR ALLAN POE Y 'TLÖN,
UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS' DE JORGE LUIS BORGES

*La presencia de huellas de Edgar Allan Poe en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges es un fenómeno ya reconocido. Sin embargo, los comentarios al respecto, de parte tanto del mismo Borges como de la crítica, se han limitado en general a tres áreas de la obra del norteamericano, a saber: los relatos policiales; la novela *Arthur Gordon Pym*; y las teorías literarias de Poe. En este artículo se explorará otra faceta: las relaciones y los paralelismos identificables a nivel intertextual entre los relatos de terror de Poe y las célebres ficciones metafísicas de Borges, tomando como textos de referencia 'The Fall of the House of Usher', el más famoso de los cuentos góticos de Poe, y 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', la fábula borgiana de la atracción intelectual de un planeta imaginario. Su examen simultáneo revelará unos vínculos significativos, tanto abiertos como encubiertos, entre los dos textos, trayéndose así a colación los modos, seductoramente semejantes y a la vez llamativamente divergentes, por los que los dos escritores destacan lo textual y lo intertextual en su exploración del concepto de una realidad paralela.*

Palabras clave: Borges; gótico; influencia; intertextualidad; paralelismo; Poe

I

That there exists a close relationship of influence and intertextuality between Edgar Allan Poe and Jorge Luis Borges is both a critical commonplace and an undoubted fact of literary history, as avowed on numerous occasions by Borges himself and subsequently confirmed by criticism (Bonells 1988; Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan 1998). Indeed, the editors of a new commemorative Spanish-language edition of Poe's complete tales, issued in advance of the bicentennial of the American author's birth in 1809, go so far as to declare that without Poe, we would not have had Borges, his follower Julio Cortázar, or, ultimately, the modern short story as such: "Todos somos descendientes literarios de Poe, pues gracias a Poe existieron Borges ... y ... Cortázar" ('We are all literary descendants of Poe, for it is thanks to Poe that Borges ... and Cortázar existed' – Iwasaki and Volpi 2008: 13). The kinship between Poe and Borges is more than evident: both exhibit a marked preference for brief forms (short story, essay and short poem), Poe having only completed one novel and Borges never having attempted one; both make display in their writings of a massive (real or apparent) encyclopaedic erudition; both regularly question and subvert the dividing-line between fiction and non-fiction, story and essay; both blur the high culture / mass culture antithesis by writing intellectual fiction in popular genres, Poe even *inventing* such a genre in the shape of the detective story; and both share a conception and practice of the text – notably the short story – as literary artefact or consciously *made* object.¹

Borges was brought up on Poe, reading him as a child in his father's library in the English original (Bonells 1988: 155). Poe is a constant point of reference for Borges the critic, right across his career, both in a series of dedicated articles and in multiple fugitive references scattered over the Borgesian *oeuvre*. Of his texts specifically on Poe, one may cite the essay 'Edgar Allan Poe', published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Nación* on 2 October 1949 (Borges 1949), the chapter of the same name in *Diálogos*, Borges' 1992 collection of interviews with Osvaldo Ferrari (Borges 1992a), and the text 'Edgar Allan Poe: Cuentos', originally published as an introduction to a selection of Poe's tales, which appears in Borges' volume of 1988 *Biblioteca personal* (which collection also includes numerous Poe allusions *passim*) (Borges 1997a). Furthermore, two of Borges' best-known stories openly acknowledge Poe's intertextual presence. 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote' ('Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*'), first published in 1939, calls its protagonist a "devoto ... de Poe" ("a devotee of Poe") (Borges 1971c: 54; English tr., 67), and, indeed, Menard is said to declare that he cannot imagine the universe without a certain line of verse by the American, namely "Ah, bear in mind this garden was enchanted!" from Poe's poem 'To Helen [Whitman]', published in 1848 (Poe 1969: 446, line 30). Equally, the text of Borges' story of 1942, 'La muerte y la brújula' ('Death and the Compass') states that its detective Lönnrot: "se creía

¹ A shorter version of this article was given as a paper at the conference "Edgar A. Poe: Two Hundred Years Later" (University of Castilla-La Mancha, Albacete, Spain), in February 2009.

un puro razonador, un Auguste Dupin” (“believed himself a pure reasoner, an Auguste Dupin”) (Borges 1971b: 148; English tr.: 106), thus placing him in a direct line from Poe’s analytic genius and first detective in literary history, the protagonist of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ of 1841 and ‘The Purloined Letter’ of 1845.

Nonetheless, in both the Argentinian writer’s own hands and those of others, discussion of Poe’s presence has tended to be confined to three areas of the American author’s work, namely: the detective fiction; the novel of 1837, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (Poe 1975); and Poe’s texts of literary theory, such as the ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ of 1846 (Poe 1972a) and ‘The Poetic Principle’ of 1848 (Poe 1972b). In the case of the detective stories, Borges saw Poe, quite unequivocally, as both inventor and canonical exemplar of the entire genre. This position is affirmed in, for instance, the interview ‘El poeta del regreso’ (‘A poet returns’), published in the Madrid weekly *Cambio 16* in 1980 (Borges 1980: 131), and also in the text ‘El cuento policial’ (‘The detective story’) included in the 1992 Borges/Ferrari volume of interviews referred to above (Borges 1992b), and has been amply confirmed by critics (e.g. Freeland 1996; Figueroa Rebolledo 2008) who, following in his wake, have mapped out a detective genealogy leading from Poe through Conan Doyle to Borges himself. *Arthur Gordon Pym* is recurrently mentioned favourably by Borges, who praised its symbolism as early as 1932 in his essay, ‘El arte narrativa y la magia’ (‘Narrative art and magic’), included in the volume *Discusión* (Borges 1964), and even went so far as to single it out as his personal favourite, telling Osvaldo Ferrari that if he had to choose one work by Poe it would be *Pym* (Borges 1997a: 351). Poe’s theoretical postulates, finally, are invoked by Borges to shore up his own espousal of the short poem and short tale, as in his 1968 Harvard interview with Rita Guibert where he states (directly in English within a Spanish-language text), paraphrasing the Poe of ‘The Poetic Principle’, that “there’s no such thing as a long poem” (Borges and Guibert 1976: 320).

Less attention has been paid to the possible intertextual relations and parallels between the nineteenth-century writer’s tales of terror – on which, indeed, Borges as critic has relatively little to say – and his twentieth-century admirer’s celebrated metaphysical fictions. Poe is, unsurprisingly, a recurrent presence in the *Introducción a la literatura norteamericana* which Borges co-authored in 1967 with Esther Zemborain de Torres (translated as *An Introduction to American Literature* [Borges and Zemborain de Torres 1971]). However, the main areas of Poe’s *oeuvre* considered in that manual, whether in the section on Poe himself or *passim*, are the aesthetic theories (there is a detailed summary of ‘The Philosophy of Composition’) and the detective stories, with an approbatory nod to *Pym* and some of Poe’s science-fictional texts. Borges and his co-author dedicate but a few lines to the tales of terror, and do not even refer to any of them by name. Criticism too has paid scant attention to the possible links between Poe’s work in this genre and Borges the composer of short stories, though Jorge Bonells (1988) has (very briefly) suggested a number of parallels between these two groups of Poe’s and Borges’ works. In the specific case of the two stories to be considered in this paper, Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ and Borges’ ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’, Bonells does not mention either, while Ib Johansen (1989) has linked ‘Usher’ to another Borges story, ‘La Biblioteca de Babel’ (1971a) (‘The Library of Babel’), his celebrated fable of 1941, but not to ‘Tlön’. Nonetheless, it will be argued here that the side-by-side

examination of ‘Usher’, Poe’s Gothic tale par excellence, and ‘Tlön’, Borges’ fable of the attraction exerted by the study of an imaginary planet, proves highly suggestive in elucidating the seductively similar yet also strikingly divergent forms in which both address the concept – now indeed reverberative in the epoch of cyberspace - of a *parallel reality*.

II

A century separates the two tales. ‘Usher’ first appeared in 1839 in Philadelphia, in *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, and received its definitive shape in Poe’s volume *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* in 1840. ‘Tlön’ was first published in 1940 in the Buenos Aires magazine *Sur* and was republished in revised form in 1944 in Borges’ collection *Ficciones* (the ‘postface’ indicated as being from ‘1947’ is date-wise a hoax). Both texts are highly self-conscious manifestations of the genre of the fantastic, a genre, indeed, openly meta-signified in Borges’ text, which states that the inhabitants of Tlön “juzgan que la metafísica es una rama de la literatura fantástica” (Borges 1971d: 24) (“judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature” – English tr. 1970: 34). The House of Usher is as visibly imaginary a location as are Borges’ fictitious toponyms, the non-existent Central Asian country Uqbar and the planet Tlön whose encroachment arises out of the study of Uqbar. The name ‘Uqbar’ could even be an echo of ‘Usher’, as indeed ‘Tlön’ could derive from Poe’s invented island of Tsalal in *Pym*. The disturbing strangeness of the two texts, as exemplars of the fantastic, is heightened by the location of both as contemporaneous with the time of writing. Borges positions ‘Tlön’ in the Buenos Aires of the mid-twentieth century, with a first-person narrator approximating to himself; ‘Usher’ is set by Poe not, despite appearances, in some *Ivanhoe*-type medieval past but in his own day, as is clear from the references to nineteenth-century medical lore, and to the painter Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) and the composer and musician Karl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) (Poe 1978c: 405). Further, philosophical readings of both texts have abounded: ‘Usher’ has been read in terms of the thought of Poe’s time as a critique of the Burkean and Kantian sublime (Voller 1988) or a negation of empiricism and transcendentalism (Vermilion and McCumber 2000), or, extrapolating into the twentieth century, as embodying Lévi-Strauss’s antithesis between nature and culture (Wasserman 1977). ‘Tlön’ has been pressed into the service of Foucault, Einstein, Wittgenstein and, again, Lévi-Strauss (Alazraki 1976; Romano Hurtado 2006). Equally, the encyclopaedic and the intertextual are key dimensions of both texts; Poe combines invented characters with largely real books and artworks, while Borges employs the reverse strategy, placing mostly real people in dialogue with imaginary books. Numerous characters in ‘Tlön’ are actual friends or connections of Borges’. In particular, his fellow Argentinian (Adolfo) Bioy Casares, who enters the story in the first paragraph, is well-known not only as Borges’ collaborator on various volumes of short stories and anthologies of short fiction but as a distinguished exponent of the fantastic genre in his own right, as novelist and short-story writer. Other members of Borges’ real literary and artistic circle appearing as themselves in the story are the Argentinian painter Xul Solar, the French Princess de Faucigny Lucinge,

and the writers Carlos Mastronardi, Néstor Ibarra and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (all Argentinian), Enrique Amorim (Uruguayan), Alfonso Reyes (Mexican; at one point ambassador to Argentina), and Drieu La Rochelle (French) (Wilson 2006: 81). Of the other personages presented by the narrator as living connections of his, two, Gunnar Erjford and the engineer Herbert Ashe, appear to be invented, but it is clear that the majority of the story's active characters originate as historical individuals. The critic Berenice Romano Hurtado evokes the problem for commentators on this story of distinguishing between those named in the text as real people and those same names as characters within the tale (2006: 98n) - as, indeed, also between Borges the narrator ("Borges personaje") and Borges the creator ("Borges creador") (2006: 102). Indeed, the narrator of 'Tlön' is best described as a simulacrum of Borges himself, not quite author, yet not quite character either.

'Tlön' was conceived in a public library, Borges' workplace at the time. In 1940 he was First Assistant at the Miguel Cané public library, in the district of Almagro Sur in Buenos Aires (Wilson 2006: 103) - later he would become Director of Argentina's National Library; Poe's text details volumes from Roderick Usher's private library. Borges' story does not explicitly name Poe or his creations, but clues leading back to 'Usher' can be found in its opening sentence: "Debo a la conjunción de un espejo y de una enciclopedia el descubrimiento de Uqbar" (Borges 1971d: 13) ("I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopaedia" - English tr. 1970: 27) - the encyclopaedia suggesting Usher's polymath library; the mirror, Poe's narrator's terror at the House's "remodelled and inverted" image in the tarn (Poe 1978c: 398). Soon after, we learn that a heresiarch of Uqbar "había declarado que los espejos y la cópula son abominables" (Borges 1971d: 14) ("had declared that mirrors and copulation are abominable" - English tr. 1970: 27) - Borges, it is said, traced his own aversion to mirrors to Poe (Bonells 1988: 155). Besides, as we shall see, Borges' concluding sentence contains a semi-concealed link that, under the sign of intertextuality, points the astute reader back towards the American writer; and, indeed, Bonells has said of the world of 'Tlön' that "Edgar Allan Poe aurait toute sa place dans un tel univers" ('Edgar Allan Poe would be more than at home in such a universe') (1988: 161).

Both 'Usher' and 'Tlön' are narratives dominated by the notion of a parallel reality and its gradual, ineluctable encroachment on everyday reality to the point where the alternative universe takes over. Poe's narrator finds himself gradually drawn into Roderick's belief regarding his house and domain that there has accumulated a "gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls" (Poe 1978c: 408): even before he enters the House, it seems to him that "about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves" (1978c: 399), and, once inside, he feels "creeping upon me, by slow degrees, the wild influences of [Usher's] own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (1978c: 411), until he finally becomes a participant in Usher's hallucination of the resurrection of his sister Madeline. In 'Tlön', too, an alternative reality gradually takes over both the narrator's consciousness and the circumambient world. The appearance of a compass with inscriptions in "uno de los alfabetos de Tlön" (Borges 1971d: 33) ("one of the alphabets of Tlön" - English tr. 1970: 40) marks "la primera intrusión del mundo fantástico en el mundo real" (1971d: 33) ("the first intrusion of this fantastic world into the world of

reality” – 1970: 41); this is followed by the discovery of a mysterious metal cone, emblem of a divinity of Tlön, at which moment “la realidad cedió en más de un punto” (1971d: 35) (“reality yielded on more than one account” – 1970: 42), and, at last, as the study of the imaginary planet starts to replace the traditional areas of knowledge, the narrator asks rhetorically: “¿Cómo no someterse a Tlön, a la minuciosa y vasta evidencia de un planeta ordenado?” (1971d: 35) (“How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an ordered planet?” – 1970: 42). Tlön is in process of substituting itself for the existing world, and whether this is a gain or a loss is for the reader to decide: as Romano Hurtado puts it, “la dificultad está en determinar el dentro y el fuera en estos mundos que se envuelven unos a otros: en saber en qué lado queda el asombro” (“the difficulty lies in determining the inside and outside of these worlds which envelop each other: in knowing on which side fear lies”) (2006: 110).

In both stories, the alternative reality is strongly mediated through textuality – through the world of encyclopaedias and libraries. The narrator of ‘Usher’ lists a shelf’s worth of “the books which, for years, had formed no small part of the mental existence of the invalid”, and adds, significantly, that Roderick’s reading is “in strict keeping” with the “character of phantasm” (Poe 1978c: 408), or “fantastic character” (1978c: 406), which he has already observed in his friend’s musical performances. Borges’ narrator, likewise, states of the antechamber to Tlön that “la literatura de Uqbar es de carácter fantástico” (Borges 1971d: 16) (“the literature of Uqbar was one of fantasy” – English tr.1970: 29). The intertextual link made here is arresting (and clearer, be it noted, in the original than in the English version): the “character of phantasm” presides over textuality in both texts. Indeed, in the case of ‘Usher’, one recent commentator, Álvaro Bisama, has even directly linked the protagonist’s downfall to his obsession with books and textuality, seeing Roderick as “un Quijote defectuoso y un lector deforme y contaminado por sus libros” (“a defective Don Quixote and a misshapen reader contaminated by his books”) (2008: 317).

The roll-call of the books that Roderick and the narrator read together merits quoting in full:

We pored together over such works as the *Ververt* et *Chartreuse* of Gresset; the *Belphegor* of Machiavelli; the *Heaven and Hell* of Swedenborg; the *Subterranean Voyage* of Nicholas Klimm by Holberg; the *Chiromancy* of Robert Flud, of Jean D’Indaginé, and of *De la Chambre*; the *Journey into the Blue Distance* of Tieck; and the *City of the Sun* of Campanella. One favourite volume was a small octavo edition of the *Directorium Inquisitorum*, by the Dominican Eyméric de Gironne; and there were passages in Pomponius Mela, about the old African Satyrs and Oegipans, over which Usher would sit dreaming for hours. His chief delight, however, was found in the perusal of an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic - the manual of a forgotten church - the *Vigiliae Mortuorum secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Maguntinae*. (Poe 1978c: 408-409)

This list of the books from Usher’s library which he shares with the narrator (and therefore with the reader) ranges over European literature from classical times up to Poe’s own day. The books number twelve within the text (thirteen in the real world, since Gresset’s *Ververt* [in fact *Vert-Vert*] and *Chartreuse* are actually two separate works, not one). They take in writers from ancient Rome (the geographer Pomponius Mela, born near Algeciras in Spain); Renaissance and baroque Italy (Niccolò

Machiavelli - the prose satire *Belphegor*, or *Belfagor arcidiavolo*, being one the more obscure works of the author of *The Prince* - and Tommaso Campanella, whose utopian narrative *La città del sole* was first published in Italian and later republished in Latin as *Civitas solis*); seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France (Marinus Cureau de la Chambre, author of *Discours sur les Principes de la Chiromancie*; the satirical poet Jean-Baptiste Louis Gresset); seventeenth-century England (the mystic Robert Flud [more correctly Fludd], author of various Latin manuals of chiromancy); eighteenth-century Denmark (Ludvig Holberg, whose fantastic-satirical novel was originally published in Latin as *Nicolai Klimii Iter Subterraneum*) and Sweden (Emanuel Swedenborg's mystico-philosophical fiction *Heaven and Hell* first appeared in 1758, again in Latin, its full title being *De Coelo et Ejus Mirabilibus, et de Inferno, ex Auditibus et Visis - Of Heaven and its Marvels, and of Hell, from things Heard and Seen*); sixteenth-century Germany (Johannes Indagine [not D'Indaginé], compiler of *Die Kunst der Chiromantzey*); and, again from Germany, Poe's contemporary, the author of Gothic fictions Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853). The 'Dominican Eymeric de Gironne', author of the *Directorium Inquisitorum* or *Inquisitors' Handbook*, was a fourteenth-century Spanish monk writing in Latin ('Gironne' is actually Gerona or Girona in Catalonia), while the anonymous "manual of a forgotten church" (*Vigils for the Dead according to the Choir of the Church of Mainz*), again in Latin, hails from Germany. Between them, the twelve works encompass a wide sweep of genres (Gothic or fantastic novel, utopian novel, philosophical narrative, prose satire, verse satire, geographical treatise, ecclesiastical or theocratic vademecum, and esoteric manual). They represent seven different geographical provenances and, at least in their originals, four different European languages: Latin (six), French (two), Italian (two) and German (two). We are not told what Roderick (and the narrator) read in - presumably English - translation and what in the various original languages, but both must, at least, have known Latin (one more book, meanwhile, enters the narrative before the end - the only book of Usher's not, in fact, real: the invented medieval romance *The Mad Trist*, ascribed to the equally imaginary Sir Launcelot Canning).

Richard Wilbur, in, curiously, a Library of Congress lecture delivered in 1966, described Usher's books as "belonging to all times and tongues" (1970: 272); this comment is somewhat exaggerated and indeed Eurocentric, but it does point to an encyclopaedic project in Poe that leads straight to Borges. The books and authors read by Usher (Machiavelli and, arguably, Swedenborg apart) may appear a shade peripheral to the Western literary canon, but they are still certainly part of it, and in its eclectic sweep across nations, centuries, languages and genres, Usher's library may be viewed as the direct harbinger of its celebrated Borgesian successors. Indeed, intertextuality fans out from Roderick's shelves, towards elsewhere in Poe and to Borges. In 'The Purloined Letter', it is Auguste Dupin who includes on his list of authorities charged with "spurious profundity" the names of Usher's two Italians, Machiavelli and Campanella (Poe 1978e: 985). Two other authors from Usher's bookcase, Flud (correctly re-spelt as Fludd) and Swedenborg, make their appearance in Borges' pages: 'La muerte y la brújula' / 'Death and the Compass' mentions as being in one of its characters' possession an imaginary study of the real Fludd, *Examen de la filosofía de Robert Fludd* (*An Examination of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd*) (Borges 1971b), while in 1975 Borges

published a preface to a selection from Swedenborg, including an extended discussion of *Heaven and Hell* (Borges 1998a). The interplay of real and imaginary places Usher's books firmly on the side of the real: that all of them, *The Mad Trist* apart, actually exist is beyond doubt – this even though the narrator is remembering them as components of a vanished library, since at the end house, inhabitants and library all disappear into the tarn. Poe's editor Thomas Mabbott states: "The books ... are all ... actual books ... Some, I believe, Poe actually had read" (Mabbott 1978, vol. II, 419n). Here, curiously, the critic Clive Bloom, in his comparative study *Reading Poe Reading Freud* (1988), citing the same passage from 'Usher' as we have just quoted to exemplify Poe's encyclopaedic vision of mind and universe, or how he "continually enwraps his tales within [a] totality of cultural and aesthetic availability", rather seriously vitiates his own argument by claiming that "the majority of the titles are works *invented by Poe*" (110, 113; Bloom's italics). Since Bloom cites James A. Harrison's 1902 edition as his main Poe text of reference, we may conclude that when composing his book he was, ironically, unaware of Mabbott's encyclopaedically annotated edition of Poe's tales, which, published ten years before, had, for the texts included in it, definitively superseded Harrison. The esoteric nature of Usher's reading thus plays strange games with Poe's critics, blurring the borders between reality and text in a fashion that should have delighted Borges.

The encyclopaedic dimension already present in 'Usher' becomes, in 'Tlön', explicit and essential to the narrative. Borges, we may note, was a proud owner of the 29-volume (1910-1911) Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Wilson 2006: 82). The story begins with the (fictional) *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* of 1917, described as a reprint of the (real) Tenth Edition (1902) of the *Britannica*; it moves into the fantastic with the (real) Bioy Casares' (imagined) location of a preternatural copy of the *Cyclopaedia's* volume XLVI, containing an apocryphal entry on the (invented) country Uqbar. By the end, the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* – at first known only through a copy of its Eleventh Volume, mysteriously dispatched from Brazil – has become a full terrene reality, manifesting in all forty volumes in Memphis, Tennessee and offered as an embodiment of an enormous project involving 300 collaborators called *Orbis Tertius* – described as "la obra más vasta que han acometido los hombres" (Borges 1971d: 32) ("the vastest undertaking ever carried out by man" – English tr. 1970: 40). In the project's second stage, the narrator adverts in anticipation of Tlön's final conquest of planet earth, there awaits the *Second Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, which will stretch to an overwhelming one hundred volumes. It is, then, above all through the creation of an alternative textuality, an enormous and expanding fund of knowledge, that Borges' parallel universe imposes itself, as if one jump further from Usher's pan-canonical library.

III

A surprising twist occurs at the end of Borges' story, when the textual mutates into the intertextual, and also loops back numinously to Poe. In the closing sentence of 'Tlön', the narrator – at this point as much the historical Borges as a fictional character –

declares that, even as Tlön impinges on the world, “yo sigo revisando ... una indecisa traducción quevediana (que no pienso dar a la imprenta) del *Urn Burial* de Browne” (Borges 1971d: 36) (“I ... go on revising ... an uncertain Quevedian translation [which I do not intend to publish] of Browne’s *Urn Burial*” – English tr. 1970: 43). Here, quotation, translation and intertextuality intersect, and behind the explicit references to the seventeenth-century writers Sir Thomas Browne and Francisco de Quevedo there lies a hidden, embedded link to Poe. Browne (1605-1682) and Quevedo (1580-1645) are both authors admired and commented on by Borges: his attraction to these two baroque writers may be linked to the elaborate and lapidary Latinity which he discerns in both, almost as if the English writer were the double of his Spanish contemporary. Here, the book mentioned, *Urn Burial* (1658 – to give it its full title, *Hydriotaphia. Urn-Burial; or, a Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns Lately Found in Norfolk*), is – untypically for this story – a real one.

The essay ‘Sir Thomas Browne’ appeared in Borges’ 1925 volume *Inquisiciones* (Borges 1994b). Meanwhile, Francisco de Quevedo, poet, picaresque novelist, prose satirist and devotional writer, is, we may note, a constant point of reference – almost as much as Cervantes or, indeed, Poe – across the Borgesian *oeuvre*, present in a series of essays and a host of fugitive allusions. The essays include: ‘Menoscabo y grandeza de Quevedo’ (‘Quevedo: Decay and Grandeur’), published in, again, *Inquisiciones* in 1925 (Borges 1994a); ‘Un soneto de Don Francisco de Quevedo’ (‘A Sonnet of Francisco de Quevedo’), in *El Idioma de los Argentinos* from 1928 (Borges 1998c); ‘Francisco Quevedo: Prosa y verso’, which first appeared as a prologue to a selection of the master’s prose and verse edited by Borges and Bioy Casares and published in 1948 (Borges 1998b); and ‘Francisco Quevedo: *la Fortuna con seso y la hora de todos. Marco Bruto*’ (referring to two of the master’s works, whose titles may be rendered as *Fortune’s Wit and the Hour that Calls for All* and *Marcus Brutus*), which rubbed shoulders with an essay on Poe in Borges’ 1988 collection *Biblioteca personal* (Borges 1997b). Notably, in the first-mentioned of those essays Borges cites one of the baroque writer’s most important works, namely the satirical sequence of prose pieces which appeared between 1603 and 1613 under the title *Los sueños (The Visions)* – a reference which, as we shall see, connects both Borges and Quevedo to Edgar Allan Poe (here too a broader intertextuality raises its head, for in this same essay Borges, pointing back to the classics, reads Quevedo’s text as a “reflejo de Luciano” (“reflection of Lucian”) (Borges 1994a: 44). In addition, Borges’ very own Pierre Menard is said to have translated Quevedo into French, certainly once and possibly twice, and altogether the story bearing his name mentions Quevedo three times (Borges 1971c). Besides, Alfonso Reyes (himself, as we have seen, a character in ‘Tlön’), writing in 1943, used the adjective *quevediano* to describe Borges’ early work (indeed, he also likened Borges to Poe) (Reyes: 1976, 61-62).

In his mention of the translation of Quevedo, and in relation to the interface between text and reality, Borges’ narrator is being a shade disingenuous. The fact is that the *real* Borges did, in January 1944, in No 14 of the Buenos Aires journal *Sur*, publish a translation, made jointly (in yet another link to ‘Tlön’) with the *historical* Bioy Casares, not of Browne’s entire text but of its fifth and final chapter (Browne 1944; Johnson 2002: 174). To boot, in one of their footnotes the translators cite none other than Francisco de Quevedo, comparing a passage in Browne’s text (on the vanity of elaborate

tombs) to one in the Spanish writer's *Epístolas a imitación de las de Séneca* (*Epistles in Imitation of Seneca*) (Browne 1944: 23n).

Meanwhile, and albeit Borges may not have known it, Poe himself is reliably believed to have owned a copy of Quevedo's prose satire (as mentioned above) *Los sueños*, translated as *The Visions of Quevedo*, and Mabbott (1978, vol. II: 83) believes this work to be a source for Poe's grotesque tale 'Bon-Bon' (Poe 1978a). If a brief digression be allowed here regarding Poe's knowledge of Spanish language and culture, we may note that his biographer Kenneth Silverman states that his modern languages studies at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville comprised *inter alia* "probably some Spanish" (1992: 30), and records that among the books mentioned by Poe's foster-father John Allan as belonging to Edgar's library in Allan's Richmond home in 1827 was a copy, presumably in English, of *Don Quijote* (1992: 36). In 'How to Write a Blackwood Article', his skit of 1838, Poe quotes some lines of verse from Cervantes, taken from the second part of *Don Quijote* (Poe 1978b: 344; Mabbott 1978, vol. II: 360n); and a source for his 1839 tale 'William Wilson' (Poe 1978f) has been located in Pedro Calderón de la Barca's drama *El Purgatorio de San Patricio* (*The Purgatory of St Patrick*) (Mabbott 1978, vol. II: 424n). Further, in the account of Longfellow's play *The Spanish Student* included in his 1845 article 'The American Drama', Poe notes his fellow author's admitted use of Cervantes' story 'La Gitanilla' ('The Gipsy Girl') and unadmitted borrowings from *Don Quijote* (Poe 1986: 465, 470), adding that "there is not an incident" in Longfellow's drama that could not be traced to "some one of the thousand and one comedies of intrigue attributed to Calderon [sic] and Lope de Vega" (1986: 474). All this suggests that Poe laid claim to a quite substantial knowledge of Spanish Golden Age literature.

What is most arresting, however, about all the intertext that froths around the conclusion of 'Tlön' is that the fifth chapter of Browne's *Urn-Burial* – as chosen by Borges and Bioy for their sample translation – includes the lines which Poe prefaced to 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' as that tale's epigraph. Those lines read: "What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond *all* conjecture" (Poe 1978d: 527, emphasis in the original). Poe's epigraph openly sources the quotation to "Sir Thomas Browne". Mabbott notes that Poe used the same quotation on three other occasions (all reviews, thus placing it under the sign of intertextuality), and adds that in Browne it "refers to the difficult questions which Suetonius, in his life of Tiberius (chapter LXX) says that the Emperor enjoyed putting to literary scholars" (Mabbott 1978, vol. II: 569n). Borges and Bioy Casares translate Browne's words as: "Qué Canción cantaban las Sirenas, o qué nombre Aquiles tomó cuando se ocultó entre las mujeres, son interrogaciones arduas, pero que no superan la conjetura", and, interestingly, in a footnote quote the same anecdote about Tiberius as does Mabbott (Browne 1944: 16, 16n, Borges' and Bioy Casares' emphasis). The current Oxford World's Classics translation of Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* renders the relevant passage: "What was Achilles' name when he was among the virgins? What songs used the Sirens to sing?" (Suetonius 2000: 132) – the first question referring to the hero of the *Iliad* (though the episode itself is not in Homer but in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and the second to the *Odyssey* (Achilles hidden on the island of Skyros, disguised as a girl in a vain stratagem to keep him from the

Trojan war: Odysseus and his men returning from that war, under the spell of the fatal Sirens). The text of 'Tlön', then, covertly connects not only to Poe but to a passage, affirming the knowability of all things, quoted by him at the opening of the tale which introduces Dupin and is a monument to an all-conquering analytic rationalism. At the same time, Borges places his own text within a spiral of intertextuality that winds back through Poe, Browne, Suetonius and Ovid and in the end leads all the way to Homer, at the very dawn of the Western canon.

IV

The last sentence of 'Tlön', then, signifies Borges' text as eminently intertextual, with a covert nod to Poe. It needs, however, to be asked how far Poe's systematised irrationality is or is not replicated in the organised hyperreality of Borges' tale. Roderick's parallel universe is certainly *logically organised*: "The conditions of the sentence had been ..., he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of the stones – in the order of their arrangement" (Poe 1978c: 408), but it also points to the *pathological organisation* of the delusional universe of mental disorder. That universe may itself be interrogated from within the medical discourse of Poe's own time, in terms of the "hysteria" (1978c: 412, emphasis in the original) or "hypochondriac" state (1978c: 405, 409) of the narrator's diagnosis (convergent too with Michel Foucault's analysis of those concepts in his famous work of 1961, *Histoire de la Folie / Madness and Civilisation*) (Foucault 1971); or, in the language of psychoanalysis, in terms of the fully-fledged, systematised delusions of paranoia as classically elucidated by Freud in his 1911 case-study of the deranged appeal court judge Schreber (Freud 1979). The apocalyptic finale, with house and denizens disappearing into the undifferentiated void of the tarn, is, surely, the limit-case of what D.H. Lawrence, in 1924, called the "disintegrative vibration" in Poe (1971: 70). If the fissure in the House of Usher is also a tragic fissure in reality, in Borges, by contrast, the vibration by which Tlön impinges on the familiar world is less disintegrative than, ultimately, reintegrative; if in Poe's tale the parallel world destroys the familiar world, in Borges' it replaces it.

The parallel universe of Tlön has been called "dystopian" (O'Dwyer 2002); and yet the Eleventh Volume of the *Second Encyclopaedia of Tlön* is, surely, a less oppressive project than the Eleventh *Newspeak Dictionary* nightmarishly bodied forth in 1949 by George Orwell in his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 1989: 312). Borges' work in general and 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' in particular are now being increasingly hailed, by a whole emerging school of criticism, as prefigurations of the new universe of interrelations that is the Internet. For John Barth, in his 1967 essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion', Tlön was "a coherent alternative to this world" (1990: 78); today, one cybercritic has declared: "What is Tlön ... if not the cyberspace for which the physical world is rapidly becoming a quaintly antiquated sketch?" (Wolk 1999), while another sees the multi-authored *Second Encyclopaedia of Tlön* as an uncanny harbinger of Wikipedia (Cohen 2008; conversely, both English- and Spanish-language versions of the actual Wikipedia harbour long entries on 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'). Behind Borges there lies Poe, unavoidable precursor and fabular master; and yet, in our epoch

of the rapid expansion, transformation and diffusion of knowledge, the most significant contribution of Edgar Allan Poe may yet prove to be less the disintegrative vibration than the dynamic of intertextuality that he, polyvalently and triumphantly, shares with Jorge Luis Borges.

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