

Introduction to Crime Fiction

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review: filming the detective

- ▶ medium and genre
 - ▶ representing thinking: eyes
 - ▶ character and star: Bogie
 - ▶ possibilities of the individual scene: horses
 - ▶ clues (and mystery) subordinated
- ▶ *Big Sleep* (1946): authorship
 - ▶ Faulkner, Brackett, Hawks, Bogart, Bacall, Jules Furthman, Jack Warner, the censor...
- ▶ Hawks: “I wasn’t going to explain things”
 - ▶ actually, the added love plot is over-explained
 - ▶ **formalization**: the detective-story elements act as a container for everything else

the case of the tetrarch's sapphires

I had previously tried my hand at two detective stories, “The Garden of Branching Paths” (1941) and “Death and the Compass” (1942). The former won a second prize in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*; the latter was flatly rejected.

Borges, “Commentaries,” in *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933–1969*, ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author (New York: Dutton, 1970), 273.

- Is “Death and the Compass” a *good* detective story? Ellery Queen apparently didn't think so. What generic expectations does this story disappoint?

sleeping the big sleep

It is true that Erik Lönnrot did not succeed in preventing the last crime, but it is indisputable that he foresaw it. Nor did he, of course, guess the identity of Yarmolinsky's unfortunate assassin, but he did divine the secret morphology of the vicious series as well as the participation of Red Scharlach. (251)

The first story, that of the crime, ends before the second begins. But what happens in the second? Not much. The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn. Nothing can happen to them: a rule of the genre postulates the detective's immunity. We cannot imagine Hercule Poirot or Philo Vance threatened by some danger, attacked, wounded, even killed.... We examine clue after clue, lead after lead. The whodunit thus tends toward a purely geometric architecture.

Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction," 45–46.

The naive fear of not being sufficiently *hardboiled*...is one of the most visible and least pleasing signs of North American literature today.

Borges, review of *Stories of the Old West* by Bret Harte, *Sur* 76 (January 1941): 121, *Biblioteca Nacional* (Argentina). "Hardboiled" is in English in the original.

Lönnrot thought of himself as a pure thinker, an Auguste Dupin, but there was something of the adventurer in him ("Death," 251)

those mean streets

those mean streets

the Hôtel du Nord—[that](#) high prism that dominates the estuary whose waters are the colors of the desert (251)



“Plaza Hotel (1910),” [Wikimedia Commons](#); “Rio de la Plata,” photograph, Earth Sciences and Image Analysis Laboratory, NASA Johnson Space Center, 2003, [Wikimedia Commons](#). The Atlantic is at the top of the picture; Buenos Aires is to the right of the estuary.

To the left and right of the automobile, the city disintegrated; the firmament grew larger and the houses meant less and less and a brick kiln or a poplar grove more and more. They reached their miserable destination: a final alley of rose-colored mud walls which in some way seemed to reflect the disordered setting of the sun. (254)

Without rejecting the possibility of a hoax (it was **carnival time**), Treviranus checked and found he had been called from *Liverpool House*, a tavern on the Rue de Toulon—**that** dirty street where cheek by jowl are the peepshow and the milk store, the bordello and the women selling bibles. (255)

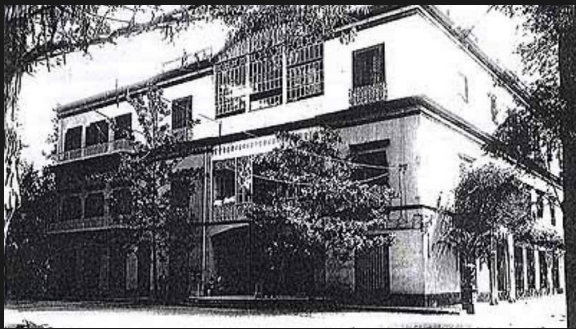
Lönnrot advanced among the eucalypti, stepping amidst confused generations of rigid, broken leaves. Close up, the house on the estate of Triste-le-Roy was seen to abound in superfluous symmetries and in maniacal repetitions: a glacial Diana in one lugubrious niche was complemented by another Diana in another niche; one balcony was repeated by another balcony; double steps of stairs opened into a double balustrade. A two-faced Hermes cast a monstrous shadow. (259)

poet of the city

Since 1923, I had been doing my best to be the poet of Buenos Aires and never quite succeeding. When, in 1942, I undertook a nightmare version of the city in “Death and the Compass,” my friends told me that at long last I had managed to evoke a sufficiently recognizable image of my home town...In order to avoid any suspicion of realism, I used distorted names and placed the story in some cosmopolitan setting beyond any specific geography.

Borges, “Commentaries,” 268.

During all these years, we usually spent our summers out in Adrogué, some ten or fifteen miles to the south of Buenos Aires, where we had a place of our own—a large one-story house with grounds, two summerhouses, a windmill, and a shaggy brown sheepdog. Adrogué then was a lost and undisturbed maze of summer homes surrounded by iron fences with masonry planters on the gateposts, of parks, of streets that radiated out of the many plazas, and of the ubiquitous smell of eucalyptus trees.



Borges at the Hotel La Delicia. Images in Florencia Saglio, “La Delicia, el hotel de los veranos de Jorge Luis Borges en Adrogué del que hoy solo quedan una columna y una estatua,” *Clarín*, August 24, 2020, clarin.com. The sources for these images are not given.

1899	b. Buenos Aires (Spanish and English spoken at home)
1914	studies at Collège Calvin, Geneva (through 1918)
1925	translates the last page of Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i>
1931	<i>Sur</i> , ed. Victoria Ocampo, begins; regular contributions by JLB
1935	<i>Historia universal de la infamia</i> (Buenos Aires: Tor)
1937	trans. Woolf, <i>Orlando</i> (Buenos Aires: Sur)
1938	works as a librarian in Buenos Aires
1938	trans. Kafka, <i>La metamorfosis</i> (Buenos Aires: Losada)

(continues)

1941	<i>El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan</i> (Buenos Aires: Sur)
1942	"La muerte y la brújula," <i>Sur</i> 92 (May)
1942	H. Bustos Domecq [JLB and Adolfo Bioy Casares], <i>Seis problemas para Don Isidro Parodi</i>
1943	Borges and Bioy Casares, eds. and trans., <i>Los mejores cuentos policiales</i> (Buenos Aires: Emecé), including Poe, Conan Doyle, "La muerte"
1944	<i>Ficciones</i> (Buenos Aires: Sur), including "La muerte"
1948	"The Garden of Forking Paths," trans. Anthony Boucher, in <i>Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine</i> ("All Nations" issue).
1949	<i>El aleph</i> (Buenos Aires: Losada)
1950	teaches English literature
1954	"Death and the Compass," <i>New Mexico Quarterly</i>
1962	<i>Ficciones</i> [in English], ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove)
1986	d.

Source: Timeline, Borges Center, www.borges.pitt.edu.

deep, man

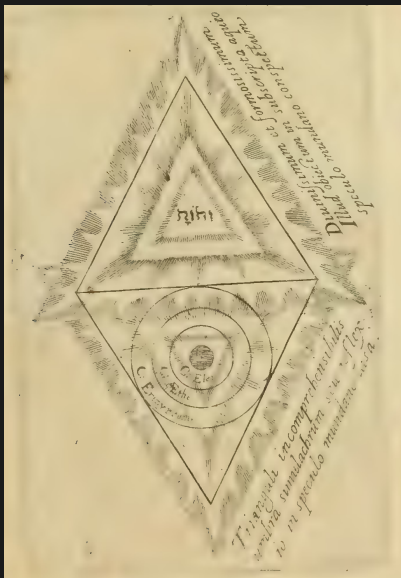
The metaphysical detective story does not have the narcotizing effect of its progenitor; instead of familiarity, it gives strangeness, a strangeness which more often than not is the result of jumbling the well known patterns of classical detective stories. Instead of reassuring, they disturb. They are not an escape, but an attack. By exploiting the conventions of the detective story such men as Borges and Robbe-Grillet have fought against the Modernist attempt to fill the void of the world with rediscovered mythical symbols. Rather, they dramatize the void. If, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is *life* which must be solved.

Michael Holquist, "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction," *New Literary History* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 155, [JSTOR](#).

Near the beginning of Borges's 'Death and the Compass', a shopkeeper decides to publish a book. This book is there because it is indispensable to the framework of the secret story....

The basic variation that Borges introduced into the history of the short story consisted in making the coded construction of Story Two the theme of the tale. Borges recounts the manoeuvres of someone who is perversely building a secret plot with the materials of a visible story. In 'Death and the Compass', Story Two is a deliberate construction of Scharlach's.

Ricardo Piglia, "Theses on the Short Story," *New Left Review* 70 (July–August 2011): 63, 66, newleftreview.org.



Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia* (Oppenheimii: aere Johan-Theodori de Bry, typis Hieronymi Galleri, 1617), I.21, [Internet Archive](#). One of Yarmolinsky's books is "An Examination of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd" (252).

the ending

- ▶ Does this ending provide satisfaction?

next

- ▶ midterm: be on time, bring writing utensils