

Esplin, Emron (2019). *Borges's Poe: The Influence and Reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America*. United States: University of Georgia Press.

When we study literature, there are many ways to get confused about important aspects to understand the real message that fictions sends. It is very common, for example, to read remarkable authors in isolation. Edgar Allan Poe and Jorge Luis Borges have influenced literature, arts and culture in the widest sense. Yet, the 19th-century United States of Edgar Allan Poe may seem far from the 20th-century Argentina of Jorge Luis Borges. It is possible that we don't know so well the connections between both of them. And if we are knowledgeable about these connections, we tend to look for the influences of Poe on Borges, but we don't usually consider how the works by Borges (essays, translations and fictions) have changed the way we read Poe. *Borges's Poe. The Influence and Reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America* gives us a deep insight into some clues to renew the vision we have about these authors. Emron Esplin explains the context and techniques of these authors with precision and clarity.

The Introduction argues that Borges transformed "Poe's reputation [...] redefining [him] in his literary criticism as a story writer rather than a poet" (2-3). It is possible that we, as 21st-century readers, assume this as natural, but Emron Esplin provides evidence to show that this perception has radically changed due to Borges's influence. Spanish American *modernismo* "was primarily a poetic movement" (2) that revered Poe as a poet-prophet. Esplin "avoids the paternalistic approach of some Poe studies scholarship, in both English and Spanish, and the imperialistic center of some comparative American literary studies by emphasizing Borges's role in the Borges/Poe relationship" (4-5). The first connection between these authors is related to Southernness. They "are not southern writers in the geographical and cultural senses of the term" (6), but they identify with the South. It has been proved that identity is not something material but a discourse construction. This is especially important to authors who are very sensitive to some narrations that shape their own personalities and writings (Sevilla-Vallejo 2017: 292). Poe and Borges developed a subjective understanding of their roots (5-8). Although Poe was born in the North of the United States, he grew up as a southerner. For his part, Borges lived "in one of the southernmost metropolises in the Americas" (7), wrote for and edited the journal *Sur* and felt that Great Britain and the United States of America were his cultural referents. In this sense, neither was he born in the South, but he had a southern mentality.

Borges distanced himself from the *modernistas* through his reading of Poe because he knew that interpretation is an essential part in the construction of literature and he considered that the interpretation of *modernistas* was no longer satisfactory to explain literature in the 20th century (10 ff.).

In the introduction to Part 1, "Renaming Poe: Jorge Luis Borges's Literary Criticism on Edgar Allan Poe," Emron Esplin addresses how Borges's interpretation changed our view of Poe. Chapter 1, "Borges's Philosophy of Poe's Composition," collects testimonies of the Argentine author who points that theoretic and literary works by Poe are more concerned with narrative strategies than with poetic methods. Furthermore, although Poe sustained that his writings were guided by a logical chain of thoughts (27), Borges showed how Poe additionally uses irrational inspiration to move forward his tales (31). In addition, Borges studied Poe's neurosis to understand the genesis of his works. In Chapter 2, "Reading and Rereading," Esplin details how Borges appreciated the contributions by Poe to fantastic horror and detective fiction. Borges stated that Poe was the inventor of the detective genre and established its six rules (56). Borges not only commented on Poe's tales but also devoted many readings and writings to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*.

Part 2, "Translating Poe. Jorge Luis Borges's Edgar Allan Poe Translations," focuses on the importance of creativity in translation. Chapter 3, "Theory, Practices, and Pym," shows how Borges "reverses the dependent and pejorative role often assigned to translations" by claiming that a translated text can be more accurate than the original one (69). He practices a periphrastic translation instead of a literal translation because he understands that the definitive text does not exist but the right words depend on the literary tradition in which the text is inserted. Emron Esplin analyzes how Borges translated *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* and the reasons that he could have had to eliminate some words from the original text. Chapter 4, "Facts and an Envelope," studies Borges' translations of *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* and *The Purloined Letter*. In the first case, he alters "syntax and decreases the wordiness of Poe's narrator's descriptions while delivering a similar, although at times slightly altered, message" (82). The second case has a similar technique and implies some changes. For example, it changes Dupin's motivations to take the case.

Part 3, "Rewriting Poe: Jorge Luis Borges's Poe-Influenced and Poe-Influencing Short Fiction," compares tales from both authors. In Chapter 5, Buried Connections, Emron Esplin explores some links to which scholars have not

paid enough attention. *Loss of Breath* by Poe and *Funes el memorioso* and *El Aleph* by Borges have very different plots, but they “all attempt to describe the indescribable” (108). The protagonists of these tales fail to communicate their memories and experiences. Moreover, there are some subtle details about these psychological contents that connect these works. One of them is that characters feel pain due to their frustration in front of their enormous desires. Chapter 6, “Supernatural Revenge,” exposes the different conceptions that Poe and Borges had about revenge. “In Poe’s tales, revenge can be justified or unwarranted, appropriate or excessive, realistic or exaggerated [...] his stories depict revenge as a viable option for his literary creations” (121). However, “In Borges’s fiction, contrastingly, vengeance either fails completely or completely fails to satisfy”. Esplin compares *Metzengerstein* and *The Black Cat* by Poe with *El Aleph* by Borges. Emron Esplin takes the model established by Todorov to argue that all these texts are “fantastic revenge stories” (124). He summarizes Borges’s methods of fantastic tales but he uses Todorov’s theory because it is more coherent than Borges’s analysis. According to Emron Esplin, Poe and Borges have in common that they create fantastic revenge narratives that need “to be unpacked in order to understand the hidden revenge plot” (138). The analysis of *El Aleph* is particularly interesting. It compares the manuscript version with the final version to show how the initial tripartite revenge plot (143) is undermined in the published text. He also compares the different sense of revenge in Poe’s *Hop Frog* to Borges’s *Emma Zunz*.

The book’s Epilogue describes how Borges’s interpretation of Poe also influenced the translations made by Julio Cortázar, the reception of Poe in Spanish speaking countries and how he also influenced the conception that English speaking countries had about this author. Borges changed the way his contemporaries read Poe, opened up the literary market to Poe’s fiction and crucially influenced Cortázar’s literary career (155 ff.).

To conclude, *Borges’s Poe: The influence and reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America* is an interesting analysis of the connections between these two authors and the key role played by Borges in the consolidating the understanding and appreciation of Poe’s literary value. It is remarkable how precise and bold could Borges influence the reception of a literary forefather such as Poe. In effect, the successor (Borges) created his precursor (Poe) in two ways. First, “the readers experience an odd, anachronistic sensation that the work they are reading was written by an author who postdates the publication of the text” (13). Thus, reading Poe today, one cannot help experiencing it through Borges’s sensibility. Second, “the reader returns to a work she has read before and sees it with new eyes because she has been affected by a piece or a body of work she has read by a more contemporary writer”. We not only feel something Borgesian in Poe, but we also interpret his writing as Borges did. In this sense, we appreciate the narrative genius of Poe and we shiver before the terrible revenges therein, wondering whether they were, after all, well deserved.

References

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Santiago Sevilla-Vallejo
 Department of Philology, Communications and Documentation
 Universidad de Alcalá
 ORCID: 0000-0002-9017-4949
 santiago.sevilla@uah.es