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Resisting Roland Barthes: Poe Is (Not) Dead

Edgar Allan Poe is widely considered to be the originator of the detective story. Franchises like Conan Doyle’s The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Paco Ignacio Taibo II’s myriad novels featuring Héctor Belascoarán Shayne are undoubtedly rooted in Poe and have demonstrated the versatility of the genre over time. Other writers like Umberto Eco and Jorge Luis Borges would also hearken back to Poe’s pioneering short stories. Many writers have speculated as to how Poe’s life of hardship and misfortune might have influenced his work. Vincent Price notes in the introduction to 18 Best Stories by Edgar Allan Poe: “I’ve never encountered any writer who was so brilliantly able to transform his inner visions or hallucinations into universally loved fiction and poetry. Poe’s achievements are particularly awesome when you consider what a miserable life he led… (Poe 7)” In “The Case of Poe: Applications/Implications of Psychoanalysis”, Shoshana Felman acknowledges Poe’s exceptionalism as a writer, and, while granting that aspects of his personal life may shed light on his creative rationale and style, she assures that:

...Poe’s text (and not just Poe’s biography of his personal neurosis) is clearly an analytical case in the history of literary criticism, a case that suggests something crucial to understand in psychoanalytic terms. It is therefore not surprising that Poe has been repeatedly singled out for psychoanalytic research, has persistently attracted the attention of psychoanalytic critics (Felman 32).

This is precisely what I seek to focus on: the utility of Felman’s contextualization of psychoanalytic approaches ¹ to analyze “Poe’s text” itself without the interference of

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¹ For this particular project, I decidedly will not purport to execute a specifically psychoanalytic reading of the detectives belonging to Poe’s successors. Hence, for the remainder of the paper, I will use the more general modifier psychological in place of psychoanalytic. I do not believe that this diffusion of specificity will too significantly alter discussions of Daniel Quinn’s identity, for example (Quinn is the protagonist-detective in City of Glass).
often tenuous and caricaturing judgements that depend on an awareness of the author’s biography.

The imposition of such parameters is not a new idea. In a short section of just a few pages entitled “The Death of the Author”, in his book *Image-Music-Text*, Roland Barthes famously challenges the role of the literary creator-writer: “The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions…” (Barthes 143). In the argumentation that follows, Barthes insists that readers can look to the text for meaning only once the author, an individual bound to biographical details—“tastes, memories, biases…”—has been completely divorced from the language and narrative of the text. The words themselves are an “inscription” (Barthes 146) informed by a palimpsest of connected preceding works. As a result, the text becomes “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Ibid.). Barthes’s work here is a classic epitomization of intertextuality and an important reminder of the “anxiety of influence” (see (5)).

On the other hand, however, Barthes’s conviction is extreme, not fairly accommodating many forms of literature, especially those cases where the connection between an author’s life and his writing is so patent—as with Poe. Specifically, without a sense of his life in mind, Poe’s short stories feel ungrounded and whose macabre and sinister themes feel unwarranted, except perhaps for the uses of personal catharsis. Because Poe’s stories are dreamlike projections of the repressed horrors in his life, they feature experiences of limited import for the typical reader.²

² Krutch acknowledges as much, directly following (6)
I introduce Barthes in order to emphasize that my premise is not to examine Poe’s own psychological maladies in order to draw conclusions about the motivations behind his fiction. Rather, I intend to survey the evolution of the psychological makeup of the detective figure (including Poe’s own Dupin) across a trio of works, “The Purloined Letter”, Jorge Luis Borges’s “La muerte y la brújula” and Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*. Barthes continues: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (Barthes 142). Not only is the mark of authorship lost—so too is “all identity”. As we will see, this often includes the identity of the detective himself.

**Felman and the Link Between Psychology and the Figure of the Detective**

In her essay, Shoshana Felman critiques two psychoanalytic readings of Poe by Joseph Wood Krutch and Marie Bonaparte, summarizing how the former suggests that Poe’s creation of Dupin may be a response to the author’s own neuroses—specifically an exercise in proving to himself that he is capable of thinking rationally like Dupin. The implication is, if he manages to create such a hyper-logical figure, should that not also say something favorable about his own rationality? I will propose how the essay also permits a psychological reading of Daniel Quinn in *City of Glass* and in Borges’s “La muerte y la brújula”. While Borges and Auster’s iterations are often considered to be anti-detective in nature, the compatibility of a psychological reading with both works

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3 Felman’s implication here is that, under certain psychoanalytic readings, rationality indicates healthfulness. She goes on to critique Krutch’s assessments of Poe’s work, which evoke reductive, caricaturing dichotomies. She writes, “Krutch believes that his own work is opposed to Poe’s as health is opposed to sickness, as normality is opposed to abnormality, as truth is opposed to delusion. But this ideologically determined, clear-cut opposition between health and sickness is precisely one that Freud’s discovery fundamentally unsettles, deconstructs” (Felman 35).

4 Given that I plan to offer a psychological reading of Auster’s main character, not Auster the author himself, I recognize the obliqueness of this parallel.
reminds us that they still owe much to Poe, while still, of course, engineering other
variations that nonetheless problematize what Poe initially set out to do.

The analytical approach to disparate clues is central to the occupation of the
detective, and the success of the case relies on his shrewdness to correctly process
them. My analysis will focus on the ways in which Borges and Auster problematize and
discard Poe’s psychological precedent of Dupin as well as preserve and honor those
selfsame characteristics that ultimately make the detective story what it is. In order to
maintain a targeted premise, I will track the evolution of the form specifically in terms of
the figure/character of the detective himself and how the stories’ distinctions are reliably
realized through him.

Felman begins by addressing Krutch and Bonaparte’s inclusions of what I will call
extra-textual \(^5\) backgrounds in their psychoanalytic criticisms of Poe, ultimately
concluding that, while distinct, both are substantially misguided.\(^6\) For example, Krutch
believes that Poe’s works “bear no conceivable relation…to the life of any people, and it
is impossible to account for them on the basis of any social or intellectual tendencies or
as the expression of the spirit of any age” (Krutch in Felman 32). This statement
presupposes whatever subjects are considered relatable to the so-called “the life of any
people” or “any social or intellectual tendencies” or “the expression of the spirit of any
age”. Furthermore, as another example—

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\(^5\) I use this term in shorthand to stand in for the context that Barthes believes necessarily dies as a result
of narration: “As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but
intrinsitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol
itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing
begins” (Barthes 142).

\(^6\) Notwithstanding Felman’s criticisms of Krutch and Bonaparte, bridging two disparate disciplines by
assessing Poe using psychoanalytical or psychological principles must bear inherent challenges. Our
intuition is to read with caution—merging literature with an empirical school of though must be done with
care.
Krutch thus diagnoses in Poe a pathological condition of sexual impotence, the result of a fixation on his mother, and explains Poe’s literary drive as a desire to compensate for, on the one hand, the loss of social position of which his foster father had deprived him, through the acquisition of literary fame and, on the other hand, his incapacity to have normal sexual relations, through the creation of a fictional world of horror and destruction where he found refuge (Felman 33).

It is clear how Krutch’s argument is not only reliant on specific psychoanalytical principles, but also so fallibly on biographical, extra-textual information. It is also obvious how Poe’s supposed “sexual impotence” and compensation for the “loss of social position of which his foster father deprived him” has absolutely nothing to do with an examination of Dupin. Felman, anticipating this problem, preempts the question of how the above relates to the detective story at all (notwithstanding the fact that Krutch is actually referring to Poe’s stories of horror in this particular instance), writing in the following line, “Poe’s fascination with logic would thus be merely an attempt to prove himself rational when he felt he was going insane…” (Felman 33). In this moment, Felman pivots towards a connection between analysis (here, “logic”) and psychoanalysis by offering an account of Poe’s fascination with logic, an account aligning with Krutch’s rationale.7

Felman does well to dismantle Krutch’s obtuse and boorish approach to Poe—whose reading demonstrates the complications of such interdisciplinary comparisons. Felman’s main thesis expresses that, despite semi-dehumanizing, caricaturing psychoanalytic approaches to Poe on the parts of Krutch and Bonaparte, Lacan shows

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7 As noted in 1, I will co-opt this parallel with one conceptual simplification—using psychology to stand in for psychoanalysis—because full-fledged psychoanalytic readings of the characters in “La muerte y la brújula” and City of Glass are outside the scope of my project.
how the psychoanalytic approach can tell us something valuable about the relationship
between psychology and literature.\textsuperscript{8}

The challenge of formulating a work of literary criticism is twofold: not only does it
require a devoted premise or thesis but also a concerted preemption of possible
counterarguments. Felman’s introduction addresses considerations of Poe by other
writers (in addition to Krutch and Bonaparte)—both his detractors and supporters. She
conducts this brief survey before at all engaging “The Purloined Letter”, quoting various
writers and their critical judgements about Poe. Before that, though, she notes,

“Perhaps no poet has been so highly acclaimed and, at the same time, so violently
disclaimed as Edgar Allan Poe. One of the most controversial figures of the American
literary scene….no other poet in the history of criticism has engendered so much
disagreement and so many critical contradictions” (Felman 27-8). Felman includes a
lengthy introduction to the above effect because it would not be advisable to hazard a
critique of psychoanalytic readings of Poe without first acknowledging certain extra-
textual details about him (specifically his position in the canon as a highly contentious
figure)—because the approaches of Krutch and Bonaparte inherently rely on
biographically-informed judgements about Poe.

\textsuperscript{8} I use the word “literature” here for clarity, though Felman uses “poetry.” She does so to emphasize the
poetic aspects of literature that resist readings mediated by psychoanalysis. Furthermore, the word
“literature” would not fit here for Felman’s extents and purposes because she earlier coins the term \textit{poetic effect} (and thus must remain consistent), explaining, “It is my contention that this critical disagreement
[about the merits of Poe’s work] is itself symptomatic of a \textit{poetic effect}, and that the critical contradictions
to which Poe’s poetry has given rise are themselves indirectly significant of poetry” (Felman 28). Felman’s
main thrust is to provide and explicate one example of such an effect, specifically that fueled by
disagreements around psychoanalytic approaches to Poe. The idea of a \textit{poetic effect} is by no means
specific to Poe. Secondly, playing on the pun afforded by the word “Poe-etic”, she goes on to explain how
Poe’s writing, like much of celebrated literature, engenders, in short, a feeling of awe or “magic” in the
reader. This \textit{genius effect}, (evoking a writer-creator, presumably, who is brilliant enough to engineer works
whose effects are awe-inspiring), as she calls it, is specific to Poe himself, given the considerable number
of references to him as “genius” by other writers. Felman very clearly lists a number of instances (Felman
29) in which other writers use the word “genius” explicitly to describe Poe, yet she acknowledges that the
status of “genius” cannot preclude disagreements arising from the aforementioned \textit{poetic effect},
suggesting more broadly that the archetype of a genius is one that necessarily includes contradiction.
Felman coins the term *poetic effect* to describe the general feedback emanating from the contention and disagreement surrounding Poe. She implies that both the positive and negatively-bent criticisms of the writer are all "symptomatic of a poetic effect, and the critical contradictions to which Poe’s poetry has given rise are themselves indirectly significant of the nature of poetry" (Felman 28). Notwithstanding the deployment of this term in order to sustain her pun, Felman raises an issue that is not only particular to conversations surrounding Poe, but is in fact a function of [literature] itself—that it not only generates multitudinous and varied readings, but the creators responsible for such productions are also in themselves contentious and are of dubious assistance in understanding their works. The introduction of this term is a continuation of an earlier statement by Felman: “To account for poetry in psychoanalytic terms has traditionally meant to analyze poetry as a symptom of a particular poet. I would here like to reverse this approach, and to analyze a particular poet as a symptom of poetry” (Ibid.). The latter concluding that controversy surrounding writers and their texts is merely a complication of literature, irrespective of the writer. The former point concerning the traditional approach to psychoanalytic readings says that a semi-clinical approach would categorize discrete texts as individual symptomatic manifestations of a given author's neurosis or illness, which is precisely what Felman believes Krutch and Bonaparte assert incorrectly and so distances herself while going on to offer a compelling alternative.

The explication of the *poetic effect* may appear to be self-evident given that it is basically a casual observation about the nature of literature. However, Felman does well to narrow her thrust by first differentiating herself from other psychoanalytic approaches,
as noted above, and then goes on to coin another “effect” more specific to Poe himself— the genius effect. She writes, “No other poet has been so often referred to as a ‘genius,’ in a sort of common consensus shared even by his detractors” (Ibid.). This plants an important parallel between the two effects, noting that both by definition cannot be mitigated by detractors. And continues, “it is clear that Poe’s poetry produces what might be called a genius effect: the impression of some undefinable but compelling force to which the reader is subjected...[a power which is felt]” (Ibid.). The genius effect is associated with the poetic, a derivative of it under Felman’s argument, because just like the poetic it eludes rigid definition and is loosely proportional to the awe Poe’s “genius” engenders in his readers. This effect, Felman says, cannot be solely attributed to Poe’s technical skills: “Poe’s “magic” is thus ascribed to the ingenuity of his versification, to his exceptional technical virtuosity. And yet the word magic, “in the most nearly literal sense,” means much more than just the intellectual acknowledgement of an outstanding technical skill; it connotes the effective action of something that exceeds both the understanding and the control of the person who is subjected to it; it connotes a force to which the reader has no choice but to submit” (Felman 29). Felman goes on to cite various renowned writers as they concede Poe’s genius specifically using the word “genius”⁹. Felman foreshadows an inevitable psychoanalytic question: was Poe consciously engineering such compelling writing?

⁹ Taking both the poetic and genius effects into account, Felman notes how the case of Poe is an apt example of the anxiety of influence: “The case of Poe in literary history could in fact be accounted for as an extreme and complex case of “the anxiety of influence,” of the anxiety unwittingly provoked by the “influence” irresistibly emanating from his poetry” (29). It is obvious that the interaction between the poetic and genius effects exerts an influence on creative successors of Poe that is stronger than the effect of either one alone. On one hand, proposing to cover ground that Poe has already touched means submitting one’s text into an already tumultuous conversation— notwithstanding the merits of the text itself, which will likely be overshadowed by Poe’s technical prowess.
The mastership of analysis is the most primal characteristic of the detective figure, and it is so placed above other conventions of the detective story because it has its roots in psychology, as Felman demonstrates. We recall that her *genius effect* accounts for the approbations of and backlashes to Poe associated with his “genius”-status. The *genius effect* is a more specific form of the earlier *poetic effect*, and “the paradoxical nature of a strong poetic effect [is such that] the very poetry that, more than any other, is experienced as *irresistible* has also proved to be, in literary history, the poetry most *resisted*, the one that, more than any other, has provoked resistances” (Felman 31). The corresponding leading question to this statement is—resisted by what or whom and resistant to what? And without resorting to descriptors such as “magnetism” or “magic” (others quoted in Felman 29), what forces actually confer that quality of resistance on Poe’s writing and provoke such vehement reaction from his contemporaries? In what seems to be becoming a serial coinage of terms, Felman produces a third—*analytical effect*—a concept that bridges the divide between the biographical and the intertextual; she even defers to an excerpt from “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”:

> This apparent contradiction, which makes of Poe’s poetry a unique case in literary history, clearly partakes of the paradoxical nature of an *analytical effect*. The enigma it presents us with is the enigma of the analytical par excellence, as stated by Poe himself, whose amazing intuitions of the nature of what he calls “analysis” are strikingly similar to the later findings of psychoanalysis: “The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects.” (Felman 31-32)

Since the faculty of analysis is so central to the definition of the figure of the detective, it is necessary to return to Poe’s initial layout of this kind of analysis. This occurs at the beginning of his first story of detection, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”—The story
features a lengthy introduction wherein Poe details said “analysis.” Lemay notes how “he uses diction more appropriate to psychology and ethics than to science” (Lemay 167)—

The mental features discoursed of as the analytical, are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects. We know of them, among other things, that they are always to their possessor, when inordinately possessed, a source of the liveliest enjoyment. As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which disentangles (Poe 102).

For Felman to cite Poe’s seminal treatise-like introduction on analysis, and evoke—no less coin a term like analytical effect—necessarily implicates the idea of a possessor, and Dupin, Lönnrot, and Quinn are undoubtedly these such possessors in varying degrees.

Felman’s case for the connection between psychoanalysis and Poe’s brand of analysis, an analysis which is the staple of all of the stories featuring C. Auguste Dupin. It is my understanding that, if psychoanalysis only coincidently has its roots in Dupin’s (Poe’s) brand of analysis, then at the very least the two can undoubtedly be linked in such a way that permits a mapping of psychoanalytic readings onto the figure of the detective himself.

“The Purloined Letter”

“The Purloined Letter” is recounted in the first person by an unnamed companion of Dupin, the same figure who narrates both “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The
Mystery of Marie Rogêt.” In his “Seminar on the Purloined Letter”, Lacan notes that the mise en scène is twofold; the story has two main scenes, which, for my purposes here, is of help to structure a summary of the plot. The “primal” scene, as Lacan calls it, begins at Dupin’s residence where the two companions are together sitting in silent reflection. The narrator notes that their silent musings concern the recent events at the Rue Morgue and with Marie Rogêt. Without notice, the buffoonish Prefect of the Parisian Police, Monsieur G—, throws open the door and soon engages the pair about a new dilemma. A letter has been stolen by a Minister D— from an unnamed lady of noble stature and presumably will be used for blackmail, however the actual contents of the letter are never revealed or discussed by either the Prefect or Dupin. The police commissioner has assiduously occupied himself with the hunt for the letter, though a series of thorough searches of the apartment of the Minister D— have been to no avail. Upon hearing the details, Dupin recommends another careful search of premises after

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10 This deliberate narrative technique—casting the narrator as a character in the story (albeit unobtrusively)—and its use in the other two mysteries, “...Rue Morgue” and “...Marie Rogêt”, underscores to the importance of the narrative voice in the detective genre by replacing the conventional, disembodied third-person narrator with one whose presence is more readily registered by the reader. It is compelling to read while visualizing the narrator’s physical accompaniment of Dupin and appreciating his situation as witness to the unfolding events with his own eyes. And as a side-note, there is perhaps additional pleasure to be derived from the sense of camaraderie between the two men, and even though Dupin is the active figure, the narrator is nonetheless part of their shared space of contemplation.

11 ...nicely grounding the story in an intertextual timeline that accommodates the reader’s awareness of the other two stories.

12 The prefect does not ever possess the letter himself to directly read its contents but would have gained enough information about it to fathom its power in the wrong hands (from his conversation with the Queen who briefs him before the narrative begins). Dupin likely reads the letter upon stealing it from the residence of the Minister. However, as Felman later points out, the contents of the letter (the signified) actually have no bearing on the structure or events to the story because the letter itself is a pure signifier. In a metaphorical sense, however, the fact that Dupin actually gets to hold and read the letter again contributes to a sense of his superiority and intellectual distance from the Prefect. Poe features a number of these devices—rhetorical, structural, metaphorical—that enshrine Dupin as a hyper-ratiocinative agent who is able to make sense of disorder (disparate clues) in order to restore order. Such is the result of his actions, though not necessarily synonymous with his motive— in “The Purloined Letter”, Dupin appears to be motivated specifically both by money and enacting revenge on his brother, the Minister D.
the two of them agree that there is no other option but for the letter to remain still somewhere within the apartment.

A month later, in what Lacan considers the second scene, the Prefect returns, visibly more flustered than before, after having conducted the latest series of probes. Dupin declares that once the Prefect writes him a check for fifty thousand francs, he will produce the letter. Astonishingly, Dupin follows through with his word, and proceeds to explain how he purloined the letter—that it was ultimately hidden in plain sight. As the story runs its course, it is clear how Poe engineers a character who embodies certain principles of investigation that lead him to the coveted object, as well as a member of a superior intellectual tier. It is primarily through the character of the detective that Poe illustrates the psychological disparity between the Prefect and Dupin

The character of Dupin undoubtedly lies at the center of “The Purloined Letter” and serves as an original against which to compare the subsequent protagonists of Borges and Auster. Dupin’s persona contributes various conventions to the form, specifically the relationship between the detective and his foil; in this case—the inferior Police commissioner-figure. Dupin’s self-satisfaction and amusement give the impression of someone who is always a step ahead, and this demeanor parallels his actual level of competence. Furthermore, it is not so much that he is consciously or concertededly anticipating the possibility of the case's inevitable simplicity, but rather his comprehension and shrewdness support an intellectual objectivity that cannot rightly rule out a seemingly intuitive solution 13.

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13 A distinction should be made here. I am suggesting that the “seemingly intuitive” account for the letter’s plain-sight hiding place can probably only be claimed for the reader. That is, to us as readers it may seem “intuitive” that an intelligent adversary would hazard hiding the letter right under the nose of the investigators. Dupin himself undergoes no evaluations on the basis of intuition. He realizes that the letter must be hidden in plain sight based on the information available to him—given the Prefect’s second search of the premises as well as the psyche of his brother, the Minister.
In “The Purloined Letter” the narrator distances Dupin from the Prefect by way of comical or even backhanded characterizations and otherwise by direct descriptions of the policeman’s actions, starting with the “throwing open” of the door to the apartment (Poe 244). The narrator says, “We gave [the Prefect] a hearty welcome; for there was nearly half as much of the entertaining as the contemptible about the man, and we had not seen him for several years” (Ibid.). The “hearty welcome” is motivated dually by virtue of his entertaining presence in spite of the “contemptible” and the pleasure of his company after so long a hiatus. The Prefect goes on to explain, “‘The fact is, the business is very simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it because it is so excessively odd’” (Poe 245). Ostensibly, the Prefect is reluctant to admit that he has indeed been stumped. The intellectual distance between the two is well-illustrated by the narrator’s characterizations as well as the dialogue and actions of the Prefect, and I point out the dynamic between them to introduce it as one convention of the detective story.

In the preceding excerpt, the Prefect describes the circumstances of the case as exceedingly “simple” and “odd.”14 One distinction lies in their distinct understandings of the concept of “simplicity.” Putting “odd” aside for a moment, what precisely does the Prefect mean when he calls the case “simple”? He is, in the first scene, referring to the present condition of knowing most or all facts about the case except the one that matters most to him: the letter’s location. This piece of information, the description of a state of affairs, cannot be either simple or complicated on its own, and its associations with other facts—which can be—such as the identity of the perpetrator (Minister D—)

14 Each of these words has been deliberately italicized by Poe.
and motive (Blackmail), are “simple”, or apparently simple, because a considerable amount of information is already known. This is a characterization of the case’s apparent simplicity associated with the character of the prefect as well as with the current unsolved condition of the case as a whole.

Following the Prefect’s introduction of the case as “simple”—that is, necessarily, in its present, unsolved state—Dupin repeats his admission “simple and odd” back to him and goes on to say, “Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault...Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain...A little too self-evident” (Poe 245). Even before entertaining the Prefect’s presentation in its entirety, Dupin may already be anticipating a simple explanation of the case. The difference here lies between the police chief’s diffuse, subjective characterization of the case as simple in general, whereas Dupin’s more focused claim refers to the location of the letter as a single datum. The Prefect cannot be referring to the location of the letter or he would have already encountered it. While the significance of their subtly distinct invocations of simplicity might only be a function of the fact that Dupin has not yet heard the totality of the facts of the case—and the commissioner has already been made familiar with them—their exchange nevertheless serves to elevate Dupin as a shrewd problem-solver. As the originator of the detective story, Poe fixes the highly skilled, even clairvoyant detective-figure as central to the form.

A gradual and systematic revelation of clues and information, both to the characters themselves and the reader is a function of the linear structure of time in the

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15 Perhaps done in mockery or merely a genuine expression of contemplation.
detective story. At the outset, there is an imbalance of information between the commissioner and Dupin, and as familiarity with the case equalizes—once the Prefect explains to Dupin the specific circumstances of the case—both move to equal ground with regard to the available information. But Dupin’s so-called “intellectual distance” remains unchanged. Poe’s narrative technique, dramatizes the superiority of Dupin by showing his initial sensitivity to the possibility of an explanation ‘right under the nose’ of the Prefect—even in light of insufficient information. The quiet might of the character of Dupin is so much a bulwark of “The Purloined Letter” because given the same information, Dupin still operates in a psychological space above that of the Commissioner.

**Borges and “Death and the Compass”**

In Borges, it is not so much that the shrewdness or intelligence of the detective itself is called into question, but rather the ultimate utility of any such qualities or associated skills, and the strength of chance over calculated methods. In a 1977 interview with Denis Dutton, Jorge Luis Borges points out that when one philosopher refutes another, he is effectively carrying on the argument (“Jorge Luis Borges: An Interview”). This statement holds true for Borges himself, as he goes on to, in one

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16 Kushigan also points out as much, noting that, among other structural features, that of time remains a shared characteristic between Poe and Borges: ““Death and the Compass” by Jorge Luis Borges can also be submitted to an analysis of its structural features which would classify it in the genre of the detective story. The stylistic devices are like those of Poe: the presentation of logical solutions which are proven false and an improbable solution which is proven correct, the design that every element of the plot should contribute to the final effect, and a linear structure of time” (Kushigan 32, my emphasis). She goes on to further emphasize time in the rest of the paper, supporting the choice to position it last in the above series. The topic sentence of a subsequent paragraph appears as follows, “The linear structure of time which allows an identification of the elements step by step, is emphasized in the genre of the detective story” (Kushigan 34). I make a note here in assurance that, despite the differences between how the detective-characters are cast, the shared features (here, structural ones named) are a function of both authors’ membership in the same genre.
Borges is a “man of letters”, not a philosopher, and he openly concedes as much and more:

I have used the philosopher’s ideas for my own private literary purposes but I don’t think that I’m a thinker…what I mean to say is that I have no personal system of philosophy…I am merely a man of letters…Dante used theology for the purpose of poetry, or Milton used theology for the purposes of poetry, why shouldn’t I use philosophy, especially idealistic philosophy—philosophy to which I [am] attracted—for the purposes of writing a tale, of writing a story? I suppose that is allowable, no?

While “Death and the Compass” and “The Purloined Letter” are inseparable from their philosophical underpinnings, Borges remains aware of the limitations of his own stature as a creator of literature, and refutes Poe on a psychological level. That is, the search for systems of order in the detective story is resistant to unmediated philosophical argumentation, so Borges rightly confronts it using the tools at his disposal, primarily via the use of metaphor. Dutton goes on to prompt Borges, “Do you think that it is possible, then, for a story to represent a philosophical position more effectively than a philosopher can argue for it?” Borges inevitably agrees, and we reflect on how “Death and the Compass” ultimately challenges Poe’s conventions by representing opposing philosophical positions without purporting to cast untenable threads of argumentation outside the scope of the operant form of literature—that is, specifically, the detective story.

Maurice Bennett succinctly characterizes the goals of Borges’s riff, saying that the works “act as both comedic parodies and serious rewritings of Poe’s tales of the reified mind” (Bennett 263). In other words, Borges’s response in the form of this story is not unapologetic but rather shows finesse and a sensitivity to Poe’s contributions to the
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genre. He both problematizes Poe’s premises as well as preserves essential elements of the form through a diligent “re-writing”.

Lönnrot is a detective in an unnamed city that echoes Borges’s own hometown of Buenos Aires (Ibid. 264). The first murder takes place in the Hôtel du Nord on December 3rd. Dr. Marcelo Yarmolinski is in town as a delegate from Podolsk to the Third Talmudic Congress. He is found stabbed in his hotel room, surrounded by a variety of cabalistic and hebraic writings, and a lone piece of paper is found in his typewriter with a single, foreboding line: The first letter of the Name has been written. Lönnrot, in a kind of psychological obsession, turns to the books scattered at the scene of the crime, convinced that clues to the crime lie hidden in the works. Treviranus, the Prefect of Police, volunteers one possibility regarding Yarmolinski’s murder, which Lönnrot promptly disavows: that the murder may not have been premeditated, suggesting that the evidence at the scene of the crime is likely not of any special significance.

The second crime takes place exactly one month later on January 3rd. Petty thug Daniel Simón Azevedo is found, also stabbed, on the outskirts of town near an old paint factory, the following chalked on the wall above his body: The second letter of the Name has been written.

Exactly a month after that, Treviranus receives a phone call from one Gryphius or Ginsberg, claiming that he has information about the previous two murders. Before he can finish, the line goes dead. Further investigation finds that Gryphius was apparently seized by two masked harlequins outside of Liverpool House, a tavern on the Rue de Toulon. Predictably, scrawled on the blackboard in the bar’s entryway, is the final
declaration, *The last letter of the Name has been written*. Meanwhile, Lönnrot is still obsessed with Yarmolinski’s volumes and so convinced of the certainty of the fourth crime that he has paid little attention to any of the clues outside of his books. Lönnrot’s investigations up to this point lead him, for better or worse, to the Villa Triste-le-Roy where he believes he will be able to preempt the fourth and final crime. Shortly after arriving at the center of the labyrinthine structure, he is seized by two henchmen who are in the employment of Red Scharlach. Lönnrot faces a final confrontation with Scharlach and is killed. It is precisely Lönnrot’s psychological obsession with an “interesting” explanation he hopes to encounter in the writings that constitutes his fatal weakness.

Borges creates a character in Lönnrot who scorns randomness insofar as it can play any significant role in the case. Specifically, he considers the murderer’s actions to be premeditated, for each murder to have been performed with intent. Twice, the commissioner offers conjectures that Lönnrot chooses to ignore. At the scene of the first crime, Trevinarus proposes that the Rabbi Yarmolinski might have been murdered unpremeditatedly—that is, the burglar having broken into the wrong room while in search of the Tetrarch’s sapphires was forced to kill Yarmolinski in order to evade detection. In response to this explanation, Lönnrot declares it “possible, but uninteresting.” Continuing, he says:

“ ‘You will reply that reality has not the slightest obligation to be interesting. I will reply in turn that reality may get along without that obligation, but hypotheses may not. In the hypothesis that you suggest, here, on the spur of the moment, chance plays a disproportionate role. What we have here is a
dead rabbi; I would prefer a purely rabbinical explanation, not the imaginary bunglings of an imaginary burglar’ ” (Borges 148).

Later, Treviranus intimates that the kidnapping of Gryphius-Ginsburg might have been staged, saying to Lönnrot,

“What if tonight’s story were a sham, a simulacrum?”
Erik Lönnrot smiled and in a grave voice read the commissioner a passage (which had been underlined) from the Philologus’ thirty-third dissertation: *Dies Judæorum incipit a solis occasu usque ad solis occasum diei sequentis.* “Which means,” he added, “The Jewish day begins at sundown and lasts until sundown of the following day” (Borges 151).

Instead of pausing to entertain the possibility of the commissioner’s hypothesis, Lönnrot rebuts him with some then-irrelevant fact about the measurement of the Jewish day. Again, the commissioner’s supposition turns out to be correct, though by no credit of his own.

In the capacity that Lönnrot is misguided in his bias towards “interesting” explanations, Borges is less jettisoning the worth of either detective’s methods so much as he is constructing an work that wholly constitutes a mistrust in those systems of order that underlie the interpretation of clues and formations of hypotheses and conjectures, processes, naturally, that are characteristic of the detective story. Trevinarus’s interjections may be treated as devices of foreshadowing, but are not done in complicity with Sharlach’s scheme, obviously, so his ignorance of and independence from Scharlach’s agenda still subordinates him in a sense.

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17 *Trans:* “Usted replicará que la realidad no tiene la menor obligación de ser interesante. Yo le replicaré que la realidad puede prescindir de esa obligación, pero no las hipótesis. En la que usted ha improvisado, interviene copiosamente el azar. He aquí un rabino muerto; yo preferiría una explicación puramente rabínica, no los imaginarios percances de un imaginario ladrón” (Borges, *Ficciones* 159).

18 *Trans:* —¿Y si la historia de esta hoche fuera un simulacro? Erik Lönnrot sonrió y le leyó con toda gravedad un pasaje (que estaba subrayado) de la disertación trigésima tercera del Philologus: *Dies Judacorum incipit a solas ocaso usque ad solis occasum diei sequentis.* Esto quiere decir —agregó—, *El día hebreo empieza al anochecer y dura hasta el siguiente anochecer.* (Borges, *Ficciones* 164)
“Death and the Compass” creates confusion around the numbers three and four by including clues that alternate between pointing to the importance of one or the other. The structure underlying each number corresponds to different characters, three to Treviranus and four to Lönnrot. Irwin systematically points out each instance in which either number is invoked. Before doing so, though he states, “The plot of ‘Death and the Compass’ revolves around a series of murders. All the obvious clues suggest that the number in the series is three, but all the less than obvious clues—the kind that police inspector Treviranus [misses], but Erik Lönnrot [does] not—point to the number four” (Irwin 30). Each of the two possible numerical structures are associated with the respective psychological acuities of Lönnrot and Treviranus. Re-readings of the story, when we are primed to expect the appearances of three and four, yield tallies of evidence for and against Lönnrot. Yet, the reality of Lönnrot’s ultimate defeat does not necessarily affirm the fallacy of the tripartite structure. In fact, by laying out most of the instances in which either number appears, he provides adequate information to make judgements about the structure of the story, notwithstanding the ostensible failure of Lönnrot.

At the end of the story, though, right before he is killed, Lönnrot disavows both the tri- and tetrapartite structures by offering another alternative—the straight line, that of Xeno’s paradox—in a final gesture against Scharlach.19

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19 In “Borges’s ‘Death and the Compass’; The Color Red; Via Negativa/Via Positiva; Indivisibility versus Totality; The Three/Four Oscillation”, John Irwin notes: “This concluding image of infinite regression as the endless subdivision of a line inverts, of course, the figure of infinite progression evoked in the tale by the movement from a triangular to a quadrangular maze, which is to say, the figure of infinite progression as the endless addition of sides to a polygon…” (Irwin 34).
Daniel Quinn’s Overwrought Psyche

In the opening paragraph of *City of Glass*, the narrator promptly conjures an array of dominant themes, including chance, predetermination, and the independence of the story’s meaning from its structure. An omniscient, third-person narrator foreshadows various questions, speaking directly to the sensibilities and conclusions ultimately drawn by Quinn:

It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. But that was much later. In the beginning, there was simply the event and its consequences. Whether it might have turned out differently, or whether it was all predetermined with the first word that came from the stranger’s mouth, is not the question. The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell (Auster 7).

Oftentimes, the opening pages of a work become more compelling when read in light of the story’s ending. The disembodied, third-person narration above reads like a consolation for the ostensibly absurd outcome of Daniel Quinn’s best investigative efforts—whereby he comes to live in an alley in the name of fulfilling his duties as a detective, experiences a loss of identity, and eventually fades into psychological oblivion.

The novel begins with a call to adventure. Quinn receives a call from someone asking for a man, Paul Auster—an obvious metafictional device. It is only after the third call from this same woman that he succumbs and confirms that he is, in fact, “the one who calls himself Paul Auster” (Ibid. 19). Quinn soon finds himself at Virginia Stillman’s apartment whose mysterious solicitation he received the day before. She has

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20 It is worth noting the subtlety of Auster’s choice of Virginia Stillman’s words. By the final call, she asks not for Paul Auster, but rather for the “one who calls himself Paul Auster”, further problematizing Quinn’s identity.
reason to believe that her husband, Peter Stillman’s, life is in danger. Quinn learns of a mad father also named Peter who has just been released from a mental hospital and was said to have threatened Stillman Jr. in a letter sent a couple of years before. When Peter enters the room, Quinn is reminded of his own dead son. From that point forward, the meeting takes on a palpable strangeness on account of Stillman’s fragmented speech and peculiar mannerisms. After losing track of time and spending the better part of the day with Peter and Virginia, Quinn accepts the assignment, subsequently locating and tailing the older Stillman.

Now situated in the role of the detective known to himself as Paul Auster, Quinn begins following the older Stillman around New York City. “The effect of being Paul Auster, he had begun to learn, was not altogether unpleasant…he could return to being Quinn whenever he wished…there was now a purpose to his being Paul Auster” (Ibid. 82). While in the beginning his newfound identity grants him a sense of purpose in the beginning, that soon falls away. Quinn begins spending days on end following Stillman who appears to have no apparent objective or destination. All the while scribbling in his red notebook, Quinn’s faith begins to wane: “Little by little, Quinn began to feel cut off from his original intentions, and he wondered now if he had not embarked on a meaningless project” (Ibid. 96). As the days go on, Quinn’s psychological self-understanding remains constantly in flux; the effort of investigative activity—of analysis—leads him to oscillate between identities. At times, he realizes he is following Stillman too closely and devises “several different methods of deceleration. The first [is] to tell himself that he [is] no longer Daniel Quinn. He [is] Paul Auster now, and with each step

21 This detail triggers a series that intertwine Quinn’s own identity with various aspects of the case—in this case, a wave of recognition during the first encounter with Stillman Jr.
he [takes] he [tries] to fit more comfortably into the strictures of that transformation” (Ibid. 98). The narrator so thematizes the influence of the physical city-space on identity. Eventually, Quinn and Stillman actually do meet; they coincide in space, but their exchanges are no more enlightening to Quinn than the haphazard wanderings have been thus far.

Eventually—inexplicably—Stillman disappears: “The old man had become part of the city. He was a speck, a punctuation mark, a brick in an endless wall of bricks” (Ibid. 141). And Quinn reevaluates his role, reminding himself that his job had been “to protect Peter, not to follow Stillman” (Ibid.). How he could have forgotten this is unclear. He considers abandoning the job altogether, but eventually decides to position himself in an alley across from the Stillman residence, watching everyone who comes in and out, waiting for Stillman to appear. Quinn ends up living in this particular alley for a matter of months, staked out, with the earnest belief that he is diligently carrying out what he set out to do. When he is finally forced to emerge due to lack of resources, he returns to civilization to find that Stillman has committed suicide, and Virginia Stillman has long since moved out of her apartment. The absurdity of this conclusion constitutes yet another blow to Quinn’s psychological stability.

Even in the absence of a first person narrator, the intimacy with which Quinn’s inner dialogue—his misgivings, worries, and idiosyncrasies—are so closely detailed calls attention to important questions about identity and psychology. The narrator goes on to associate problems surrounding Quinn’s self-identification with the impulse to write detective stories, thematizing a link between the genre and identity:

In the past, Quinn had been more ambitious. As a young man he had published several books of poetry, had written plays, critical essays, and had
worked on a number of long translations. But quite abruptly, he had given up all that. A part of him had died, he told his friends, and he did not want it coming back to haunt him. It was then that he had taken on the name of William Wilson. Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books, and although in many ways Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself (Ibid. 9).

The part of him who in the past wrote plays, essays, and the like has died, and Quinn compensates for this loss by adopting the pseudonym of William Wilson, the name under which he has begun to publish mystery stories, leaving academic work behind. He fears that this past self will return to “haunt” him and becoming Wilson may protect him from that. However, it is not solely a change of name, but also a difference in content, in product. He is now a writer of mysteries. This example submits mystery-writing—participation in the creation of works within a delineated genre—as a way to cope with loss of identity. In some respect, Quinn is psychologically ready to take on the Stillman assignment, a real case, because of Wilson.

However, there is a subtle exception here worth noting. Above, the narrator states, “Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books, and although in many ways Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself”. A vestige of Quinn still remains, but it is creatively impotent; this is a partial death, raising questions about how that ever-present, half-dead component of him—“no longer existing for anyone but himself”—may influence his actions later on. In this case, the resemblance to Borges’s short piece “Borges y Yo” is striking and undeniable. In the paragraph-long reverie-like reflection, Borges muses about his dual self:

…I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is not hard for me to confess that he has

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22 William Wilson can be thought of as a precursor to Paul Auster. First, the writer-part of Quinn dies, and Wilson is formed. When Quinn steps out into the world and believes he is becoming a detective, he self-actualizes to an even greater degree.
achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belong to no-one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him… ("Borges y Yo").

Daniel Quinn is the self that “goes on living” and does so while William Wilson “contrives his literature”, and that literature “justifies” Quinn’s existence. A sense of loneliness is palpable—in Quinn just as it is in the speaker of “Borges y Yo”. The speaker is the private Borges, the one who does not write. Psychologically, both Quinn and Borges know their dual selves are interdependent, and cannot exist without each other.

Perhaps, however, the most important convention of the detective story is the parallel between the act of unraveling clues on the part of the detective and the act of reading itself. This association is best illustrated in City of Glass. Jeffery Nealon, points this out in “Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer”

The unraveling work of the detective within the story mirrors and assists the work of the reader, as both try to piece together the disparate signs that might eventually solve the mystery. The reader of the detective novel comes, metafictionally, to identify with the detective, because both reader and detective are bound up in the metaphysical or epistemological work of interpretation, the work of reading clues and writing a solution or end… (Nealon 117).

While a fairly straightforward point, the above also suggests that the writer/author’s awareness of this parallel is also a feature of the detective shell and asks where the writer fits alongside the parallel between detective-as-reader and reader-proper.

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Trans: “…yo vivo, yo me demo vivir, para sue Borges pueda tremor su literature y isa literature me justifier. Nada me cuesta confessor due ha logrado ciertas páginas válidas, pero esas páginas no me pueden salvar, quizá porque lo bueno ya no es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o la tradición. Por lo demás, yo estoy destinado a perderme, definitivamente, y sólo algún instante de mí podrá sobrevivir en el otro. Poco a poco voy cediéndole todo…”
Particular to *City of Glass* is the impression that as readers, we are literally looking over the shoulder of Daniel Quinn as he thinks, writes, reads and reasons. All of which is facilitated by the omniscient third-person narrator. This is not so patently the case in “Death and The Compass”. First, the acceptance of and work on the case coincides with his decision to begin writing in his red notebook,

...Then he opened the red notebook. He picked up his pen and wrote his initials, D.Q. (for Daniel Quinn), on the first page. It was the first time in more than five years that he had put his own name in one of his notebooks. He stopped to consider this fact for a moment but then dismissed it as irrelevant. He turned the page. For several moments he studied its blankness, wondering if he was not a bloody fool. Then he pressed his pen against the top line and made the first entry in the red notebook (Auster 64).

“Daniel Quinn” is included in parentheses after his initials, as if we need to be reminded what they stand for. As a writer, presumably, he hand-writes daily, but never until this point has marked the page with his own initials. Emphasis on the “blankness” of the pages evokes a general uncertainty, which we may simply liken to that same uncertainty present in all mysteries. As is dramatized by the inscription of his initials on the blank page of the notebook, Quinn’s understanding of his own identity, as well as ours of his, is unquestionably bound up in the act of writing and reading.

The impression of “reading over Quinn’s shoulder” does not stop with the red notebook. Just as Lönnrot looks to books for clues, so does Quinn engross himself in *The Garden and the Tower: Early Visions of the New World*, a book that Stillman Sr. has written, and a whole chapter in *City of Glass* is devoted to Quinn’s musings on the work. Quinn gives a summary and analysis of the book’s two parts, the first about the story of the Garden of Eden, and the second on that of the Tower of Babel in Genesis. The elaborate explication of Stillman’s book makes for a kind of psychological hiatus
from the action of the actual investigation, which has effectively not even begun, as he has not started following Stillman yet at this point.

Abruptly, Stillman transitions from commentary about the Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel to a figure named Henry Dark, a man who apparently served as a private secretary to John Milton. The considerable attention Stillman pays this figure turns out to be proportional to his relevance to Quinn’s own identity. After a lengthy backstory about Henry Dark, Stillman writes that the only reason he has any information about Dark is because he managed to recover a small pamphlet called *The New Babel* saved from a fire that killed Dark and his wife and destroyed their house. The story goes another level deeper and Stillman begins to summarize this pamphlet, all of which is being narrated from the perspective of Daniel Quinn as he is sitting in the Columbia Library. Quinn so summarizes Stillman’s summary:

*The New Babel*, written in bold, Miltonic prose, presented the case for the building of paradise in America. Unlike the other writers on the subject, Dark did not assume paradise to be a place that could be discovered. There were no maps that could lead a man to it, no instruments of navigation that could guide a man to its shores. Rather, its existence was immanent within man himself: the idea of a beyond he might someday create in the here and now. For utopia was nowhere—even, as Dark explained, in its “wordhood”. And if man could bring forth this dreamed-of place, it would only be by building it with his own two hands (Auster 75).

Mediated through the perspectives of multiple people, this final statement alludes to the central dilemma of the detective story—with an emphasis on the psychology of the individual. The idea of utopia or paradise is an ideal, one that is physically sought out by explorers of the new world. The counterargument is an almost humanist one, that paradise exists within man himself. But at the same time the narrator says “utopia [is]

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24 Henry Dark is a fictional character; Milton had no assistant by this name.
nowhere”, and that the best attempt at realizing this “dreamed of place” would be an
effort with man’s “own two hands”, also evoking Freudian dream-studies. That is, the
creation of some ideal place or state of being—or system of order—must be attempted
by man himself—within his own psyche—and cannot be sought out externally. Through
this complicated, multilayered narration, Auster’s narrator alludes strongly to the fact
that a final resolution will owe much to the influence of human schemes, and to
questions of human identity, specifically that of Daniel Quinn.

With respect to the role of human “schemes”, it may be useful to briefly return to
Borges. Leo Corry, in “Jorge Borges The Author of the Name of the Rose” explains how
Borges fundamentally doubts the possibility of knowing anything worthwhile about the
universe:

Any attempt at knowing the universe is hopeless, claims Borges, and every
theory is arbitrary and no more than a conjecture. We do not even
understand the concept of universe, and we do not know whether that
concept refers to something real. Even so, Borges insists, “the impossibility
of penetrating the universe's divine scheme cannot deter us from planning
human schemes, even when these are merely provisional” (Corry 423-33).

While the comparison here relies on connecting terms “universe” and “new world”,
they are analogous in terms of the scale at which they are conceptualized. In the
example of Dark’s “new world”, it is a place, at best, to be “found”, and, similarly, the
“universe”, so named by Borges, is one to be “known”, both of which are impossible.
Borges’s and Dark’s redemptive consolations for these harsh impossibilities are
analogous—respectively: that we cannot be deterred from planning human schemes,
and the existence of utopia is immanent in man himself. Ultimately, both Borges and
Auster’s response to Poe follow an awareness of the preceding restrictions as well as
expose Poe’s idealism to show the presumption bound up in creating a detective story that so neatly resolves itself like in the “Purloined Letter.”

Earlier, I cited Nealon’s point analogizing the reader and detective. Yet he goes one step further, stating that, “In fact, writing seems more closely tied to the work of the detective than reading, insofar as the writer and the detective—unlike the reader—embark on a journey that has no guaranteed destination” (Nealon 118). In other words, a reader’s work is, in one sense, done when he turns the last page of the book; there is a guaranteed ending. On the other hand, the duty of the writer is considerably more demanding—that he cohere all necessary details of the story to create a structured narrative and resolution—just as the detective must interpret disparate clues and details to come to some sort of resolution. Nealon writes, “The writer is the one who… searches—perhaps more desperately than the reader—for its end, for ‘the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them’” (Ibid. 118).

What separates City of Glass from both of the works in question before it is that Daniel Quinn fulfills the role of all of these figures: he is simultaneously, reader, writer, and detective, and we play some of those roles alongside him. This is perhaps the single most important functional evolution of the detective story from Poe to Borges to Auster.

**The State of the World**

At this point, we wonder how far we’ve come and to what end. What of the difference between these works—and their similitude? Chronologically, the end lies

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25 This point is notably deficient considering that the physical act of turning the last page of a book can only pale in comparison to the demand of meaningfully engaging with and attempting to understand a text—the act of reading concluded or not. There is no acknowledgement of this distinction by Nealon.
with Auster. He stands at the finality of the associative chain, bearing a novel that
swiftly crushes any remaining faith we might have had in an underlying universal order.
How can a man (Daniel Quinn) so earnestly committed to an occupation—a noble
mission—fail—not only fail—but be rent by a psychological void when it occurs to him
that the man he used to be is no more, and the multiple identities he had at the outset
were at best mere simulacra.

Ultimately, I believe that Auster’s production is but a grotesque and insidious
layering of particulars. It normalizes poisonous postmodern paradigms, and conditions
readers to be content with confusion, chaos, and disorder by simply accepting that
“the question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the
story to tell” (Auster 8). This dastardly acquiescence to an opting-out of “meaning” is
responsible for more worldly evil than we may be able to rightly gauge. The original,
uncorrupted premise of metafiction is to enable fiction to “reflect on its own framing
and assumptions” (Routledge 301), yet it has been abused so heinously by Auster that
delineations between text and reality are treacherously diminished. When an author can
be a character in his own book, we wonder if there yet exist any artists in the world so
grievously self-indulgent as him.

The Judeo-Christian paradigm offers one of the most profound descriptive truths
about the universe: that we are ultimately pitted in a grim battle of good and evil. This
primal dichotomy of Good/Evil lies but masked in a host of others: Idealism/
Empiricism, Whole/Part, Metaphor/Positivism, God/Man, Poetry/Mathematics, Order/
Disorder, Fate/Randomness, Principle/Relativism, Analysis/Calculation, Profundity/
Complexity…the list continues into infinitude…
However, if there is some consolation to be sought, some anchor, some assuredness amongst this sea of troubles before we take up arms, it is that the figure of the detective is a crucial point of departure towards an understanding of human psychology and faculties of analysis within the context of the detective story.
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