

Borges and Chesterton: Theologians of the Detective Story

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Abstract

Although a text may not reflect an author's life story, it does quite often reveal his or her worldview in the construct of plot and characters. Such is the case with two seminal writers of detective fiction: Jorge Luis Borges and G.K. Chesterton. This article discusses Chesterton's influence on Borges in imagining an intrigue but points out how each author's ontological views lead them to divergent narrative closure.

In one of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges' (1899-1986) short stories, two theologians ardently dispute a chapter of St. Augustine's *City of God* in which Plato asserts his belief in the eternal return of Time. One of these theologians embraces the Platonic view of cyclical human history symbolized in Eastern philosophy by the Wheel. The other theologian, in a manner not uncontaminated by professional jealousy, sets out to denounce this view as abominable heresy. Feverishly perusing the collective arguments of Cicero, Plutarch, Origenes and the Apostle Paul, the second theologian produces a stinging refutation of his rival's thesis, assuring the significance of the individual in the linear course of history in which the Cross stands as an unrepeatable event. As a result, "the Wheel fell before the Cross" and the second theologian's views flourish in popularity (*Labyrinths*, 122). Unfortunately religious intolerance ensues, resulting in the first theologian being condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake. The second theologian witnesses his nemesis perish in the flames. Despite the fact it is the first time he has ever seen the man, his rival's face looks uncannily familiar. Years later, plagued by loneliness and the recurring need to justify

his ill-fated denunciation, the second theologian dies in analogous fashion when lightning hits a tree and incinerates the monastery where he resides. According to Borges, the end of the story “can only be related in metaphors since it takes place in heaven where there is no time”. (126) There, both theologians converse with God and discover that they, the orthodox and the heretic, are ultimately the same person and their differences are meaningless to God.

Like several other Borgesian tales, “The Theologians” reflects the author’s fascination with the question of God and the essence of Time in religious thought. These metaphysical concerns remained with Borges throughout his life and resulted in a dominant theme in both his prose and poetry. While the Argentine writer shunned monolithic religious dogmas because he felt they led to persecution and war, he never tired of exploring the essential mystery of the Divinity. In fact in a recent article entitled “Jorge Luis Borges, Religions and the Mystical Experience” (1999), María Kodama, Borges’ widow, explains that in his adolescence the author discovered Buddhism through Schopenhauer’s philosophy, which contends that matter exists solely as individual perception (*The World as Idea*) - and that by renouncing the will one can achieve liberating nothingness (*The World as Will*). These philosophical precepts shape the plots and characters of Borges’ fiction. As Kodama asserts “In ‘Las ruinas circulares’ ...Borges poetically transmutes the Buddhist idea of the world as a dream, an idea which will lead the idealist philosophers to believe in the illusory and hallucinatory character of the world.” (17) As Borges states in his article “El budismo”: “We must strive to understand that the world is an apparition, a dream, that life is a dream” (*Obras completas*, IV: 251, translation mine). It follows that in several of Borges’ stories the protagonist is actually the dream of Someone else (“The Circular Ruins”, *Labyrinths*, 45) or the action of the story occurs only in the mind of the protagonist (“The Secret Miracle”, *Labyrinths* 88; “The South”, *Ficciones*, 195).

Despite his intellectual adherence to Schopenhauer’s philosophy throughout his life, Borges seemed reluctant to leave the Judeo-Christian God alone. Instead, the author continuously pondered the Christian doctrine of human significance within a linear history that conforms to divine purpose. According to Kodama, Borges’ English grandmother “filled his soul by reciting verses from the Bible” (15) during his childhood, which helps explain the author’s familiarity with Scripture and his frequent citing of the words of Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Kodama relates that Borges, a

declared unbeliever, maintained an admiration for the figure of Christ throughout his life and the “topic of the crucifixion of the man, supposedly the son of God, will linger until *Los conjurados*, his last book in 1985.” (19)

The question of God also fascinated the English writer, G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), whose Father Brown detective series predate Borges’ work by a few decades and whom Borges considered a major influence on his own fiction. Chesterton, author of *The Everlasting Man*, a rather erudite review of the history of man and comparative religions, found the genre of the detective thriller to be a clever apologetic tool for presenting the claims of Christianity to popular audiences in the twentieth century. In a sense both Chesterton and Borges employed their narratives to present a worldview and make a case for its plausibility. Hence, if we define theology loosely as the study of matters of ultimate concern, both authors might be considered “theologians of the detective story”.

By examining what aspects of Chesterton’s stories fascinated Borges and what elements of his stories he attributes to Chesterton’s influence, we can see how closely the Argentine writer follows the Englishman’s model in constructing his detective tales but how differently from Chesterton he resolves the intrigue. Clearly the narrative strategy of closure in their respective stories reflects the philosophical position each held on the question of God and essence of the human condition. Essentially Borges’ Eastern worldview of the human condition – exemplified in the destiny of his protagonists – is poles apart from Chesterton’s Christian worldview. What Borges portrays as a tragic view of man in his fiction stands in striking contrast to what Chesterton’s characters reveal to be “the tragic *beauty* of man’s destiny on earth”, a phrase Borges coins in a prologue to a collection of Chesterton’s stories to describe the author’s conception of humanity (*La cruz azul y otros cuentos, Obras Completas, IV:455, translation mine*).

The Detective Story as Modern Epic

By the early twentieth century when Chesterton was writing, the Industrial Revolution had transformed Western Europe from a predominantly agrarian civilization to an urban one. This economic transformation brought changes to art and literature, replacing the artists’ rural Arcadia – heretofore the source of poetic inspiration - with the City, forcing writers and painters to seek new forms of expression that might reflect human experience at the dawn of Modernity. Much like Baudelaire and Apollinaire

had done for poetry and Balzac and Dickens for the novel a few years earlier, Chesterton sought to poetize the city by refashioning the epic into a detective *whodunit*. The larger-than-life epic hero who fought dragons and demons to restore order to his homeland becomes the shrewd sleuth who traverses the city combating members of the criminal underworld in order to restore civic tranquility. As Chesterton wrote in 1901:

The first essential value of the detective story lies in this, that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life. Men lived among mighty mountains and eternal forests for ages before they realized that they were poetical; it may reasonably be inferred that some of our descendants may see the chimney-pots as rich a purple as the mountain peaks, and find the lamp-posts as old and natural as the trees. Of this realization of the great city itself as something wild and obvious the detective story is certainly the *Iliad*. (*Collected Works, VI: 26*)

Chesterton and Borges played a significant role in the development of the short story thriller in the twentieth century, particularly in creating what is considered the *fantastical detective story*. An avid reader of Chesterton, Borges recognized the Englishman's genius in being the first author to take the two short story genres established by Poe: the detective story and the *fantastical* or horror story, and combine them into one. He marveled at Chesterton's ability to propose supernatural causes of a crime but resolve the crime with a logical rational solution.

Then we have Chesterton, the great inheritor of Poe. Chesterton said that he hadn't written detective stories superior to those of Poe, but Chesterton, in my opinion, is superior to Poe. Poe wrote stories that were purely *fantastical*...But Chesterton did something different, he wrote stories that are at the same time *fantastical* stories and in the end have a detective solution. ("El cuento policial", *Obras Completas, IV: 196*)

Despite Borges' admiration for Chesterton and his recognition of

the Englishman's influence on his own detective stories, the two writers held very different worldviews which effectively shaped the design of their stories. Although both authors sought in somewhat similar ways to evoke fear or terror in the reader, the resolutions of their plots reveal how their respective views of the human condition stand in stark contrast to each other. In the case of Chesterton, an Anglican turned Catholic, it is the Christian worldview that supplies the framework for his detective thrillers. While Chesterton is less of an essayist than Borges in his fiction, he uses the criminal intrigue as a type of allegory for fallen Man whose individual acts will inevitably face true justice when an account is demanded. Borges at times lamented the fact that Chesterton's stories were thinly veiled Christian apologetics. He understood nonetheless that the intricately woven plots he admired were inseparable from the author's Christian beliefs.

I don't share his (Chesterton's) theology, in the same way
 I don't share that of the *Divine Comedy*, but I know that
 both are indispensable for the conception of the work.
 (prologue, *El Ojo de Apolo*, 12)

In the same way, Borges' "theology" based on the ancient stoic view of cyclical history - reformulated in modern times by Berkeley, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche - shapes his own intrigues. He, too, uses detective or *whodunit* stories to propose metaphysical suppositions which like Chesterton's are also indispensable for the conception of his work. Employing several motifs including the labyrinth, the mirror and the lottery as symbols of a universe not decipherable by man, Borges creates a fictional world that negates the possibility of significant individual acts. Donald Shaw puts it this way in his critique of "The Theologians": "[the story] involves the idea that individual identity is an illusion in any case, that one man is all men, and hence that rivalry and vengeance are absurd and futile." (Shaw 169).

With regards to the narrative strategy of detective fiction, Borges pointed out that a vital component in Chesterton's stories was the metaphysical terror they evoke. He claimed "that discord, that precarious subjection of a demoniacal will" defined the nature of Chesterton's texts. (*Other Inquisitions*, 84) In fact, working on the assumption that Man is corrupted by sin and capable of horrible wickedness, Chesterton succeeds masterfully in probing the depth of human wantonness and uses that understand-

ing to portray a savageness in his characters. The world of crime for Father Brown, Chesterton's unlikely sleuth, originates in a true Underworld where forces of personified evil manifest themselves through human will.

In comparison, Borges evokes fear in his fantastical fictions not by creating a climate of haunting evil but by destabilizing the order of the world in which his characters move, suggesting that any apparent design to human destiny is simply illusion. At times he does this by retelling a familiar story but inverting its closure. In fact, he specifically mentions this tactic as a narrative strategy he uses in stories with biblical sources such as "Three Versions of Judas" (*Labyrinths*, 95) and "The Gospel According to Saint Mark" (*El Informe de Brodie*, 127). He is captivated by the degree to which shifting perceptions can invert the status of the hero and the villain, a narrative recourse which produces great unease in the reader because it questions the existential possibility of good and evil.

Closure as Cosmivision.

It is often noted that Borges constructs his characters not as individuals but rather as a generic representation of the human condition. While such characters represent an array of figures from diverse cultures and time periods, each finds himself (herself in a couple of stories) in a confusing labyrinth of alternatives searching for the center. Mary Lusky Friedman in her study *Una morfología de los cuentos de Borges* goes so far as to assert that all seventy some Borgesian stories follow the same narrative paradigm. (Lusky Friedman, 13)

In addition, Sylvia Molloy in *Las letras de Borges* points out that most often the protagonist in Borges' stories is someone who must decipher a text of some sort. Molloy distinguishes between stories such as: "The Garden of Forking Paths", "Death and the Compass", "Deutsches Requiem" and "Averrões" which end with the immediate death of the character upon completing the text and stories such as "The Secret Miracle", "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" and "The Other Death" where the characters are allowed the chance to modify their incorrect or incomplete reading or writing of the text before death occurs (Molloy, 70). Nevertheless once the text is deciphered, the characters meets their irrevocable demise.

In contrast, unlike Borges' characters who bring about their downfall by misreading a text in a world of shifting signifiers, Chesterton's unlikely sleuth, the Catholic priest Father Brown, may initially find the particulars of a case perplexing but he ultimately succeeds in deciphering them be-

cause he is confident that there is an order to the universe which man can intuit. A good example of this basic premise of Chesterton's stories is "The Honour of Israel Gow" (*The Complete Father Brown*, 77), a story Borges and Bioy Casares translated into Spanish.

The story begins when Father Brown and his friend Flambeau, the reformed criminal turned detective, are called to investigate the death of the Earl of Glengyle. The two travel to a somewhat sinister looking Scottish castle that suggests "dreamy, almost a sleepy devilry" (78) to find a suspicious servant the only inhabitant. The earl has been buried by the servant, a deaf-mute, but when the body is unearthed by the investigators, the head is missing. The only clues are several candles without candlesticks, a hoard of diamonds without settings and several religious images that have been defaced. The other detectives propose three possible explanations but Father Brown must sleep on the question first for spiritual direction.

The next morning Father Brown observes the servant digging up potatoes in the garden and notices the man avoids a certain spot. The priest thereby discovers the true explanation for the assumed "crime" to be entirely different than what the others had imagined. He finds Israel Gow not to be a criminal but rather a truly honorable servant. In reality the earl died not of foul play but of natural causes leaving his servant a testament with the right to all the gold in the estate. It was Israel Gow's literal reading of the text – a strikingly unusual reading but uncannily just – that explained his retrieval of every speck of gold in the house, in candlesticks, in jewelry and in religious icons.

While Borges' characters misread a text and meet their end in a capricious maze, Chesterton's character realizes the true intent of the text (the testament) by retrieving all the gold promised him, even to the extent of extracting his master's gold teeth after his death. For Chesterton, it is the most sensible explanation that fits the unusual truth of the universe – a point the Englishman makes in *The Everlasting Man* in defense of Christianity (270) and one Borges reiterates in his prologue to a Spanish language edition of Chesterton's stories.

[Chesterton] argued that the unusualness of the faith matches the rarity of the universe, like the strange form of a key that exactly matches the strange form of the lock. (*El Ojo de Apolo*, 9)

If we compare Chesterton's narrative strategy of closure in another story, "The Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (*Thirteen Detectives*, 143), with Borges' story of "Death and the Compass" (*Labyrinths*, 76), which the Argentine states in the beginning sentence was inspired by the Englishman's text, we see once again how differently each author concludes his story. In Borges' story we find the hero to be the keen detective, Erik Lonrot, who carefully traces the pattern of clues intentionally left by the murderer after each of three homicides. Lonrot is determined to prevent the fourth murder from occurring and feels confident that he has deciphered the pattern traced out by the murderer and therefore knows where the fourth murder is to take place. The compass is his guide and the directional point missing is south. The appointed day arrives, exactly one month after the third crime. Lonrot sets out to foil the crime and finds instead that he is trapped in an unsuspected pattern. Misreading the clues by assuming four directional points, he finds the fourth point is actually equidistant from the last two crime scenes and he is the target. In true tragic fashion, Lonrot is allowed his moment of realization before the bullet falls him. In the few moments before his death, he offers the criminal Scharlach an alternative for a more perfect crime in a linear pattern for the next time.

Chesterton sets his story "The Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse" in a grey expanse of landscape that suggests a sinister presence is lurking. The scene opens in the camp of the Prussian army where the Marshal is deciding the fate of a prisoner, a poet, who was captured across the valley. Using phrases such as "the sergeant felt the presence of some primordial slime that was neither solid nor liquid nor capable of any form; and he felt its presence behind the forms of all things" the author evokes an eerie metaphysical unease in the reader. (*Thirteen Detectives*, 153) Marshal Von Grock appears to be the devil personified, intent upon killing the poet because of his potential role as a prophet.

Von Grock sends the first horseman – a demonic emissary - across the valley with an order to kill the prisoner. A few moments later the High Prince, a Messianic figure, appears in the camp, demanding a reprieve be sent by a second horseman, an angelic type. Upon the High Prince's departure, Von Grock defiantly sends out a third horseman to shoot the second, intending to cancel the reprieve. When the first horseman hears he is being followed, he turns and shoots the second horseman – the bearer of the reprieve - who falls over a cliff, out of sight. The third horseman – a second

demonic messenger - spots the first at a distance and mistakenly believing him to be the bearer of the reprieve shoots and kills him. Thus the poet is set free because no order arrives to kill him. In Chesterton's story, good triumphs over evil by turning evil on itself. In fact, the Prussian Marshall's evil intent is thwarted by soldiers following his own orders.

If we look closely at the narrative strategy of closure in both stories, we see how each writer's "theology" determines the fate of the protagonist. Borges' story "Death and the Compass" reflects Schopenhauer's worldview of illusory reality which "conducts its heroes through a thousand dangers and difficulties to the goal; as soon as this is reached it hastens to let the curtain fall" showing that the goal "in which the hero expected to find happiness had only disappointed him". (Schopenhauer 262) The type of closure in "The Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse" illustrates Chesterton's Christian worldview, where the hero (the poet) is rescued from death and the evil one by the sacrifice of Another.

For both authors, the human condition is one of paradox. For Borges the paradox of life is characterized by the keen detective who deciphers the clues correctly according to his perception. However, by doing so he meets his end because he is tricked by his own conclusions, finding himself the victim of a more astute figure, the criminal. Borges' protagonist moves in a Schopenhaurian universe that is indecipherable; he is therefore easily deceived because shifting perspectives make reality unstable. For Chesterton the paradox of the human condition arises from the mysterious workings of the Divinity engaged in an unseen cosmic battle in which Good allows Evil to be foiled by its own hand as in the case of Von Grock's undoing.

The Hero and the Traitor

A similar comparison can be drawn between Chesterton's story and Borges' "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" (*Labyrinths*, 72), another text which Borges attributes directly to Chesterton's inspiration. Both depict a protagonist unsuspectingly directing his own demise. Borges' story portrays a young biographer, Ryan, examining the unresolved circumstances of the assassination of his great grandfather Kilpatrick, the hero of Irish emancipation. The uncanny similarity of the events surrounding his great grandfather's death a century prior and those of the assassination of Julius Caesar astound him. He thus concludes that some mysterious recurrence of the same figure has taken place at two different points in history. However,

Borges says “he (Ryan) is rescued from these circular labyrinths by a curious finding...which then sinks him into other more ...heterogeneous labyrinths...the fact that a beggar spoke with Kilpatrick on the day of his death using the words of Shakespeare’s *MacBeth*”. (75) Consequently, Ryan uncovers an astonishing detail: one of Kilpatrick’s companions, James Alexander Nolan, had translated both Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* into Gaelic.

Ryan discovers that a few days before the revolution broke out, Kilpatrick, the leader of the Irish insurgece, met with Nolan and fellow conspirators. Suspicion was running high because an unknown traitor was threatening the success of the imminent uprising. Kilpatrick therefore charged Nolan with the task of finding the traitor but by doing so signed his own death sentence because Nolan promptly declared that in fact, Kilpatrick himself was the traitor. Realizing his fate was sealed but unwilling to go down in history as a traitor, Kilpatrick asked to collaborate in his own death, a solution favorable to both the conspirators and the traitor. If he died in what appeared to be an assassination by the monarchy, he would die a hero and further the conspirators’ plan by inciting more of the population to revolt. Nevertheless, time was short and imagining the details of the intricate illusion too time-consuming. Thus, Nolan borrowed dramatic scenes from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, enlisting hundreds of conspiring actors to collaborate in (re)creating monumental moments of Irish history. Borges concludes ironically that Kilpatrick was “swept along by this minutely detailed destiny which both redeemed him and destroyed him”. (*Labyrinths*, 75)

Borges’ Kilpatrick shares a similar fate with Chesterton’s Von Grock in that the orders of both leaders are followed faithfully but inasmuch produce the opposite of their intent. However, what differs in Borges’ story and Chesterton’s is the premise of hero and traitor. For Borges these are arbitrary roles. The question is not one of individual heroic actions following an established morality but of characters in history swept along by events and swallowed up by greater political agendas which construct the hero to suit an end. In Borges’ story, Irish emancipation is the ultimate good and Kilpatrick’s treason can be reconfigured into heroism to bring about this greater good. Ryan, betraying his role as biographer, decides the truth is best left untold because it will deconstruct the mythical underpinnings of Irish nationalism and the heroic status of his ancestor.

In Borges’ world of Schopenhauerian illusion, individual moral-

ity can have no inherent essence; rather, it is determined by the greater labyrinth of cultural context and historic moment in which individuals find themselves. In Chesterton, however, the question of morality receives a markedly different treatment. While the figure of Chesterton's Von Grock, like Borges' Kilpatrick, is foiled by his consuming ambition, that ambition is not construed as an amoral force that can be refigured into heroic proportions for the benefit of a people. The first horseman understands his superior's amoral view: "Hocheimer also understood the Marshal's peculiar moral philosophy: that an act is unanswerable even when it is indefensible" (*Thirteen Detectives* 153); thus he shoots the second horseman, a gallant celestial figure bearing a noble reprieve. The second horseman however embodies what Chesterton's Christianity declares to be the true essence of a hero – one who dies not for personal ambition but for the salvation of another. (*Everlasting Man* 243) For Chesterton "hero" and "traitor" are not shifting signifiers but emblems of an essential human nature which chooses to respond to unseen forces of either good or evil. In Borges "hero" and "traitor" have no such distinctive essence but are illusory constructs.

Borges' story "The Garden of Forking Paths" presents a similar relativism in the context of nationalism. Yu Tsun, an Asian agent for the German Reich, must convey the secret location of an artillery depot to his German superiors. In order to do so, he plots to kill a man, Stephen Albert, because his last name will indicate to the Germans a town of the same name where the depot is found. What he discovers when he is about to kill this innocent man is that Albert has uncovered the key to an ancient labyrinth of his own ancestor, Ts'ui Pên (*Labyrinths* 26), one that reveals the secret workings of Time. Instead of preserving Albert who can disclose this monumental truth of Pen's historic people, the Chinese spy shoots him in order to carry out his military mission because he feels compelled to prove the worth of his race to the Germans. Paradoxically he betrays his ancestral people in order to honor them. As Pen awaits the gallows, he feels terrible contrition. On one hand he is a hero of the German Reich for his patriotic act against the British, an act that dignifies his Asian race in the eyes of the Germans; on the other hand, he is an abominable traitor to generations of his people for destroying the one who holds the key to Chinese metaphysics.

Once again we see how Schopenhauer's philosophy informs Borges' worldview. If one man is all men, than one man's actions encompass all the good and evil in the world to the extent that there is no outside

reference for either. One man is capable of all acts and only circumstances determine how each act is labeled. In a certain historic moment, a German can “heroically” exterminate thousands while at the same moment but within a different national construct, the same German commits an atrocious act against humanity. Herein lies the crux of difference in the theological premises of each writer: the possibility or the illusion of significant human moral acts. In fact, Chesterton himself recognized the instability of hero and villain as part of the Eastern worldview that Borges embraced through Schopenhauer:

All the best critics agree that all the greatest poets, in pagan Hellas for example, had an attitude towards their gods which is quite queer and puzzling to men in the Christian era. There seems to be an admitted conflict between the god and man; but everybody seems to be doubtful about which is the hero and which is the villain. (*The Everlasting Man* 108)

Furthermore, according to Schopenhauer, even painful human suffering caused by human hands can be explained by the incessant drive of an amoral life force that strives for dominance. (376) Likewise, there is no place within Borges’ cosmological vision for significant individual acts, only a representation of a singular life force whose “morality” is the preservation of the species. Heroes and traitors are interchangeable because there is no final meaning to the universe.

Borges’ tragic Man and Chesterton’s “tragic beauty of Man ...”

Given the ambiguous nature of human acts but the inevitability of human suffering, Borges’ vision of the human condition, like the Greeks’, is tragic in nature. Similar to classical tragedy, in Borges’ ambivalent universe, the hero errs (by misreading a text), falsely interpreting illusion to be reality. He therefore suffers death. The reader feels both pity and fear that the hero struggles to authenticate himself in a world of inauthenticity where is no room for human freedom or individual dignity because all acts are equal.

For Chesterton, the significance of human choice within the framework of God’s sovereignty is what makes Christianity far superior to any other creed. Christianity declares that the death of one man as God incar-

nate is tragic in a human sense but truly heroic in a divine sense. Herein lies the empirical basis of all morality. Individual acts can be deemed heroic to the extent they reflect the selflessness of God made Man. For where Eastern idealist philosophy ultimately concludes that even the gods – the moral force - are part of Brahma’s dream, Christianity insists that true divine justice exists, although human beings can only vaguely comprehend it. As Chesterton points out in the case of Job, we may not understand this paradox but in such a paradox there lies hope for the human predicament:

It (the Book of Job) obviously stands over against the Iliad and the Greek tragedies; and even more than they, it was an early meeting and parting of poetry and philosophy in the morning of the world. It is a solemn and uplifting sight to see those two eternal fools, the optimist and the pessimist destroyed in the dawn of time. And the philosophy really perfects the pagan tragic irony, precisely because it is more monotheistic and therefore more mystical. Indeed the Book of Job avowedly only answers mystery with mystery. Job is comforted with riddles but he is comforted. Herein is indeed a type, in the sense of a prophecy, of things speaking with authority. For when he who doubts can only say “I do not understand” it is true that he who knows can only reply or repeat “You do not understand”. And under that rebuke there is always a sudden hope in the heart; and the sense of something that would be worth understanding. (*The Everlasting Man* 98)

For this reason Borges aptly calls Chesterton’s view the “tragic beauty of Man” (*Obras Completas*, IV: 455). Human beings suffer, but not insignificantly. They may be driven by a nature – a tragic flaw of sorts - to commit the worst of human acts but will be judged for these acts as agents of free will. There is no doubt who the hero is and who the villain; however, an earthly tragedy reveals that the true hero must suffer for the true villain. As Chesterton states: “tragedy is the undue suffering of Christ – an extreme and startling doctrine of the divinity of Christ: the idea of the king himself serving in the ranks like a common soldier.” (*Everlasting Man* 242) The “tragic beauty” of this suffering lies in the manner in which it affirms the individual as made in the image of God and the beneficiary of such a

sacrifice. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr explains it this way: “[the Cross] proves that sin is not a necessary and inherent characteristic of life. Evil is not a part of God, nor yet a part of essential man...if the defect lies in us and not in the character of life, life is not hopeless.” (Niebuhr 168). In contrast, Eastern thought sees human suffering not as a product of a fallen world which will one day be set right but as part of the character of the eternal life force which makes no distinction between good and evil. As Schopenhauer asserts:

The individual, on the contrary, neither has nor can have any value for Nature, for her kingdom is infinite time and infinite space, and in these infinite multiplicity of possible individuals. Therefore she is always ready to let the individual fall, and hence it is not only exposed to destruction in a thousand ways by the most insignificant accident, but originally destined for it, and conducted towards it by Nature herself from the moment it has served its end of maintaining the species. (219)

But human experience tells us that individuals are not content to fall “by the most insignificant accident”. Quite the contrary: they strive desperately for individual significance. Interestingly enough, Willis Barnstone, one of Borges’s frequent interlocutors, relates that as Borges grew older:

his poems took on an immense pathos precisely because the speaker, Borges, was the weak man talking, the dreamer and despairer, unashamed of being the frightened blind man alone in the universe, measuring time with nightmares and metaphysical verses. (Barnstone 166)

Suffering from blindness and other infirmities, Borges uses his poetry to ask the fundamental human question that his Eastern worldview does not appear to satisfy. In the poignant poem “Christ on the Cross” written two years before his death, the poet approaches the crucifixion and says:

His face is not the one seen in engravings.
It is severe, Jewish. I do not see it

And I will keep on searching for it
 Until my last step on earth. (*Los conjurados*, 465)

The poem concludes with the poet's question: "Of what use is it to me that this man has suffered, if I am suffering now?" (*Los conjurados*, 465). Borges appears not to make the leap of faith to embrace what he cannot see, nonetheless he knows to ask this question of the Cross, not of the Wheel. In an illusory universe where only the species has value - not the individual - Borges' suffering finds no answer to its cry because as Schopenhauer concluded:

If now, from the standpoint of this last consideration, we contemplate the turmoil of life, we behold all occupied with its want and misery, straining all their powers to satisfy its infinite needs and to ward off its multifarious sorrows, yet without daring to hope anything else than simply the preservation of this tormented existence for a short span of time. (Schopenhauer 376)

Borges finds himself asking the question of suffering at the foot of the Cross because Christianity maintains there is a purpose to human suffering, albeit one veiled from human eyes. The Apostle Paul declares human suffering is significant in the Divine plan. "Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." (Romans 8:17, NIV)

In another of his final poems "*In Praise of Shadow*", Borges also betrays a longing to know his individuality upon death despite being a declared unbeliever in the immortality of body, spirit or personal memory:

Now I can forget them. I reach my center,
 my algebra and my key,
 my mirror.
 Soon I will know who I am. (qtd. in Barnstone 157)

His words again echo the words of the Apostle Paul: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (I Corinthians

13:12)

Borges made continuous reference to this passage of Paul's throughout his lifetime, particularly the symbol of the mirror, which he interpreted to mean reality is the inversion of what we see. In contrast, Chesterton rejected the mirror as symbol for human identity:

Thought as engendered by mirrors is for Chesterton a synonym for infinity and repetition, ultimately symbolized by what he abhorred most, the Ouroboros, or the serpent that eats its own tail. This for him comes to stand for Oriental mysticism in general, its endless wheels and circles, a mind-boggling simplicity and repetitiveness which needed to be supplanted by the complexity and the historicity of the cross. (Schenkel, "Circling the Cross, Crossing the Circle: On Borges and Chesterton", 297)

As Borges approaches death, the "endless wheels and circles" of his Eastern worldview cannot satisfy his intense yearning for individual significance. What Borges sees as illusion in Paul's words, Chesterton sees as anticipation of a validation of the individual as an essence to be known because of the historicity of the Cross.

The works of Chesterton and Borges, "theologians" of the detective story, show that their respective ontological views made a profound difference in their poetic conception of the human condition on earth. It appears that Borges, however, struggled to live within the illusory world of his Eastern ontology as he approached death because he yearned to know his individuality and comprehend his suffering. In stark contrast, Chesterton pursued the practice of gratitude to the Creator for life and love as gifts permanently good (Fagerberg 24), believing the Christian could thereby find the happiness that was his center and his key.

Unlike the theologians in Borges' story who discovered that their ontological differences were irrelevant in heaven, it is reasonable to think these theologians of the detective story found their beliefs made as much difference in heaven as they did on earth.

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