

Edgar Allan Poe, Julio Cortázar and Paris: A Study in Doubling

Christopher Rollason – rollason54@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the presence of doubling within and between two short stories located in Paris, Edgar Allan Poe's celebrated 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) and the less well-known but equally striking 'El otro cielo' ('The Other Heaven') (1966) by Poe's Spanish-language translator and avowed admirer, the Argentinian Julio Cortázar. Both are instances of crime fiction much of whose action is situated in the same district of Paris – the 'arcades quarter', the locus of flânerie best known today through Walter Benjamin's monumental study of nineteenth-century Paris, *The Arcades Project*. Both narratives weave a labyrinth of doubles, creating uncanny bonds between themes, characters and, in Cortázar's case, places (Paris doubles Buenos Aires, even to the arcades). Poe, unlike the adoptive Parisian resident Cortázar, never visited Paris, and Cortázar's story is, unlike Poe's, a murder tale without a detective. Nonetheless, a series of textual allusions and links tie 'El otro cielo' firmly to 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', a story which Cortázar translated. If for Poe Paris is a space of struggle between violence and rationality, for Cortázar the antithesis is one of violence versus utopia. The joint study of these two Parisian tales by non-Parisians points to the need for further research into the differences between Poe's North American and Cortázar's Latin American vantage points, and their underlying historical and geopolitical determinants.

Keywords: *Poe, Cortázar, Paris, doubling, utopia*

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Comparative literature as a discipline may be considered as a *study in doubling*, an investigation into the similarities and differences of texts of different origins that resemble each other. To compare the work of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and that of his Spanish-language admirer, translator and avowed disciple Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) is also to juxtapose two *oeuvres* in which the double itself looms large as a theme. Cortázar is known to have "devoured" Poe from the age of eight (Berriot 1988: 55), and the short stories of the American function as an ineluctable diffused presence across those of the Argentinian. Cortázar's translation into Spanish of Poe's major works, including all his short stories, appeared in 1956: Mario Vargas Llosa has affirmed that this translation "figura entre las obras maestras de la literatura contemporánea en lengua española" ("is a masterpiece of contemporary literature in Spanish"), adding that "a Julio Cortázar Edgar Allan Poe ... le ... fue un espejo que le permitió descubrir su propia cara" ("for Julio Cortázar, Edgar Allan Poe

was a mirror enabling him to discover his own face" - 2008: 20). Today's vogue for Poe in the Spanish-speaking world is not unrelated to a translation that has often been compared in its influence to Charles Baudelaire's celebrated nineteenth-century rendering of Poe into French.

Criticism has routinely acknowledged Poe's influence on Cortázar (Bonells 1988); it has been infrequent, however, for critics to set up direct encounters between individual tales by the two, although for instance, Santiago Rodríguez (1996) has mapped the parallels between 'MS. Found in a Bottle' and 'Manuscrito hallado en un bolsillo' ('Manuscript Found in a Pocket'). The two stories which this paper will examine are Poe's celebrated 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', published in 1841 (translated by Cortázar as 'Los crímenes de la calle Morgue') and Cortázar's 'El otro cielo', published in 1966 (in English, 'The Other Heaven'). Cortázar's interest in 'Rue Morgue' may be deduced from a mention in *Rayuela*, his novel of 1963 (in English, *Hopscotch*), of "experiencia tipo doble asesinato de la calle de la Morgue" ("experience of the double-murder-in-the-rue-Morgue type" - Cortázar 1980: 313). There, curiously, Cortázar evokes Poe's tale not under his own title but in a Hispanicised version of Baudelaire's ('Double assassinat dans la rue Morgue'), thus highlighting the theme of *doubling*, an element which will prove to be a major presence both within and between the two tales. If 'Rue Morgue' scarcely needs introduction, as one of the best-known short stories in world literature, 'El otro cielo', though less familiar to the general reader, has been seen by the cognoscenti as one of its author's finest works (Berriot 1988: 29-39; Cortázar/Prego 1985: 15-18). Cortázar's biographer, Karine Berriot, following Baudelaire, has even briefly posited a link between the two tales, precisely through the twin keywords "double" and "murder" ("double" and "assassinat" - 1988: 35).

'Rue Morgue' is generally held to be the first modern detective story (Rollason 1988; Figueroa Rebolledo 2008), instigating the genre and activating the conventions that would later be systematised by Arthur Conan Doyle in the Sherlock Holmes narratives. Poe's narrator, an American resident in Paris, shares an apartment with the Frenchman Charles Auguste Dupin, who exhibits remarkable analytic capacities that allow him to solve a mystery impermeable to the police – the grisly murder of a mother and daughter in a locked room in their apartment in the Rue Morgue, a crime which, through a detailed chain of ratiocination, Dupin traces to an escaped orang-utang imported from Borneo by a sailor. Cortázar's tale is also a crime story, but one without a detective. Its narrator, an Argentinian, leads a double life between cities and epochs, alternating in dreamlike shifts between Buenos Aires in the 1940s and Paris in the 1870s. The two cities are linked by the shadows of war and authoritarian politics (the Franco-Prussian war; World War II and the rise of Perón), but also by the doubling between two covered passages or arcades, Pasaje Güemes in the Argentine capital and Galérie Vivienne in Paris: the latter's glass-and-stucco ceiling is the "otro cielo" or artificial sky of the title. Transported to the Parisian past as a stockbroker, the narrator befriends Josiane, a woman of the night who lives above Galérie Vivienne and whose life is haunted by fear of a serial killer stalking Paris. The killer, Laurent, finally gives himself up spontaneously to the police; another character at one point suspected of the murders, a nameless "South American", is later found dead in his garret. The narrator finally returns to his own time and to a routine married life in Buenos Aires.

The theme of doubling is written across both tales, with agents and locations endlessly and disturbingly reflecting off each other – Dupin and ape, ape and sailor, the Dupin-narrator and L'Espanaye dyads and the apartments of both; Laurent and South American, narrator and South American, Paris and Buenos Aires, Güemes and Vivienne. Poe's narrator speaks of his

friend as a "double Dupin" or "Bi-Part Soul" (Poe 1978: 533); Gabriel García Márquez has, extratextually, even read the South American as a double of Cortázar himself (Berriot 1988: 18). Equally, the tales double each other in their shared nineteenth-century Parisian setting – and here the twin axes of similarity and difference come into operation, around both an absence and a presence.

Both stories are narratives of Paris (Cortázar's also alternating with Buenos Aires), intertwining the fortunes of an unnamed, expatriate first-person narrator with those of other residents of Paris. Both thus foreground foreigners in Paris, though only in Cortázar is the expatriation the author's too. Poe's Paris is a textual creation: it was Baudelaire who asked rhetorically in a note to his translation: "Ai-je besoin d'avertir ... qu'Edgar Poe n'est jamais venu à Paris?" ("Do I need to point out ... that Edgar Poe never came to Paris?" - Poe tr. Baudelaire 1951: 1069n). Cortázar, by contrast, was writing as an adoptive Parisian, who had lived in the city since 1951 and would make it his permanent home until his death in 1984. His narrative allows its Argentinian protagonist to cross and re-cross repeatedly between nineteenth-century Paris and twentieth-century Buenos Aires (anticipating the topography of *Rayuela*, a novel structured around the alternation between the same two cities). There are parallels here with other Cortázar stories, such as 'La noche boca arriba' ('The Night Face Up') and 'Todos los fuegos el fuego' ('All Fires the Fire'), which shift between Paris and, respectively, Aztec-era Mexico and ancient Rome. This is not without a link to Poe and his 'A Tale of the Ragged Mountains', a story whose scene mutates between Virginia in 1827 and Benares (India) in 1780, and which Cortázar, in his 1956 life of Poe, singled out for praise as "[un] relato digno de los mejores" ("a tale to be ranked with the best" - 2008: 43). 'Rue Morgue', for its part, plays on another disturbing alternation, that between human and non-human, as embodied in its celebrated orang-utang; the same opposition is famously interrogated by Cortázar in another tale of Paris, 'Axolotl' (Vázquez 2008) – a story, incidentally, located in the zoo of the Jardin des Plantes, which is also Poe's ape's final destination. In 'El otro cielo', the narrator remarks to Josiane: "¿O todos los sudamericanos te parecen unos orangutanes?" ("Or are all us South Americans orangutans to you?" - Cortázar 1985b: 22; 2005: 138) – an embedded citation marking the intertextual link between the two stories.

'Rue Morgue' and 'El otro cielo' are interrelated by their cartography and toponymy of Paris. Poe's editor Thomas O. Mabbott wrote that "Poe's inaccuracies ... in details of his French setting have been criticised" (Poe 1978: 569n), but while not every street named in the tale exists, most do, and on closer examination Poe's geography of Paris proves to be far from arbitrary. Cortázar's version of 'Rue Morgue' scrupulously respects Poe's French toponyms, refraining from hispanicising them; the title has "calle Morgue", but the text gives 'Rue Morgue' throughout. It is a real quarter that frames the fictional Rue Morgue, described as "one of those miserable thoroughfares that intervene between the Rue Richelieu and the Rue St. Roch" (546). In an earlier episode, Dupin and the narrator are "strolling ... down a long dirty street, in the vicinity of the Palais Royal" (533), and their talk evokes the Théâtre des Variétés (534); later (545), Dupin mentions Vidocq, the real-life criminal turned chief of police, who – in a curious extratextual detail – lived above Galérie Vivienne. Mapping these details reveals that much of Poe's topography concerns a particular part of Paris, i.e. what may be called the 'arcades quarter', on the right bank of the Seine. This quarter is the subject of *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin's epochal study of nineteenth-century Paris and its contradictions as mediated through the dialectical image of the glass-and-iron covered passages, or arcades: a book which counts Poe among its influences, and which Cortázar's tale reads like an uncanny commentary on - even though he could not have read it, since *The*

Arcades Project, though written between 1927 and 1940, was not published in any language until 1982. For Benjamin, the arcades were "the most important architecture of the nineteenth century" (1999: 834), at once an alienating "landscape of consumption" (827) and temple to the commodity, and a utopian space promising a universe of hedonistic plenty.

The garden of the Palais-Royal, with its 'wooden galleries' (Galeries de Bois), was the forerunner of the arcades; rue Richelieu skirts one side of the Palais-Royal, and rue Vivienne, on to which abuts Galérie Vivienne, the other. At the other end of rue Vivienne, between it and Boulevard de Montmartre, is Passage des Panoramas – the first of the arcades, conceived in 1800 and home to the Théâtre des Variétés. Cortázar's story, in its turn, centres even more closely on the same quarter. The narrator works at the Bourse, whose square spreadeagles rue Vivienne. The image of Buenos Aires' Pasaje Güemes leads him to Galérie Vivienne, above which, mirroring Vidocq, lives the courtesan Josiane. The tale names numerous other arcades, including Passage Verdeau, Galérie Colbert and, echoing Poe, Passage des Panoramas, as well as the Palais-Royal and a multitude of streets in the quarter, such as rue des Petits Champs and rue de Notre-Dame-des-Victoires. The murders attributed to Laurent disrupt the tranquillity of Galérie Vivienne. If Poe's murders are also *the double murder in the arcades quarter*. Cortázar's double them as the *serial murders in the quarter of the Bourse*.

Closely bound up with the arcades is the figure of the *flâneur*, or city stroller – a nineteenth-century social archetype which Benjamin connects to the detective, finding in both "indolence presented as a plausible front" and the hidden "riveted attention of an observer" (1999: 442). Dupin and his companion, "enamoured of the Night for her own sake" (Poe 1978: 532), are nocturnal *flâneurs*, "seeking, amid the wild lights and shadows of the populous city, that infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford" (533); for Cortázar's narrator, "los pasajes y las galerías han sido mi patria secreta desde siempre" ("arcades and galleries have always been my secret country" – 1985b: 13; 2005: 129). In both tales, the Parisian space leisurely traversed by the *flâneur* is disrupted by violence; the two writers, however, employ different strategies to tackle that disruption. In Poe, the "mental excitement" of ratiocination wins the day; Dupin, as emblematic Gallic rationalist, imposes order through his detective method on the chaos symbolised by the ape's depredations. By contrast, Cortázar's narrator, despite Laurent's murders and his own inevitable return to Buenos Aires and the present, echoes Benjamin in nostalgically perceiving the arcades as utopian space, as locus of the "other heaven" of his title: "ese falso cielo de estucos y claraboyas sucias, esa noche artificial que ignoraba la estupidez del día y del sol ahí afuera" ("that false sky of dirty stucco and skylights, ... that artificial night which ignored the stupidity of day and the sun outside" – 1985b 14; 2005, 130). If for Poe Paris is a space of struggle between violence and rationality, for Cortázar the Parisian conflict is one of violence versus utopia. The difference in orientation redeems Cortázar from any charge of imitating Poe and also suggests that further research may reveal a significant divide, in historical and geopolitical terms, between the two writers' perceptions of France and Europe - between Poe's enlisting of French rationalism in a context of emergent American hegemony, and the mid-twentieth-century radicalism of a Cortázar caught between a first-world yet utopian Paris and the contradictions of the Latin American periphery. Such a study, however, would require another kind of passage, one not only between texts but between *other heavens*, the perceptual and ideological structures that mark a clash of divergent world-views.

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