

# THE MAN WHO WOULD BE QUAIN: BORGES, THE DETECTIVE STORY AND ELLERY QUEEN

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## 1. TWO ROADS DIVERGED

The English literary world scarcely registered Herbert Quain's death. Before 1948 his creator, Jorge Luis Borges, also could have passed unmourned there. But thankfully the August edition of genre bastion *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, a special "All Nations" edition devoted to international detective fiction, included Anthony Boucher's translation of "The Garden of Forking Paths." The piece won second prize.

Many are familiar with the *EQMM* as Borges's first appearance in English, but few remember now the magazine's namesake and editor, wildly popular at the time. Both the author and lead character of his novels, Ellery Queen was actually the partnership of Frederic Dannay and his cousin Manfred Lee.<sup>1</sup> These details alone would be enough to attract Borges,<sup>2</sup> himself one-half of H. Bustos Domecq. As Paula Rabinowitz, one recent critic who does remember Queen, puts it, this "pseudonymous amalgam . . . must have appealed to Borges," even though (or perhaps because) the

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1 *Dannay* and *Lee* were themselves aliases of Daniel Nathan and Manford Lepofsky, respectively—the head begins to swim. Throughout the essay, I will use *Queen* and singular pronouns to refer to the co-authors.

2 Eduardo Ramos-Izquierdo also makes this point in his provocative *Contrapuntos analíticos a "Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain"* (22).

Queen novels were the stuff of romance writer Madame Delly (188).<sup>3</sup> As in the case of Delly,<sup>4</sup> whose turn-of-the-century series looked forward to the Harlequin Romance (Holmes 17), “Borges may have disparaged this pair of authors and the formulaic pleasures their popular romance provided,” but nevertheless he was “not immune” to Queen’s charms (Rabinowitz 188). After all, “at the movies,” a sentimental Borges purportedly told Adolfo Bioy Casares (the other half of Bustos Domecq), “we are all readers of Madame Delly” (Rabinowitz 188).

This scholarly story—the aesthete seduced by vulgar romance—seems immediately plausible and attractive. What’s most interesting, though, is that in a sense it’s all wrong. Borges did not disparage Ellery Queen at all—far from it. Borges was one of the most, if not the most ardent ally of detective fiction in Latin America. Indeed, Daniel Altamiranda considers him “unquestionably the first and most significant promoter” of the form in the region (37). He defended detective fiction in various essays and lectures, reviewed its most popular authors, and co-edited the long-running collection of detective fiction called *The Seventh Circle*. In addition to the familiar short stories (e.g. “The Garden of Forking Paths,” “Death and the Compass”) included in his most famous volumes, Borges, writing as Bustos Domecq with his friend Bioy Casares, produced one of the most provocative detective books written in Spanish, *Six Problems for don Isidro Parodi*.

So to a certain extent it’s not surprising that Borges in his slim *An Introduction to American Literature* should include a section on the genre, which, he suggests, distinguishes his own primer from more ponderous volumes (3-4). But in the same year that the *Introduction* was published, Borges gave an interview to Richard Burgin in which he remarked on the prevailing prejudice against the form. “The idea that a detective story could also be literary was a new idea in the Argentine,” when Borges began *The Seventh Circle* series, “because people thought of them, as they must have

3 Rabinowitz’s recent essay on Borges is much recommended, but, in respect to Queen, I believe it follows the wrong path. The relationship between Queen and Borges has received little attention. As far as I can tell, the only full-length essay devoted to this specific connection is Graham Law’s “Variations on the Theme of Popular and Serious: Ellery Queen and Jorge Luis Borges,” which has very different fish to fry.

4 *Madame Delly*, needless to say, was also a “pseudonymous amalgam,” the partnership of Frédéric Petitjean de la Rosière and his sister Jeanne-Marie.

thought of Westerns, as being merely amusing” (Borges, “Living” 24). After remarking on the fountainhead of intellectual detective fiction, Edgar Allan Poe, Borges’s *Introduction* discusses four North American successors: S. S. Van Dine, Erle Stanley Gardner, Dashiell Hammett, and Ellery Queen.

Of the four, Borges would recall Queen approvingly throughout his life. The others, not so much. In the same interview, Burgin brings up “The Garden of Forking Paths,” saying that he loves the work, while Borges, it seems to him, doesn’t think much of it (“Living” 24). “I think it’s quite good as a detective story,” Borges responds, to which Burgin objects: “I think it’s more than a detective story, though.” Borges adds, “Well, it should be. Because, after all, I had Chesterton behind me and Chesterton knew how to make the most of a detective story.” “Far more than Ellery Queen or Erle Stanley Gardner,” he continues, before remembering himself, “Well, *Ellery Queen’s* quite a good story.” The emphasis is his own.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, almost twenty years later, in an interview with Clark Zlotchew, the eighty-five-year-old Borges was still thinking of Queen, although with failing memory. Zlotchew grandiosely broaches the subject of the detective story, “which has labyrinths in time and space,” asking “what is the purpose of all this? Is there a purpose?” (Borges, “Interview” 234). Borges responds flatly: “No. I’m a great reader of detective novels, that’s all.” “I met one of them,” he brags, moving elliptically from the genre to one of its most distinguished authors, “the one who used to sign himself . . . Ellery Queen. The other one died, I think.” “Dashiell Hammett?” Zlotchew offers, somewhat amusingly. “No, no,” Borges mutters, probably more irritated with himself than Zlotchew, “Dashiell Hammett . . . He was rather a writer of novels of violent action, not of what you might call intellectual detective novels.” And then still trying to recall Frederic Dannay’s name: “It was . . . I know Ellery Queen, but . . . There were two persons who wrote the Ellery Queen mysteries, but I don’t remember their names.” “One of them died,” he finally concludes, “and I met the other one. It was at a dinner for mystery writers.”

Dashiell Hammett, Borges implies in his *Introduction*, had signaled the decline of the detective genre in favor of the espionage novel and science fiction. “Until his appearance the detective novel had been abstract and in-

5 This is indicated clearly by Burgin’s italics.

tellectual,” whereas Hammett’s novels featured detectives “no less violent than the outlaws whom they pursue” (Borges, “American” 82). Certainly, this was a fall from the grace of S. S. Van Dine and his hero Philo Vance, whose “urbanity and pedantry [was] an evident projection of the author himself” (81). In his capsule biography, Borges explains that Van Dine, or rather William Huntington Wright (aka S. S. Van Dine), had written on the high-brow topics of aesthetic theory and Nietzsche and had fancied himself an intellectual, but alas “the universe had examined these works with more resignation than enthusiasm” (“Van Dine” 172). “To judge by the dazed fragments that survive encrusted in his novels,” Borges adds, “the universe was correct.” Wright’s pen name, on the other hand, “blaze[d] from all the multicolored kiosks in the world.” Of these best-selling volumes, Borges recommends *The Canary Murder Case* in particular as being probably his finest book, even though, Borges remarks, the central idea is cribbed from Conan Doyle.

In Borges’s own estimation, Gardner, Hammett, and Van Dine represent three of the four greatest North American heirs to Poe. Yet one can imagine the narrator of “A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain” complaining that Borges awards “not a single laudatory epithet that is not set straight (or firmly reprimanded) by an adverb” (“Survey” 107). Queen, however, seems to have escaped unchastened, or if not, only mildly so. If he fell short of the rarified Chesterton, whose popularity exceeded even Queen’s, what shame in that, considering that Borges thought the Englishman “one of the most attractive figures” in all of literature (*Introduction to English* 66).

Chesterton died in 1936. A year later, the same year as his capsule biography of Van Dine, Borges published a review of Queen’s new novel *The Door Between*, saying that it concerned “a problem of enduring interest: the corpse in the locked room ‘which no one had entered and no one has left’” (“Door” 181). Borges would later claim that the locked-room mystery, invented by Poe, is *the* first problem of detective fiction (“Detective” 496). Queen, at the time of Borges’s review, is said to have formulated the problem for only the sixth time (and the first time by an American since Poe). A tradition including Gaston Leroux and Chesterton devolves on *The Door Between*, which is “interesting . . . but quite inferior to Queen’s best novels: *Chinese Orange*, *Siamese Twin*, and *The Egyptian Cross*” (“Door” 181).

In March of 1938, Borges would again reference these novels as “among the best of the [detective] genre” along with others by Queen that are “simply splendid” and so forth in his review of Queen’s latest work, *The Devil to Pay* (“Devil” 216).<sup>6</sup> But this anomalous twelfth novel from the “weary inventor” adds “an unexpected record to those [Queen] already holds.” “Before,” Borges quips, “one could say that he was the author of some of the best detective novels in our time,” but “now we can add that he is the author of one of the most forgettable.” Even here, Queen manages to offend in an interesting, almost laudable way, somehow managing a wretched novel that is, nevertheless, free from his characteristic flaws—the piling on, for instance, of extensive catalogs, characters, and plans. Curiously, the novel seems “the stuff of Van Dine,” as if the sins were his, not Queen’s (Borges, “Devil” 217).

In fact, the following year Borges judged that the United States, even though the detective genre originated there, could now claim only two notable practitioners: the “deplorable” S. S. Van Dine and Ellery Queen, author of thirteen “luminous” volumes (“Four” 323). He moves from this singular complement to some critical remarks—and, indeed, throughout the end of the decade, Borges becomes increasingly worried about the newest novels of Queen, those following the stunning successes of the early thirties. Part of the explanation for this may be Dannay and Lee’s concern, during these years, to “open up” the formal deductive puzzle.

Queen connoisseur Francis Nevins explains that by this time “S. S. Van Dine, the major influence on Queen’s first period, had plummeted abysmally in both critical and commercial esteem,” but that “his place was taken over not by another person but by media: the high-priced women’s slick magazines and Hollywood” (51). Dannay and Lee were now publishing in *Cosmopolitan* and *Redbook*,<sup>7</sup> for example, and pitching their stories to the movies, and so, Nevins suggests, this shift in audience was bound to correspond to a shift in story-telling technique, “the humanization of

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to my colleagues Andrew Reynolds and Susan Amos for their help with the translations. Any errors are my own.

<sup>7</sup> Nevins observes (perhaps unfairly) that even though technically “Queen’s first slick-paper sales were made in 1934, when both *Chinese Orange* and ‘The Mad Tea-Party’ appeared in *Redbook* . . . it took a year or so before the influence of these slicks on his work became apparent” (219).

Queen's universe." "In some respects," he judges, "the influence of these media was unfortunate, for none of Queen's novels of this period and only two of his short stories are even in the same league with the works of *Period One*." But, nevertheless, "under the guidance of his two new markets he learned to infuse greater life and warmth into his characters, including Ellery himself; to master the presentation of a woman's viewpoint . . . and to develop skill with character and relationship approximating his finesse with clue and counterplot" (Nevins 51-52). In short, Queen was learning, for good or ill, to write romance in the late thirties.

Borges himself, writing in the pages of *El Hogar*, an Argentine "women's slick," notices much the same. He would close his 1938 review of *The Devil to Pay* by singling out a new development: "Hollywood comes up in this novel . . . [and] is presented by the author . . . as a ludicrous place, undesirable and essentially dismal" (Borges, "Devil" 217). "I might suggest," Borges adds, "that the validation of such a description is a literary tradition in American letters." The next year, in his review of Queen's latest novel *The Four of Hearts*, Borges notes that the atmosphere is nightmarish, but that this is characteristic of Queen's novels as a whole ("Four" 324). After explaining the virtues of this atmosphere—the terrifying or grotesque effects that thereby become possible—Borges complains that Queen has become "insensible" to the nightmarishness of not only his atmosphere, but his characters. Readers suffer an "indignity" in being made to "follow the love affairs and witness the raging anger and kisses," such erotic adventures being entirely inappropriate to the mood of the story and the repulsiveness of the characters themselves.

The issue, however, is not limited to this particular novel or even Queen's work as a whole; the problem, as Borges sees it, concerns the appropriateness of romantic plotlines, whether erotic or not—the appropriateness of "adventures," period, within the detective story in general. I mentioned earlier his feeling that the hardboiled novels of Dashiell Hammett signaled a decline of the genre. Along these lines, Borges later pronounced that

Currently [1978], the detective genre has greatly declined in the United States, where it has become realistic and about violence—sexual violence, as well. In any event, it has disappeared. The intellectual origins of the de-

tective story have been forgotten. They have, however, been maintained in England, where very calm novels are still written. ("Detective" 499)

"Everything is intellectual," he repeats, "everything is calm, there is no violence, and not too much bloodshed."

Northrop Frye's *The Secular Scripture* is still instructive here. In the case of popular literature, consisting mostly of various kinds of romance, Frye admits that "the fact that sex and violence emerge whenever they get the chance *does* mean that sexuality and violence are central to romance" (26).<sup>8</sup> As a result, critical "guardians of taste" have treated these lowbrow works with condescension, "one form of condescension being the writing of such tales themselves"—"as academics write detective stories today," he adds (Frye 23). Though the critics may disparage the formulaic pleasures of such adventures, they often are privately charmed (or titillated) by them nevertheless, for at the movies, we are all readers of Madame Delly.

Amounting to a sort of adventure or romance, the kind of detective story that Frye is talking about, though, is *not* the sort that Borges admired. It's not that the high-brow Borges was seduced, against his better judgment, by the romantic plots of Queen; that's an undoubtedly attractive solution, a novelistic one, but clearly incorrect. On the contrary, Borges rated Queen so high as a detective novelist precisely because of the lack of this sort of adventure in his novels. In this context, he preferred to be calmed, not stimulated,<sup>9</sup> and turned critical of Queen only when his novels became more like romances: more exciting, more charming—let's face it, more readable. But such criticism, to be sure, was overwhelmed by praise. In fact, it's fair to say that Borges considered Queen, following Poe, the greatest detective novelist in the country which invented the form, a form responsible for "safeguarding order in an era of disorder" ("Detective" 499).

8 Note, however, that Frye's subtle work argues that romance cannot be reduced to pornography.

9 For a helpful discussion of the "calming" effect of "golden age" detective fiction, see Alfredo Alonso Estenoz's very sensible essay "Herbert Quain o la literatura como secreto" (55-59).

## 2. A DÆFT SOLUTION

All detective novelists are would-be Poes or Chestertons. Nevertheless, in Borges's mind, the novels of Queen constituted an advancement over these luminaries. "In the history of the detective genre (that dates from the month of April, 1841, the date of publication of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Murders of the Rue Morgue') the novels of Ellery Queen deviate from the norm, or cause a small progression of the genre," Borges wrote ("Half-Way" 40). "The [usual detective] novelist," he explains, "tends to propose a vulgar explanation of the mystery," sometimes supernatural in flavor, "and then dazzles his readers with an ingenious solution," that is, despite all, quite terrestrial. Chesterton, for his part, "loses nothing" in the substitution, a *tour de force* (Borges, "Labyrinth" 114), but Queen goes one better. First "propos[ing] a daft explanation," he "then hints (at the end) a most beautiful solution, that makes the reader fall in love" (Borges, "Half-Way" 40). Imminently attractive, this ingenious solution, though, is itself "refuted and a third is uncovered, which is the correct one: always less extravagant than the second, but always unpredictable and satisfactory."

Almost one hundred years after Poe's groundbreaking, April 1938 saw Borges returning obsessively to the detective novel in his review of Richard Hull's potboiler *Excellent Intentions*. Previously, in a review of Queen, he had promised not to commit "the blunder" of revealing *The Door Between's* key (Borges, "Door" 181), but now in his review of Hull he seems bent on doing so. Hull's book is so competent, his prose so able, his characters and irony so convincing and civilized—and yet Hull's solution is so utterly predictable—that Borges suspects the existence of a secret plot. "Ah me, or ah Richard Hull!" he sighs, "I can't find that plot anywhere" (Borges, "Hull" 184). Regardless, Borges (jokingly) claims to have foreseen the central idea of such a book three or four years earlier, suggesting in effect that *Excellent Intentions*, the very real book now overflowing kiosks, cribbed his imaginary volume.

That imagined work, one of the few, he hoped, that would justify him before God, would have been a thoroughly conventional "detective novel of the current sort, with an indecipherable murder in the first pages, a long discussion in the middle, and a solution at the end." But then Borges planned "almost in the last line, to add an ambiguous phrase—for ex-

ample: 'and everyone thought the meeting of the man and the woman had been by chance,'" a phrase which would indicate, or at least "raise the suspicion that the solution was false." Unnerved, "the perplexed reader would go through the pertinent chapters again, and devise his own solution, the correct one," and so in this case—the case of the secret solution—the reader "would be sharper than the detective" (Borges, "Hull" 184). When *Ficciones*, including "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain," came out a couple of years later, almost these exact words recur at the end of Herbert Quain's first novel, the failure of which was laid at the door of Queen's *The Siamese Twin Mystery*.

Almost these exact words, but not quite, for the crucial retrospective phrase no longer specifies a man and woman. "Everyone," we read, "believed that the chessplayers had met accidentally" (Borges, "Survey" 108). It turns out that Queen's real-life novel, supposedly appearing in print only a few days after Quain's *The God of the Labyrinth*—conjoined, for all intents and purposes with the latter—actually includes two prominent chess-players, the eponymous twin brothers. If *The God* and *The Siamese Twin Mystery* were born almost simultaneously, one wonders how closely the two were related. Both Queen and Quain, albeit in different senses, are "fictional" authors and protagonists, and their surnames, of course, bear a strong resemblance.<sup>10</sup> *Queen*, in fact, derives from an Old English word *cwēn*, which is pronounced identically to *Quain*.

Earlier in his review of Hull's *Excellent Intentions*, Borges had juxtaposed that novel with his own imaginary work, claiming that, in respect to their secret plots, they were one and the same. Given that Quain's fictive detective novel includes, in an appropriately modified form, the crucial, retrospective sentence from the detective novel Borges had previously imagined, we might speculate proportionately: Borges's imaginary detective novel is to Hull's *Excellent Intentions* as Quain's *The God of the Labyrinth* is to Ellery Queen's *The Siamese Twin Mystery*. If *The God* contains an official solution, endorsed by the detective, that is false and a secret solution, to be ferreted out by the reader, that is true, then so too perhaps does its twin. In short, perhaps Borges suspects that Queen's novel has a secret solution and indicates this through his remarks on Quain, a kind of stand-in.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ramos-Izquierdo (12, 21-23). I'm especially intrigued by his reference to W. V. O. Quine, the twentieth-century logician and philosopher of language (42).

Along these lines, the first thing to point out is that the Queen partnership originally conceived *Siamese Twin* as having a different solution from the one that their detective ultimately discovers. A wartime exposé in *Life* magazine distinguished Dannay and Lee from the common run of genre writers who compose their novels by working backwards from the crime. The Queen duo, in contrast, began with *any* exceptional detail. Once, for instance,

while visiting a freak show, Lee and Dannay fell to wondering what would happen if a Siamese twin committed a murder. In *The Siamese Twin Mystery* which resulted, they considered the legal and practical angles, including how to electrocute one Siamese without damaging the other. (Bainbridge 75)

Taken with this idea, the writer complains that Dannay and Lee “lamely resolved the problem by clearing the twins of the crime,” but one wonders whether these origins were ever really left behind.

Five years later, Borges appeared in English for the first time. Mystery writer Anthony Boucher’s translation of “The Garden of Forking Paths,” itself a detective story of sorts, was included in the August edition of the *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, the genre flagship edited by Dannay.<sup>11</sup> In this tale, the Chinese spy Dr. Yu Tsun, working for the Germans in World War I, murders an English Sinologist whom he has never met in order to signal the exact site of the new British artillery park, a town sharing the Englishman’s last name. Originally, this “secret name” was “Corbie,” although in later iterations Borges changed it, for reasons unknown, to “Albert.” “Albert,” Paula Rabinowitz writes, “Albert, Victoria the imperial Queen’s husband.” (184). Could this be an homage, she wonders, to “the author/editor/detective—Ellery Queen—who first brought this writer-from-the-pampas’ prose to English?”

In his *EQMM* introduction of the Argentine newcomer—what must that have been like, to have to introduce a heretofore unknown Borges?!—Dannay predictably mentions the motif of the labyrinth, before remarking on “another persistent quirk” of Borges’s writing, his “inordinate fondness for mock scholarship” (Queen 101). “He will,” Dannay explains, “invent a completely apocryphal author or literary school and then write

<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, the first story in this edition of *EQMM* is about Siamese twins.

a long and delightfully learned dissertation on the esoteric importance of his imaginary figure or movement.” Nevertheless, Dannay is quick to note, “the fantasy and satire he weaves into his critical opinions are not always without factual significance.” Immediately following these rather ambiguous remarks, Dannay references “A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain,” calling it “one of [Borges’s] most brilliant essays,” and then reproduces the entire “remarkable” passage from that piece describing Quain’s detective novel *The God of the Labyrinth*, its ruinous conjunction to Queen’s book, and its dual plot, one official, the other secret. “Now you know what to expect!” Dannay concludes mysteriously (Queen 102).

There are several things to note here: first, why would anyone describe “A Survey” as one of Borges’s most brilliant essays? That’s not the most intuitive choice, it seems. At least it hasn’t been to the critics.<sup>12</sup> One answer, of course, is that this work references Ellery Queen, so, in effect, Dannay is simply preening, “look at this intellectual Argentine with the good taste, see how popular and respected we are.” In this case, the “factual significance” of Borges’s essay is simply that he alludes to the publication of a real book as the cause of an imaginary book’s failure. But that’s a fairly weak sense of “significance.” Any historical novel, for instance, would reference factual events as causes for fictional ones. And if Dannay just wants to advertise Ellery Queen’s popularity, why include the entire explanation of Quain’s novel? Because the secret plot idea is a good one for a book? In that case, the significance of *The God* wouldn’t be factual but hypothetical—if a real detective novel had this plot, it would be a good read.

But regardless—here’s the real point—Queen needed no upstart Argentine, fresh from the plains, to legitimate his work. A mere five years earlier, Queen had been the best-selling mystery writer at a point when one of every four fiction titles published in English was a mystery (Bainbridge 71). Whereas most of these works, in their original editions, were selling around 3,000 volumes a piece, Queen was averaging 300,000 per

<sup>12</sup> Alonso Estenoz begins with this observation and suggests that “A Survey” is, in part, about the interpretative and market expectations underlying this very unattractiveness. Along these lines, consider the critical preference for “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” in terms of sheer numbers. A quick search of the MLA International Bibliography (on July 3, 2012) yielded the following results: ninety-nine hits for “Pierre Menard and Borges,” four for “Herbert Quain and Borges.” Searching JSTOR with the same terms yielded three hundred and sixty-four versus thirty-five, respectively.

novel. That's staggering; John Bainbridge, the author of the *Life* article, joked that "even in Bible-selling circles, [this] would be considered a more than modest success" (70). Dannay's reference to Borges, if mere advertising, would seem to be laughably superfluous.

Instead, why not understand his remarks in this way: Borges has an inordinate fondness for mock scholarship, concerning a fictional author, but sometimes the critical opinions presented in this guise are factual enough, about real authors and real books. Dannay, I'm saying, implies that Quain is a stand-in for Queen, *The God of the Labyrinth* for *The Siamese Twin Mystery*.<sup>13</sup> And so Borges, as he did in the Richard Hull review, would be suspecting the existence of a secret plot in Queen's novel. Dannay, in fact, would be implicitly confirming these suspicions, which explains, incidentally, why he thinks "A Survey" is so brilliant, Borges alone having detected the mystery.<sup>14</sup>

If *The Siamese Twin Mystery* contains an official solution, endorsed by the detective Ellery Queen, and a secret solution on the order of Quain's *The God*, what is it? I want to beg off this question for a moment and instead consider the rest of the books attributed to the fictional Quain. It turns out that they bear more than a passing resemblance to the Ellery Queen works following *Siamese Twin*. Borges's narrator describes Quain's next work, "the 'regressive, ramified novel' titled *April March* . . . whose third (and only part) is dated 1936" as "even more heterodox" than *The God*. The backwardness of *April March*, though, is of a special type: the content of the story isn't regressive, the narrator insists, "only the manner of telling [the] history."

13 To an extent, I agree with Alonso Estenoz that Borges considers Queen a representative of "golden age" detective fiction and its conventions, but I think this applies much more to Queen's earlier work. *Siamese Twin* does not fit neatly into this tradition. It is not as richly plotted as previous Queen novels, and if Nevins is right about the theme—both "the power and emptiness of reason in the face of death" (41)—its orientation in respect to "golden age" values is ambiguous.

14 In fact, with his reference to Borges's theme of the labyrinth, which borders on calling it a crutch, and then the appreciative remarks on *An Essay*, Dannay would be going Borges one better, mirroring, in his own introduction of Borges's work, Borges's description of Quain's work, in which he notes disapprovingly the sea motif and then reveals the esoteric plot of *The God*.

After *Siamese Twin*, Ellery Queen next published a work entitled *The Chinese Orange Mystery*, the Argentine version appearing, like *April March*, in 1936. This, too, was a heterodox work, a backward one, although unlike Quain's novel, the storytelling isn't regressive, but rather the world of the story itself. Ellery Queen enters a hotel waiting room to find every movable item either inside-out or backside-front. After discovering the corpse, our detective finds that every article of his clothing is on backwards. Queen connoisseur Francis Nevins speaks for many—not for Borges, who rates the novel as one of Queen's best, but for many—with the following: "If the entire story of the man who was backwards even approached the craftsmanship and bizarrerie of the early chapters, this would be one of the greatest detective novels of the century" (43). Yet, despite a certain appeal, it falls short because the remainder of the story meanders among trivia: "philately, sex, Chinese culture, blackmail, and missing Hebrew biblical commentaries." "None of which," he adds, "has any relevance to the murder case except that by amazing coincidence each involves some element that is, in one or another of the many senses of the word, backward." And so Queen's book, albeit in a different way, turns out to be as "regressive" as Quain's.

With this in mind, consider the epigraph of *Chinese Orange*, purported to be an excerpt from an anonymous article appearing in *Esoterica Americana*. Some, the epigraph explains, have attributed the article to Matsoyuma Tahuki, "the noted Japanese authority on the Occident" (Queen, "Chinese Orange" 176). (I, for one, can find no trace of that noted authority, if indeed he actually existed—it seems, perhaps, that Queen and Borges enjoy similar games). Regardless, the excerpt alludes to two observations, one by Schlegel claiming that "the historian is a prophet looking backwards," and then an even "more subtle" one by Carlyle that "history is the distillation of rumor." Queen's epigram suggests that these are good descriptions of the art of detection. This playful, somewhat self-important flash of erudition and its arrangement recalls (or looks forward to) Quain's prologue, which, on one reading,<sup>15</sup>

15 "Someone once noted that there is an echo of the doctrines of Dunne in the pages of this book; Quain's forward prefers instead to allude to that backward-running world posited by Bradley, in which death precedes birth, the scar precedes the wound, and the wound precedes the blow (*Appearance and Reality*, 1897, page 215)" (Borges, "Survey"

makes reference to the doctrines of Donne before turning, with grandiose preference, to Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*. "So much for Herbert Quain's erudition" snaps Borges's narrator, who then piles on a few more learned references for good measure ("Survey" 109).

Following the backwardness of *Chinese Orange*, Ellery Queen turned to the theme of the double life. *Halfway House*, appearing in 1936, features a corpse who had possessed, at one and the same time, two distinct identities: in one life, he was a lower-middle-class salesman known as *Joe Wilson*, whereas in the other he was a Park Avenue financier named *Joseph Kent Gimball*. The title refers to his changeover place, the doorway between the two lives, where, as Nevins says, "he was both of his identities and neither." Nevins also adds that this book traditionally has been thought to mark the beginning of a new period in Queen's writing, one in which the rigorous formal requirements of the genre would be relaxed so as to make room for a fleshier narrative—an "opening up" of the formal deductive puzzle (52).

Herbert Quain was busy relaxing, as well. "In the works we have looked at so far," Borges's narrator says, "the formal complexity hobbles [Quain's] imagination," but "in *The Secret Mirror* that imagination is given freer reign" (Borges, "Survey" 110). Like *Halfway House*, Quain's two act comedy also focuses on the theme of the double-life. This time, not only the protagonist, but all the characters of the first act, save the socialite Ulrica Thrale, appear in the second bearing different names. "The plot of the two acts is parallel," the narrator explains, "though in the second everything becomes slightly menacing," so that the dramatist Wilfred Quarles becomes John William Quigley, a commission agent in Liverpool, "the implausible or improbable 'country estate'" of the first act, "the Jewish-Irish rooming house he lives in, transformed and magnified by his imagination" (111). Thus the entire narrative of Quain's novel takes place within the halfway house, where "everything is put off, or frustrated."

One piece of furniture was missing from Queen's own *Halfway House*, his usual "challenge to the reader." As a rule, at a certain point in the narrative Queen would proclaim that the reader possessed all the necessary data,

108-109). Are we to read the former as a reference by Quain that occurs within his prologue or as an observation about Quain's work from an outside source included by the narrator?

as accessible to the reader as to the detective, for deducing the solution. This device, so prominent in Queen's previous novels, was jettisoned for whatever reason—too formal, rigid, artificial.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Queen's first genre anthology, the first of dozens, would be entitled *Challenge to the Reader*, as would the first section, "in which," the subtitle reads, "Mr. Ellery Queen Invents a New Kind of Detective Story Anthology" (*Challenge* v).

J. J. McC., Queen's fictional friend who often introduces the early novels, is visiting the detective in his library, when they fall out over the topic of anthologies. McC. challenges his friend, who claims that they are all essentially the same, to produce a novel one (Queen, *Challenge* 3-4). Although Queen, somewhat smugly, pooh-poohs the possibility, McC. hits on his own idea: "'Say,' he mumbled. 'Say! How about this? Imagine a convention of the famous fiction detectives—you know, like the one held annually by the famous magicians. The pry-and-peer kings get together in London, or New York, to test one another's skill!'" (*Challenge* 6). Queen objects that it's simply the Arabian Nights pattern, but McC. doesn't think that is such a bad thing, for "here each detective would tell the story of his greatest case, give all the facts, the clues, the action—everything but the solution . . . each great detective would be challenging the others to a tremendous battle of wits!"

McC.'s game, essentially, is one between story-tellers, but Queen takes the idea in a rather different direction, in fact "an entirely different" one according to him (*Challenge* 7). "Challenge to the reader," he says, a game in which the reader must recognize the great detectives with their names changed. It is, Queen himself admits, an elementary challenge—the reader correcting a story only slightly marred. Whether it would make an anthology "new under the sun," as the detective hopes, is dubious. When Borges's Herbert Quain released *Statements*, "perhaps the most original of his works," he offered his own challenge to the reader—in Quain's opinion an "extinct species" (111). What passed now for readership, he argued, was a degenerate sort of creativity, and so since few were capable

16 Alonso Estenoz references Queen's accustomed "challenge" as an example of the explicit, thematic nature of the author/reader relationship in detective fiction in general and "golden age" novels in particular. Critics, he rightly points out, typically find this attractive about the genre (54-55). And so I think it's significant that Queen is willing to cast it off at this point in his career.



of authentic invention, readers—or “writers manqués”—would have to survive through parasitism. For these poor devils, “whose name is legion,” Quain offered a series of stories, each of which “prefigures, or promises, a good plot, which is then intentionally frustrated by the author.” Making the correction, the reader, “blinded by vanity,” will believe that he has invented the superior plot, surpassing the original. In this way, Quain’s *Statements* constitutes his own challenge to the reader, blending the two kinds considered by Ellery Queen in his anthology. Whereas McC.’s competition is one between storytellers and Queen’s between author and reader, Herbert Quain challenges his own readers to outstrip him as writer, to discover his secret, frustrated plots.

Which takes us back to the question: what is the secret, frustrated plot of Ellery Queen’s *Siamese Twin*, if there is one? In the spirit of Borges, I won’t commit *that* blunder. But I will say this: the works of Herbert Quain and those of Queen, following the *Siamese Twin*, seem too similar to be ignored. Hardly any critics (or any readers, period) remember Ellery Queen, or, remembering, think his genre fiction worthy of “serious” scholarly attention. I recall one particularly nasty (if entertaining) remark by Frye’s rogue pupil Harold Bloom in which he laments his own popularity and that of others. “What shall I reread?” he asks, “quite apart from the School of Resentment’s canonizings of all those past and present, who cannot write their way out of a paper bag, I am confronted daily by a tidal wave of books, proofs, manuscripts, and letters that vary from no to considerable literary value” (Bloom xi). “Overpopulation in literature,” he adds in a Scroogean moment, “has gone beyond Malthusian dimensions, and soon the world’s computers will enhance a Noah’s flood of productivity.” Channeling Asimov now, Bloom prophesies: “if I live long enough, I fully expect individual computers themselves to declare their possession of personality and genius, and to bombard me with the epics and romances of artificial intelligence.” “In all this proliferation,” he asks, “where shall I turn?” Not to Ellery Queen—that, if nothing else, is certain. But Borges felt otherwise.

The “pleasant yet arduous convolutions” (“Survey” 108) of Queen did much for Borges in the summer of 1940, still a year away from the publication of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, his first book of original short stories. In the wake of his near fatal Christmas Eve accident and the death of his

father, and facing war both open and concealed, Borges read mysteries. Or rather he read Ellery Queen’s *New Adventures*, which he faithfully reviewed in *Sur*. Citing Shaw’s quip that “the process of those who pass with delight from Dupin ‘the ingenious robot’ to the inept adventures of Sherlock Holmes, prince of duffers and dullards . . . is degenerative,” Borges agrees that “Sherlock is worth less than Auguste,” but explains that this is so “precisely because he is not an ‘ingenious robot’” (“New Adventures” 231). And so the “humanization” of Ellery Queen, which Borges dates from 1939, seemed decadence to him, and quite terrible since Queen had been “until very recently, the most impersonal and least annoying of all the detectives” (“New Adventures” 232). Even in decline, Queen’s romance of artificial intelligence was not mere comfort, but something more along the lines of *deus ex machina*. The review concludes: “I write in July, 1940; each morning seems more like a nightmare.” “It is only possible,” he confesses, “to read pages that don’t allude at all to reality.” Cosmogonies, works of theology or metaphysics, grammatical debates—and, of course, among such trivia, the “frivolous problems” of Ellery Queen.

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